

RELATING DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION INDEX OF GRAMMATICAL COMPLEXITIES TO CEFR PROFICIENCY LEVELS

NORIKO NAGAI

Ibaraki University, Japan

Abstract. Linguistic studies which have practical benefits to language teaching seldom draw proper attention from language professionals. The developmental progression index of grammatical complexity (DPIGC) proposed by Biber, Gray and Poonpon (2011) is no exception. They proposed the index based on corpus analyses of two registers, speech and writing. Used in language teaching, this evidence-based index would enable teachers to see learners' development in grammatical competences necessary for reading and writing in academic contexts. Despite its great potential, the DPIGC is not widely adopted or used by language professionals. The index may be less accessible because its scales are relative only within the index itself and not related to more globally accepted proficiency levels in language teaching. This paper related each grammatical structure in the DPIGC to those in the English Grammar Profile (EGP). It revealed that grammatical features that are much more frequently used in academic prose than speech do not have any corresponding structures in the EGP, not even at the C1 and C2 levels, while those more commonly used in speech do. Given that the EGP is based on the corpus of L2 English learners' writing scripts, the result indicates L2 English learners are not competent users of distinctive grammatical features of academic prose and suggests the necessity of instruction of these features.

Key words: grammatical complexity, academic prose, complex NP, CEFR, EGP, EAP

INTRODUCTION

The nexus between linguistic studies and their application to actual language teaching is seldom seen despite abundant studies which would have considerable benefits and impacts on language teaching. A series of corpus-based studies by Biber and his colleague (Biber, 1988, 2006; Biber, Stig, Leech, Conrad and Finegan, 1999; Biber and Gray, 2016; Gray, 2015) are no exception. They reveal that grammatical features which appear frequently in writing differ drastically from those in conversation. The former heavily uses dependent phrases functioning as pre- and post-modifiers of the head noun, while the latter uses dependent clauses functioning as constituents of other clauses such as verb complements and adverbial clauses.

Based on these findings as well as their new corpus analysis of academic prose, Biber, Gray and Poonpon (2011: 30-31) proposed a developmental progression index of grammatical complexity (DPIGC), which describes grammatical complexities specific to each of the five developmental stages. The index would immensely benefit ELT professionals including curriculum designers, material developers, assessment designers, and teachers, especially those working in the area of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and English Medium Instruction (EMI). These courses do not only aim at acquisition and appropriate use of vocabulary and grammatical constructions peculiar to academic contexts but also help learners acquire and deepen disciplinary knowledge through various receptive and productive activities of academic language.

Unfortunately, the index is not well known or adopted by language professionals. One of the reasons for too little attention to this index lies in the lack of the linkage between the five scales in the DPIGC and proficiency levels more widely utilized in language education, for instance, CEFR's six proficiency levels (A1 through C2).

This study aims to map grammatical features at each stage of the DPIGC to one of the six CEFR proficiency levels by comparing developmental grammatical complexities in the DPIGC with those in the English Grammar Profile (EGP), which describes grammatical features criteria to each of the six CEFR levels. This paper first explicates the DPIGC and the EGP. Then five-scaled grammatical features of the DPIGC are aligned to the CEFR proficiency levels. Finally, the results of the study and some pedagogical implications are discussed.

DPIGC AND EGP

1 DPIGC

Biber et al. (2011) analyzed large-scale corpora of conversation and academic prose. The conversation corpus uses subcorpus of Biber et al. (1999), which consists of 723 text files and approximately 4.2 million words of American English. The academic writing corpus includes 420 research articles (approximately 3 million words) from eleven academic journals in four disciplinary areas including science/medicine, education, psychology and history (Biber et al., 2011: 17-18).

The analysis adopts two linguistic parameters: syntactic structure and its function, namely, the function that a grammatical structure serves. The former parameter consists of two major grammatical structures: clauses and phrases. Clauses are further classified into finite and nonfinite clauses. The latter parameter distinguishes various functions that clauses and phrases serve. For instance, clauses serve as complements of verbs, complements of nouns, relative clauses

and subordinate clauses such as adverbial clauses. Phrases mainly function as noun and verb modifiers.

The DPIGC provides grammatical features associated with five developmental stages. The developmental progression is hypothesized based on a general assumption of language acquisition that grammatical features in speaking are acquired first and then those in writing. Biber et al. (2011) also consider some lexical factors. For instance, *that*-complement of verbs is used first with a limited number of verbs such as *think* and *believe* and with a wider variety of verbs at a later stage. Furthermore, they seem to take into consideration semantic explicitness by considering whether or not null elements exist in structures. Finite clauses explicitly express subjects and objects while nonfinite clauses do not. Hence, the former developmentally precedes the latter. The following table enlists grammatical items classified into five developmental stages in Biber et al. (2011).

Table 1 Grammatical features of DPIGC (adopted from Biber et al., 2011: 30-31)

Stage	Grammatical features
1	Finite complement clauses controlled by extremely common verbs (e.g., think, know, say)
2	Finite complement clauses controlled by a wider set of verbs; Nonfinite complement clauses controlled by common verbs; Simple phrasal embedding in the noun phrase (NP)
3	Phrasal embedding in the clause; Nonfinite complement clauses controlled by a wider set of verbs; <i>That</i> relative clauses; Simple phrasal embedding in the NP; Possessive nouns as premodifiers; <i>Of</i> phrases as postmodifiers; Simple prepositional phrases (PPs) where P = other than <i>of</i> with concrete locative meanings
4	Nonfinite complement clauses controlled by adjectives; Extraposed complement clauses; Nonfinite relative clauses; More phrasal embedding in the NP; Simple PPs as postmodifiers where P = other than <i>of</i> with abstract meanings
5	Preposition + nonfinite complement clause; Complement clauses controlled by nouns; Appositive noun phrases; Extensive phrasal embedding in the NP

Thirteen grammatical items more commonly used in academic writing, namely variants of complex NPs, are taken from the above table and are to be related to the EGP in the next section. Table 2 enlists these grammatical structures that function as modifiers and complements of the head noun.

Table 2 Grammatical features frequently used in academic prose

Stage	Grammatical features
2	Simple phrasal embedding in the noun phrase: attributive adjectives
3	<i>That</i> relative clauses, especially with animate head nouns Simple phrasal embedding in noun phrases: nouns as premodifiers Possessive nouns as premodifiers <i>of</i> phrases as postmodifiers Simple PPs as postmodifiers, especially with prepositions other than <i>of</i> when they have concrete/locative meanings
4	Nonfinite relative clauses More phrasal embedding in the NP = attributive adjectives, nouns as premodifiers Simple PPs as postmodifiers, especially with prepositions other than <i>of</i> when they have abstract meanings
5	Preposition + nonfinite complement clause Complement clauses controlled by nouns Appositive noun phrases Extensive phrasal embedding in the NP: multiple prepositional phrases as postmodifiers, with levels of embedding

The developmental progression hypothesized by Biber et al. (2011) is partly verified by Parkinson and Musgrave (2014), Lan and Sun (2019), and Lan, Lucas, and Sun (2019). Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) compared frequency of use of different types of noun modifiers by EAP students and by MA students in their datasets as well as by professionals in the datasets in Biber and Gray (2011) and Biber et al. (1999). They found that EAP students used attributive adjectives much more frequently than MA students and professionals. By contrast, MA writers and professionals used nouns as pre-modifiers and PPs as post-modifiers much more frequently than EAP students. With these results Parkinson and Musgrave concluded that nouns as premodifiers and PP as postmodifiers will be acquired at a later stage than attributive adjectives as Biber et al. (2011) predicted.

2 EGP

The EGP was developed by the University of Cambridge with other collaborative institutions and support from the Language Policy Division of Council of Europe. It is one of the CEFR resources, known as Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs) for national and regional languages (UCLES/CUP 2011). Since the CEFR (COE 2001) provides neutral descriptions of communicative language competences to be comparable across languages and does not provide any language-specific details, it is essential to have language-specific descriptions at a given level of the CEFR when adopting the CEFR in local contexts. The EGP specifies syntactic

features of English which are distinctive and criterial to each of the six CEFR proficiency levels, known as criterial features. Hawkins and Filipović (2012: 11) define them as ‘properties of learner English that are characteristic and indicative of L2 proficiency at each of the levels and that distinguish higher levels from lower levels’. They are validated by empirical study using mainly the Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC), which consists of world-wide L2 English learners’ writing scripts from Cambridge English exams at all six levels of the CEFR, approximately 55 million words (Online 1).

The EGP contains 19 major categories including Adjective, Nouns, Clauses, Passive, Modality, and Questions. Each major category is further divided into several subcategories. The category Nouns, for instance, is classified into five subcategories consisting of noun phrases, noun phrases-grammatical functions, plural, types, and countable. Each subcategory provides grammatical features distinctive and criterial to one of the six proficiency levels. The entry of each grammatical item is accompanied with three elements: ‘guideword’, ‘can-do statement’ and examples. The category Noun Phrases at the B2 level, for instance, lists four grammatical items (guidewords): ‘noun + “of” + possessive determiner + noun’, ‘possession with plural nouns +’, ‘postmodifying with adjective phrase’ and ‘complex noun phrases with adjectives combined with “but”’ (for more detailed list of noun phrases, see Appendix 1, Table 1). Likewise, the super category Clauses consists of nine subcategories including relative clauses. The category Relative Clauses lists nineteen variants of the structure which are classified into three proficiency levels ranging from A2 to B2 (for more detailed list, see Appendix 2, Table 2).

RELATING DPIGC TO EGP

1 METHODS

To relate thirteen DPIGC grammatical structures listed in Table 2 to those in the EGP, the following procedures were undertaken.

First, relevant subcategories in the EGP were selected. Thirteen grammatical structures in DPIGC are all NPs with simple or complex pre- and/or post-modification or with complements. Out of 19 major categories of the EGP, categories related with NPs are the categories of Nouns and Clauses. Subcategories of Nouns and Clauses were closely examined, and as a result, noun phrases and relative clauses subcategories are selected for this comparative study. Grammatical items in each subcategory are listed in Table 1 in Appendix 1 and Table 2 in Appendix 2.

Second, the initial mapping was made. Grammatical items in DPIGC and those listed in Table 1 (Appendix 1) and Table 2 (Appendix 2) are compared and contrasted. Grammatical items in the DPIGC are linked to those in the EGP.

Finally, example sentences of each grammatical item in the DFIGC (Biber et al., 2011: 30-31) and those of the EGP (Online 2) are carefully analyzed and examined to assess the initial mapping from the second procedure. Although both DFIGC and EGP are descriptive scales, the ways they describe grammatical structures occasionally differ. They sometimes use different terminology for the identical structure or use identical terminology for different structures. Subclassifications of a structure are also different. The DFIGC pays more attention to types of modifiers and their positions, pre- or post-modifiers of the head noun, while the EGP gives finer subclassifications of types of nouns and of determiners.

2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of grammatical items in the DFIGC and those in the EGP revealed that most of the grammatical items in the former are also represented in the latter. However, some higher-stage grammatical items do not have any corresponding structures in the EGP. Furthermore, some items from one stage of the DFIGC are spread across different CEFR levels (e.g. Stage 3 structures are found in three CEFR levels: A1, A2 and B1. See Table 3). Detailed comparison of grammatical items at each developmental stage is given below and summarized in Table 3.

First, the head noun premodified by attributive adjectives at Stage 2 of the DFIGC corresponds to the identical EGP structure at the A1 level.

Second, three out of the five structures at Stage 3 have similar grammatical features in the EGP. The NP premodified by nouns is identified as the A1 level, while the NP premodified by possessive nouns and *that* relative clauses are identified as the A2 level. The EGP contains a finer classification of relative clauses depending on types of relative pronouns and the location of a gap in the relative clause as shown in Appendix 2. However, the DFIGC does not classify relative clauses using these criteria. The example given in the DFIGC is similar to those given in A2 level relative clauses, and hence *that* relative clauses are judged as the A2 level. The other two structures, '*of* phrases as postmodifiers' and 'simple PPs as postmodifiers, where prepositions other than *of* with concrete/locative meaning' correspond to similar constructions at the B1 level in the EGP.

Third, Stage 4 includes three structures, 'Nonfinite relative clauses', 'More phrasal embedding in the NP with attributive adjectives and/or nouns as premodifiers', and 'PPs as postmodifiers (Ps = other than *of* with abstract meanings)'. Although the EGP does not use a grammatical category, 'Nonfinite relative clauses' as seen in Appendix 2, examples listed in 'Postmodifying with adjective phrase' in the EGP contain nonfinite relative clauses as exemplified below (Online 2, emphasis added):

- (1) a. I am very lucky, because I was born in a small but beautiful city called Neuva Helvecia.
 b. Emily Brönte succeeded in writing a romantic, psychological and tragic story, beautifully set in these mysterious moors.

Hence, ‘Nonfinite relative clause’ is judged as the B2 level. Another structure, ‘More phrasal embedding in the NP = attributive adjectives, nouns as premodifiers’ is judged as the B2 level since the examples used in the EGP category, ‘Complex noun phrases with adjectives combined with “but”’ exhibits similar complexity as shown in the examples below (Online 2, emphasis added):

- (2) a. [...] you need to ask yourself a simple but tricky question that no man would like to be asked.
 b. I will be on business in London to sign a contract with a new but significant customer.

NPs postmodified by PPs in the DPIGC are classified into two developmental stages depending on prepositions and their meanings, while the EGP does not make such a distinction. The example shown in NP + PP category in the EGP at the B1 level uses two prepositions other than *of* as shown below (Online 2, emphasis added):

- (3) It was a beautiful red dress with blue flowers on the back.

Hence the structure in question is judged as the B1 level.

Finally, among Stage 5 grammatical features, only one out of four structures correspond to the EGP. The structure, ‘Appositive noun phrases’, corresponds to ‘Noun phrase, Noun phrase’ at the B1 level in the EGP. The other three structures, ‘Preposition + nonfinite complement clause’, ‘Complement clauses controlled by nouns’, and ‘Extensive phrasal embedding in the NP’, do not have any corresponding constructions in the EGP.

To sum up, Table 3 shows approximate CEFR levels of the grammatical items at each stage of the DPIGC.

Table 3 CEFR-informed DPIGC

DPIGC Grammatical Features		CEFR levels
Stage 2	• Simple premodifying (attributive adj.)	A1
Stage 3	• <i>That</i> relative clauses, especially with animate head nouns	A2
	• Simple phrasal embedding in noun phrases: nouns as premodifiers	A1
	• Possessive nouns as premodifiers	A2
	• <i>of</i> phrases as postmodifiers	B1
	• Simple PPs as postmodifiers, especially with prepositions other than <i>of</i> when they have concrete/locative meanings	B1

DPIGC Grammatical Features		CEFR levels
Stage 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nonfinite relative clauses • More phrasal premodification in the NP • PPs as postmodifiers (Ps, other than <i>of</i> = abstract meaning) 	B2 B2 B1
Stage 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preposition + nonfinite complement clause • Complement clauses controlled by nouns • Appositive noun phrases • Extensive phrasal embedding in the NP: multiple prepositional phrases as postmodifiers, with levels of embedding 	N/A N/A B1 N/A

The table indicates some expected correlations between the DPIGC and the EGP. Simple premodifiers and relative clauses, which are frequently used in conversation (Biber and Gray 2016: 98-99), are the A level, while postmodification using prepositional phrases and nonfinite relative clauses, which are much more common in writing than conversation, are the B level. Most of the Stage 5 grammatical structures, which are most frequently used in academic prose (ibid.), however, are not listed in the EGP, not even at the C1 and C2 levels.

This result is intriguing and can be interpreted in two ways. First, given that the EGP is based on L2 English learners' writing data, it means that L2 English learners are not competent users of grammatical features commonly used in academic prose, although we cannot deny the possibility that Cambridge English exams do not have tasks which demand exam takers to use them. Second, if authors of the CEFR-informed English textbooks use the EGP as reference when selecting grammatical items to be included, then they may fail to contain the most prominent grammatical structures of academic prose. This means that they may not be explicitly taught in classrooms.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The discussion above suggests the importance of instruction of the most notable grammatical construction of academic prose, complex NPs. It is especially important for teachers to be aware of them as part of their Teacher Language Awareness (TLA) so that teachers can give appropriate and effective instructions to target learners whenever necessary. Thornbury (1997: x) defines TLA as 'the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively'.

Various types of complex NPs may pose serious barriers to different levels of learners when performing different language activities such as processing texts and writing academic reports and essays. In processing texts, learners must construe meaning of complex NPs through disambiguation. Complex NPs are notorious for their ambiguity, having layered pre- and/or post modification.

The following example taken from Biber et al. (2011), for instance, is ambiguous in two ways:

- (4) the **presence** of layered **structures** at the borderline of cell territories (Biber et al., 2011: 31, emphasis added, phrase boundaries deleted)

In example (4) the prepositional phrase ‘at the borderline of cell territories’ modifies either ‘structures’ or ‘presence’.

Less advanced L2 English learners may not be able to distinguish between PPs functioning as NP modifiers and those functioning as VP modifiers as the following examples indicate:

- (5) a. The new teacher looked at a student with glasses.
b. The student read a book on the sofa.

Teachers must be aware of the fact that students at different levels may face different difficulties in disambiguating complex NPs and provide them with appropriate assistance.

In writing academic reports and essays, students must make a stylistic change from speaking to writing style. In speaking, finite clauses functioning as verb complements and adverbial clauses are most frequently used. By contrast, academic writing adopts informationally condensed NPs using different syntactic devices. Learners must know such devices and be able to use them appropriately.

To give appropriate instructions, teachers should be familiar with structural variants of complex NPs. The head noun is premodified by attributive adjectives, nouns, present- and past-participles, as well as postmodified by finite and nonfinite relative clauses and prepositional phrases. Furthermore, nouns can take complements. The following table exhibits syntactic variants of complex NPs (cf. Biber et al., 1999)

Table 4 Syntactic variants of Complex NP

1. Noun modifiers
a. Premodifiers: attributive adjectives, nouns, present- and past-participles
b. Postmodifiers: {
• Finite relative clauses
• Prepositional phrases
• Non-finite relative clauses: <i>ing-</i> , <i>ed-</i> and <i>to</i> -infinitive clauses
2. Noun complements:
• Finite <i>that</i> -clauses
• <i>to</i> -infinite clauses
• <i>of</i> + <i>ing</i> -clauses
• Dependent <i>wh</i> -interrogative clauses

Special attention needs to be given to syntactic variants of noun complements. Complements controlled by a limited number of nouns are not included in

the EGP at any level, and it is most likely that most English textbooks currently on the market do not contain them. Hence, teachers must give appropriate instructions to learners whenever necessary.

This paper does not suggest that syntactic variants of complex NPs should be instructed in isolation. Rather, it suggests that language professionals should know them as part of their TLA to make instruction and tasks appropriate to target learners. Knowing these grammatical devices will contribute to effective teaching and learning.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper related each grammatical structure in the DPIGC to those in the EGP. It revealed that grammatical features more commonly used in speech than writing are represented in the EGP, although some items from one stage of the DPIGC are spread across different CEFR levels. By contrast, grammatical complexities that are much more frequently used in academic prose than speech do not have any corresponding structures in the EGP, not even at the C1 and C2 levels. Given that the EGP is based on the corpus of L2 English learners' writing scripts, the result indicates L2 English learners are not competent users of distinctive grammatical features of academic prose.

The paper suggested that teachers should know the unique grammatical features of academic prose as part of TLA and provide appropriate instructions and effective language activities to help learners to acquire these grammatical items and to become competent users of them.

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APPENDIX 1

Table 1 Criterial features in noun phrases subcategory in the EGP (extracted from Online 2)

Level	Guideword
A1	FORM: DETERMINER + NOUN
A1	FORM: DETERMINER + ADJECTIVE + NOUN
A1	FORM: ADJECTIVE + PLURAL NOUN
A1	FORM: NOUN + NOUN
A2	FORM: DETERMINER + UNCOUNTABLE NOUN
A2	FORM: DETERMINER + NOUN
A2	FORM: NOUN PHRASES WITH ADJECTIVES
A2	FORM: WITH RELATIVE CLAUSE AS POSTMODIFIER
A2	FORM: WITH RELATIVE CLAUSE AS COMPLEMENT
A2	FORM: POSSESSION WITH 'S' + NOUN
B1	FORM: COMPLEX NOUN PHRASES WITH ADJECTIVES
B1	FORM: COMPLEX NOUN PHRASES WITH ADVERBS + ADJECTIVES
B1	FORM/USE: 'SUCH (A)' + ADJECTIVE + NOUN

Level	Guideword
B1	FORM: NOUN + PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES
B1	FORM/USE: NOUN PHRASES WITH SUPERLATIVES
B1	FORM/USE: POSSESSIVE 'S' WITHOUT NOUN
B1	FORM: NOUN + 'OF' + POSSESSIVE PRONOUN
B1	FORM: FRIEND + 'OF' + POSSESSIVE DETERMINER + NOUN
B1	FORM: COMPLEX NOUN PHRASE WITH POSSESSIVE 'S' + NOUN
B1	FORM: NOUN PHRASE, NOUN PHRASE
B1	FORM: INDEFINITE PRONOUNS
B1	FORM/USE: 'THE THING'
B2	FORM: NOUN + 'OF' + POSSESSIVE DETERMINER + NOUN
B2	FORM: POSSESSION WITH PLURAL NOUNS + '
B2	FORM: POSTMODIFYING WITH ADJECTIVE PHRASE
B2	FORM: COMPLEX NOUN PHRASES WITH ADJECTIVES COMBINED WITH 'BUT'
C1	FORM: NOUN PHRASE WITH POSSESSIVE 'S' WITHOUT NOUN
C1	USE: NOMINALISATION, FORMALITY
C1	FORM/USE: 'WH-' CLEFT, FOCUS
C2	FORM: COMPLEX NOUN PHRASES WITH 'LITTLE' OR 'NO' + NOUN

APPENDIX 2

Table 2 **Criteria features in relative clauses subcategory in the EGP** (extracted from Online 2)

Level	Guideword
A2	FORM: NON-DEFINING, SUBJECT, WITH 'WHO'
A2	FORM: DEFINING, SUBJECT, WITH 'WHO'
A2	FORM: NON-DEFINING, SUBJECT, WITH 'WHICH'
A2	FORM: DEFINING, SUBJECT, WITH 'WHICH'
A2	FORM: DEFINING, OBJECT, WITH 'THAT'
A2	FORM: NON-DEFINING, OBJECT, WITH 'WHICH'
A2	FORM: DEFINING, OBJECT, WITH 'WHICH'
A2	FORM: DEFINING, WITHOUT PRONOUN
B1	FORM: NON-DEFINING, OBJECT, WITH 'WHO'
B1	FORM: DEFINING, OBJECT, WITH 'WHO/THAT'
B1	FORM: WITH 'WHOSE NAME'

Level	Guideword
B1	FORM: WITH 'WHERE', PLACE
B1	FORM/USE: 'THE REASON WHY', FOCUS
B1	FORM/USE: 'WHEN', FOCUS
B1	FORM/USE: 'THE' + NOUN + 'WHO/THAT', FOCUS
B2	FORM: PRONOUN + PREPOSITION
B2	FORM: NON-DEFINING, WITH 'WHOSE'
B2	FORM/USE: DEFINING, WITH 'WHOSE'
B2	FORM/USE: SENTENCE, EVALUATIVE

Noriko Nagai (Ph.D. in Linguistics, Professor at College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Ibaraki University, Japan) is teaching English and Linguistics. Her research interests lie in cross-linguistic influence, explicit instruction of English grammar based on comparative analyses of English and Japanese, CEFR-informed criterial lexical and grammatical features of academic prose, and the implementation of the CEFR to English education in the Japanese higher education context.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2648-3840>

Email: noriko.nagai.kishimoto@vc.ibaraki.ac.jp