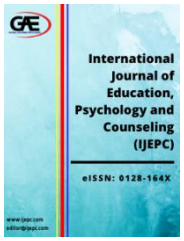
International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1760-1778




**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY AND COUNSELLING (IJEPC)**
https://gaexcellence.com/ijepc

# SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY IN L2 COLLEGE ENGLISH WRITING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH (2022-2026)

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**Article Info:**

**Article history:**
Received date: 02.08.2026
Revised date: 20.08.2026
Accepted date: 02.09.2026
Published date: 30.09.2026

**To cite this document:**

Tan, L., & Rahim, S. A. (2026). Syntactic Complexity In L2 College English Writing: A Systematic Review of Recent Research (2022-2026). *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling, 11*(64), 1760-1778.

**Abstract:**

Syntactic complexity has become an important construct in second language writing research because it reflects how L2 writers organise ideas, elaborate meanings, and develop academic writing proficiency. In college English writing contexts, it is widely used to examine writing quality, learner development, task performance, and instructional effects. But recent results are still not consistent because of differences in research design, writing task, learner background, assessment focus and measurement approach. To this end, this systematic literature review synthesized recent empirical studies of syntactic complexity in L2 college English writing from 2022 to 2026. Following the PRISMA framework, an advanced search was conducted in Scopus and ERIC using the keywords "syntactic complexity" and "writing". After screening, eligibility assessment, and removal of irrelevant records, 31 primary studies were included in the final analysis. The findings were organised into four themes: syntactic complexity as an indicator of writing quality, developmental patterns, task- and context-sensitive variation, and pedagogical mediation. The review indicates that syntactic complexity is an important but not independent indicator of L2 writing quality. Its development is now understood to be multidimensional, non-linear and context-sensitive, with increasing attention to fine-grained and genre-sensitive analyses. The review highlights the systematic interaction between learner, task and instructional variables influencing syntactic complexity, and calls for more longitudinal and context-sensitive research to improve theoretical understanding and methodological comparability.

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1760-1778
**DOI:** 10.35631/IJEPC.1164097 **Keyword:**
College English Writing; L2 Writing; Second Language Writing; Syntactic Complexity; Systematic Literature Review

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## Introduction

Syntactic complexity has long been regarded as a critical dimension of Second Language (L2) writing development and academic writing proficiency among university students. Within the framework of college English writing, learners are expected to move beyond producing everyday sentences and to develop more extensive syntactic resources to organize ideas, elaborate meanings, and construct texts that are academically appropriate (O'Leary & Steinkrauss, 2022; Ortega, 2003; Thi et al., 2023). In applied linguistics, syntactic complexity is widely defined as the diversity and complexity of syntactic structures in written production. It is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct rather than a single linguistic feature, involving production-unit length, subordination, coordination and phrasal or nominal elaboration (Yang, 2021; Yang et al., 2022). This general understanding allows for syntactic complexity to be a useful construct to investigate how L2 writers develop the linguistic resources needed to produce academic communication.

Research on syntactic complexity has expanded considerably in L2 writing studies, especially in relation to writing quality, proficiency development, task performance, genre variation, and learner background. Existing evidence suggests that syntactic complexity can provide meaningful information about learners' writing development, but its interpretation is not straightforward. Its contribution to writing quality may be affected by the context, genre, discipline, institutional setting, L1 background, and writing task (Lei et al., 2023; Lu & Ai, 2015; Ortega, 2003). Meanwhile, corpus-based, fine-grained and computational approaches have contributed to the measurement and understanding of syntactic complexity which suggest that traditional indices are still useful but may not be sufficient to reflect the developmental and cognitive aspects of learner writing (Casal & Lee, 2019; J. Jiang et al., 2019; Kyle et al., 2021; Ouyang et al., 2022). The present study's results imply that syntactic complexity is a context-dependent construct and meaning is constructed by the linguistic measurement and writing settings.

Recent empirical studies have further complicated this picture by proving that syntactic development in L2 college writing is often dynamic rather than linear. Learners' syntactic development does not necessarily involve a simple increase in sentence length or clausal subordination; rather, it reflects the interaction of multiple linguistic and contextual dimensions (Li et al., 2022; Lyu et al., 2022; L. Zhang & Zhang, 2024). However, the diversity in learner populations, educational contexts, genres, criteria for assessment, task designs and

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1760-1778

measurement frameworks makes it difficult to compare findings between studies. Variation across disciplinary and national contexts has also been reported (e.g., Alkhalaf, 2022; Crossley & McNamara, 2014; Lei et al., 2023; Lyu et al., 2022; Shen et al., 2023; Thi et al., 2023; Y. Yang et al., 2022), suggesting that all of proficiency, first-language background, instruction, and task conditions may contribute to the shaping of syntactic complexity in university writing. As a result, the current body of evidence remains fragmented, and a coherent account of recent research trends is still needed.

Although previous work has contributed substantially to the conceptualisation and measurement of syntactic complexity, recent empirical findings have not yet been sufficiently synthesised in relation to L2 college English writing. Existing reviews and methodological discussions offer important foundations on the construct of syntactic complexity. Yet, there is a lack of a focused synthesis of existing studies on how the construct is conceptualized, operationalized and interpreted (Lahuerta Martínez, 2024; Lu, 2011; X. Yang, 2021). To fill this gap, the present systematic literature review investigates empirical studies published between 2022 and 2026 applying the PRISMA framework. This paper seeks to shed light on the dominant research trends, methodological characteristics, thematic patterns and knowledge gaps that still exist in recent studies of syntactic complexity in L2 college English writing. By synthesising this evidence, the review provides a clearer basis for future research.

## Literature Review

Syntactic complexity, commonly understood as the variety, density, and sophistication of syntactic structures in written language, has become a central construct in research on academic writing and L2 development (Ortega, 2003; Lu, 2011; Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998). In college-level ESL and EFL writing, it is extensively used to indicate writing proficiency, linguistic maturity, and developmental progress. Rather than measuring grammatical correctness alone, syntactic complexity concerns how writers organize clauses, phrases, and sentences to express abstract, precise, and academically appropriate meanings. Different dimensions of learner writing development have been captured using automated measures such as mean length of T-unit, clauses per T-unit, dependent clauses per clause, coordinate phrases, and complex nominals (Lu, 2011). This tradition of measurement assumes that syntactic complexity is multidimensional, including subordination, coordination, sentence length and phrasal elaboration (Lu & Ai, 2015). Moreover, recent studies (Y. Yang et al., 2022, Zou et al., 2026) indicate that such measures can provide useful insights into variation across proficiency levels, genres, and learning contexts. Syntactic complexity, then, provides a critical lens to understand both L2 writing quality and the developmental processes that underlie college English writing.

### *The Role of L1 Background*

A major issue in this field is the role of L1 background on syntactic complexity. Learners bring different linguistic resources, rhetorical habits, and syntactic preferences into English writing, so their development does not always follow the same pathway. Differences between native-speaker and non-native-speaker writing have been reported in indices related to subordination and phrasal sophistication (Ai & Lu, 2013). L1 background may further shape learners' use of syntactic measures, such as coordination, clausal embedding, and noun phrase modification, producing different syntactic profiles (Lu & Ai, 2015). Generally, Chinese EFL learners tend to go through a developmental pattern from clause complexity to simpler phrasal structures (Li et al., 2022), but such a developmental pattern does not necessarily happen consistently across

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EISSN : 0128-164X
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different levels of language proficiency. Korean and Japanese learners might also show L1-related preferences in terms of clause types or sequencing patterns (Lyu et al., 2022). Therefore, L1 influence should not be seen as just interference, but also as part of learners' multilingual resources and developmental trajectories (Shen et al., 2023). Being aware of these patterns helps to avoid overgeneralization and enables more targeted pedagogy.

### *Effect of Genre on Syntactic Complexity*

Syntactic complexity is also affected by genre as different genres of writing make different rhetorical and cognitive demands. Argumentative writing is usually written in a more complex syntax than narrative writing, because it needs claims, reasons, and evidence (Bae & Min, 2020). In complex nominals and longer production units, too, genre-based variation has been found, with argumentative essays being more densely syntactic than narrative or descriptive texts (Dong et al., 2023). This can be explained by the informational density of academic argumentation that is based on abstract ideas and conceptual relations that encourage the modification of noun phrases, embedded clauses and syntactic compression. Chinese EFL argumentative essays tend to use more complex nominal constructions that are characterized by logical reasoning and abstraction (Lei et al., 2023). However, the effects of syntactic complexity and writing quality might be genre-dependent, and a feature effective for argumentative writing might not be effective for narrative or expository writing (J. Zhang & Zhang, 2025). Moreover, expressive writing can also foster syntactic sophistication if the learners have an emotional attachment to the topic (Alkhalaf, 2022). Syntactic complexity should therefore be discussed in relation to genre conventions, topic familiarity, communicative purpose and writer engagement.

### *Instructional Practices and Educational Contexts*

Instructional practices and educational contexts affect syntactic development. Longer exposure to English does not lead to college students learning more advanced syntactic structures. They grow with teaching, feedback, task design, exposure to reading, and opportunities to revise. Targeted instruction helps learners to understand the function of complex phrases and clauses in academic writing and to develop advanced uses of syntax (Lei et al., 2023). In addition, the repetitive exposure and practice of the target structures in the form-focused instruction in writing tasks may promote the development of syntactic sophistication (Zhou & Lü, 2022). Syntactic development is not always a linear process. Students may increase sentence length or subordination first and then later switch to more compact phrasal complexity. Academic reading can also be useful to this process as students are introduced to dense noun phrases, embedded structures and other complicated patterns that can be transferred into writing (Bi & Wang, 2025). But syntactic complexity does not always improve on feedback. The effect may be minor and incidental as students tend to focus on error correction rather than on experimenting with different syntactic structures (Thi & Nikolov, 2023). Thus, instruction should not only correct errors but also promote syntactic expansion and transformation and rhetorical appropriateness.

### *Syntactic Complexity and Writing Quality*

The relationship between syntactic complexity and writing quality is significant, but not linear. More advanced writers can use elaborated structures to express complex meanings, so increased syntactic complexity is often correlated with better writing. More proficient writers

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EISSN : 0128-164X
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tend to use sophisticated phrasal constructions while less proficient writers tend to make use of coordination or simpler clausal structures (Ai & Lu, 2013). This corroborates the view that development is from clause chaining to phrasal elaboration and syntactic compression. But more complexity does not necessarily mean better writing, as long and badly controlled sentences can reduce clarity, especially for learners with lower proficiency. However, although some syntactic measures are capable of predicting the quality of EFL argumentative essays, measures at the clausal and phrasal levels are generally more informative than more global measures such as sentence length (Moges et al., 2025). Moreover, syntactic complexity's predictive power varies by genres, proficiency levels, and rating criteria (J. Zhang & Zhang, 2025). In conclusion, teachers and raters should avoid treating longer sentences or more subordination as automatic signs of quality and should interpret syntactic complexity in relation to task purpose, genre expectations, clarity, and learner control.

## Review Methodology

### *Research Framework*

This systematic review employed the PICo framework (Population, Interest, Context) to formulate research questions for qualitative inquiry. Stern et al. (2014) developed the PICo framework as a systematic approach to defining the key elements of a research inquiry, specifically for qualitative and exploratory research.

**Table 1: PICo Components and Its Descriptions**

| Components | Descriptions |
|---|---|
| Population (P) | College-level L2 English writers |
| Interest (I) | Conceptualization, operationalization, and development of syntactic complexity in writing |
| Context (Co) | Academic writing contexts in higher education (2022-2026) |

### *Research Objectives and Questions*

This review aims to synthesize recent research on syntactic complexity in college-level L2 English writing. It reviews how syntactic complexity has been conceptualized and operationalized, what developmental patterns have been identified, and how task-related, contextual, and instructional factors influence learners' syntactic performance. This review also clarifies the role of syntactic complexity in L2 writing development and shed light on its implications for writing assessment and pedagogy. The review thus addresses the following research questions:

*RQ1* *How is syntactic complexity conceptualized and operationalized as a dimension of writing quality in college-level L2 English writing research?*

*RQ2* *What types of development of syntactic complexity have been reported for college-level L2 English writers?*

*RQ3* *How do task-related and contextual conditions affect syntactic complexity in L2 English writing at the college level?*

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EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1760-1778

*RQ4* *In what ways do pedagogical and instructional practices mediate syntactic complexity development in college level L2 English writing contexts?*

***Identification***

The review process started with the identification stage following the PRISMA framework, which aims to find all potentially relevant studies through a comprehensive and systematic database search. We applied a structured search strategy, which consisted of identifying keywords and searching databases. We first identified relevant keywords and related terms from previous studies, subject-specific terminology and the objectives of the present review. The search string "syntactic complexity" AND "writing" was then developed and applied consistently across two internationally recognized databases, Scopus and ERIC (see Table 2). These databases were selected because of their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in applied linguistics, second language writing, and educational research, thereby ensuring both comprehensive coverage and disciplinary relevance. For both databases, the same search string was used to find the search to ensure consistency and transparency.

The first database search yielded 1014 records (694 from Scopus and 320 from ERIC) prior to screening and eligibility. The increased number of publications is attributed to a wider multidisciplinary scope and the larger number of high impact journals indexed by Scopus. ERIC provided additional education-related studies that were not indexed in other databases. The addition of these two databases was intended to increase the completeness of the literature search and reduce the risk of missing relevant publications. All identified records were exported into a reference management system for subsequent screening, according to the PRISMA guidelines. Duplicate records were identified and excluded during screening prior to eligibility assessment. Reporting the number of publications retrieved from each database adds an audit trail to the identification process and makes the systematic review more methodologically rigorous, reproducible and reliable.

**Table 2: Search Strings from the Scopus and ERIC Databases**

| Database | Search String and Date of Access |
|---|---|
| Scopus | TITLE-ABS-KEY ((“syntactic complexity” OR “syntax complexity” OR “complexity of syntax”) AND (writing OR “written expression” OR “written communication” OR “text production”))<br><br>**Date of Access: June 2026** |
| ERIC | (“syntactic complexity” OR “syntax complexity” OR “complexity of syntax”) AND (writing OR “written expression” OR “written communication” OR “text production”)<br><br>**Date of Access: June 2026** |

***Screening***

Screening was performed to select records matching the pre-determined scope and research questions for this review. At this point, the retrieved records were analysed according to the exclusion and inclusion criteria established for the study. Exclusion criteria included non-

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English publications, publications before 2022, conference papers, books, reviews or in-press articles and articles indexed outside the fields of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities. These criteria were used to ensure that the remaining studies were recent, peer-reviewed journal articles closely related to the disciplinary focus of the review. Thus, in the screening phase, 747 records were excluded. 267 records were obtained after the screening process, comprising 197 records from Scopus and 70 records from Eric. Then a duplicate checking process was conducted, as the same articles may appear in more than one database. This process eliminated 33 duplicate papers from the searched list. Hence, the stage of eligibility assessment was kept for 234 unique records. The screening process helped narrow the search results to studies that were more suitable for answering the review questions and reduced the possibility of including irrelevant, outdated, incomplete, or overlapping publications. Table 3 illustrates the selection criteria for the screening.

**Table 3: Selection Criterion for Screening**

| Criterion | Inclusion | Exclusion |
|---|---|---|
| Language | English | Non-English |
| Timeline | 2022 – 2026 | < 2022 |
| Literature type | Journal (Article) | Conference, Book, Review |
| Publication Stage | Final | In Press |
| Subject | Besides Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities | Besides Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities |

***Eligibility***

After screening and duplicate removal, 234 articles were assessed for eligibility. At this stage, the titles, abstracts, keywords, and full text were reviewed against the objectives of this study. The review included studies that focused on syntactic complexity in ESL/EFL or L2 English writing at the college, university, undergraduate, or graduate level. Articles were considered eligible when syntactic complexity was a central construct or a major analytical variable, and when the study contributed to issues such as writing quality, proficiency, genre, task type, topic, feedback, instruction, or developmental patterns in L2 English writing. Records were excluded if they were outside the field, not clearly related to L2 English writing, or if their titles and abstracts were not significantly connected to the objective of this review. Studies focusing on non-college learners, non-English writing, speaking rather than writing, or general language performance without sufficient attention to syntactic complexity were also removed. This eligibility process ensured that the final sample was directly aligned with the review scope and research questions. Finally, 31 studies were included in the qualitative analysis for further evaluation and synthesis.

***Data Abstraction and Analysis***

An integrative thematic analysis was used as one of the assessment strategies in this study to examine and synthesise studies with different research designs. The purpose of this process was to identify relevant themes and sub-themes related to syntactic complexity in college-level L2 English writing. The analysis selection was carried out by author and co-author. After the screening and eligibility stages, 31 studies were included in the final qualitative synthesis. The complete selection process is illustrated in Figure 1, which presents the PRISMA flow diagram

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showing the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and included at each stage (see Figure 1). The systematic selection process from initial database searches (n = 1,014) to screening, eligibility assessment and final inclusion (n = 31) based on PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) is presented in Figure 1. The authors carefully reviewed the selected studies, and extracted information on syntactic complexity, writing quality, developmental patterns, task and contextual factors, and pedagogical mediation. The methods, research contexts and key findings of the included studies were also compared to ensure that the developed themes were grounded in the reviewed literature.

The process of developing themes was iterative, involving repeated reading, coding, comparison, and refinement. A log was kept during the analysis to document analytical decisions, emerging ideas, uncertainties and interpretations of the data. The author and co-author then reviewed the preliminary categories and compared them with the evidence from the included studies. Any discrepancies during the process of theme development were resolved through discussion and further review of the extracted findings. Finally, the themes were refined to ensure clarity, consistency, and relevance to the focus of the review. Based on this process, four themes were developed: Syntactic Complexity as an Indicator of Writing Quality, Developmental Patterns in L2 Syntactic Complexity, Task- and Context-Sensitive Nature of Syntactic Complexity, and Pedagogical Mediation of Syntactic Complexity.

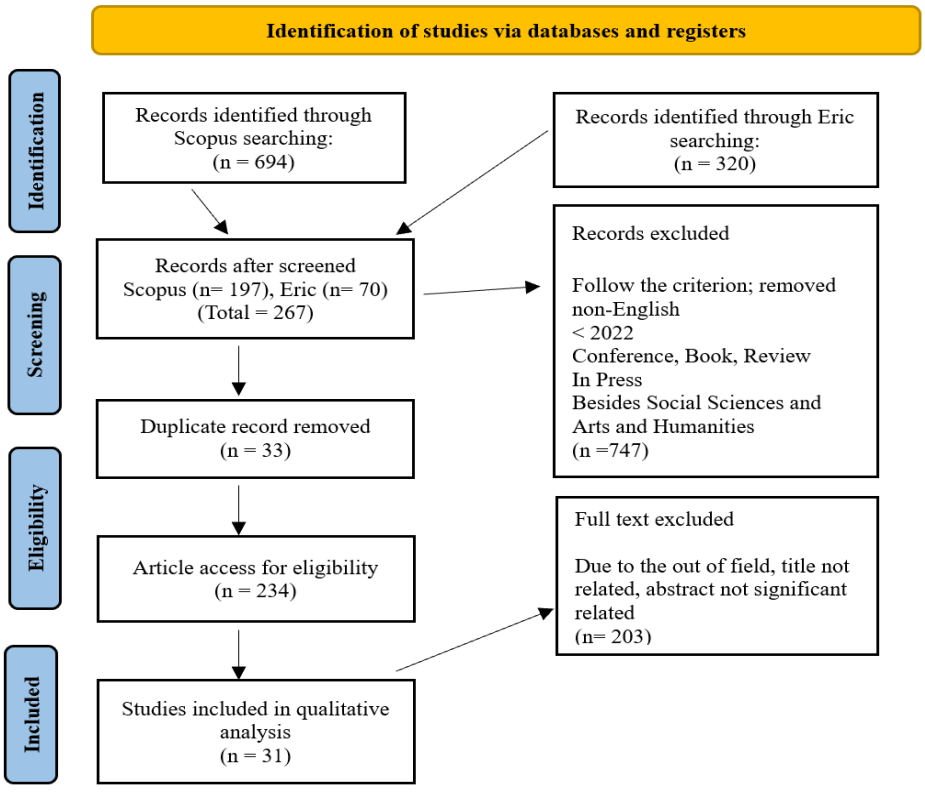



**Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram for Study Selection Process**

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## Result

A total of 31 primary studies were extracted and analysed following the PRISMA-based search and screening process. The selected studies were then categorised thematically to provide a structured understanding of recent.

### *Syntactic Complexity as an Indicator of Writing Quality*

Across recent studies, syntactic complexity has been treated as an important but not independent indicator of L2 college writing quality. Findings show that syntactic measures can explain meaningful variation in human-rated scores, especially when analysis moves beyond broad sentence-level indices. Fine-grained measures appear more informative than traditional global indices because such measures capture specific structural resources used in advanced academic writing. For example, fine-grained syntactic indices accounted for more variance in scores than traditional indices for both application letters and argumentative essays (X. Zhang & Lu, 2022). Similar evidence is available in studies of shared linguistic features, where the count of complex nominals per clause, in conjunction with lexical sophistication and lexical diversity, accounted for a very large percentage of writing quality in application letters and argumentative essays (X. Zhang et al., 2022). Syntactic complexity was another salient factor in assessment, as identified by a structural equation model (SEM) that accounted for 42% of the variance in human-rated scores of argumentative writings (Peng et al., 2024). These results suggest that syntactic complexity contributes to writing quality mainly through more elaborated nominal structures, longer production units, and phrasal modification. However, syntactic complexity functions best as one component of writing quality rather than as a single substitute for expert judgement, because rating outcomes are also shaped by lexical, phraseological, fluency, and genre-related features.

A consistent finding across these articles is that phrasal complexity, especially noun phrase elaboration, has become a central predictor of stronger L2 academic writing. Earlier syntactic complexity research often emphasized clausal subordination, but recent findings from college-level EFL writing show that noun phrase complexity may offer stronger evidence of mature writing. The writing was judged to be argumentative by trained raters. Noun phrase complexity was a factor of influence, and prepositional phrases and relative clauses as noun modifiers were important explanatory factors (Peng et al., 2024). Undergraduate EMI writing quality was related to sentence length, noun phrase length, and subordination, with noun phrase length predicting proficiency levels (Lahuerta Martínez, 2024). Research on topic-based argumentative writing also found differences on phrasal-level metrics between proficiency levels but not on clause-level metrics (Ha, 2022). Y. Zhang and Ouyang (2023) found that the finer-grained syntactic indices (e.g., phrasal complexity and syntactic sophistication) were better predictors of writing performance than the broader syntactic indices in both independent and integrated writing tasks. These studies collectively suggest a shift in the way we think about syntactic complexity. High-quality L2 college writing is not just longer or more subordinated, but often denser, more nominal, and more elaborated at the phrase level.

The relationship between syntactic complexity and writing quality also varies by genre, task type and topic, which limits the use of a universal syntactic benchmark for L2 writing assessment. The genre effect was particularly obvious when comparing application letters and argumentative essays, with different explained variances and significant syntactic predictors for each genre (X. Zhang & Lu, 2022). A more holistic genre-based analysis, however, revealed

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that complexity, accuracy and fluency explained significant proportions of variance in writing scores, but the predictors varied depending on whether the writing was narrative, expository or argumentative. Narrative and expository tasks were noted for their fluency, while argumentative tasks were more prominent for their lexical sophistication (W. Yang et al., 2025). The predictive power of syntactic complexity was relatively stable for independent and integrated writing; lexical indices were more predictive for independent writing and phraseological indices were more predictive for integrated writing (Y. Zhang & Ouyang, 2023). It is difficult to deal with topic effects. Ha (2022) demonstrates different syntactic profiles of argumentative essays written on different topics, focusing on T-unit complexity, and phrasal level metrics. Such findings suggest that assessment practices should not view syntactic complexity as a stable trait. Instead rating rubrics and automated scoring models need to take into account whether a given task naturally promotes fluency, lexical sophistication, phrasal elaboration or clause-level complexity.

Although computational tools have increased the efficiency of syntactic and lexical analysis, findings suggest that automated indices need careful interpretation when used for writing assessment. Besides, computational measures (e.g., those provided by tools such as TAASSC and L2SCA) were found to be very useful in modelling absolute syntactic complexity and predicting expert-rated argumentative writing quality (Peng et al., 2024). Nevertheless, studies on narrative writing have revealed that lexical diversity and lexical sophistication are more predictive of human-rated quality than computational syntactic measures, and that manually coded syntactic complexity is a better predictor than automated syntactic indices (Janebi Enayat, 2025). Computational tools then may be able to pick up many surface features but may not be able to capture functional quality of syntactic choices in context. Also, research on undergraduate EMI writing indicates that syntactic and lexical complexity do not always develop in parallel, with the first one plateauing at higher levels and the second one continuing to develop (Lahuerta Martínez, 2024). Therefore, syntactic complexity should be interpreted together with lexical sophistication, lexical diversity, phraseological complexity, and task demands.

***Developmental Patterns in L2 Syntactic Complexity***

Developmental research on L2 syntactic complexity shows that growth in college English writing is not a simple movement from short to long sentences. Across the texts, development is more often described as uneven, genre-related, and measure-dependent. Longitudinal evidence at the macro level showed that Chinese university learners increased in length-based complexity, coordination and phrasal sophistication over four semesters but decreased in clausal subordination (Lei et al., 2023). This suggests a development of the style to be more formal, academic rather than more clauses. Similar developmental trends were found in argumentative writing in semester-based Learners had lower coordinated clausal complexity, but higher nominal complexity, especially for the upper-intermediate learners (Li et al., 2022). A different study looking at two levels of proficiency and two genres found a differential effect of time, genre and their interaction on large-grained and fine-grained syntactic indices, showing the importance of writing genre and learner level in understanding syntactic development (Wang and Lu, 2026). Together these findings suggest multidimensionality in L2 syntactic development in college writing. Improvement does not always mean more subordination; rather, stronger academic writing often involves denser noun phrases, more elaborated nominal structures, and selective use of syntactic resources according to genre.

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A major pattern found across the studies is the gradual shift from clausal complexity toward phrasal and nominal complexity. Integrated writing research provides clear support for this view. In graph writing and summary writing, significant changes were found in both clausal and phrasal complexity, but the overall direction pointed toward a more phrasally complex academic style, with summary writing generally producing higher values on several fine-grained measures (Golparvar et al., 2025). Reading-to-write argumentative tasks also showed simultaneous increases in syntactic and lexical complexity, especially through complex nominals and sophisticated vocabulary, while qualitative evidence suggested that nominal structures in source texts helped scaffold learners' writing development (L. Tao et al., 2025). This is consistent with the large-scale longitudinal study which documented the growth of phrasal sophistication and more visible features of academic prose over time (Lei et al., 2023). Moreover, in the research on argumentative writing, the measurements of nominal complexity were more frequently used and there were significant proficiency-related differences in the measurements of pre-adjective, post-preposition and nominal clause (Li et al., 2022). Taken together, this body of research suggests that nominal elaboration is a strong correlate of L2 writing development at the college level and appears to be a hallmark of syntactic maturity in academic writing.

Another major finding was that syntactic complexity evolved in a dynamic and nonlinear way across levels of proficiency and individuals. The study was designed to be comparable to the CDST and found significant but non-linear development of both lexical and syntactic complexity across five proficiency levels. The development of syntactic complexity was more consistent, while the lexical complexity levelled off at intermediate levels (J. Liu et al., 2025). So the development of the different language subsystems does not necessarily occur at the same speed. A corpus-based approach by Wang et al. (2024) showed the dynamic and non-linear development of the three proficiency levels at the group and individual levels. The same level learners followed different routes. Such variability is further supported by studies on argumentative writing where syntactic complexity did not increase linearly during a semester-long writing course (Li et al., 2022). The relation between lexical and syntactic complexity also seems to be somewhat competitive. For example, a study with Dutch undergraduates showed that the lexical frequency profile and the number of complex nominals per sentence predicted academic quality, but negative correlations between lexical diversity and phrasal complexity indicate competition between lexical and syntactic resources (O'Leary & Steinkrauss, 2022). Therefore, developmental patterns should be interpreted as interaction among language subsystems rather than isolated growth in single syntactic measures.

Overall, the reviewed articles suggest that time, proficiency, genre, task type, source input and interaction with lexical development affect the developmental patterns of L2 syntactic complexity. In longitudinal and corpus-based studies, traditional length-based measures have been demonstrated to be insufficient for capturing syntactic development. More fine-grained indices will be capable of capturing finer grained changes in the phrasal elaboration, the syntactic variety and the academic nominal style (Golparvar et al., 2025; Lei et al., 2023; Wang & Lu, 2026). Additional support comes from integrated and reading-to-write tasks that demonstrate that source texts facilitate complexity development by exposing learners to more complex vocabulary and nominal structures (Golparvar et al., 2025; L. Tao et al., 2025). From a pedagogical point of view, these results support the necessity of stage-appropriate instruction, with lower-level learners needing help in balancing lexical and syntactic resources and more advanced learners needing more instruction in nominal modification, phrase-level compression, and genre-specific academic structures (Li et al., 2022; J. Liu et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024).

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### *Task- and Context-Sensitive Nature of Syntactic Complexity*

The reviewed studies consistently indicate that syntactic complexity is highly sensitive to learners' task readiness, particularly topic familiarity, planning opportunities, prior knowledge, and reasoning demands. Rather than reflecting a fixed learner ability, syntactic complexity varies according to the cognitive support available before and during writing. The results indicated that topic familiarity and strategic planning had an impact on syntactic complexity, but the planning affected the phrasal level of complexity and not the other linguistic levels (Tabari & Wang, 2022). Similarly, prior knowledge facilitated lexical sophistication, whereas higher reasoning demands limited syntactic complexity, implying that the augmented cognitive load could shift learners' focus from syntactic elaboration to meaning construction (N. Tao & Wang, 2025). These findings are in line with the evidence that task conditions differentially allocate learners' attentional resources across complexity, accuracy, fluency and functional adequacy (Xu et al., 2023). The evidence as a whole point toward syntactic complexity being a task-sensitive construct whose development depends on the cognitive readiness of learners to the writing task.

Task readiness, as well as the design and implementation of writing tasks, also influence syntactic complexity in systematic but not always consistent ways. Independent and integrated writing tasks elicited different syntactic profiles, with integrated writing tending to promote more accuracy and phrasal elaboration, probably because source texts provided linguistic and informational support (L. Jiang et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). Research on task complexity has also found mixed results. Task complexity was increased by resource-directing dimensions, which improved syntactic complexity and lexical diversity, but other manipulations of reasoning demands did not result in significant gains in syntactic complexity, although it decreased lexical complexity and functional adequacy (C.-Y. Liu et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023). These contrasting findings suggest that the effects of task complexity depend less on complexity itself than on how task demands are operationalised. Evidence from task repetition and sequencing further supports this interpretation. Some features of syntactic complexity improved with task repetition, but task repetition was less effective than simple-to-complex sequence in comparison with complex-to-simple sequencing, which led to more consistent gains in both syntactic complexity and accuracy (Tabari et al., 2024; Tabari & Cho, 2025). It appears that the most advantageous demands for syntactic development are those which are increased stepwise, not linearly.

These findings also suggest that syntactic complexity is context sensitive with the interaction of learner characteristics and task conditions. In L. Jiang et al. (2025) study, working memory predicted syntactic complexity and writing accuracy, but the effect is specific to metrics and task types (L. Jiang et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). Language aptitude was also moderately related to overall writing performance but predicted specific aspects of clausal complexity, lexical variety and fluency (C.Y. Liu et al., 2023). We also found significant affective factors. The design of the tasks influenced not only the learners' linguistic performance but also their emotional readiness for complex writing. The simple-to-complex sequencing helped decrease anxiety of tasks and increase enjoyment (Tabari et al., 2024). Overall, these findings indicate that syntactic complexity is the outcome of the interaction between task conditions, cognitive resources, and affective experiences, and not a stable linguistic ability, supporting its essentially context-sensitive nature.

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1760-1778

***Pedagogical Mediation of Syntactic Complexity***

Pedagogical mediation of syntactic complexity is represented most clearly in studies on feedback, reading input, and classroom-based support for academic writing. Evidence from feedback research suggests that written feedback does not necessarily reduce structural complexity, even when learners may attend more strongly to accuracy. For example, a semester-long comparison of teacher feedback, automated feedback and combined feedback found no significant differences between original and revised texts, or pre-writing and post-writing assessments, in terms of syntactic complexity, indicating that the feedback did not cause the students to produce syntactically fewer complex texts (Thi & Nikolov, 2023). But the effect of written corrective feedback was more visible. Valizadeh (2022) found that the clause measures (clauses per sentence, clauses per T-unit, and complex T-units per T-unit) had improved after the receipt of direct corrective feedback although some gains were not maintained after a delayed interval. Groups of learners may also be distinguished in terms of syntactic complexity and error patterns. One group produced longer sentences that were less complex and contained more errors while the other group produced shorter sentences that were more complex (Thi & Nikolov, 2023). These findings suggest that diagnostic and feedback analysis can serve as a basis for writing pedagogy, but effects are contingent on the feedback type, proficiency, writing prompt and linguistic target.

Academic input and genre exposure also appear to mediate the development of syntactic complexity, especially in advanced contexts of academic writing. Extracurricular academic reading was found to support graduate students' abstract writing, with the reading group showing stronger growth than the comparison group in both large- and fine-grained syntactic complexity indices. Students produced longer sentences and more subordination, complex nominals, verb phrases, nominal clauses, finite relative clauses, initial adverbial participle clauses and multiple prepositional phrases after the reading program, suggesting deeper awareness of abstract genre conventions (Bi & Wang, 2025). This finding is related to the research on phrasal complexity in argumentative writing. Expert textbook essays and expert English majors used more noun phrases as subjects or objects, more prepositional phrases as adverbials and noun post-modifiers, and more multiple pre-modification and appositive phrases; the differences between STEM majors, English majors and textbook models indicate that the teaching materials may provide useful syntactic models for phrase level elaboration (Shao et al., 2022). Automated syntactic analyses of complexity and errors can also be used to identify groups of learners who may need more explicit instruction on sentence complexity, subordination, and production-unit length (Thi et al., 2023). Overall, reading-based instruction, model texts and corpus-informed diagnosis are conducive to a more genre-sensitive approach to syntactic development.

The mediation of syntactic complexity is further complicated by learner-internal pedagogical conditions, especially motivation and proficiency. Results indicated that motivational orientations predicted different aspects of L2 writing performance at different proficiency levels, implying a non-unidirectional role of motivation in syntactic complexity. Promotion was a strong predictor of phrasal complexity and lexical sophistication and predicted overall syntactic complexity for upper-intermediate and advanced learners but was negatively related to intermediate learners (Tabari and Farahanynia, 2025). Negative predictions for phrasal complexity and lexical diversity were found for the lower-proficiency learners, and positive predictions for prevention accuracy were found for the intermediate learners. The evaluation was believed to have syntactic subordination especially in intermediate and advanced groups.

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
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EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1760-1778

This is consistent with feedback and reading research that pedagogical intervention should be congruent with the learner's level, task goal, and linguistic focus (Bi & Wang, 2025; Thi & Nikolov, 2023; Valizadeh, 2022). Pedagogy that promotes syntactic complexity may therefore need balanced attention to affective readiness, corrective support, academic reading, and explicit modelling of phrasal elaboration.

## Discussion

The findings of this review indicate that syntactic complexity in L2 college English writing should not be interpreted as a simple indicator of writing quality. Although many studies reported positive associations between syntactic complexity and writing performance, this relationship was shown to depend on genre, task type, proficiency level, assessment criteria, and the specific measures employed. Recent research has also shifted from broad sentence-level indices towards fine-grained measures, particularly those capturing phrasal and nominal complexity, suggesting that syntactic maturity in academic writing is characterised less by longer sentences or greater clausal subordination than by the effective use of compact, information-dense structures. Furthermore, syntactic development was found to be uneven rather than linear. Learners may simultaneously increase phrasal elaboration while reducing clausal complexity, with such developmental patterns shaped by task conditions, source input, cognitive resources, affective factors, and instructional support. Taken together, these findings reinforce the view that syntactic complexity should be understood as a dynamic and context-dependent dimension of L2 writing development rather than a universal indicator of writing quality. This perspective has important implications for both assessment and pedagogy, suggesting that instructional and assessment practices should emphasise the appropriate, accurate, and genre-sensitive use of syntactic resources rather than simply encouraging greater structural complexity.

## Conclusion

This systematic literature review synthesised studies on syntactic complexity in L2 college English writing published over the past five years. To update field knowledge, 31 Scopus and ERIC studies were carefully reviewed using the PRISMA framework. The review integrated findings from several studies to distil the main trends in syntactic complexity research in writing quality, developmental pathways, task and contextual effects, and educational practices. It offers a platform for future studies on L2 academic writing by synthesizing scattered information and giving a coherent review of recent advances in the research of syntactic complexity. There are some limitations of course that should be pointed out. The review focused on English-language journal publications in Scopus and ERIC from 2022-2026. Hence, large amounts of evidence from various databases, publication formats or earlier time periods may have been missed. Future research will be improved with more coverage of databases, longer longitudinal studies, different learner demographics, and methodological consistency in quantifying syntactic complexity. These attempts will increase comparability and help us comprehend L2 academic writing syntactic development.

**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to PPIB, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia, and College English Department, Heihe University, China, for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and teachers who contributed valuable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.

**Funding Statement:** No Funding

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling (IJEPC).

**Ethics Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the participants' faculties. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

**Author Contribution Statement:** All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Dr. Sabariah Abd Rahim was responsible for the conceptualization, critical revision of the manuscript, and overall supervision of the study. Tan Liangshuang handled literature review, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1760-1778

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