Book Review


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In this book Housen, Kuiken and Vedder have brought together an engaging set of chapters focusing on complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) in second language acquisition (SLA) research. In their introduction, the editors review earlier work into the central concepts of the volume. They stress that much earlier research has used CAF as dependent variables to measure second language (L2) performance and proficiency. For example, L2 production was evaluated by means of, for example, the number of subordinate clauses per total number of clauses as a measure for structural complexity or a type–token based ratio for lexical complexity. Likewise, accuracy is often accounted for by using a global measure like ‘error free clauses’ or a more specific measure like the ‘target-like use of articles’. Similarly, fluency has been measured by referring to speed (e.g. the average number of syllables or words produced per second), as well as pausing and repair behavior of L2 speakers.

More recent work has put CAF in the focus of attention, that is, researchers have turned to investigate the constructs of complexity, accuracy and fluency themselves to come up with more precise definitions and more advanced measures. Also the contributors to this volume take a theoretical, methodological or empirical perspective on CAF addressing the constructs as topic of investigation or as dependent variables to measure L2 performance and proficiency.

In Chapter 2, Bulté and Housen search for a definition of linguistic and cognitive complexity and present an in-depth analysis and taxonomy of this construct. Towell, in Chapter 3, critically reviews CAF by relating the dimensions to psycholinguistic concepts of (1) linguistic competence, (2) learned linguistic knowledge and (3) the mental representations that enable linguistic information processing. Chapter 4 by Myles exemplifies how the use of formulaic sequences, especially at the beginner level of L2 performance, affects the evaluation of learners’ proficiency by means of CAF. Chapter 5 by Agren, Granfeldt and Schlyter shows how CAF is affected at various stages of L2 development. In Chapter 7 (Kuiken & Vedder) and Chapter 9 (Skehan & Foster) the respective authors share the overarching conclusions of synthesizing results of a set of earlier studies (three in Kuiken & Vedder, seven in Skehan & Foster) that used CAF as a dependent variable. Chapter 6 (de Jong, Steinel, Schoonen, Florijn & Hulstijn) and
Chapter 8 (Levkina & Gilabert) present original new investigations into effects of task manipulations on CAF. The final three chapters take a developmental perspective: Tonkyn in Chapter 10 investigates short-term group gains during an intensive English for academic purposes program and Gunnarsson (Chapter 11) and Ferrari (Chapter 12) take an in-depth and qualitative look at longitudinal development of multiple cases.

From this brief summary it can be seen that the authors in this volume jointly tackle some major challenges of CAF research, including the definition of CAF as theoretical constructs, their operationalization as empirical variables, the relationship of CAF with underlying cognitive L2 processes and their manifestation in L2 performance and proficiency. As a result, the book gives a comprehensive overview of current L2 research that is based on CAF. It is a very welcome addition to the field, especially since the last volume on CAF (Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki and Kim, 1998) is no longer available. Furthermore, it complements and extends more recent work (Housen & Kuiken 2009). The volume is in particular rich in addressing relevant issues from many different perspectives. A further strength of this book is the inclusion of many different linguistic contexts presenting data of child, adolescent and adult native speakers and L2 speakers at various levels of proficiency with a variety of source and target languages, investigating oral and written production, focusing on monologic and dialogic performance on a large variety of different tasks. The fact that well-known scholars and young beginning researchers both explain their thoughts on CAF shows again the volume’s wide scope.

For researchers interested in using CAF this book will be a vital source on theoretical and methodological issues to consider in future work. The editors’ introduction, which summarizes the main areas of debate and gives current definitions of the CAF constructs, will be of interest to scholars new to the field and may be of use for introducing CAF-based SLA research at the MA level. Researchers familiar with earlier work will benefit from the critical evaluations and detailed analyses in the more theoretical chapters and will value the many new aspects named in the empirical chapters.

There are a few critical points to mention. First, the audience is a research community, that is, L2 practitioners looking for guidance on how to examine their students’ classroom performance possibly will struggle with the content. Similarly, there is not much attention to language teaching, other than that some contributors name the pedagogical implications of their findings. Second, even though the title suggests that the book addresses performance and proficiency, there is more on the former while the latter is only briefly covered. The final point of concern may well be considered a strength: a reader hoping to find answers about CAF could be disappointed since the studies presented in this book open many more new questions than they answer. As such, the volume is an engaging research-oriented collection of innovative work that critically reviews the constructs of complexity, accuracy and complexity in second language research.

References