

# Gauging Spontaneous Language Gain

## SPONTANEOUS WRITTEN LANGUAGE GAIN IN AN UPPER-LEVEL COLLEGE GERMAN COURSE

Martina Lindseth, Annisa Luginbill | UW-Eau Claire, Department of Languages

The Power of **AND**

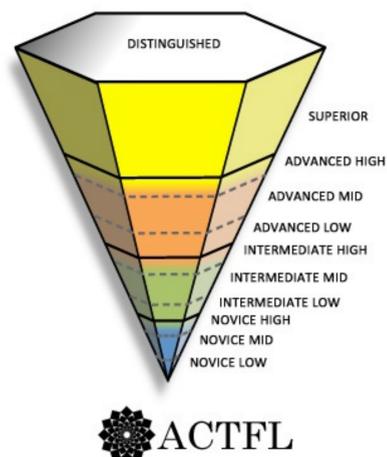
University of Wisconsin  
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### INTRODUCTION

This research project gauged the development of students' proficiency in *spontaneous* writing over the course of a semester at UWEC.

### JUSTIFICATION

Reaching the *Advanced* level of language proficiency according to the national standards of the American Association of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is a high stakes target at many universities across the United States, as well as a benchmark for graduation at UWEC. Much research has been done regarding the development of advanced level language functions. Most upper level classes focus on developing *reflective* writing, writing which grants unlimited time to the student and use of manipulatives, such as dictionaries. However, in a real world setting, students also need advanced level proficiency in spontaneous writing within a certain time limit and without access to said manipulatives to write cohesive and comprehensible emails, memos, and reports in a timely fashion.



### METHODS

#### SAMPLE COLLECTION

Two spontaneous writing samples were collected from 13 students who participated in German 314 during the spring semester of 2017 at the University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire. The samples were collected at two benchmarks, the beginning and the end of the semester.

#### LANGUAGE FEATURES AND DATA SELECTION

The following linguistic features were analyzed:

- Sentence Length
- Verb Usage

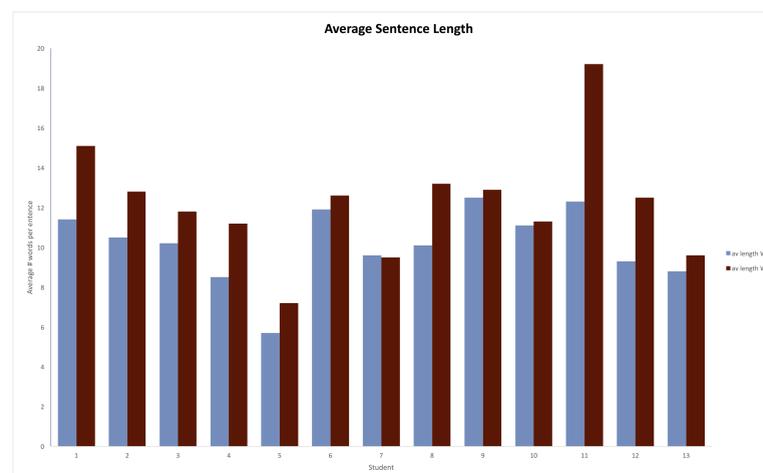
### SENTENCE LENGTH

First, the number of sentences were counted for each student, as well as the number of words in each sentence. Then, the average length of the sentences was determined. Longer sentences presumably correlate to more advanced proficiency levels, because they indicate the presence of a higher number of cohesion-building connectors, thus pointing in the direction of "connected discourse of paragraph length and structure" described in the ACTFL (2012) guidelines. Longer sentences also suggest the growing presence of more complex nominal phrases with the attributive use of adjectives, prepositional phrases ("the very nice lady with the cute little dog").

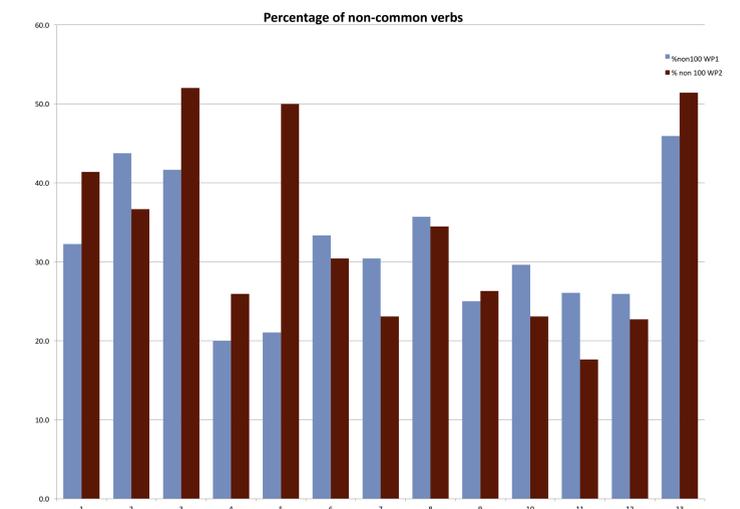
### VERB USAGE

Verb usage was analyzed in terms of variety and specificity. First, the total number of unique verbs was tallied for each writing sample at the two benchmarks. The individual lists of unique verbs were then cross checked with a list of the top 100 most used verbs in German, based on A Frequency Dictionary of German: Core Vocabulary for Learners (Jones & Tschirner 2006), thus calculating the number of less common (i.e. non-100) verbs for each sample. Less common verbs tend to be more specific, therefore lending themselves to more colorful descriptions and vivid narrations, but most importantly functions of a higher proficiency level.

### RESULTS



The group average sentence length increased from 10.1 words 12.2 words per sentence. A Wilcoxon Signed- Rank test implied that there was a significant difference at  $p \leq .05$  ( $z=3.11$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) with a large effect size  $d=1.539$ .



The percentage of less common verbs in the overall samples increased for the group, from 31.6 % to 33.5 %. However, this percentage did not increase for each student, varied greatly from individual to individual, and the difference was not statistically significant.

### ANALYSIS

Wilcoxon Signed- Rank tests were used to calculate interval values  $p$ . This study assumes the widely accepted  $p$ -value for the difference to be statistically significant at  $p \leq .05$ , which means that the results would occur by chance fewer than five times in 100 trials. Effect size were also calculated as an index of the magnitude of results that is not sensitive to sample size.

### CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The results imply that sentence length is a suitable and reliable measure to show language gain in students' spontaneous writing skills over the course of the semester. More studies are needed to test the generalizability of the findings and shed light on the interaction and potential correlation between oral and writing skills. Some questions that are being considered are:

- Is sentence length a reliable measure of language gain in speaking skills?
- Does a student with a large overall gain in speaking skills also have a large chance rate in sentence length?
- Is there a statistically significant correlation between growth rates of sentence length in writing and speaking?