

The development of sentence complexity in the writing of young learners of L3 Spanish in Norway

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Abstract

This article explores the development of sentence complexity in the writing of young learners of Spanish as the third language (L3) learned in Norwegian schools. Learning to write in a foreign language is a complex process, and a novice learner will start to write simple sentences that develop over time. To track this development, the present study investigates texts written by learners of Spanish from the first and second year of upper secondary school (school years 11-12, ages 16-17) as their ordinary schoolwork. The texts are collected as part of the TRAWL (Tracking Written Learner Language) corpus and show how learners write in an authentic school context. To address sentence development, the use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions is analyzed. The findings indicate that most pupils use *y* (and) and *pero* (but) to coordinate clauses. In subordinate clauses, *que* is frequently used to introduce relative clauses and *porque* to introduce causal clauses. There are only a few examples of a more varied use of conjunctions, indicating individual differences in the process of developing sentence complexity. The studied features are estimated to be acquired at the A1 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), while the pupils in this study are expected to be at the A2 level. The findings show that there may be a discrepancy between the pupils' actual knowledge and the expected knowledge according to the reference levels.

Keywords

Sentence complexity, young learners, Spanish, writing development, Norwegian school context, L3.

1. Introduction

To be able to express oneself through writing is an important part of learning a language. Writing is considered a basic skill, and both national and international curricula of language learning emphasize the development of writing skills (Council of Europe, 2001; Ministry of Education and Research, 2022; The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2006). Nevertheless, writing in a foreign language is a complex process, and a novice language learner will start writing simple sentences with a structure that will develop over time. In many Second Language Acquisition (SLA)-oriented L2 writing studies, how learners develop their writing is seen as indicative of their overall language development (Norris & Manchón, 2012, p. 224). Following this point of view, the study of learners' written texts will give insight into the learners' acquisition of language, but as Norris and Manchón (2012, p. 225) warn: "writing development cannot and should not be reduced to a few linguistic variables". It is important to take into account different variables that may influence the learner's writing, such as the context, the curriculum, the type of task as well as individual factors when studying the learners' development.

Furthermore, it is important to focus on the development of writing skills alone, and not solely as evidence of overall competence in a new language. In line with this idea, the present article aims at shedding light on the development of sentence complexity in writing by studying texts written by young learners of Spanish as their third language (L3) in a Norwegian school context by asking the following research question: Do young learners of L3 Spanish use more complex sentences during the course of their first two years of upper secondary school?

The data used for this study are texts collected as part of the TRAWL (Tracking Written Learner Language) corpus (see Dirdal et al., 2022), and follow the learners in their first and second year of upper secondary school (school years 11 and 12, henceforth Y11-Y12). The theoretical framework of the study will be presented in Section 2. As it is important to consider variables such as the context of the writing and the curriculum, the situation of L3 Spanish in the Norwegian school system will be presented in Section 3. Furthermore, research questions will be presented in Section 4, while the data used and the methods for data selection and analysis are described in Section 5. Finally, findings are presented in Section 6 and discussed in Section 7.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 *Language development and complexity*

As writing is an essential part of foreign language (FL) learning, it is an area that is widely explored. In the field of FL and SLA, research on writing development has frequently been related to the concepts of *complexity*, *accuracy*, and *fluency* (CAF) (Housen et al., 2012; Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Ortega, 2012). Following Connor-Linton and Polio (2014, p. 1), the “linguistic analysis of L2 writers’ texts was brought to the forefront of L2 writing research by Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, and Kim” in 1998, but due to differences in the method and the data used, it was not possible to establish reliable measures of development. Authors, including Pallotti (2009, 2015) and Mavrou & Ainciburu (2019), discuss the validity of the concepts of complexity, accuracy and fluency and the difficulties in comparing studies as the concepts are used with different meanings, while Ortega (2012) argues that the concepts should be analyzed separately.

The notion of complexity is a concept used to describe various aspects of language, as discussed by Housen, Kuiken, Vedder (2012) and Housen et al. (2019). On the other hand, Verspoor et al. (2017) state that “(L)inguistic complexity can be regarded as a valid descriptor of L2 performance, as an indicator of proficiency, and as an index of language development and progress”. Despite these ongoing discussions, the notion of different aspects of complexity is widely addressed in SLA research. Menke & Strawbridge (2019) analyzed the development in syntactic complexity in university students of L2 Spanish showing that length-based measures developed the most, but that there were individual differences. Mavrou & Ainciburu (2019) studied Greek students of L2 Spanish and discuss limitations in the construct of CAF and the possible influence of both L2 and L1 in the mean length of utterance. The study shows that many factors may influence students’ writing and that it is important to treat the results from CAF measurement with caution.

Most studies of linguistic complexity are based on texts written by university students and intermediate and advanced learners. Research on texts written by young learners and novice learners is scarce, especially because of the lack of available corpora. As Ortega pointed out in 2012: “(L)ittle is known about the incipient capacities of instructed foreign language learners before they reach the infamous and ubiquitous ‘intermediate’ level” (2012, p. 150). To the best of my knowledge, this claim is still valid today. The TRAWL corpus thus gives us an opportunity to explore the development of sentence complexity in the writing of young learners in their first years of instruction in their L3. Since these learners are below the intermediate level and are in their first phase of developing complex sentences, an analysis of how they write

complex sentences and how they meet the required structures in the language they are learning will be more fruitful than using standard measures of complexity.

2.2 Sentence structures in Spanish

In Spanish, a sentence is defined as a segment consisting of a subject and a predicate, although the subject does not need to be explicit (Real Academia Española, 2010, p. 17). This definition does not require a final punctuation mark for a segment to be called a sentence, and in Spanish grammar, the same word, ‘oración’, is used for both sentences and clauses. An ‘oración simple’ (simple sentence) consists of only one sentence, and an ‘oración compuesta’ (compound sentence) contains more than one clause that may be subordinate to the main clause (Real Academia Española, 2010, p. 18, my translations). Furthermore, subordinate clauses are traditionally divided into three groups: ‘sustantivas’ (nominal clauses), ‘adjetivas o de relativo’ (relative clauses), and ‘adverbiales o circunstanciales’ (adverbial clauses) (Real Academia Española, 2010, p. 19, my translations).

To connect and introduce sentences and clauses, Spanish grammar distinguishes between coordinating conjunctions connecting words and clauses on the same syntactic level and subordinating conjunctions connecting elements on different levels that depend on each other (Real Academia Española, 2010, p. 603). The conjunctions may be simple or compound. Simple coordinating conjunctions are *y* (and), *o* (or), *pero* (but), *sino* (but) and *mas*, while examples of compound coordinating conjunctions are *ni...ni...* (neither...nor), *tanto...como* (as well as), *tanto...cuanto*, *así...como*, *bien...bien*, *o...o* and *ya...ya*. The most common subordinating conjunction is *que*. *Que* introduces subordinate clauses alone or in combination with other words in fixed phrases called *locuciones conjuntivas* (Real Academia Española, 2010, p. 617). Table 1 shows examples of simple subordinate clauses in Spanish introduced by *que* with translation to English.

Table 1: Subordinate clauses in Spanish

<i>Oraciones sustantivas</i> (Nominal clauses)	Creo que es importante.	I think that it is important.
<i>Oraciones relativas</i> (Relative clauses)	El libro que te gusta.	The book that you like.
<i>Oraciones adverbiales</i> (Adverbial clauses)	Estudio porque me gusta.	I study because I like it.

Adverbial clauses fulfil different functions and are introduced by subordinating conjunctions or *locuciones conjuntivas*. Table 2 shows different types of subordinating conjunctions introducing adverbial clauses in Spanish. As seen in the table, many subordinating conjunctions are identical, but they are used with different meanings. The so-called *locuciones conjuntivas* may be of different types, as preposition + *que* in *porque* (because) and *para que* (in order to).

Table 2: *Subordinating conjunctions in Spanish* (Real Academia Española, 2010, pp. 604–605)

completive	que	si			
conditional		si	como		
causal			como	porque	
concessive		si bien		aunque	
temporal		ni bien		luego que	
consecutive	que				
illative				conque	luego
comparative	que		como		
exceptions					salvo

Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), the Spanish institution in charge of promoting the study of Spanish language and culture, Instituto Cervantes, has developed the *Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes* (2006). This document is not an official subject curriculum, but functions as a suggested curriculum for L2 and L3 Spanish, with specific descriptions of each reference level. Following these descriptions, at the lowest level defined as A1, learners are expected to coordinate clauses with *y* (and), *o* (or), *ni* (neither) and *pero* (but) and the compound coordinating conjunctions *ni..ni..* (neither..nor), *tanto...como* (as well as). In addition, they are expected to be able to produce subordinate clauses with simple patterns, as shown in the examples in Table 1. Regarding the description of A2, learners on this level are expected to use verbs in the past tense in the subordinate clauses, as well as conditional clauses with *si* (if), comparative clauses with *tanto... como* (as much as) and clauses introduced by prepositions and verbs in the infinitive.

3. Context of Study

With the Knowledge Promotion curriculum reform in the Norwegian school in 2006 (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2006), Spanish was introduced as a regular

third language (L3) at the lower secondary level in Norway. From the start, Spanish has been a prevalent choice, and continues as the most popular foreign language in lower secondary schools (Buckholm, 2022). In lower secondary school, pupils acquire what the Subject curriculum for foreign languages (*Læreplan i fremmedspråk*) defines as Level I (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2006), and the pupils continue with Level II in the first two years of upper secondary school. The curriculum was reformed in 2020 (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2021), but since the texts analyzed in this article were written before this reform, the main references will be to the curriculum from 2006 (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2006).

The Subject curriculum for foreign languages defines some competence aims for writing skills at Level II as “use words, sentence structures and text connectors in a varied and appropriate way” and “write cohesive texts in various genres” (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2006). In lower secondary school, in both the new and the old curricula, the final exam in a foreign language is an oral exam (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022; The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2006). This means that the main focus in lower secondary school is to develop oral skills, and the ability to write texts is not given the same attention as if the pupils were to have written exams. In upper secondary school, in contrast, pupils may be selected for a national final written exam and the development of writing skills is given more importance. In Y11 writing prompts are usually related to the pupils’ personal life. In contrast, in Y12 the writing prompts are similar to those used in the national final written exams, turning attention to aspects related to the Spanish-speaking world (Drange, 2019). This turn in attention requires that pupils develop more complex writing skills in upper secondary school to be able to respond to the exam prompts.

The national final written exams used to have three different writing prompts: one short answer and two longer texts with the possibility of choosing a genre. In the Directorates’ evaluation of the exams from 2019, it is stated that the pupils wrote longer texts, and that the less competent pupils would have “benefitted from writing shorter texts focusing more on language than on content” (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020a, my translation). In the description of the exam results, it is stated that pupils with high competence managed to write complex sentences and did not use Norwegian syntax, while the less competent pupils wrote simple sentences and used verbs in the infinitive. About 50 % of the pupils that participated in the exam received marks from 4 to 6, which are the highest marks indicating competence in writing complex sentences and following Spanish syntax (The Norwegian

Directorate for Education and Training, 2020a). To shed light on this process, it is relevant to study the development of these constructions from Y11 to Y12 in upper secondary school.

The Norwegian curriculum from 2006 does not indicate a relation between the levels in the CEFR and the curriculum, which means that the pupils' exams are not evaluated in terms of CEFR levels. Despite this lack of explicit relation, it is expected that pupils from secondary school are approaching the A2-B1 level when applying for university. For the updated curriculum from 2020, this relation is specified explicitly (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020b)

4. Research Questions

As indicated in the exam report described in Section 3, pupils with high competence manage to write complex sentences following Spanish syntax (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020a), which means that they would use coordinating conjunctions and subordinating conjunctions as *que* and *porque* (*Plan Curricular Del Instituto Cervantes*, 2006). The exam report describes what the pupils have managed to do in the national final exam, and it is interesting to track the pupils' development from the beginning of Y11 until the end of Y12 to see when these features are introduced in the pupils' texts, and how the development may differ between pupils. With this background, the following main research question is formulated:

Do young learners of L3 Spanish use more complex sentences during the course of their first two years of upper secondary school?

This question will be answered through the following sub-questions:

- a. Do the learners of L3 Spanish use coordinating conjunctions?
- b. Do the learners of L3 Spanish use subordinating conjunctions?
- c. Do the learners of L3 Spanish use different types of subordinate clauses?

5. Data and Methodology

5.1 Data

The data used in this study is selected from the TRAWL corpus. TRAWL is a longitudinal and multilingual learner corpus of written, authentic texts (see Dirdal et al. 2022 for a description of the corpus). To be able to track the longitudinal development of sentence complexity in the writing of young learners of L3 Spanish, one Spanish class was followed from Y11 to Y12 for

the purpose of the present study. The pupils studied Spanish at Level 2, which means that they had studied Spanish in lower secondary school. Nearly all the pupils in the class had agreed to hand in their texts as contributions to the corpus, but not all of them were present in all writing situations. For the present study, three collection points were selected, and only the pupils that had handed in all three texts were included. Table 3 shows information about the three collection points selected, each group of texts constituting a sub-corpus in this study. During the selected period, the pupils would be developing from advanced A1 to A2 according to the levels defined in CEFR indicated in parenthesis. The texts are identified with the unique four-letter code they received when included in the TRAWL corpus.

Table 3: Texts selected for the study

SUBCORPUS	TITI – Y11 (A1+) ¹	VIAC – Y12	HELS – Y12 (A2)	TOTAL
Number of texts	15	15	15	45
Total number of tokens	3365	4667	6613	14 645
Average words per text	224	311	441	

The first text, TITI, is part 3 of a test written by hand at school with no dictionary available. The pupils could choose between two prompts: *Mi recorrido por las Islas Canarias* (My tour around the Canary Islands) or *Mi viaje a Perú* (My trip to Peru). The genre was defined as either an email or a letter to the local newspaper about a trip last year. There were specific requirements such as: write about what you saw or experienced, places you visited or food you tried. It was also required to recommend three activities for young persons. The task included a list of words and connectors that could be used.

The second text, VIAC, is part 2 of a test written by hand at school with no dictionary available. The prompt was entitled *Mi viaje a Cuba* (My trip to Cuba), and it included specifically the following requirements: it should be written during a trip to Cuba for the Christmas holiday, and it should include some information about what you have experienced and some plans for the rest of the stay. It could also include some thoughts about life in Cuba. The pupils were able to choose the genre by themselves; it could be alternatively an email or a dialogue. A list of some connectors was provided together with the test.

¹ TITI = four letter text code, Y11= first year of upper secondary school, A1 = CEFR level.

The third text, HELS, is from a whole-day mock exam before the final exams. The mock exam follows the format of the national final exam with three writing tasks. Only task 4 was made available for the corpus, and this was written digitally at school with access to an online dictionary. This task included four different prompts with the pupils choosing one of the following: Migration, The year 2017, My identity and My trip to... (a Spanish-speaking country). The first prompt is the most formal text, while texts 2 and 3 invite the students to write about personal experiences and thoughts. The last prompt is defined to be written as an e-mail. As Table 4 shows, the task *My trip to...* was the most selected by the pupils.

Table 4: The selection of tasks

Description of prompts	1 Migration	2 The year 2017	3 My identity	4 My trip to...
Number of answers	3	2	0	10

Regarding genre, all of the prompts in the mock exam, except one, are descriptions of personal experiences. The most common type of texts are e-mails to a friend, and those would be considered informal texts. None of the prompts included requirements about length. Because of the similarities in the types of text, the comparisons of the texts across tasks will give a good idea of the longitudinal development of the pupils.

5.2 Methodology

As the TRAWL corpus is continuously developing, the data selected for this article was not integrated in the corpus when the texts were analyzed. The selected texts were anonymized and in the process of being published, but the tools integrated in the corpus' interface could not be used. To be able to analyze the data, the selected texts were uploaded as three separate corpora in *LancsBox*, which is a corpus tool where you can upload your own texts and create your own corpus (Brezina et al., 2020). Automatic calculations in *LancsBox* are used for the number of tokens, average words per text, relative frequencies, and other relevant measurements. Other tools in *LancsBox*, such as KWIC (Key Word in Context) concordances, are used to find words in the texts. Figure 1 shows the KWIC concordance where the keyword *o* is highlighted and centered so that one can easily observe the context to the left and right in *LancsBox*.

▼ Corpus		Corpus HELS Trawlartikkel		▼ Context	
Texts 5/15				7	
Left		No...			
	una disculpa! El internet en mi casa,	o	en la casa yo vivo en ahora,		
	loco frente a en noruego. Nadie titila	o	muestra a donde van a, está muy		
	Pero este día visitamos una otra escuela,	o	más de un guardería y colegio para		
	muy guapas. Después fuimos a un museo,	o	la previa casa del hombre de revolución,		
	jugamos baloncesto y futbol. El día después,	o	ayer estuvimos en una laguna, se llama		
	placer, porque tienen familia en otros países	o	aprenden una lenguajes o amor. Otros países		
	en otros países o aprenden una lenguajes	o	amor. Otros países tienen otras culturas, comida.		
	ha emigrado de su país por placer	o	por necesidad de muchos años. Algunas personas		
	personas huyen de guerras, pobreza, personas peligrosas	o	religión, y otras personas cambian debido a		
	otras cosas como el clima, el trabajo	o	la familia. ¿Qué son los motivos a		
	motivos a migración y es migración positiva	o	negativa? En este texto voy a utilizar		
	y familias llegan a Noruega sin dinero	o	ropa. Otro ejemplo es la situación en		
	diferente en seguridad. Además, pueden buscar trabajo	o	estudiar. Por otra parte, puede ser difícil		
	libres y derechos democráticos, economía, pobreza, guerras	o	solo por placer. Puede ser difícil y		
	Tal vez visitar la plaza del revolución	o	ir a la ciudad Trinidad de Cuba.		
	2017 e r t y u i	o	p a s d f g		
	æ n c v e r i	o	i o p o i u r		
	c v e r i o i	o	p o i u r e s		
	e r i o i o p	o	i u r e s El año		
	en mi vida. No tengo un novio	o	novia, pero ahora no es necesito. Tengo		
	males, pero no creo que sea jóvenes	o	hombres que sólo tienes días buenos. Mis		

Figure 1: Example of KWIC concordances of *o* in HELS

Due to the lack of more sophisticated annotations of the corpus, it was not possible to do an automatic count of clauses. Because of time limits, a manual count was not possible either. This means that common measures for sentence complexity as *mean length of clause* and *mean length of T-unit* are not displayed. Further, the norm of omitting the subject in Spanish is an element that would influence these measurements. In the process of learning the language, many pupils use an explicit subject even if it is not considered correct in Spanish. Measuring the mean length of a clause in the texts of these learners would give an insufficient report of their competence since they would produce longer sentences than the pupils omitting the subject as required. Instead of focusing on these quantitative measures, this article has a more qualitative focus aimed at analyzing the actual structures used – and their possible development – by looking at how different conjunctions are used to introduce more complex sentences.

As described in Section 2, learners at the A1 level are expected to use *y* (and), *o* (or), *ni* (neither), and *pero* (but) and the compound coordinating conjunctions *ni...ni...* (neither...nor) and *tanto...como* (as well as). To answer the research questions, a search for each of these conjunctions is done in *LancsBox* in each sub-corpus. The same procedure is followed for the subordinating conjunctions in Table 2. Based on the results of these searches, the relative frequency of each of the conjunctions is counted in *LancsBox* in each sub-corpus. Furthermore, to shed light on the use of the conjunctions, a KWIC concordance is displayed for each. As coordinating conjunctions may connect both nouns and sentences, the KWIC concordance will be used to identify the sentences, and the examples will be counted manually. The same procedure will be used on other conjunctions that may have different meanings, such as *que*.

Dispersion, “the degree to which occurrences of a word are distributed throughout a corpus evenly or unevenly” (Gries, 2020, p. 99), is calculated automatically in *LancsBox*. In this study, the dispersion value of DP_norm is used to see how the different conjunctions are distributed in the pupils’ texts. DP_norm is the normalized version of DP (deviation of proportions) and falls between 0 and 1, where the lower number indicates a more even distribution (Gries, 2020, p. 103).

6. Findings

6.1 General findings

The main research question addressed in this article asks if young learners of L3 Spanish use more complex sentences during the course of their first two years of upper secondary school? This question was divided into three sub-questions, where findings regarding the use of coordinating conjunctions will be presented first, followed by findings related to the use of subordinating conjunctions. Finally, findings related to the use of different types of subordinate clauses will be discussed.

When comparing the three sub-corpora, Table 3 in Section 5 shows that the average number of words per text increases over the period, as well as the total number of tokens. These numbers indicate a higher competence in writing by the end of the period studied, since HELS is the last text written by the pupils. Still, it is necessary to bear in mind that HELS was part of a whole-day mock exam, where the pupils may have had more time to write compared to the other texts. A closer analysis of the conjunctions used in the texts will indicate the use of more complex sentences and shed light on the writing development of young learners of L3 Spanish.

6.2 The use of coordinating conjunctions

The search for coordinating conjunctions in all three sub-corpora shows that *y* is the most common conjunction, followed by *pero*, while *o* is a less used conjunction. Neither the simple conjunction *ni* nor the compound conjunction *ni...ni* have been used at all, as presented in Table 5. A KWIC search for *tanto...como* showed that this construction was only used once and is therefore not included in the table. The relative frequency of the conjunctions indicates that the use of *y* decreases over time while the use of *o* increases in the final texts.

Table 5: Relative frequency of coordinating conjunctions

	TITI	VIAC	HELS
<i>y</i> (and)	475	480	428
<i>o</i> (or)	9	2,14	32
<i>ni</i> (neither)	0	0	0
<i>pero</i> (but)	65	60	83

LanCSBox includes the possibility of discovering the distribution of a word in all parts of a sub-corpus, and this tool shows that *y* is used in all the texts in all three sub-corpora, while *o* is only used in two texts in TITI, one text in VIAC and five texts in HELS. Four texts do not include *pero* in TITI and VIAC, and only one text does not include *pero* in HELS.

The calculation of the dispersion shows that DP_norm for *y* is 0,14 in TITI, 0,07 in VIAC and 0,10 in HELS, which indicates that *y* is relatively evenly distributed and also it is among the most evenly distributed words in all three sub-corpora.

A further step to analyze the use of *y*, is the display of a KWIC concordance in *LanCSBox*. A manual revision of the examples of *y* in TITI and HELS shows that 59 % of the examples of *y* in TITI connect two clauses with finite verbs, while 54 % of the examples of *y* in HELS connect two clauses. A comparison of the use of *y* in TITI and HELS shows that this conjunction is used slightly less in HELS.

The KWIC concordance of *o* shows that all the examples of this conjunction in TITI and VIAC are connecting words and not clauses. Even if the frequency of *o* is higher in HELS, it is only used once to connect two ordinary clauses.

Regarding *pero*, Table 5 shows an increase in the relative frequency of this conjunction in the last collection point HELS. The KWIC search shows that *pero* is mostly used as a coordinating conjunction, but there are also some examples of sentences starting with this word. In TITI, 77 % of the examples are coordinating two clauses, and the dispersion DP_norm is 0,28, almost the same as in VIAC with 0,27. In HELS, 84 % of the occurrences of *pero* are connecting two clauses, and the dispersion is more even as the DP_norm is 0,22.

6.3 The use of subordinating conjunctions

Table 2 in Section 2 shows the subordinating conjunctions in Spanish. Some of these conjunctions are difficult to use, and it is not expected that beginners have acquired them. The search for these subordinating conjunctions in the three sub-corpora only displayed examples for *que*

and *porque* in all three sub-corpora, while *aunque* only appeared with few examples in HELS, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Relative frequency of subordinating conjunctions

	TITI	VIAC	HELS
<i>que</i>	145,6	184,3	223,8
<i>porque</i>	56,5	38,6	52,9
<i>aunque</i>	0	0	6

The conditional conjunction *si* appears once in HELS and is not included in the table. In the following subsections, the use of the subordinating conjunctions *que* and *porque* will be described in more detail.

6.4 Subordinate clauses introduced by *que*

As indicated in Section 2, *que* is frequently used in fixed phrases introducing subordinate clauses in combination with other words, the so-called *locuciones conjuntivas*. In the KWIC search for *que* in *Lancsbox*, only the examples where *que* is used as an independent word are classified. Table 7 shows that the relative frequency of *que* increases from the first to the final texts. The distribution in the texts shows that 13 of 15 pupils used *que* in the first two texts, while all of them have used *que* in the last text. The dispersion indicates an even distribution. To be able to classify how *que* is used, manual counting of examples has been done, and the actual number of cases is included in the table. This number of cases also shows an increase from the first to the final group of texts.

Table 7: Distribution of *que*

	TITI	VIAC	HELS
Relative frequency	145,6	184,2	223,8
Distribution	13/15	13/15	15/15
Dispersion (DP_norm)	0,323	0,160	0,167
Number of cases	49	86	148

As *que* is used to introduce different types of subordinate clauses, each case is classified manually according to the type of clause. Table 8 shows the distribution of clause types introduced by *que*, including a category for other uses of *que*:

Table 8: The distribution of clause types introduced by *que*

Que introducing:	TITI	VIAC	HELS
Nominal clauses	3	21	40
Relative clauses	35	51	86
Adverbial clauses	0	0	4
Other uses of <i>que</i>	11	14	18
TOTAL	49	86	148

As shown in Table 8, relative clauses are used with a certain frequency in the first texts, while other types of subordinate clauses are almost unused. There are only a few examples of *que* introducing adverbial clauses, and here it is important to bear in mind that in introducing adverbial clauses, *que* will frequently be used in combination with other words in the so-called *locuciones conjuntivas* (e.g. *para que* ‘in order to’), and the table only includes cases where *que* is used alone. Furthermore, all the categories of subordinate clauses increase from the first to the last texts.

There are a few uses of *que* in different clause types as comparative clauses, such as fixed constructions and verb phrases that are classified as “Other uses of *que*” in Table 8. These few occurrences are not discussed in this paper since the number of cases is low. For adverbial clauses, it is important to look at *que* in combination with other words, such as *porque*, which will be discussed in the following subsection.

6.5 Subordinate clauses introduced by *porque*

Porque introduces causal clauses and is listed in the *Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes* as a feature expected to be used at the A1 level in Spanish. Table 9 shows the relative frequency and distribution of *porque* in the texts.

Table 9: Distribution of *porque*

	TITI	VIAC	HELS
Relative frequency	56,46	38,5	52,9
Distribution	10/15	9/15	13/15
Dispersion (DP_norm)	0,936	1,18	0,325
Number of cases	19	18	35

The relative frequency indicates that the use of *porque* is relatively stable over the period, while the distribution in the texts indicates that some pupils do not use *porque* in the first texts, and there is an increase in the pupils using *porque* in the final texts. The dispersion measure used, DP_norm, confirms that the use of *porque* is more evenly distributed in the last group of texts. The KWIC search of *porque* confirms that all the clauses introduced by *porque* have a finite verb and are thus subordinate clauses.

7. Discussion

The main aim of this article was to discover whether young learners of L3 Spanish developed their use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions during the course of their first two years of upper secondary school. If they do use these conjunctions to a greater extent by the end of Y12, it is a sign of having acquired a competence in writing more complex sentences after five years of L3 Spanish instruction in Norwegian schools. In the evaluation of the national exams of Spanish from 2019, as discussed in section 3, the National Directory of Education has indicated that about half the pupils are acquiring competence in writing complex sentences (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020a). It is not specified further what is understood by ‘complex sentences’. As mentioned in section 2, standard measures of complexity are frequently used to evaluate the development of learners. Instead of using these measures in the present study, a search for specific descriptors related to sentence structures of reference level A1 in the *Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes* (2006) was used to define elements required to write a complex sentence. Then an analysis of these descriptors was applied to texts written by a class of young learners of L3 Spanish in Norway. The findings support the need to develop more fine-grained measures for young and novice language learners, which also is discussed in Vold (2022) in relation to vocabulary development among learners of L3 French in Norway.

It is important to consider that this analysis only sampled one class of pupils, and that the results are limited to that class. Nevertheless, the class could be considered a typical class of L3 learners in Norway, and the findings are therefore relevant to take into consideration when developing teaching and learning materials for these groups of learners. Applying the measures used in this study to a larger number of texts would also be necessary to strengthen the findings and the measurement.

7.1 *The use of sentences with coordinating conjunctions*

The findings related to coordination indicate a variation in the use of the coordinating conjunctions. While *y* is used frequently in the first texts written, the use decreases slightly in the last texts. On the other hand, the use of *o* is increasing over time. Still, the KWIC concordance of *o* shows that this conjunction is mostly used to connect words and not clauses. Furthermore, *pero* is mainly used to connect clauses, and its use increases from the earlier to the later texts. The distribution in the later texts indicates that *pero* is used by almost all the pupils.

The negative conjunction *ni* is not used at all, neither as a simple nor as a compound conjunction. The compound conjunction *tanto...como* is only used correctly once, and that is in the HELS-corpus:

(1) *tanto todos los noruegos como todos los nicas*

Gloss: all the Norwegians **as well as** all the Nicas

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Two other pupils have tried to use the construction, one in the VIAC-corpus and one in HELS, using *y* instead of *como*, which is not correct in Spanish:

(2) *Los bailarinas eran muy bueno y bailaron tanto Cha cha cha y rumba*

Gloss: The dancers were very good and [they] danced **as well** Cha cha cha **and** rumba

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(3) (...) *tanto debido a desempleo y economía, y también a razón de la corrupción y el narcotráfico*

Gloss: (...) **as well** because the unemployment and economy, **and** also because of the corruption and the narcotraffic

P06443

These examples indicate that the compound conjunctions are more difficult to acquire since they display a specific pattern and thus are more complex. The increase of *o* and *pero* indicates that the idea of introducing an alternative or a contrast is more demanding than adding information with *y*. In the development of sentences, the pupils may use more complex words to add information as *y* decreases. In addition, the students are also able to express more complex ideas with more varied conjunctions.

As the dispersion shows, *y* and *pero* have been acquired almost evenly by all the pupils at the end of Y12, and both are used to coordinate clauses. When it comes to the other coordinating conjunctions, only a few pupils are in the process of including them in their texts. The first step in this process is linking words at the same level, and as the KWIC concordance indicated, there are only a few clauses coordinated by *o* in the corpus.

7.2 *The use of sentences with subordinating conjunctions*

The *Plan Curricular Del Instituto Cervantes* (2006) indicates that learners at the A1 level are expected to produce subordinate clauses with simple patterns, such as the examples in Table 1 (Section 2). The findings presented in Table 7 (Section 6) indicate a development in the use of *que* as a subordinating conjunction. On the other side, the frequency of *porque* does not show a clear pattern, while the appearance of *si* and *aunque* in the last texts indicates that the pupils are in the process of acquiring a greater variety of subordinating conjunctions, which, in turn, is an indicator of complexity. In contrast with the coordinating conjunctions, the subordinating conjunctions always introduce a subordinate clause.

Table 8 (Section 6) shows that the distribution of *que* in the later texts is even, and it is used by all the pupils. In Table 9 (Section 6), it is possible to see what kind of clauses *que* is introducing. While relative clauses are also used with some frequency in the early texts, the use of *que* to introduce nominal clauses increases from the early to the later texts.

For adverbial clauses, it is important to look at *que* in combination with other words, such as *porque* and different types of *locuciones conjuntivas*. For example, Table 9 (Section 6) indicates that the use of *porque* has developed over the period, resulting in a more even dispersion in the later texts. So even if the relative frequency has decreased slightly compared to the early texts, more pupils are using this subordinating conjunction.

8. Conclusions

The findings from this study indicate that most young learners of L3 Spanish use the conjunctions *y* and *pero* in their writing by the end of Y12. Regarding the use of these conjunctions in clauses for coordination, there has been a development in the whole group. However, when it comes to the use of a variety of coordinating conjunctions, there are only a few examples of more complex constructions, indicating that there are some individual differences in the development of more complex constructions.

In relation to the development in the use of subordinate clauses, the findings discover an increase in the use and distribution of clauses introduced by *que*. There are also a few examples

of the use of more complex connectors, indicating individual differences. The findings also indicate a clear increase in the use of nominal clauses by the end of Y12, which is a sign of more complexity in the sentences. Regarding the complexity measures discussed in the theoretical framework of this article, these findings support the need to develop more nuanced measures for young and novice language learners. In order to strengthen the findings discussed here, it is necessary to apply the measures used in this study to a larger number of texts.

The pupils studied are finishing their fifth year of instruction in Spanish and are expected to reach an A2 level in this language. Despite this expected competency, only a few of the features expected for the A1 level, in relation to sentence structures, are found. As the findings indicate a development in sentence complexity, some expected features are not found in the texts. There may be many reasons for this. Perhaps the genre of texts written does not require complex structures, or perhaps the structures have not been introduced in the textbooks or through other input. Another reason may be that some of the constructions are not comparable to the pupils' L1 and therefore are more difficult to acquire. Another important point is that learning a language outside of the context where the language is used, means that the exposure to natural and complex language is limited, making it impossible to use structures to which the pupils have never been exposed. In addition, it is important to consider that the number of texts analyzed is limited. Given the many factors that influence the writing experience, an analysis of texts written by another group of students may yield different results. Nevertheless, the class analyzed here is considered a typical class of L3 learners in Norway, and the findings are therefore relevant to take into consideration when developing teaching and learning materials for these groups of learners.

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