A longitudinal study of theme selection and progression in advanced L2 writing

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Outline of presentation

- Overview of educational context: Collegiate FL education in the USA
- Rationale for investigation of theme
- Data presentation and analysis
- Implications & next steps

Collegiate FL education in the USA

- Situated in humanistically oriented FL departments
- Four years of study, from beginning to advanced
- Limited contact hours (45-75 per semester)
- Traditional focus at the lower levels on "language" within a communicative language teaching framework
  - 2-4 semester language requirement contributes majority of lower-level enrollment; noticeable attrition after completion of requirement
- Subsequent focus at the upper levels on "content", i.e, literary and cultural studies → departmental "bifurcation" (Byrnes, 1998) results in national concern (e.g., MLA Report, 2007) but limited local action

Addressing departmental bifurcation: *Integrated* curriculum construction

Georgetown University German Department's (GUGD) four-year undergraduate curriculum:

- Centrality of texts and textuality to deliver content and model language use at *all* curricular levels
- Focus on genre as construct for
  - Selecting and sequencing texts;
  - Providing pedagogical guidance;
  - Serving as basis for genre-based writing and speaking tasks.

GUGD-based writing research 1

(Data source 1)

- <u>Syntactic development</u> (Byrnes, et al., 2005; Byrnes, Maxim & Norris, 2010):

  – Increase in Mean Length of T-Unit (MLTU) and Mean Length of Clause (MLC) from intermediate to very advanced learners

  – Increase in Clauses per T-Unit (CTU) for intermediate and advanced learners but decrease for very advanced learners

- <u>Relativization</u> (Byrnes & Sinicrope, 2008):

  – Emergence and use of more marked relative clauses already at intermediate level. Increase in relativization and reduction of more marked types of relativization at upper levels

GUGD-based writing research 2

(Data source 1)

- <u>Grammatical Metaphor</u> (Byrnes, 2009):
  - Increase in use of grammatical metaphor for meaning making and information structuring

- <u>Clausal manifestation of advancedness </u>(Maxim & Petersen, 2008):
  - Increased hierarchical organization of information through increased hypotaxis & decreased parataxis
  - Increased complexification at the phrasal, rather than at the clausal, level (longer, denser, yet fewer, clauses, i.e., increased lexical density and decreased grammatical intricacy) ⇒ increase in *intra*clausal activity & decrease in *inter*clausal activity

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GUGD-based writing research 3

(Data source 2)

- <u>Coherence- and cohesion-building through Theme</u> (Ryshina-Pankova, 2006):
  - Increase in use of lexically and grammtically complex themes for cohesion and coherence

- <u>Coherence- and cohesion-building through grammatical metaphor</u> (Ryshina-Pankova, 2010):
  - Increase in use of grammatical metaphor for meaning making and information structuring at advanced levels

Theme

- First element in clause; "Starting point for the message" (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004, p64)

- Indicator of method of development in text

- Resource for contextual coherence and textual cohesion (e.g., Ryshina-Pankova, 2006)

- Complement to previous GUGD-writing research on ideational and textual meaning

Data Source 1

- 14 undergraduate learners who completed three consecutive curricular levels:
  - <u>Level II</u> ("Intermediate"; 170 contact hours upon completion of level):
    - telling personal stories about contemporary issues in the German-speaking world (e.g., environment, multicultural society, identity, art and society)
  - <u>Level III</u> ("Lower-Advanced"; 255 contact hours upon completion of level):
    - framing personal stories against public events and histories in the German Federal Republic (e.g., post-war Germany, divided Germany, unified Germany)
  - <u>Level IV</u> ("Upper-Advanced"; 310 contact hours upon completion of level):
    - "reading" discourses of contemporary public life and developing the kinds of literacy abilities that are at the heart of summarizing, interpreting, critiquing, presenting and substantiating an opinion or argument.
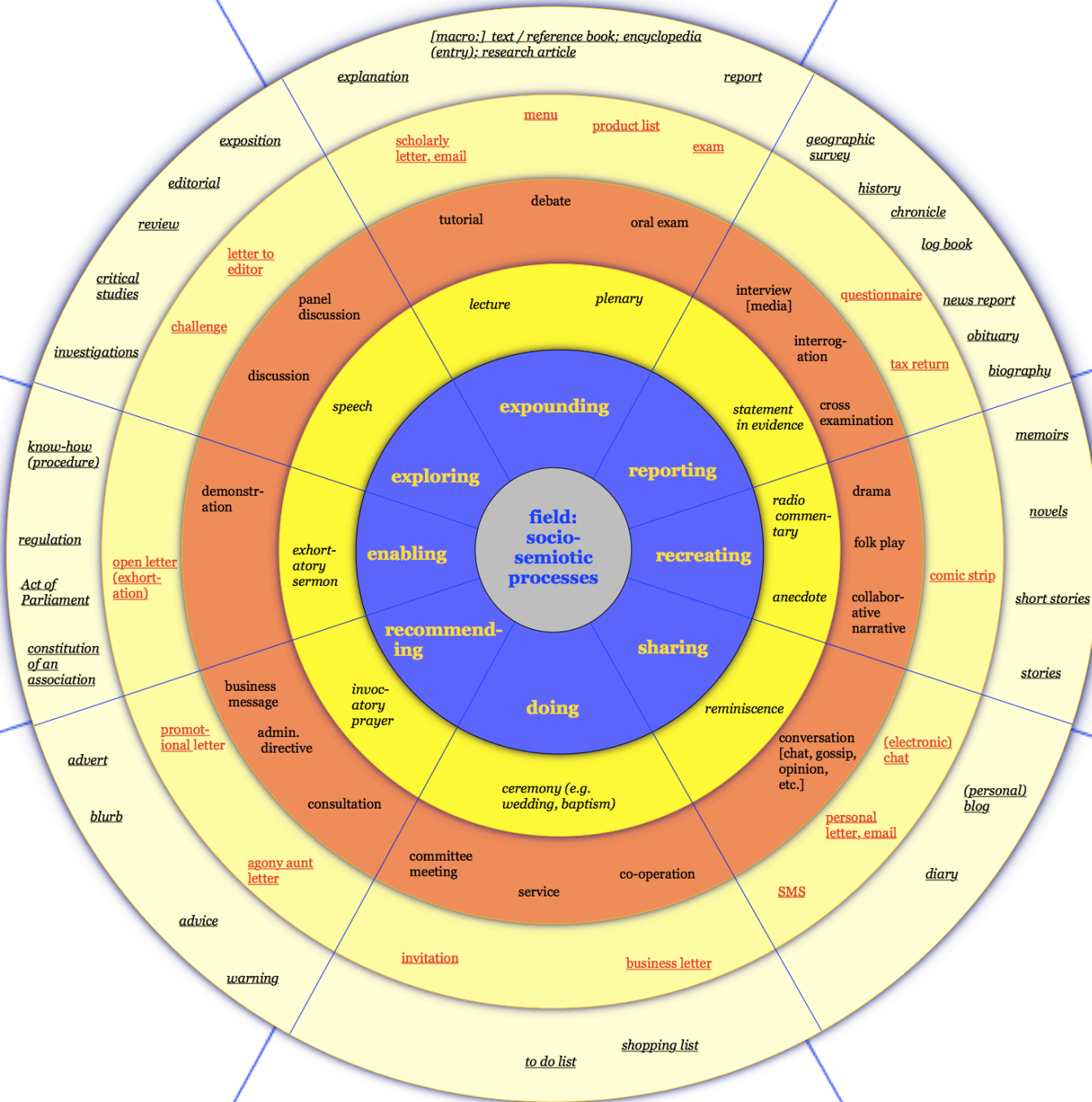
Data Source 2

- End-of-level prototypical performance writing tasks (PPTs)
  - Curriculum-dependent and pedagogy-embedded tasks
    - that reflect content and language focus of particular level
    - that are designed to elicit performances prototypical for end-of-level learners
  - Detailed "task sheet" divided into 3 categories
    - Task appropriateness
    - Content
    - Language focus
  - Rough draft submitted to corpus

Overview of PPTs

Task	Thematic focus	Textual focus → type
Level 2: 1st person narration of alternative ending to the novel *The Story of Mr. Sommer*	Imaginative treatment of personal relationships	Placing narration about personal lives into the context of a literary work → *recreating*
Level 3: Journalistic portrayal of a Vietnamese Family in Germany	Multicultural lives in contemporary German	Placing personal experiences into a broader social context → *reporting/expounding*
Level 4: Public speech on comparison and contrast of the European Union and the United States	Germany's role in the EU; creation of a constitution	Making an argument about social, political, economic developments in societies → *expounding/exploring*

field: socio-semiotic processes

expounding · **reporting** · **recreating** · **sharing** · **doing** · **recommending** · **enabling** · **exploring**

speech · lecture · plenary · statement in evidence · radio commentary · anecdote · reminiscence · ceremony (e.g. wedding, baptism) · invocatory prayer · exhortatory sermon

tutorial · debate · oral exam · interview [media] · interrogation · cross examination · drama · folk play · collaborative narrative · conversation [chat, gossip, opinion, etc.] · co-operation · service · committee meeting · consultation · admin. directive · business message · demonstration · discussion · panel discussion

[macro:] text / reference book; encyclopedia (entry); research article

explanation · exposition · editorial · review · critical studies · investigations · know-how (procedure) · regulation · Act of Parliament · constitution of an association · advert · blurb · advice · warning · to do list · shopping list · diary · (personal) blog · stories · short stories · novels · memoirs · biography · obituary · news report · chronicle · log book · history · geographic survey · report

menu · product list · exam · scholarly letter, email · questionnaire · tax return · letter to editor · challenge · open letter (exhortation) · promotional letter · agony aunt letter · invitation · business letter · SMS · personal letter, email · (electronic) chat · comic strip

Overview of Data Analysis 1

- Coding of all constituents of each sentence <u>up until</u> first element with a transitivity role as Theme
  - Coding of interpersonal, textual, and topical elements
- Coding for markedness of Theme (Eggins, 2004)
  - Unmarked Theme is Theme that conflates with Mood structure constituent typically found in 1st position of Mood class (e.g., Theme = subject in declarative; Theme = finite in interrogative)

Overview of Data Analysis 2

- Coding for grammatical and lexical complexity and lexical density (Ryshina-Pankova, 2006)
  - Lexically complex Theme = Theme with 3 or more ideational lexical items
  - Grammatically complex Theme = hypotactic clause complex as Theme
  - Lexically dense Theme = Grammatical metaphor as/in Theme

- HERE:
  - Theme with 3 or more ideational lexical items = lexically dense Theme
  - Hypotactic clause as Theme = grammatically complex Theme
  - Grammatical metaphor as/in Theme = Grammatical metaphor

Overview of Data Analysis 3: Classification of Themes as entities (Martin & Rose, 2003)

Indefinite pronouns		*some/any/nothing/nobody/no one*
Concrete	everyday	*man, girlfriend, face, hands*
	specialized	*mattock, lathe, gearbox*
Abstract	technical	*inflation, metafunction, gene*
	institutional	*offence, hearing, applications*
	semiotic	*question, issue, letter*
	generic	*colour, time, manner, way*
Metaphoric	process	*relationship, marriage, exposure*
	quality	*justice, truth, integrity*

Interpersonal elements in Theme

Percentage of interpersonal themes by level

	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Upper CI	0.12	0.06	0.09
▬ Mean	0.09	0.04	0.06
Lower CI	0.06	0.02	0.03

Curricular level
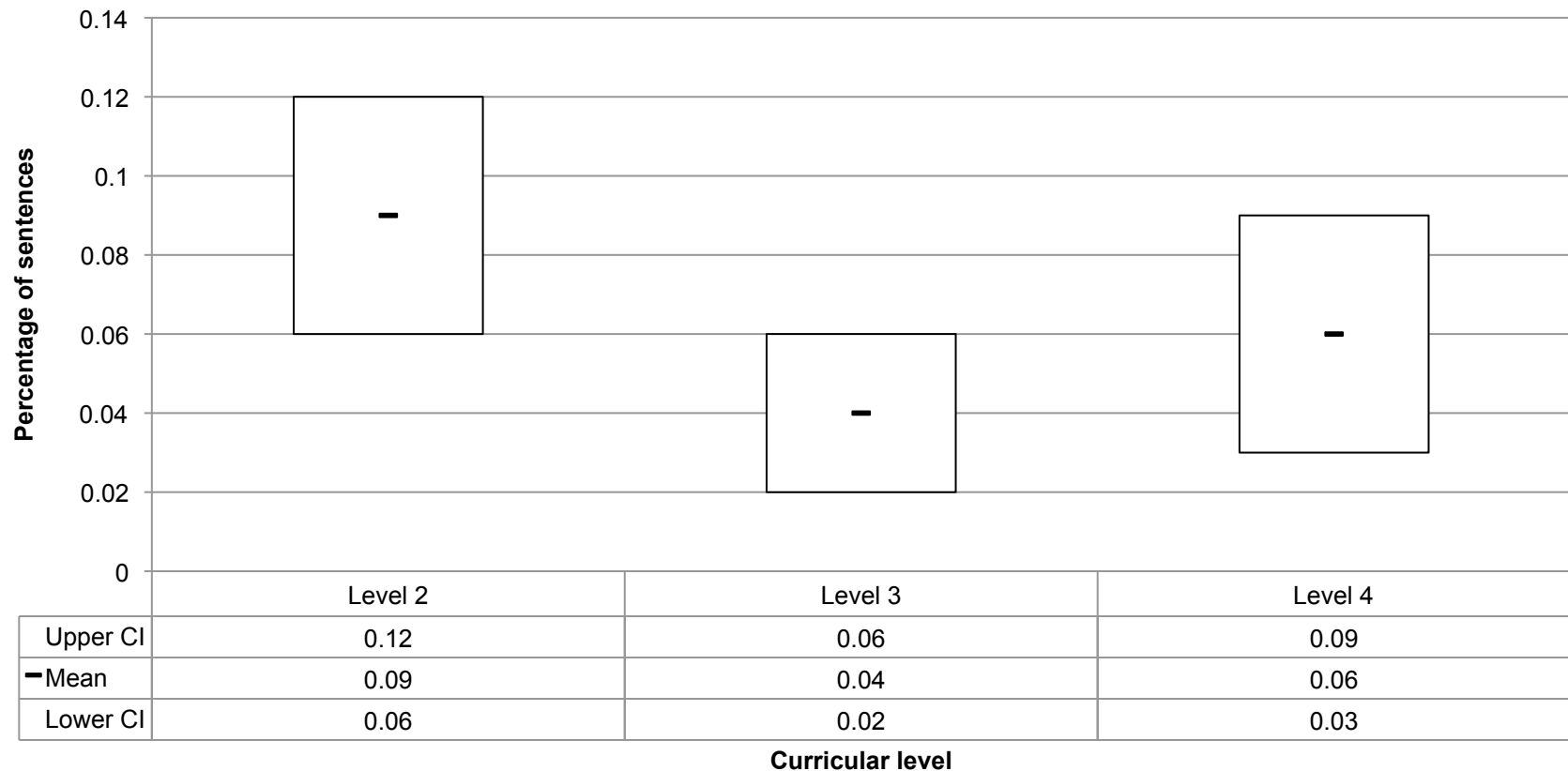
Textual elements in Theme

Percentage of textual themes by level

	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Upper CI	0.12	0.15	0.16
— Mean	0.09	0.11	0.12
Lower CI	0.06	0.07	0.08

Curricular level
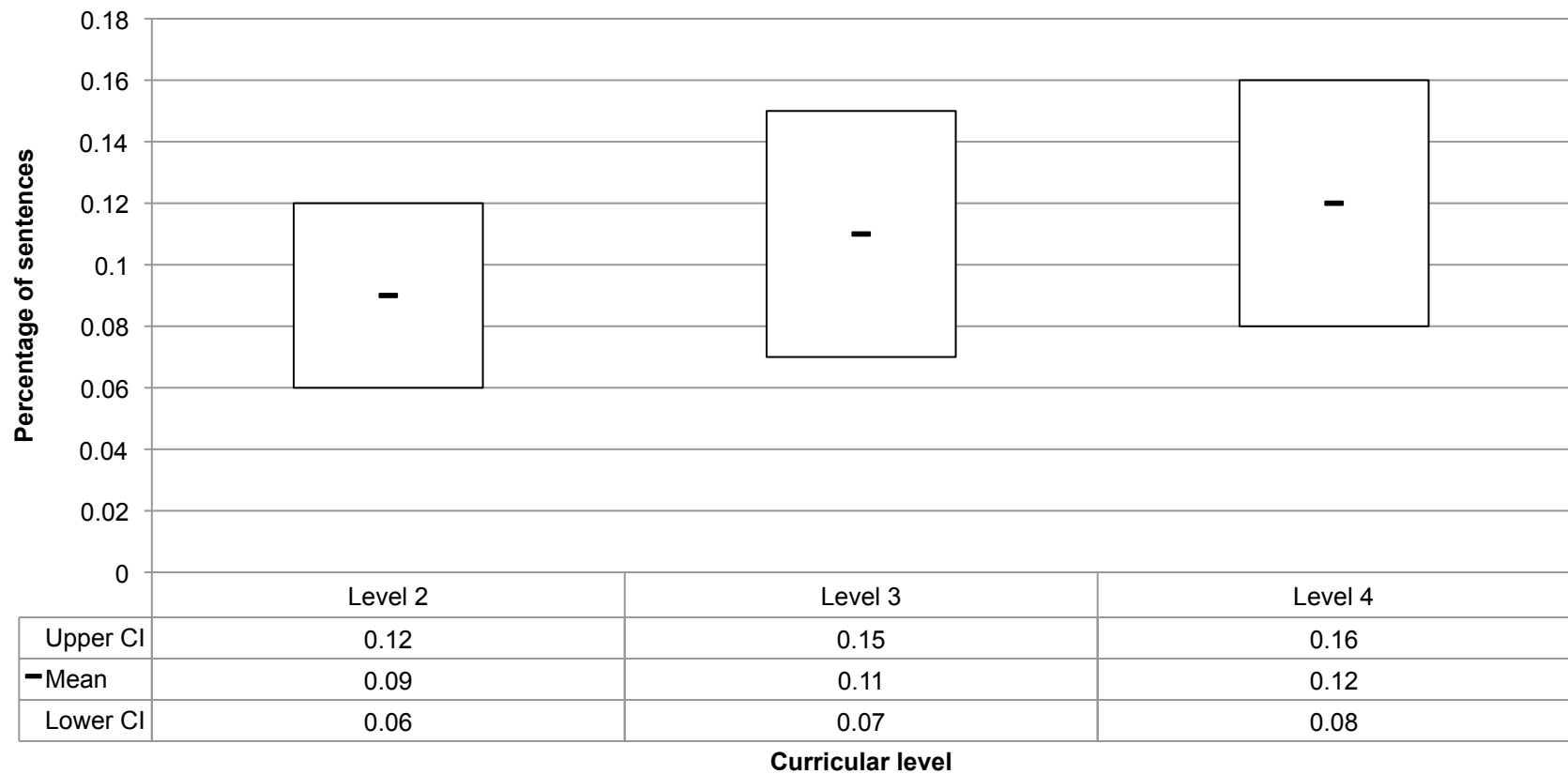
Exemplification of textual Theme: Learner 1197

Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Temporal: *dann* (then) *schließlich* (finally) Adversative: *aber* (but) Additive: *und* (and)	Temporal: *dann* (then) *danach* (after that) Adversative: *aber* (but) *jedoch* (however) Appositive: *zum Beispiel* (for example) Causal: *also* (therefore)	Temporal: *dann* (then) Adversative: *aber* (but) *jedoch* (however) *einerseits* (on the one hand) Causal: *deswegen* (therefore)

Markedness 1

Percentage of sentences with marked themes by level

	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Upper CI	0.25	0.32	0.31
Mean	0.2	0.26	0.25
Lower CI	0.15	0.2	0.19

Curricular level
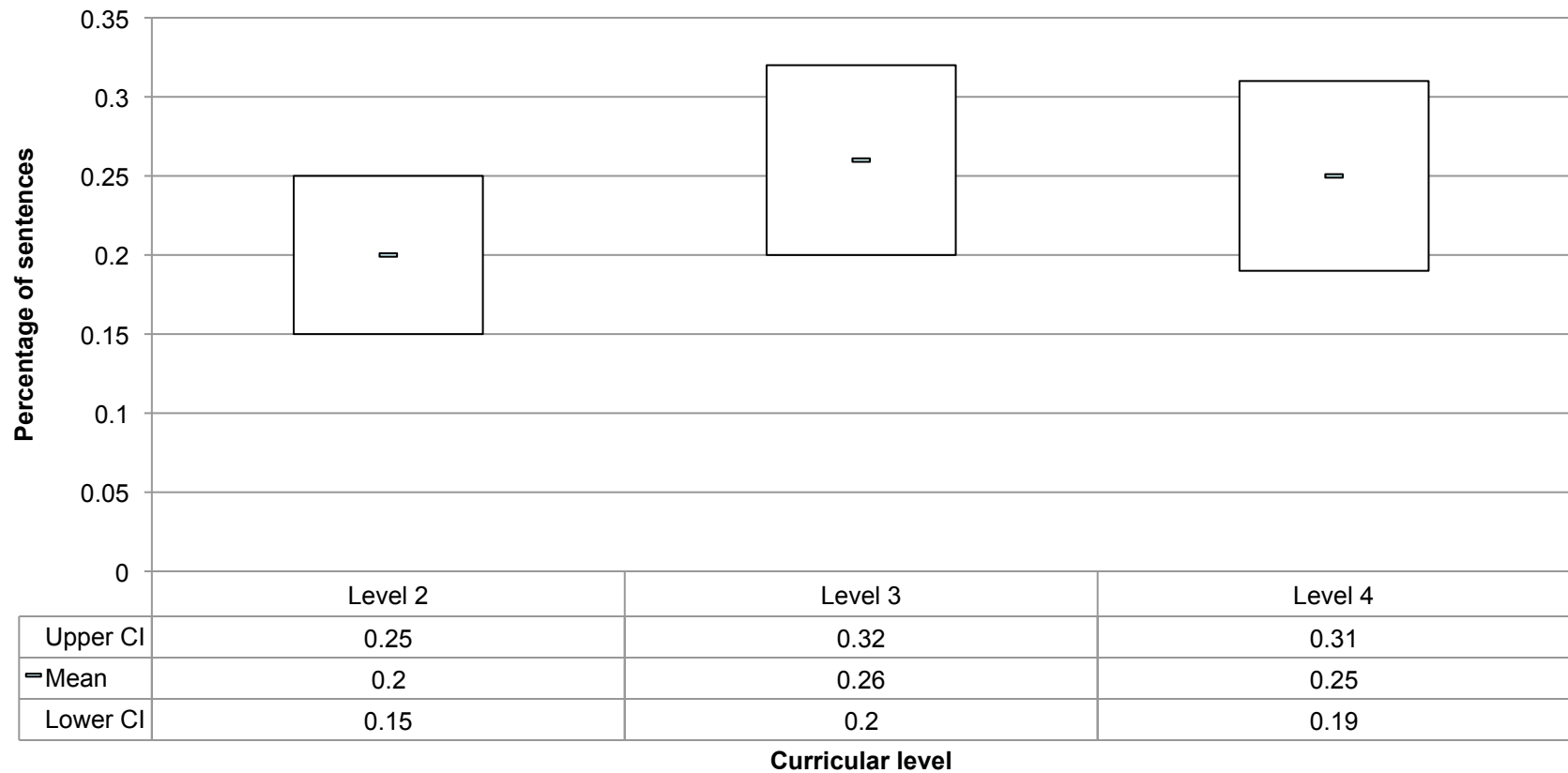
Markedness 2: Theme as circumstance

Percentage of themes as circumstance by level
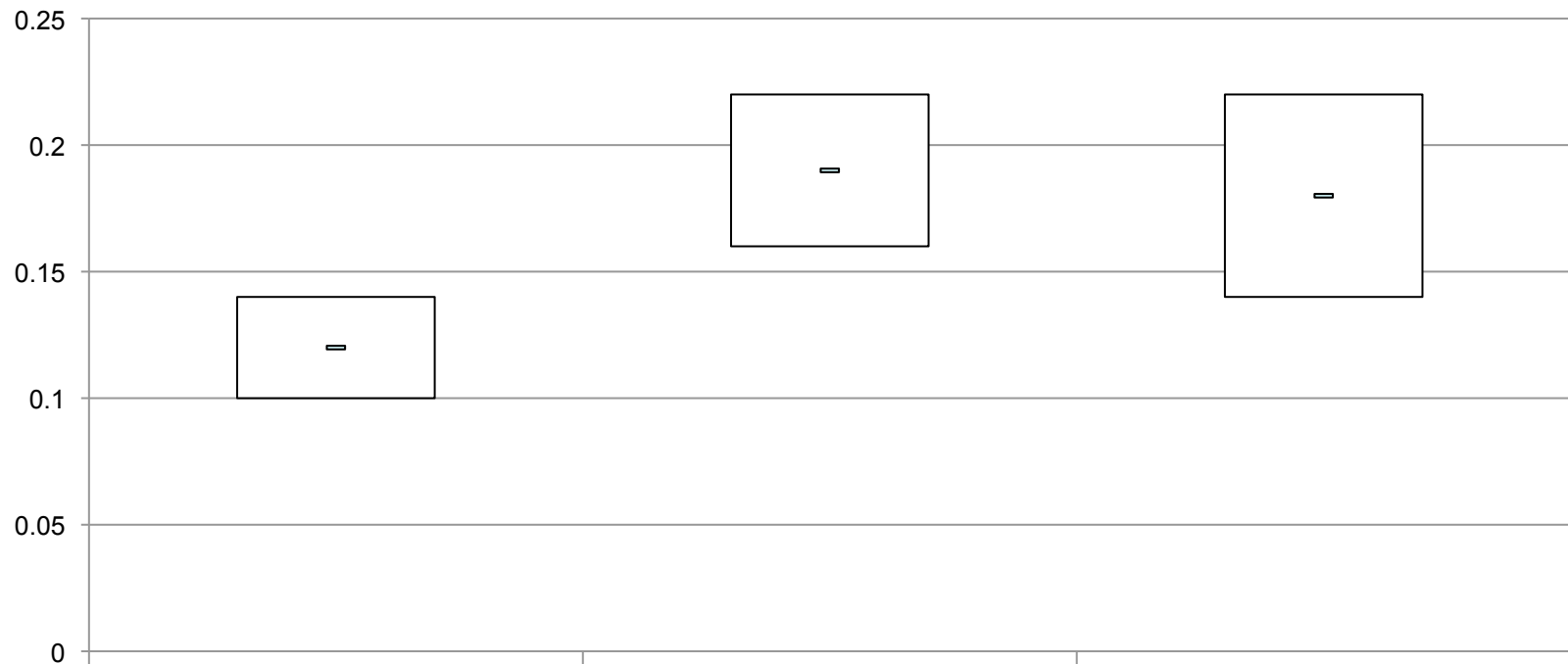
	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Upper CI	0.14	0.22	0.22
Mean	0.12	0.19	0.18
Lower CI	0.1	0.16	0.14

Exemplification of circumstantial Theme: Learner 1197

Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Location: *jeden Tag* (every day) *einmal* (once) *eines Tages* (one day) *dort* (there)	Location: *schon* (already) *jetzt* (now) *1988* *seit den 60er Jahren* (since the 1960s) *In Tschechien* (in the Czech Republic) Manner: *durch ihre schrägen Augen* = by means of her crooked eyes	Location: *Hier* (here) *In der EU* (in the EU) Manner: *Ähnlich zu ..* (similar to) Accompaniment *Anstelle …* (instead of) Causal: *Wegen …* (because of)

Markedness 3:
Theme as hypotactic clause

Percentage of themes as hypotactic clauses by level

	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Upper CI	0.11	0.11	0.1
— Mean	0.08	0.07	0.07
Lower CI	0.05	0.03	0.04

Curricular level
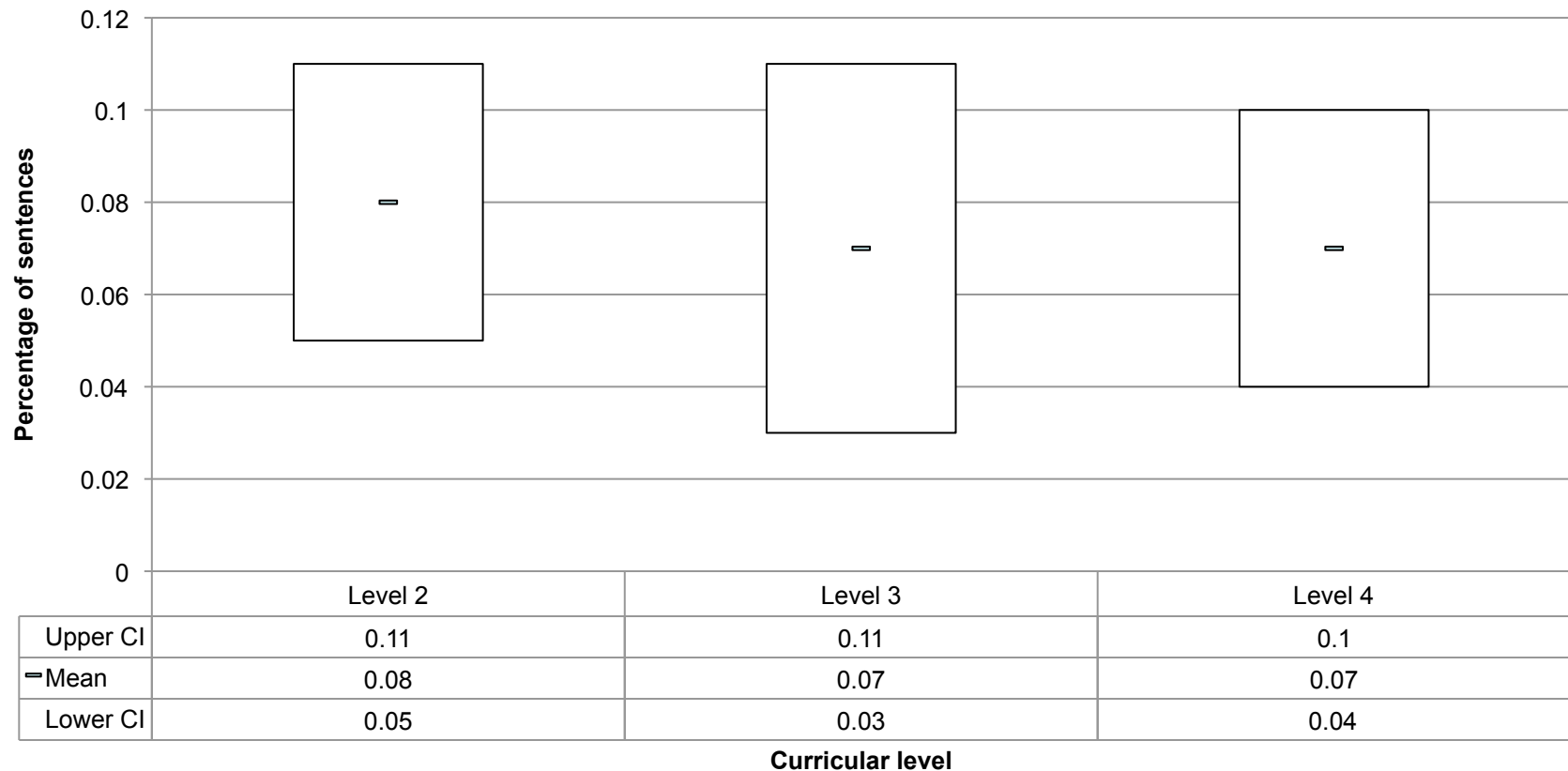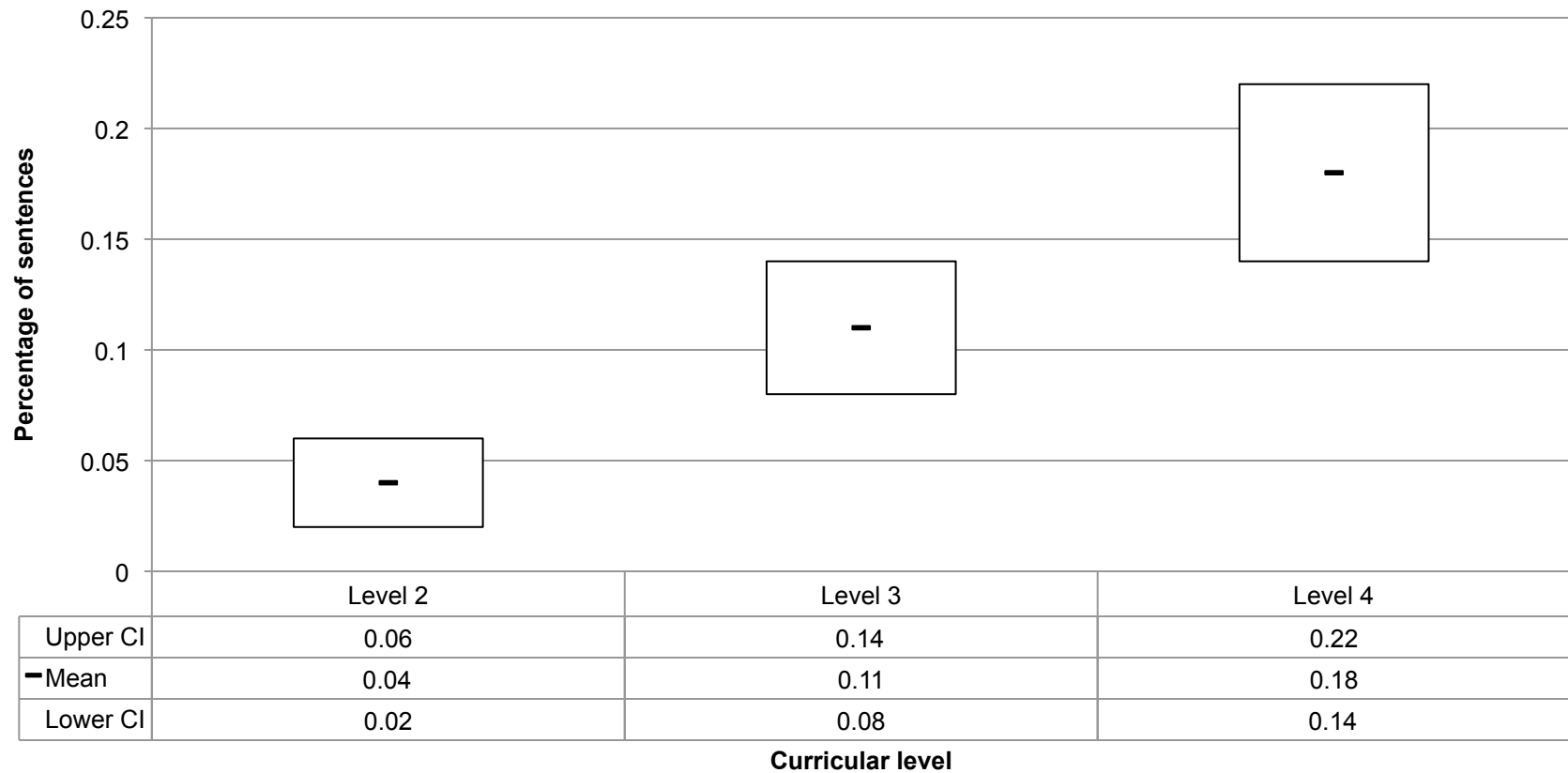
Discussion of hypotactic clause complexes as Theme

- Little change in incidence but change in variety
  - Temporal & causal → temporal, causal, conditional, contrastive
- Decrease in overall grammatical intricacy (clauses ÷ sentence)
  - Increased phrasal elaboration in place of subordination
    - Example, Learner 1197, Level 4: *Wegen der Teilung …* (Because of the division …)
- Increase in overall lexical density (ideational lexical items ÷ tokens)
  - Increased phrasal elaboration, nominalization
- Prevalence of human participants at Level 3
  - 1197.3: 13 different human participants appeared as Theme compared with 4 at level II and 5 at level III.
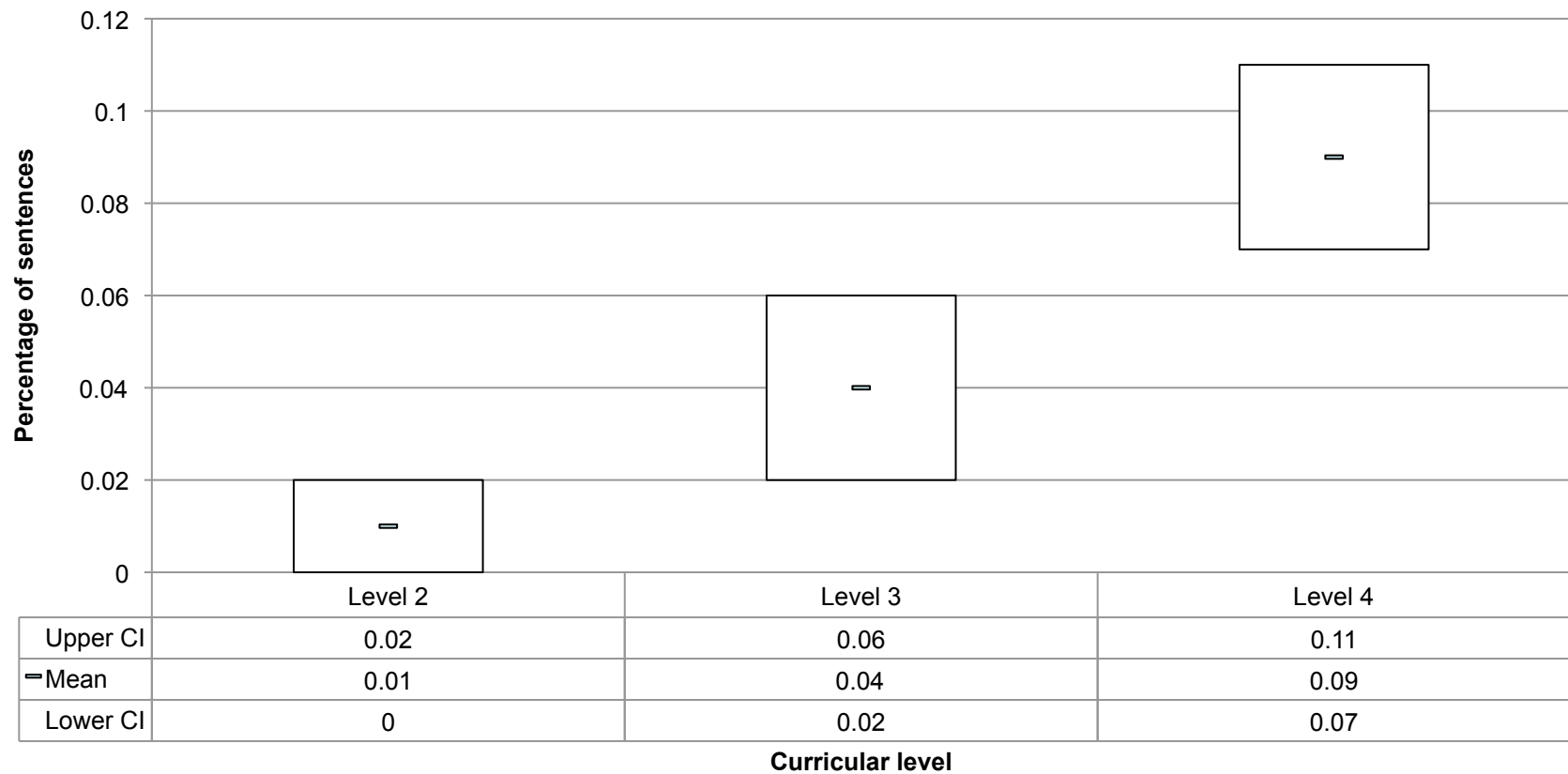
Lexical density

Percentage of lexically dense themes by level

	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Upper CI	0.06	0.14	0.22
— Mean	0.04	0.11	0.18
Lower CI	0.02	0.08	0.14

Curricular level

Percentage of sentences

Grammatical metaphor

Percentage of themes as grammatical metaphor by level

	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Upper CI	0.02	0.06	0.11
▬ Mean	0.01	0.04	0.09
Lower CI	0	0.02	0.07

Curricular level

Discussion of lexical density and grammatical metaphor in Theme

- Mirrors statistically significant increase in lexical density for entire corpus
  - Increased phrasal elaboration, nominalization
- Mirrors findings by Byrnes (2009)
  - Grammatical metaphor as a means for expanded meaning making and textual organization at the advanced level
    - 1197.4: *Warum sollen die politischen Phänomene - entweder 13 Kolonien oder 25 Länder politisch vereinigen?* **Die Begründung** *ist aktuell heute wie gestern: innere- und außere Sicherheit, Wirtschaftswachstum, eine beachtliche Einheit zu sein.*
    - Why should the political phenomena – either 13 colonies or 25 countries – unite politically? **The reason** is actually [the same] today as yesterday: internal and external security, economic growth, to be a considerable unity.
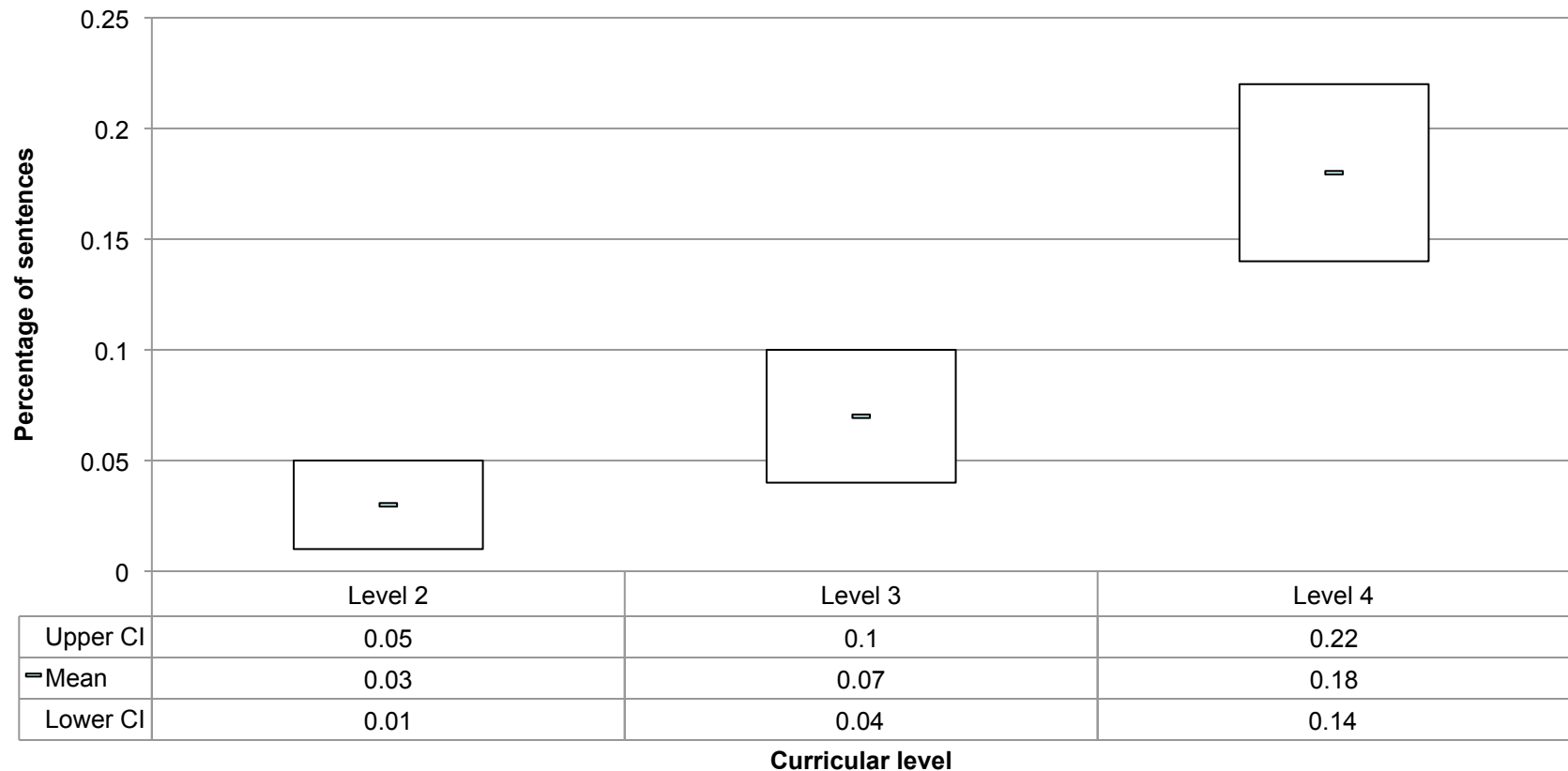
Classification of Theme as concrete entity

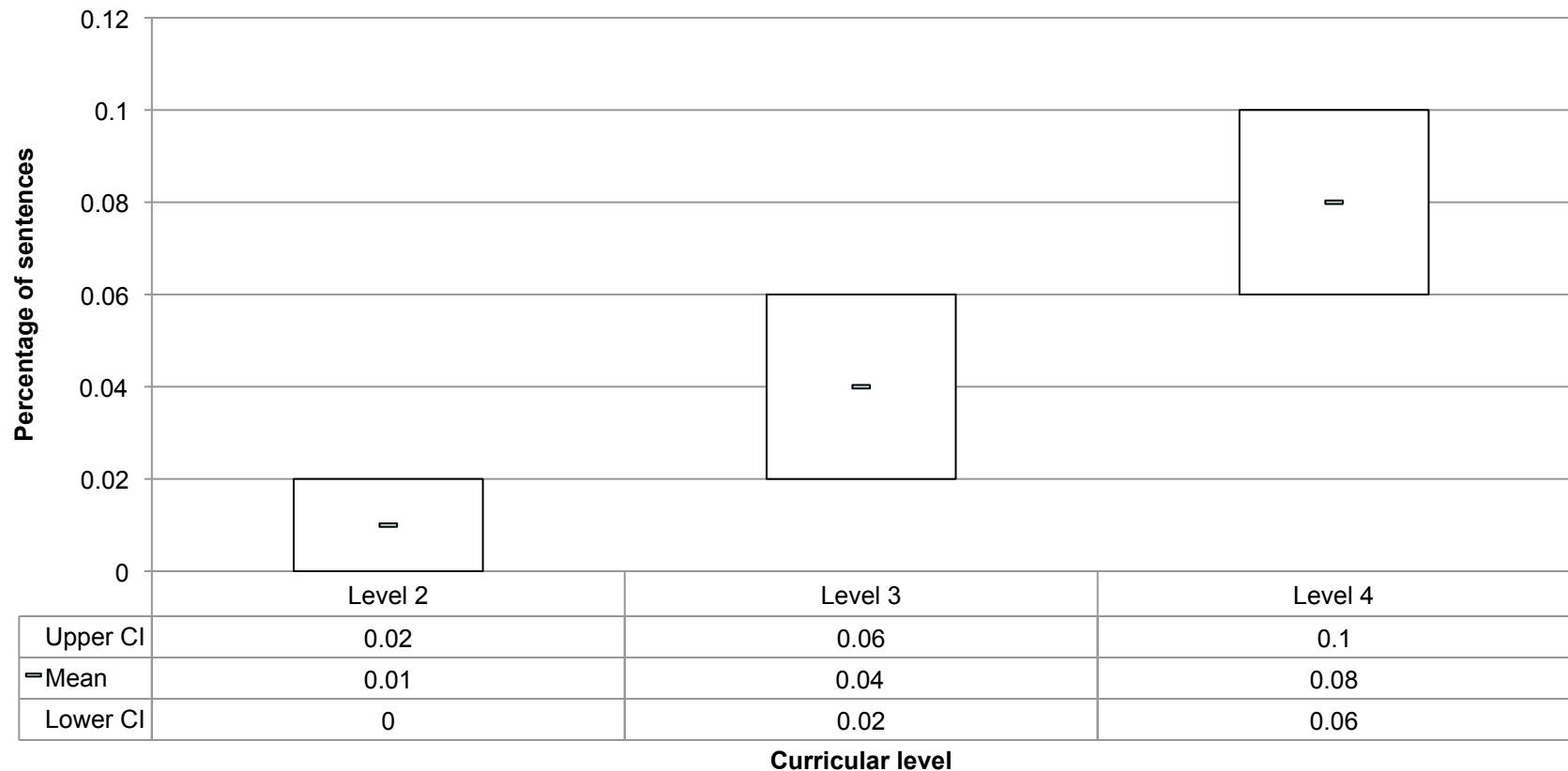**Percentage of themes as concrete entities by level**

	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Upper CI	0.74	0.58	0.46
Mean	0.7	0.52	0.42
Lower CI	0.66	0.46	0.38

Curricular level
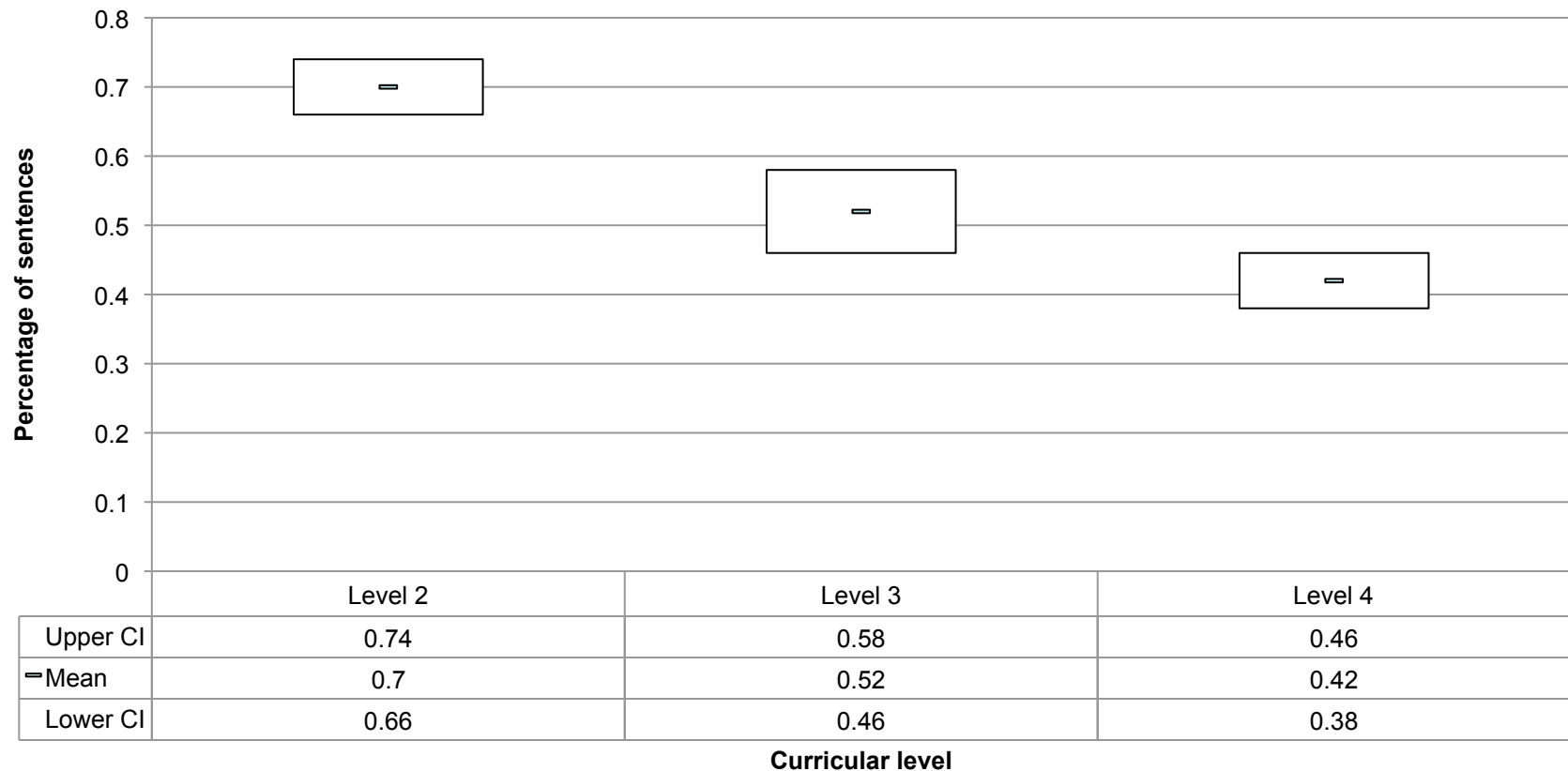
Classification of Theme as <u>abstract</u> entity

Percentage of themes as abstract entities by level

	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Upper CI	0.05	0.1	0.22
▬ Mean	0.03	0.07	0.18
Lower CI	0.01	0.04	0.14

Curricular level

Classification of Theme as <u>metaphoric</u> entity

Percentage of themes as metaphoric entities by level

	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Upper CI	0.02	0.06	0.1
▬ Mean	0.01	0.04	0.08
Lower CI	0	0.02	0.06

Curricular level

Exemplification of entity distribution as Theme: Learner 1197

Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
ich (I) *wir* (we) *er* (he) *Herr Sommer*	*Tran* *Ihre Mutter* (her mother) *Ihr Vater* (her father) *Vertragsarbeiter* (contract workers) *Ausländer* (foreigners) *Gesellschaft* (society) *Politiker* (politicians)	*ich* (I) *wir* (we) *Sie* (you) *Politik* (policy) *Frage* (question) *Mitglieder* (members)
Die Liebe meines Lebens (the love of my life)	*Gewalt* (violence) *Geduld* (patience) *Einstellung* (frame of mind)	*Zusammenarbeit* (collaboration) *Handelsfähigkeit* (ability to trade)

Summative Comments

As learners progress through the curriculum, their thematization patterns become …

- More lexically complex
- More nominalized
- More lexically abstract and metaphoric
- More diverse circumstantially
- More diverse hypotactically

Implications & next steps

- Importance of multi-metafunctional analysis
- Qualitative analysis of development & success
- Pedagogical washback
- Analysis of correspondence between thematization patterns and generic moves

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