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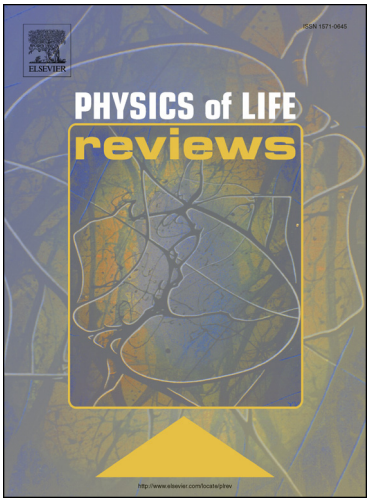

Dependency distance: A new perspective on the syntactic development in second language acquisition

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ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Dependency Distance: A New Perspective on the Syntactic Development in Second Language Acquisition: Comment on "Dependency Distance: A New Perspective on Syntactic Patterns in Natural Languages" by Liu H. *et al.*

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Liu *et al*. [1] offers a clear and informative account of the use of dependency distance in studying natural languages, with a focus on the viewpoint that dependency distance minimization (DDM) can be regarded as a linguistic universal. We would like to add the perspective of employing dependency distance in the studies of second languages acquisition (SLA), particularly the studies of syntactic development.

Theoretically, syntactic theories should guide and facilitate syntactic studies of SLA. But actual research indicates that some syntactic theories are neither effective nor efficient in processing languages of different types, including learners' languages in SLA. It is proved theoretically and practically that dependency grammar is not only more practical in syntactic parsing [2], but also more suitable for the research of language acquisition, because language learners, especially elementary language learners, make many syntactic mistakes [3]. Thus under the theoretical guidance of dependency grammar, it will be more scientific and systematic to investigate the syntactic development of L2 learners across different language learning stages.

Under the theoretical framework of dependency grammar, dependency distance, measured by the linear distance between two syntactically related words in a sentence, is regarded as an indicator of syntactic complexity [1]. By using the mean dependency distance (MDD), we can measure the relative difficulty of sentences [4]. Second language learners' language system is "interlanguage", a structurally intermediate status between the native and target languages [5]. Previous research [6] indicates that dependency features of English and Chinese are different, which means that dependency features of Chinese English learners' interlanguage should be different from those of Chinese and English. As a kind of natural language, theoretically, second language learners' interlanguage' syntactic complexity can also be measured by dependency distance. Therefore, it would be interesting to find out the MDDs of their compositions, how the MDDs change with the increase of learners' language proficiency and where the MDDs stand as compared with those of Chinese and English. Bearing these in mind, we calculated the MDDs of Chinese EFL learners' English compositions at different learning stages across eight grades: from grade one of junior high schools to grade two of universities.

The results of data analysis show that the MDDs of Chinese English learners' English compositions increase from 1.845 at grade one of junior high schools to 2.466 at grade two of universities. The variations of the MDDs indicate that the syntactic complexity of students' English compositions has increased along with the increase of

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