WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK AND ITS IMPACT ON SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY IN EFL STUDENTS' WRITING

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In second language writing, providing written corrective feedback has been recognized as an effective means of helping students improve writing. Accordingly, previous studies have explored the extent to which written corrective feedback facilitates writing development. Inquiry in this field of research primarily investigated how feedback facilitates students' writing accuracy, and confirmed that the provision of written corrective feedback leads to improved accuracy. It is, however, equally important to understand how feedback influences other constructs of writing improvement including complexity and fluency. Specifically, the development of syntactic complexity is an integral part of a learner's overall development in the target language, which is determined by the range and sophistication of syntactic structures in one's writing. To this end, this study explored the impact of written corrective feedback on the syntactic complexity of 27 EFL undergraduate students' writing over a 13-week semester. The analysis was based on a corpus of 216 student essays including their initial drafts and revised texts. The essays were analyzed by means of the L2 Syntactic Complexity Analyzer (L2SCA; Lu, 2010). Five dimensions of writing complexity were measured: length of production units, sentence complexity, subordination, coordination, and phrasal sophistication.

The results revealed steady growth in three dimensions: sentence complexity ratio, subordination indices, and one coordination index (sentence coordination ratio), but limited variation in other aspects of writing complexity. In particular, significant differences were found in the sentence complexity index: clauses per sentence significantly increased from essay 1 (M=1.77) to essay 4 (M=1.95, p=.002), indicating that students produced more clauses per sentence in essay 4 compared to essay 1. Moreover, clauses per T-unit, dependent clauses per clause, dependent clauses per T-unit, and complex T-units per T-unit showed a significant increase in essay 4. However, the opposite was the case in the indices of length of production units and phrasal sophistication. Mean length of clauses significantly decreased from essay 1 (M=9.26), to essay 4 (M=7.53, p=<.001), indicating that they produced shorter clauses in essay 4 compared to essay 1. These outcomes suggest that the provision of feedback had a positive influence on some aspects of EFL students' writing complexity, whereas other subcomponents declined over time. These findings further inform teachers about which aspects of writing complexity can or cannot be developed by feedback, and such awareness might help them manage resources in writing instruction. It is recommended to apply automated analysis of syntactic complexity in classroom research to evaluate the effectiveness of any pedagogical intervention aimed at promoting syntactic development.