

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to explore the production of if-conditionals by Chinese EFL speakers and the problems they confront. This introductory section will give the motivation, objectives and an overview of the present study.

1.1 Motivation

As Eexpressing conditioning is a universal phenomenon in human languages¹, the acquisition of conditionals turns out to be quite interesting. Understanding it might help to establish the theoretical frameworks in the field of language acquisition and explain how language operates in conjunction with human minds. Studying conditionals is thus an emergent need, which serves as a cornerstone for the improvement of linguistic research.

Conditionals have been widely noted as a weighty topic: there is a small body of research, which has addressed the question why conditionals confuse language

¹ For example: English, Chinese, German, Hua...etc., please refer to Comrie (1986) and Haiman (1978).

learners so much; a pronounced paradox is raised when conditionals are expressed: the numbers of formal patterns of conditionals seem to be limited on the surface but their applications involving interaction with speakers' intention become multitudinous. On the one hand, learning conditionals is supposed to be easy since crude rules could be found, but the fact that the subtle changes in the formal expressions result in entirely different interpretations brings in great difficulties, on the other hand. Though there is a call for drawing attention to these complicated sentences, research into studying conditionals recently has been mainly concentrated on logic semantics or philosophy (Crouch, 1993; among many others) but was scarcely conducted in terms of linguistics, particularly in the domain of second language acquisition. The lack of a systematic and empirical study on this issue calls for the commencement of this paper.

Finally, triggered by the corpus-based techniques, many scholars such as Granger (1998) have trumpeted for applying the corpora as the material in studying learners' interlanguage. In order to answer their calls to incorporate modern technology, this present study will investigate the acquisition process systematically and empirically from a large-scale learner corpus.

In next section, we will define the goals and foci and summarize two problems,

which arise from the previous studies. These two problems will be resolved in tandem in this present thesis.

1.2 Goals

The reasons stated above have warranted that the question of acquiring L2 conditionals is worth pursuing. We are aware that a study on the acquisition of conditionals is a matter of theoretical and pedagogical necessity, but such a research is now unavailable. L2 learners obviously encounter grave difficulties when dealing with conditionals, but the problems have remained unsettled. Therefore, the primary purposes of this thesis are two-fold: first, to observe the acquisition process of conditionals. Especially, we will attempt to explain it in terms of form-function mappings. Our second goal is to explore the error patterns and their compensation strategies, with which the acquisition difficulties can be revealed. So and much, these broad goals can be translated into concrete questions, which will be elaborated in section 1.4 below. It is hoped that the answers to these questions will offer a satisfactory account for understanding the problems in the process of acquiring L2 conditionals.

The significance of this thesis lies in two aspects: the idea of regarding the

acquisition process as mappings of forms and functions is of central importance to the issue of acquiring conditionals. It may help to account for the inconsistency of previous studies and obtain a cogent conclusion, which may flesh the theories out. The thorough understanding of errors may further provide a chance for researchers and teachers to grasp the keys of L2 acquisition and figure out more effective learning approaches. This thesis expects to offer a promising avenue of understanding the enigmatic process of learning languages.

1.3 Focus

Conditionality can be expressed in two ways—explicit and implicit ones. Explicit conditionals are marked by a conditional marker, for instance, “if”, “as long as”, “providing that”, “unless”... etc (Partington, 1998). By contrast, sometimes two constructions are put together without those markers. With the absence of an overt connective, those sentences are labeled as implicit conditionals. In this paper, we limit our discussion in explicit conditionals.

Generally, conditioning can be expressed via different sentential structures (such as juxtaposition) or markers (for example: *unless*, *or*). Nonetheless, we will focus on

if-conditionals in this present study for two reasons. First of all, “*if*” is deemed as “a cue to consider a possible or hypothetical state of affairs” (Johnson-Laird, 1986; 73). The implication of conditioning is strongly suggested by *if*. Secondly, in terms of language typology, Wierzbicka (1997; 25) claimed, “*if* is a universal human concept lexicalized in all languages”. Most languages have a morpheme to perform the functions, which are equivalent to English *if*.

1.4 Overview of the Thesis

Conditional structures are difficult for speakers to acquire because of their inherent complexity, which derives from the interplay of forms and functions. At first glance, the indeterminate change of verb forms in the bi-clause constitutes the formal complexity. Moreover, the multi-layered meanings contribute to the complication. Lastly, to comprehend or produce these conditional relationships demands a lot of cognitive efforts because of the various forms and poly-functions.

Because there are many subtle and complicated differences between all types of conditionals, an extended discussion is necessary. Classified as coarse-grained types, the schemes of conditionals will be thoroughly introduced in Chapter 2, along with

their meanings. This paper focuses on the linguistic features of conditionals with an emphasis on the dynamic interaction of temporality and tense, hypotheticality and mood, as well as modals. All these details will be further exploited in Chapter 2.

This thesis is essentially an attempt to answer one central question and some related sub-questions:

The main question is:

- ◆ How are if-conditionals acquired by Chinese English Learners?

This question leads to two sub-questions presented as below, which will be addressed using the data from CLEC (Chinese Learner English Corpus).

- ◇ What is the L2 acquisition sequence of English conditionals?
- ◇ What are the errors and the problems of acquiring conditionals?

The first sub-question not only aims to describe the facts, but also attempts to account for the acquisition stages on the basis of a form-function mapping model. The second sub-question seeks to find out the general error patterns the L2 learners commit and the compensatory strategies they utilize. Furthermore, we also hope to

summarize the difficulties the Chinese English Learners (CELs) face and trace the clues of possible reasons. Compartmentalizing the links of disparate forms with their correspondingsive meanings, we believe the acquisition process of conditional types can be examined and the reasons be explained, through a systematic error analysis.

The answers to those sub-questions will lead to a conclusion to the main question, with which the acquisition properties of the interlanguage (in the domain of conditionals) of CELs will be known.

These questions are put forward under a number of assumptions: The first one is, the acquisition sequence of the various conditional types implies difficulty hierarchy. Secondly, the error frequencies reflect the degrees of L2 learners' learning difficulty. That is to say, learners may make more errors of certain conditional types, on account of their feature differences derived from linguistic ambiguity and irregularity. The differences will show the acquisition stages (or difficulty hierarchy) represented by the error rates. Finally, we believe that the features those errors convey will tell us where the problems are.

This thesis is organized as follows: Chapter 2 deals with the literature review of conditionals. The preliminary knowledge of conditionals is introduced in section 2.1.

It contains the summary of syntactic and semantic categorization schemes of conditionals and the introduction of an integrative one. Section 2.2 probes the problems of acquiring conditionals and looks at the three dimensions: tense, mood and modal, which constitute the influential issues in examining acquisition difficulties. Lastly, Section 2.3 summarizes the studies of first and second language acquisition with the concentration on grammar acquisition sequences, and delves into some explanatory theories. A brief introduction of error analysis ends this Chapter. Chapter 3 describes how a Chinese learner corpus is employed in investigating the target phenomenon. The results are analyzed and explained in Chapter 4, while the conclusion is summarized in the final Chapter.

