

Chapter Four

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Overview of Conditionals

To begin with, the frequency of if-sentences in each sub-corpus is shown as below (Table5). The total amount of if-sentences in CLEC was 3343 (Qui & Yang, 2003, p.32), but the result we gained was 2140 after eliminating some non-targets as identified in Chapter Three.

Table 5

Distribution of If-sentences in Each Subcorpus

Sub-corpus	ST2	ST3	ST4	ST5	ST6	Total
Original	390	696	1084	533	640	3343
Filtered	381	435	450	423	451	2140

Subsequently, we compared two corpus-based surveys of conditionals by Hwang (1979) and Fulcher (1991) with our results (Table6). Hwang examined both modes of writing (357,249 words) and speech (63,746 words) in various discourse types. Because the data source of CLEC is from written texts, only the writing part was compared. Fulcher's (1991) data was retrieved from a written database, composed of about 113,363 words, with text types of academic, narrative, magazine materials and news stories. The data of those two studies were both produced by English native speakers.

The numbers in the parentheses (Table6) are the ranks of conditional types. In regards of type distribution, although the orders of production rate in the three studies are not exactly the same, the Chinese non-native learners are characterized by the

dominance of the widespread present real (Type2) conditionals, which may suggest an overuse. On the other hand, the underuses of parallel (Type1) and past unreal (Type4) conditionals should be considered. It is reasonable to speculate that CELs tended to evade using past unreal conditionals in order to avoid making errors. The production of fewer parallel ones, however, is less obvious.

Table 6

Comparison of the Production Rates of NS and NNS

	Hwang (1979): NS			Fulcher (1991): NS			Ke (2004): NNS	
	%	Rank	LL ¹²	%	Rank	LL	%	Rank
1. parallel	16.5	2	-57.73	33.78	1	-475.84	10	3
2. present real	30.7	1	+642.45	27.43	2	+804.05	66	1
3. present unreal (past real)	16	2	+36.19	20.03	3	+2.2	21	2
4. past unreal	5.5	4	-49.55	3.01	4	-3.44	2	4

4.2. Developmental Sequence of Form-function Mapping

We will look into the relationships of FFM on conditionals across the acquisition stages and test whether the account of CPAO has explanatory adequacy. Mellow *et al.* (2001) utilized the concepts of MDH (Eckman, 1996) and CCP (Brown, 1973) together to examine the past time form-function mappings, and thus created a new Functional-Cognitive (FC) model (cf. section 2.3.2), upon which a developmental pattern of second language acquisition was built. CPAO is one of the essential theoretical principles which construct the FC model.

¹² LL represents Log-likelihood values.


As CLEC contains five sub-corpora of different proficiency levels, it is possible to make a cross-sectional comparison between the variations of conditionals. The percentage of errors of the four target conditional types are calculated and presented in Table 7¹³.

¹³ The raw data is shown in Appendix C.

Table 7

Error Rates of Conditional Types in Sub-corpora

	Formal features	Functional features	<u>ST2</u>	<u>ST3</u>	<u>ST4</u>	<u>ST5</u>	<u>ST6</u>
1.(a) present parallel	-past#-past	-past,-unreal	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%
(b) past parallel	+past#+past	+past,-unreal	25%	6%	5%	7%	6%
2. Nonpast real	-past#(+past)+modal	-past,-unreal	12%	16%	7%	9%	3%
3. (a) Nonpast unreal	+past#+past+modal	-past,+unreal	18%	24%	50%*	21%	21%
(b) Past real	+past#+past+modal	+past,-unreal	N.A.	8%	19%	0%	0%
4. Past unreal	+past+past#+past+past+modal	+past,+unreal	67%*	50%*	55%*	58%*	33%



Stage Stage Stage

To determine the development sequence is by no means easy, since the interlanguages are dynamic rather than static systems (Braidı, 1999). Several approaches of describing the acquisition stages have been proposed (Cancino *et al.*, 1978; Wode, 1981), but they have flaws in certain ways, so we drew on the more comprehensive one suggested by Meisel *et al.* (1981), who took the developmental rules as an implicational order. In this vein, the acquisition of one rule implies the acquisition of an earlier rule. This method offers a solution to deal with the inconsistency in the interlanguage.

One of the most important tenets it assumes is that a learner may enter a subsequent stage without having mastered all the previous rules in all contexts; therefore, the particular stage of development is determined by the predominant correct use of a target linguistic item. In our case, it is not the proportion of occurrence but errors calculated. Because we believe that the grammatical accuracy is more powerful than simply calculating the frequencies of occurrence. So the relatively smaller number in each column in Table7 indicates higher degrees of certainty of the acquisition of a feature or rule. After analyzing the mapping relationships as shown in Table1, we discern that acquisition of conditionals demands two rules, which are identified as:

Rule1: mapping of temporality

Rule2: mapping of hypotheticality

Seen in the light of Meisel *et al.* (1981), the development stages are determined by the order of rules, in which the acquisition of one rule implies the acquisition of an earlier rule (cited in Braidı, 1999, p.23). So the acquisition procedure starts with zero

acquisition and develops into the acquisition of either of the rules, and to the end both rules are acquired. As a result, three stages can be recognized as below:

None of the mapping rules has been acquired.

Phase(): ST2: Type1a [-past, -unreal]

Subphase(): ST2: Type2 [-past, -unreal]

The mapping rule of temporality has been acquired.

Phase(): ST3 & ST4: Type1b [+past, -unreal]

Subphase(): ST3 & ST4: Type3b [+past, -unreal]

Acquired: Type1a, Type2

The mapping rule of hypotheticality and the mapping rule of temporality have been acquired.

Phase(a): ST5: Type3a [-past, +unreal]

Acquired: Type1a, Type2, Type1b, Type3b

Phase(b): ST6: Type4 [+past, +unreal]

Acquired: Type1a, Type2, Type1b, Type3b, Type3a

The three acquisition stages are determined according to the error rates in Table 7. After identifying the stages, the question worth pursuing is the detailed mappings in the developmental sequence. The framework of the Functional-Cognitive Model (Mellow and Stanley, 2001) is believed to be advantageous to account for these phenomena. In the FC model, Mellow and Stanley (2001) distinguished two types of groupings of mappings—phase and subphase. A phase is established when a set of interrelated mappings achieve a high level of accuracy, while a subphase is a set of interrelated mappings which have emerged but have not reached the criterion of being qualified as a phase (p.54). They further pointed out that “for the purposes of

measurement, the construct of a threshold level for change may be *operationalized* [italics added] within a study as a specific percentage....” and “the use of these specific operationalized values or levels suggests a division of development into discrete stages” (p.62). Therefore, according to Morgan *et al.* (1995) and Saxton (2000)¹⁴, the acquisition was hypothesized to take place at a threshold level of 50% accuracy. In our case, it means that the error rate which is higher than 50% should be regarded as not having been acquired yet¹⁵. Although the standard is not rigorous, it only serves to exclude the impossible candidates of acquisition. Those which are potentially acquired are determined by the dominant conditional types, which construct a phase and a subphase.

In Table7, the conditional type with the lowest error rate in each subcorpus is labeled in a square, which indicates a phase of development is formed. The next lower rate is underlined, indicating the most typical conditional type in the subphase. The conditionals which are not judged as the representation of a phase, except those which do not reach 50% accuracy, are grouped under the category of a subphase. In addition, the shaded portion illustrates the possibility of having been acquired.

These three consecutive stages are described with the features analyzed in Table2. Recall the CPAO quoted in section 2.3.2., the acquisition difficulties are imputed to formal and functional properties, including complex structure features and functional load. It predicts a sequential order of the four conditional types as illustrated in the four stages identified above.

In Stage , Type1(a) conditionals surpasses the others by the lowest error rate (10%), followed by Type2 (12%). Comparing the features of Type1(a) and Type2 according to CPAO, the Type1a (present parallel) conditionals which carry least

¹⁴ Because 50% is a specifically operationalized criterion in both studies, its appropriateness will be discussed in Chapter Five.

¹⁵ Those items which have not been acquired are starred in Table7.

features both in form and function, is the simplest type. But the question gets opaque when it comes to comparing Type1 (b), past parallel conditionals, with Type2. The former contains a [+past] marker in the if-C with reference to past time while the latter involves the use of modals. According to our analysis, the outcome shows that Type1b is acquired later than Type2, which suggests that the use of modals appears to be a minor problem for beginners (ST2) than the use of past time mapping, which is postponed until the next stage. Although Type1 exhibits a lower overall error rate than Type2 (4% v.s. 9%), Type1b shows a quite high error rate (25%) in Stage , revealing that parallel conditionals become more problematic when involving a [+past] feature referring to past habits for novice learners.

The declining rate of Type1b opens the period of Stage , in which the learners begin to achieve more success in marking the past time with past tense in the conditional structure. This stage extends across two subcorpora, ST3 and ST4, where the Type1b and Type3b with the same semantic features emerge as the target structures of this phase and subphase. This situation is clear in ST3, for the two types evince the lowest rates (6% and 8%) after precluding Type1a and Type2, which are regarded as having been acquired since Stage . Nonetheless, learners do not make great progress in ST4, because the error rates of the conditional types left (Type3a and Type4) are not lower than 50%. Therefore, ST4 does not create a new phase but only remains in a state of stabilization. Specifically, the CELs are assumed to have acquired the mapping rule of temporality in this stage.

The interlanguage system is getting complicated in the final stage. Stage consists of two phases, because the learners go through a period of acquisition of a new rule—Rule2 after they have acquired Rule1, according to the implicational hypothesis (Meisel *et al.*, 1981), and finally master both the two rules, moving towards native-like. The first phase is mainly located in ST5, characterized by the

percentage (21%) of Type3a conditionals. In this phase, there is no predominant conditional type which can mark the subphase; hence no subphase is recognized. In the same vein, the second phase (phase b) overlaps ST6, where the CELs acquire the most complex structure, past unreal conditionals, which demand the application of both Rule1 and Rule2. The acquisition of the two necessary rules of producing conditionals has not been completed until this last stage.

The results appear to be congruent with the explanatory accounts given by CPAO, upon which two points are raised. First, the developmental stages summarized show that the mappings with fewer features involved are acquired earlier, as expressed in the first part of CPAO that “acquisition orders across mappings occur because the aggregation of specific formal and functional properties makes a mapping more or less difficult” (Mellow and Stanley, 2001, p.56). Secondly, the sequence is also evidenced to be “coherent and meaningful”, because the overlaps of linguistic relationship between the mappings support the second part of CPAO: “mappings that are sequentially related to each other within the order are interrelated and dependent upon each other (*ibid.*).

4.3. Error Analysis

Since the second concern of this thesis lies in error patterns, the results were processed in an error analysis approach. With the assumptions of EA mentioned earlier in section 2.4.2 (Schachter, 1974), the concrete error frequencies were regarded to present the abstract difficulty levels. As a result, we can find out their error patterns and look for their acquisition problems in different degrees.

The three steps of EA procedure were followed: error identification, error description, and error diagnosis.

4.3.1. Error Identification

The initial step is to identify the errors and quantify them. The errors collected consist of the main verb errors and modal errors, which delimit in “form-change errors”. In other words, those errors were first classified by their grammatical features as shown by the labels in the first column of Table8. For instance: “past...present” means that the “present” is replaced with a “past”. That is to say, the learner inserts a past form in the position where a present form should be used.

The figures in Table8 represent the error rate in percentage, whereas the numbers in the parentheses stand for absolute frequency. It appears that the overall error rate is not extremely high. Totally, 264 errors were found in the 2140 sentences of the four types of conditionals, the percentage is about 12%. That is to say, although conditional is one of the most difficult structures for L2 learners to acquire, this does not mean every type is equally difficult, but merely certain conditional types, for example: Type4, will cause more problems.

The errors of the verbs manifest several error types as listed in Table8. However, neither the parallel conditionals (Type1a & 1b) nor Type3b show any tendency, because their absolute frequencies are low. The present verbs in the non-past real conditionals (Type2) are transformed to their past counterparts (8%). Conversely, despite the addition of semantic loads, the non-past unreal ones (Type3a) are expressed in plainer forms -- the present (13%). Likely, the verb forms in the past unreal conditionals (Type4), i.e. the past perfect, are also simplified into simple past forms (28%).

Bearing in mind that those errors all pertain to the nature of conditionals, either in temporality or hypotheticality, we are aware that they are the misuses of verb or modal forms to indicate wrong time or inappropriate degrees of unreality. Therefore, it is necessary to scrutinize the typical usage of these errors.

Table 8

Error Distribution of Conditional Types¹⁶

conditional types errors	Type1a <i>n=139</i>	Type1b <i>n=81</i>	Type2 <i>n=1410</i>	Type3a <i>n=395</i>	Type3b <i>n=65</i>	Type4 <i>n=50</i>
(a) present...past	*0%(0)	*6%(5)	-	13%(51)	*3%(2)	*10%(5)
(b) present...past perfect	-	-	-	-	-	*10%(5)
(c) past...present	*0.7%(1)	-	8%(119)	-	-	-
(d) past...past perfect	-	-	-	-	-	28%(14)
(e) past perfect...past	*0%(0)	-	-	3%(12)	*2%(1)	*0%(0)
(f) were-structure	-	-	-	8%(32)	-	-
(g) others	*0.7%(1)	*2%(2)	0.7%(11)	*0.5%(2)	*2%(1)	*0%(0)
subtotal	*1%(2)	9%(7)	9%(130)	25%(97)	*6%(4)	48%(24)
Total	4%(9)		9%(130)	22%(101)		48%(24)

¹⁶ We have known that the distinction of a mistake and an error needs to be identified. An error is systematic and stable whereas a mistake is accidental. As a result, we decided that the error frequency smaller than or equal to five, which are starred, would not be considered and discussed.

Next, we look into the dominant error pattern in each conditional type respectively. Table9 displays the proportion of these patterns, followed by some representative examples.

Table 9

Proportions of the Error Pattern

Conditional type	Type2	Type3a	Type4
Freq. of the dominant pattern	119	51	14
Freq. of all errors	130	97	24
%	92	53	58

Nonpast real conditionals (Type2)

The Chinese learners show a mounting tendency (92%) using a past verbal form in the present real conditionals (Type2). However, in these cases, the time references of the conditionals were not located in past, nor did their truth-value suggest unreal meanings. These (c) errors can be illustrated by the examples [3] below:

[3] **Maybe you will say it is possible to finish some tasks in very short time. Of course it is possible, but it always ends in failure if we did [vp6,-s] something too haste [wd2,-].**

The conditional in example [3] is apparently a description of a regular event. So the author misapplied a past form, which should be changed to a present *do*. This is an “error of unreality”, where the past form was used to denote hypotheticality, rather than a “temporality” error, because there is no reason for the writer to shift to past time since the tense sequence was consistent in present tense. Example [4] also shows a similar interpretation.

[4] The spring [fm3,-] Festival is coming. When you walk on the street, you'll see everyone carry [vp3,1-3] many big bag [np3,2-0] and with [sn6,12-4] smile in the face. They will say "Hello" or mod [fm1,-]. If someone knew [vp6, 2-1] each [wd4,5-0] , they'll say congratulation for [wd3,2-2] each other.

This article is about how Chinese people celebrating and enjoying the “spring festival” in New Year. The author used present tense through the whole narrative to describe the common situation. However, in this if-clause, he changed the verb form into past, either in denoting a hypothetical action or referring the event to the past time. The latter seems to be less possible, because he did not talk about something happened in the past, but a general condition. Thus it can be reasoned that the learners seemed to excessively emphasize the hypotheticality implied by “if”, so they tended to hypercorrect the application of “back-shifting” in the protasis, where less hypotheticality was suggested.

Nonpast unreal conditionals (Type3a)

For Type3a conditionals, learners used the present form to replace the past form in most cases (53%). Examples [5] shows a non-past unreal conditional, in which the verb *use* in the if-C should be replaced by its past form—*used*, and the modal *will* in the MC should ensue to change to *would*. The writer expressed his admiration to his uncle’s daughter, for her possession of great capacity learning English quickly and easily. Evidently, it is no doubt a present unreal conditional, which represents a counterfactual situation.

[5] Xiao qing, Uncle Wang's daughter, was [vp6,0-4] one year old now, [sn9,-] and she began to learn the [np7,2-1] language. She listened to what people say [vp6, 4-s] and she tries [vp6,7-0] to imitate what she heard. When she want [vp6,2-1] something, she had to ask for it. in [fm3,-] fact, she was using the language. She was talking in [vp2,2-4] it all the time. I thought if I use [vp6,4-1] English like this, I will [vp6,s-s] learn it more quickly [fm1,-] than before and use it widely. ~(ST2)

In this example, the learner used past tense in the sentences preceding the if-conditional, but he used the present form in the conditional. This might suggest that he was able to use past tense, but the emphasis of denotation of “unreality” was easily overlooked when performing a hypothetical or counterfactual conditional for the Chinese learners¹⁷.

Past unreal conditionals (Type4)

For Type4 conditionals, we came up with some interesting results that learners tended to adopt simple past form when indicating past unreality, which was meant to be performed by double [+past] markers (58%). This may reveal their weak ability to use “backing-shifting”. For example, the sentence below ([6]) expresses a past counterfactual condition, thus the verb phrase in the if-C should be revised as “had not spent”. Since this being a past unreal conditional, the misuse of past tense here

¹⁷ In the next place, learners seemed to be unfamiliar with the “were-structure” (8%), so they often inserted other “be verbs”, such as *is, are...*etc, instead of “were” (see the example below).

Someone will [vp9,-1] said: “you’re stuput [fm1,-], [sn9, s] if I am [vp8, 1-] you, I will [vp8, 1-] sleep to eleven or twlve [fm1, -]”~(ST2)

suggests the author's incapacity of expressing "past unreality".

[6] For example, a famous singer in Taiwan performed military service for three years. During this period, he had not sung for his fans and lost nearly half of his audience. This made him depressed. Maybe he would have been successful if he didn't spend [vp8,s-] three years in the army. ~(ST6)

In sum, it seems that CELs generally overemphasize or over-look the usage of expressing "hypothetical" events or actions. With this finding, we are able to give a description of their errors.

4.3.2. Error Description

As the traditional error analysis procedure goes, a "Target Modification Taxonomy" including omission, addition, misselection, misordering, should be applied (James, 1998). On condition of the purpose of this thesis, only the former two categories are related and thus being discussed.

Observing the results in Table8, we could easily classify the error types into the two error categories: omission and addition. For Type2, type(c) errors are a kind of addition error, because a [+past] marker is added (ex: present is replaced by past), while for Type4, type(a),(b) and (d) are all omission errors with a [+past] marker being deleted (ex: past perfect is reduced to past). By the same token, Type3a have two categories: type(a) error is omission and type(e) error is addition. We see that Type2 conditionals are filled with addition errors, whereas Type4 conditionals are all omission errors. Despite some addition errors, Type3a has the majority of omission errors.

We can conclude that the CELs display two characteristics of errors:

- (i) *Omission*: the missing of a [+past] marker, which simplifies the past perfect into past or the past into present (see Type3a and Type4).
- (ii) *Addition*: the use of a redundant [+past] marker, substituting present with past tense (see Type2).

4.3.3. Error Diagnosis

After describing these errors, it is also important to give diagnosis about the error sources (James, 1998). We have observed two phenomena: (i) the CELs tend to “add” a past feature in the nonpast real contexts, while (ii) they “omit” the unreal feature in the unreal occasions.

These two error categories, addition and omission, can be retraced to two kinds of intra-lingual error sources: “hypercorrection” and “overgeneralization” (James, 1998). For the error pattern of addition in nonpast real conditionals, example [3] and [4] show the overuse of past tense in place of present tense by the CELs. It is the overemphasis of a surplus [+unreal] meaning, led by the “if” subordinator, driving the learners to use the wrong forms. Because all the errors occur in the if-clause, i.e. the protasis position, it is reasonable to suggest that the learners may be misled by the if-marker and hence hypercorrect the verb forms in the if-clause. In other words, they may over-monitor their L2 output (James, 1998), but the reason that invokes the hypercorrection is far from clear.

On the contrary, the omission pattern is more overt. As we speculated, the CELs may be making use of past tense to minimize the need for the pluperfect. Example [5] to [6] illustrate that the Chinese learners are apt to overlook the “unreality” function, or specifically, forget the back-shifting procedure, in expressing unreal conditionals.

This result is keeping with Chou's (2000) research, in which she found there was an inclination for many learners using the past form to substitute the past perfect. Chou suggested that this may be attributable to their wishes to simplify difficult grammatical rules. By virtue of the layers of semantic and syntactic features in the past unreal conditionals, this inference seems reasonable. It appears that the CELs incline to "over-generalize" the past to represent "irrealis", or in James' term (1998), they utilize the strategy of "systematic simplification" to express unreality.

Discussion

In this study, we have explored the answers to two research questions. First, we found that the acquisition sequence of conditionals be ordered with the increase of form and function complexities. The development is a process of mapping rules in accordance with CPAO. Second, the results also show that CELs exhibit particular error characteristics of conditional types of different complexities. The predominant error types are addition and omission, which result from hypercorrection and overgeneralization

This study made a first attempt to explore the developmental order of acquiring conditionals by CELs. The sequence was found to fit in ideas of previous studies. To begin with, the acquisition sequence we obtained lends supports to the optimal instruction order proposed by Mindt (1996). It implies that the optimal instruction order is better arranged in keeping with the natural development situations, from easy patterns to complex ones. Though this inference seems straightforward and is also in keeping with Chou's hypothesis (2000), it does not reconcile with the results of her work. However, there are many drawbacks in Chou's research (2000), such as her theoretical assumptions and research design. Our findings cast some suspicion on Chou's primary claim that it is only the syntactic complexity which determines the

acquisition difficulty. Although she made such an assumption, the results she obtained did not support her hypothesis. At last, Chou admitted that “the acquisition order cannot be explained by syntactic complexity alone” (p.86) in her discussion, but she ascribed the additional influence to L1 transfer. Since our results are in accord with her prediction order based on syntactic complexity, it appears that the semantic complexity and the mappings between form and function also take a part in increasing the extent of production problems. In a word, to compare our study with Chou’s, the reason why her results did not lend support to the hypotheses may be ascribed to two facets. In the first place, she used the syntactic complexity alone in accounting the acquisition order, but the concept of semantic complexity was no less important. In the second place, her research design that used a cloze test to simulate learners’ answers delimited their natural performance, and the vagueness of her scoring criterion might also make the interpretation of results far from clear. Our research avoided these disadvantages by means of investigating a large corpus.

Moreover, our application of the FC model: CPAO echoes current theoretical development and offers appropriate accounts on acquisition of conditionals. It is evidenced that the language learning process is a process fraught of form and meaning mappings. The acquisition sequence is demonstrated as the mappings of temporality and hypotheticality rules. Also, the process is regarded as a kind of associative learning done through establishing the strength of connections incrementally. The processability of the linguistic features affects the production accuracy. In other words, the complexity of formal and functional properties determines the difficulties.

The second concern of this thesis is to find out the error patterns and sources, furthermore, to explore the acquisition problems. Previous researchers have summarized similar reasons of the problems in acquiring conditionals. They include approaches of compartmentalizing conditional types, forms, functions and time-tense

relationship (Covitt, 1976; Berent, 1985; Nayef & Hajjaj, 1997; Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Schwenter, 1998). Our results add to previous results that L2 learners face grave problems in acquiring conditionals, suggesting that the difficulties result from complexities of forms and functions, and unsteady mappings. Besides, it is surprising that there seems to be a gradual pattern of the strategies the CELs utilized to deal with errors. Since the complexities increase with the acquisition time, however, the simplification of error shapes is found in the later stage.

All in all, it is obvious that the developmental situation of L2 conditional acquisition bears out the prediction of CPAO. The loads of formal and functional features wield considerable influence on the time and challenges of acquisition. In addition, errors also reflect the difficulty levels of different conditional types, and most importantly, they reveal what difficulties are caused by different features on the one hand, and how the L2 learners deal with them, on the other hand. Our results suggest the misuses of CELs have two tendencies: conditional types with lighter feature loads are prone to complication, while those with heavier contents are in favor of simplification. The evidence accumulating over this work reaffirms the idea that the acquisition problems center around “oversimplification classification”, “complex formal and functional loads” and “unstable mapping relations”

To sum up, the results of this thesis may contribute to the field of L2 development. If the distinction of temporality and hypotheticality is accepted, then our findings beg the question that “whether CELs generally commit errors of hypotheticality rather than temporality”. It opens a new direction for future research. Finally, although there are some flaws in the methods and study design, they do not downgrade the importance of this paper. The conclusions and implications will be summarized in Chapter Five.

