

Chapter Five

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

5.1. Final Remarks

This paper takes on the investigation of the L2 acquisition of conditionals. It aims to examine the acquisition sequence, to capture the error characteristics of the Chinese learners and explore the insurmountable difficulty of acquiring English conditionals. To that end, two research questions posed in section 1.4 were addressed. In this chapter, the answers obtained from this research will be summarized. Subsequently, the important findings and the significance of this work will be concluded. In the last part, the limitations and implications for future studies will be sketched and suggested.

This study has centered around the idea that the degrees of the acquisition difficulties increase with the formal and functional complexities of conditional types, which the CELs use different strategies to treat and hence different error patterns are committed.

First of all, the developmental sequence of disparate conditional types is identified. The order implies the time of acquisition and degree of difficulty. The data indicates that making past counterfactuals is truly the most problematic task for the Chinese learners. On the other hand, the other three conditional types display far less errors. Since learning a L2 is regarded as a process of form-function mapping, it is observed that the associations are established gradually from simple to complex units through the application of mapping rules. The acquisition stages seem to develop according to the mapping complexity of forms and functions. As claimed by the CPAO, those carry more syntactic or semantic features are to be acquired later and with more difficulties. The reason why Chinese learners cannot get over the

elusiveness of conditionals can be appealed to the processability of the linguistic features and the sophisticated form-function mappings. The conditional type, which uses more [+past] markers to indicate more degrees of hypotheticality or refer to the more backward time, brings about more perplexities and difficulties.

Secondly, the analysis of errors also displays the particular properties of CELs. The misuses show that the Chinese learners face different problems when dealing with different kinds of conditional types. Two error patterns, addition and omission, are recognized. Although Type2 conditionals, which do not involve past time reference or implication of unreality, are supposed to be easy; the learners are still apt to using past tense in the if-C. But on the contrary, when dealing with the more complicated Type3 and Type4 conditionals, they hesitate to move forward and became conservative in back-shifting the verb forms. In general, a reverse effect is observed in the strategies learners utilized: the less complex structures are generally complicated, whereas the more complex ones are often simplified.

It is conjectured that the CELs over-monitor their output in Type2, but overgeneralize the use of past in Type3 and Type4. The complication may result from the over-emphasis of the if-marker by teachers in the instruction process, misleading the Chinese learners to stress the hypotheticality in the non-past habitual and the non-past real conditionals, which also can imply a weak “hypothetical condition” or “possibility”. The problems of acquiring conditionals may lie in mapping failure of complex forms and functions. When the correct mapping fails, learners may be misled by some learning strategy-based errors, such as hypercorrection and overgeneralization, adding or omitting the formal or functional features.

The survey of the large learner corpus-CLEC yielded some important findings. Firstly, the acquisition sequences concur with the prediction of the form-function mapping theory—the FC model. The accumulating evidence favors that the difficulty

levels indeed increase with the syntactic and semantic loads of a conditional. Secondly, Learners display a tendency to complicate these simple conditionals but, conversely, simplify the complex ones. The mapping process fails when they overcorrect or oversimplify the wrong forms to correspond to narrow- or wide-ranged functions.

All in all, this work contributes to our understanding of the development stages and the problems within that period. It demonstrates that studies on L2 acquisition are more facile with the notion of FC model. The findings give a rich description of the roles of linguistic forms and functions, which may draw new researchers into the area of conditionals.

5.2. Limitation and Implication

Although the significance of this thesis is assured, there are some inevitable limitations. In the first place, some figures in the raw data may be too small to give certain results. Besides, the lack of some useful information appears to be a disadvantage. Detailed descriptions of the subjects' background, their proficiency levels and the data collection procedures will help to interpret the results more accurately.

With regard to the criterion of 50% set by Morgan *et al.* (1995) and Saxton (2000), it seems to be too high. According to our results, the cut point may be better set at 30 to 40 percent to determine the acquired conditional types. More data is required to give supports to this criterion.

Also, as a cross-sectional study, some phenomena may not be as obvious as in a developmental study. On the other hand, when judging the conditional types, some sentences are very ambiguous, which could result in different interpretation. Therefore, the chief flaw is that inferring from the verbal shapes leaves open a wealth

of interpretations, resulting in the exclusion of many unascertainable sentences. Additionally, we did not further analyze the different performance of if-C and MC, but this may benefit our understanding of each grammatical feature concerning the verb phrases in both clauses in the conditional.

Despite of those flaws, our study also gives some specific advices for researchers and learners in the future. First, the function performed by one specific form is decided by its form. However, there may be a gap between the usage and the speaker's original ideas for L2 learners. It is quite risky to say what the function is for the researcher. To avoid circularity, it is necessary to take the whole context into consideration. Though our interpretation may not exactly equal to subjects' intentions, we have judged the proper verb forms from the context and via the comparison of the two main verbs in each clause. It is suggested that future researchers to elicit the speakers' intentions to add authenticity.

Second, CELs may have more problems in “hypotheticality” rather than “temporality”. The findings of the acquisition stages and error analysis seem to suggest that hypotheticality plays a more important role than temporality. The acquisition sequence that the mapping rule of temporality precedes that of hypotheticality provides support. Also, the consideration of the error sources evidences that expressing tense is not a problem for CELs but conveying the irrealis is. As claimed by Comrie (1986), the “unreality” is only a matter of degrees. This idea is of central importance to the issues about acquisition of conditionals. The learners may have full control of expressing tense but lack the awareness of the degrees of hypotheticality and the ability to associate appropriate forms with the specific functions. Also, because the form-function mappings are not simply one-to-one, the cases with more syntactic and semantic features are hard to grasp. The L2 learners are easily to confuse the meanings and usage represented by different formal structures of

conditionals. Indubitably, the solution that helps Chinese learners to acquire conditionals lies in recourse to establishing a lucid form-function mapping, with a clear elucidation of tense and mood, temporality and hypotheticality. Therefore, the links of form and functions should be reinforced. To sum up, the advice given to L2 learners and teachers is that systematic introduction or instructions are needed. Teachers should elaborate the deep functions, temporality and hypotheticality, and their manifestations in forms, so that the learners can acquire the stable mappings and utilize them freely.

The findings of this present paper have revealed some implications. First of all, this paper merely discusses the four basic patterns (see Table1); however, there are other conditionals of various patterns, which are worthy of attention. To round out the picture, it is necessary to take consideration of all kinds of conditional types. Besides the four basic patterns we studied in this thesis, others are of equal significance. The investigation of the miscellaneous conditionals is totally uncharted territory.

The next one is, we dealt the data with error analysis, which is more or less restrictive and assertive. On the other hand, EA cannot precisely and certainly account for the causes of the errors. Some errors are purely tense or mood errors, which are due to learners' partial control of these grammatical categories, but not the conditional construction itself. Granger (1998, p.6) made comments that by the means of learner corpora, researchers can have access not only to errors but also to learners' total language. Therefore, the interlanguage analysis that views deviations as learners' particular systems rather than errors may be able to provide different insights.

Lastly, the future research should put this issue in a larger context, for example, trying to include the pragmatic factors, which are context-dependent with nonce meanings. Since conditionals were proofed to function as topics (Haiman, 1978), some relevant issues, such as their interaction with the discourse and the sameness or

difference of subjects in the if-C and MC position...etc., all merit further investigation.

This thesis is a first attempt to explore the elusiveness derived from acquiring conditionals by applying a form-function mapping framework, whereby serving to assist the L2 learners in overcoming their problems. Hopefully, this thesis may provide some help to researchers or even practitioners, who are interested in studying conditionals, and contribute to theoretical growth or pedagogical development.

