

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the topic structures in Chinese EFL learners' interlanguage elicited by three tasks—the grammaticality judgment task (GJ), the translation task (TR), and the guided writing task (GW). The four topic structures under investigation—LD, DP, TOP, DS—were chosen on the basis of a comparative study of Chinese and English topic structures. In addition, I have formulated two hypotheses about the interlanguage topic structures according to three SLA theories—L1 influence, UG, and the subset principle. I also asked questions about the linguistic implications—hierarchy of difficulty of the topic structures, subject-object asymmetry in LD and DP.

In the comparative study of Chinese and English topic structures, I found that the main differences between Chinese and English topic structures lie in the presence of syntactically marked topics (topics in the sentence-initial position) and the unmarked topic in the form of zero. That is, the four topic structures form a superset of English. Based on the first hypothesis, the four structures were likely to be transferred. Thus, I chose the three syntactically-marked topics—LD, TOP, DS and the unmarked topic in

the zero form topic—DP as the targets of my investigation.

The findings suggested that all the Chinese levels revealed high error rate (TP mean scores) in the controlled tasks—controlled comprehension task (GJ) and controlled production task (TR), but this rate fell in the free production task (GW). Generally, except for the U-shaped pattern in TOP in the GJ task, the error rate of all levels were not significant different. In contrast, in terms of correct responses (non-TP mean scores), students in level 1 performed significantly better than either or both of the other two levels across tasks. On the other hand, the hierarchy of difficulty was determined as LD>>DP>>TOP, DS(B)>>DS(A) based on the error rate and the correct rate. Moreover, the subject-object asymmetry was found in three cases—the Chinese group's responses to non-DP (S>>O), level 2' s to DP(O>>S), and the English control' s to LD(O>>S).

Two hypotheses about the interlanguage system were proposed to explain these findings, one was based on L1 transfer and the other on UG. The results of TP scores and non-TP scores supported the existence of L1 transfer and of UG respectively, but the latter evidence was found mostly in level 1. Thus the hypothesis may be modified by dividing the internal interlanguage system into three stages—initially L1 transfer, then UG and L1 transfer, and finally UG. The subjects in level 1 may have achieved the second stage, since they showed better performances than other levels in non-TP

scores but virtually no significant different responses in TP scores from other levels. However, those in the other two levels seemed to stay in the first stage—L1 transfer being dominant in the interlanguage.

On the other hand, the relative difficulty of LD and the asymmetric responses in DP(S) can be explained by the nature of inputs, those of the LD being indirect and those of the latter being direct and enhanced. Thus, the two results supported my second hypothesis, stating that the nature of inputs will affect the incorporation of them into the interlanguage system. The relative difficulty of DP, in contrast, can be attributed to its relative unmarked status among the four structures. In this way, DP matched three conditions of L1 transfer, more than did the other structures. This result, therefore, supported my first hypothesis, stating that the more conditions are met, the more transferable a L1 feature is.

Finally, in order to solve the learnability problems of the most difficult structures—LD and DP, I have proposed a teaching plan, which offers both positive input enhancement and the negative input.

The results of this study have further tested the SLA theories, formulated a theoretical framework of interlanguage process, determined the areas of difficulties in terms of L1-induced topic structures, and offered constructive suggestions for English teaching through a teaching plan. However, as noted in chapter 5, there were some

methodological limitations of this study. Moreover, the proposed teaching plan still waits for the actual practice in teaching to prove its effectiveness. Therefore, further studies are needed to replicate this study by using different methodology and by incorporating the actual practice of the teaching plan.