

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation

Chinese is classified as a topic prominent language, while English a subject prominent language (Li and Thompson, 1976, 1981). The typological difference between Chinese and English has long been found to influence learners' 'interlanguage' (Selinker, 1972), either from Chinese to English (Zhang, 1987; Yip, 1995; Green, 1996; Yuan, 1997; Ou, 1997; Xiao, 1998) or from English to Chinese (Xie, 1992; Jin, 1994; Yuan, 1995; Shi, 1999; Liao, 1999; Ou, 1998). Besides, in second language acquisition (SLA) studies, first language (L1) knowledge is generally believed to play an important role in shaping second language (L2) learners' interlanguage. However, many previous studies regarding the issue of topic-comment structures of interlanguage have been done in L2 settings (Xie, 1992; Jin, 1994; Yuan, 1995; Shi, 1999, Liao, 1999; Yip, 1995, Green, 1996; Xiao, 1998); only a few of them deal with this topic in L1 environment (Zhang, 1987; Sasaki, 1990; Ou, 1997; Yuan, 1997). For L2 learners without L2 settings, the status of formal instruction is important (Krashen and Seliger, 1975; Long, 1983). Learners need teachers' guidance

in their L2 learning if they have no chance to practice using L2 outside the classroom.

In addition, the related research about topic-comment structures in interlanguage has not provided a comprehensive framework to describe learners' topic structures.

Therefore, more research needs to be done in order to discover the proper guidance teachers can offer to their students in L1 settings when unlearning the topic structures in their first language.

The thesis investigates Chinese learners' interlanguage in terms of topic-comment structures, and focuses on Taiwan students' acquisition of English in the classroom settings.

1.2 Theoretical Background

In this section I will provide a brief introduction of the interlanguage theory in section 1.2.1, the related SLA theories and my framework of interlanguage system developed from them in section 1.2.2, and the comparative grammar and language typology in section 1.2.3. The detailed explanation of the theories will be offered in chapter 2 and chapter 3.

1.2.1 Interlanguage Theory

Interlanguage theory, proposed by Selinker (1972), was developed in the 1970s in order to better describe L2 learners' L2 outputs. Interlanguage refers to the internal language system revealed by L2 learners at a single point in time and to the series of

interconnected systems developed by L2 learners during the process of L2 acquisition.

Unlike contrastive analysis (CA) in the 1960s, which deems the learner as a passive L1-habit-carrier, the interlanguage position renders L2 learners a more active role of rule-creator. Also in contrast to error analysis (EA) in the 1970s, which focuses on erroneous L2 production, the interlanguage theory not only considers correct and incorrect responses, but also production and underproduction.

Interlanguage as a whole is rule-governed, systematic, and is constantly changing through the exposure to L2 inputs and subsequent restructuring of the whole system.

1.2.2 SLA Theories and My Theoretical Framework Developed from Them

There are three main SLA theories in analyzing learners' language—L1 influence, the existence of universal grammar (UG), and the subset principle. The three SLA perspectives are summarized in the following.

1. L1 influence: According to contrastive analysis (CA), which claims that differences between L1 and L2 result in difficulties, L1 influence are divided into two kinds—positive transfer and negative transfer. The former is the beneficial effect of L1, and occurs when L1 and L2 features are similar. In contrast, the latter is the bad effect of L1, and occurs when L1 and L2 features are different. However, the empirical interlanguage studies have shown that L1 influence interacts with developmental stage and is constrained by markedness (Larsen-Freeman & Long,

1991). Namely, L1 transfer is promoted when L1 features overlap with those typical of a developmental stage, and this stage will be prolonged due to such enhancement of L1 transfer. On the other hand, unmarked L1 features are more likely to be transferred than unmarked ones.

2. The Existence of Universal Grammar (UG): Universal grammar (UG), proposed by Chomsky (1986), is a language acquisition device through which human beings acquire their first language based on the triggering language data they are exposed to. However, the status of UG in L2 acquisition remains a controversial issue. Empirical studies have shown that the nature of input, or the triggering evidence, being explicit or implicit, is important to determine if UG is still available in L2 acquisition (Lightbown and Spada, 1990; White, 1991; White et al, 1991).

3. The Subset Principle: The subset principle is a learning principle guiding the way parameters (i.e., the choices under one UG principle) are to be set (Ayoum, 1996), and functions when two grammars are in a superset-subset relationship (Wexler& Manzini, 1987). This learning principle assumes that acquisition can be achieved through ‘positive evidence (i.e., examples of grammatical sentences) only’, rejecting the existence of negative evidence (i.e., instructions showing some sentences are ill-formed). It operates in L1 acquisition, where learner’s grammar form a subset of the target grammar, in order to avoid overgeneralized ‘wild grammar’ (i.e., grammar

that does not occur in human languages). However, empirical research has shown that the operation of the subset principle is blocked when L1 generates a superset of the L2 grammar (White, 1989b; Rutherford, 1989). In this situation, learnability problems are found to occur in the form of L1 transfer.

Based on the three SLA perspectives, I formulate a theoretical framework of the operation of interlanguage system, in which two mechanisms are at work—L1 transfer and UG. However, there are some conditions to be met before the two mechanisms function. The conditions for L1 transfer are related to markedness, developmental stage features, and the superset-subset relation between L1 and L2. The conditions for UG are related to the nature of L2 inputs. The diagram and hypotheses of this framework will be presented in 2.2.4.

1.2.3 Comparative Grammar and Language Typology

Contrastive analysis (CA) has largely been replaced by comparative grammar, which places equal emphasis on the similarities and the differences between languages based on well-defined principles (Yip, 1995a). Therefore, the framework of comparative grammar is adopted in this study to compare the topic structures in Chinese and English.

Since Chinese is a topic prominent (TP) language and English a subject prominent (SP) language (Li and Thompson, 1976, 1981), the topic-comment structure is a basic

syntactic unit in Chinese but rarely occurs in English (Huang, 1984a, b). This study, under the comparative grammar framework, investigates the marked topics and unmarked topic structures in Chinese (Chu, 1998) and determine if there are corresponding structures in English.

The results of comparison showed that Chinese and English differs in that the former has the zero form of unmarked topics and both syntactically marked topics and morphologically marked topics, while the latter only has morphologically marked topics. Thus, there are two kinds of Chinese topic structures which form a superset of English—unmarked topics in the zero form (topic drop), and syntactically marked topics (double-subject, topicalization, and left-dislocation). The four topic structures were chosen as the targets of our investigation since, according to the condition- L1 as a superset- in my theoretical framework of the operation of interlanguage system, they are subject to L1 transfer. Moreover, DP and LD are further divided into two types with respect to the subject position and object position in order to discover if there is any subject-object asymmetry in our subjects' responses.

1.3 Research Questions

1) SLA Theories

- a. L1 transfer: Do the Chinese learners apply their L1 knowledge of topic structures to learn English? If yes, their interlanguage will show topic structures, and the

error rate will be high.

- b. the Existence of UG: Will Chinese learners correctly respond to L2 structures not instantiated in L1? If yes, there is the existence of UG.
- c. the Subset Principle: Will L1 topic structures which generate superset of L2 be difficult to the Chinese learners? If yes, the subset principle does not function in L2 acquisition, and L1 transfer will override the subset principle.

2) Linguistic Implications

- a. Hierarchy of difficulty: Do the topic structures cause different degree of difficulty for the learners? If yes, what is the hierarchy of difficulty and how does the structural complexity of these structures affect this hierarchy?
- b. Subject-object asymmetry: Do the subjects respond differently to LD and to DP with respect to the subject and object position? If yes, what is the source of asymmetric responses?

1.4 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis examines mainly Chinese learners' interlanguage of English in terms of topic structures. The present study investigates L1 influences on Taiwan EFL learners' interlanguage with respect to topic structures, which are determined by a comparative study between Chinese and English typology. In chapter 2 I will review the related SLA empirical studies. In order to understand the role that Chinese L1

plays in the interlanguage, I need to compare Chinese and English topic structures.

Thus in chapter 3 a comparative study between Chinese and English topic structures is conducted. In chapter 4 the methodology and results are presented, including subjects' information, the control group, data collection, materials (grammaticality judgment task, translation task and guided writing task), procedure, and the results. In chapter 5 the results will be discussed. After analyzing the interlanguage elicited by the three tasks, I will focus on the implications for English teachers and propose a teaching plan in chapter 6. Finally a conclusion will be made in chapter 7.