Topic Prominence in Typological Interlanguage Development of Chinese Students' English

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Abstract:

This study aims to investigate the general characteristics of topic-prominent typological interlanguage development of the Chinese English learners in terms of acquiring subject-prominent English syntactic structures in a systematic way. This study shows that the Chinese students of English at each proficiency level have employed TP structures in their interlanguage to a certain extent. However, there is a general tendency that the frequency of using TP features in the interlanguage decreases and that of using SP structures increases with the development of learners' English proficiency level. The study also shows how the typological Chinese influence is manifested in the learner language of English in a hierarchical way of ease and difficulty. The Topic-to-Subject Hypothesis is testified sound and valid in terms of the general interlanguage development route of the Chinese students of English.

Key Words: Interlanguage, Typological Transfer, Topic-to-Subject Hypothesis, Hierarchy of Difficulty Hypothesis

1. INTRODUCTION

English and Chinese are typologically different languages. Chinese is a topic-prominent language in which topic plays an important role in the formation of a sentence, whereas English belongs to subject-prominent language in which subject is an indispensable element that determines the English sentence pattern (Li & Thompson 1976). In view of the fact that the influence of the mother tongue on second language acquisition has been widely recognized, the inevitable typological differences between Chinese and English will be reflected in the interlanguage of Chinese EFL learners. In second language acquisition research, quite a number of empirical studies have been conducted at home and abroad based on the language typological classification of subject-prominence (SP) and topic-prominence (TP)(Giv-όn 1983, Shi 1989, Sasaki 1990, Cai 1998, Jung 2004, Yang 2008).

The previous studies usually explore the TP/SP issue in a pure syntactic way, focusing on the phenomenon description and they scarcely touch these typological structures in terms of a syntax-pragmatic approach, which would be more workable in identifying the interrelations between the pragmatic constraints and the acquisition of TP/ SP typological features by Chinese learners of English. This study focuses on the six categories of typological TP interlanguage structures in Chinese students' spontaneous work and careful translation work in each of the three groups. These structures include Double Nominative (DN), Existential Constructions (EC), Pseudo Passives (PP), Null Element (NE), Periphrastic structures (PS), Subject-predicate disagreement (SPD). This study aims to investigate the general characteristics of topic-prominent typological interlanguage development of the Chinese English learners in terms of acquiring subject-prominent English syntactic structures in a systematic way.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language Typology

When the relation between topic and subject in the languages is invoked to the typological level, Li and Thompson (I976) asserted that topic-prominent and subject-prominent relation are the two basic relations in the structures of languages. The sentences of any languages though may not be limited to either of the relations, could be classified in terms of its preference for either of types: subject-prominent languages or topic prominent languages. The first types are those in which "the structure of sentences favors a description in which the grammatical relation subject-predicate plays a major role."(1976: 459) By contrast, topic prominent languages are those in which "the basic structure of sentences favors a description in which the grammatical relation topic-comment plays a major role."(ibdi.) Originally, it is Charles N. Li & Sandra A. Thompson who categorized world languages into four basic types: languages that are subject-prominent; languages that are topic-prominent; languages that are both subject-prominent and topic-prominent; languages that are neither subject-prominent nor topic-prominent.

The typological analysis above accordingly provides guidelines for identifying characteristic patterns in the study of any language, and for analysis of interlanguage in terms of these patterns acquisition.

2.2 Typological Universals

It is argued that the typological approach, which is viable in investigating linguistic universals across languages, should also hold for language acquisition. Hawkins holds that implicational universals for diachronic as well as synchronic predictions should be manifested in language acquisition as well. Comrie (1981) states that one could study the acquisition of a second language, to see if any universals are mirrored in its acquisition process, especially in cases where those universals are not the subject of direct evidence in either the native language or the target language. One of the most important discoveries of the typological universals study is that one can generalize across unrelated and geographically nonadjacent languages regarding the occurrence and co-occurrence of structures. Many of the typological universals are expressed in terms of implications, such that, if a language has feature X, it will also have feature Y. We can find how typological universals shed light on interlanguage development in the example of the study of relative clauses (Ellis, 1997).

The fact that the typological approach has been effectively applied in addressing issues in SLA shows that the field of second language acquisition is a valid field for testing language universals, which would help to further understand the characteristics of second language acquisition.

2.3 TP/SP Typological Studies in Interlanguage Development

Investigations of the role of syntactic typology in second language acquisition have led to two controversial, contradictory findings. One set of studies claims that the process of L2 acquisition is actually characterized by an early universal topic-comment stage, independent of a learner's native language. Fuller and Gundel (1987) argue that second language acquisition is, in general, characterized by an early topic-comment stage that is independent of the learner's native language. Odlin (1989: 89), too, accepted that there was 'detailed evidence for the heavy reliance of some learners on topic-comment patterning in the early stages of acquisition.' Learners of German, irrespective of their L1, have been found to produce similar topic-comment utterances (Klein 1986; Clahsen and Muysken 1986). All these suggest that topic-prominence is not a transferable typology and L2 learners of different language backgrounds may go through a similar stage of universal topic-prominence.

The second set of findings claims that the early topic-prominence stage is evidence of typological transfer from L1 to L2. Schachter (1979) and Rutherford (1979, 1983), after examining five groups of people learning English from both TP and SP languages, find evidence of overproduction of topic sentences by TP speakers, especially Chinese speakers whose language has typical TP features. Based on Li and Thompson's TP/SP typological framework (1976), Chen (1992) proposes that topic-prominence tends to characterize different

stages of the Chinese EFL learners. Sasaki (1990) examines interlanguage constructions of English existential locative sentences in written production by Japanese learners, and results indicate a general shift from topic-prominence to subject-prominence constructions with the learner's increasing L2 proficiency. Givón (1995) suggests that early TP-like production does not necessarily indicate a universal topic-prominence stage, but rather a systematic transfer of TP features from L1 to L2. Xiao (2002) investigates the effects of topic prominence on the syntactic development of Chinese children learning English as an L2 in the United States and finds evidence of children's topic-prominence L1 properties in their production. Jung (2004) examines topic-prominent interlanguage of subject-prominent first language speakers and found learners transferred their subject-prominent L1 features in topic-prominent L2 learning.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to deepen our understanding on the topic-prominent features of Chinese learners of English with different proficiency levels, and to demonstrate the developmental routes of these different structures, the present study addresses the following questions and hypotheses:

1. What are the characteristics of topic-prominent typological interlanguage of the Chinese English learners in terms of acquiring subject-prominent English syntactic structures in a systematic way? Hence, **the Hierarchy of Difficulty Hypothesis** of the six types of TP interlanguage structures is proposed.

2. How do learners at different proficiency levels go through the TP stage to SP stage? Do learners decrease the choice of TP structures with the increase of use of SP structures along with their proficiency levels? Hence, **the Topic-to-Subject Hypothesis** in the interlanguage development is proposed.

4. METHOD

4.1. Participants

The participants of this study are 90 Chinese students of English in China. Group 1 are 30 high school students, while Group 2 are 30 first-year university English major students and Group 3 are 30 first year postgraduate students of English major at the same university of Group 2. Since there are three or four years of difference in formal learning among the three groups, it is assumed that they represent three proficiency levels of preliminary, intermediate and advanced. Undoubtedly it is admitted that there is no definite and absolute dividing line between every two proficiency levels. Therefore, the classifications of different proficiency levels are just relatively made among those subjects according to their different grades and the length of years of English learning in China.

4.2. Instrument

A questionnaire with thirty sentences of Chinese-English Translation was utilized for the present study. The design of the tasks aims to elicit the interlanguage data with the Spontaneous

Oral Task and Careful Translation Task in terms of Tarone's Vernacular Style and Careful Style (Tarone, 1983: 152). The first task is oral interpretation of the 30 Chinese sentences into English, which is purposely designed to cover all the sentences in a natural or spontaneous way for the Chinese learners to yield English sentences. This is done through an orally administered task requiring spontaneous production of the TP constructions investigated in this study. This task intends to elicit the vernacular style of interlanguage of Chinese students, in which some TP and SP typological universals are investigated. The second task is to translate the same 30 Chinese sentences into English, which aims to investigate the various topic-prominent sentences with high frequency. This task of translating generally represents a careful style in which the subjects produce language structures far more accurately and correctly than in their vernacular style. The subjects' writings are studied regarding the interlanguage typological features in comparison with the subjects' oral interlanguage.

4.3 Data collection and procedure

The data collection is manipulated on class with the help of some teachers. The data processing involves the processing of transcribing, coding, tabulating and sorting out data. Raw data in the two tasks are classified, calculated and tabulated into various tables ready for data analysis.

The data collected is first manually tagged and analyzed. Then the frequencies of various types of TP interlanguage structures were counted. The results of the frequencies of different types of TP interlanguage structures tagged are analyzed using SPSS instrument. In the analysis the results of the three groups are compared in order to reveal whether there is a similarly strong tendency among preliminary, intermediate and advanced learners in the production of topic-prominent constructions. With respect to data analysis, descriptive statistics such as percentages are employed to describe relative proportions and tendencies, and at times the data is assessed upon the software packages SPSS for the statistics concerned. The features of each TP structure are analyzed and the frequencies of each TP properties are singled out as compared with the total number of each group. The One-Way ANOVA is undertaken to measure the significant difference between each level.

5. RESULTS

5.1 TP Interlanguage Structures Among the Three Groups

5.1.1 Distributions of TP IL Structures at Preliminary Level

At preliminary level, there are a variety of errors of English structures and spelling. The proportion of these six kinds of interlanguage constructions make up almost half of all the incorrect sentences. Particularly existential constructions, periphrastic structures, and pseudo passives occupy the great majority of those topic-prominent constrictions.

The distribution of these different topic-prominent constructions produced by subjects at the preliminary level will be shown in the following table:

Table 1: The distribution of TP structures at preliminary level

Structures / Task Types	Numbers and percentages of Each TP Structure					
	DN (4×30)	EC (4×30)	PP (4×30)	NE (4×30)	PS (4×30)	SPD (4×30)
Spontaneous Oral Task	25 20.83%	50 41.67%	40 33.33%	35 29.17%	74 61.67%	27 22.50%
Careful Translation Task	16 13.33%	30 25.00%	24 20.00%	20 16.67%	72 60.00%	16 13.33%

There is a tendency for the subjects at the preliminary level to be influenced by their native language when they are required to write an English sentence. Each parameter of TP has their influences on the subjects' production, but the degree is quite different. According to Table1, the distribution of TP constructions is imbalanced.

5.1.2 Distributions of TP IL Structures at International Level

At the intermediate level, those interlanguage sentences still include the six TP structures and other incorrect expressions about English grammar and spelling. The proportion of such sentences has decreased by almost one-third of that of preliminary level.

The distribution of these different topic-prominent constructions produced by the subjects at the intermediate level is shown in the following table:

Table 2: The distribution of TP Structures at intermediate level

Structures Task Types	Numbers and percentages of Each TP Structures					
	DN (4×30)	EC (4×30)	PP (4×30)	NE (4×30)	PS (4×30)	SPD (4×30)
Spontaneous Oral Task	10 8.33%	24 20.00%	25 20.83%	38 31.67%	52 43.33%	16 13.33%
Careful Translation Task	3 2.50%	10 8.33%	18 15.00%	17 14.17%	50 41.67%	10 8.33%

Table 2 shows that the six kinds of TP constructions still occupy a quite large proportion of all the interlanguage sentences though their order is a little different from that of preliminary level. The order from the highest to the lowest distribution is periphrastic structures > existential constructions > pseudo passive > null element > double nominative.

5.1.3 Distributions of TP IL Structures at Advanced Level

Generally speaking, the errors produced by advanced subjects are obviously fewer than those of the other two groups though periphrastic structures may outnumber those of the intermediate subjects. The distribution of all those topic-prominent constructions produced by the subjects at the advanced level is shown as follows:

Table 3: The distribution of TP Structures at advanced level

Structures Task Types	Numbers and percentages of Each TP Structures					
	DN (4×30)	EC (4×30)	PP (4×30)	NE (4×30)	PS (4×30)	SPD (4×30)
Spontaneous Oral Task	8 6.67%	18 15.00%	20 16.67%	21 17.50%	59 49.17%	16 13.33%
Careful Translation Task	2 1.67%	4 3.33%	13 10.83%	7 5.83%	58 48.33%	15 12.50%

There is a tendency for the subjects at the advanced level to be less influenced by their NL when they use the L2. They are more likely to employ their monitoring systems and a variety of learning strategies during the discourses so that they can produce more grammatical sentences.

5.1.4 Comparison and Analysis of Different Proficiency Levels

In order to attain a clearer answer to the question whether there would be a tendency of learners' interlanguage gradually developing from more topic-prominent to subject-prominent with the increase of learners' proficiency level, it is necessary to compare the data from these three levels. Take a look at Figure1 and Figure2:
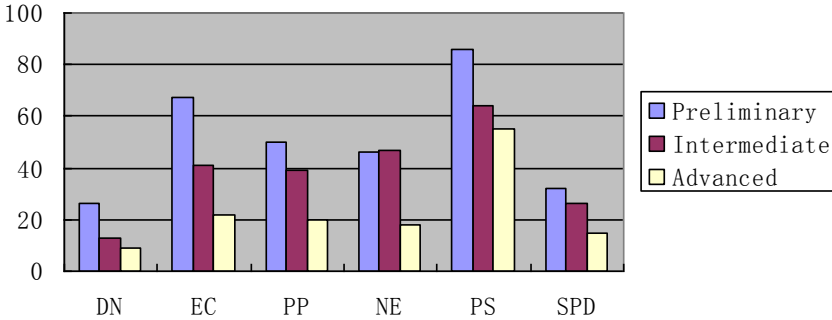

Figure 1 The Manifestations of 6 TP IL Structures in Spontaneous Oral Task
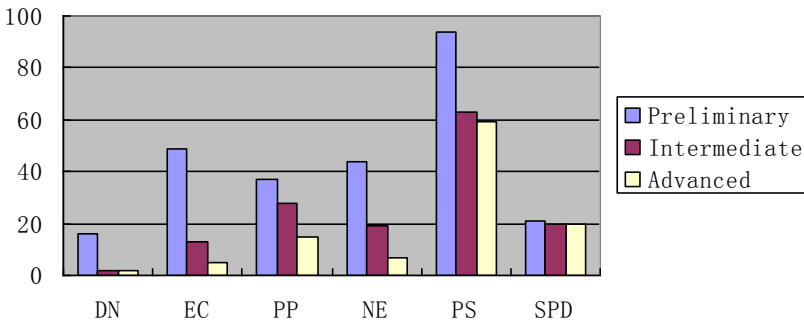

Figure 2 The Manifestations of 6 TP IL Structures in Careful Translation Task

By comparing and analyzing the data from the three proficiency levels, we can learn from the analysis that:

All the subjects at each proficiency level are influenced by the topic-prominent features from their NL, that is, topic-prominent constructions in Chinese are transferable. The reason is that when they are required to produce an English composition, all the subjects, to some extent, produce some topic-prominent constructions with the influence of their native language.

There is a general tendency from topic prominence to subject prominence with the increase of the learners' English proficiency level. Even though there is fluctuation of a certain parameter which seems to violate the normal tendency, it still can not be denied that their interlanguage will become more like the target language so long as the plateau is overcome.

5.2 The Multiple Comparisons of Each TP Interlanguage Structure between Proficiency Groups

5.2.1 Double Nominative (DN)

Results of multiple comparisons of DN between proficiency levels:

Table 4 The Multiple Comparisons of DN between Proficiency Levels

Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: DN
LSD

(I) level	(J) level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
P	I	.467*	.097	.000	.28	.66
	A	.517*	.097	.000	.33	.71
I	P	-.467*	.097	.000	-.66	-.28
	A	.050	.097	.605	-.14	.24
A	P	-.517*	.097	.000	-.71	-.33
	I	-.050	.097	.605	-.24	.14

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 4 displays the differences between different proficiency levels are not the same in terms of DN structure. The differences between Preliminary Level and Advanced Level and that between Preliminary Level and Intermediate Level are the most significant with their value p=0.000, while the difference between Intermediate Level and Advanced level is p=0.605 (p>0.05), indicating statistical insignificancy.

5.2.2 Existential Constructions (EC)

Results of multiple comparisons of EC between proficiency levels:

Table 5 The Multiple Comparisons of EC between Proficiency Levels

Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: EC
LSD

(I) level	(J) level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
P	I	.767*	.150	.000	.47	1.06
	A	.967*	.150	.000	.67	1.26
I	P	-.767*	.150	.000	-1.06	-.47
	A	.200	.150	.185	-.10	.50
A	P	-.967*	.150	.000	-1.26	-.67
	I	-.200	.150	.185	-.50	.10

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 5 still displays the differences between different proficiency levels are not the same in terms of EC structure. The differences between Preliminary Level and Advanced Level and that between Preliminary Level and Intermediate Level are the most significant with their value p=0.000, while the difference between Intermediate Level and Advanced level is p=0.185

(p>0.05), indicating statistical insignificancy.

5.2.3 Pseudo Passives (PP)

Results of multiple comparisons of PP between proficiency levels:

Table 6 The Multiple Comparisons of PP between Proficiency Levels

Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: PP

LSD

(I) lev el	(J) lev el	Mean Dif f erence (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Conf idence Interv al	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
P	I	.350*	.139	.013	.08	.62
	A	.517*	.139	.000	.24	.79
I	P	-.350*	.139	.013	-.62	-.08
	A	.167	.139	.233	-.11	.44
A	P	-.517*	.139	.000	-.79	-.24
	I	-.167	.139	.233	-.44	.11

*. The mean dif f erence is signif icant at the .05 lev el.

Table 6 has the same results as that of the previous two structures, displaying the differences between different proficiency levels are not the same in terms of PP structure. The differences between Preliminary Level and Advanced Level and that between Preliminary Level and Intermediate Level are the most significant with their value p=0.013 and p=0.000, while the difference between Intermediate Level and Advanced level is p=0.233 (p>0.05), indicating statistical insignificancy.

5.2.4 Null Element (NE)

Results of multiple comparisons of NE between proficiency levels:

Table 7 The Multiple Comparisons of NE between Proficiency Levels

Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: NE

LSD

(I) level	(J) level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
P	I	.000	.139	1.000	-.27	.27
	A	.450*	.139	.001	.18	.72
I	P	.000	.139	1.000	-.27	.27
	A	.450*	.139	.001	.18	.72
A	P	-.450*	.139	.001	-.72	-.18
	I	-.450*	.139	.001	-.72	-.18

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

From Table 7, it can be found that the difference in terms of DN structure between Preliminary Level and Advanced Level and that between Advanced Level and Intermediate Level are the most significant with their value P=0.001, while the difference between Preliminary Level and Intermediate level is p=1.000 (p>0.05), indicating statistical insignificancy.

5.2.5 Periphrastic Structures (PS)

Results of multiple comparisons of PS between proficiency levels:

Table 8 The Multiple Comparisons of DN between Proficiency Levels

Multiple

Dependent Variable: PS

LSD

(I) level	(J) level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
P	I	.733 *	.159	.000	.42	1.05
	A	.483 *	.159	.003	.17	.80
I	P	-.733 *	.159	.000	-1.05	-.42
	A	-.250	.159	.118	-.56	.06
A	P	-.483 *	.159	.003	-.80	-.17
	I	.250	.159	.118	-.06	.56

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 8 still displays the difference between different proficiency levels are not the same in terms of PS structure. The difference between Preliminary Level and Advanced Level and that between Preliminary Level and Intermediate Level are the most significant with their value p=0.000 and p=0.003, while the difference between Intermediate Level and Advanced level is p=0.118 (p>0.05), indicating statistical insignificancy.

5.2.6 Subject-predicate Disagreement (SPD)

Results of multiple comparisons of SPD between proficiency levels:

Table 9 The Multiple Comparisons of SPD between Proficiency Levels

Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: SPD

LSD

(I) level	(J) level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
P	I	.283*	.132	.033	.02	.54
	A	.200	.132	.130	-.06	.46
I	P	-.283*	.132	.033	-.54	-.02
	A	-.083	.132	.527	-.34	.18
A	P	-.200	.132	.130	-.46	.06
	I	.083	.132	.527	-.18	.34

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

It is interesting that Table 9 shows that only the difference between Preliminary Level and Intermediate Level is the most significant with their value p=0.033. The differences between the other two groups are not statistically significant, with the value of p=0.130 and p=0.527 (p>0.05).

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Hierarchy of Difficulty Hypothesis

The investigation has shown how the typological Chinese influence is manifested in the learner

language of English in a hierarchical way of ease and difficulty. Because of the cross-sectional design of the present study, the individual learners' developmental patterns of TP features in English cannot be assessed, as such an assessment calls for a longitudinal study. Based on the present data, a proposed Hierarchy of Difficulty in TP Structures for Chinese students of all levels can be summarized as following hierarchy PS＞EC ＞NL ＞PP＞SPD＞DN and in Table 11:

Table10 Hierarchy of Difficulty in TP Structures

6	Periphrastic structures		PS
5	Existential constructions		EC
4	Null elements	Null subject Null object	NL
3	Pseudo passives		PP
2	Subject-predicate disagreement		SPD
1	Double nominatives	Co-referential double nominatives Non-coreferential double nominatives	DN

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the general hierarchy of ease and difficulty at the two types of tasks. Several points are noted here. First, this hierarchy of difficulty in TP Structures is not determined by the language processing, but by the error proportion when the students finish the tasks. We would not expect students to learn the TP structures according to the ordering of the Hierarchy of Difficulty, considering the Hierarchy of Difficulty from the point of view of learnability. Second, the Hierarchy of Difficulty suggests that the Chinese students' maximum generalization in terms of TP and SP structures occurs from more marked structures to the less ones. Generalization from less difficult to more difficult does not appear to occur. Third, students of all levels tend to use periphrastic structures with more prepositional phrases to mark the topic. This reveals that the Chinese students tend to reflect two distinct characteristic stages of interlanguage development, i.e., direct reliance on topic-comment structure as opposed the utilization of syntactic devices (prepositional phrases) to mark topics.

6.2 Topic-to-Subject Hypothesis

The results of this study show that the Chinese students of the three proficiency levels are similarly characterized by topic-prominent constructions in their interlanguage. There is a general tendency that the transfer from the students' NL in their interlanguage decreases eventually with the development of their proficiency level. However, the advanced learners still can not resist the influence of the topic prominence feature from Chinese. It may suggest that the topic-prominent feature of interlanguage production may prevail over a relatively long

period for learners with a topic-prominent L1 background such as Chinese students. Sometimes the TP structures from advanced learners even will never be eradicated due to the fossilization. However, it does not violate the Topic-to-Subject Hypothesis.

6.3 NL-related Typological Transfer

Since Chinese and English belong to different language families, the native language transfer will inevitably occur as Odlin (1989) defines transfer as 'the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired'. The topic-prominent structure in Chinese is common and natural and it's an unmarked structure. In English it's rare and uncommon and it violates the basic word order of SVO, so it's a marked structure. As some researchers (for example, Hyltenstam 1984) claim that, learners will transfer unmarked forms when the corresponding target language form is marked. Generally speaking, this kind of transfer is unconscious, and it's referred to as "transfer to nowhere". The viewpoint that the similar structures among different languages can result in transfer is somewhat analogous to Andersen's (1983) principle of "transfer to somewhere". Andersen proposes two prerequisite conditions for the occurrence "transfer of similarities". First is that the transferred structure should agree with the natural acquisition sequence. Secondly, the input of the target language should prove that occurrence of transfer is reasonable. That is to say, not only learners' interlanguage can accept the transferred structures, but also there exist some structures which can make learners believe that they are the corresponding parts of the transferred structures in the input of the target language. Therefore, when the EFL learners are speaking English, they will unconsciously transfer the topic-comment structure in their native language, and it will be demonstrated in their Chinese-English interlanguage in the form of TP structures, double nominative constructions and others. In a word, the topic-prominent L1 influences L2 syntax, which implies a view of topicalization as a discourse function in the second language syntacticization in which discourse and pragmatic relations are gradually reanalyzed as grammatical or syntactic relations through the emergence of grammatical machinery (Rutherford, 1983).

6.4 Priority of Pragmatic Objective

Second language acquisition, like the first language acquisition, proceeds largely from functions, featuring the primacy of the communicative meaning. This functional approach can be evidenced with the fact that both first and second language acquirers begin by producing the telegraph speech and the formulaic or chunks of language, having high functional value in communication. Semantics appears to take the precedence over syntax and morphology, and pragmatics, in turn, takes priority over semantics (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; VanPatten, 1996).

When learners are using the second language to communicate, they will first fulfill the pragmatic functions, (although sometimes it is not grammatically correct), other than the accuracy of the grammatical rules. When language learners are using the second language to

conduct social intercourse, they will lay more emphasis on the conveyance of meanings. The focus of the speaker is on the pass of information and word collocation in the process of speaking, therefore, the other aspects of his utterance are neglected.

When learners haven't acquired the standard rules in the target language, the productive-mechanism of brain will produce incomplete rules to compensate the language incompetence. Learners will usually borrow the constructions in the native language to give expression to the corresponding pragmatic functions, thus pragmatic transfer occurs. Rutherford (1989) argue that, with the increasing contact with the target language, the incorrect constructions produced by productive mechanism will be preempted by the correct constructions which have the same functions with the incorrect ones. This process is called by Rutherford preemption. Since Chinese learners are studying English as a foreign language in the environment of the native language, they have far fewer opportunities to come into contact with and apply the target language. Chinese learners are less sensitive to the errors they make, and the process of the incorrect constructions being preempted by the correct ones will become longer and longer, and sometimes it can't be accomplished. This results in the fossilization of errors. In the present study, although the advanced students have studied English for over 10 years, they still couldn't successfully identify the errors in syntactic structures related to Chinese TP features. This reflects that the dependence' on L1 semantics and syntax often continues into the advanced stage of L2 learning. This study shows that the L1 TP semantics and its syntactic expression remain the driving force for their production of interlanguage featuring the six structures.

7.   CONCLUSION

English and Chinese, as two distinct languages, belong to different language typological systems respectively. Chinese is a topic-prominent language in which topic plays an important role in the formation of a sentence whereas English is a subject-prominent language in which subject is an indispensable element that determines the English sentence pattern. There is a general tendency that Chinese students of English produce the TP structures such as Double Nominative (DN), Existential Constructions (EC), Pseudo Passives (PP), Null Element (NE), Periphrastic structures (PS), Subject-predicate disagreement (SPD) in their interlanguage due primarily to the TP features of their native language.

TP properties are dominant, though there is substantial evidence of SP properties in the interlanguage of Chinese students of English. The Chinese students of English at each proficiency level have employed TP structures in their interlanguage to a certain extent. However, there is a general tendency that the frequency of using TP features in the interlanguage decreases and that of using SP structures increases with the development of learners' English proficiency level. Based on the analysis of the features of the three levels, and the three-stage developmental route, the Topic-to-Subject Hypothesis is proposed. The operation of Topic-to-Subject progression begins with the L1 TP conceptual system serving as

the substrate to be then followed by "cognitive shifts" towards the L2 SP conceptual system, as L2 proficiency advances. The study shows that when the two languages come into contact, the L1 linguistic and conceptual system will initially exert a dominant impact on the L2 or the L1 and L2 are mutually contributable to the interlanguage development. However, as the L2 proficiency increases, the L1 system gradually gives way to the L2. So the hypothesis of Topic-to-Subject progression is testified sound and valid in terms of the general interlanguage development of the Chinese students of English.

TP structures exist pervasively in the interlanguage of Chinese students of English at each proficiency level. The TP structures in the interlanguage are mostly motivated by NL-related typological transfer, priority of pragmatic objectives and the failure of formal instruction. It is suggested that the source of these TP properties is an interaction of native language influence, discoursal/pragmatic language universals. The development of interlanguage is a process of typological syntacticization and pragmaticization.

The Hierarchy of Difficulty is generally testified as PS＞EC ＞NL ＞PP＞SPD＞DN in this study. The ease or difficulty of the TP structures may be affected by the availability of form-function mapping between L1 and L2. When L1-L2 form and function are similar or identical, their mapping is transparent. When L2 lacks the corresponding L1 form and function, there will be no L1-L2 form and function mapping. So, Second language acquisition consists of form-function association. Meaning can be a great source of difficulty than form, and in that vein, grammatical morphemes encoding abstract notions are likely a long-lasting learnability problem for L2 learners, due to the underlying interference of their L1-based semantic and conceptual system. Also, Chinese students of English seem to follow a route to proceed from discourse to syntax in terms of their interlanguage development. Some TP syntactic structures of interlanguage are actually motivated by the needs in discourse. Hence discourse study can offer explanations for the TP interlanguage structures syntactic ease and difficulty.

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