Interlanguage features of learners of English as a second language: from a multi-dimensional perspective

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This study examined syntactic features in the interlanguage of learners of English as a second language (ESL) via tasks of conversation and free essay-writing. Data were collected from sixty international students of different first language backgrounds at the Monash University English Language Centre and examined with regard to language style, typological universal and language transfer. Results showed that interlanguage did vary in tandem with style in various syntactic aspects, that the typological universal (the Accessibility Hierarchy) was supported by the data, but that language transfer did not seem to play an important part in the use of topic-comment structure. The findings of the study suggest that examination from a multi-dimensional perspective provides a richer picture of English interlanguage features under investigation.

1. Introduction[1]

Second language acquisition (SLA) research is regarded as having been established as a field of inquiry in applied linguistics around the late 1960s (Ellis 1994). There has been much research conducted on the acquisition of second languages. Features in the interlanguage (Selinker 1972) of second language (L2) learners have been examined with different theoretical orientations and practical methodologies.

The early *Contrastive Analysis* focused on the comparison of L2 learners' first language (L1) with the target language, and treated as errors any forms of L2 production that deviated from the target norm. This approach (e.g. Brooks 1964) argued that learners' errors occurred primarily as a result of interference when they transferred L1 grammatical 'habits' into L2 and interference occurred whenever grammatical 'habits' of L1 and L2 differed, and insisted that, by systematically comparing language habits of L1 and L2, errors could be predicted, avoided and even overcome through new habit formation in L2 learning via sufficient and prompt practice of the target model. Although still tagged as errors, many L2 learners' non-standard forms were found not to be predicted by the Contrastive Analysis (e.g. Dulay and Burt 1973), and were treated by researchers employing *Error Analysis* as providing positive evidence of the system of the language the learner is using (Corder 1967).

From a different perspective, Krashen (1977, 1982) put forward his 'Monitor theory' which assumed a common underlying route of acquisition for both L1 and L2 development. In his Monitor model, Krashen distinguished between acquisition and learning, and argued that the subconsciously acquired system could act as a generator of spontaneous utterances in a situation of communicative demand, while the consciously learned system could work only as a check or monitor on the output of the acquired system under certain very limited conditions and could not be converted into acquired knowledge.

Under the influence of pidgin-creole and sociolinguistic studies (e.g. Bailey 1971; Bickerton 1971; Labov 1969), language was assumed to be inherently variable, and L2 learners' interlanguages were therefore studied, within a variationist paradigm, in various social, cultural, situational or task contexts. For example, Tarone (1985) showed the systematic

variability of interlanguage was task-related in that the performance of L2 learners on a certain task (e.g. a written grammar test) varied from their performance on another (an oral interview). Moreover, the task-related variability also correlated with the variability of styles used in the tasks, that is, when the tasks were ordered in terms of degree of attention to language form required, the styles used by L2 learners in response to those tasks could also be ordered along a continuum. This continuum paradigm in addressing systematic variability in interlanguage systems was more thoroughly developed in Tarone (1988), where she postulated a 'capability continuum' of styles that range from the 'vernacular' (which demands the least attention to language form) to the 'careful' style (which demands the most attention to language form). In L2 production, learners will vary in using different styles required by different degrees of attention to linguistic forms under different conditions of language use. When new forms enter any one of the styles along the continuum, they may also permeate into the other styles. Tarone (1988) suggested that styles towards the careful end of the continuum are more target-like and less systematic than those towards the vernacular end, which are in turn more internally stable and less permeable to invasion from other styles. Consequently, the learner's language capability develops as entry and spreading (usually towards the direction of careful style) of new forms occur.

Since the 1980s, considerable attention has been attached to explaining facts about SLA in terms of universal properties of language. Two prominent universal approaches have considerable bearing on L2 studies: the principles-and-parameters approach of Universal Grammar advocated by Chomsky (1981) and his fellow researchers, and the typological approach advocated by Greenberg (1963, 1976) and other typologists. Universal Grammar argues that language universals, which reflect the innate properties of the human mind, underlie any human language and can be deductively discovered by studying a limited number of individual languages and consistently explained within the formalist domain in terms of abstract formal constructs of syntactic structures. The typological approach, on the other hand, claims that language universals should be formulated on the basis of observations across a wide range of languages, and that thus inductively-formulated language universals can be explained from language-externally motivated considerations (such as discourse and processing factors) as well as from language-internal accounts (such as structural properties).

Both universal approaches have inspired a significant amount of SLA research (e.g. under the Universal Grammar approach: Clahsen 1988; Bley-Vroman 1989; Schachter 1989; Flynn 1984, 1987, 1996; White 1985; White and Juffs 1998; Epstein et al. 1996, 1998; under the typological universal approach: Gass 1979, 1982; Pavesi 1986; Eckman et al. 1988; Eckman et al. 1989; Li and Li 1994; Sadighi 1994; Sadighi and Jafarpurin 1994; Aarts and Schils 1995; Park 1998, 2000; Ito 2001). The Accessibility Hierarchy of Keenan and Comrie (1977), for example, captures a typological regularity found in relative accessibility to relativisation of NP positions on the basis of the examination of the syntactic form of relative clauses in a sample of about fifty languages. Keenan and Comrie (1977) found that languages vary systematically with respect to relativisation on different NP positions and that certain positions are more accessible to relativisation than others, which is summarised in Figure 1.

$$SU > DO > IO > OBL > GEN > OCOMP[2]$$

Figure 1: Accessibility Hierarchy (AH)

Gass (1979) was the first researcher to test the relevance of the Accessibility Hierarchy in SLA studies. In an attempt to better determine the nature of language transfer in relation to the role of universals of grammatical relations, Gass conducted a study which investigated the formation of relative clauses based on the Accessibility Hierarchy (henceforth AH) in SLA. Language universals "were found to play the leading role in this study since they were dominant both in assigning relative orders of difficulty and in determining where language transfer occurs" (Gass 1979: 341). Although the AH was not upheld in recent L2 studies (e.g. Ito 2001), most other studies (e.g. Gass 1982; Pavesi 1986; Eckman et al. 1988; Li and Li 1994; Sadighi 1994; Sadighi and Jafarpurin 1994; Aarts and Schils 1995; Park 1998, 2000) in SLA relating to the Accessibility Hierarchy, in general seem to lend support to its validity in predictions about L2 acquisition, albeit to varying extent.

Incorporating insights gained in the field, this study focused on the examination of five syntactic features of English interlanguage in an attempt to examine the extent to which English interlanguage features of ESL learners could be

accounted for from different perspectives. Specifically, finite coordinate clauses, finite adverbial clauses, finite complement clauses, relative clauses and topic-comment structures were examined with respect to three factors—language style (spoken versus written), typological universal (concerning relative clauses), and language transfer (concerning topic-comment structures). It was hoped that the adopted multi-dimensional approach could help reveal more of the English interlanguage features under investigation.

2. Method

Data were collected via a conversation task and written essays from international students studying English courses at the Monash University English Language Centre in Australia. The subjects for the study were recruited on a volunteer basis from two rounds of data collection with the same tasks; 60 subjects (including 4 two-round participants counted twice) were recruited for the conversation task and written essays were collected from 42 of these subjects. Due to the variable 'English proficiency' being controlled in recruiting potential subjects, 'first language', the other subject variable, could only be used as a moderator variable in this study and L1 groups recruited were consequently not equal in number. The subjects came from different countries speaking a variety of first languages: Mandarin Chinese (N = 18), Japanese (N = 11), Korean (N = 8), Vietnamese (N = 7), Thai (N = 7), Indonesian (N = 3), Spanish (N = 3), French (N = 1), Italian (N = 1) and Bengali (N = 1). The average length of their English learning (mainly in their own countries) was 10.5 years and the average length of their stay in Australia was 3.3 months.

The conversation comprising an interview and a role-play with a cue card, was designed to elicit spontaneous English interlanguage speech from L2 learners in a simulated setting similar to sitting an IELTS speaking test. A female native English speaker, who had been an experienced English teacher for many years, was recruited to conduct both the interview and the role-play with the subjects. The interview was aimed at obtaining background information of the subjects such as their country of origin, first language, age, education, years of learning English and length of stay in Australia. The cue card role-play, on the other hand, enabled the subjects to take the initiative to speak English. The interviewer endeavoured to create a semi-formal communicative situation in which the subjects were encouraged to talk freely, and thus collected data constituted the oral database for the study.

The collection of written essays was not a task performed by the subjects in the test venue, but the subjects were requested by the researcher to submit an original essay written in class. Because less control could be exerted over the collection of the subjects' writing, the essays collected vary with respect to topic, genre, length and depth. Nevertheless, these writings representing a 'Careful Style' were then analysed in comparison with the 'Vernacular Style' (Tarone 1983) in the subjects' speech with regard to such syntactic features as finite coordinate clauses, finite adverbial clauses, finite complement clauses, relative clauses and topic-comment structures.

Raw data were first transcribed according to standard English orthography, and against the transcribed data instances of syntactic features such as structure of coordination and subordination were sorted out and collated on the basis of basic constructs and corresponding defining properties. Thus classified data were then calculated in terms of the number of actual instances, percentages and/or occurrence rates for each feature and presented in tabulated forms for analysis.

3. Results and analysis

After data collation, an English interlanguage database of spontaneous speech production in the conversation task (totaling to about 47,552 words) from 60 subjects, and of original writing production in the collected essays (totaling to 10,261 words) from 42 subjects, was established. On the basis of this database five syntactic features were examined including finite coordinate, complement, and adverbial clauses, relative clauses and topic-comment constructions. Each of the five features were examined with respect to style variation, the use of relative clauses was further examined with regard to the Accessibility Hierarchy and so was the use of topic-comment constructions with respect to language transfer. Results of examination are provided hereafter.

3.1 Results regarding style variation

The five syntactic features examined in the subjects' speech and writing include finite coordinate clauses (CoC), finite adverbial clauses (AdC), finite complement clauses (ComC), relative clauses (RC) and topic-comment structures (TCS), some examples of which are presented in Figure 2.[3]

CoC:	I studied gra-, only grammar in Japan, but now I, I have many conversations in my class.
	This world would be peaceful and no starvation or poverty would exist.
AdC:	How many day can I try it if it doesn't work?
	Although they approve the antismoking drive, but their freedom of smoking in offices is attacked.
ComC:	It seems that just I finished high school.
	I always feel that there are so many crimes and violences existing nowadays.
RC:	We have write all things the teacher teach us.
	Learning English means being able to read books which are printed in English.
TCS:	The picture, it was very fantastic.
	Also for cars and motorcycles we will not use petrol but we will use batteries.

Figure 2: Exemplifying examples of the five syntactic features

The overall results of the examination of the five features are presented in terms of token counts and occurrence rates as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Counts and rates for the use of different grammatical features in speech (S) and writing (W)

Grammatical features		Total number of instances (S: 60 subjects W: 42 subjects)	Average number of instances per person	Average rate of occurrence (one instance in every n words: 1/n)
1 finite coordinate clauses (CoC)	S	576	9.6	1/83
	W	169	4.0	1/61
2 finite adverbial clauses (AdC)	S	446	7.4	1/107
	W	147	3.5	1/70
3 finite complement clauses (ComC)	S	94	-	1/506
	W	121	2.9	1/85
4 relative clauses (RC)	S	27	0.5	1/1761
	W	99	2.4	1/104
5 topic-comment structure (TCS)	S	37	0.6	1/1285
	W	18	0.4	1/570

Overall results show that the syntactic features examined occurred more frequently, albeit to varying extents, in the written essays of the subjects than in their speech, and that the greatest differences were found in the use of finite complement clauses and relative clauses.

The use of finite complement clauses (feature 3) and relative clauses (feature 4) was less frequent especially in the subjects' speech. In fact, the subjects used finite complement clauses in their writing about six times more frequently than in their speech (1/85 and 1/506 respectively). More strikingly, they produced relative clauses in their writing over 16 times as frequently as in their speech (1/104 versus 1/1761). All this seems to indicate that the use of finite complement and relative clauses is more characteristic of a careful style in their essay writing than of a casual vernacular style of their speech, thus evidencing interlanguage variation in terms of style. Such style variation was somewhat comparable to

findings of another study (Greenbaum and Nelson 1995), which examined clause relationships in a range of spoken and written English texts and found that spontaneous conversations had the highest percentage of simple clauses and the lowest percentage of coordinate and subordinate structures.

On the other hand, the use of finite coordinate clauses (feature 1) and finite adverbial clauses (feature 2) was only slightly more frequent in the subjects' writing than in their speech, and that both types of clauses were, in fact, used very frequently. The indiscriminate and frequent use of the two clause types suggests that the structures of finite coordinate clauses and finite adverbial clauses are characteristic of both a vernacular style and a careful style in interlanguage speech and writing.

Significantly, the examination of feature 1 through to feature 4 indicates that the occurrence frequencies of these four clause types in the subjects' speech and writing seem to accord with the structural complexity of each type.[4] That is, the more complex the structure becomes, the less frequently it is used in both oral and written interlanguage production, as is shown in Figure 3.[5]

Speech: RC (1/1761) < ComC (1/506) < AdC (1/107) < CoC (1/83)
Writing: RC (1/104) < ComC (1/85) < AdC (1/70) < CoC (1/61)   ('<' = less frequent)

Figure 3

Similar findings can also be found in two recent studies concerning the acquisition of Spanish and Italian as a second language.[6] In investigating interlanguage syntactic complexity of US college Spanish L2 learners via a number of tasks over the course of a semester, Ortega Alvarez-Ossorio (2001) finds that the syntactic complexity of L2 discourse produced by intermediate-level Spanish L2 learners is attributed more to relative clause followed by noun subordination, but not to adverbial subordination. In the examination of text organisation of Italian L2 interlanguages by Ferraris (2001), simple clauses and coordinate clauses are found to be used before subordinate clauses, which appear to develop from adverbial to complement and relative clauses.

We can, nonetheless, see from Figure 3 that the frequency change of these clause types as a function of structural complexity is more pronounced in speech than in writing. This may well be ascribed to the fact that speech, typical of prompt spontaneous on-line processing, attends more to meaning than to form, whereas more attention could be devoted to form and particularly to complex structures in writing, hence a more 'careful' style (Tarone 1983). It may also well be that the subjects' spontaneous speech was generated from their 'acquired' system, whilst their writing could be 'monitored' via access to their 'learned' system, hence more structurally complex (cf. Krashen 1982).

As regards topic-comment structure (feature 5), its use was infrequent in both the speech and writing of the subjects. Although the subjects used the structure twice as frequently in their written essays as in their speech (1/570 versus 1/1285), the percentage of those using this structure in their speech (25; 42%) doubled that of those using this structure in their written essays (9; 21%).

In closing, the use of four clause types under examination shows that English interlanguage of L2 learners does vary in style from speech to writing and that this variation becomes more distinct with the increase of structural complexity.

3.2 Results regarding the Accessibility Hierarchy

It is found that there are only 27 relative clauses used in the subjects' speech production with an average of one relative clause appearing in about every 1,761 words whereas there are 99 relative clauses used in their writing with an average of one relative clause in every 104 words. These relative clauses spread over the relativised positions of SU, DO, OBL and GEN, which are exemplified in Figure 4.[7]

SU:	It's very, very rare to see someone who...*who can finish within four years.* Many news and important events *that happen in the world are first broadcast in English.*
DO:	What is good place of interest *that I can maybe visit* in Melbourne? There are three important issues *that you should know before you tour.*
OBL:	Melbourne is ...very, very different from other cities *I have been to.* Using drugs in sports may hurt not only athletes themselves but is also unfair to the other athletes *they compete against.*
GEN:	Once I took listening practice, yeah, the tape, the woman in the tape *who accent is terrible.*

Figure 4

The relative clauses of different types in the subjects' speech and written essays are presented in terms of token counts in Table 2.

Table 2: Counts of relative clauses in the subjects' speech and written essays

Task	Relativised Position				Total
	SU	DO	OBL	GEN	
Conversation (N = 60)	13	10	3	1	27
Written Essays (N = 42)	79	18	2		99
Total	92	28	5	1	126

As can be seen from Table 2, the subjects mainly used relative clauses on SU and DO positions with only five instances of relativisation on OBL position and one instance on GEN position. The order of accessibility to relativisation in the subjects' speech and writing can then be presented respectively in Figure 5:[8]

Speech: SU (13) > DO (10) > OBL (3) > GEN (1)	
Writing: SU (79) > DO (18) > OBL (2)	('>' means 'more accessible than')

Figure 5

As can be seen from Figure 5, SU position is the most accessible one to relativisation with DO position having a relatively high degree of accessibility and OBL/GEN positions having a very low degree. Furthermore, the use of relative clauses in the subjects' speech and writing conforms to the predictions made by the Accessibility Hierarchy; that is, predicted instances of relativisation on SU position are more than those on DO position, which are, in turn, more than those on IO/OBL positions with GEN position having the fewest instances—only one. Significantly, the data not only overwhelmingly uphold the typological universal but lend strong support to its underlying processing principle proposed by Hawkins (1994, 1999) which associates processing load with the structural complexity on each relativised position. The higher the relativised position is on the hierarchy, the less complex the corresponding structure is, hence more exemplifying instances in both speech and writing; and the reverse is true with the lower positions of the hierarchy.

In short, the examination of the use of relative clauses in English interlanguage with respect to the Accessibility Hierarchy in this study provides evidence for the predictive validity of processing-motivated typological universals in addressing spontaneous interlanguage production.

3.3 Results regarding language transfer

One of the possible areas that may involve language transfer in SLA relates to a typological classification of languages in terms of subject-predicate or topic-comment as basic grammatical relations in the sentential structure of a language (Li

and Thompson 1976). Indonesian and Indo-European languages such as English, French, Italian and Spanish belong to subject-prominent languages, Chinese to topic-prominent languages, whereas Japanese and Korean are regarded as both subject-prominent and topic-prominent languages (Li and Thompson 1976: 460). Other Asian languages such as Thai (Filbeck 1997; Iwasaki 2002) and Vietnamese (Clark 1992; Rosen 1996) are also characteristic of topic-comment languages. It will therefore be interesting to see whether language transfer may come into play in the English interlanguage data of the subjects, whose first languages spread across the three types. Table 3 provides statistics of the use of topic-comment structure by different L1 groups in the conversation task and the collected written essays.

Table 3: Counts for the use of topic-comment structure in the subjects' speech (S) and writing (W) by different L1 groups

Data type	First Language Groups						
	Mandarin	Japanese	Korean	Vietnamese	Thai	Indonesian	Romance*
Speech	N = 18	N = 11	N = 8	N = 7	N = 7	N = 3	N = 5
Writing	N = 15	N = 6	N = 5	N = 5	N = 5	N = 3	N = 4
Speech	14**	8	3	7	3	-	2
	67%	36%	25%	43%	29%	-	40%
Writing	4	2	-	4	-	4	4
	20%	17%	-	40%	-	33%	50%

* Romance-speaking group refers respectively to three Spanish-speaking subjects, one French-speaking subject and one Italian-speaking subject in the conversation, three Spanish-speaking subjects and one Italian-speaking subject in writing.
** The upper figure indicates the total number of instances of topic-comment structure used by a group, while the lower figure refers to the percentage of students within the group who actually used this structure.

Results from Table 3 show that this structure is widely available to all L1 groups except the Indonesian group in speech and Korean and Thai groups in writing. In the conversation task, the Mandarin group (whose language is typical of topic-prominence) had the highest percentage of the use of topic-comment structure (12 subjects; 67%) and the Indonesian group (whose language is typical of subject-prominence) did not produce a single instance of such structure, thereby indicating a trend of language transfer. Nevertheless, such a trend is weakened by the fact that two subjects (Italian-speaking and Spanish-speaking respectively) from the Romance-speaking group also used topic-comment structures in their speech.

Interestingly, a reverse trend can be found in the writing of different L1 groups. The Romance-speaking group had the highest percentage of the use of topic-comment structures (2 subjects; 50%) and one subject from the Indonesian-speaking group produced the most instances of such a structure (4), whereas, surprisingly, Korean- and Thai-speaking groups exemplified no such instances at all. It is therefore safe to say that language transfer does not seem to have any effect on the writing of the subjects.

A further examination of the data by language level[9] reveals that the variable of language level does not play a role in the use of topic-comment structure in speech; that is, instances of users and nonusers of this structure can be found across all levels. Interestingly, however, all users of this structure in writing were at the mid and high levels with nonusers found at all the three levels including low level.

Overall, these results suggest that the use of topic-comment structures is a common interlanguage feature among different L1 groups and is, on the whole, not subject to the effect of language transfer. Although the use of topic-comment structure in writing was only available to mid- and high-level subjects in this study, more subjects tended to use this structure in speech (25 out of 60 versus 9 out of 42 in writing), thus indicating that more subjects particularly those from China, who might have been taught in their home country to avoid this structure in English, might be able to

monitor their output in writing consciously. These results, however, should be read and referred to with caution due to the uneven representation of L1 groups in this study.

4. Conclusion

This study examined interlanguage features of English L2 learners of diverse L1 backgrounds with respect to style variation, language universal and language transfer. There are a number of findings arising from the study. First, interlanguage is shown to vary in style in various syntactic aspects and this variation goes in correspondence with structural complexity of clause types. Second, the typological universal (the Accessibility Hierarchy) is generally supported by the data, thus evidencing its predictive validity for second language data. Finally, language transfer in terms of topic-comment structure does not seem to play its part in addressing the data of this study with only a limited possible role in the spoken English interlanguage of the subjects. It is hoped that future research with comparable L1 groups could shed more light on this issue. To sum up, the findings of the study suggest that the examination and analysis of interlanguage data from a multi-dimensional perspective can provide a richer picture of English interlanguage features of ESL learners.

Notes

1. I wish to thank the referees for their valuable comments.

2. '>' means 'is more accessible than'; SU = subject, DO = direct object, IO = indirect object, OBL = oblique object (or major oblique case NP expressing arguments of the main predicate), GEN = genitive (or possessor) NP, and OCOMP = object of comparison (Keenan and Comrie 1977:66).

3. Defined as a finite coordinate clause in this study is one that contains two or more finite clauses joined together by a coordinating conjunction such as *and, but, or* and *so*; similarly, a finite subordinate clause is defined as one that has two or more finite clauses joined together by a subordinator (e.g. *when, if, because* or *although*), a complementiser (*that, if* or *whether*) or a relative pronoun (e.g. *who, that, which* and *whose*). Instances of relative clauses in which relative pronouns were omitted are also counted for analysis. Topic-comment structures are classified following Li and Thompson (1976), irrespective of their theoretical underpinnings discussed in the Chomskyan approach by Yip and Matthews (1995). Under each feature, the first example is chosen from their speech and the second is from their writing.

4. The conventionally assumed complexity of finite coordinate and subordinate structures can be naturally explained in terms of processing load associated with each type of structure; that is, the more processing load a structure has, the more complex the structure is. All other things being equal, a finite coordinate structure is less complex than a finite subordinate structure which involves processing at least an extra syntactic binding construction. Similarly amongst types of finite subordinate structure, an adverbial clause not necessarily embedded (Breul 1998) is less structurally complex than a complement clause (embodying embedding), which, in turn, is less structurally complex than a relative clause which, apart from being embedded, contains a difficult filler-gap construction to process (Hawkins 1999).

5. At the individual level, the style hierarchy generally holds for the oral data except that 14 out of 60 subjects produced more adverbial clauses than coordinate clauses; however, the written data appear to vary greatly: among those subjects (22 out of 40) whose production does not fit into the hierarchy, 19 produced more adverbial clauses than coordinate clauses, three produced more complement clauses than adverbial clauses, and eight wrote more relative clauses than complement clauses.

6. It seems that despite their differences in some areas such as verb inflection and adjective-noun order, English, Italian and Spanish are comparable in terms of structural complexity given that all these languages have coordinate clause, adverbial clause, complement clause and relative clause.

7. For each relativised position, the first example is chosen from the subjects' speech and the second is from their writing. The only instance of relativisation on GEN position comes form the spoken data and involves the use of an incorrect relative clause marker *who* in lieu of *whose*.

8. A further examination of the use of relative clausese at the individual level shows that in the conversation data, only 27 relative clauses were produced by 22 subjects respectively, hence incomparable at this level; by contrast, 99 relative clauses produced by 33 subjects in their writing tend support the hierarchy with the exception of only three subjects (two of them produced two relative clauses on DO position and one on SU position with the other subject producing three relative clauses on DO position and one on SU position).

9. Based on their enrolled language courses at the time of data collection, the subjects were conveniently grouped into three proficiency levels—low level, mid level, and high level.

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