

The Learning of Pronouns and Word Order: With a Focus on Chinese and Japanese Learners of English

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(Received September 30, 2001)

This study was designed to investigate whether there were differences in SLA (second language acquisition) between learners with different language backgrounds, specifically Japanese and Chinese learners of English, and to investigate the effect of the two language structures upon SLA: pronouns and word order.

The main conclusion of this study is that the differences in second language learning for Japanese and Chinese high school students could not be explained from the viewpoint of differences of language structures.

Key words: pronoun, word order, SLA, Chinese /Japanese learners of English

Historical perspective

1. *The influence of the native language*

As regards the SLA studies, they mainly deal with the learning problems, that is, the acquisition of the complexities of a second human language. Among the studies, the study of the influence of the native language has undergone significant changes over the past few decades (Gass & Selinker, 2001).

In 1950s and 1960s, many works considered the notion of language as habits. Under this situation, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) was very popular. One of the assumptions of the CAH was that difficulty and ease in learning were determined respectively by differences and similarities between the two languages in contrast. However, the early version of the CAH could not explain SLA since the NL was far more complex and there were also other factors that affect SLA.

In the 1960s, the behaviorist theory of language and language learning was challenged. Language was seen in terms of structured rules instead of habits.

In the early 1970s, there was less of emphasis on native language influence (Dulay and Burt, 1973, 1975). As a result of the diminishing importance of the NL, researchers believed that a cognitive view of the process of acquisition was more appropriate. However, it was not inconceivable that one could adopt a cognitive view of SLA and maintain the significance of the NL.

Since the late 1970s, research on the role of the NL has took a different emphasis. The view of transfer which could be viewed as a creative process began to predominate. The interests of SLA researchers shifted from the acceptance or rejection of the NL to the explanation of how and when learners use their NL. The term of transfer was broadened to include avoidance, language loss and rate of learning. Laufer and Eliason (1993) found that the best predictor of avoidance was the L1-L2 difference. Zobl (1982) compared the acquisition of English definite article by a Chinese-speaking child and a Spanish-speaking child, and the differences between the two children suggest that the facts of their NLs lead them down to two different paths of acquisition.

本論文は、課程博士候補論文を構成する論文の一部として以下の審査委員により審査を受けた。
審査委員：小篠敏明（指導教官）、三浦省五、中尾佳行、森敏昭、縫部義憲

Over the last two decades, researchers interested in investigating the linguistic competence of second language (L2) learners have drawn heavily on current generative grammar in order to understand the nature of the mental representation, or interlanguage grammar, attained by L2 learners (White, 2000). The enriched relationship between linguistic theory and L2 acquisition theory can largely be attributed to the introduction of the Principles and Parameters framework (Chomsky, 1981). White (2000) outlined five possible positions regarding the availability of Universal Grammar (UG) and the role of L1 that centered around transfer and access. They were: Full transfer/partial (or no) access; No transfer/full access; Full transfer/full access; Partial transfer/full access; Partial transfer/partial access. However there were some problems such as disentangling the properties of the L1 grammar from the properties of UG.

My present research is to investigate the influence on the L2 (English) of different L1s (Chinese and Japanese) experimentally. In this paper I investigate the acquisition of two English structures (pronoun & word order) by Chinese and Japanese learners of English.

The Rationale

1. Pronouns

The differences and similarities of pronouns (the pronoun subject and object) among English, Japanese and Chinese are discussed here.

According to Huang (1984: 531), English may be said to be a "hot" language because pronouns can not in general be omitted from grammatical sentences. On the other hand, Chinese may be said to be a very "cool" language in that pronouns are usually omissible from grammatical sentences, although understanding a sentence may involve inference, context, and knowledge of the world. Japanese is also a language that allows this freedom in the use of the empty or zero pronoun (Huang 1984: 533).

According to Huang (1984: 532), the characteristics of the English empty pronoun are as follows (please see notes):

Speaker A: Did John see Bill yesterday?

Speaker B: a. Yes, he saw him.

b. *_iYes, e₂ saw him.

c. *Yes, he saw e.

d. *Yes, e saw e.

e. *Yes, I guess e saw e.

f. *Yes, John said e saw e.

Sentence a is the only grammatical sentence in English, while the rest (b - f) are ungrammatical. However the above English ungrammatical sentences are acceptable in Chinese and Japanese (for examples, see Zhang, 2001). The differences and similarities of pronouns among English, Chinese and Japanese are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Pronoun structure

Language	English	Chinese	Japanese
Pronoun (subject & object)	not omitted	omissible	

White (1985) has pointed out that adults learning second languages have particular problems when their mother tongue has activated a parameter of Universal Grammar which is not present in the second language. It has been suggested that the learner will carry the parameter over from L1 to L2, causing transfer errors. In Davies' research (1996), he divided the subjects into three levels as low intermediate, high intermediate and advanced by tests. The relationship between language proficiency and task performance was examined with ANOVA. As might be expected, subjects in more advanced classes generally outperformed others, but there are individual exceptions and some task differences. "Although proficiency level is significantly related to overall task performance, and the relationship between

proficiency and performance on the null subject items approaches statistical significance, proficiency level and performance on the verb agreement items are clearly not significantly related" (Davies 1996: 482). In my research, I also investigate the relationship between the different proficiency levels and the acquisition of the two language structures in SLA for both Chinese and Japanese groups with ANOVA.

2. Word order

The differences and similarities of word order among English, Chinese and Japanese are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Word order structure

Language	English	Chinese	Japanese
Basic word order	SVO		SOV

We can see from Table 2 that the basic word order of English and Chinese is SVO, whereas Japanese word order is SOV.

Neeleman and Weerman (1997) argued that the OV/VO parameter is set at a very early stage, and that parameter setting is perhaps more instantaneous than usually assumed.

Objectives

The previous study (Zhang 2001) investigated whether there were differences in SLA between learners with different language backgrounds, specifically Japanese and Chinese college students, and the effect of the two language parameters upon SLA, i.e. the null subject parameter and the head parameter. (In this paper, I refer to them as pronouns and word order).

The present study sought to test the differences for Chinese and Japanese high school students (whose level was supposed to be lower than college students) in acquiring pronouns (Huang 1984; Davies 1996; White 1985) and word order (Neeleman and Weerman 1997; Zhang 2001). This study intended to provide an explanation of SLA of Chinese and Japanese high school students from the two language structures tested here, and intended to find the differences and similarities between the acquisition of college students and that of high school students.

Research questions

The focus of the study was to compare the use of pronouns and word order between Chinese learners and Japanese learners of English. The present study addressed the following research question (RQ):

RQ: Is there a relationship between the different proficiency levels (low, intermediate, and advanced) and the use of the two language structures (pronoun and word order) for both Chinese and Japanese groups?

Method

1. Participants

The subjects consisted of two groups. The first group comprised 57 second-year high school students (mixed group) from Dalian, China. (We tested 75 students, and the effective answers were 57 because 18 students failed to make correction as instructed in Test B). The participants were native speakers of Mandarin. They have five English classes every week, and each class is 45 minutes. The tests were administered in June and July 2001.

The second group comprised 47 third-year high school students (mixed group) from Hiroshima, Japan. (We tested 62 students, and the effective answers were 47 because 15 students failed to make correction as instructed in Test B). The mother tongue of the second group was Japanese. They have five or six English lessons every week, and each class is

50 minutes. The tests were administered in June and July 2001.

The students participated in both Test A and Test B. The duration of Test A was 30 minutes and that of Test B was 25 minutes.

2. Material

In this study, Test A - CELT (Comprehensive English Language Test for Speakers of English as a Second Language, Harris & Palmer 1986) was used as a proficiency test to differentiate the levels of the students. Test B was a grammaticality judgement task (GJT) based on degree of certainty, which followed the studies of Huang (1984), Davies (1996), White (1985), Neeleman and Weerman (1997) and Montrul (2001). The GJT included sentences concerning both the pronoun and word order. In Test B, next to each sentence there was a scale ranging from -3 (definitely incorrect) to 3 (definitely correct), the participants were asked to choose one number among the seven numbers. The subjects were also asked to repair the sentences which they judged "incorrect" in order to give some indication of the reason for their choice. For example,

(1) Rained all day long.

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
definitely incorrect		unsure				definitely correct

Results and discussion

1. Analysis measures

A two-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) was performed with two independent variables (1) Learners L1: Chinese and Japanese and (2) Levels: Low (L), intermediate (I) and advanced (A) levels. The two-way ANOVA was performed twice for pronoun and word order separately. The two-way ANOVA was calculated with Learner's L1 and Levels as between-groups factors (see tables 7 and 8).

2. Scores

The scores of the Test A for both Chinese and Japanese students are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Proficiency Test A (Maximum score: 75)

	Numbers	Mean Errors	SD
CHN	57	12.74	4.64
JPN	47	17.04	7.73

Table 3 reveals that the average error of the Chinese students is 12.74, while the average error of the Japanese students is 17.04. Both Chinese students (hereafter CHN) and Japanese students (hereafter JPN) were divided into L, I and A according to their scores in Test A, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The scores of L, I, A for CHN & JPN

	L	I	A
Error	> -15	-15 ~ -10	< -10
CHN (N)	14	25	18
JPN (N)	24	12	11

It can be seen from Table 4 that 14 Chinese and 24 Japanese low level students' errors were more than 15, 25 Chinese and 12 Japanese intermediate students' errors ranged from 10 to 15, while 18 Chinese and 11 Japanese advanced level students' errors were less than 10.

For Test B, the GJT, 9 sentences concerning pronouns and 8 sentences concerning word order were analyzed (see Appendix A). The average scores on pronouns were 2.22 for CHN and 1.34 for JPN, and the average scores on word order were 2.37 for CHN and 1.85 for JPN. The average scores are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5. Pronoun (Score range: -3 ~ 3)

	Numbers	Mean Error	SD
CHN	57	2.22	0.75
JPN	47	1.34	0.92

Table 6. World order (Score range: -3 ~ 3)

	Numbers	Mean Error	SD
CHN	57	2.37	0.52
JPN	47	1.85	0.83

3. ANOVA (Analysis of variance)

ANOVA was carried out to test the effects of the different levels on the learners' L1.

Table 7. ANOVA for Pronoun

Source	SS	df	MS	F
L1(CHN & JPN)	16.43	1	16.43	24.19****
Level	3.77	2	1.89	2.78+
Interaction	0.64	2	0.32	0.47
Error	66.57	98	0.68	

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$, **** $p < .001$

As for pronoun, we can see from Table 7 that there were significant differences between Chinese and Japanese

students, $F(1, 98) = 24.19^{****}$, $p < .001$. There was the tendency for significant differences between the low (L), intermediate (I) and advanced (A) Levels, $F(2, 98) = 2.78+$. However, there was no interaction between the learners' L1 and the different Levels, $F(2, 98) = 0.47$.

Table 8. ANOVA for word order

Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
L1(CHN & JPN)	6.16	1	6.16	13.33****
Level	1.26	2	0.63	1.36
Interaction	0.26	2	0.13	0.28
Error	45.27	98	0.46	

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$, **** $p < .001$

As for word order, we can see from Table 8 that there were significant differences between Chinese and Japanese students, $F(2, 98) = 13.33^{****}$, $p < .001$. However there were no significant differences between the L, I, and A levels, $F(2, 98) = 1.36$, and there was no interaction between the learners' L1 and the different levels, $F(2, 98) = 0.28$.

Comparing Table 7 with Table 8, we can see that there were significant differences between CHN and JPN for both pronouns and word order irrespective of the similarity of pronoun and the difference of word order between CHN and JPN. It thus may be concluded that the differences in second language learning for Chinese and Japanese high school students can not be explained from the viewpoint of differences of language structures. There may be some other factors affecting their SLA.

We can see from Table 7 that there was the tendency for significant differences between the different levels and the acquisition of pronouns, however there were no significant differences between the levels and the acquisition of word order for high school students from Table 8.

One-way ANCOVA (Analysis of covariance) was also performed for CHN and JPN, and the same results as ANOVA were obtained. As for pronoun, there were significant differences between CHN and JPN, $F(1, 101) = 19.86^{****}$, $p < .001$; as for word order, there were significant differences between CHN and JPN, $F(1, 101) = 10.37^{***}$, $p < .005$.

Conclusion

According to the ANOVA, there was the tendency for significant differences between the different levels and the acquisition of pronouns; however there was no significant differences between the levels and the acquisition of word order for high school students.

According to the ANOVA, it can be concluded that the differences in second language learning for Chinese and Japanese high school students could not be explained from the viewpoint of differences of language structures.

In my previous study (Zhang 2001), I concluded that Chinese and Japanese college students (except for Chinese advanced students) overcome the difficulty of second language learning irrespective of the different types of the parameters, i.e. the null subject parameter and the head parameter (in this paper, pronoun and word order were used). It can thus be concluded from the two studies that the differences of the parameters do not play an important role in SLA of both Chinese and Japanese college and high school students.

Pedagogical implications

Since the conclusion is that the differences of the parameters do not play an important role in SLA of both Chinese and Japanese college and high school students, we suppose that there must be some other universal learning process

influencing the acquisition of Chinese and Japanese college and high school students than the differences of language structures. From the conclusion we may find some universal English teaching methods for both Chinese and Japanese high school students irrespective of the differences of their NLs. Then we would like to suggest that in teaching teachers should consider what may cause difficulties in acquiring pronouns and word order; teachers should observe individual students' interlanguage concerning the use of pronouns and word order; teachers should collect the data and analyze them on these structures and give proper guidance according to their analyses.

Further Study

A narrative performance test will be necessary in the further studies. In addition to senior high school students, junior high school students seem worthy of further studies.

Notes

¹ Sentences with the * mark are ungrammatical.

² e means empty pronoun.

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Appendix A

Directions: -3 means definitely incorrect, 3 means definitely correct, and 0 means unsure, please circle the proper number for the sentence following the > sign. If you think the sentence is incorrect, please correct it.

Example: I want to go to Chicago this weekend.

> But I hasn't found a ride yet.

haven't

-3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3

9 sentences concerning pronoun

1. The doctor is not in the office.
> Is at the hospital today.
2. John does not want to watch that movie with us.
> He saw when he was in New York.
3. We didn't go to the beach yesterday.
> Rained all day long.
4. Mary was not in class today.
> Seems that she was sick.
5. Jim told me that he would come here at 2 o'clock.
> However, didn't come.
6. John will not be in class today.
> He said that had a doctor's appointment.
7. Did John see Bill yesterday?
> Yes, I guess saw.
8. Did Mary meet Rose the day before yesterday?
> Yes, Mary said met.
9. What time does the game begin?
> Begins at 7 o'clock.

8 sentences concerning word order

1. What does he teach?
> He math teaches.
2. How many apples are left?
> Of the five apples, he two ate.
3. Have you ridden a horse?
> I a horse rode when I was young.
4. Do you know the factory was closed?
> He his job lost when the factory closed.
5. I am hungry. Do you have something to eat?
> A cookie and an apple eat.
6. You are shivering.
> I'm cold! Some more coal put on the fire.
7. The boy looked very tired.
> The boy very far walked.
8. Oh, that cat is strange.
> I think I that cat have seen before.