1. The conception of transfer

According to Odlin (1989), transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired. At present, this definition is perhaps acceptable to most linguists who have ever contemplated on the problem of transfer. However, there have been significant changes of its conceptions in the development of SLA research. In early SLA theory based on structuralist linguistics and behaviorist psychology, transfer was seen in terms of L1 habits being carried over to the L2 acquisition. Lado (1957) made the following observation:

We assume that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult. (1957:2)

In the forward to Linguistics Across Cultures by Lado (1957), Fries stated:

Learning a second language ... constitutes a very different task from learning the first language. The basic problems arise not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the new language themselves but primarily out of the special “set” created by the first language habits. (1957:1)

According to behaviorist theories, the main impediment to learning was interference from prior knowledge. In such cases, the old habits had to be “unlearnt” so that they could be replaced by new ones. Behaviorist theories of L2 learning emphasized the idea of difficulty. The degree of difficulty was believed to depend on which the target language pattern was similar to or different from a native language pattern. Where the two were identical, learning could take place easily through positive transfer of the native language pattern. But where they were different, learning difficulty arose and errors resulting from negative transfer were likely to occur. Such errors or bad habits were considered damaging to successful language learning because they prevented the formation of the correct target-
language habits. Thus the task for the linguists is to pinpoint the differences between learners' native language and the target language so as to understand where their difficulties are.

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis proposed by Lado (1957) in his *Linguistic Across Cultures* not only laid out the theoretical bases but also described the technical procedures needed to carry out the detailed contrastive analyses. Other linguists carried out analysis based on surface structualist descriptions of the two languages concerned. The scholars of the 1960s recognized different kinds of difference and attributed to them different degrees of difficulty. The strong form of the contrastive analysis hypothesis claims that it is possible to predict when difficulty will occur on the basis of the differences between the native and target languages.

The contrastive analysis hypothesis had its heyday in the 1960s, but gradually fell out of favour in the 1970s. Its predictive power claimed by the contrastive analysis hypothesis faced serious challenges. It was pointed out that many errors were not caused by transfer. For example, a number of studies have found the omission of forms of *be* in the speech of Spanish-speaking learners of English though a contrastive analysis of Spanish and English would not predict that Spanish speakers would omit the form since Spanish has similar grammatical structures. (e.g., Butterworth and Hatch 1978; Peck 1978; Shapira 1978.) Felix (1981) found that some errors seem to arise not from language transfer, but from transfer of training. Duley and Burt (1974) examined six structures in the L2 speech of Spanish learners of English. However, the study showed that less than 5 per cent of the total errors in the corpus were of the interference type, the rest being either developmental or unique. Duley, Burt and others claim that second language acquisition is essentially no different from child language acquisition. That is to say, the first language influence is minimum and the errors made by the second language learners are similar regardless of their first language background.

In spite of the criticisms about transfer, much of the empirical research in the 1970s and 1980s has led to new and more persuasive evidence for the importance of transfer. The existence of language transfer cannot simply be ignored. In fact, empirical research has been carried out on almost all levels of language and new significant evidence has been found to support the existence of language transfer.

The most challenging discoveries have been made at the discourse level. Researchers now have detailed information about specific cross-linguistic contrasts in requests, apologies, and also coherence, etc..

Some contrastive studies indicate that speakers of different languages prefer different levels of directness in their requests. In a detailed empirical study, Kasper (1981) showed that native speaker norms in German and English differ; German usage allows for more directness in requests than does English usage. For example, German speakers show a preference for modal forms suggesting a sense of obligation, as in *Du solltest das Fenster zunachen* ("You should close the window"), whereas English speakers prefer modal forms with a weaker force, as in *Can you close the window?* The example suggests that speakers of one language might have difficulty in learning to make requests that

— 70 —
are differently expressed.

Apologies also show considerable cross-linguistic variation and pose problems for second language learners. Research indicates that the problems may arise from two kinds of cross-linguistic differences: differences in the frequency of use of apologetic formulas, and differences in the relations between apologies and other speech acts. Comparisons of the frequency of use of apologetic formulas were made among the speakers of Hebrew, Russian, and English (Cohen and Olshtain 1981; Olshtain 1983). Their findings were: English speakers use apologetic formulas the most, and Hebrew speakers used them the least.

In Japanese, the relations between thanks and apologies are not clear-cut. Some expressions like sumimasen, gomen, and o-jama shimashita can be used to express both gratitude and apology. This kind of double-functioning expressions are not found in English. Therefore, inappropriate use may occur in the speeches of the second language learners.

Differences related to coherence in discourse may also create problems for learners in their reading or listening comprehension efforts. For example, some researchers found that English writing resembles a linear line style while Japanese and Chinese writing exhibit a circular style. The cross-language differences in discourse discussed above can cause misunderstanding and may also lead to second language speech or writing that differ greatly from the discourse norms of the target language.

Syntactic transfer has been one of the most intensively studied subsystems of language contrastive analysis. A great deal of evidence has been found for syntactic transfer (both positive and negative) in studies of word order, relative clauses and negation.

Many studies done in word order have supported language transfer. For example, the basic word order of Japanese is Subject - Object - Verb (SOV), while English is Subject - Verb - Object (SVO). English learners whose native language is Japanese may produce ungrammatical sentences of wrong word order. Nagara (1972) reported that Japanese speakers of Pidgin English in Hawaii used SOV patterns as in mi: cu: stoa getcc (me two store get = "I got/acquired two stores"). Givon's (1984) study of Korean speakers learning English shows many instances of OV phrases in their texts. The fact that Korean is another SOV language might account for the errors.

As to the attributive clauses, transfer has also been found in second language learners. Kuno (1974) has found that SOV languages have the tendency to place the relative clauses before the noun they modify (Left Branch Direction or LBD) opposed to the tendency in VSO (and most SVO) languages for relative clauses to follow the noun (Right Branch Direction or RBD). For example, in Japanese (SOV):

Nezumi ga tabeta cheese wa kusatte ita
rat ate cheese rotten was

but in English (SVO):

The cheese that the rat ate was rotten.

But we should note that although Chinese is also a SOV language, it also has the order of placing attributive clauses before the modified nouns.

There is evidence that when two languages show a difference in principal branching directions, the acquisition of complex syntax will become more difficult than when both
languages show the same branching direction. In a study of Japanese-speaking and Spanish-speaking ESL students, Flynn (1984) found that Japanese speakers had more difficulty in repeating sentences with adverbial clauses. This may be explained by the fact that both Spanish and English are RBD languages while Japanese is an LBD language and transfer takes place at this point. Schachter (1974) found that the speakers of Japanese and Chinese (LBD languages) seem to have often avoided using relative clauses in written compositions; in contrast, equally proficient students who spoke Arabic and Persian (which are like English, RBD languages) used many more such clauses (Schachter and Hart 1979). Avoidance of the grammatical items that seem difficult to the learners because of language differences is another instance of transfer.

There is little doubt that native language phonetics and phonology are powerful influences on second language pronunciation. Two languages frequently have sounds which may seem identical but which in fact are occasionally different. Phonemes that are found in one language but not in another cause difficulties for the learners of these two languages to acquire the languages in mutual directions. The distinction between [l] and [r] in English is notoriously difficult for speakers of languages such as Japanese and Korean, which do not have that phonemic distinction.

With the advent of cognitive psychology and generative grammar, a different view of the nature of language and language learning came into being, i.e. language is a cognitive system that is creative and productive; to acquire a language is to acquire the knowledge of grammar of a language, which is represented in the human mind. Therefore, the nature of transfer is described as a process in which L1 and L2 interact. Schachter (1992) argues that transfer is a constraint imposed by previous knowledge on more general cognitive processes, such as inferencing, formulating and testing hypothesis. Transfer is both a facilitating and a limiting condition on the hypothesis testing process.

Transfer cannot be properly understood without an adequate understanding of the role that universal grammar (UG) plays. UG offers an explicit theory of the L1 structures involved in transfer. To evaluate the role of L1 transfer, one needs an adequate understanding of the nature of linguistic knowledge of the L1. Linguistic knowledge is conceived as structured in terms of interacting universal principles from different modules of grammar. This represents a radical departure from the language-particular, construction-specific rule systems described in traditional and earlier generative grammar. The central goal of linguistic theory is to specify what form this prior linguistic knowledge takes in terms of universal, maximally general principles, some of which are associated with parameters that have to be fixed by experience: hence the principles and parameters theory.

A major attraction of the principles and parameters model is that it promises the potential of deriving a theoretical framework from a single parameter. This potentiality has led a number of SLA researchers to account for significant clustering of properties in interlanguages in terms of an underlying parameter. Schachter's (1989) study of English Subjacency effects found differential success between language groups (Dutch, Indonesian, Korean and Chinese) in making correct judgments. For example, Dutch instantiates Subjacency effects similar to those of English and speakers of Dutch produced judgments
accurately, as native speakers of English did, whereas Chinese only instantiates limited Subjacency effects and Chinese subjects performed much less accurately, and failed to apply the constraint in all the relevant cases. The results of Schachter's study demonstrate clearly the lack of equipotentiality in SLA: speakers of different L1 backgrounds do not have equal ability to acquire a particular L2.

2. Topic-prominence versus Subject-prominence

Another valuable source of insights which a study of transfer cannot do without is language typology. Typological insights derived from the cross-linguistic study of language variation are valuable in enriching our understanding of natural language. In SLA, findings from typological research regarding topic-prominence have been a major source of insight, for example, in the work of Schachter & Rutherford (1979) and Rutherford (1983) on the acquisition of English by speakers of topic-prominent languages. It is argued that the L1 intrinsic organization principles — namely, topic-comment — are carried over onto the L2, manifested in some distinctive interlanguage features.

The notion of topic is very often regarded as a discourse notion. For example, topic is "the part of the sentence which constitutes what the speaker is talking about" (Hornby 1971), or "the frame within which the sentence holds" (Chafe 1976). A classic formulation of classifying languages into Topic-prominence type and Subject-prominence type is accomplished by Li and Thompson (1976). They differentiate topic and subject with three basic factors: discourse strategy, noun-verb relations, and grammatical processes. The topic but not necessarily the subject is discourse-dependent. As for noun-verb relations and grammatical processes, it is the subject rather than the topic that figures prominently. Thus, a subject is normally determined by a verb, and is selectionally related to the verb and the subject often controls verb agreement. In short, according to them, a topic is a discourse notion, whereas the subject is to a greater extent a sentence-internal notion.

But topic has also been seen as a syntactic unit by some other linguists. Recent work both in language typology and in generative grammar has treated topic as a syntactic category rather than a purely conceptual notion. Shi (1992), for instance, argues that a topic chain can function as a predicate, subject, adverbial modifier of an NP or the complement of an NP and hence should be considered the largest syntactic unit in Chinese.

In spite of the different conceptions of topic, it has been generally noted that the topic-comment relation plays a more important role in certain languages than others. The best known formulation of this idea is Li and Thompson's (1976) distinction between topic-prominent and subject-prominent languages: topic-prominent languages are those in which "the basic structures of sentences favors a description in which the grammatical relation topic-comment plays major role," while subject-prominent languages are those in which "the basic structure of sentences favors a description in which the grammatical relation subject-predicate plays a major role" (Li and Thompson 1976:459). They also pointed out some characteristics contrasting topic-prominent languages and sentence-prominent languages. (a) Surface coding. There is a surface coding for the topic in TP languages. For
example, in Chinese, the topic is always at the initial position of the sentence. In Japanese, the surface coding is realized by the morpheme marking wa in contrast with ga which marks the subject. However, in SP languages, the subject is not necessarily confined to the initial position. (b) The passive construction. Among TP languages, passive constructions either do not occur at all or appear as marginal constructions. (c) “Dummy” subjects. “Dummy” or “empty” subjects, such as the English “it” and “there”, the German “es”, may be found in an SP language but not in a TP language. (d) “Double subjects”. In TP languages, two nominatives may occur side by side in the subject position. Li and Thompson argue that one of them may be called a subject and the other may be called a topic. (e) Controlling coreference. In a TP language, the topic, and not the subject, controls the co-referential constituent. (f) TP languages tend to be verb-final languages.

The typological division of topic prominent and subject prominent inspired many researchers to wonder if the features found specific in TP languages and SP languages are transferable. The literature shows that the topic-subject relationship and their effect on language transfer have drawn intense attention from a considerable number of researchers and this attention has been kept alive until quite recently. There seems to have been a general acceptance of the typological division of topic-prominence and subject-prominence among languages. However, the researchers tend to be divided when they consider the roles that this typology may play in language acquisition.

In his study concerning this language typology and its possible language transfer, Rutherford (1983) found evidence of overproduction of topic sentences by TP speakers, especially Chinese speakers whose language has typical TP features. For example, in the interlanguage of the Chinese speakers, there were frequent occurrences of so-called “heavy” subjects and “serial verbs”, which were evidence of a direct influence from the mother tongue. In addition to the evidence of overproduction of topic sentences by topic-prominent speakers, he also found that the speakers of topic-prominent languages went through stages of what he termed as syntacticization. For example, he found in his data that there was a three-stage syntacticization. In the first stage, the subject is not present at all. In the second stage, the subject is present along with coreferential topic. In the last stage, the topic has been realized as subject.

On the other hand, Fuller and Gundel (1987) claimed that there were no differences in topic prominence in the English interlanguage narratives between the speakers of topic-prominent languages (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) and less topic-prominent languages (Arabic, Farsi, and Spanish) in their investigation of the role of topic-comment structure in the acquisition of English as a second language by adults. They concluded that the process of L2 acquisition was actually characterized by an early universal topic-comment stage, independent of a learner’s native language. This suggests that TP/SP is not a transferable typology and that L2 learners of different language backgrounds may go through a similar stage of universal TP.

Jin (1994) conducted an experiment in the opposite direction, that is, not in the direction from TP to SP nor from SP to SP, but in the direction from SP to TP, specifically, from English to Chinese. He found that English speakers learning Chinese relied on their
mother tongue for inspiration in producing their Chinese sentences, especially at their early stages.

Jin found that English L1 learners studying Chinese displayed a process of systematically transferring English subject-prominence features to Chinese. According to him, the learners' grammaticalization of Chinese may follow four stages: stage one is called "subject and predicate". The learner at this stage treats Chinese as a subject-prominent language such as English. At stage two, he begins to use null subjects based on the evidence of Chinese input but is still at the stage of transferring subject prominent features. At stage three, clustered features begin to occur in learners' data. The researcher calls the final stage toward topic prominence. He argues that this stage is not necessarily the ultimate stage of topic development, because although the learners become sensitive to TP features as seen in the full range of clustered TP features, they are still somewhat influenced by their native language. His findings successfully confirm that the typological features of TP and SP are transferable in the interlanguages of the L2 learners.

Based on the observation that Chinese differs from English in that in Chinese the topic can be base-generated (base-generated topics are topics that are not created through movement), whereas in English it has to go through the process of movement, Yuan (1995) investigated the acquisition of base-generated topics in Mandarin Chinese by English native speakers learning Chinese as a second language. The study found that the hypothesis that it would not be difficult for English speakers to acquire the base-generated topics in Chinese was not confirmed. On the contrary, the learners acquired the topics quite late. Yuan's research (1995) was also done in the direction of SP to TP and found that English speaking learners had difficulties in acquiring the base-generated topics in Chinese.

Yip (1995) examines some salient aspects of Chinese speakers' English interlanguage with insights from the Principles and Parameters Theory and research in language typology. The study focused on the typological comparison between topic-prominence in Chinese and subject-prominence in English. She observed the occurrence of transfer of Chinese topic structures such as *New cars must keep inside and argued that it can be preempted by the acquisition of the passive construction. The author also discussed the so-called pseudo-tough-movement construction (*such as I am not convenient to come to school this week) and believed that the solution to the learnability problem posed by the construction involves the interaction of syntax and semantics.

Yuan (1997) did another study on the transfer from Chinese to English, focusing on the pro-drop parameter. The study reports on an empirical study investigating the unlearning of null subjects and null objects by Chinese learners of English. L1 literature has reported that English-speaking children display an asymmetry by frequently allowing null subjects but rarely null objects. However, this study found out that Chinese learners are able to reject the incorrect null subject in English, but unable to detect the ungrammaticality of the null objects.

Sasaki (1990) investigated topic-prominence in two controlled tasks performed by a relatively large number of Japanese EFL students: the first task tests the students' "automatic" performance; the second task tests the students' "nonautomatic" but usable
knowledge. She found that there is a general change from the use of topic-prominent to subject-prominent structures as their proficiency level increases. In this study, some subjects switched from topic-prominent to subject-prominent, or from subject-prominent to topic-prominent, even though they were instructed to treat each sentence independently. The results of Test 2 show that just because students with lower proficiency did not use the target-like subject-prominent structures, it does not mean that they could not use them. In fact, most of them could if these structures were directly elicited. The existential structure there is (are) is usually taught in the first or second year of EFL instruction in Japan. The structure is generally regarded as "basic" in the EFL curricula. Nevertheless, lower-proficiency students found it difficult to produce this construction under Test-1 conditions because it contradicts the canonical representations in their interlanguage. One implication of Sasaki's study is that the occurrence of the first language transfer has little to do with whether the learners have their conscious acknowledgement of the target language structures, but whether they can automatically use them.

Summary

Experimental evidence given in the linguistic literature shows that transfer as a language influence in second language acquisition does exist. However, we are not ready to attribute the deviations that the second language learners make exclusively to L1 influence, because the universal factors are just as evident as those of transfer. Transfer is both a facilitating and a limiting condition on the hypothesis testing process. Transfer is a constraint imposed by previous knowledge on more general cognitive processes, such as inferencing, formulating and testing hypothesis. The first language transfer has little to do with whether the learners have their conscious acknowledgement of the target language structures, but with whether they can automatically use them. Furthermore, consideration of "creative construction" is equally indispensable to the study of interlanguage. The research on language transfer seems to have entered a new stage, that is, the new approach has been eclectic in a way in that it integrates the findings from both the comparisons among languages and the study of universal factors.

The typological division of topic-prominence and subject-prominence is an important one because it opens new approaches to the study of language transfer. The research into the typology of topic-prominence and subject-prominence has found out that the role of prior linguistic knowledge and transfer is seen as pervasive in shaping the interlanguage grammar, calling for the application of comparative analysis. Topic/subject prominent characteristics of some languages are the underlying general principles that might be transferred. We need a comparative study between Japanese speakers and Chinese speakers learning English. Since both Chinese and Japanese are topic-prominent languages, they may not only have similarities but also have differences which may shape the actual use of English in which TP features play roles. It also might be interesting to make comparisons between the learners who have received English education in the classrooms and those who have learned English outside schools. The attention can be focused on which group will rely on their mother tongue more as far as TP features are concerned if the other factors such as
language proficiency are not taken into consideration.

References


