Topicalization: A psycholinguistic perspective

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Abstract

The present study explores topicalization in the Chinese-English translation classroom. The paper first provides an overview of the effect of the students’ L1 on the target language. It then, focuses on the principles of acquisition order and developmental sequence. In the ensuing section, the paper proceeds to an elaborate analysis of elicited data through recourse to Manfred Pienemann’s Multidimensional Model. The paper ends by discussing pedagogical implications of the findings and suggesting ways to accelerate students’ progress from their current stage of interlanguage to native-like or near-native competence.

Context

As an integral component of the National Curriculum, translation is offered to EFL undergraduate classes as a compulsory course in all the foreign language universities and colleges of China. This curricular module is intended to prepare EFL trainees for effective and efficient cross-linguistic communication. The course is designed to integrate linguistic analysis and task-specific practice as a whole, with much emphasis being placed on skill training and development. The point of departure underlying the instructional strategy is that assumptions and propositions largely arise from student performance (Nida and Taber, 1969) and in turn, provide a general benchmark for examining and evaluating the learner’s use of metacognitive knowledge and skill packages across different types of translation tasks.

Viewed from the perspective of the coding-decoding theory, translation takes place in a linear fashion. In the process of translation, the translator or practitioner, first inputs a SL (source language) message to his mental processor and then decodes it with reference to linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts. The ensuing step is to encode or restructure the SL...
message in the TL (target language) that is considered appropriate to context and use. Finally, the translator activates his innate Control Monitor (Stern, 1999) for an overall review and examination of his work to ensure that the resulting translation is supposedly faithful to the SL text in both semantic and pragmatic terms. Even though the overall translation activity is a kind of communicative behavior between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) via the translator (Jang, 2000: 14), the coding-decoding mechanism, cannot fully explain how contents are transformed, distorted, lost or suppressed in the process of communication (Sperber and Wilson, 1997: 145-51). Translation is also a complex cognitive process of cross-linguistic representation of information where continuous linguistic choices are made consciously or unconsciously for linguistic or extra-linguistic reasons. A translator’s ability to arrive automatically at interpretations of SL information must be based on his pre-existing knowledge structures (Widowson, 1998) mostly built up in the L1, which holds true especially with translators in the low-context Chinese culture (Markey, 1998). As a consequence, the product of his translation is inescapably subject to varying degrees of L1 influence that bear certain features of interlanguage regardless of the amount of effort by the translator to monitor the overall translation process. In this context, tentative attempts to identify the developmental stages and the processing strategies governing certain aspects of language learning and use should be of great significance to second language acquisition (SLA) research.

To date, much work has been done to investigate the issue of topicalization from different perspectives. Chao (1968) equated the subject-predicate relation with the topic-comment relation in his interpretation and analysis of the Chinese language system. Li and Thompson (1976) drew a clear distinction at one point between subject-prominent and topic-prominent languages, the latter characterized by topics which are defined as pre-posed and discourse central. Lambrecht (1987) described a topic slot for French, which is located sentence initially but outside the core clause. More recently, Xu and Liu (1992) rendered a systematic and elaborate account of their research findings pertaining to the structure and function of the topic feature. From the viewpoint of contrastive discourse, Scollon, Scollon and Kirkpatrick (2000) discussed the same linguistic phenomenon within the framework of cross-linguistic transformation. Based on those studies, the present one is intended to take a psycholinguistic approach to the issue of topicalization in an endeavor to posit the existence of a developmental
sequence that beginner translators may possibly follow in rendering Chinese topic-comment structures into English.

The study

The subjects in this study were a group of adult Chinese students (n=42), taking a compulsory course in translation. All of them were experienced classroom learners of English, having attained an intermediate level of language competence. They had had at least eight years' experience in EFL learning before they registered for this 18-week course, which is an integral module of a degree program leading to a BA in English language and literature. The learners were taught in two separate groups, with two hours of instruction per week. They were given a 500-word translation assignment every two weeks. The textbook of instruction was Peter Newmark’s *A Textbook of Translation* (1995), which served to provide them with a general understanding of translation theories and strategies. The coursebook was supplemented by a workbook for itemized yet integrated practice. The instruction placed emphasis on the value of the closest semantic and stylistic equivalence (Nida and Taber, 1969) between the two languages in question.

The data examined and analyzed for this small-scale study were collected longitudinally from the learners’ C-E translation practice exercises over a period of four months. The overall study terms included 100 Chinese sentences, which are principally of four types in terms of topic feature as shown by the examples in Table 1: co-referential (Examples 3, 4 and 5), spatial (Example 7), temporal (Example 2) and conceptual-background (Examples 1, 2, 6, 8 and 9). Such a classification provided the basis for the selection of the nine examples plus 378 English versions to the considered in this paper. These examples were assumed to reflect the overall topic feature of the total sample size (n=100) and facilitate our observation and analysis of the effect of the SL topic-feature on the TL performance. Thirty-five English versions that correspond to the nine SL examples were selected as representative of the general repertoire of the learners’ interlanguage performance. The elicited data were examined and grouped primarily in terms of the extent to which the SL topic construction was transferred into the TL. This approach was intended exclusively for the observation and identification of the major processing strategies that the learners tended to employ to translate the SL sentences of the different topic categories into
the TL. The amount of processing effort and the level of TL accuracy were two major considerations in delineating and sequencing the five broad stages of development. The learners under observation were classified into three broad levels of competence in terms of their processing strategies. In spite of individual variability, weaker students tended to use simpler strategies whereas better students made recourse to more complex ones. Table 1 gives the nine SL sentences used as a basis for this study as well as three or more English translations of each SL sentence as elicited from the students. Only those translations that bear close relevance for this paper are used on the ensuing discussion. The purpose of this study is to identify the stage of the learners’ general competence by observing their specific language performance on the translation task and empirically set forth general guidelines for facilitating L2 instruction and learning in the Chinese context.

The effect of L1 on the target language

According to recent contrastive studies, English is basically grammar-centered and Chinese is semantically-centered (Pan, 1999). The contrast is often framed in terms of subject-prominence versus topic-prominence (Li and Thompson, 1976; Yip, 1995) or sentence-oriented vs. discourse-oriented (see discussion in Huang, 1984). The work of LaPolla (1992) and Rutherford (1989) suggests a more nuanced view: word order is pragmatically determined to a greater extent in Chinese, while English syntactic relations such as subject and object are more highly grammaticalized. In fact, there are numerous features of the sentence structure which must be adjusted in the process of C-E translation. The notions of topic and subject have been used as a point of departure in the analysis of typological features of Chinese and English, with the realization that the former is topic-prominent and the latter is subject-prominent. This basic distinguishing feature figures largely in the problems of cross-linguistic transformation. The following data illustrate how student translators generally render topic-featured Chinese sentences into English. Some of the examples provide clear evidence for the direct transfer of L1 topic-comment [T-C] forms into the target language.
### Table 1: Source language sentences plus students’ translations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Student translations</th>
<th>No of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **1** | Wo zufu, wo zhi jianguo tade zhaopian.  
My grandpa, [T] I only saw his picture. [C] | (a) **My grandpa**, I have only seen his picture.  
(b) **About (For) my grandpa**, I only saw his photo.  
(c) **As for my grandpa**, I have only seen a photo of his.  
(d) I have only seen a picture of **my grandpa**. | 12 |
| | Nanian kaoshi, ta hen jinzhang.  
That year [T<sup>1</sup>] exam, [T<sup>2</sup>] he very anxious. [C] | (a) The examination of that year made him very nervous.  
(b) In (During) that year’s exam, he was very nervous.  
(c) As for the exam that year, he was very anxious.  
(d) In that year, he worried about the exam very much.  
(e) He was worried about that year’s exam very much. | 15 |
| | Wo zhege fengzheng ya, feide you yuan you gao.  
My this kite, [T] fly both far and high. [C] | (a) My kite, it can fly very far and high.  
(b) This is my kite, it flies far and high.  
(c) This kite of mine flies far and high. | 11 |
| | Yiwu jiaoyu ke fen wei liangge jieduan.  
Compulsory education [T] may divide into two stage. [C] | (a) Compulsory education may divide into two stages.  
(b) Compulsory education consists (is composed) of two phases.  
(c) Compulsory education can be divided into two stages. | 11 |
| | Taliang de hunshi, tade fumu jianjue fandui.  
They two’s engagement, [T] her parent definitely oppose. [C] | (a) Their engagement her parents definitely opposed.  
(b) As for their marriage, her parents were firmly against it.  
(c) Her marriage with the boy was strongly opposed by her parents.  
(d) They were married, but her parents opposed it strongly.  
(e) Her parents firmly objected (to) their marriage. | 17 |
Most of the TL sentences in Table 1 display varying degrees of Chinese influence or the effect of the SL pragmatic word order on the learners’ interlanguage (IL) syntactic permutations. The examples as listed in Table 1 may lend support to the claim that English has a higher degree of grammaticalization than Chinese. Moreover, in mapping out meaning onto the surface structure, English underscores the role of the subject-predicate relation. Different from this Indo-European language, Chinese builds up information structures on the basis of the topic-comment relation.
Topicalization, which is a salient linguistic feature in the Chinese language, only represents a highly marked word order in English and therefore does not count as one of its distinguishing features (Steele, 1978). In terms of cross-linguistic influence, the transfer of unmarked Chinese topic-comment forms is more likely than the transfer of marked ones (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1999), as evidenced by translations 1-(a) and 2-(a) (Table 1).

A second consideration in terms of SL influence on the IL sentences has much to do with the rigidity of word order. Typologically, both English and Chinese have SVO as the basic word order, but they differ considerably in terms of rigidity (Odlin, 1989). Chinese is more flexible than English, with at least four possible permutations: SVO, SOV, OSV and (Ø)VO (null-subject sentences). One of the possible reasons is that the Chinese basic sentence is generally constructed on the basis of the Theme-first Principle and the Chinese language has a disposition towards using the topic-comment order in expressing a wide range of ideas. In contrast, the English basic sentence is generally according to the Animated-first Principle (Tomlin, 1986; Xu and Liu, 1992). The subject-predicate pattern largely figures in mapping conceptual representations onto the surface structure. Topicalization is a highly marked discourse-related linguistic feature in English, evidenced by left dislocation and right dislocation (Lambrecht, 1994; Myhill, 1992). Noticeably, the examples in Table 1 provide clear evidence for some of the learners’ heavy reliance on topic-comment patterning in creating the TL versions. The TL output shows that the learners have basically mastered the SVO pattern despite some of the errors caused by topicalization as a result of Chinese influences.

This analysis lends support to the claim that: ‘those whose L1’s are topic-prominent attempt to preserve the topic-comment discourse function in their English utterances’ (Jordens, 1983: 327-57), and also leads us to the hypothesis that learners are less likely to make errors in syntactic permutation if the topic-comment order coincides with the subject-predicate pattern, as shown by Examples 3-(c) and 4-(c) (Table 1). In other words, the possibility of committing TL errors largely depends upon the degree of syntactic correspondence between the two different word orders and the effect of L1 influence on L2 learning and use.
The acquisition order and developmental sequence

Krashen (1976) claims that SL performance proceeds under two separate systems: the acquired system and the learned system. First, learners apply the language-learning abilities for first/native language acquisition in second/foreign language performance and possess a subconscious knowledge of the target language grammar. Learners are said to be biologically or innately endowed with the capacity to process language. Such competence, as Chomsky has expressed, is ‘the intrinsic knowledge’ that underlies actual performance (Stern, 1999). The endowment is language-specific: ‘deep-down’; the ‘mental organ’ for language (Chomsky, 1975) produces one basic product, a human language in one fundamental way (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1999). Typologically, the SVO pattern is common to both Chinese and English, which suggests a high degree of metacognitive uniformity between the native speakers of the two languages in representing the philosophical notion of subject-predicate relation.

Second, Krashen asserts that the learned system is realized through instruction and comprises a conscious knowledge of grammatical rules. This system serves to inspect or monitor the output of the acquired system.

The learners within the purview of this inquiry were adult students with a Chinese language background. Generally, they had relatively easy access to the SVO rules of English in this target language. I hasten to add that their knowledge of the SVO pattern acquired through the native language was naturally or automatically initiated when they processed English sentences with the same basic word order. As illustrated by the examples, they displayed a relatively high level of accuracy in using the SVO pattern. The problem with their IL performance brings to mind the issue of topicalization. A careful study of the TL versions which can be taken to display the learners’ interlanguage shows that topicalization lay at the heart of their problems. The topic-featured samples elicited as translations of the SL constitute a sub-system of their IL repertoire and suggest that there are five stages of development through which the learner has to move before being able to render an accurate translation in the TL. The empirical sequencing of the developmental stages is primarily based on the level of SL processability and that of TL accuracy. In other words, they are sequenced in terms of the amount of processing effort that the learner has to put into creating TL sentences with an accuracy rate of 80-90 percent (Ellis, 1994: 75). These five stages are outlined below.
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Stage X retention

Topic retention is one of the most convenient strategies that beginner translators may employ to process topic-featured SL sentences in the C-E translation process. This approach requires the least amount of cognitive or processing effort. Careful observations show that the learner utilizes the L1 feature in the resulting translation rather than that of the target language. The examples below provide sufficient evidence for the retention of the SL topic feature in the TL.

Examples
1-(a) My grandpa, I have only seen his picture.
3-(a) My kite, it can fly very far and high.
4-(a) Compulsory education may divide into two stages.
5-(a) Their engagement her parents definitely opposed.
9-(a) Wang Tao’s cheating in the exam, I don’t believe that.

Example 1-(a) illustrates the topicalization of ‘Wo zufu (My grandpa)’, which is known as the possessive topic (Xu and Liu, 1992) and sets the frame within which the rest of the sentence holds. The topic bears possessive relation to the object ‘picture’. The SL comment construction has no slots for the topic; therefore, its movement to internal positions is blocked. Example 3-(a) retains the topic feature by setting off ‘My kite’ from the rest of the sentence. The topicalized element bears co-referential relevance for the empty category in the subject position. The slot is filled by the pronoun ‘it’ in the elicited IL sample. Example 4 is typical of Chinese pseudo-passive sentences featured by topicalized subjects. The NP ‘Yiwu jiaoyu’(Compulsory education) which performs the topic function in the SL is directly transferred into the TL. The learner version obviously bears the topic feature as a result of the SL influence, thus illogically relating the subject to the predicate. Example 5-(a) is fronted by ‘Taliang de hunshi (Their engagement)’, which is co-referentially related to the empty category in the object position. The translation is pragmatically possible, but leaves much to be desired syntactically, though the number of such responses was small (6 in total). Again, the underlined structure of Example 9-(a) arises from the direct transfer of the clausal topic feature of the SL sentence.

This type of syntactic permutation is commonplace in the SL but largely discourse-dependent in the TL. Nevertheless, such a syntactic representation of information constitutes only a highly marked word order
in English. Most likely, the learners have generalized the Chinese rule for the topic feature into the TL.

*Stage X+1 transformation*

At this stage, the learner not only transfers the SL topic feature into the TL, but also makes certain necessary modifications in the TL versions according to his internal system of IL grammar. The processing strategy he uses is to transform SL topic structures into adverbials, which are apparently realized by the use of prepositional phrases (PPs). The learner is seen to have used his knowledge of EFL grammar in addition to the direct transfer of the SL topic construction. This claim can be amply supported by the following examples.

**Examples**
- 1-(b) *About (For) my grandpa, I only saw his photo.*
- 2-(b) *In (During) that year’s exam, he was very nervous.*
- 6-(b) *As for (In regard to) public relation skills, we can go to a training class.*
- 7-(b) *At the entrance, there were two people standing and smoking.*

At Stage X, the movement of the SL topic to the internal position is blocked as a result of the L1 influence. The learner then proceeds to the next-higer stage where PP fronting takes the place of the SL topic structure. The PP is used as an alternative strategy of translation. ‘About (For)’ (n=18) or ‘As for’ (n=45) was used to introduce the topic in the elicited samples, evidenced by 1-(b), 1-(c), 2-(c), 5-(b), 6-(a) and 6-(b). Typologically, each of them sets the frame within which the rest of the sentence is presented (Li and Thompson, 1981). For example, ‘As for the exam’ [2-(c)] serves as a point of departure for the remainder of the sentence or represents an entity about which the comment holds. Undoubtedly, it holds true that ‘as for’ is a topic marker in the English language, exclusively used to introduce a generic element or a definite concept in discourse development. The problem, nevertheless, is that most of the learners seem to have over-generalized the use of the rule in processing topic-featured SL sentences.

In terms of overall frequency, prepositional phrases are the most common syntactic realization of adverbials. The high frequency of PPs as adverbials is due to their common use as circumstance adverbials (Biber, et
al., 2000: 768-772). Some of the learners use an adverbial in the place of the SL topic as a processing option. In Example 2-(d), “In that year, he worried about the exam very much”, the topic ‘the exam’ is relocated to the internal position of the TL sentence (which I would call the process of de-topicalization), yet the temporal topic ‘In that year’ still remains in the initial position. More elicited samples, 2-(b), 7-(a) and 7-(b), may offer evidence for the transformation of locative and temporary topics into PP-featured adverbials as background information. Example 7 is typical of existential sentences in Chinese, fronted by either a spatial or temporal topic or by a combination of the two (Scollon, et al., 2000). The spatial adjunct ‘Rukou chu (At the entrance)’ in Example 7-(b) is equivalent to what is known as the topical theme in systemic functional grammar. The use of the adverb ‘nali (there)’ requires the reader to retrieve the identity ‘Rukou chu’ in order to follow the flow of information. The original locative topic, ‘Rukou chu’, is turned into the PP, ‘At the entrance’ and placed in the initial position of the TL version.

**Stage X+2 integration**

At this stage, the learner removes the topic-initiation constraints by integrating the topic structure with the rest of each TL sentence. The topic structure is conflated with the subject or any other sentential element. Interference from the L1 tends to lessen, and removal of topic-induced PPs from initial position is possible. The learner shows a clearer preference for mapping meaning onto the surface structure in conformity with the L2 syntactic patterns of SVA_c (subject + verb + adverbial of circumstance) and SVO_A_c (subject + verb + direct object + adverbial of circumstance). This stage, more complex than the preceding one, involves an overall restructuring of information and requires a greater amount of processing effort.

**Examples**

2-(a) The examination of that year made him very nervous.
3-(c) This kite of mine flies far and high.
4-(c) Compulsory education can be divided into two stages.
5-(c) Her marriage with the boy was strongly opposed by her parents.
7-(c) There were two men standing at the entrance smoking.

In Example 2-(a), the multiple topic structure, ‘Nanian’ (that year) and ‘kaoshi’ (exam), are transformed into an NP, which is then placed in the
subject position. As a consequence, the rest of the sentence is restructured to serve such a transformation. The same also holds true with Examples 4-(c) and 5-(c). The SL topic structure, ‘Taliang de hunshi’, finds itself in the subject position of the TL, which in turn leads to a shift of voice from active to passive. As Example 3 shows, the word cluster ‘Wo zhege fengzheng (This kite of mine)’ functions as the topic and esphorically refers to the null-subject of the remaining word group. Perceivably, the comment, ‘[Ø]fei de you gao you yuan’ is an SVO structure with a slot in the subject position. As the topic and the subject are conflated, the SL topic fills the slot for the subject to build up the canonical word order. Example 7-(c) illustrates the integration of the topic-induced PP with the rest of the sentence. This overtly suggests that right branching of PPs as adverbials takes place at this stage, but only within a clause.

**Stage X +3 clausalization**

At this stage, the learner makes recourse to a more complex processing strategy known as clausalization. The SL topic structure is transformed into a clause in the TL, without any disruption of the rest of the SL sentence. Moreover, the process of clausalization takes place on the condition that the rest of the SL information remains complete and the canonical word order is well preserved in the TL.

**Examples**

3-(b) This is my kite, it flies far and high.
5-(d) They were married, but her parents opposed it strongly.
8-(b) When you eat, you shouldn’t make any noises (sounds).
9-(b) Wang Tao cheated in the exam, I don’t believe such a thing.

The preceding IL samples illustrate the learner’s use of the clausalization strategy in processing SL topic constructions. Such developmental errors as in 3-(b) and 9-(b) obviously arise from the process of clausalization. The VP ‘Chifan (eat meal)’ in Example 8 serves the topical function and is transformed into an adverbial clause in the TL version. Example 9-(b) illustrates the use of the clausal topic in TL sentence construction. The clause ‘Wang Tao kaoshi zuobi (Wang Tao cheated in the exam)’ is topicalized; that is, the clausal topic provides a point of departure for the rest of the sentence. These findings support and confirm the claim (Scollon, et al., 2000) that Chinese shows a clearer disposition towards the use of the modifier-modified pattern in syntactic permutation than English.
Observations indicate that the learners within the scope of my inquiry most likely carried over or over-generalized the pattern into the TL, especially when they processed such SL sentences as featured by spatial, temporal or clausal topics. Such initialization constraints cannot be removed until the next-higher level of attainment.

**Stage X+4 right branching**

Right branching means that the learner removes the initialization constraints by placing topic-featured clauses in final positions of TL sentences (Ellis, 1994: 304). In other words, the learner is no longer constrained by left-branching strategies widely applicable to the Chinese language, especially at the clausal-topic level.

**Examples**

8-(c) One shouldn’t make any noises when (while) eating.
9-(d) I doubt (don’t believe) that Wang Tao cheated in the exam.

At this stage, the learner removes the topic-initialization constraints at the clausal level, and his overall language processing abilities are seen to improve. The resulting translations are free of L1 interference and in proximity to the norms of L2. As Example 8-(c) shows, the VP-featured topic ‘Chifan’ (eat meal) is transformed into an elliptical clause, which in turn finds itself in final position. This finding lends support to the claim that circumstance adverbials have a strong preference for final position in English (Biber et al., 2000: 772). Again, the clausal topic, ‘Wang Tao kaoshi zuobi (Wang Tao cheated in the exam)’ is moved to the internal position of the TL sentence. The learner has realized that the subject-verb relation is a top priority with English sentences and that the SVO pattern basically expands in a natural order, that is, from left to right (Liu, 1992) if discoursal factors are not considered.

**Summary of stage development**

The preceding examples generally display a high degree of uniformity between accuracy orders and developmental stages. The development from the learner’s first stage of IL development, X, to the next stage, X+1, is achieved through the learner comprehending language which contains the topic feature at X+1. As the learners progressed from Stage X to Stage X+4,
the accuracy of their IL performance also increased, despite the fact that the individual learners followed different routes to the ultimate level of attainment. Moreover, the complexity of SL topic processing strategies increases with each stage of development. As one proceeds from a particular stage to the next-higer, more cognitive or processing effort is generally involved. In terms of their syntax-processing abilities, about one-third of the students were at Stage X+1, one-third somewhere between Stages X+2 and X+3 and approximately one-third at Stage X+4, despite the fact that free variations did exist and learner responses overlapped (see Table 2). Learning is a complex developmental process, therefore, there cannot be a highly distinct boundary between any two stages of development. Nevertheless, this research approach can help language teachers create a general profile of learner performance on specific language tasks and gain access to better instructional efficiency. More importantly, research into the developmental sequence of stages which EFL learners are predicted to follow in processing topic-featured SL sentences provides the basis for the study of the topic feature in the textualinguistic domain.

Table 2: Number of respondents identified at given levels and the number of their responses classified as within that level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents' Level</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X+1</th>
<th>X+2</th>
<th>X+3</th>
<th>X+4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of respondents identified at level</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total possible responses of those at given level</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (%) of responses identified at level</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(55.5%)</td>
<td>(48.5%)</td>
<td>(53.7%)</td>
<td>(69.5%)</td>
<td>(82%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (%) of responses outside (above/below) level</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(44.4%)</td>
<td>(51.5%)</td>
<td>(46.3%)</td>
<td>(30.5%)</td>
<td>(18%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of respondents = 42; number of responses per respondent = 9; total responses per level = no respondents at given level x 9 responses. (e.g. level X: 4 x 9 = 36)
The Multidimensional Model

Manfred Pienemann’s Multidimensional Model represents one of the most recent approaches to SLA which links teaching and learner performance to developmental stages (Pienemann, 1995). Based on an analysis of longitudinal and cross-sectional data collected from learners of German and English, Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley (1988) have posited the existence of an invariant sequence in syntax and morphology which can be explained in terms of speech processing constraints. While some features in what has come to be known as the Multidimensional Model (MM) are said to be subject to an invariant sequence of development, other features not involving cognitive operations of any complexity, known as variational features, have also been identified (Brindley, 1998). The MM brings together the common sequences of acquisition in L2 learners and variation between them. The developmental sequence is claimed to depend on general factors of language processing; the variational sequence is based on learner variables such as the distribution of forms and meanings of the learner’s native language and culture to the foreign language and culture (Lado, 1957). A multidimensional study of learner language with reference to a particular task will help us identify the accuracy level of learners’ language performance and assess our teaching procedures in the light of what we can reasonably expect to accomplish in the classroom climate.

In the previous section, we have examined and analyzed the accuracy order and the developmental sequence underlying the outcome of the learners’ IL performance in the C-E translation classroom. In this section, we will proceed to an in-depth analysis of this pivotal issue in light of the Multidimensional Model. The preceding examples, all of which are pertinent to the issue of topicalization, offer clear evidence for the experienced adult classroom learners’ progress from the initial stage of interlanguage to a relatively high level of attainment along the continuum from the SL to the TL. It must be emphasized that the developmental stages have been sequenced on the basis of two major factors: the level of SL processability and that of TL accuracy. The very purpose is to provide a general profile of the learners’ actual IL performance in translating the topic-featured SL sentence into the TL SVO structure.
A careful examination of the learners’ IL performance will offer a great possibility of finding cognitive explanations for their language processing features. According to Pienemann (1984:186-214):

processing is supposedly constrained by the set of strategies available to the learner at any one time, ‘development’ viewed from this perspective consists of the shedding of strategies, or of the gradual removal of the constraints they impose on what is processable.

The data presented in the previous section show that the learners underwent a hierarchy of different but correlated stages in translating topic-featured SL sentences into TL SVO structures. The process of transfer is constrained by an admixture of two basic strategies: COS (Canonical Order Strategy) and IFS (Initialization-Finalization Strategy). COS means that surface strings reflect direct mapping of underlying meaning onto syntactic form (for example, *I left my handbag on the bus*), and IFS suggests that movements of elements to internal positions in underlying sequences are blocked, for example, ‘*This year, we’ll have a bumper harvest*’ and ‘*This I promise from the heart*’. Basically, the learners in this study demonstrated a relatively good mastery of the COS, as evidenced by most of the examples. One of the plausible explanations for this is that the SVO order is common to both Chinese and English. The learners, with a Chinese language background and eight years’ experience in EFL learning, were able to remove the COS constraints from the process of language transfer. But the reverse might be true with the IFS as a result of L1 influence. In the Stage X example, ‘Yiwu jiaoyu’ performs the topical function in the SL and is directly transferred into the TL, thus simplifying the subject-verb relation of the IL version (*Compulsory education may divide into two stages*). At Stage X, Example (5-a) displays an obvious disruption of the associated elements inside the word string, with the transitive verb ‘opposed’ followed by a free empty category (Their engagement her parents definitely opposed). However, approximately half of the learners removed the IFS constraints at Stage X+2, as evidenced by the emergence of perfect SVO versions, such as *‘We may attend a training course in public relation skills’*. The five stages constitute a hierarchical sequence of development, which beginner translators are predicted to follow in dealing with topic-featured SL and subject-prominent TL structures. Moreover, they should not be able to skip a stage in the developmental sequence, given that each stage depends upon the availability of processing strategies at previous stages, plus a new one (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1999).
The multidimensional model also indicates that individual learners follow different paths or routes to the ultimate level of attainment while developmental IL sequences are held invariant (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1999). The learners of translation within the scope of this inquiry have exhibited two different types of variation in using the TL SVO pattern: situational and linguistic. Most of the learners were able to use the TL SVO pattern with reasonable accuracy in the classroom setting after a couple of weeks’ instruction and practice. But there is much evidence to show that their use of the SVO pattern was liable to situational variations. For example, some of them were seen to regress to the frequent use of topic-featured structures at the English-speaking Corner. In the classroom, they consciously monitored their IL use against the TL norms for the sake of accuracy. But their extracurricular IL performance was more communicatively oriented (Ellis, 1992), with a heavier reliance on the topic-comment SL structure. The preceding observation serves as clear evidence for horizontal variation in that IL performance varies with the environment. In regard to linguistic variations, some of the learners employed different strategies to process SL topic constructions within the same category. They were also seen to have more difficulty translating SL SVO variants into the TL than the standard form. At Stage X, ‘Yiwu jiaoyu’ (compulsory education) functions as the topic of the SL sentence and also as the recipient of the main verb ‘fen’ (divide). This type of sentence represents a large portion of pseudo-passive T-C structures in Chinese. The IL version, ‘Compulsory education may divide into two stages’, is obviously a product of direct transfer which bears the stamp of restrictive simplification, as evidenced by the use of a simple makeshift in the position of the main verb. Different TL responses to the same SL sentence, for example, 5-(a), 5-(b), 5-(c) and 5-(d), offer evidence for vertical variation in that IL performance varies with the level of development.

Manfred Pienemann’s Multidimensional Model serves as the basis for recognizing both developmental and variational linguistic features, which can help language teachers better predict and understand the sources of learner errors and provide useful input to certain types of syllabus design (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1999). As one of the most important contributions to SLA research, the MM is expected to exert a significant influence on second language education in general, and, as such, is pertinent to EFL teaching in China.
Pedagogical implications

Pienemann (1995) claims that students can only learn from instruction when they are psychologically ready for it (the learnability hypothesis) and that the learnability of a structure in turn constrains the effectiveness of instruction (the teachability hypothesis). According to the results of his 1984 study, instruction cannot alter developmental sequences but have a facilitating effect on the rate of SL / EFL learning (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1999). In addition, ‘the principles and regularities of natural language acquisition must also be considered in foreign language instruction’ (Felix and Simmet, 1981: 26). These earlier research findings have implications for our teaching practices which need to be implemented for learners to progress from their current stage of interlanguage to a higher level of EFL attainment.

The great value of the MM lies in the predictability and explicability of learner language. More importantly, the application of this model in the assessment of learner performance and teaching procedures is believed to bring about better instructional quality and higher learning efficiency. In this connection, language teachers need to arrange for diagnostic tests (either verbal or non-verbal) with reference to concrete teaching goals at the outset of each course. Such tests should be well designed to elicit the kind of data that is needed to find out whether the student can handle specific language tasks. On the basis of overall analysis, it is possible to obtain an objective and reliable profile of the student’s interlanguage (Pienemann, 1995). With this in mind, language teachers will be able to develop a practical syllabus that conforms with the learner’s ‘built-in syllabus’ and then select an appropriate teaching approach that can materialize through a package of instructional strategies. A teacher’s attitude is most probably one of the most important factors in classroom teaching. On the one hand, the learner needs to be praised and motivated for good performance in anticipation of better, and on the other, the teacher should carefully examine and analyze the type and source of learner errors before judgments are made and corrective action is taken. But no matter what learner errors are, tolerance is the best policy; individual attention is the appropriate feedback mechanism, because active learner participation is the key to substantial progress. In addition, language teachers should revolutionize EFL teaching in the classroom by shifting from the conventional saturation approach to the ability-oriented approach, with much emphasis being placed on the
student’s ability to discuss, describe and give rules for language use. In the translation classroom environment, the role of the instructor should shift from being the sole provider of translation theories and skills to the facilitator of the learner’s discovery and generalization of new rules through a sequence of well-organized classroom activities. One of the central tasks facing teachers of translation is to sensitize their learners to the differences and similarities between the two languages in three major domains of linguistic study: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. Learners’ metacognitive development in EFL is the key to higher learning efficiency and therefore must be given top priority in the language class.

As stated earlier, English is taught and learned as a foreign language in China. EFL learning takes place primarily in the classroom setting, and distinguishes itself from naturalistic language acquisition. In Pienemann’s words (1995:18), ‘it is seen to be the purer form of learning because it is seen to be happening under the control of the teacher.’ Psycholinguistically, if the second language is learnt as a foreign language in a language class in a non-supportive environment, instruction is likely to be the major or even the only source of target language input (Stern, 1999). This overtly speaks to the EFL learner’s lack of exposure to the target language in its natural setting. In other words, the linguistic and cultural distance between the classroom instruction and the target language obviously suggests some learning problems. In such a situation, whatever EFL teaching approach is taken, the native language exerts an inescapable influence on the pace and quality of EFL learning in the classroom climate. In the Chinese context, sources of information and authentic teaching materials are not easy to come by, and the students generally lack the motivation to participate in classroom processes. However, solutions to the problem are at hand. For example, watching Chinese movies with English subtitles may be an effective solution to the C-E translation problem addressed in this paper. Such movies are seen to constitute a rich corpus of topic-comment structures with English translations. A deliberate or conscious study of simultaneous linguistic transformations will show the differences between the SL and the TL, sharpen the learners’ sensitivity to cross-linguistic phenomena and gradually lead them to the next-higher stage of language competence.

Again, with the applications of information technology, the problem of language immersion can be alleviated. The Internet provides immediate access to an international database of information. Reading Chinese and
English texts of the same genre (for example, news stories) makes it possible for EFL learners to conduct a contrastive study of specific language features such as topic-prominence versus subject-prominence. Exchanging e-mail messages and chatting with native speakers online can enhance learners’ verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Clearly, speaking is a complex thinking process, and responding to others is an indispensable way of expressing ideas. Importantly, chatting online may gradually lead EFL learners to realize the way in which native speakers generally process information and map out conceptual representations onto the surface structure. With the advent of the Internet, regular exposure to the target language has become a reality, and students are more enthusiastic about EFL learning than before (Li, 1999). With easy access to such a virtual naturalistic environment, they can be expected to move closer towards the ultimate level of attainment as a result of long-term ‘immersion’.

A note of caution

There are several limitations to the present study that involve issues of reliability, validity and generalizability. The 100 SL samples were randomly selected from the learners’ translation practice exercises, which may not fully represent the overall topic features of all Chinese sentences. In addition, the numbers of SL examples and subjects may not be large enough to elicit sufficient IL data. Strategically, both the SL and the TL were empirically incorporated into the same developmental or performance pattern and analytically examined on a cross-linguistic basis; further research needs to be conducted to confirm the validity of such an approach. Because the data collected for this study were used to examine how the learners within the purview of our inquiry generally processed topic-featured SL sentences in the C-E translation classroom and to posit the developmental sequence that beginner translators in the Chinese-speaking context may most likely follow in dealing with such sentences, we cannot generalize findings to other contexts in which issues of inquiry, task demands and learner groups may differ from those in this situation. Nevertheless, this study goes some way to explaining the developmental stages that Chinese learners of English go through when rewriting Chinese topic comment structures into English. It should help facilitates designing translation tasks to explain to students their problems and to develop tasks
and exercises which will lead students through the developmental stages to greater native-like accuracy of their translations.

Notes

1. EFL, English as a foreign language, is used instead of L2 in order to match the reality in China, where English is learned through instruction and used as a medium of international communication. Such an environmental factor is one of the crucial considerations in textbook development, syllabus design, instructional procedures and classroom processes, thus resulting in different learning patterns and outcomes.

2. Krashen (1978) postulated a Monitor as a construct to refer to the editing and controlling function that can be exercised during the study of a language or when writing or reading.

3. Joan Markey (1998) made a clear distinction between low-context and high-context cultures with reference to the degree of similarity between learners’ L1s and English. Learners, with L1s of Spanish, Portuguese and other Indo-European languages, are thought to come from high-context cultures, while those who have the Chinese, Japanese or Korean language background are claimed to be from low-context cultures. This research finding is believed to have certain implications for EFL teaching and learning.

4. There has been controversy over the use of translation as an instrument for observing and analysing EFL learners’ interlanguage performance in the past decades. I assume that Chinese exerts an inescapable influence on EFL regardless of the type of elicitation instrument. One of the plausible reasons is that Mandarin is such an overwhelmingly important medium of daily communication in China that EFL learners’ long-term memory has been built in Chinese and they are seen to have an obvious reliance on the native language when they use English. The developmental errors covered in this paper have been also found in the learners’ compositions. Compared with other language performance activities, translation provides a greater possibility of studying and analysing the EFL interlanguage that arises from SL influences.

5. Before their registration for the translation course, all the learners under observation had passed the EPT (English Proficiency Test-Level 4), which is believed to be a reliable indicator of intermediate EFL competence in China.
This paper restricts its attention to sentence topics or clausal topics. Little will be said about the notion of discourse topic, which has more to do with discourse understanding and text cohesion than with the grammatical or syntactic form of sentences.

The notion of topic in this paper has a wider scope of inquiry than what has been viewed as the object-movement to the initial position of an SVO sentence. First, topic is defined in terms of the relation of "aboutness" between an entity and a proposition. Second, it is also referred to as an element, which sets "a spatial, temporal or individual framework within which the main predication holds" (Chafe, 1976:51).

Rod Ellis (1994) claims that the accuracy level is usually set at 80-90 percent, below 100 percent, to take account of the fact that even adult native speakers may not achieve complete accuracy.

In typological terms, both English and Chinese have SVO as the basic word order. But they vary greatly from each other in terms of SVO expansion. Generally, the English SVO expands in a natural order, that is, from left to right while its Chinese counterpart expands in a reverse order, that is, from right to left (Liu, 1992).

This assumption is largely based on Noam Chomsky's GB (Government and Binding Theory), also known as Principle-and-Parameter Theory. The initialisation of the object 'their engagement' that the transitive verb 'opposed' requires in the obligatory context is an obvious violation of the island conditions, thus placing the verb in suspension. The lexical gap after the verb is known as a free empty category. The topic-prominent Chinese language, though this point is debatable, does not subject itself to such constraints (Xu, 1992).

References


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