Proposing a guideline for teaching word order in first-year and second-year Chinese

Background
Tai (1985) pointed out that word order and auxiliary words code grammatical relation in Chinese and the word order conveys more meanings in Chinese than in other inflectional languages. The canonical word order in Chinese is widely acknowledged as SVO (Jiang 2009). However, linguists have observed and analyzed the SOV word order in Chinese (Sun and Givon 1985). According to Shyu (2001), SOV word order can occur with bare object movement or object movement in a structure such as lian-focalization.

Significance
Given the importance and flexibility of word order in Chinese, it is not surprising to see the fact that word order errors are the most frequent syntactic errors for non-native Chinese language learners. (Cheng et al. 2014) Studies on acquisition of word order in Chinese have been done to test theories such as markedness and structure building and explain why word order in Chinese is difficult (Jin 2008, Jiang 2009, Liu 2015) However, few studies have related to the textbooks and provide pedagogical suggestions on teaching word order in Chinese. The current paper aims to provide a guideline for teaching word order in first-year and second-year Chinese by textbook analysis.

Research procedure
The paper selects two major Chinese language textbooks used in the U.S.: Integrated Chinese 3rd edition and Chinese links 2nd edition and analyzes how the textbooks explain word order. The paper argues that the explanation of word order is insufficient and proposes a guideline for teaching word order that covers the grammar in the first and second year of Integrated Chinese and Chinese links.

Major findings
18 lessons out of 42 lessons in Chinese links level1 and 2 and 28 lessons out of 43 lessons in Integrated Chinese level1 and 2 contain grammar related to word order. In terms of word order, Chinese links introduces topic-comment sentences in one lesson and Integrated Chinese explains topic-comment sentences and Subj.+ Adverbial+ Verb + Obj. word order in two lessons.

The topic-comment structure described in both textbooks can explain the bare object movement, but is not enough to cover object movement within a structure such as lian and ba. However, these structures involving object movements are generally considered difficult for learners. It is important to incorporate them into the teaching of word order. In addition, the Subj.+ Adverbial+ Verb + Obj. formula is helpful to decide the position of adverbials, but it does not specify the position of other words such as prepositions.

A guideline is proposed for teaching purpose. The guideline integrates word order teaching with vocabulary and grammar in the textbooks in a systematic way. It contains three basic word order: topic-comment, S...VO, S...OV. Topic-comment structure allows the movement of bare object to precede the subject. S...VO requires adverbs, prepositional phrase, time and location to be placed before the verb. S...OV states that complex structures such as ba, bei, lian, and bi can trigger the movement of the object.

Reference
Liu, Feng-his. 2015. Acquiring topic structures in Mandarin Chinese. Chinese as a Second Language Research
