L1 Transfer and Chinese as Second Language Learners’ Comprehension of Noun-Noun Combinations

Abstract

L1 transfer is an important topic in second language acquisition. It has been widely accepted that learners are affected by their L1s when they acquire L2 (Corder, 1967; Gass, 1996; Ellis, 1997). According to the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis (FT/FA) (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996), all features of L1 will be transferred to interlanguage at the initial stage. As learners improve in their L2 proficiency, they can reset features of target language based on L2 input therefore the role of L1 will dwindle. This study explored whether the two features in noun-noun combinations (position of modifier and head, expression of semantic relations) follow the transfer pattern predicted by FT/FA Hypothesis. Specifically, the study examined whether the FT/FA Hypothesis is applicable to the noun-noun combination comprehension of CSL learners with diverse L1 backgrounds and L2 proficiency.

120 low and high proficiency level learners with English and Thai as their L1s participated in this study. The instrument developed for this study was a comprehension task. It contained 24 Chinese noun-noun combinations within which 12 words shared the same noun-noun expression in Chinese, English and Thai (expression of semantic relations of MADE OF) while the other 12 shared the same expression only in Chinese and English (expression of semantic relations of LOCATED and HAS). The participants were asked to provide their interpretations of these words. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were adopted to answer the following research questions: (a) Do learners from an L1 with modifier-head order outperform those from an L1 with head-modifier order? (b) Do learners from L1 which shares the same expression of semantic relations outperform those from L1 which doesn't? (c) Do high L2 proficiency level learners outperform those of low L2 proficiency level?

The results revealed that English L1 learners at low proficiency level outperformed their Thai L1 counterparts in overall comprehension and particularly in interpretation of words of LOCATED semantic relation which was not expressed through noun-noun
combination in Thai and which was of relatively low L2 input frequency. While Thai L1 learners performed the same as English L1 learners in words of HAS semantic relation which was not expressed through noun-noun combination in Thai but was of high L2 input frequency. Results suggest that L1 transfer did take place at initial stage of acquisition and was affected by input frequency. However, Thai L1 learners made a great progress as their L2 proficiency improved, indicating that learners can reset the target language features.

A qualitative analysis of the interpretations given by participants was also conducted to provide a deeper insight into the role of learner L1s. Findings were consistent: Thai L1 learners offered more deviating interpretations than their English L1 counterparts. The main type of deviations found among Thai L1 learners was "order-reverse" while among English L1 learners was "other semantic relations".

The data from both quantitative and qualitative analyses lends partial support to FA/FT Hypothesis. At initial stage, features of L1 will transfer to interlanguage whereas L1 transfer will be affected by L2 input frequency. At later stage, L1 transfer gradually decreases and the reset of target language feature will occur.

Based on the results of the study, pedagogical recommendations were made about Chinese noun-noun combination instruction. Instructors should be aware that learners of different L1s may face different problems in acquisition. Therefore, the instruction should help learners with the L1s different from Chinese in word order by drawing their attention to the differences and emphasizing the formation mechanism of Chinese noun-noun combinations.

References


