

## **An Investigation into the Influence of Chinese Topic-prominent Features on Chinese EFL Learners' Acquisition of Passive Voice**

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### **Abstract:**

Typologically, English and Chinese, belong to different language typological systems respectively. Chinese is a topic prominent language in which topic plays an important role in the formation of a sentence whereas English belongs to a subject prominent language in which subject is an indispensable element that determines the English sentence pattern (Li & Thompson, 1976). This current study attempts to step forward on the basis of the previous research, focusing on a special sentence pattern--passive voice, and investigates on topic-prominence in interlanguage of Chinese EFL learners.

The present study indicates that, the acquisition of passive voice by Chinese EFL learners also reflects the characteristics of second language acquisition process from topic-prominence to subject-prominence, and the typological transfer hypothesis and the Topic-to-Subject Hypothesis which was proposed by Yang (2008) are testified. The findings of the present study contribute to a better understanding of Chinese EFL learners' interlanguage development from topic-prominence to subject-prominence.

**Key Words:** passive voice, typological transfer, topic-prominence, subject-prominence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The role of learner's first language (L1) has long been the center in the field of second language (L2) acquisition. Typologically, English and Chinese, belong to different language typological systems respectively. Chinese is a topic prominent language in which topic plays an important role in the formation of a sentence whereas English belongs to a subject prominent language in which subject is an indispensable element that determines the English sentence pattern (Li & Thompson, 1976). Many researchers abroad have contrasted topic-prominence versus subject-prominence to investigate questions of L1 transfer. In China, the studies attempting to examine topic-prominence are relatively few, especially with regard to a specific sentence pattern, such as passive voice.

This current study attempts to step forward on the basis of the previous research, focusing on a special sentence pattern--passive voice, and investigates on topic-prominence in interlanguage of Chinese EFL learners. Passive voice has always been a difficult sentence structure for Chinese students, and the process of acquiring passive voice can reflect the developing characteristics of Chinese EFL learners' interlanguage from the perspective of language typology. This current study is made up of a questionnaire, with ten sentences of Chinese-English Translation. The design of the tasks aims to elicit the interlanguage data with the Spontaneous Oral Task and Careful Translation Task in terms of TP structures. Three groups of Chinese EFL learners of different English proficiency levels (preliminary level, intermediate level and advanced level) were tested. The results and findings were calculated and analyzed. This study aims to investigate the general characteristics of topic-prominent typological interlanguage development of the Chinese English learners in terms of acquiring subject-prominent English syntactic structures in a systematic way.

The present study indicates that, the acquisition of passive voice by Chinese EFL learners also reflects the characteristics of second language acquisition process from topic-prominence to subject-prominence, and the typological transfer hypothesis and the Topic-to-Subject Hypothesis which was proposed by Yang (2008) are testified. The findings of the present study contribute to a better understanding of Chinese EFL learners' interlanguage development from topic-prominence to subject-prominence.

## 2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Language Typology

Human language may be defined as a system of communication conveying meaning by means of speech sounds. Its mechanisms are treated in three distinct aspects: phonological, semantic and syntactic. Since the phonological component is constructed in accordance with parameters of speaking and hearing, and the semantic at least in part accordance with the outside world, the syntactic component becomes the most distinctive part of human language. It is also the most

significant for language typology. The typological analysis in syntax is based on the structure of the sentence and on that of its constituents. For example, English and a large group of languages are referred to as SVO (subject-Verb-Object) languages because the typical structure of the simple sentence involves these essential elements in SVO order.

Based on the subject-prominent and topic-prominent parameters division, Li and Thompson (1976: 459) apply the four basic types to world languages with regard to the sporadic strategies in constructing the sentences:

a. Languages that are subject-prominent:

English, Indo-European, Niger-Congo, Finno-Ugric...

b. Languages that are topic-prominent:

Chinese, Lahu (Lob-Burmese), Lisu (Lob-Burmese)...

c. Languages that are both subject-prominent and topic-prominent:

Japanese and Korean...

d. Languages that are neither subject-prominent nor prominent:

Tagalog and Illocano...

It is necessary to point out that the above classification does not confine exact boundary of each language. Rather, it is more like a continuum which underlies the gradual change: that is to say, topic and subject dominance are not discrete categories into which the languages of the world fall into neatly. They are only labeled as to present the general tendency of languages with regard to topic and subject as parameters. Li and Thompson also examined a number of properties of TPL and SPL:

a. In TPL, there will be a surface coding for the topic by means of initial position or morphological marker, but not necessarily for the subject;

b. The passive construction is common in SPL, on the other hand, passivization either does not occur at all, or appears as a marginal construction, rarely used in the speech in TPL;

c. Dummy subject is the unique feature in SPL;

d. TPLs are famous for their “double-subject” constructions;

e. In a TPL, the topic, and not the subject, typically controls co-referential constituent deletion;

f. TPLs tend to be verb-final languages;

g. In certain SPL, the topic-comment type of sentence is highly constrained in terms of what can serve as the topic constituent (Li & Thompson, 1976: 467-471).

The typological analysis above accordingly provides guidelines for identifying characteristic patterns in the study of any language, and for analysis of interlanguage in terms of these patterns acquisition.

## **2.2 Typological Transfer**

TP Chinese and SP English, as two salient typological languages, share some similarities but retain more differences. Consequently, when a TP Chinese/ SP English learner makes an attempt to acquire the SP English/ TP Chinese, some TP/SP features would naturally be assumed as the most reliable methods. Then under the cognitive framework of hypothesis-testing, both his previous knowledge of L1 and the present knowledge of L2 are resorted to make a final decision: whether TP/SP features are available in this SP English/ TP Chinese. Research shows two contradictory claims on the role of topic/subject prominence typology on second language (L2) acquisition. One claim is that irrespective of learners' first language (L1), the process of L2 acquisition is characterized by an early universal topic-prominent (TP) stage and that the typology of topic/subject prominence is not transferable. Another claim regarding the role of topic/subject prominence typology in L2 acquisition is that learners' L1 plays a role in their L2 learning and that as their L2 proficiency increases, native speakers of TP languages gradually increase the use of SP features in their L2 production. Fuller and Gundel (1987), for example, compared spoken narratives from native speakers of English (a subject-prominent [SP] language) to those from learners of English as an L2 from both TP L1 (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) and SP L1 (Arabic, Farsi, and Spanish) backgrounds in regard to TP features, which include zero anaphora, topic coding, dummy subjects, double-subject constructions, subject-creating constructions, and subject-verb agreement. To measure the degree of topic prominence of learners' L2 narratives, a three-point implicational scale was employed. No difference was found in L2 spoken production between the speakers of TP and SP languages. Moreover, the L2 learners from both L1 typological backgrounds produced more TP features in their narratives than the SP target language speakers.

Heubner (1983), however, found in his longitudinal study of a Hmong adult learner of English that the learner continued to treat the copula as a topic boundary marker in his early stage of L2 acquisition. The learner also consistently took the subject noun phrase in English as definite in the early L2 acquisition stage, as would be required for a noun phrase in a topic position. The learner's interlanguage was also found to progress from the initial TP to the SP stage through morphological syntactization. Similarly, Schachter and Rutherford (1979) and Rutherford (1983) found numerous examples of transfer of TP L1 features in L2 written English by native speakers of TP languages (Chinese and Japanese).

## **2.3 Passive Voice**

A lot of definitions on voice are given in the way of dividing it into several classes. For example, the description of voice by Huddleston (1984), provides a useful definition: "Voice applies to a system where the contrasting forms differ in the way semantic roles are aligned

with syntactic functions, normally with some concomitant marking on the verb". The terms active and passive are applied on the basis of the alignment of the roles with functions in clauses that express an action. If the subject of a sentence is aligned with an active role, with the role of agent performing the action, the sentence is called active. If the subject of a sentence is associated with a passive role, the role of patient receiving the action performed, the sentence is called passive.

Characteristically English is a typical inflectional language, in which there are various inflectional variants. English belongs to explicit linguistic category, while Chinese has the open and implicit linguistic characteristics. Voice is a grammatical category which makes it possible to view the action of a sentence in two ways (Quirk, et al, 1972, 801-811), without change in the fact reported:

- (1) The butler murdered the detective.
- (2) The detective was murdered by the butler.

Sentence (1) is in active voice and sentence (2) in passive voice.

The active-passive relation involves two grammatical "levels": the verb phrase and the clause. In the verb phrase, the difference between the two voice categories is that the passive adds a form of the auxiliary and the past participle (-Ved) of the main verb. At the clause level, passivization involves rearrangement of two clause elements and one addition. (A) The active subject becomes the passive agent, (B) the active object becomes the passive subject, and (C) the preposition *by* is introduced before the agent. The prepositional agent phrase of passive sentences is an optional sentence element.

SLA research on passive construction was mainly conducted from the 80s of the 20th century, but strictly speaking, such research could be traced back to the late 70s of the last century, and two influential notions were proposed and they opened the door of studying passive construction on the perspective of SLA.

One remarkable notion was the distinction between topic-prominent and subject-prominent Languages suggested by Li and Thompson (1976). In addition, they observed that while the passive construction was common in subject-prominent language, it was less productive in topic-prominent language: some did not have passives at all. Another influential idea was Unaccusative Hypothesis proposed by Perlmutter (1978) and updated by Burzio (1986). Perlmutter was the first to propose that there existed two distinct classes of intransitive verbs: one class was called unaccusative and the other unergative; while Burzio was the first to describe the two classes of intransitive verbs in the GB framework where the sole argument of unergative verbs was an agent generated in subject position whereas that of unaccusative verbs was a theme or patient base generated in object position. Unaccusative Hypothesis discussed that syntactically an unaccusative verb "resembled other intransitive verbs in that they subcategorized for a single argument and that argument generally appeared on the surface as

the subject” (Yip, 1995: 130); whereas semantically these verbs “described changes of state and process that lack volitional control on the part of the subject” (Yip, 1995: 130).

Yip (1995) draws her attention to Chinese-speaking learners though all the 20 subjects in her experiment come from Taiwan rather than the Chinese mainland. Yip mainly observes how the Chinese EFL learners could clearly distinguish grammatical passive constructions, pseudo-passives and passivization of unaccusative verbs by adopting the approach of grammaticality-judgment. Yip concludes that Chinese learners tend to under-generate grammatical passives while they overextend the passivization to unaccusative verbs. According to Yip, “the pseudo-passive is a malformed passive” (Yip, 1995: 99) which could be illustrated in the following sentences:

New cars must keep inside.

These sentences can analyze many ways.

Erhu [Chinese violin] can play like this.

(Yip, 1995: 97)

Yip argued that the acceptance of pseudo-passives for Chinese learners laid in the confusion of the topic-prominence language (Chinese) and the subject-prominence language (English). In terms of the passive unaccusative, Yip first divided the unaccusative verbs into “unpaired verbs which only occur as unaccusatives, and paired verbs which have a transitive counterpart” (Yip, 1995: 143). And she pointed that the confusion of paired unaccusative verbs and transitive verbs led to the over-passivization of unaccusatives and speculated from the learnability perspective that internalized, inappropriate passives of paired unaccusatives would be harder to expunge than that of unpaired unaccusatives. Findings from Yip’s research have shown that Chinese learners often passivize unaccusative verbs despite the fact that the active form is required in equivalent sentences in their L1.

### 3. RESEACH QUESTIONS

The study reported here explores whether such topic-prominent features in Chinese exist in the interlanguage of Chinese learners of English when acquiring English passive voice. The guiding research questions are put forward as follows:

- (1) What are the characteristics of topic-prominent typological interlanguage of the English learners of China in terms of acquiring English passive voice?
- (2) How do learners at different proficiency levels go through the TP stage to SP stage?
- (3) Do learners decrease the choice of TP structures with the increase of use of SP structures along with their proficiency levels?

### 4. METHOD

## **4.1 Participants**

The subjects of this study are 90 English students in China. Group 1 has 30 junior middle school students, while Group 2 has 30 senior middle school students, and Group 3 has 30 first-year university English major students. Since there are three or four years of difference in formal learning among the three groups, it is assumed that they represent three proficiency levels of preliminary, intermediate and advanced. Undoubtedly it is admitted that there is no definite and absolute dividing line between every two proficiency levels. Therefore, the classifications of different proficiency levels are just relatively made among those subjects according to their different grades and the length of years of English learning in China.

## **4.2 Study Design**

Two translation tasks are designed to elicit the interlanguage data: Spontaneous Oral Task and Careful Translation Task. The first task is oral interpretation of the 10 Chinese sentences into English, which is purposely designed to cover all the sentences in a natural or spontaneous way for the Chinese learners to yield English sentences. This is done through an orally administered task requiring spontaneous production of the passive voice constructions investigated in this study. This task intends to elicit the vernacular style of interlanguage of Chinese students, in which some TP and SP typological universals are investigated. It should be noted that the oral spontaneous interpretation data sampled for the vernacular style do not reflect truly informal speech style because all the subjects will still be monitoring their speech to a fairly high degree. The second task is to translate the same 10 Chinese sentences into English, which aims to investigate the various topic-prominent sentences with high frequency. In this Chinese-English translation, we would like to investigate the topic-prominent structures--pseudo passive. This task of translating generally represents a careful style in which the subjects produce language structures far more accurately and correctly than in their vernacular style. The subjects' writings are studied regarding the interlanguage typological features in comparison with the subjects' oral interlanguage.

## **4.3 Procedure**

Before the tests were given out, directions were read aloud to the participants. The following aspects were stressed:

First, in order to ensure that all the subjects treated the tests as seriously as possible, they were informed that responses to the tests would have implications for the improvement of English teaching in China. Second, all the subjects were instructed to make responses independently. For the translation task, they were required to finish the translation for each sentence within limited time, which was controlled by the experimenter. They were instructed to translate each sentence according to their prompt reaction and not to go back to make any correction.

In order to ensure that the subjects from the three groups finished the tests independently and enhance reliability of the study, two teachers who were teaching English in the subjects' classes

were invited to assist the experiment. The two tests were given out one by one and controlled with strict time limits. After the first translation task, all the subjects were required to put down their pens and not allowed to make any correction. Then all the test papers were collected and the second task of Careful Translation began. With the consideration that there might be missing or invalid data from the subjects, the number of participants of each group exceeded 30, from which the data used for analysis were sampled from the valid ones.

The data processing involved the processing of transcribing, coding, tabulating and sorting out data. Raw data in the two tasks were classified, calculated and tabulated into various tables ready for data analysis. This study also designed a categorization of incorrect structures related to Chinese TP features, which were believed to result from the influence of Chinese TP features. The data collected was first manually tagged and analyzed. Then the frequencies of various types of anaphora were counted. The results of the frequencies of different types of anaphora tagged were analyzed using SPSS and EXCEL instruments. In the analysis, the results of the three groups were compared in order to reveal whether there was a similarly strong tendency among preliminary, intermediate and advanced learners in the production of topic-prominent constructions. With respect to data analysis, descriptive statistics such as percentages were employed to describe relative proportions and tendencies, and at times the data was assessed upon the software packages SPSS for the statistics concerned. The features of each kind of anaphora were analyzed and the frequencies of each kind of anaphora were singled out as compared with the total number of each group. The one way ANOVA and Paired-Samples T-Test were undertaken to measure the significant difference between each level.

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1 PP Structures among the Three Groups

After the empirical investigation we collect all the data from three different groups, which are analyzed, examined and marked for the TP structures within the typological framework above, which is the Pseudo Passives (PP). It is found that there are some considerable TP structures produced by the subjects. The following Table1 and Table2 display the proportion of the number and percentage of TP sentences in all the experimental items, which are identified in the Chinese students' Spontaneous Oral Task and Careful Translation Task.

Table 1 The manifestation of PP in spontaneous oral task

Numbers and percentages of PP	Proficiency Groups		
	<b>Preliminary (n=30)</b>	<b>Intermediate (n=30)</b>	<b>Advanced (n=30)</b>
PP(6×30)	60 33.33%	37 20.56%	30 16.67%



Table2 The manifestation of PP in careful translation task

Numbers and percentages of PP	Proficiency Groups		
	<b>Preliminary (n=30)</b>	<b>Intermediate (n=30)</b>	<b>Advanced (n=30)</b>
PP(6×30)	36 20.00%	27 15.00%	19 10.56%

From Table1 and Table2, it can be firstly seen that the structures influenced by the typological TP structures do exist in learners' interlanguage, which is confirmed by most of the previous studies that there is a tendency for the TP L1 speakers to produce TP constructions during their SP L2 acquisition. Although all of the subjects have learned English for three years to ten years, they still tend to rely on Chinese topic-prominent structures. It accounts for a comparatively large proportion in the whole utterances they produced as in Table3 of the overall manifestations of two kinds of tasks.

Table3 The comparison between two kinds of tasks

Numbers and percentages of PP	Proficiency Groups		
	<b>Preliminary (n=30)</b>	<b>Intermediate (n=30)</b>	<b>Advanced (n=30)</b>
Spontaneous Oral Task PP(6×30)	60 33.33%	37 20.56%	30 16.67%
Careful Translation Task PP(6×30)	36 20.00%	27 15.00%	19 10.56%

We can learn from the tables that the subjects of lower levels are characterized by the tendency of producing more TP constructions in both their Spontaneous Oral Task and Careful Translation Task. As L2 proficiency levels increase, such tendency gradually and regularly becomes weaker though each of the items makes up a different proportion in terms of the production of topic prominence as in Table3. The findings of this study are consistent with those of the previous investigations (Rutherford, 1983; Yang, 1999).

## 5.2 Analysis of the PP Structure

Interlanguage sentences with PP structures are chosen out from all the tasks and analyzed. And the detailed results for PP interlanguage structure will be further analyzed with the tree diagram and typical interlanguage data in following part.

Table4 presents the frequency of participants' use of sentences with pseudo passives in the spontaneous and written tasks by their second language proficiency levels. The results indicate that PP occupies a large proportion at each level. And the proportion of the pseudo-passives in the interlanguage decreases sharply from 33.33% to 20.56% and then to 16.67% in the Spontaneous Oral Task and 20.00% to 15.00% and then to 10.56% in the written task with the development of the students' L2 proficiency level.

We term these sentences as pseudo passives because the intended meaning is that of English passives and they result from their Chinese counterparts of semantic passives which are active in form but passive in meaning. These sentences are of course not to be construed as abortive attempt by the Chinese learners to produce the passive, but rather as a rendering of topic-comment structure with suppression of nonessential subject and deletion of coreferential /pronominal topic. We find the students at the preliminary level have great problems in this area and are insistent in using the pseudo-passives in their interlanguage. On one hand they assume that such kind of passives are allowed in English and thus under-generate the English passives, and on the other hand they transfer the Chinese passive form directly into the English interlanguage and thus over-generate the Chinese passives. When required to translate those Chinese sentences about passives into English, the students at higher proficiency level tend to use learning strategies to avoid errors. For example, they prefer to employ the active voice. The higher the students' proficiency level, the more likely they would use the active voice instead of the passive.

Table4 The overall manifestation of pseudo passives

PP Proficiency Groups	Numbers and percentages of Two Kinds of Tasks			
	Spontaneous Oral Task (6×30)	percentage	Careful Translation Task (6×30)	percentage
Preliminary (n=30)	60	33.33%	37	20.00%
Intermediate (n=30)	37	20.56%	27	15.00%
Advanced (n=30)	30	16.67%	19	10.56%

Table5 has the same results as that of the previous two structures, displaying that the differences between different proficiency levels are not the same in terms of PP structure. The difference between the Preliminary Level and the Advanced Level and that between the Preliminary Level and the termediate Level are the most significant with their value  $p=0.013$  and  $p=0.000$ , while the difference between the Intermediate Level and the Advanced level is  $p=0.233$  ( $p>0.05$ ), indicating statistical insignificancy.

Table 5 The multiple comparison of PP between proficiency level

**Multiple Comparisons**

Dependent Variable: PP  
LSD

(I) levcl	(J) level	Mean Difference (I,J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
P	I	.350*	.139	.013	.00	.62
	A	.517*	.139	.000	.24	.79
I	P	-.350*	.139	.013	-.62	-.08
	A	.167	.139	.233	-.11	.44
A	P	-.517*	.139	.000	-.79	-.24
	I	-.167	.139	.233	-.44	.11

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

## 6. DISCUSSION

By comparing and analyzing the data from the three proficiency levels, it can be learned from the analysis that:

All the subjects at each proficiency level are influenced by the topic-prominent features from their NL, that is, topic-prominent constructions in Chinese are transferable. The reason is that when they are required to produce an English composition, all the subjects, to some extent, produce some topic-prominent constructions with the influence of their native language.

From the examples it can be seen that there is a general tendency from topic prominence to subject prominence with the increase of the learners' English proficiency level. Even though there is fluctuation of a certain parameter which seems to violate the normal tendency, it still cannot be denied that their interlanguage will become more like the target language so long as the plateau is overcome.

The results of this study show that the characteristics of Chinese topic prominence will be transferred to the interlanguage of Chinese ELF learners, and result in the PP structures. The Chinese students of the three proficiency levels are similarly characterized by topic-prominent constructions in their interlanguage. There is a general tendency that the transfer from the students' NL in their interlanguage decreases eventually with the development of their proficiency level. However, the advanced learners still cannot resist the influence of the topic prominence feature from Chinese. It may suggest that the topic-prominent feature of interlanguage production may prevail over a relatively long period for learners with a topic-prominent L1 background such as Chinese students. Sometimes the TP structures from advanced learners even will never be eradicated due to the fossilization. However, it does not violate the Topic-to-Subject Hypothesis (Yang, 2008). So the acquisition of passive voice by Chinese EFL learners also reflects the characteristics of second language acquisition process from topic-prominence to subject-prominence.

Since Chinese and English belong to different language typological families, the native language transfer will inevitably occur as Odlin (1989) defines transfer as "the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired." The topic-prominent structure in Chinese is common and natural and it's an unmarked structure. As some researchers (for example, Hyltenstam 1984) claim that, learners will transfer unmarked forms when the corresponding target language form is marked. Therefore, when the EFL learners are speaking English, they will unconsciously transfer the topic-comment structure in their native language, and it will be demonstrated in their Chinese-English interlanguage not only on syntactic but on discourse level as well.

## 7. CONCLUSION

English and Chinese, as two distinct languages, belong to different language typological systems respectively. Chinese is a topic-prominent language in which topic plays an important role in the formation of a sentence whereas English is a subject-prominent language in which subject is an indispensable element that determines the English sentence pattern. There is a general tendency that Chinese students of English produce the TP structures such as Pseudo Passives (PP) in their interlanguage due primarily to the TP features of their native language.

Based on an investigation into the performance of 90 subjects, this study has examined the cross-linguistic influence of the native language topic-prominence in shaping Chinese-English interlanguage. By quantifying the manifestations of passive structures related to Chinese topic-prominence in the candidates' production, this study shows that Chinese EFL learners' interlanguage is characterized by interference of TP features of their mother tongue—Chinese. This provides evidence that when speakers with Chinese as their native language are learning English, two typological parameters unavoidably interact, and transfer is likely to happen. In general, no matter their English proficiencies are on advanced level or intermediate level, Chinese TP features obviously influence the learner's acquisition of the passive structures. However, learners exhibit a decrease in the use of TP construction and an increase in SP structure with development of learners' interlanguage. It is claimed that learners have some difficulties in producing natural and grammatical English, on the issues of passive structures. The research also finds that subjects make subject-predicate disagreement errors systematically and frequently, manifesting a tendency of fossilization.

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