

# Error Analysis in Chinese Language Acquisition

## 漢語教學中的 偏誤分析

任長慧 著  
Theresa Jen



武漢大學出版社  
Wuhan University Press

# Error Analysis in Chinese Language Acquisition

## 漢語教學中的 偏誤分析

任長慧 著  
Theresa Jen



武漢大學出版社  
Wuhan University Press

## 图书在版编目(CIP)数据

汉语教学中的偏误分析/任长慧著. —武汉: 武汉大学出版社, 2001. 3

ISBN 7-307-02920-0

I. 汉… II. 任… III. 对外汉语教学—教学参考资料  
IV. H195

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2000)第 15907 号

责任编辑: 陶佳珞 责任校对: 程小宜 版式设计: 支 笛

---

出版: 武汉大学出版社 (430072 武昌 珞珈山)

(电子邮件: wdp4@whu.edu.cn 网址: www.wdp.whu.edu.cn)

发行: 新华书店湖北发行所

印刷: 通山县印刷厂

开本: 850×1168 1/32 印张: 10 字数: 226 千字 插页: 4

版次: 2001 年 3 月第 1 版 2001 年 3 月第 1 次印刷

ISBN 7-307-02920-0/H·196 定价: 15.00 元

---

版权所有, 不得翻印; 凡购买我社的图书, 如有缺页、倒页、脱页等质量问题者, 请与当地图书销售部门联系调换。

# CONTENTS

## Chapter I

THE PROBLEM AND ITS BACKGROUND .....	1
--------------------------------------	---

Background .....	1
------------------	---

Purpose of Study .....	1
------------------------	---

The Problem .....	2
-------------------	---

## Chapter II

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE .....	6
--	---

### Second Language Acquisition:

A Historical Perspective .....	6
--------------------------------	---

Role of NL on SLA: A Historical Overview .....	18
--	----

Current Perspective on the Role of NL in SLA .....	27
--	----

Teaching Language in Context .....	30
------------------------------------	----

### Second Language Acquisition and

Cultural Understanding .....	31
------------------------------	----

### Traditional Chinese Language Teachers' Philosophy

and Views Towards Errors .....	34
--------------------------------	----

Error Analysis and Chinese Language Teaching .....	35
--	----

## Chapter III

METHODOLOGY .....	41
-------------------	----

Introduction .....	41
--------------------	----

Type of Inquiry-Oral Proficiency Interview .....	43
Stage I : Pilot Study .....	45
Stage II : The Main Study .....	47
ACTFL-OPI Rating .....	48
Data Collection .....	49
Chapter IV	
RESULTS .....	50
Introduction .....	50
Analysis of Data .....	52
Error Types .....	55
Chinese Ethnic Backgrounds .....	81
Previous Overseas Experiences .....	82
Errors Versus Mistakes .....	84
Chapter V	
CONCLUSION .....	88
Novice Level .....	88
Intermediate and Advanced Levels .....	90
Chinese Ethnic Backgrounds .....	92
Previous Overseas Experiences .....	92
Error Transfer from Other Chinese Dialects .....	92
Cultural Notions .....	94
Implications for Teaching Chinese as a Second Language .....	96
Thesis Limitations .....	99
Suggestions for Future Research .....	100

REFERENCES .....	102
APPENDIX A American Council on the Testing of Foreign Languages—Oral Proficiency Interview Assessment Criteria .....	110
APPENDIX B Error Category and Analysis .....	117
APPENDIX C Chi-square Test: Relationship Between Frequency of Errors and Chinese Ethnical Backgrounds .....	309
APPENDIX D Chi-square Test: Relationship Between Frequency of Errors and Previous Overseas Experiences .....	311

# CHAPTER I

## THE PROBLEM AND ITS BACKGROUND

### **Background**

Research studies that focus on language learners and interest in language teaching methodology, whether for first language acquisition or for second language learning, has stimulated interest in both general language learning theory and language teaching practice. The most significant impact of the findings of second language acquisition (SLA) studies has been on teaching methodology. In the field of SLA, however, the majority of empirical studies have been focused on learners acquiring English and various European languages. Much of this empirical research has been concentrated on interaction of cognate languages such as English and Spanish and has neglected an examination of genetically unrelated languages such as English and Chinese (Polio, 1994).

### **Purpose of Study**

The objective of this study was to identify and compile Chinese language learners' errors. According to Halle and Keyser (1971), a scientific study of any specific issue in SLA

basically relies on a systematic examination of linguistic phenomena that are produced by the second language learners. Such a study of errors becomes a tool of diagnostic significance because the study can provide Chinese language teachers insights regarding causes of errors. The findings of this study can be used to guide teachers in designing a proper syllabus and curriculum, and can serve as an indicator to pinpoint the areas where many learners have difficulties in learning and need more of teachers' attention. To summarize, such a study might eventually help native English speakers learning Chinese as a second/foreign language.

## **The Problem**

The increasing strategic and economic importance of the Chinese language has been reflected in increasing enrollments in the United States at both high school and college levels. According to the report published by the National Foreign Language Center (Walton, 1992), collegiate enrollments in Chinese have expanded immensely over the past decade, growing by 72% between 1980 and 1990, with the largest rate of growth occurring between 1983 and 1986, an impressive 28% increase. This pattern is even more significant at the secondary school level. In 1990, junior high and high school enrollments in Chinese increased by 116%. As a consequence, more teachers are needed to enter in the field of Chinese language teaching. The Dodge Foundation has invested \$ 2.7 million since 1982 to support and develop Chinese language programs in the United States. This grant was designated for a series of workshops for



teacher training for the next ten years. Such an increase in Chinese language enrollment in the United States underscores the need to understand how Chinese is acquired by second language learners and to develop effective teaching methodologies.

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), the majority of empirical studies have been focused on learners acquiring English and various European languages. In addition, many SLA studies use ESL students as experimental subjects. The relevance of these findings to teaching Chinese as a foreign language is unclear; these findings cannot be directly applied to issues and concerns that are commonly shared by Chinese language teachers. Brown (1988) specified that Error Analysis keeps educators too closely focused on a specific language, English, rather than looking at the general aspects of languages. Moreover, a large proportion of the Error Analysis studies including the well recognized morpheme acquisition studies (Dulay & Burt, 1974) were based on data from learners not receiving formal instruction, particularly from children (Corder, 1981). These studies and findings are not applicable to the teaching of Chinese in the United States. Sharing the same belief, Gass (1984) recommended that Error Analysis studies be designed to identify linguistic phenomena that are common to all languages. Researchers in SLA need to examine a wide variety of languages so as to see how different features, particularly those not found in Indo-European languages, are acquired by second/foreign language learners. Despite the fact that teaching Chinese as a foreign language has a relatively long history in the field of SLA, there are very few data-based studies, either in Chinese or

English language journals, on how second/foreign language learners learn Chinese or how their interlanguage is structured. (Polio 1994). In brief, there are no modern linguistic analysis and experimental studies that have been specifically designed to explore issues of teaching Chinese as a foreign language at both the theoretical and practical levels. (Teng, 1991).

Many researches have been done on such topics as the usage and significance of particles and articles in Chinese language structure such as the word ba (把), and the usages of de (的) and le (了). Debates over the pros and cons of different phonetic systems such as Pinyin (a romanization system adopted by The People's Republic of China) versus GR (Gwoyeu Romatzyh), another romanization system that differentiates among tones in Chinese or arguments over the merits of simplified characters over complicated characters have been spirited. Yet issues relevant to second language acquisition or teaching pedagogy are basically lacking or missing from the research literature.

The textbooks used in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong districts to teach Chinese as a second language emphasize on grammar instruction. Lessons are designed and based on grammatical description, from the introduction of words, to phrases, to sentences. Chinese grammar is systematically presented in accordance with its structure and function. In the latest trend in teaching in China teachers still employ grammatical instruction but with a slightly refined pedagogical approach.

Lu Bi Song, doyen of Chinese language teaching in mainland China, has argued recently that an unconventional teaching approach, one contrary to the traditional grammatical

description, is needed to prepare Chinese language learners to function in realistic situations. Lu (1987) believes effective teaching methods that will serve this purpose need to include the Contrastive Analysis (CA) technology; and needs to systematically compare learners' Native Language (NL) with Chinese to account for learners' errors. He also stresses the importance of developing a textbook that includes the common errors of Chinese language learners together with an account of such errors.

The association between learners' errors and their previous Chinese language background is also an issue that has never been explored by researchers. Does someone of Chinese background yet with English as native language make similar types of errors compared to a learner without any previous Chinese language experience? For those with Chinese background, how do regional dialects such as Cantonese or Taiwanese, spoken at home, influence the Chinese language learning process? Answers to those questions can provide significant help to Chinese language teachers in designing a curriculum to target a special learning population and to facilitate the learning process.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **Second Language Acquisition: A Historical Perspective**

In the early 1950s the field of language teaching was dominated by behaviorism. The behaviorists believed that language acquisition was a product of habit formation. Second language learning, then, was viewed as a process of overcoming the habits of the native language (NL) in order to acquire the new habits of the target language (TL). This was to be accomplished through the pedagogical practices of dialogue memorization, imitation, and sentence pattern drills. Most errors were ascribed to interference from NL and consequently a major part of pedagogical research of that time was devoted to CA. The CA approach, originally formulated by Fries (1945) and developed and popularized by Lado (1957), was used to compare two grammar systems, the learner's NL and the TL and to map points of contrast. Researchers of that time were motivated by the prospect of being able to identify similarity and

difference between the two languages, believing that a more effective pedagogy would result when these were taken into consideration. As a consequence, CA was viewed as vital to the teaching of foreign languages. If differences between a learner's NL and TL could be anticipated by language teachers, a student's errors might be prevented or at least reduced to a minimum ( Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991 ). In the 1960s, researchers inspired by Chomsky's theory of language learning began to view language acquisition not as a product of habit formation, but rather as one of rule formation. Such a revolution had a considerable effect on our understanding and view of language acquisition, and of the nature and structure of language. Second/Foreign language learners are, in this view, engaged in the task of discovering the system or code of the TL. The learners do this by making for themselves a set of hypotheses about how the language works on the basis of language data that are available to them. Later, Dulay and Burt (1972, 1973) after studying errors made by second language learners maintained that learners were found to commit developmental errors; errors that were the same as those committed by first language learners of a specific TL. In these error studies, second language learners were believed to form hypotheses about the nature of certain TL rules after initial exposure to the TL. They would then test their hypotheses by applying these to produce TL utterances. Based on the mismatch learners perceived between the forms and functions of the TL to which they were being exposed and what they were producing, learners would modify their hypotheses about the nature of the TL rules so that their utterances increasingly conformed to the

TL.

The native language is used for an undeniable role in second language learning. Teachers have known that at any stage in the learning of a second language, there are observable productions that can be attributed to a learner's native language (Venable, 1974, Schachter and Celce-Murcia, 1977). The notion of language transfer, first embraced then rejected and then again fully accepted, has been controversial during the course of second language acquisition research. Much of the history on this language transfer concept has been tightly related to the acceptance or rejection of specific theories in language and language learning with which it has been associated (Gass & Selinker, 1994). In the early 1970s, an opposing view to the NL transfer hypothesis emerged. Using the L1 (native language/ first language) acquisition = L2 (target language) acquisition hypothesis, Dulay and Burt set out to demonstrate that second language acquisition by children before puberty does not rely on NL transfer but rather on an active mental organization process.

The term language transfer, long associated with the theoretical framework of behaviorist psychology, was used broadly from the 1940s to the 1960s. Its basic assumption is that a language learner's prior learning is carried over into a new learning situation; thus the learning of a second language will be affected by the linguistic knowledge and learning experience of a learner's first language.

Foreign-language learners are all too familiar with the interfering effects of their NL, causing everything from accented speech to inappropriate non-verbal behavior. Anyone who has attempted to learn a foreign language will be able to substantiate

such experience with Lado's claim that was clearly expressed in his influential book *Linguistics Across Cultures*:

*Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture—both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives. (1957, p. 2)*

Lado further claimed that linguistic differences could be used to predict learning difficulty. When two languages were similar, similar structures and linguistic behavior would transfer from the NL to the TL, resulting in correct utterances: positive transfer. When these were different, the different linguistic habits would produce errors in the TL: negative transfer. Stockwell, Bowen, and Martin (1965) offer the following example. If a Spanish speaker is learning Italian, when asking a question that speaker might correctly produce:

Mangia bene il bambino?

Eats well the baby

because in Spanish one uses the same word order to form questions.

Come bien el niño?

Eats well the baby

This is known as positive transfer. But if that same speaker is learning English and produces an error:

Eats well the baby?

This is known as a negative transfer.

The conviction that linguistic differences could be used to

predict learning difficulty gave rise to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). Researchers in this field were motivated by the prospect of being able to identify points of similarity and difference between particular native languages (NLs) and target languages (TLs).

Lado's work, and much of the work of that time, arose from the need to produce teaching materials for foreign language classes and teachers. In *Linguistics Across Culture* (1957) Lado methodically discusses and establishes the comparison between two different sound systems, grammatical structures, vocabulary systems, writing systems, and cultures. Fries (1945), a one-time mentor of Lado and one of the leading applied linguists of the day, also maintained that difficulty and ease in foreign language learning are determined by differences and similarities between the NL and TL in contrast. Contrastive analysis (CA), a systematical structure-by-structure comparison of the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and even the cultural systems of two languages, is recommended for the purpose of developing more effective teaching materials. In his book *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*, Fries clearly stated:

*The most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner. (1945, p. 9)*

In the meantime, while CA gained popularity, the field of language teaching was dominated by the prevailing view of learning, behaviorism. Behaviorists held that language acquisition was simply a product of habit formation. Habits,



according to behaviorists, were formed by the association of a stimulus with a response, repeated through reinforcement. Second language learning, then, was viewed as a process of overcoming the habits of the NL in order to acquire the new habits of the TL.

Ironically, while the association of CA with behaviorism gave it academic legitimacy, this ultimately led to its downfall. In the 1960s, Chomsky posited a theory in which humans were thought to possess a certain innate predisposition to induce rules of the TL from input to which they were exposed. Inspired by Chomsky's theory of language acquisition, researchers started to view children as active participants involved in creating grammars of their language. On this view, learners do not mindlessly absorb what goes on around them, but are actively trying to make sense of the language to which they are exposed. Once acquired, these rules would allow learners create and comprehend novel utterances; which they would neither have understood nor have produced were they limited to imitating input from the environment.

Examples derived from children can be cited as evidence against the imitation view of language acquisition (Cazden, 1972, p. 92):

Child: My teacher holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.

Adult: Did you say your teacher held the baby rabbits?

Child: Yes.

Adult: What did you say she did?

Child: She holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.

Adult: Did you say she held them tightly?