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Patterns of Chinese-English
Interlanguage and
Comprehensibility

A Comparative
Discourse Analysis of
Academic Mini-lectures

刘 静 著

汉英中介语
使用模式及
其可理解性

学术话语对比分析

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汉英中介语使用模式及其可理解性 ——学术话语对比分析

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, in response to complaints by undergraduate students taught by foreign-born teaching assistants (TAs), training of international teaching assistants (ITAs)^① in English language use has become important at U. S. universities, especially with the increasing number of foreign-born TAs, particularly in the natural sciences. Among the foreign-born TAs, in recent years, the number of Chinese TAs has clearly been growing faster than other national groups.

Research on Chinese TAs' English discourse reveals "problems"^② in their English language use, including inappropriate intonation (Wennerstrom, 1997), poor syntactic incorporation (Rounds, 1987; Tyler, 1992, 1994; Tyler & Bro, 1992; Tyler, Jefferies, & Davies, 1988), lack of discourse markers (Williams, 1992), and over-repetitions and pauses (Anderson-Hsieh & Venkatagiri, 1994). All the inadequate second language use seems to have caused incomprehensibility of the native speaker. These studies compare Chinese native-speaker TAs' discourse with "standard English" or English native-speaker discourse. Although it is absolutely necessary for learners of English to observe norms of English language use when they use English as a communicative medium, an in-depth understanding of the influence of their mother tongue and native culture on their second language use will contribute to a further understanding of ITA problems and hence to more efficient teaching or training of ITAs as well as of Chinese native-speaker learners of English.

This study expands on previous ITA research and interlanguage discourse studies by investigating academic mini-lectures of Chinese speaking prospective TAs. The research explores not only discourse organization in relation to comprehensibility^③ but also syntactic structuring to uncover general discourse pat-

① *International Teaching Assistants* refers to those graduate students who go to the United States from other countries to pursue their higher degrees while working as teaching assistants.

② These "problems" are not necessarily negative in that they are developmental as part of the learner's interlanguage system.

③ In this current research project, *comprehensibility* refers to the judgment of qualified ESL raters in the form of evaluation scores, i. e., the raters' "estimation of difficulty in understanding" (Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006, p. 112) the nonnative speaker's spoken discourse. Also see Chapter 2.

terns. The research is based on the assumptions that people generally speak in a certain way because of their specific sociolinguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds and that speakers who began to study their second language past the age of puberty generally use their target language in a way effected by both native and target languages. Based on these assumptions as well as previous research findings and the data collected for the current study, I asked these research questions:

1. How do Chinese native speakers of English^① organize lectures in terms of global discourse structure and syntactic structure?
2. What are the relationships between the way the lecture is organized and the comprehensibility by qualified English native-speaker raters?
3. What might characterize Chinese-English interlanguage^②?

Based on the answers to these three questions, I further asked:

4. What pedagogical implications could the findings suggest?

To explore the answers to these questions, the current research employs comparative discourse analysis. Discourse analysis has been a popular tool in language studies since the early 1970s (van Dijk, 1985), though it is still a theoretically under-developed area. Its application in studies of native speakers' English language use has uncovered discourse patterns, which serve as models in English language learning and teaching (DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988; Flowerdew, 1994; Flowerdew & Miller, 1997; Hansen, 1994; Murphy & Candlin, 1979; Shaw, 1983; Young, 1994). Its application in researching nonnative speakers' English language use has identified problems or variations in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) use and hence has helped improve ESL/EFL learning and teaching (Rounds, 1987; Tyler, 1992, 1994; Tyler & Bro, 1992; Tyler, Jefferies, & Davies, 1988; Williams, 1992). Research on ESL/EFL use is often limited to comparing interlanguage with target language use. However, studies (Green, 1991, 1996; DuBabcock, 1999) show that comparative discourse analyses between the interlanguage and first language enhance our understanding of second language use. Few studies have compared Chinese-English interlanguage with Chinese native language use at discourse level.

The current study will, therefore, incorporate a comparative discourse anal-

① *Chinese native speakers of English* as a term used in this book refers to those whose first or native language is Chinese (Mandarin Chinese) and who can speak English but learned English later in life.

② *Chinese-English interlanguage* refers to English spoken by the Chinese native speaker whose English has not reached the proficiency level of an English native speaker. It is sometimes simply referred to as *Chinese-English* or *interlanguage* in this book.

ysis. Given the data available, local discourse organization^① will be compared for the first language, target language, and interlanguage. Global discourse organization is compared in the target and interlanguage in relation to overall discourse comprehensibility by English native speaker raters. The interlanguage and Chinese data are all mini-lectures presented by Chinese native speakers of English. Discourse analyses of these mini-lectures focus on discourse organization structuring and subordinate syntactic structuring. It is assumed that Chinese native speakers of English differ from English native speakers in both global and local discourse structures due to typological differences in language and culture.^② This assumption is rooted in the “ethnography of speaking” (Hymes, 1962): that people share a way of speaking when they share core resources of language and culture. They form a unique speech community that can be contrasted to other groups.

Nevertheless, we have to be cautious about such group identities (Selinker, 1992). We can hardly take it for granted that Chinese native speakers of English organize their lecture discourse in a completely different way from English native speakers, especially at the global level. One important factor has to be considered, namely, the educational goals of literacy. Mohan and Lo (1985) argue that the source of Chinese students’ difficulties in organizing essays in English “lies in the emphasis of the English language instruction programs to which students are exposed” rather than “in a preference for ‘indirectness’ in the language and culture of Chinese” (p. 528). In other words, target language input plays an important role in shaping learners’ target language use. Mohan and Lo suggest that “both developmental and transfer factors” should be considered in studies of second language composition (*ibid.*). Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, Kroll, and Kuehn (1990) point out that “L2 [second language] literacy development is a complex phenomenon... involving variables such as L2 language proficiency, L1 [first language] and L2 educational experience, and cultural literacy practices that may be related to different patterns of L2 literacy acquisition” (p. 245). With respect to lecturing, these variables may also be involved. In Chinese, lecturers are expected to provide clear goals and up-coming items at the beginning and a conclusion at the end.^③ However, a lecturer without training or experience could probably behave linguistically in a similar way in both spoken English and Chinese. The typological differences between English and Chinese language might not have direct effects on the dis-

① This kind of three-pronged studies has been conducted on Chinese as the first language and English as the second as well as other languages as the first or second. The number of such studies, however, is very limited. Each of the studies seems to focus on different areas of language such as syntax (Dekydspotter, Sprouse, & Anderson, 1998), phonology (Broselow, Chen, & Wang, 1998), and pragmatics (Fouser, 1997).

② Chinese language and culture is used here in its broad sense in contrast to Western language and culture.

③ This is based on my own observations and informal interviews of an undergraduate student in China and of three Chinese graduate students in the United States.

course structuring of lectures but possibly on the syntactic structuring. Therefore, it is necessary to make clear that the differences in Chinese native speakers' English language use from English native speakers' could result from *interactions* of language and culture, as well as educational experience, personality, and learning ability.

Not only is language use on the part of the speaker complicated, comprehensibility on the part of the listener is complicated, too. Whether a spoken discourse is comprehensible or not or how much it is comprehensible may depend on several factors such as the listener's role in the speech event and his or her native language and culture, and educational background. It may even depend on whether or not the listener is physically as well as mentally attentive throughout the speech event due to special features of spoken discourse different from the written. Furthermore, whether the listener is biased against the speaker's accent or not could also affect comprehensibility (Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006). In this research project, comprehensibility is assumed to reflect the raters' interpretation of the course requirements for the lecturer (i. e., the student). The raters act as "gatekeeper" rather than a normal listener. The latter generally focuses on getting the gist of meaning, but the former concentrates on evaluating by *prescribed* criteria for comprehensibility.

Considering the complexity of language use and comprehensibility, and the availability of data, this research will focus on relationships of the following variables: boundary exchanges and comprehensibility, syntactic complexity and comprehensibility, and positions of the adverbial clause and its discourse functions. The discourse is analyzed from top to bottom. First, the discourse organization structuring at the global level is analyzed based on Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) model. I hypothesize that a lack of meta-talk or boundary exchanges, namely metastatements and conclusions, results in lower comprehensibility. The hypothesis is based on previous discourse analyses of English native speakers' lectures, which strongly suggest positive relationships between global discourse structuring and comprehensibility.

Second, syntactic structuring at the local level is examined in terms of its effects on comprehensibility. Because syntactic structures can express either parallel or hierarchical relationships of meaning, overuse of paratactic structures might defocus meaning in discourse and hence result in low or incomprehensibility (Tyler, 1992, 1994). Moreover, the use of syntactic structures in interlanguage is explicated by comparing target language hypotactic syntactic constructions with those of the native language to explore the possible effects of L1 on L2 in terms of typological differences. The hypothesis examined is that typological differences between the target and native languages constrain learners in using the target language in a native-like way.

Finally, the adverbial clause in Chinese-English is examined in comparison with its Chinese and English counterpart in terms of its position with respect to the main clause and its discourse functions. It is assumed that Chinese native speakers of English would use the adverbial clause in English in a way

similar to their first language because of differences in prototypical syntactic construction. The three layers of analysis work together to present one perspective of how this group of speakers uses English in delivering lectures, which contributes to understanding of interlanguage variation and second language acquisition process.

The data used to investigate the English use of Chinese native speakers comprise 20 final mini-lectures with their evaluation forms,^① and 9 weekly mini-lectures.^② In addition, to investigate the L1 influence on L2 lectures, I collected 9 Chinese mini-lectures, and conducted interviews with the speakers. The subjects in this study were Mandarin Chinese native speakers who began learning English in middle school. They were enrolled in the English language training course for prospective ITAs because of their low TSE (Test of Spoken English) or SPEAK (Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit)^③ scores. But the subjects had all passed the English language requirements for international students when they were admitted as graduate students into a research university in the United States. They were required to pass this course to become eligible for an ITA position at the university.

The fact that the subjects are all Chinese native speakers of English allows for an insider's perspective because the investigator herself is a Chinese native speaker. The contribution of a Chinese voice is particularly valuable in the context of an increasing number of ITAs from the People's Republic of China (PRC) employed at American universities.

This book^④ seeks to present a unique perspective on Chinese-English interlanguage use. This perspective will serve two goals. First, both trainer and trainee or teacher and student need to understand how first language and culture could affect second/foreign language learning and teaching. Second, for the purposes of better teaching and learning, both instructors and learners can benefit from understanding students' interlanguage discourse patterns in relation to native and target language patterns.

The following is a brief overview of the book. Chapters 2-4 investigate three areas of discourse. Chapter 2 analyzes if and how the use of boundary exchanges correlates with scores of Overall Comprehensibility based on statistical analysis. The data used comprise 20 Chinese-English mini-lectures and their evaluation forms. The comparative study in this chapter is limited to a comparison of English and Chinese-English due to unavailability of comparable Chinese lecture data. Chapter 3 explores correlations between syntactic com-

① Seventeen of these were collected by Ann K. Wennerstrom; three were collected by me. I am grateful to Wennerstrom for allowing me to use her data.

② I collected three mini-lectures by each of three subjects.

③ Both TSE and SPEAK are produced by the Test of English as a Foreign Language program in the United States. The scores of either TSE or SPEAK for a TAship are set by the enrolling universities.

④ This book is a revision of the author's PhD dissertation.

plexity and scores of Overall Comprehensibility based on statistical analysis. The data used are the same as in Chapter 2. This chapter also examines the use of subordinating clauses in English and Chinese-English interlanguage by comparing subordinating constructions in English and Chinese. Chapter 4 is focused on a comparison of the use of adverbial clauses by position and type among English, Chinese-English interlanguage, and Chinese. It also examines the use of pair conjunctions in Chinese-English and Chinese. The data used comprise 9 Chinese-English and 9 Chinese mini-lectures together with interview notes. Pedagogical implications of the findings and further discussion of the qualitative and quantitative analyses in those three areas are briefly discussed in Chapter 5. They are directly inferred from the findings and discussion in the previous three chapters. Finally, a summary is presented in Chapter 6, including recommendations for further research to substantiate the findings of the current research.

Overall Comprehensibility and Organizational Structure

2.1 Introduction

The “incomprehensible” lectures of English nonnative speaker ITAs seem to be well-known sources of complaint by their English native speaker undergraduate students (see, for instance, Bailey, 1984; Madden & Myers, 1994; Pickering, 2001). They feel hard to understand their ITAs because of their strong foreign accents, unfamiliar discourse organization or interpersonal communicative style. Research on ITA spoken discourse has revealed several major problems. One of them is the lack of obvious transitions or explicit marking of discourse structure, claimed to be a contributory cause of incomprehensibility (for example, Rounds, 1987; Tyler, Jefferies, & Davies, 1988; Tyler, 1992; Williams, 1992). Discourse analyses of native speaker academic lectures (Chaudron & Richards, 1986; DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988; Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995; Flowerdew & Miller, 1997; Hansen, 1994; Khuwaleh, 1999; Thompson, 2003; Young, 1994) have all pointed out that native speaker lecturers generally employ *lexical discourse markers* among other devices to organize their lectures, which helps with the listener's comprehension. These lexical discourse markers serve important functions in discourse. For example, “Today I’m going to talk about. . .” is often used to give an overview of what is to be talked about; “Let’s move on to. . .” is used as a topic shifter; and “So that’s why. . .” summarizes what has been said. These markers signal boundaries at the beginning or the end of a chunk of information, and are hence categorized as “boundary exchanges” in Sinclair and Coulthard’s (1975) terms. Since the goal of lecturing is to help listeners (i. e., students) understand the information conveyed and allow them to take away with them the important points after the lecture, lecture discourse in English seems to require these markers along with other devices (Bligh, 2000).

The results of previous studies of English native speaker and nonnative speaker discourse structuring using the boundary exchanges in academic lectures (Chaudron & Richards, 1986; DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988; Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995; Flowerdew & Miller, 1997; Hansen, 1994; Khu-

waileh, 1999; Rounds, 1987; Thompson, 2003; Young, 1994; Williams, 1992) suggest that *discourse structuring devices* have a substantial impact on students' comprehensibility. In other words, the judgment of comprehensibility depends partly on whether the discourse in question is "chunked" under different topics or sub-topics by discourse markers (Rounds, 1987). Comprehensibility in those studies mainly refers to students' understanding of lectures by means of qualitative analysis.

In this chapter, comprehensibility refers to the raters' judgment of the overall comprehensibility of ITAs' lecture discourse. Exploration of comprehensibility in this perspective may contribute to a more complete understanding of ITAs' lecture discourse in that evaluation of comprehensibility by the raters as gatekeepers reflects certain rules or principles that the evaluated must follow, though many other factors interact to affect comprehensibility. It is assumed that investigation of whether evaluation of comprehensibility correlates discourse structuring may be instructive to both lecturer trainers and lecturers as well as EFL learners and teachers. This chapter, therefore, examines twenty mini-lectures of Chinese prospective ITAs to find out whether and how the use of explicit information chunking predicts comprehensibility of the lecture discourse.

Analysis of the discourse organization structuring will be basically framed within Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) system—specifically their focusing moves, which (along with framing) constitute the boundary exchanges and are formed by the obligatory discourse acts of metastatement and conclusion. I assume that the quantity of these acts will be predictive of ITAs' Overall Comprehensibility scores when the two variables of Production (basically phonology) and Classroom Interaction are held presumably constant. ①

Although previous research has found that discourse organization structuring plays an important role in comprehensibility, most of the research has only identified the importance or lack of discourse structuring devices in native speaker and nonnative speaker academic lecture discourse respectively without the use of statistics or quantitative support. To expand previous research in this area, the current study attempts to incorporate quantitative analysis to understand one ITA problem—lack of information chunking and its consequence on raters' comprehensibility, and to describe the Chinese native speakers' English language use pattern.

In the following, I will first review the extant literature relevant to the current study, followed by discussion of the analytical apparatus based on Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) descriptive framework. Then, I will describe the method and present the data analysis results and discussion. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by summarizing the major findings as well as pointing out its limitations for further research.

① For the evaluation criteria, see the Method section of this chapter.

2.2 Previous Research

There have been only a few published studies of the discourse organization structuring of native speaker and nonnative speaker academic lectures (Chaudron & Richards, 1986; DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988; Flowerdew & Miller, 1997; Hansen, 1994; Khuwaileh, 1999; Rounds, 1987; Thompson, 2003; Young, 1994; Williams, 1992).^① They have presented varied perspectives on discourse organization structuring of English academic lectures, but they share a common research goal to help second language learners with their listening comprehension of English academic lectures.^② One of the linguistic features investigated in the research is the discourse acts of metastatement and conclusion though various terms and approaches are adopted by different researchers.

The first approach divides a lecture discourse of a topic or subtopic into introduction, body, and conclusion (Chaudron & Richards, 1986; DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988; Flowerdew & Miller, 1997; Thompson, 2003). “Macro-markers” or “macro-organizers” are identified as signals of transitions from one topic or subtopic to another as Flowerdew and Miller (1997, p. 38) point out,

[a]t different stages in the lecture, the lecturer signposts what he is going to present or confirms what he has already stated, by the use of macro-markers. At the beginning of the lecture, for example, the lecturer says, “Okay, let’s get started...” and at the end, he says, “now here/we’ll put up our last slide/and come to the conclusions.”

These markers are assumed to have effect on the nonnative speaker’s comprehension of English lectures. Though found common in authentic native speaker lectures, they seem to be overused in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) listening textbooks (Thompson, 2003).

Macro-markers might be used differently in three different styles of lecturing: conversational in which the lecturer speaks informally and more interactively, rhetorical “in which the lecturer is more like a performer,” and reading “in which the lecturer reads from notes or speaks as if reading from notes” (DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988, p. 93). Table 2.1 shows examples from each of the styles.

① There are several MA and PhD dissertation papers on lecture discourse analysis unpublished (Lynch, 1994).

② Flowerdew and his associates use the term ‘second language lectures’ to refer to lectures given by English native speaker lecturers to English nonnative speaker listeners.

TABLE 2.1 **Examples of Global Lexical Organizers of Discourse in Three Different Types of Lectures** (Adapted from DeCarrico and Nattinger (1988, p. 95).)

<i>Style</i>	<i>Topic Markers</i>	<i>Topic Shifters</i>	<i>Summarizers</i>
Conversational	Let me talk about X, then we'll go to Y	So let's turn to...	So there you've/ what we've got is...
Rhetorical	I'll be talking to you about...	Let me talk a little bit about...	We've suggested that...
Reading	Today we're going to hear...	Now I'd like to give you...	My point is that...

The second approach called “phasal” analysis is assumed “to reveal a more accurate configuration of the discourse structure of university lectures” than the one discussed above (Young 1994, p. 164). Young (1994) defines “phases” as “strands of discourse that recur discontinuously throughout a particular language event and, taken together, structure that event”(p. 165). Two of the metadiscoursal phases, “Discourse Structuring” and “Conclusion” phases are formulated by the nature of the relationship between lecturers and students and marked by some micro-features. In the Discourse Structuring phase, lecturers indicate what they are going to talk about and therefore prepare their students to follow their lectures. Its micro-features are, for example, “Let’s construct now the marginal revenue curves...” and “... we *will* be looking at block codes...” [italics in the original] (p. 170). In the Conclusion phase, lecturers recap the important points covered in the lecture, which their students are supposed to learn. This phase is often marked by the conclusive word *so*, for example, “So that’s the way how a volumetric water content is measured”(p. 171).

The third approach employs Givon (1979) and Brown and Yule’s (1983) topic analysis methods specifically for improving nonnative speaker students’ note taking skills (Hansen, 1994). Three layers of topics are identified in a native speaker lecture discourse: the major topics, subtopics, and minor points. They are hierarchical in terms of their organization in a lecture. The transition from one layer to another is marked by either linguistic, metalinguistic, or paralinguistic devices. One of the linguistic examples of major topic metatalk is “the things I’m going to have to say”(Hansen, 1994, p. 140).

Finally, “chunking” analysis is mainly an approach applied in comparing native speaker and nonnative speaker lectures (Khuwaileh, 1999; Rounds, 1987; Williams, 1992). The role of “chunks” among other factors is investigated in understanding coordinated academic lectures as well as problems of nonnative speaker TAs, the so-called ITA problems. One common problem related to discourse structuring is the lack of transitional signals such as those that mark boundaries of discourse chunks. For example, the more successful TA would summarize a particular step by saying “That’s...” and then direct

the listener's attention to the new step by saying "Okay well let's see where this gets us" when working through a problem (Rounds, 1988, p. 663).

Such discourse marking is found to help improve comprehensibility in non-native speaker spoken discourse (Williams, 1992). The findings are based on the level of comprehensibility measured by the native speaker undergraduate and ESL professional raters and the correlated use of discourse marking such as in introductions and summaries. Since their comprehensibility was reportedly always rated higher than the nonnative speaker TAs', the native speaker TAs seem to have devices other than discourse marking to produce comprehensible discourse, such as pronunciation and intonation.

To summarize, discourse marking or information chunking seems to be a crucial element in producing comprehensible spoken discourse. Because of the features of spoken discourse, speakers must present themselves clearly by signaling each move within discourse and also by integrating these moves into a coherent unit.

2.3 Analytical Apparatus

Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) system of discourse analysis is used as the basis of the analytical apparatus in this study as it lends itself to investigating discourse organization structure, specifically the macro-structure.

Sinclair and Coulthard's model consists of five ranks with the lower one functioning as a constituent in the structure of the higher. From top to bottom, the five ranks are "Lesson, Transaction, Exchange, Move, and Act." Exchange as a term for one of the discourse ranks is not explicitly defined but simply described as a rank consisting of moves. It is first classified into two categories: teaching and boundary. Boundary exchanges, as the name suggests, function to signal "the beginning or end of what the teacher considers to be a stage in the lesson" (p. 49). A boundary exchange comprises "framing" and "focusing" moves, which may or may not occur together. Framing is a signal of the ending or beginning of one stage in the lesson, whereas focusing represents a change of plane by talking *about* the discourse in terms of what is going to happen or what has happened (p. 45).

The last and the basic rank is "act" or more exactly "discourse act." It is typically one free clause plus any subordinate clauses, the function of which is determined by both relevant situational information and position in the discourse (p. 23). It denotes both the speech act and discourse function of an utterance. Table 2.2 shows the definition of those acts that construct boundary moves. ^①

^① Sinclair and Coulthard identify a total of 22 different discourse acts. Presented here are those pertaining to the current study.