



Learner Language Analysis: A Case Study of a Chinese EFL Student

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Introduction

Since the late 1960s, learner language has been a major area of inquiry in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research studies. Learner language is generated when people engage in communication using a second language. Examining learner language has been considered important and beneficial for researchers and teachers. Since there is no direct measure of competence, learners' performance or the production of the second language has become the primary source data in SLA research (Ellis, 2015).

By investigating learner language, researchers can deepen our understanding of learners' language development. Tarone and Swierzbina (2009) point out that "the goal of the study of learner language is to understand the nature of the 'built-in syllabus' that L2 learners follow" (p. 11). Ellis (2015) also stresses that investigating learner language could shed light on how learners acquire grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and pragmatic features. For teachers, the study of learner language can assist them in adjusting pedagogical practices to serve students' needs. It is also argued that analyzing learner language at the local level can improve teachers' understanding of phenomena in their classrooms (Tarone, 2009). Learners can also benefit from analyzing their production of the language they are learning because they can be more aware of the language features that caused them problems.

There are different approaches to analyzing learner language. Influenced by Behaviorism, Lado (1957) has formulated the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) which postulates that learners' difficulties in acquiring a second language are because of the influence of their mother tongue. Contrastive analysts believe that L2 errors can be predicted based on the differences between learners' L1 and the target language. However, later research studies find that could not explain all the errors in learners' production. For example, sometimes L2 learners show similar errors that appear in young L1 learners. While the CAH attempts to predict L2 errors, Error Analysis systematically analyzes learner language and finds out different types of L2 errors. Richards (1971) discusses four types of errors, including overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized. However, Tarone and Swierzbina (2009) comment that one of the limitations of Error Analysis is that "it only tabulates cases where the learner tried to produce a difficult form and failed ... does not identify cases where the learner avoided that form" (p. 29).

Selinker (1972) defines interlanguage as the underlying linguistic system of learner language that is created when learners attempt to express meanings in a second language. In his "Interlanguage" paper, Selinker (1972) broaches the principle of "interlanguage as a system in its own right" in his Interlanguage Hypothesis and identified five psycholinguistic processes that shaped learner language, including native

language transfer, overgeneralization of target language rules, transfer of training, strategies of communication, and strategies of learning. In *Interlanguage: Forty Years Later*, a book compiled by Han and Tarone (2014) to acknowledge the impact of Selinker's seminal "Interlanguage" paper, Selinker states that "perspectives on learner talk and writing were profoundly changed from traditional concentration on the chaos of 'errors' ...to viewing such talk and writing as being highly systematic and, thus being emblematic of complex acquisitional and developmental processes" (p. 222). To have a deeper understanding of L2 learners' linguistic development, SLA researchers and teachers need to treat learner language as a systematically developing linguistic form that is differently from both L1 and the target language. The current study draws extensively on Interlanguage Hypothesis in analyzing learner language.

Purpose of the Study

The researcher chose to analyze the spoken and written production of English by a Chinese L1 student who was studying for the IELTS test. The purpose of this study was twofold. First, it attempted to identify the interlanguage forms by the students so as to find out what caused those interim forms and design individualized lesson plans targeting those forms. Second, considering there has been a paucity of research studies showing teachers how to analyze learner language and translate findings into enhanced teaching practices, this study aimed to offer a detailed description of how such an analysis could be done.

There were various interlanguage forms in both spoken and written language produced by the learner. The most noticeable difference between the transcription of the spoken language and the written language was that the learner showed fewer interlanguage forms in written language than in spoken language. The focus of the current study is on grammar and vocabulary. The analysis of learner language was guided by the following two research questions.

1. What were the major psycholinguistic processes involved in written and spoken production by the student?
2. How should the most salient interlanguage forms in the student's written and spoken production be interpreted?

Method

The participant in this study was a female Chinese L1 student who was studying English for the IELTS test. She was a second-year college student at a university in China at the time of study and had studied English for approximately 8 years prior to the study. Tarone and Swierzbina (2009) suggest that "the learner's interlanguage is not produced when the learner focuses on grammatical accuracy ... The learner's interlanguage can only be observed when he or she is focused on the meaning of the message" (p. 12). Therefore, to elicit learner language, an interview was carried out between the researcher and the learner. The learner was also asked to describe a picture about mobile phone use in school and answer follow-up questions. The learner also completed an untimed essay writing task on the same topic. The interview, picture description task, and follow-up conversation were transcribed for analysis.

This study adopted the Interlanguage Hypothesis framework to provide possible explanations to the interlanguage forms. Five central psycholinguistic processes are involved in the Interlanguage Hypothesis (Selinker, 1972). The first process, native language transfer, happens when the occurrence of interlanguage forms is a result of the native language. Transfer of training occurs when the interlanguage forms are attributed to training procedures. If a learner wrongly applies a general rule to all situations without exception, then overgeneralization is at play. Tarone (2006) summarizes that "strategies of communication are used by the learner to resolve communication problems when the interlanguage system seems unequal to the task" (p. 749). Some strategies of communication include simplification,

switching to the first language, and avoidance. Strategies of learning concerns the learner’s approach to learning the target language.

The first step of data analysis was to identify the interlanguage forms in the transcript and the writing text. The next step was to reformulate the interlanguage forms based on conventions of the target language. Though it was comparatively easy to find out the interlanguage forms, in some cases it was more demanding a task to provide reformulations that were close to the learner’s language structure. To provide reformulations that were faithful to the learner’s original language, the researcher consulted Google Books Ngram Viewer (Google Labs, 2010) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008). Then, after tagging each interlanguage form based on the area of language knowledge, the researcher provided possible explanations utilizing Selinker’s Interlanguage Hypothesis framework. Questions regarding uncertainty in tagging interlanguage form were addressed by consulting an experienced researcher in applied linguistics. Though the five central psycholinguistic processes could provide possible explanations for most of the interlanguage forms, there were some outliers that could not be explained by the framework. In those cases, I referred to other relevant research work in the field.

In this study, strategies of communication were divided into simplification, code switching, and avoidance. I counted and tabulated the number of interlanguage forms that might have been explained by the same psycholinguistic process. Repetitive interlanguage forms were tallied only once. It is worth mentioning that some interlanguage forms could be explained by multiple psycholinguistic processes and thus were tallied more than once. As Tarone and Swierzbin (2009) have stated, “a single error may have more than one cause” (p. 25). To compare the results in writing and speaking as accurately as possible, the number of interlanguage forms was converted to percentages. The next section presents results from data analysis and discusses in detail the meaning of those results.

Results and Discussions

Major Psycholinguistic Processes

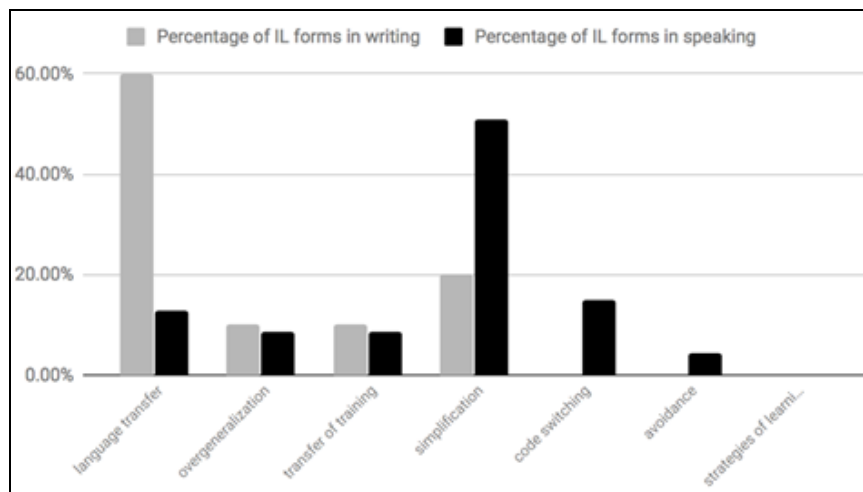


Figure 1. Interlanguage forms in writing and speaking.

Figure 1 shows that native language transfer, overgeneralization, transfer of training, and strategies of communication (simplification) contributed to the interlanguage forms in both speaking and writing by the student. Code switching and avoidance only had an impact on the occurrence of interlanguage forms in speaking, while strategies of learning did not play a role in writing or speaking. This suggests that the student might have engaged in more psycholinguistic processes when having a spontaneous conversation than when writing an essay without a time limit. It is possible that the time pressure of having a

spontaneous conversation prompted the student to mobilize more mental resources to get the message across.

It is noticeable that native language transfer accounted for 60 percent of the interlanguage forms in the student's written text and for only about 12 percent in the transcript of spoken production. This might be because the student had more time to retrieve L1 resources when writing, while the spontaneity of a conversation gave the student less leeway to fall back on the native language. In contrast, one of the strategies of communication, simplification was more favored by the student in speaking than in writing. When speaking, the student might have leveraged less complex grammatical or morphological rules so as to prioritize and attend to meaning production. Ellis (2015) contends that simplification is "likely to occur whenever learners are under pressure to communicate spontaneously and have had no opportunity to plan" (p. 93). Simplification also ranked second when it comes to writing, indicating its importance in the student's writing process.

Following simplification, code switching was the second most favored strategy of oral communication by the student. The student switched to the L1 seven times in the interview and picture description task. This might be caused by the student's awareness of the fact that I am a native speaker of mandarin Chinese and could understand the Chinese words. The sociolinguistic theory posits that the social role of the interlocutor and the social context can influence a learner's production of linguistic forms (Tarone & Swierzbis, 2009). Therefore, with limited linguistic resources to express her ideas, the student, focusing on meaning, inserted L1 words to facilitate communication (VanPatten & Benati, 2010).

Interpretation of Most Salient Interlanguage Forms

TABLE 1

Areas of Language Knowledge and Psycholinguistic Processes Involved in Interlanguage Forms

	Areas of language knowledge	Psycholinguistic processes
Speaking	past tense (10)	simplification (10)
	Vocabulary (7)	code-switching (7)
	noun clause (4)	language transfer (2); overgeneralization (1); simplification (2)
	preposition (4)	language transfer (1); simplification (4)
	passive voice (3)	transfer of training (3)
		language transfer (2); overgeneralization (1); transfer of training (1); simplification (2)
	singular & plural (3)	
	third person singular (2)	Simplification (2)
	expression (2)	avoidance (2)
	quantifier (1)	language transfer (1)
	word form (1)	overgeneralization (1)
	intransitive verb (1)	overgeneralization (1)
	copula (1)	Simplification (1)
	present progressive (1)	Simplification (1)
	modal verb (1)	Simplification (1)
Writing	word choice (4)	language transfer (4)
		language transfer (1); transfer of training (1); simplification (1)
	relative clause (3)	
	word form (1)	language transfer (1)
	modal verb (1)	overgeneralization (1)
	preposition (1)	Simplification (1)

This section discusses the most salient interlanguage forms in the student's written and spoken production. The focus will be on spoken interlanguage forms related to the past tense, vocabulary, and noun clauses and written interlanguage forms related to word choice and relative clauses.

In Table 1, the most salient interlanguage forms in the student's spoken production are related to the past tense. In all 10 cases, the student used the present tense in situations where past tense was needed. The student produced interlanguage forms such as:

T: Okay. Did you do anything in between?

S: Yes, I do something but I think maybe just a little.

Or

S: Because when I am young, I study English I never say it to a teacher or to a student.

The reason why the student chose to simplify or ignore the need of past tense forms might be that thinking about grammatical features while attempting to express meaning in English would be too demanding a task and affect the communication process. This fits Skehan's (1998) Trade-off Hypothesis which "proposes that learners will have difficulty in focusing on all aspects of production at the same time and thus will prioritize one aspect to the detriment of the other aspects" (Ellis, 2015, p. 326). Without considering past tense, the student was able to direct attentional resources to meaning expression in a spontaneous conversation. In comparison, the student did not show tense-related interlanguage forms in writing. This might be because the student was able to commit more attentional resources to form without worrying about the time pressure and fluency.

When there was a problem with vocabulary, the student often switched to her first language, hoping that the interlocutor could understand or offer the right way of saying the word. For example, the student produced the following sentence:

S: Because my family always think I am not 独立 (independent)

This indicates that the student had assessed the context and social role of the interlocutor and decided to insert Chinese words to keep the conversation going. However, in some cases, the student switched to her native language first but subsequently provided the English translation herself. In the following sentence, the student literally translated the Chinese word into English.

S: I think the student who play phone in class is the 少数 (minority) is the small number of the students.

This suggests that even though there was time pressure in the spontaneous conversation, the student still resorted to her first language to help her formulate ideas. In answering another question, the student admitted that "When I talk to you first I need to the Chinese in my heart and I will next talk to you in English." The student did not switch to Chinese in writing, but the same cognitive process, formulating ideas in Chinese and translating them directly, existed. The most salient interlanguage forms in the student's written production are related to word choice. The student had the following sentence in her essay:

When we grow up, the time...is more and more less.

The student added "more and more" before the word less because that is how the idea was expressed in Chinese. Obviously, the student was influenced by her native language when choosing words to express the idea.

In both speaking and writing, dependent clauses seemed to be a challenge for the student. During the interview, the student borrowed first language patterns to formulate noun clauses. In Table 2, the first three interlanguage forms were caused by language transfer. The second noun clause interlanguage form was caused by direct translation from L1. In the first and third noun clauses, the student did not use the gerunds, -ing form of *study* and *go*, because in Chinese gerunds do not exist and some verbs can be used as nouns directly. The student's using verbs as subjects in the dependent clause could also be the case of simplification. The fourth noun clause interlanguage form concerned the word order in the dependent clause. Since the student had been familiar with the common questions form, it was possible that she overgeneralized the pattern. In the first relative clause produced in writing, the student added the subject

them after the verb *see*. This might be because the student was taught to always write full sentences with subject, verb, and object. The second relative clause might be caused by simplification, and the third might be that the student directly translated in the L1.

TABLE 2

Interlanguage Forms Related to the Noun Clause

	Interlanguage form (function)	Target reformulation	Area of language knowledge	Possible explanation
Spoken	I think study English is	I think studying English is	noun clause	simplification
	I think the important is presentation	I think what's important is presentation	noun clause	transfer
	I heard that go abroad you need	I heard that going abroad you need	noun clause	transfer/simplification
	I don't know what can I do	I don't know what I can do	noun clause	overgeneralization
Written	things that they never see them before.	things that they never see before.	relative clause	transfer of training
	people who around them	people who are around them	relative clause	simplification
	the time that accompany them	the time that they could accompany them	relative clause	transfer

There are various explanations for the interlanguage forms in producing dependent clauses. Since the student had studied both noun clauses and relative clauses in high school, these interlanguage forms might suggest that the student was not developmentally ready for the dependent clauses.

Conclusion

The analysis of the interlanguage forms produced by the student suggests that there were different psycholinguistic processes at play in both written and spoken L2 English. While the spoken interlanguage forms by the student were more attributed to simplification and code switching, the written interlanguage forms mainly resulted from native language transfer and simplification. The analysis of the causes of the most salient interlanguage forms in the student's written and spoken production indicates that how a learner distributes attentional resources and whether the learner is developmentally ready for certain linguistic features can have considerable impact on his or her production of interlanguage forms.

The findings of this study suggest that the development of interlanguage knowledge is not a linear process. Learners produce interlanguage forms of a linguistic feature even if they have learned it. The spontaneity of a conversation and the social role of the interlocutor could also influence the production of interlanguage forms, adding evidence to one facet of the trade-off hypothesis and sociolinguistic theory.

It is worth pointing out that there are two interlanguage forms related to the copula and future tense, which could be interpreted as backsliding. For example, the student used *will very crazy* even though she seemed to have mastered this grammatical feature in the former part of the conversation. In spite of this, the current study demonstrates that the Interlanguage Hypothesis is a useful framework to help teachers of English as a second or foreign language to identify possible causes of interlanguage forms produced by students. The results of this study could be used to make individualized lessons plans to help the student enhance her language skills. Future research could focus on how to utilize the findings of this study to customize teaching strategies for the student.

One of the limitations of this study is that the written text was shorter than the spoken language produced by the student. It is possible that the student might have shown more interlanguage forms if she had been asked to provide more written production. Collecting an equal amount of spoken and written production could be one way of strengthening the findings. Another limitation of this study is that the researcher acted as the only coder of the data. Having a second researcher double check the coding would

also improve the reliability of the analysis. Since there was only one participant in the study, the results should be interpreted with caution and not be generalized to other students.

The Author

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