The Influence of Chinese Topic Prominence Construction on English Acquisition

—A Study on Non-English Majors and English Majors at a Chinese College

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Abstract
As Chinese is a topic prominent language and English is a subject prominent language, there are many differences between these two languages. The present study investigates the influence of Chinese topic prominence constructions on the acquisition of English with the instrument of a translation task. 60 Chinese college students of two levels were divided into two groups according to their English proficiency level (the non-English majors for low level and the English majors for high level). The results were analyzed and calculated in terms of four types of topic prominence constructions: Noun phrases as topics, clauses as topics, verb phrases as topics and prepositional phrases as topics.

Through this study, it is found that the interlanguage of Chinese learners for English is characterized by topic prominence construction. What is more, Chinese learners of English can gradually decrease the use of topic prominence construction, turning into more target-like interlangage with the increase of their English proficiency level.

The findings of the present study contribute to a better understanding of Chinese English learners' interlanguage development from topic prominence to subject prominence. Furthermore, the results of the current study are significant for the English teaching in China. The language teacher should enhance the comparison between Chinese and English so that the learners could be more aware of the difference between these two languages and errors could be avoided.

Key Words: topic prominence, subject prominence, transfer, second language acquisition.
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Appendix 1
1. Introduction

Through many Chinese English learners' written and spoken interlanguage, we can often see or hear some structures like this:

(1. 1) China, this country is very big.

中国，这个国家很大。

(1. 2) This matter, you have to do.

这件事，你不能不做。

(1. 3) Those pictures, this one is most beautiful.

那些画，这幅最美。

These sentences are apparently ungrammatical or sound odd in English. But why do Chinese learners have these incorrect structures? Is it because of the transfer of Chinese or poor master of English grammar? The errors made by learners can be influenced by many kinds of factors, among which first language transfer plays an important role. Topic prominence and subject prominence are two parameters when studying transfer. According to Li and Thompson (1976), generally speaking, Chinese basic structures are dominated by different topic constructions; hence Chinese is a topic prominent language, while English is typologically different from Chinese, it is a subject prominent language. To investigate the influence of L1, it is necessary to start from the typological differences between the Chinese and English languages. It has been considered by some researchers that the different features between two languages will cause difficulty in acquiring target language. When those above sentences are translated into Chinese, they are natural in Chinese. In Chinese, there are nearly 50 percent sentences in this structure, that is topic comment structure (Zhao, 1979). Whereas in English, governed by its rigorous grammatical rules, the subject is obligatory as a sentence constituent unless in imperative sentence, and the sentences should follow the SVO structure. In the above examples, 中国 (China), 这件事 (This matter), 那些画 (Those pictures) are the topics and the following parts are
Since Chinese is typologically different from English, many researchers wonder what kind of influence of Chinese topic prominence features are on Chinese-English interlanguage. Some of their studies prove that not only topic prominence features but also subject prominence features are transferable during acquisition of L2 and with the increase of the learners' L2 proficiency level, they tend to produce more and more target-like structures. However, there are some researchers who do not agree with this view. Fuller and Gundel (1987) did a study to indicate that regardless of the typology of the learners' mother tongue, topic prominence and subject prominence alike, there is a universal topic prominence stage at the beginning for second language acquisition (SLA) learners. Given this controversy, it is necessary to investigate further on this issue.

1.1 Aim

The aim of the present investigation is to find out whether Chinese topic prominence constructions will influence Chinese learners in the acquisition of English. And through a way of using a Chinese-English translation task, four types of topic prominence constructions are applied to analyse the results and to find out the degree of using these four types of topic prominence constructions. What is more, it is to find out whether English majors are less influenced by Chinese topic prominent features than non-English majors during their English learning just because their English is in a more advanced stage and closer to the target language, or if English majors are more sensitive to subject-prominent features of English than non-English majors.
1. 2 Material and Method

In order to find out whether Chinese topic prominence constructions will influence Chinese learners in the acquisition of English, this study based on the difference and comparison of Chinese and English, intends to test the influence of Chinese topic prominence constructions on the acquisition of English with the instruments of translation task. Sixty students were divided into two groups according to their English proficiency level (the Non-English major students for low level and English major students for high level). Four types of Chinese topic prominence constructions: Noun Phrases as topics, Clauses as topics, Verb Phrases as topics and Prepositional Phrases as topics were applied to analysis their degree of using Chinese topic prominence constructions during SLA. After the test, an interview of some students in both groups is adopted.

1. 2. 1 Pilot Study

To make sure the instrument used in the present study will give the intended type of data, a pilot study was done in advance. Done in one class which consists of non-English majors in grade three in a different college in China, who used the same task as the one for the 60 participants. After getting the feedback from these 30 participants, it is known whether the students can finish the task within the limited time and whether there are some difficult words and phrases which will interfere with the participants' performance, so that improvements can be made in the following test.

1. 2. 2 Participants

The participants in this study are 60 students from a university in China and they were divided into two groups. One was regarded as the low level of English proficiency group. They were 30 non-English majors in their third grade (average age=21), so their English proficiency could be assumed as the typical level of college students. The other group was regarded as the high level of English proficiency group. They were 30 English majors (average age=21) also in their third
grade, and most of them have passed the TEM-4 (Test for English Majors) and are preparing for
the TEM-8. All of these students in this two groups have learnt English for over 9 years. The time
and settings for English learning between the two groups are almost the same. However, as to the
English majors, before they become English majors, they should have better knowledge than
those who are non-English majors. And they should have learnt English more professional and
can do it more proficiently and systematically. Furthermore, they have far more opportunities to
make full use of the English they have learnt, such as communicating with native speakers and
classmates. Generally speaking, English majors' proficiency of English should be higher than
those of non-English majors. But we are going to find out whether English majors less influenced
by Chinese topic prominent features than non-English majors in acquiring the four subjects
during their English learning just because their English is in more advanced stage and closer to
target language, or English majors are more sensitive to subject-prominent features of English
than non-English majors.

All these participants will take part in a translation task. They are divided into high and low
proficiency groups according to their grade. The low proficiency group is the non-English major
students in third grade, they have never received the whole professional English training before,
and they have not attended the CET6 (College English Test 6) either, which is easier than the
TEM4, they only take the CET4, which is easier than the CET6. The high proficiency group is
the third grade English majors and all of them have passed the CET6, and nearly half of them
passed the TEM4. The profile of the participants is presented in table 1.

Table 1 The Profile of Participant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Level of English Proficiency Group</th>
<th>High Level of English Proficiency Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ranges of Age(years)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Non-English</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 1. 2. 3 Study Design

All the participants are asked to do a translation task (see Appendix I) which is in written form. This translation task is designed according to Chen Jianping's questionnaire in 1992, among which there are 20 typical topic prominence sentences that I have borrowed. Some new words and phrases are provided in case that some students will give up translating some sentences because of some unknow words, which would interfere with the students' performance. This task intends to reveal the influence of topic prominence construction on Chinese English learners' second language acquisition.

Before beginning this test, the students were informed that they should finish it within limited time and they should do it independently without consulting the dictionary and the other students, and they should give the answer immediately after they were given the task.

### 1. 2. 4 Procedure

To make sure the instrument used in the present study to get the data we want, the pilot study was made in advance. After this small-scale pilot study, it is known that the time for finishing this task is 30 minutes. Some improvement was made because some participants forgot the phrase like English department, the word bean or other words. Therefore these phrase and words were given in the test of the later formal experiment.
Then the formal experiment was carried out in two classes. One of them is the class of the students whose major is not English. They are regarded as a low level of English proficiency group. The other is the class of the senior students who have been received three-year formal professional education of English. They are regarded as high level of English proficiency group. Before the tests were given out, the students were informed that what they would do was useful for English teaching and of great significance. So they were required to do them carefully and seriously. Only those students of non-English major whose English marks of their final exam last term exceed 90 were chosen as low level of English proficiency group member so that the unnecessary factors like the score is too low or the task can not be finished would be avoided. Because even in one class, there exists great difference among those students, some students' English are not so good that they cannot provide valid data. As for the high level of English proficiency group, the selected 30 students are have passed the CET4.

After the students finished the task within 30 minutes under the supervision of their English teacher, the questionnaires were collected via email from their teacher—a friend of mine for analysis. Furthermore, an interview of some participants in two groups are adopted after the analysis.

2. Theoretical Background

In this chapter, the concepts of subject and topic are illustrated, and comparison is made between topic prominent languages and subject prominent languages with Chinese and English as their respective representatives. Then, some relevant theories in second language acquisition like theories of transfer are presented to build up linguistic framework for this study.

2.1 Topic and Subject
In order to make full understanding of features of Chinese topic prominence, it is necessary to understand the concept of topic and subject.

2.1.1 Topic

The notion of Chinese topic was first put forward by Zhao in 1968. He believed that the grammatical relationship between subject and predicate in Chinese was that between topic and comment. In other words, the relationship between topic and comment is as the main idea with an detailed explanation, while the relationship between actor and action is as the relationship between the doer and the thing that he does. In his *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese*, he claims "in Chinese, the proportion of applicability of the actor-action meanings is still very low, perhaps not much higher than 50 percent and wider conception of topic and comment is much more appropriate" (Zhao, 1979: 45). Since then, the concept of topic has aroused considerable interest and heated debates among linguists.

There are many views on topic. However, there is no consensus on the definition of topic. According to Xu and Liu (1998, 23-24), Schlobinski and Schutze-Coburn have made an overall survey and find that linguists of this field are trying to get the answer from the following four perspectives.

1. Topics as given (old) information.
2. Topics as starting point of discourse or information structure.
3. Topics as the *aboutness* of a sentence.
4. Topics as communicative dynamism.

(Xu & Liu, 1998: 23-24)

As for topics as the *aboutness* of a sentence, many linguists hold this view on topic. Chafe (1983) defines the topic of a sentence as aboutness of a sentence, and also views topic as either definite or generic. When the topic refers to something that the hearer already knows about, it is definite. When it refers to a class of entities, it is generic. Li and Thompson (1981: 15) explain that the topic of a sentence is what the sentence is about. It always comes first in the sentence, and it
always refers to the information that the speaker assumes the listener can get from the utterance. Furthermore, a topic can always optionally be followed by a pause in speech which serves to set the topic. In this study, I agree with the concept of Li and Thompson on topic.

Shi (2000) defines the topic from the perspective of generative grammar, and he claims a topic is an unmarked noun phrase that precedes a clause and is related to a position inside the clause; a topic represents an entity that has been mentioned in the previous discourse and is being discussed again in the current sentence, in other words, topic is what the current sentence is set up to add new information to. However, Zhang and Su (2002) advocate that the topic is a starting point of a discourse or some information, or the basic reference point of a sentence; and also advocate that the comment is the detailed expression of the sentence topic.

2. 1. 2 Subject

The notion of subject has long been considered as a basic element in grammatical description. This term originates from the western grammar system, hence it possesses extensive applicability in analyzing Indo-European languages, such as English, but it comes with certain problems in other languages, such as Chinese.

In spite of the numerous definitions and characteristics of subject from various perspectives, up to now, there is no seemingly rational illustration that can present the whole picture of the term. Radford (2002) explains subject as one of the major constituents of a clause, and the smallest type of clause that we can construct is one that comprises a subject and a predicate. Grammatically the subject of a clause is typically the expression that agrees with the verb, which precedes the verb and which carries nominative case of the verb; semantically the subject of a clause is typically the entity performing the action described by the verb (Radford, 2002: 530).

2. 1. 3 Contrastive Studies on Topic and Subject
Though topic and subject are different notions, they are not mutually exclusive, which means a topic can act as a subject, and a subject can also play the role of a topic. According to Chen (1999), many disputes and much confusion exist in terms of the definitions of the topic and subject in the field of Chinese linguistics. Therefore it is necessary to know the difference between topic and subject.

When the relation between topic and subject in the languages is invoked to the typological level, Li and Thompson (1976) assert that topic prominent and subject prominent relation are the two basic relations in the structures of languages. The sentences of any languages, though it may not be limited to either of the relations, it could be classified in terms of its preference for either of types: subject prominent languages or topic prominent languages. The first types of subject prominent languages are those in which "the structure of sentences favors a description in which the grammatical relation subject, predicate plays a major role" (Li & Thompson, 1976: 459). By contrast, topic prominent languages are those in which "the basic structure of sentences favors a description in which the grammatical relation topic comment plays a major role" (Li & Thompson, 1976: 459).

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, Korean…

d. Languages that are neither subject prominent nor topic prominent:
   Tagalog, Illocano...

(Li & Thompson, 1976: 459)
It is necessary to point out that the above classification does not confine the exact boundary of each language. Instead, it is more like a continuum which underlies the gradual change: that is to say, in world languages, topic and subject dominance are not discrete categories. They are only labelled as to present the general tendency of languages with regard to topic and subject as parameters.

When the respective properties of subject and topic in sentence are clarified, Li and Thompson perceive that Mandarin Chinese sentences could not be operated well without the element topic, because they are dissociative. They claim that topic is one of most prominent features in Chinese, it sets Mandarin Chinese different from many other languages (Li & Thompson, 1981: 15). Thus, the identity of Chinese formally can be labelled as a topic prominent language.

2. 2 Topic and Subject in Chinese and English

Chinese is a typical topic prominent language with topic having distinct feature of high grammaticalization, while English is subject prominent language in which topic is highly marked. Therefore, in describing Chinese sentence structures, basic terms like topic and comment should be used in addition to subject and object (Li & Thompson, 1976). However, it does not mean that there is no topic in English, and no subject in Chinese. In order to make the research objectives clear, it is necessary to make a comparison between the topic and subject in Chinese and the topic and subject in English. There are some subtle similarities and differences between them.

2. 2. 1 Topic and Subject in Chinese

In Chinese, the topic of a sentence often comes first in the sentence, and it always refers to something that the writer assumes readers may know about the sentence. The subject of a sentence is the noun phrase that has a doing or being relationship with the verb in the sentence. An example from Chen & Ye (2007) in (2. 1).
(2.1) 那台电脑 张三 修过了. (Na tai dian nao Zhangsan xiu guo le.)

↓ ↓

topic subject

*That computer Zhangsan fix.
That computer Zhangsan has fixed.

那台电脑 (that computer) is the topic, while 张三 (Zhangsan) having a doing relationship with the verb 修(fix) is the subject of the sentence (Chen & Ye, 2007).

Xu and Langendon (1981: 5 quoted by Jin, 1991) classify the topics in Chinese into six categories, any of which can be used as a topic. They are NP (noun phrase), S (sentence), S’ (topic sentence), VP (verb phrase), Prep. P (prepositioned phrase) and Post. P (post-positioned phrase). They are listed in the following examples.

(2.2) 这些话我不相信。(Zhe xie hua wo bu xiang xin.) (NP)

*These words I not believe.
I do not believe these words.

(2.3) 他会说这些话我不相信。(Ta hui shuo zhe xie hua wo bu xiang xin.) (S)

*He say these words I not believe.
I do not believe that he said these words.

(2.4) 这些他会说我不相信。(zhe xie hua Ta hui shuo wo bu xiang xin.) (S')

*These words he say I not believe.
I do not believe that he could have said these words.

(2.5) 在桌上他放了几本书。(Zai zhuo shang ta fang le ji ben shu.) (Prep. P)

*On the desk he put some books.
He put some books on his desk.

(2.6) 桌子上有书，床上不会有书。(Zhuo zi shang you shu, chuang shang bu hui you shu.) (Post. P)

*On the table have books, on the bed will not have books.
There are books on the table while there can not be any on the bed.

(2.7) 说这些话我不赞成。 (Shuo zhe xie hua wo bu zan cheng.) (VP)

*Say such words I not agree.
I do not agree on saying such words.

The underlined parts of the above sentences are all topics, the first translation with * is the Chinese version, and the following translation is English version. This shows that English sentences generally follow the subject predicate structure whereas Chinese follows topic comment structure.

As we know the properties of topic and subject, it is very easy to identify topic and subject in the sentence. There are four types of sentences: sentences with both subject and topic, sentences in which the subject and the topic are identical, sentences with no subject, and sentences with no topic, which are exemplified in (2.8) to (2.11) respectively (Li & Thompson, 1981).

(2.8)  Sentences with both subject and topic.

那本书我已經讀過了。 (Na ben shu wo yi jing du guo le.)

*That book I already read.
That book I have already read.

Topic can be easily distinguished from subject in this kind of sentences. According to Li and Thompson, 那本书 (that book) is identified as the topic of this sentence because it tells what the sentence is about, it is definite, it is placed in sentence initial position. The reason why 我 (I) is identified as the subject of the sentence is that it bears doing or being relationship, i.e. the selectional relationship, with the verb 读 (read).

(2.9) Sentences in which the subject and topic are identical.

张先生打我。 (Zhangsan da wo.)

*Zhangsan hit I.
Zhangsan hit me.

In this sentence 张三 (Zhangsan) is identified as the subject because it has a selectional relationship with the verb 打 (hit). It can also be considered as the topic since it satisfies all the conditions for being the topic: being definite, telling what the sentence is about, and allowing the appearance of the pause particles (Li & Thompson, 1981).

(2. 10) Sentences with no subject.

衣服烫完了. (Yi fu tang wan le.)

*Cloth iron finish.

The clothing (someone) has finished ironing it.

In this sentence, 衣服 (clothing) is identified as the topic rather than the subject because it has no selectional relationship with the verb 烫 (iron). Such sentences are usually translated into English in passive forms. But in Mandarin Chinese, no passive forms are adopted. Although the subject of the verb is absent, it can be easily understood from the context (Li & Thompson, 1981).

(2. 11) Sentences with no topic, such as some imperative sentence.

进来一个人。(Jin lai le yi ge ren.)

*Enter-come one person.

A person came in.

In this sentence, 一个人 (a person) is identified as the subject rather than the topic since it has a selectional relationship with the verb 进来 (come in), and is neither definite nor generic, nor in sentence initial position (Li & Thompson, 1981).
2. 2. 2 Topic and Subject in English

Even though English is a subject prominent language, and topic structure is an unconventional and irregular pattern, for the purpose of emphasis, sometimes some constituents of sentences will take up the initial position of the sentence, which then becomes an English topic structure.

Jin (1991) analyzes topic structures in English by comparing them with those in Chinese. He answers this question from the point of generative grammar and operating them in syntactic notion at sentence level, and claims that "The element which appears at the later part of the normal word order is raised to the sentence initial, hence takes the position of topic" (Jin, 1991: 1). That is to say, English topic is an irregular reverse of syntactic position by fronting the sentence constituent to the left periphery. According to the word category, NP (noun phrase), AdjP (adjective phrase), VP (verb phrase), S (sentence), PP (prepositional phrase), and AdvP (adverbial phrase) can take up the position of topic, and among them the noun phrase is the most common one. The underlined parts of the following six example sentences are the topics.

(2. 12) **An utter fool** she made me feel. (NP)
(2. 13) **Very strange** it seemed. (AdjP)
(2. 14) **Break his body neck,** I will. (VP)
(2. 15) **He was a wonderful athlete,** I have heard. (S)
(2. 16) **Into the stifling smoke** we plunged. (PP)
(2. 17) **Defiantly** they have spoken but **submissively** they will accept my terms. (AdvP)

(Jin, 1991: 1)

The relation between English subject and topic is comparatively clear and simple. According to *Longman Grammar of Written and Spoken English* (1999), an authorized latest English grammar dictionary based on corpus analysis, the notion of subject and predicate are laid out as follows: "structurally, these (subject and predicate) correspond broadly to a nominal part and a part with a verb nucleus; semantically to a topic and a comment" (Biber, 1999: 122). This illustration suggests that English subject and topic are no less than the same entity functioned in different layer. Specifically, in normal sentence order, English subject and topic actually are overlapped with each other in syntactic position.
Halliday (2001) views subject from the infomational structure, and equates subject with topic in declarative sentences.

(2. 18) The duke gave my aunt this teapot.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{The duke} \\
\text{subject/topic} \\
\hline
\text{gave my aunt this teapot} \\
\text{predicate/topic}
\end{array}
\]

Under such situation, the topic is unmarked. However, when other sentence constituent is applied to the initial position of sentence from a certain purpose, topic is differentiated from the grammatical subject. For example:

(2. 19) The teapot, the duke gave to my aunt.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{The teapot} \\
\text{topic} \\
\hline
\text{the duke gave to my aunt} \\
\text{subject} \\
\text{predicate}
\end{array}
\]

Here this teapot is the theme but not the subject. Halliday names it as the marked theme (topic) which is produced by movement, but the number of such marked theme is limited. Thus, undoubtedly, the overlapping of subject and topic still gains the mainstream of English sentence formation.

2. 2. 3 Contrastive Studies on Topic and Subject in both Chinese and English

It is said that Chinese is a topic prominence language and topic is an unmarked phenomenon. English is a subject prominence language and its topic structure is a marked phenomenon. Chinese topic structure is a normal word order and most of them are base-generated while English topic structure is an irregular word order and most of them are formed by movement. According to Yuan (1995, 570), one of the fundamental differences between Chinese and English is that the former allows base-generated topics: topics that are not created through movement, whereas the latter, base-generated topics are not possible.
There are only two forms for English topic construction which are illustrated by example (2. 20) and (2. 21).

(2. 20) *John, I did not like.
(2. 21) John, I did not like him/the man.

(Xu & Liu, 1998)

There is no object after the verb in sentence (2. 20). The topic John is actually the object of the verb like. In sentence (2. 21) there is a pronoun him or a noun phrase the man which refer to John. There is co-indexation between the topic John and the object him (Xu & Liu, 1998). However, in Chinese, in addition to two forms (example 2. 22 and 2. 23) as the forms in English, there is another form (2. 24) which does not exist in English.

(2. 22) 小王，我不了解。(Xiao wang, wo bu liao jie.)
* Xiao wang, I not know.
 Xiao wang, I do not know.

(2. 23) 小王，我不了解他。(Xiao wang, wo bu liao jie ta.)
* Xiao wang, I not know him.
 Xiao wang, I do not know him.

(2. 24) 蔬菜，我最喜欢西红柿。(Shu cai, wo zui xi huan xi hong shi.)
* Vegetables, I most like tomato.
 Of all the vegetables, I like tomato most.

The topic of sentence (2. 22) and (2. 23) is the same as English topic structure which can be formed by movement. But sentence (2. 24) is what Chafe (1983) once called Chinese style topic construction and it is formed through base-generation.

In conclusion, Chinese style topic and English style topic maybe distinguished from the following perspectives (Shi, 1998):
(1) Syntactically, co-indexation sometimes exists between English topic and object, while Chinese topics are not selected or categorized by the verb of the comment, that is, they may not have relationship with any structural position inside the comment.

(2.25) Jimmy, Mary said that nobody likes.
   The topic *Jimmy* is actually the object of the verb *like*.

(2.26) Jimmy, Mary found him very smart.
   There is co-indexation relation between the topic *Jimmy* and the object *him*.

(2.27) Jimmy, Mary knows the guy.
   The topic *Jimmy* and the object the guy refer to the same person.

(2.28) 中秋节大家吃月饼。 (*Zhong qiu jie da jia chi yue bing.*)
   *Mid-Autumn festival everybody eat moon cakes.

(2.29) 他视力不好。 (*Ta shi li bu hao.*)
   *His eyesight not good.

The topics of the two Chinese sentences are *中秋节 (Mid-Autumn Festival)* and *他 (he)* which have no relationship with any element in the comment.

(2) From the perspective of formation, Chinese style topic is base-generated without any process of topicalization, while movement of certain element from other part of the sentence to the sentence initial position forms English style topic.

(3) There is only one topic in an English sentence, but in Chinese, one topic can be shared by several clauses, which forms a topic chain.

(2.30) 这棵树，花小，叶子大。所以我不喜欢。 (*Zhe ke shu, hua xiao, ye zhi da. Suo yi wo bu xi huan.*)
   *This tree, flower small and leaves big. So I not like.

Here the topic *这棵树 (this tree)* cover two clauses so that it becomes the topic chain.

(4) Speaking of their position, English style topics always appear at the beginning of the sentence, but Chinese style topics can occupy initial position, in the middle, or at the end of a sentence.

(2.31) 太聪明了，他。 (*Tai congming le, ta.*)
   *Too smart, he.

(5) Topic is unmarked pattern in Chinese while it is marked in English.

*(Shi, 1998)*
Based on the discussion about subject and topic in English and Chinese, the following conclusion can be reached: "Chinese is a topic prominence language in which the grammatical units of topic and comment are basic to the structure of sentences, and English is a subject prominence language in which the grammatical units of subject and predicate are basic to the structure of sentences and in which sentences usually have subject predicate structure" (Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics, quoted by Yang, 2006). The present research is to study the influence of Chinese topic prominence on Chinese learners of English, therefore, it is necessary to know the characteristics of Chinese as a topic prominence language.

Though the grammaticalization degree of topic is far lower in English than in Chinese, there are some sentences with both subject and topic in English, and the following examples are mentioned as exceptions of regular English syntactic patterns:

a. Susan her name is. (The predicate or subject complement is moved to the front functioning as topic)
b. Awfully sorry I felt, too. (The predicate is used as topic)
c. Vacation you call it. (The object complement as topic)
d. Really delicious food they prepared at the restaurant. (The object as topic)
e. At five o'clock she woke me up that morning. (The adverbial modifier as topic)
f. Dance I can not very well. (Partial predicate as topic)

(Shi, 1998)

The above six sentences have one point in common in terms of topic formation, that is, their topics go through the process of movement — one element of a sentence is moved to the front, or the left of the sentence, which is called left-dislocation or thematic fronting for the purpose of discourse cohesion or rhetoric effects (Shi, 1998).

2. 3 Learner Language and Transfer

Transfer inevitably involves a contrastive study of similarities and differences between target language and mother tongue. Since the objective of the current study is to find the influence of L1 to L2 during language learning, it is necessary to know what the language transfer is.
As an indispensable part in SLA research, the study of transfer can be traced back to 1950s when bilingualism was the key topic of linguistic study, and the role of learner's mother language in SLA or FLL (foreign language learning) aroused great interest among linguists. Since then, this terminology has been examined again and again and definitions of transfer vary a lot on the grounds of different research trends.

In L2 learning, the notion of transfer is closely related to the behaviorist theory, behaviorist holds the view that the L1 habits influence the acquisition of L2 habits (Yu, 2004). Although later this view lost it popularity, the notion of transfer has revived again and it remains one of the most fundamental concepts in SLA research. The most popular definition is Odlin's definition of transfer: "Transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and the other languages that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (Odlin, 1989: 27). Ringbom (1992, 87) defined transfer as the influence of L1-based elements and L1-based procedures in understanding and producing L2 text. All these notions are means that L1 plays a very important role during our second language acquisition, on the process of L2 learning, we get a better understanding and producing L2 with the help of our L1.

It is clear that transfer is the result of interaction between two languages, and there are two kinds of transfer in general. One is substratum transfer that refers to influence of certain linguistic features of the learner's native language on target language; the other is borrowing transfer, such as from target language to native language. The substratum transfer is discussed in this thesis rather than borrowing transfer, for we only consider the role of the learner's mother tongue in the developmental process of SLA.

Nevertheless, such views on language learning have been challenged by Chomsky and Selinker, who emphasize the internal factors of the human brain and believe that the innate ability of human minds can help language acquisition. They defy the importance of transfer (Yu, 2004).
In this paper, it is hypothesized that Chinese English learners are affected by their native language because of the difference between these two languages due to their difference. So I adopt the Odlin's definition of transfer as one of my theory bases. According to Ellis,

The transfer can be divided into two categories, that is positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurred where there was concordance between the L1 and L2. In such a situation, acquisition would take place with little or no difficulty. Negative transfer, on the other hand, occurred where there was some sort of dissonance between the L1 and L2.

(Ellis, 1994)

However, some people regard the process of language acquisition as that of behavior formation. In this way, they believe that potential linguistic problems and difficulties can be predicted according to the dissimilarities between two languages. Apparently, they simplify the process of SLA and it is actually inadequate to predict the interference, because later studies suggest that there is no positive relationship between learning difficulty and linguistic differences, and no positive relationship between the learner's native language and target language. In addition, difficulty and difference are categorized to psychological and linguistic domain respectively. Therefore, in order to provide more reasonable explanation of how the learner's existing linguistic and cognitive backgrounds influence the course of his/her L2 development, transfer has been increasingly relocated within a cognitive framework (Ellis, 1999a).

Selinker refutes Ellis's argument about transfer from native language to target language and argues that mother tongue features are transferred to learner language instead of target language. Meanwhile, Ellis (1999a) suggests the following five principal processes operated in interlanguage from linguistic and cognitive perspectives:

a. Language transfer that is closely related to interference. Some of the rules in language learner's interlanguage system may be the result of transfer from his/her first language.

b. Overgeneralization. Some of the rules of language learner's interlanguage system may be the result of the overgeneralization of specific rules and features of his/her second language.

c. Transfer of training is the result of instruction. Some of the elements of learner's interlanguage system may come from transfer of specific elements via which the learner is taught the second language.
d. Strategies of second language learning.
e. Strategies of second language communication with native speakers.

(Ellis, 1999a: 48)

The above five points interlock with each other, they constitute the ways that the learners use for releasing burden and forming power for the development of their interlanguage.

Another good case in point to show the role of the learner's cognitive knowledge in SLA, they are three manifestations of transfer identified by Ellis, that is, facilitation, avoidance (or under production), and overuse (Ellis, 1999b: 302). The facilitative effect is positive transfer of L1 in an earlier stage before the learner is ready to reconstruct developmental rules in learner language. In an early stage of learner language, learners transfer both marked and unmarked features and use certain target language feature correctly if this feature corresponds to a L1 feature, and then replace it with a developmental L2 feature before finally return to previous correct forms; As for avoidance or omission, it is a covert manifestation of transfer of the learner's native language. Learners barely use certain linguistic structures that they find difficult for fear of committing errors, but sometimes they overuse certain grammatical forms, such as overgeneralization and overextension, which are similar to that in their first language acquisition. In a word, language transfer is not the simple transfer of habits as behaviorists once believed (Ellis, 1999b).

2. 4 Study on Topic Prominence Features in Interlanguage

Topic prominence and subject prominence become the two parameters on study of cross language transfer (Jin, 1994). We will review the relevant studies in this section. The previous investigations of the role of syntactic typology in L2 acquisition have led to two controversial, contradictory findings. One set of studies has claimed that the process of L2 acquisition is characterized by an early universal topic comment stage, the other set has found that L2 learners transfer topic prominent features from an L1 to an L2 at an early stage (Jin, 1994).
2. 4. 1 View of Universal Topic Comment Stage

The linguists who hold this view argue that the process of L2 acquisition is actually characterized by an early universal topic comment stage, independent of a learner's native language. Fuller and Gundel (1987), for example, examined oral narratives with both native language and interlanguage, from speakers of highly topic prominent language (Chinese, Japanese and Korean) and three relatively less topic prominent languages (Arabic, Farsi, and Spanish) backgrounds in regard to topic prominent features, which include dummy subjects, double-subject constructions, subject-creating constructions, and subject-verb agreement. The study resulted in two findings. First, there was no difference in topic prominence between the speakers of topic prominent and less topic prominent languages in their English interlanguage narratives. Second, L2 interlanguage as a whole was more topic prominent than was that of L1 native speakers of English. They form the hypothesis that second language acquisition is, in general, characterized by an early topic comment stage, independent of the learner's native language.

2. 4. 2 View of Topic Prominent/Subject Prominent Typological Transfer from L1-L2

The conclusions from other studies assert that native speakers of topic prominent languages gradually decline the use of topic prominent features as their L2 proficiency strengthened. Rutherford (1983) examines the L2 written production by topic prominent L1 speakers (Chinese, Japanese and Korean) at different L2 proficiency levels and detects evidence of overproduction of topic sentences by topic prominent speakers, especially Chinese speakers whose language has typical topic prominent features.

Jin (1994) argues that it is insufficient to investigate the role of topic prominent typology only with Chinese as L1 and English as L2. She claims that whether topic prominence is a universal development stage must rely on a bilateral direction which subject prominent English as L1 and topic prominent Chinese as L2 are also feasible. Then, after inviting four groups of English learners of Chinese but at different proficiency level, three production tasks are used to elicited to
assess the production of learners' Chinese topic structures, such as null element, specificity marking and double nominatives construction. Instead of a universal topic prominent stage, English speaking learners demonstrate a process of systematical transferring subject prominence English features to Chinese. As a result, Jin claims that not only topic prominence but also subject prominence is a transferable typology.

3. Analysis and Discussion

This part will present the results of the translation task. From four types of topic prominence constructions, it shows that the performance of Chinese learners' English is with the characteristic of topic prominence construction. Now let us take a look at the four types of topic prominence constructions in the translation task separately.

3.1 Noun Phrases as Topics

Noun Phrases as topics is the most typical features in Chinese. Because of a lack of knowledge in English, the low level of English proficiency group students easily transfer their L1 knowledge when making up sentences. The data were presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 The Number and Percentage of the Sentences with NPT (Noun Phrases as Topics)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Low level of English proficiency group</th>
<th>High level of English proficiency group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number*</td>
<td>Percentage(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPT</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>26.67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: NPT = Noun Phrases as Topics
*Total number of each group is 600.
After analysing the 20 sentences of every student, which means the 600 sentences in each group. From Table 2, it is easily found that as for the low level students, out of all sentences they translated, the proportion of noun phrases as topics sentences is 26.67%, which takes more than one fourth of total topic prominence construction sentences of all sentences in all. However for high level of English proficiency group students, the proportion of noun phrase as topics is only 6%, from which it is easily found that compared with low level of English proficiency group students, high level of English proficiency group students use fewer noun phrases as topics.

Some examples selected from the students' tasks of low level of English proficiency group will be shown as follows.

(4) 这个人, 我不说你也知道是谁。
   *The person, you will know who he is even though I do not tell you.

(5) 这件事, 你不能光麻烦一个人。
   *This matter you should not only bother one person.

(6) 这种文章他觉得写起来很费劲。
   *This kind of article, he think it is hard to write.

(7) 这件事，中国人民的经验太多了，
   *This thing, Chinese people have many experience.

It can be easily found that these ungrammatical sentences are a Chinese version of English, and they were translated literally from Chinese almost word by word. After a interview of some students in both low level and high level of English proficiency group, low levle of English proficiency group students said that because of the poor master of English knowledge, they are not familiar with the difference of structures and grammar between English and Chinese, so they will easily make such mistakes.

However, those who are English majors provide less noun phrases as topics, they said it was because they major in English, they accepted the professional knowledge of English through
reading and listening as well as other ways. So that they know what the right structure of English it is, and they will try to avoid this kind of mistakes and transform those Chinese sentences into target-like interlanguage. Still, they cannot totally avoid this because of the influence of their L1, sometimes they will still make this kind of mistakes unconsciously. However, they can reduce the proportion of mistakes to a large extent. In this test, the proportion of noun phrases for high level of English proficiency group is lower to 6%.

3.2 Clauses as Topics

Clauses as topics do exist in Chinese, but is not allowed in English unless it comes with some relative conjunctions. Only with relative conjunction, two clauses can be together in English language. For example,

Zhangjie is going to American tomorrow, which I really feel surprised.
Here Zhangjie is going to American tomorrow acts as a topic.

Now let us take a look at Table 3.

Table 3 The Number and Percentage of the Sentences with CT(Clauses as Topics)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type (CT)</th>
<th>Low level of English proficiency group</th>
<th>High level of English proficiency group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number*</td>
<td>Percentage(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There be</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>7.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclamatory clause</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other types</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: CT = Clauses as Topics
Total number of each group is 600.

From Table 3, out of all sentences they translated, we find that clauses as topics takes up large proportion both in low level of English proficiency group and high level of English proficiency group. Compared with low level of English proficiency group proportion of 19%, the proportion of high level of English proficiency group is less, only 10.67%. Some examples are selected from the two groups as follows.

(8) 张杰明天去美国，我觉得很突然。

*Zhangjie is going to American, I feel it is sudden. (low level)
Zhangjie is going to American tomorrow, which I really feel surprised. (high level)

(9) 五个苹果两个坏了。

*There are five apples include three bad apples. (low level)
*There are five apples, among these two of them are bad. (high level)

(10) 这三个人你看我我看你，谁也不想先开口。

*There are three people, you look at me and I look at you, no one want to start to talk first. (low level)
*The three people kept looking at each other, none of them want to say something first. (high level)

(11) 那场火，幸亏消防队来的快。

*That fire, thanks to the fireman come fast. (low level)
*There was a fire, fortunately, the fire man arrived at once. (high level)

From these above examples, it can be found that even if there is no very obvious difference between the two groups on translating sentences in topic prominence construction, the high level of English proficiency group students are trying to make the sentences more English like with relative pronoun or pronoun and preposition or adverb. Actually, example (8) translated by high level student is almost grammatically right in English, the reason why it is still be chosen as one of the case is that to some extent, it is still under the influence of Chinese topic prominence construction, it was nearly translated word by word.
And out of all sentences they translated, among the clause as topics, it can be found that low level of English proficiency group students used 44 *there be* structure and high level of English proficiency group students used 30. Therefore, this structure needs to be discussed in more detail. 

Chen (1992) states that dummy subject of existential sentence like *there be* is an unique subject prominence language. However, according to Schachter and Rutherford (1979), Chinese students use too much *there be* structure, they explain this *there be* structure as topics introduce structure (quoted by Chen, 1992). As reviewed in section 2, Li and Thompson claim that the topics is definite or genera. In Chinese, if the noun phrase is not semantically definite or pragmatically given, the existential verb 有(*have*) will be usually required to add to introduce it to keep the usual topic comment relationship in the sentence, which means make others more clear about the sentence. For example: 有人进来了(*someone comes in*). Thus, the above *there be* examples shows that they all derive from Chinese counterparts to label indefinite topic. But sadly, the Chinese English learners did not recognize such difference between Chinese and English existential sentences. Therefore, they translate the Chinese sentences with *there be*(有). In a word, we can say such topic prominence construction caused errors could largely be attributed to negative transfer of Chinese existential sentences and lack of L2 knowledge.

### 3. 3 Verb Phrases as Topics

The same as clause as topics, verb phrases as topics is not allowed in English. However, sentence like 住, 广州最方便; 吃, 还是香港好 (*live, Guangzhou is most convenient, eat, Hongkong is better*) is very common in Chinese. When Chinese English learners translate this kind of sentences, they would use verb or verb phrases to translate them at their first reaction. Then, the data of VPT in translation task were presented in Table 4 below.

<p>| Table 4 The Number and Percentage of the Sentences with VPT (Verb Phrases as Topics) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type (VPT)</th>
<th>Low level of English proficiency group</th>
<th>High level of English proficiency group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number*</td>
<td>Percentage(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V-ing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: VPT = Verb Phrases as Topics
*Total number of each group is 600.

In Table 4, out of all sentences they translated, it also proves that the interlanguage of Chinese learners for English is characterized by topic prominence construction. From this table, it is easily found that the percentage of verb phrases as topics is 5% for low level of English proficiency group, and 0.67% for high level of English proficiency group. It is worth noting that in spite of the whole decreasing tendency, the percentage of V-ing as topics goes up instead, from low level of English proficiency group's 1.67% to high level of English proficiency group's 4.33%. Why would this happen? Let us take some example to have a look first.

(12) 到美国留学，中国政府早就有了规定。
*Go to America for study, China government had a regulation in several years ago. (low level)
*Going to America for study, the China government has regulation early. (high level)

(13) 住，广州最方便，吃，还是香港好。
*Live, Guangzhou is the most convenient, eat, Hongkong is better. (low level)
*Living, it is most convenient in Guangzhou. Eating, Hongkong is much better. (high level)

From these two examples we can see the interlanguage of the students inevitably influenced by Chinese topic prominence construction. But there do exists the development of interlanguage as the increase of learners' English proficiency. The high level of English proficiency group students said that they gradually realize the original verb cannot be topics in English, they become clear that on what kind of sentence, what kind of form it should be used, and what is the most suitable form for each sentence. So they use V-ing to translate the Chinese topic prominence construction.
sentences in the front examples, because V-ing can act as adverbial modifier in English, and it is clear that it is most suitable form for this two sentences. And from these examples, it is find that the higher level of English proficiency the students is, the better they can do to target language, so through the table we found high level of English proficiency group's using of V-ing more than low level of English proficiency group.

3. 4 Prepositional Phrases as Topics

The analysis of the above three type topics both shows that Chinese English learners' use of interlanguage is characterized by topic prominence construction. And as the increase of Chinese English learners' English proficiency level, they can gradually decrease the use of topic prominence construction, instead, they turn to more target-like when dealing with English usage. When it comes to the prepositional phrases as topics, things are on the other way around, the data were presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5 The Number and Percentage of the Sentences with PPT (Prepositional Phrases as topics).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Low level of English proficiency group</th>
<th>High level of English proficiency group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number*</td>
<td>Percentage(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPT</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>10.67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: PPT = Prepositional Phrases as Topics
*Total number of each group is 600.

Compared with the information we get from Table 2, 3 and 4, it can be found that the students use large number of prepositional phrases as topics compared with other types. This finding is in line with Chen's (1992) study which says that the senior students prefer to use prepositional phrases as topics rather than use Chinese sentence order directly. Let us take a look at this example:
(14) 这件事你不能光麻烦一个人。

*This thing you do not bother one person. (low level)
As for this matter, you can not just bother one person. (high level)

In example (14), the low level of English proficiency group students just mechanically translate the sentence as Chinese topic comment order, whereas, the high level of English proficiency group use prepositional phrases to introduce the topic. The high level of English proficiency group students said that they know that English is different from Chinese, English do not allow a noun phrase which has no syntactic relation with the predicate function as a topic.

Besides the inclination of using prepositional phrase to introduce topics, the high level students can use more various prepositional phrases to introduce topics than low level of English proficiency group students, it can be found it in Table 6.

Table 6 The Comparison of Prepositional Phrase as Topics between Two Levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type (PPT)</th>
<th>Low level of English proficiency group</th>
<th>High level of English proficiency group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number*</td>
<td>Percentage(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>among</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because of</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thanks to</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as for</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as to</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From table 6, out of all sentences they translated, it is found that not only the percentage of prepositional phrases as topics increased, but also the variety of prepositional phrases becomes more with the increase of the students' level of English proficiency. These students of the two groups are all prefer to use prep *about, for* which is common use in everyday English. However, there is also a phenomenon that some prepositional phrases like *as for, as to, above, during* only appears in high level of English proficiency group students’ test, which is really surprised me. As to this phenomenon, I interviewed some participants in the low level of English proficiency group about why they do not use these kind of prepositional phrases when doing the task. What shocked me was that they told me they are not familiar with the usage of those prepositional phrases. During their daily practices, for fear of making mistakes, their teachers encourage them to use those prepositional phrases they are familiar with, not to use those prepositional phrases they are no confident in use. Nevertheless, the high level of English proficiency group students’ answers are totally different. They told me that their teachers encourage them to use more new words and different prepositional phrases, in that case, they can make their sentences more beautiful and more target-like. And their teacher also told them that even they will make mistakes this time, they will learn to use it better next time. So this is why they are not afraid of making mistakes, they want to do better in future study and make their sentences target-like. Obviously, the interlanguage of high level students gradually conforms the grammar of English, they are trying to do it better, they are trying to produce the subject prominence sentences.

Through these four types of topic prominence construction, we can infer that Chinese English learners will move Chinese structure mechanically at the beginning of English learning, as the increasing of English knowledge and proficiency, they will gradually try to get rid of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2</th>
<th>0.33%</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>0.67%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>on</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>above</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.67%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>during</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>10.67%</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>20.33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total number of each group is 600.*
influence of their native language even though they will still make some mistakes sometimes, which shows the process of L2 learning.

Schatchter (1979) once stated that, it is impossible to say that the process of L2 learning is the same as L1 learning, because when we are discussing the relationship between second language acquisition and kinds of grammar, we can find learner's native language will obviously act a positive role or negative role more or less. And if we carefully check the interlanguage they use, we can easily find if he is a native speaker or not. Schatchter further argued that it is very common that one depends on his native language during the L2 acquisition (quoted by Chen, 1992). From the translation task of current study, it can be found that the way of depending on one's native language is also used when dealing with the four types of topic prominence construction, almost all we Chinese learners are dominated by this way.

3.5 Results of these Four Types

Almost all students both in low English proficiency level group and high English proficiency level group have produced topic prominence construction sentences, which means they are more or less affected by their L1, the Chinese topic prominence language. After analysing the 20 sentences of every student, which means the 600 sentences in all in each group. The total number of four types of topic prominence construction interlanguage and the percentage in the two groups are presented in Table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Low level of English proficiency group</th>
<th>High level of English proficiency group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number*</td>
<td>Percentage(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPT</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>26.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CT</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NPT</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPT</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPT</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>10.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: NPT = Noun Phrases as Topics, CT= Clauses as Topics, PPT= Prepositional Phrases as Topics, VPT= Verb Phrases as Topics.
*Total number of each group is 600.

From the Table 7, it is easily found that the topic prominence construction percentage of low level of English proficiency group is 63% in all and the percentage of high level of English proficiency group is 42% in all. This means that even the high level of English proficiency group, there are still large number of sentences with topic prominence construction. It can be said that the Chinese English learners are inclined to produce topic prominence construction and they tend to transfer the topic prominence construction of their native language to their interlanguage. However, as the increase of their English proficiency, it is clear that the learners are gradually try to produce less topic prominence construction sentences.

And Table 7 clearly shows that the comparison of the number of different topic prominence construction is Noun Phrases as Topics > Clauses as Topics > Prepositional Phrases as Topics > Verb Phrases as Topics for low level, and Prepositional Phrases as Topics > Clauses as Topics > Noun Phrases as Topics > Verb Phrase as Topics for high level. What we can read from this is, because of the different level of English proficiency, students' tendency of using what kind of type of topic prominence construction are different. Low level students prefer to use noun phrases as topics most, while high level students are inclined to use prepositional phrases as topics.

As to the phenomenon that because of the different level of English proficiency, students' tendency of using what kind of type of topic prominence construction are different, I randomly interviewed some students with small questions both in low group and in high group. With regard to the test itself, both of them are indicate that this test is a success. First, all these sentences are typical Chinese topic prominence construction. Second, these sentences are very simple and no new or hard words. Third, the time for the test and the number of the sentences are rational.
With regard to the response of the testees, some students in low level of English proficiency group say that because they are non-English majors, they have not pay much attention on structure of English sentences on account of they are not professional English learners. They are not required by their teachers that they should learn English as if they are English majors, their requests for English is daily use, which means only others can understand what they are talking about is enough. And because people who they need to communicate with are their teachers and friends, they are all Chinese, so they can easily understand what they really want to express. Because of these reasons, they are not required to acquire too much knowledge about the structure and grammar of English, so that the low level students are not familiar with the difference of structures and grammar between English and Chinese, which leads they will easily make some mistakes. As to the high level of English proficiency group students, some students say that because they are English majors, they have the condition to learn English professionally and they are required to learn it systematically, so that they know what the difference of structures and grammar between English and Chinese, and they know NPT, CPT and VPT are usually not permitted in English whereas PPT exists in English as a marked structure. So they will use more prepositional phrases to introduce the topic instead of using other three types which manifests the learning strategy. And they will try to use more different types of prepositional phrases, as the same time, they will try to avoid some mistakes. Nevertheless, under the deep influence of their L1, sometimes they will use Chinese topic prominence sentences unconsciously because of the language transfer, but they will reduce the mistakes to a large extent.

And as to why low level of English proficiency group students provide more Noun Phrases as topics, they say because it all comes from Chinese structure. Noun Phrases as topics is allowed and very common in Chinese, so they are used to use it. While high level of English proficiency group students know what English structure should be and what is right and what is wrong in English expressions, so they will avoid making some mistakes. When refers to why high level students use so many kinds of Prepositional Phrases as topics whereas low level students use less, the answer can be found from the interview of them. Under the influence of the teachers and also the English proficiency of students themselves, it is clear that high level students master better knowledge and they can use them more flexible compared with students in low level of English proficiency.
proficiency group. However, another limitation we cannot deny for this result is that because all these sentences are typical Chinese expressions, so it is unavoidable that during their translation tests, all the participants are easily affected by the Chinese expression.

3.6 Effect of Transfer

From above analysis and discussion, one conclusion can be reached that Chinese English learners are influenced and interfered by Chinese topic prominence construction when they are producing English. However, there are still some sentences are not influenced by topic prominence construction. As to low level of English proficiency group, there are 222 sentences are not influenced by topic prominence construction, which takes the percentage of 37% of total 600 sentences. Whereas high level of English proficiency group performs better, there are 348 sentences are not influenced by topic prominence construction, which takes the percentage of 58% of total 600 sentences. The result of this translation task shows that the characteristic of Chinese English interlanguage is topic prominence construction, which means topic prominence construction is transferred into the learners' interlanguage. However, with the increase of the student's English proficiency level, students' English level becomes more target-like. So according to this result, possible reasons for transfer were analyzed for explaining the present study. And because Chinese and English belong to different language families, the native language transfer will inevitably occur.

There is very huge difference between child and adults in second language acquisition. The students of the present study are all adults and they have begun learning English since secondary school. To deny it or not, it is unavoidable that transfer exists during their L2 learning. Normally, if the corresponding target language form is marked, learners will transfer unmarked forms. Topic prominence construction is unmarked form in Chinese, while it is marked in English, and this kind of transfer usually is unconsciously.

Green (quoted by Zhang & Su, 2002) claims two conditions for transfer. First is the similar word sequence between the native language and target language. The word sequence of Chinese and
English are both SVO (subject-verb-object), but the limitation for Chinese is that Chinese is more flexible, English is not. Chinese is more pragmatic word order, whereas English is closer to the end of grammatical word order in language typology continuum. The second condition is that the learners are more and more realized the typological features of their native language, however they do not know the possibility and limitation of these features like marked feature in target language. Therefore when the learners are producing English, although they are trying to make less mistakes, they will unconsciously transfer the topic comment structure in their native language. So it is unavoidable that some mistakes will still exist and it will exist for quite a long time in the learners' interlanguage.

In addition, lack of rules and lack of knowledge of target language will cause transfer. There are many kinds of errors in students' questionnaires, especially for low level of English proficiency group. When the learners come across some difficulties in target language use or they do not really know how to deal with the translate appropriately within limited time, they will naturally turn to find a easy way to finish it like with their L1, then transfer occurs. According to Corder, it is called borrowing. As Zobl (1980) has pointed out, that is, by using lexical items in target language to replace the one in L1, not to affect the syntactic structure of L1. In the case of borrowing, this would suggest that what is happening is that the learner is simply retaining his mother tongue syntax and using target language lexicon (quoted by S. Pit Corder, 1983: 26).

Native language transfer is an important source of errors in SLA. Since Chinese learners are learning English as a foreign language in the environment of the native language, they have less chance to contact with and apply the target language with those people who come from English speaking countries, which means the input of positive evidence is very little. Hence Chinese learners are less sensitive to the errors they make, and the process of becoming more target-like will be longer and longer, and sometimes it cannot be accomplished. This results in the fossilization of errors, and this is why the high level of English proficiency group students of present study still have large proportion of topic prominence construction in their interlanguage.
4. Summary and Conclusion

Through this study, it is find that the interlanguage of Chinese learners for English is characterized by topic prominence construction. What is more, Chinese learners of English are trying to gradually decrease the use of topic prominence construction, turning into more target-like interlangage with the increase of their English proficiency level.

By analyzing the four types of topic prominence construction in this task, two major findings are presented as follows:

1. This task shows that learners' interlanguage is characterized by interference of topic prominence features of their mother tongue—Chinese. No matter low level of English proficiency group or high level of English proficiency group, there are considerable sentences with topic prominence construction. It is evident that when Chinese learners are learning English, these two languages are unavoidably interact, and because of their typological difference, transfer is likely to happen.

2. This task also shows that the development of the interlanguage. With the increase of learners' English proficiency level, learners' interlanguage gradually becomes more target-like. And with the analysis of dividing the sentences with topic prominence construction into four types, it is found that the frequency of using of four types of topic prominence construction is NPT > CPT > PPT > VPT for low level of English proficiency group, PPT > CPT > NPT > VPT for high level of English proficiency group. The percentage of every type decreases for high level of English proficiency group, comparing with low level of English proficiency group's except for the type of PPT. It shows that high level of English proficiency group students realize that Chinese and English are different language types. And NPT, CPT and VPT are usually not permitted in English whereas PPT exists in English as a marked structure. So the high level of English proficiency group students will use more prepositional phrases to introduce the topic instead of using other three types which manifests the learning strategy.
4. 1 Didactic Suggestions

The findings of this study provide some implications for language teaching and learning.

Since Chinese learners are learning English under the environment of their native language, the influence of their mother tongue is inevitable. Just as the results of first task, many topic prominence construction were translated literally from Chinese. Because learners are not aware of typological difference between their L1 and target language, and then they transfer the structure of their mother tongue, so negative transfer of L1 occurs. Of course, sometimes there exists positive transfer too. In order to avoid the negative transfer, contrastive analysis is necessary. Although contrastive analysis is out of favor in L2 acquisition, we can not deny that there is still instruction and enlightenment for language learning in it. As Dai and Shu (1994) argue, "contrastive analysis is still an indispensable assistant tool for foreign language teaching although it is not possible to predict all the errors learners may produce". English teachers had better carry out some teaching activities to make comparison between English subject predicate construction and Chinese topic comment construction, and to make learners to notice the similarities and dissimilarities between the two typological structures.

Traditional English teaching focuses on vocabulary and grammar of target language. Right now the teaching focus was transferred to communication. And the English teacher seldom contrast the target language and L1, let alone the typologically comparison. According to present study, we know that in students' mental knowledge, they have already known sentences with subject prominence are more acceptable. However in their performance production, they are still under the influence of L1, which means they gradually familiar to English grammar nevertheless unfamiliar to the difference between the two different languages and do not know how to transform the topic prominence into subject prominence. So English teacher should pick out some typical examples to show the translation skills and create more opportunity to practice except for clarifying the typological difference of the two languages.
4. 2 Limitations

This study intends to further the research on topic prominence features in interlanguage by one task for testing topic prominence construction in the interlanguage of students. Due to the small scale of the number of students, the results we got should be considered cautiously even though they have statistics meaning. For future study, a longitudinal should be carried out instead of a cross-sectional study taken by present study to examine the influence of all of the topic prominence features on the development of interlanguage. Since it involves the development the interlanguage, only two group divided by low and high level is not enough and it is better to have low, intermediate, high group to show the gradual development trend. What is more, as to the result we get from this test, it is find that Chinese students are prefer to use Chinese topic prominence construction. But we cannot deny that all these sentences used for translation are typical Chinese topic prominence construction, so the test itself is to a certain degree affects the results. If it is a test not only with Chinese typical expressions, but also with English daily expressions, the translation results should be different. So these limitations are unavoidable, what we should do is try our best to make it better, making the limitation the least.
References


[http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/crile/docs/crile33powell.pdf](http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/crile/docs/crile33powell.pdf)


Appendix 1

Translation Task
Translate the following sentences into English:

1. 这件事你不能光麻烦(bother)一个人。
   *This matter you can not only bother one person.
   As for this matter, you can not only bother one person.

2. 这个问题最好不要提出来。
   *This problem had better not to mention.
   It is better not to mention this problem.

3. 五个苹果两个坏了。
   *Five apples include two bad.
   There are five apples and two of them have gone bad.

4. 到美国留学中国政府早就有了规定(regulation)。
   *To America study, Chinese government have a regulation very early.
   The Chinese government already has a regulation about studying in America.

5. 这个人我不说你也知道是谁。
   *This person I not say you also know who is he.
   You should know this guy even though I do not tell you who he is.

6. 那场火幸亏消防队(fireman)来的快。
   *That fire, thanks to firemen's come fast.
   As to that fire, thanks to firemen for come fast.

7. 这几个学生他最聪明。
   *These students, he is the most clever.
   He is the most clever one among these students.
8. 住, 广州最方便; 吃, 还是香港好。

*Live, Guangzhou is most convenient; eat, Hongkong is better.
It is most convenient to live in Guangzhou, but much better to eat in Hong Kong.

9. 这种文章他觉得写起来很费劲。

*This kind of article, he thinks it is hard to write.
He feels it is quite difficult to write this kind of article.

10. 这种书买的人不多。

*This kind of book, very few people to buy.
There are not too many people who would buy this kind of book.

11. 那种豆子(beans)一斤三四块钱。

*That kind of bean, three or four yuan half kilo.
That kind of bean is about three or four yuan half kilo.

12. 英语系(English department)开会我可以跟李教授提起这件事。

*When English department have meeting, I can talk this matter with Professor Li.
I can mention this problem to professor Li at the meeting of the English department.

13. 这个问题你去谈比我去谈好。

*This matter you go to talk better than me.
It is better for you to talk about the problem than me.

14. 这么好的足球赛, 不看彩电不行。

*Such good a football match, not to watch is not good.
It is such a good football match, it should be watched with a color TV set.

15. 这三个人你看我看你, 谁也不想先开口。

*This three person, you look at me and I look at you, no one want to speak first.
The three men looked at each other and no one wanted to speak first.

16. 去北京旅游的人, 十个有九个要登长城。

*Trip to Beijing, nine in ten will will go to Great Wall.
When people travel to Beijing, nine out of ten will go to climb the Great Wall.
17. 张杰明天去美国，我觉得很突然。

*Zhangjie is going to America tomorrow, I think it was a sudden.
Zhangjie is going to America tomorrow, which really surprises me.

18. 这件事，中国人民的经验太多了。

*This matter, Chinese people have much experience.
Chinese people have too much experience on this matter.

19. 你要的那东西我已经帮你买到了。

*What you want I have bought to you.
I have bought the things you want.

20. 这个年轻人我好像在哪儿见过。

*This young people as if I have met him somewhere.
It feels like I have met this young man somewhere before.