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Acquisition of Word Order in Chinese  
as a Foreign Language

Mouton de Gruyter

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# Acquisition of Word Order in Chinese as a Foreign Language



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Peter Jordens

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*by*

Wenying Jiang

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## Forword

The beginnings of this book can be traced back to the first year of my teaching Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in 2002 at The University of Queensland, Brisbane Australia. Comparing with my previous experience in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), one thing stood out with my CFL students. They found Chinese word order very challenging. Word order errors frequently occurred in their oral presentations, written assignments and exam papers. When I tried to explain those word order errors to them, I found myself powerless in making my explanation as explicit and convincing as I expected. It was difficult even for me to describe and differentiate those various Chinese word order errors. The desire of providing a clearer and more convincing explanation to my students regarding their word order errors inspired me to conduct my doctoral study on acquisition of Chinese word order by native English speakers. This book is based on my doctoral thesis completed in the year of 2006. Now I must acknowledge my deep gratitude to my students who inspired me for pursuing this research and my supervisors who guided me through this research project.

I am fully aware that, despite my effort to gather advice and assistance to make this book both readable and rigorous, it may have many flaws. While thinking “to err is human”, I take ultimate responsibility to any flaws. It brings me great comfort that at least I learn to know how to describe various Chinese L2 word order errors and to convincingly explain them to my students after completing this research project.

I would very much like to acknowledge my gratitude to my husband, Professor Bingqiang (Bill) Zhao, and our daughter, Shuiqing (Sherry) Zhao, for their love, support and understanding throughout the years in which we travelled from one country to another studying and teaching overseas. I would like to dedicate this work to them.

Wenyang Jiang

Edmonton Canada, May 2008



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## List of abbreviations

### *Abbreviations used in the book:*

CA	Contrastive Analysis
CD	Communicative Dynamism
CFL	Chinese as a Foreign Language
CM	The Competition Model
EA	Error Analysis
ESL	English as a Second Language
FL	Foreign Language
GB	Chomsky's Government and Binding Theory
GWO	Grammatical Word Order
L1	First Language
L2	Second/Foreign Language
LAD	Language Acquisition Device
M	Measure Word in Chinese
NL	Native Language
NP	Noun Phrase
PT	Processability Theory
PWO	Pragmatic Word Order
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SOV	Subject-Object-Verb
SVO	Subject-Verb-Object
TL	Target Language
UG	Universal Grammar

### *Important Chinese word order principles identified:*

CBC	The Principle of Container-Before-Contained
EP	The Empathetic Principle
GPP	The Greenberg Pattern Principle
MBH	The Principle of Modifier Before Head
PCD	The Principle of Communicative Dynamism
PF	The Principle of Focus
PTS	The Principle of Temporal Sequence
WBP	The Principle of Whole Before Part





# Chapter 1: Introduction

“It is often said that all Chinese grammar is syntax, all Chinese syntax is word order, and therefore all Chinese grammar is word order” (Chao, 1968, p. 260).

## 1. Status of second language acquisition research in Chinese<sup>1</sup>

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), the majority of empirical studies have focused on English and various European languages. Despite a large body of literature in this field, there remains a paucity of studies on Chinese second/foreign language (L2) acquisition. At present, research in Chinese L2 acquisition does not match the increasing demand to learn Chinese as an L2 and the consequent need for understanding how L2 learners acquire Chinese, which is now the fastest growing foreign language (FL) in Japan, South Korea, the United States, Canada and Australia (Goh, 1999). Not only is the number of studies of Chinese L2 acquisition limited, but also empirical studies are rare (Polio, 1994; Zhang, 2001). Qian’s (1999) comprehensive bibliography of studies on Chinese L2 acquisition examined more than 100 journals in China over a 20-year period between 1977 and 1998 and found no more than 10 articles that were data-based studies.

Ko (1997) has also noted the paucity of literature in Chinese L2 acquisition research. In her words:

Much research has been done on such topics as the usage and significance of particles and articles in Chinese language structure such as the word *bā* (把), and the usage of *de* (的) and *le* (了). Debates over the pros and cons of different phonetic systems such as *Pinyin* (a Romanization system adopted by The People’s Republic of China) versus GR (Gwoyeu Romatzyh, another Romanization system that differentiates among tones in Chinese) or arguments over the merits of simplified characters over complicated characters have been spirited. Yet issues relevant to second language acquisition or teaching pedagogy are basically lacking or missing from the research literature (p. 4).

---

1. In this book Chinese is used to refer to the officially recognized standard language in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, known as Mandarin overseas, *Putonghua* ‘the common language’ in Mainland China and *Guoyu* ‘national language’ in Taiwan.

Research on the Chinese language, it seems, is largely confined to linguistic studies. The need for more research in Chinese SLA is compelling. In particular, research in Chinese L2 word order acquisition requires special attention because Chinese relies heavily on word order for information structuring at the sentence level, due to the lack of alternative devices such as verb endings that indicate tense and aspect. This book makes an effort to fill this gap by conducting word order acquisition research in Chinese as a foreign language (CFL). Specifically, it investigates word order errors made by English-speaking learners of Chinese.

## **2. Importance of word order in grammar**

Word order refers to the temporal or linear sequence of words in a sentence, clause or phrase. Hudson (2000) defines word order as one of the three essential aspects of syntax, which includes grouping, function and word order. Among the three components of syntax, word order has received the most attention from researchers.

The importance of word order in information structuring of a sentence lies in the fact that “Word order is one of the primary devices languages offer speakers to express who does what to whom” (Gershkoff-Stowe & Goldin-Medow, 2002, p. 377). For example, the sentence “A hates B” describes a very different situation from “B hates A.” Given the important role word order plays in a language system, the study of word order has long captivated linguists (Bloomfield, 1933; Gershkoff-Stowe & Goldin-Medow, 2002; Sapir, 1921; Tomlin, 1986).

As a central aspect of SLA, word order acquisition can be challenging to L2 learners because the word order features of their L1 and L2 are often different (Li, 1999). Moreover, problems remain in describing and explaining these word order differences. In Tomlin’s (1986) words:

The new second language learner often is intrigued as much by word order differences in the new language as by any other feature except, perhaps, phonology. Word order, thus, represents the most overtly noticeable feature of cross-linguistic syntax, yet at the same time it remains a tantalizing problem, both to describe the pertinent facts of word order variability and to provide some explanation for the great diversity one can see cross-linguistically (p. 1).

One of the most marked differences between Chinese and English is the role played by word order. Word order has more complicated roles

in Chinese than in English in information structuring of a sentence. The following section demonstrates the centrality of word order in Chinese information structuring.

### 3. Centrality of word order in Chinese

Some languages rely more on word order than others for the interpretation of sentences or utterances. Chinese is “one of those languages that rely heavily on word order as an underlying marking feature for meaning” (Ho, 1993, p. 138). The recognition of the importance of word order in Chinese by researchers is evident in Chao’s (1968) quote at the beginning of this book. In the following, the salience of Chinese word order roles and functions to information structuring of sentences is explained and demonstrated with examples.

#### 3.1. Role of word order in Chinese

Chinese syntax has a number of unique features. In contrast to languages such as English, it stands out as a language without a great number of affixational morphological processes (Chao, 1968; Chen, 1995; Ho, 1993). There are few overt syntactic expressions of tenses, subject-verb agreement, case, gender or number markings, as found in inflectional languages. For example, the verb *lai* ‘to come’ remains *lai* no matter whether the action happened yesterday, today or will happen tomorrow. It remains *lai* in form when the subject is of the third person and singular, or the first person and plural. So, a verb itself is consistent in form. Another good example of verb consistency is that the variations of the English linking verb ‘be’ – am, is, are, was and were – have just one Chinese counterpart, *shi*. Besides verbs, a Chinese noun or pronoun does not undergo any change regardless of whether it is used as a subject or object. For instance, *women* ‘we’ stays *women* in form whether it is a subject ‘we’ or an object ‘us’. The lack of affixational morphology also means that counterfactual or subjunctive mood sentences (e.g. if I were you) are not expressed with explicit grammatical devices. English expressions such as ‘Can you?’ and ‘Could you?’ correspond to the same form in Chinese, and ‘if I am you’ would be just as acceptable in Chinese grammar as ‘if I were you’. The lack of overt syntactic expressions of tenses in a Chinese verb, agent-patient roles in a Chinese pronoun

and subjunctive mood is compensated by word order variations in a sentence for the information structuring of the sentence (Kirkpatrick, 1993).

Word order is one of the most powerful devices used in Chinese to indicate subtle change of meaning. For instance, purely through word order, the following *shunkouliur* ‘Chinese doggerel’ in (1) suggests that the citizens of the provinces mentioned differ as to their tolerance of spicy food.

- (1) 四川 人 不 怕 辣; 湖北 人 辣 不 怕; 湖南 人 怕 不 辣。<sup>2</sup>  
*Sichuan ren bu pa la; Hubei ren la bu pa; Hunan ren pa bu la.*

Sichuan person **not fear spicy**; Hubei person **spicy not fear**;  
 Hunan person **fear not spicy**.

Sichuaners do not (fear their food) being spicy; (Their food) being spicy is not a fearful matter to Hubeiners; Hunaners fear that (their food) is not spicy.

Notice especially the last three syllables of each clause. The order suggests that people from Hunan province tolerate the spiciest food; people from Hubei are next, followed by people from Sichuan. The very subtle differences in meaning are expressed by a mere rearrangement of the word order of the last three characters in each clause: *bu* ‘not’, *pa* ‘fear’ and *la* ‘spicy food’. The meaning differences relate to placement of negation, verb and noun. The first word order *bu pa la* ‘negation + verb + noun’ is conventional in expressing ‘people do not fear something’. The second word order *la bu pa* ‘noun + negation + verb’ emphasizes the noun, which connotes that *la* is the least people fear. In the third word order *pa bu la* ‘verb + negation + noun’, the ‘negation’ does not negate the verb, but the noun. This word order connotes that people love spicy food and that they ‘fear’ their food not being spicy. Unfortunately, the differences are not explicit in the English translations, especially the meanings of the first two clauses, which are virtually indistinguishable in English.

---

2. The first line of the example is written in Chinese characters. The second line is the same sentence written in *pinyin*, the official Chinese phonetic system used in the People’s Republic of China. This is followed by a word-for-word or literal English translation in the third line. The last line in the example provides an idiomatic English translation. All the Chinese examples throughout the book follow the same pattern.

Word order can therefore serve as an important syntactic device in Chinese for information structuring. Rearrangement of word order not only brings meaning change but also shows the skillful manipulation of the words in a sentence. Chen (1995) summarizes the crucial role of word order in Chinese as follows:

First, Chinese is a syllable-timed language, which means that stress does not play as important a role in conveying information status as that of stress-timed languages. Second, the notions of tense and aspect are not marked on the Chinese verb, so Chinese cannot rely on tense and aspect markers to structure its information, as languages like English can. Third, there is no article system in Chinese to mark definiteness and indefiniteness, which suggests that Chinese lacks yet another means to manipulate its information structure. These and other facts which I have not touched upon seem to force the Chinese language to rely heavily on the linear order of sentence elements for information structuring purposes (p. 218).

In the following, the centrality of word order in Chinese information structuring is further explained and demonstrated through its functions.

### 3.2. Functions of word order variations in Chinese

Chinese word order not only marks grammatical functions as English word order does (in that word order indicates which noun phrase (NP) is subject and which is object), it also marks other functions such as definiteness/indefiniteness for nouns and cohesiveness in discourse (Chu, 1998). The following pair of three-word sentences with identical words and minimal difference in the ordering of two words (Li & Thompson, 1985, p. 510) illustrates how word order signals definiteness and indefiniteness:

- (2) 来 人 了。

*Lai ren le.*

Come person LE

Some person/people has/have come.

- (3) 人 来 了。

*Ren lai le.*

Person come LE

The person/people (we are expecting) has/have come.

What is interesting is that the difference in meaning between the two sentences, that is, *definiteness* versus *indefiniteness* of the noun phrases (*some person/people* versus *the person/people*), is not signaled by definite and indefinite articles as in English, but by changing the ordering between the two words *lai* ‘come’ and *ren* ‘person’. If word order plays such a crucial role in interpreting short sentences like (2) and (3), it would be expected to convey more complex information in longer, more complicated sentences. Discourse and its context add even more complexity to Chinese word order variations because they play such an important part in determining the actual word order of sentences (see Hu, 1992). Thus, the role of word order in Chinese is complicated and it is not surprising that adult native-English-speaking learners of Chinese tend to produce many word order errors (Ko, 1997).

Studies show that, compared to other L2 linguistic features, L2 word order is more influenced by L1 word order (James, 1998). James maintains, “misordering is often the result of learners relying on carrying out word-for-word translation of native language surface structures when producing written or spoken utterances in the TL [target language]” (p. 110). Thus, in order to better understand Chinese L2 word order errors by adult native-English-speaking learners, it is necessary to briefly compare the word order features of their L1 (English) with those of their L2 (Chinese).

#### **4. Cross-linguistic comparison of Chinese and English word orders**

In SLA, it is generally accepted that adult learners learn their L2 by using their L1 as a tool (Jiang, 2004; Newmeyer, 1996). With highly developed cognition and conceptualization of the world based on their L1, adult learners cannot avoid associating with their L1 when learning their L2. Knowledge of the similarities and differences in word order in learners’ L1 and L2 will be of great help in understanding L2 word order errors.

Firbas (1992) emphasizes that the word-order system of a language can be understood in a more comprehensive way if it is compared with that of another language, preferably one of different structure. Based on Li and Thompson (1976, 1981), Lust and Chien (1984), Rutherford,

(1983), Sun and Givón (1985), Tai (1973), Thompson (1978) and Tomlin (1986), the word order features of Chinese and English are summarized in Table 1.1. Each of the four features listed will be discussed below.

*Table 1.1* Cross-linguistic comparisons of Chinese and English word orders

Features	Chinese	English
Canonical word order (CWO)	Subject-Verb-Object (SVO)/ Subject-Object-Verb (SOV)	SVO
Prominence	Topic-prominent	Subject-prominent
Constraint	Pragmatic word order (PWO)	Grammatical word order (GWO)
Principal branching direction	Principally left-branching (PLB)	Principally right-branching (PRB)

#### 4.1. Canonical word order

Greenberg (1963, 1966) lays out ways of classifying languages according to the position of the three nuclear constituents of a declarative transitive clause, namely, subject (S), verb (V) and object (O). Following Greenberg (1966), Tomlin (1986) identifies the relative frequencies of the six basic canonical word orders (CWO) of human languages, which are:  $SOV = SVO > VSO > VOS = OVS > OSV$ . This indicates that the CWO of most human languages is either SOV or SVO. It needs to be pointed out that in describing a language as SVO, one only refers to the word order of its most prevalent and unmarked declarative sentences. Other word orders, such as OSV, may also exist in complex syntactic structures or in order to achieve a pragmatic function. For example, the OSV order in the compound sentence “Mary I like while Jane I dislike” is used to express a contrast.

Typologically speaking, English is a rigid SVO language (Thompson, 1978). As Thompson describes, “English is a language in which basic grammatical relations are signaled by word order. Specifically, it is a language in which there must be a noun phrase [NP] immediately preceding the verb in main clauses and that noun phrase, if unmarked, is the subject” (p. 25). Structures with a ‘dummy’ or ‘empty’ subject “it” demonstrate the rigid SVO word order in English. For example, in sen-



tences like “it is raining”, a ‘dummy’ subject ‘it’ is required to occupy the subject position even if it carries no lexical meaning.

There is heated debate over whether the CWO of Chinese is SVO or SOV (Ho, 1993). Three positions have been articulated in the literature. The first position is represented by Tai (1973). Tai proposes that the CWO of Chinese is SOV on the basis of the features associated with SOV languages defined by Greenberg. These features include the sequence of modifiers before the modified, frequent use of postpositions and the use of interrogatory helping words at the end of Yes-No questions (Ho, 1993). Since all these features are found in Chinese, Tai concludes that Chinese is an SOV language. Li and Thompson (1976, 1981) propose a second view that Chinese has undergone a process of evolution from an SVO language to an SOV language, as characterized by the frequent use of the *ba*-construction<sup>3</sup>, less rigidity of a definite NP before the verb and an indefinite NP after the verb, and the optional positioning of prepositional phrases before or after the verb. There are also linguists who do not consider Chinese word order to be SOV or in the process of transition from SVO to SOV. Authors that hold a third position that Chinese is predominantly an SVO language include Light (1979), McGinnis (1988), Lu (1980), Mei (1980), Chu (1984), Sun and Givón (1985) amongst others. Their position is supported by a number of statistical studies undertaken calculating the frequency of SVO sentences (e.g. Sun & Givón 1985; Wang, 1988). Although many researchers claim that Chinese is predominantly an SVO language in terms of statistical predominance and unmarked surface level word order, it is evident that difficulties arise in deciding what language type best describes Chinese as the language manifests both SVO and SOV characteristics.

Furthermore, even when Chinese exhibits an SVO word order, as English does, the determining factors behind the surface SVO order are

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3. *Ba* is a Chinese function word. It is usually regarded as a preposition or a co-verb. The *Ba*-construction is a unique syntactic structure in Chinese. It is often employed when people want to emphasize what happened or what should happen to an object. The word order of a *Ba*-construction is: S-*Ba*-O-V. The following example emphasizes the importance of the object “the money”:

你把钱带上。

*Ni Ba qian dai shang.*

You *Ba* money bring up

Please do take the money with you.

different in the two languages (Chao, 1968; Huang, 1982; Mangione, 1982). These factors include 'prominence', 'constraint' and 'principal branching direction', which are all different in Chinese and English. These are discussed below.

#### 4.2. Prominence

On the typological continuum ranging from *subject-prominent* to *topic-prominent* languages, English and Chinese are said to typify two respective extremes (Li & Thompson, 1976). The majority of linguists working on the Chinese language support the view that both topic and subject exist in both Chinese and English as separate grammatical notions and that both can exist in the same sentence (Huang, 1982; Li, 1990; Li & Thompson, 1976, 1981; Ning, 1993; Qu, 1994; Shi, 2000; Shyu, 1995; Tsao, 1979, 1990). However, Chinese differs from English in that while the syntactic category of *subject* is basic and central to the English grammatical system, it is peripheral and secondary to that of Chinese. In the Chinese case, the central role is played by the category of *topic*. For example, if one compares both English and Chinese answers to the same question, "Have you returned that book?", the answer in English shows a subject-predicate structure in (4) while the answer in Chinese allows several different topic-comment structures in (5):

(4) A: Have you returned that book?

B: Yes, I did. Subject + Predicate

(5) A: 你还那本书了吗?

*Ni huan na ben shu le ma?*

You return that book *LE* *ma*

Have you returned that book?

B: 还了。

*Huan le.*

Return *LE*

Returned.

Comment

C: 书还了。

*Shu huan le.*

Book return *LE*

The book has been returned

Topic + Comment

D: 书 我 还 了。

*Shu wo huan le.*

Book I return LE

The book, I have returned it.      Topic + Subject + Comment

#E: 是的, 我 还 那 本 书 了。

*Shi de, wo huan na ben shu le.*

Yes, I return that book LE

Yes, I did return that book.      Subject + Predicate

The # symbol preceding (5)E indicates that the sentence is inappropriate in context although it is grammatically correct independently. Examples (4) and (5) demonstrate that in *subject-prominent* languages like English, a subject is essential for a sentence to remain grammatical while in *topic-prominent* languages like Chinese many grammatical sentences are subjectless. As a consequence, adult native English-speaking learners of Chinese may tend to use more subjects than necessary in Chinese production due to their L1 influence (Ko, 1997). Both Jin (1994) and Jung (2004) have confirmed the typological influence of L1 in learners' L2 production: English learners of Chinese in Jin's study and English learners of Korean in Jung's study do transfer their *subject-prominent* L1 features in *topic-prominent* L2 learning. This type of transfer often leads to L2 errors.

#### 4.3. Constraint

As Li and Thompson (1981) point out, the order in which major constituents of a sentence occur in Chinese is governed to a large extent by considerations of semantic or pragmatic factors, while English is governed mainly by grammatical functions. Based on the constraints of word order, Thompson (1978) differentiates languages into *pragmatic word order* (PWO) languages and *grammatical word order* (GWO) languages. In PWO languages like Chinese, it is pragmatic or discourse factors that at least partially determine the order of canonical constituents in a sentence. In contrast, in GWO languages like English the positioning of canonical constituents primarily obeys grammatical or syntactic constraints at the sentence level (Rutherford, 1983; Thompson, 1978). In other words, word order in GWO languages is "conditioned only by the syntactic and semantic relationships within the sentence" while in

PWO languages, the word order of a sentence is also conditioned by “a larger context”, that is, discourse (Kitić, 2002, p. 304).

Due to their different constraints, it is often said that Chinese is *discourse-oriented* while English is *sentence-oriented* (McGinnis, 1999; Tsao, 1979; Zhang, 1995). This indicates that the basic functional unit in Chinese is *discourse*, while in English it is *sentence*. Communication strategies, such as politeness, are conveyed in English at a sentence level by making a sentence longer or using the subjunctive mood while in Chinese they are conveyed through linguistic units larger than the sentence, namely discourse (McGinnis, 1999; Zhang, 1995). For example, Zhang (1995) finds that in English if one wishes to borrow a camera from a friend, using the request ‘*Could I possibly borrow your camera?*’ is more polite than ‘*Can I borrow your camera?*’ In Chinese, however, politeness is not achieved by making a sentence longer or using subjunctive mood. Such a request of borrowing a camera is usually achieved by alternative strategies that involve a discourse instead of a sentence. Chinese native speakers tend to first find out whether the friend will possibly use his/her camera by asking questions like ‘*Are you planning to go out sightseeing at all?*’ before they actually make the request. Sometimes people just express their wish of having a camera instead of making the request directly. It is considered more polite to leave the opportunity for the friend to offer lending his/her camera. Given that the basic functional unit in Chinese is discourse, the word order of each sentence of the discourse is not determined only by the sentence, but also by the discourse.

The two word order features of “prominence” and “constraint” discussed above seem to correlate to each other (Rutherford, 1989). Topic-prominent languages are often pragmatically constrained (PWO) while subject-prominent languages are often grammatically constrained (GWO) (Rutherford, 1989). Chinese represents the former while English represents the latter. Due to these typological differences, English learners find Chinese word order acquisition challenging (Ko, 1997; Li, 1999).

#### 4.4. Principal branching direction

Apart from major constituents, namely S, V and O, a sentence may also include modifiers such as adjectives, adverbs and relative clauses. The ordering of these modifiers is also very important. Indeed for this study

their order may be more important than the ordering of the major constituents because many Chinese sentences share the same SVO word order as English sentences. The typological ordering difference of modifiers in the two languages is characterised by the notion of “Principal Branching Direction” (PBD) (Lust & Chien, 1984, p. 54). Chinese is a “*principally left-branching*” (PLB) language in that relative clauses and subordinate clauses position to the *left* of their head, while English is “*principally right-branching*” (PRB) in that relative clauses and subordinate clauses position to the *right* of their head (Lust & Chien, 1984, p. 54). This is demonstrated by example (6).

- (6) 那个说中文的女孩子是我妹妹。  
*Na ge shuo zhongwen de nü hai zi shi wo meimei.*  
 That speak Chinese *de* **girl** is me younger sister  
**The girl who speaks Chinese** is my younger sister.

The bold highlighted noun phrase (NP) in (6) is a head and the underlined relative clause modifies the head. In Chinese, the relative clause modifier is positioned to the *left* of the head while in English the relative clause modifier is positioned to the *right*. This difference causes problems for English-speaking learners particularly in learning the word order of Chinese relative clauses and the heads they modify.

In sum, four word order features, that is, the canonical word order, prominence, constraint and principal branching direction, have been compared in Chinese and English. Chinese exhibits both SVO and SOV features while English is a rigid SVO language. Chinese is a topic-prominent language while English is a subject-prominent language. Chinese is a PWO language while English is a GWO language. Chinese is principally left-branching while English is principally right-branching. Due to these differences, it is not surprising that English-speaking learners of Chinese encounter difficulties in their word order acquisition and often produce many Chinese word order errors.

## 5. The problem: how to describe and explain Chinese L2 word order errors

Given that the roles and functions of word order are more complicated in Chinese than in English, the acquisition of Chinese L2 word order by English speakers can be very challenging (Li, P., 1998; Li, W., 1999).

Ko (1997) provides a descriptive typology of the linguistic, lexical and syntactic errors produced by native-English-speaking students in their first, second, third and fourth years of Chinese instruction. Among the 506 errors she collected, eight categories were identified. The two most frequently occurring errors in her study were misuse of vocabulary (214, 42%) and improper word order (135, 27%). Ko's (1997) study confirms that native-English-speaking learners of Chinese do find word order challenging. Xie (1992) has also found that, even though some advanced learners of Chinese have native-like fluency in their utterances, their discourse organization and word order use "do not even come close to the level of native speakers" (p. 98).

The author's own observations gained from teaching Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) to Australian adult learners show that they have difficulty in acquiring Chinese word order. For example, the following sentences with word order errors are from second-year written Chinese examination papers.

(7a) # 你 可以 来 坐 火车。

*Ni keyi lai zuo huoche.*

You can come sit train

You can come by train.

(7b) 你 可以 坐 火车 来。

*Ni keyi zuo huoche lai.*

You can sit train come

You can come by train.

(8a) \*我们 开[始] 五 点。

*Women kaishi wu dian.*

We begin five o'clock

We begin at five o'clock.

(8b) 我们 五 点 开始。

*Women wu dian kaishi.*

We five o'clock begin

We begin at five o'clock.

As mentioned earlier (p. 10), the # symbol preceding (7a) indicates that the sentence is inappropriate in context. An asterisk \* preceding a sentence, as in (8a), indicates that the sentence is grammatically incorrect. In these cases, the grammatically correct or appropriate form of

the example is given as (b) following the same serial number, as shown in (7b) and (8b).

Many examples of word order errors, such as (7a) and (8a), appear in the students' oral presentations, written assignments and exam papers. However, no adequate means is available for Chinese L2 researchers and teachers to explicitly describe these word order errors. Without an explicit description, Chinese word order errors cannot be categorized and neither can they be adequately explained for instruction purposes.

Word order errors frequently occur in learners' Chinese L2 performance, however, no adequate means is available to describe them, nor are any adequate explanations available to account for them. In other words, while it is widely acknowledged that it is problematic for native-English-speaking learners to acquire Chinese word order, it is not clear what the exact problems are. In order for L2 researchers and teachers to better understand the process of Chinese L2 word order acquisition, word order errors that learners make need to be explored. Specifically, learners' word order errors need to be categorized in order to allow them to be more accurately described and explained. This book examines how Chinese L2 word order errors can be described explicitly and explained specifically in a pedagogical sense.

## **6. Objectives and research questions**

Chinese native speakers have the language intuition or capacity to make use of word order variations in different contexts in order to achieve different communicative effects. Adult L2 learners, however, rarely possess such an intuition. They find acquiring Chinese word order challenging. As a result, word order errors frequently occur in learners' production. Categorizing these word order errors allows one to provide a more accurate description of them in Chinese L2 word order instruction.

The principal aim of this book is to develop a comprehensive taxonomy of Chinese L2 word order errors. Taxonomy is defined in the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993) as "the branch of science that deals with classification". James (1998) maintains that "A mere listing of errors, including alphabetic ones, is not a taxonomy. A taxonomy must be organized according to certain constitutive criteria" (p. 102). Therefore, it is crucial to review available error taxonomies and search for a valid criterion or criteria to be used in classifying Chinese L2 word order errors. The taxonomy to be developed should be able to organize these

errors into a logical system of classification. Through this, explicit description of various Chinese L2 word order errors can be achieved, specific sources of these errors can be traced and instruction of Chinese L2 word order can be enhanced.

Building on the findings of relevant linguistic studies of Chinese word order and Chinese L2 word order acquisition, this book aims to achieve two principal objectives: (1) to critically evaluate existing word order error taxonomies; and (2) to develop a comprehensive taxonomy of Chinese L2 word order errors to enable explicit description and specific explanation. In so doing, this book will answer the following questions:

1. What Chinese L2 word order error taxonomies are available to date?
2. Are the categories in existing taxonomies theoretically motivated?
3. How can existing taxonomic categories be modified so as to better account for Chinese L2 word order errors?
4. How adequately do existing Chinese L2 word order error taxonomies account for the data collected from this cohort of learners?
5. Drawing on a proposed taxonomic framework, what categories of word order errors are made by the Chinese L2 learners in this study?
6. What are the relative frequencies of occurrence of various Chinese word order errors in this study?

## **7. Significance of the study**

In answering the above research questions, this book will present a comprehensive taxonomy of Chinese L2 word order errors. Such a taxonomy should enable L2 researchers and teachers to describe Chinese L2 word order errors more clearly and accurately, and should also provide insight into the acquisition process. The findings of the study will not only contribute to an understanding of the acquisition process of Chinese L2 word order, but will also provide a basis for Chinese L2 teachers to teach word order more effectively.

Word order errors are indispensable to learners since they can be “a device the learner uses in order to learn” (Selinker, 1992, p. 150). The establishment of an empirically based taxonomy of Chinese L2 word order errors is a preliminary but crucial step towards a better understanding of the cognitive operating system at work in the Chinese L2 word order acquisition process. This taxonomy is also a prerequisite for



effective error-correction feedback, since it provides the base for a better understanding of the nature of Chinese L2 word order learning difficulties. Error-correction efforts do not always succeed (Ellis, 1994; James, 1998), presumably because feedback is not sufficiently clear for learners to understand. A comprehensive description of Chinese L2 word order errors, together with clear pedagogical information, has great potential for helping learners self-monitor, cope with and eventually overcome persistent errors more efficiently and effectively.

## **8. An overview of the book**

The book consists of eight chapters. Chapter One discusses the status of SLA research in Chinese, the importance of word order in grammar, and the importance of word order in Chinese. It compares word order in Chinese and English and identifies potential Chinese L2 word order difficulties for adult native-English-speaking learners of Chinese. The objectives, research questions and significance of the book are presented and important terminological concepts relevant to this study are defined.

Chapter Two sets out the L2 acquisition framework adopted in the study. Four different SLA approaches that have been used to investigate L2 word order acquisition are examined. They are the Universal Grammar approach, the Processability Theory approach, the Competition Model approach and the Cognitive Functionalist Approach. The four approaches are compared and evaluated, with the Cognitive Functionalist Approach deemed as the most appropriate theoretical framework for investigating Chinese L2 word order errors.

Chapter Three, in search of existing word order error taxonomies, firstly reviews particular studies on Chinese L2 word order acquisition. It then reviews studies on Chinese L2 word order errors. Through the two reviews, the need for a systematic examination of Chinese word order principles is identified. Consequently, Chinese word order principles are reviewed systematically and demonstrated with examples. Two conclusions emerge from reviewing the literature: (1) existing taxonomies are too limited for describing Chinese L2 word order errors; and (2) violation of any basic word order principle or sub-principle can be utilized as a criterion to categorize word order errors made by Chinese L2 learners.

Chapter Four explains how data should be collected and analysed in order to address the research questions. It argues for the choice of a

cross-sectional research design in the study. The main research method used is Error Analysis (EA). EA is critically reviewed and ways are presented for overcoming the limitations in methodology employed in previous Chinese EA studies, namely lack of empirical data; lack of explicit criteria in identifying errors; lack of precision in error description and lack of adequacy in error explanation.

Chapter Five presents the procedure of data collection and analysis employed in this book. Details of the participants, data type and unit of analysis are reported.

Chapter Six documents the development of a comprehensive taxonomy of Chinese L2 word order errors. An existing extendable taxonomy, Ko's (1997) three-category taxonomy, is applied to the data collected in order to further demonstrate its limitedness in describing Chinese L2 word order errors. Building on the categories of word order errors identified in Chapter Three, a new categorization of the Chinese L2 word order errors collected is conducted. Through this re-categorization, existing categories from the literature and new word order error categories emerging from the data are successfully incorporated into one system. Thus, a new comprehensive taxonomy of Chinese L2 word order errors is developed. This taxonomy enables a more accurate description and specific explanation of Chinese L2 word order errors.

Chapter Seven documents the relative frequencies of occurrence of the Chinese L2 word order errors collected. It provides a quantitative perspective on Chinese L2 word order errors by showing how errors distribute among the various categories in the new taxonomy. Error rates for all word order error categories are presented and the word order error rate for each of the categories is discussed.

Chapter Eight concludes the book by revisiting the research objectives, summarizing the main findings and contributions, discussing the limitations, pinpointing pedagogical implications and suggesting topics for further research.

## **9. Terminology issues in this study**

Before concluding this chapter, this section defines the basic terminology used in this book. This research project examines the acquisition of word order in Chinese as a foreign language. It draws on basic concepts and methods used in second language acquisition (SLA) research. However, as is common in many fields, SLA researchers often use the same