
Review article: A tree in the wood: A review of research on L2 Chinese acquisition

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Abstract

There has been considerable research in Chinese as a second language (L2) in recent years, particularly in its morphological and syntactic aspects. This article reviews research in these aspects with reference to the broader discipline of second language acquisition (SLA) and suggests that L2 Chinese research has contributed to SLA through verification, modification or posing challenges to research findings in the L2 acquisition of other languages. On the basis of these studies, the author points out the limits of current L2 Chinese research and discusses the prospects for future development, arguing that L2 Chinese is to be investigated against hypotheses based on other L2s so that theoretical contributions can be made to the discipline of SLA.

Keywords

second language acquisition of Chinese, linguistic theory, theory construction, linguistic research on Chinese

I Introduction

There has been considerable research in second language (L2) Chinese morphosyntax, especially in the interfaces between morphology, syntax and semantics, despite little study of pragmatic or sociolinguistic factors. This article reviews studies of the morphosyntactic aspects of L2 Chinese and explores how they might contribute to the development of theories in second language acquisition (SLA).

Chinese has some morphological and syntactic features, as listed in (1), which are salient to L2 Chinese studies.

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1. Some features of Chinese salient to studies of L2 Chinese acquisition:
 - a) classifiers used before nouns;
 - b) topic structure;
 - c) impoverished inflectional morphology; no case or gender marking;
 - d) temporality represented with aspect markers or through context;
 - e) resultative verb compounds used to express achievements or accomplishments;
 - f) *wh*-words remaining in situ;
 - g) long-distance binding of the reflexive *ziji*;
 - h) some unique constructions like *ba* and *bei* structures.

The article is structured as follows. First, I outline findings of L2 Chinese studies in seven morphosyntactic aspects. Next I examine the broader discipline of SLA in the light of these findings to see in what ways L2 Chinese studies can contribute to the discipline. Then I discuss problems and future prospects for studies of L2 Chinese acquisition. Finally I point out the significance of SLA research in general to the understanding of L2 acquisition of Chinese and vice versa.

II Research and findings in L2 Chinese studies

I Unaccusative/unergative distinction and verb-raising

In Chinese, the external argument of unergative verbs occurs preverbally as in English, but the internal argument of unaccusative verbs can raise to the subject position or remain in the object position as long as it is indefinite, in contrast to English where it raises obligatorily to the subject position.

Yuan (1999) and Shan (2006) examined the unaccusative/unergative distinction in English speakers' L2 Chinese. Yuan (1999) found that the distinction is acquired very late and that its acquisition undergoes a process of first language (L1) interference and overgeneralization of L2 properties before it is properly represented in L2 grammars. Shan (2006) found that near-native learners are able to demonstrate the lexical-semantic representations of unaccusatives and unergatives, whereas learners at other proficiency levels exhibit optionality with the V–NP unaccusative construction due to L1 influence. Research by other scholars (e.g. Ju, 2000) indicates that learners from various L1 backgrounds avoid the NP–V unaccusative construction and that L2 learners use non-target passivized forms to mark NP-movement involved. However, neither avoidance nor overpassivization was evidenced in Shan (2006). Both Yuan (1999) and Shan (2006) suggested that the syntax–semantics interface concerning unaccusatives and unergatives can be properly represented in L2 grammars, thus challenging the prediction of the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace and Filiaci, 2006), which holds that grammatical aspects involving an interface between syntax and other cognitive domains may not be acquirable in L2 grammars.

Chinese, like English but unlike French and German, does not allow thematic verb-raising. Therefore, verbs occurring before frequency adverbs (e.g. * *he changchang pijiu* 'drink often beer') or clausal negators (e.g. * *he bu pijiu* 'drink not beer') are not allowed. In two empirical studies, Yuan (2001, 2004) found that thematic verb-raising is not

inevitable in L2 Chinese, regardless of whether the learners' L1s are English, French or German, and that L2 learners of different proficiency levels all have native-like behaviours. These findings suggest that L1 transfer does not necessarily occur, even at the initial stage, which disconfirms proposals that L2 grammar starts from L1 grammar (e.g. Clahsen and Hong, 1995; Schwartz and Sprouse, 1996). They also suggest that L2 grammars can have fully and properly specified features of functional categories right from the start even if these features have different values in the learners' L1s. This conclusion contradicts previous findings (e.g. Eubank et al., 1997) that thematic verb-raising occurs in L2 grammars even if it is disallowed in the L2.

2 Reflexives, pronouns and noun phrases

The Chinese reflexive *ziji* allows both long-distance and local binding, similar to the Japanese reflexive *zibun* but different from the English reflexive *oneself* which allows local binding only. A property of long-distance reflexives is subject orientation, whereas reflexives in local binding allow both subject NPs and object NPs as their antecedents.

Chen (1995) and Yuan (1998) investigated L2 Chinese acquisition of *ziji* and both observed an L1 effect: L1 English and L1 French speakers accept local binding of *ziji* only (Chen, 1995), while Japanese speakers are in an advantageous position in acquiring the long-distance properties of *ziji* (Yuan, 1998). These findings are in contradiction to previous studies based on L2 acquisition of Japanese *zibun* (e.g. Thomas, 1995), which concluded that learners' L1s do not have a significant effect on the interpretation of the reflexive. Yuan (1998) also found that both English and Japanese speakers incorrectly admit free orientation of *ziji* in their L2 Chinese, indicating that the L1 effect is not absolute, contrary to the Full Transfer hypotheses (e.g. Clahsen and Hong, 1995; Schwartz and Sprouse, 1996).

There are two types of null elements in Chinese: the type due to syntactic deletion, which is a syntactic category, and the type due to discourse deletion, which is a syntax–discourse interface category. An embedded null subject can refer to either the matrix subject or a discourse entity, but an embedded null object can refer only to a discourse entity. In a study of overt and null arguments in L2 Chinese, Zhao (2008) found that both types of null elements can be acquired by English-speaking learners, again in disagreement with the prediction of the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace and Filiaci, 2006).

Chinese and Japanese share some nominal properties including classifier projection, the incompatibility of the numeral-classifier phrase with the plural marker, adjectival possessives and the co-occurrence of determinative elements. In contrast, English has none of these properties. Liang (2006) studied the L2 acquisition of Chinese noun phrases by Japanese and English speakers. Results indicate that only the adjective possessive is found in Japanese speakers' initial L2 Chinese grammar, which again implies that L1 transfer is not inevitable. They suggest that the incompatibility of the numeral-classifier phrase with the plural marker *men* is underspecified in English and Japanese speakers' L2 Chinese, even at the advanced stage, but L2 learners' failure to use semantically appropriate Chinese classifiers does not hinder the presence of the classifier projection or its syntactic specifications in their L2 Chinese. These findings indicate that functional

categories can be properly projected in L2 grammars, contrary to the conclusion of Hawkins and Chan (1997), and that there is a discrepancy between syntactic development and semantic development.

3 Aspect markers

Temporal relations are realized through context and aspect markers in Chinese (Huang, 2003; Smith and Erbaugh, 2005). Jin (2009) investigated the aspect markers *le*, *guo*, *zai* and *zhe* in L2 Chinese, finding that drawing up a simplistic order of acquisition for these markers is not feasible because L2 learners experience specific problems associated with each aspect marker at different stages. Low-intermediate learners exhibit a strong L1 effect and incorrectly accept the perfective verb-final *le* in all situation types due to their misperception of *le* as a grammatical marker for the past tense in L1 English. Similar conclusions were reached by Wen (1995), Teng (1999), Yang et al. (1999) and Ma (2006). Jin (2009) also found that as learners' L2 proficiency advances, their interlanguage aspectual system gradually approximates the target, although not along the path predicted by Andersen and Shirai's (1996) Aspect Hypothesis. A conclusion is that restructuring the aspectual system may result from an interaction of L1 interference, exposure to the input, and frequency and semantic complexity of the aspect markers.

Other studies of aspect markers found that L2 Chinese learners, particularly those at low proficiency levels, tend to undersupply *le* in their oral narratives, omitting it in certain obligatory contexts (Yang et al., 2000; Duff and Li, 2002). Telicity plays a significant role in determining the frequency and accuracy of the use of *le* so that it is combined more often and more accurately with achievements than with activities (Fan, 2005).

4 Wh-words

In Chinese, a *wh*-word remains in its base-generated position. However, it can undergo topicalization on the condition that the *wh*-question where it occurs is linked with discourse and that the *wh*-topic meets various syntactic constraints. Dugarova (2010) examined English and Russian speakers' L2 Chinese and found that *wh*-topicalization, which involves a syntax–discourse interface, can be acquired by L2 Chinese learners who have established topicalization in their L2. She also found that not all types of *wh*-questions are equally acquirable in L2 Chinese, with an internal mechanism of *wh*-words and persistent L1 transfer causing residual optionality.

Chinese *wh*-words can be used as existential polarity words (EPW), with lexical words (e.g. negators) and functional morphemes (e.g. the yes–no question particle *ma*) acting as licensors. In an empirical study, Yuan (2010) found that English and Japanese speakers' judgments of Chinese sentences with *wh*-EPWs are indeterminate, and that the semantics–syntax interface is only established between EPWs and the lexical-word licensors but not the functional-morpheme licensors, even at the advanced stage. In this case, the data are consistent with Sorace and Filiaci's (2006) hypothesis that interfaces cannot be fully established in the interlanguage. Yuan concluded that L2 acquisition of interfaces is dependent on a number of variables, including the categorical nature of elements involved in the interface relationships, the

status of these elements in the target languages, the input that learners are exposed to, and cross-linguistic influences.

Chinese and Japanese are both *wh*-in-situ languages, but the lexical features of *wh*-words in the two languages are different. The *wh*-particle *ne* in Chinese values C^0 with [+Q, +wh] features, licensing the *wh*-word in situ and thus no *wh*-movement is necessary. In contrast, the question particles *ka* and *no* in Japanese value the ambiguous C^0 as [+Q] and are thus unable to specify whether questions are [+yes/no] or [+wh]. Yuan (2007) found that the lexical morphological feature [+wh] of the particle *ne* is permanently deficient in Japanese speakers' L2 Chinese, which leads to variability in their L2 Chinese *wh*-questions. He argued that differences in the seemingly identical features of the *wh*-words in L1 and L2 are responsible for variability and thus proposed a lexical morphological feature deficit account, suggesting that the morphology–syntax interface is a source of variability in L2 acquisition. An implication is that fossilization may result from selection by the computational system of an L2 lexical item with deficient morphological features.

5 Causatives and resultative verb compounds

Chinese predicates express states and activities, which are atelic and unable to denote achievements or accomplishments. Therefore, a causative event as an event of accomplishment cannot be realized by a single verb. Accordingly, psych verbs like *xingfen* ('excite') and *shiwang* ('disappoint') cannot take an experiencer NP as object, unlike their counterparts in English. For the same reason, Chinese unaccusative verbs (e.g. *duan* 'break') are not involved in causative alternation and therefore cannot select an object NP. In this case, resultative verb compounds (RVCs) (e.g. *da-duan* 'hit-break'), which consist of an activity predicate and a result predicate, must be used for a telic event.

Zhao (2006) studied L2 acquisition of decausativeness of Chinese psych verbs and unaccusative verbs by English-, Japanese- and Korean-speaking learners, finding that L2 learners tend to reject the incorrect object-experiencer psych verbs, but accept the incorrect causative alternating unaccusative verbs, irrespective of their L1s. This implies once again that L1 transfer is not inevitable and that other factors like the thematic hierarchy (Grimshaw, 1990) function in the development of L2 grammars, swamping the role of L1 transfer.

In his study of L2 Chinese RVCs, Zhao (2006) found that L2 learners can have native-like representations on the prototypical RVC where the activity predicate is transitive and the result predicate is unaccusative, but show uncertainty or optionality on the other types, even at advanced proficiency levels, whether their L1s are English, Japanese or Korean. Zhao attributed this to L2 learners' difficulty with theta-roles assignment in non-prototypical RVCs. Although an L1 effect is not evident in the syntactic structure of L2 Chinese RVCs, it is found in the thematic structure so that English and Japanese speakers interpret ambiguous RVCs in the way their counterparts are interpreted in their respective L1s, although all these learners have native-like syntactic representation of these RVCs. This indicates that there is an asymmetry between the reconstruction of the syntactic structure and that of the thematic structure in L2 Chinese, as Yuan and Zhao (2011) further suggest (also see Liang, 2006). The implications are that an L2 structure is not acquired once and for all, and that syntactic and

thematic structures need to be examined separately in L2 research because their reconstruction does not develop uniformly.

6 Topic structure, *bei*-structure and *ba*-structure

Topic structures in Chinese can be roughly classified into two categories: derived topics and base-generated topics. Studies of L2 Chinese topic structure attempt to answer two questions: (1) whether the topic structure is acquirable, and (2) whether L1 typology, i.e. topic-prominent vs. subject-prominent, has any effect on L2 Chinese.

In studies of English (subject-prominent) speakers' L2 Chinese, Yuan (1995) found that base-generated topics are acquired very late, probably because L2 learners mistake Chinese sentences as subject-prominent due to incorrect parsing strategy. Jin (1994) found that L2 Chinese grammar is dominated by the subject-prominent feature transferred from L1 at the initial stage (see Jiang, 2006). Gradually, learners move on to topic-prominence due to positive evidence and growing awareness of typological differences between L1 and L2 (see Xiao, 2004).

Comparative studies of learners from typologically different L1s found that speakers of Japanese (which is both topic-prominent and subject-prominent) do not show any advantage over English-speaking learners of Chinese (Zhao, 2001), and that learners at the initial stage analyse Chinese sentences on the basis of SVO order irrespective of the typology of their L1s (Li, 1996; Cao et al., 2006), in the same way that Chinese children acquire their L1 Chinese in which canonical SVO sentences are preferred (Chen, 2009). These findings contrast with studies from the 1980s (e.g. Huebner, 1983; Dittmar, 1984), which indicated that L2 grammars start from topic structures.

The *bei* and *ba* structures are two of the most often used constructions in Chinese: *bei* is a passive marker and heads a passive structure, while *ba* selects a patient/theme NP and places it in a preverbal position. What the two structures have in common is a telicity requirement for the event they depict. Accordingly only certain types of VP can enter the two structures.

Huang and Yang (2004) and Huang et al. (2007) investigated L2 acquisition of the two structures by English-speaking learners and found that telicity is properly represented in L2 Chinese, consistent with the Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen and Shirai, 1996). They also show that L2 learners' difficulty with the two structures lies in their uncertainty as to whether a certain type of verb can be used in the structures. An L1 effect is evident in that learners equate the *bei*-structure with the English passive voice. Overgeneralization and simplification coexist in the L2 *ba*-structure. On the one hand learners use other verbs in the structure without considering the telicity requirement, while on the other hand they incorrectly simplify the structure as having an SOV order (see Jin, 1992; Du, 2004). These findings indicate that L2 learners tend to use properties of corresponding L1 structures before acquiring features of the target structures, probably as a learning strategy.

7 Relative clauses

With regard to relative clauses (RCs), Chinese and Korean are head-final whereas English is head-initial. Due to the similarity, it was predicted that Korean-speaking

learners would be in an advantageous position in the L2 acquisition of Chinese RCs. However, such an assumption was not borne out in Hu and Liu's (2007) empirical study. On the contrary, the reverse was observed where the English speakers are able to distinguish between target-like and non-target-like RCs earlier than the Korean speakers. Hu and Liu (2007) argued that the superficial dissimilarity in head direction between Chinese and English leads to a rapid restructuring of English-speaking learners' L2 grammars, while the surface similarity between Korean and Chinese makes such restructuring harder for Korean-speaking learners. They concluded, therefore, that where L1 and L2 share salient properties such as head direction in Korean and Chinese RCs, restructuring of the less salient features encoded in functional categories takes longer and may be persistently problematic.

Hu and Liu's (2007) finding seems to be in conformity with that in Yuan and Zhao's (2005) study of the L2 acquisition of Chinese resumptive pronouns (RPs). RPs are not allowed in English but are allowed in indirect object and genitive positions in Chinese and in direct object, indirect object and genitive positions in Palestinian Arabic. Since RPs are allowed in both Palestinian Arabic and Chinese, it was hypothesized that the L2 acquisition of Chinese RPs would be easier for Palestinian Arabic speakers than for English speakers. However, results indicate that English-speaking learners are more accurate than Palestinian Arabic speakers in rejecting non-target-like RPs and in accepting target-like RPs, contrary to the prediction based on L1 properties. According to Yuan and Zhao (2005), positive evidence in the Chinese input helps English-speaking learners to arrive at a superset Chinese grammar which allows both gaps and RPs, from the subset English grammar which allows gaps only. Since Palestinian Arabic and Chinese are similar with regard to RPs but dissimilar in some positions where RPs occur, Palestinian Arabic speakers either overgeneralize or show optionality on Chinese RPs. The two studies reviewed above seem to imply that L1–L2 similarities may not necessarily facilitate L2 acquisition and that distinctions between the L1 and target languages may not be inevitable obstacles to L2 acquisition.

In another study, Xu (2009) conducted experiments to test the relative degrees of difficulty in L2 learners' acquisition of different types of Chinese RCs where subject, direct object, indirect object and object of preposition are relativized respectively. The results are consistent with the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy proposed by Keenan and Comrie (1977).

III L2 Chinese acquisition within the framework of SLA

I Problems in SLA from the perspective of L2 Chinese acquisition

SLA research covers a wide range of issues, but many L2 researchers have concerns about the initial state, final state and variability of L2 grammars (see White, 2000). L2 Chinese studies can shed new light on these issues.

A question concerning the initial state is whether L2 starts from L1, and if it does what transfers from L1 to L2. There is little consensus on this issue in the SLA literature, and answers found in L2 Chinese studies are also very diverse. For example, an L1 effect was found in the long-distance binding of *ziji* in Japanese-speaking learners' L2 Chinese

(Yuan, 1998) and in the thematic structure of English and Japanese speakers' L2 Chinese RVCs (Zhao, 2006). It was also found in the unaccusative/unergative distinction (Yuan, 1999; Shan, 2006), in the aspect marker *le* (e.g. Jin, 2009) and in the telicity requirement on the *bei* and *ba* structures (Huang and Yang, 2004; Huang et al., 2007) in English–Chinese interlanguages. However, no L1 effect was found in thematic verb-raising in English, French and German speakers' L2 Chinese (Yuan, 2001, 2004).

What makes the problem more complicated is that L1–L2 similarities do not always facilitate but can sometimes hinder L2 acquisition, as evidenced in the acquisition of L2 Chinese relative clauses in Hu and Liu (2007) and *wh*-words in Yuan (2007). Therefore, we cannot predict an L1 effect simply on the basis of similarities in lexical or syntactic features between the two languages. Rather, we need to scrutinize these features in the learners' L1s, in the target language, and in the interlanguage, comparing categorically similar units in fine detail.

A question concerning the final state is whether L2 learners can reach native-like competence in the target language. L2 Chinese studies give a positive answer to this question, at least in some respects. They even suggest that initial state L2 grammars can have native-like representations (Yuan, 2001, 2004), implying that L2 grammars can be set to the target value from the very start so that the initial and final states overlap. This conclusion goes against proposals based on the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis (Schwartz and Sprouse, 1996), Full Transfer/No Access Hypothesis (Clahsen and Hong, 1995), Valueless Features Hypothesis (Eubank, 1996), Minimal Trees Hypothesis (Vainikka and Young-Scholten, 1996) and proposals of the non-nativeness of interlanguages supported by previous empirical research findings (e.g. Zobl, 1989).

In addition, the findings in L2 Chinese studies problematize the issue of being native-like: can we say an L2 grammar is native-like if it has a native-like syntactic representation but non-native-like semantic properties, as found in L2 Chinese RVCs (Zhao, 2006)? If the answer to this question is 'yes', how can we separate syntactic features and semantic properties in a single construction? If the answer is 'no', how can we be sure that native-like representation is ever achievable? We can base our claim only on observable syntactic structures but not on unobservable thematic structures in L2 grammars.

Variability is a characteristic of L2 grammars and may result from failure of parameter resetting (Eubank, 1995), L1 influence (Selinker and Lakshmanan, 1993), poor quality of input (Gass and Lakshmanan, 1991), failed functional features (Hawkins and Chan, 1997), failure of mapping from feature to form (Lardiere, 1998) or vulnerability of interfaces (Sorace and Filiaci, 2006). L2 Chinese studies indicate that variability or fossilization could also result from failure of retreat from overgeneralization or negative transfer (Yuan and Zhao, 2005), failure in acquisition of functional morphology (Yuan, 2010), or failure in theta-role assignment (Zhao, 2006).

From the review above, we can see that L2 Chinese acquisition research has contributed to the understanding of SLA in three ways. First, study of L2 Chinese has verified some hypotheses in the literature. Second, it has suggested modifications to some hypotheses for SLA. Third, findings in L2 Chinese studies have presented challenges to L2 theories and models which are based on L2 acquisition of European languages, such as the Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen and Shirai, 1996) and the Interface Hypothesis

(Sorace and Filiaci, 2006), because different L2 Chinese studies arrived at different conclusions concerning these hypotheses.

To compare conclusions of L2 Chinese studies and those drawn from L2 acquisition of other languages, it is necessary for us to look into the characteristics of Chinese in detail.

One of the most striking characteristics of Chinese is its paucity of overt morphological markings. In the research reviewed above, this characteristic differentiates Chinese from all the learners' L1s. As a result, learners from these L1s cannot rely on affixes, case or tense markers to represent grammatical relations in L2 Chinese, and may simply turn to word order (see Jin, 1994) or the thematic hierarchy (see Zhao, 2006), or simplistically equate a Chinese grammatical form to an L1 form (see Jin, 2009).

Other possible factors that may hinder L2 Chinese acquisition can be related to discourse or potentially misleading input. Chinese is a discourse-oriented language and, consequently, a sentence that is unacceptable as an isolated utterance may be acceptable in a context, as shown in (2).

2. a) *na shou ge bei ta chang le.
 that CLASSIFIER song *bei* he sing PARTICLE
 b) wo xiang chang na shou ge, keshi bei ta chang le.
 I want to sing that CLASSIFIER song but *bei* he sing PARTICLE

Example (2a) is ill-formed because it violates the telicity requirement on the *bei*-structure. In a context such as that in (2b), however, it becomes acceptable probably because the focus of the sentence shifts from the verb *chang* 'sing' to the adjacent agent *ta* 'he'. On the basis of input like (2b), L2 learners may be uncertain how to classify the verb *chang* 'sing', as Huang et al. (2007) suggested.

Another type of misleading evidence comes from idioms where classical Chinese grammar is preserved. For example, modern Chinese does not allow lexical causatives (for types of causatives, see Comrie, 1976), but classical Chinese does. Idioms with lexical causatives that are widely used in modern Chinese add to the difficulty of acquiring the unaccusativity of unaccusatives (see Zhao, 2006).

These are only some characteristics of Chinese that may affect L2 Chinese acquisition. We need to examine these characteristics closely in order to provide adequate explanations to L2 Chinese grammars.¹

2 Problems and future prospects of L2 Chinese acquisition research

Study of Chinese as an L2 emerged as a major focus of the Beijing Languages and Culture University, which was established as Beijing Languages Institute in 1962, but currently hundreds of higher education institutions in China provide Chinese programs for international students. Major journals where L2 Chinese research is published include *Shijie Hanyu Jiaoxue* (*World Chinese Teaching*), *Hanyu Xuexi* (*Chinese Language Learning*) and *Yuyan Jiaoxue Yu Yanjiu* (*Language Teaching and Research*) published in Mainland China, and *Hua Yuwen Jiaoxue Yanjiu* (*Chinese Language Teaching and Research*) published in Taiwan. Most articles in these journals are studies of different

aspects of Chinese like syntax and pedagogically-oriented studies. Beijing Language and Culture University and Jinan University in Guangzhou have developed two corpora of L2 learner language of Chinese. Of the numerous L2 Chinese research centres, the Center for Studies of Chinese as a Second Language based in Beijing Language and Culture University and the Graduate Institute of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language based in Taiwan Normal University are two most prominent ones.

Although L2 Chinese teaching has had decades of history and in spite of the achievements made so far in this respect, L2 Chinese acquisition is a relatively new area of study, as we can see from the research reviewed above. Several aspects need more attention in future studies.

The first aspect is the limited number of L1s of the L2 Chinese learners. Until now, L2 learners with English, Korean and Japanese as their L1s have received the most attention, and the total number of L1s involved in L2 Chinese studies reviewed in this article is about 10. Although they represent different language families, learners' L1 backgrounds are on the whole typologically restricted. This potentially weakens the universality and validity of any conclusion drawn from the L2 Chinese studies.

The second aspect is the relevance of L2 Chinese studies to SLA in general. The research reviewed above is far from comprehensive.² Some L2 Chinese research (e.g. Xiao and Zhou, 2009), which has not been reviewed in this article due to lack of space, is descriptive either of learners' errors or of the order of acquisition of a linguistic phenomenon, without reference to the relevant SLA literature. This could be a consequence of the isolation and fragmentation that the field of L2 Chinese teaching has frequently suffered from as a result of language barriers or lack of academic resources (Linnell, 2001). Although description and hypothesis generation are fundamental, they are not enough if L2 Chinese studies are to play a role in SLA theory construction. It is thus necessary to place these studies within the theoretical framework of SLA so that they may contribute to the discipline through verification, modification or falsification, and in doing so push the discipline forward.

The third aspect concerns data and research methods. Until now most research has been cross-sectional. Longitudinal studies are rare, probably because they are time-consuming. However, longitudinal studies complement cross-sectional studies and are indispensable to understanding the natural process of L2 acquisition. With regard to data collection, questionnaires and interlanguage corpora are both used in L2 Chinese studies. A problem with questionnaire-based research is that the number of participants is usually small (for example, there are 8 English-speaking and 9 French-speaking participants in Chen, 1995), and thus only tentative conclusions can be reached. A problem with most corpus-based studies is that learners' L1s are not differentiated (e.g. Sun, 2002), a fact which obfuscates cross-linguistic influence in the data.

In view of these problems, there might be three future directions for L2 Chinese studies: to examine learners of L2 Chinese with a greater variety of L1s, to explore problems in L2 Chinese acquisition within the framework of SLA research in general, and to conduct longitudinal as well as cross-sectional studies. All these lead to the same goal: to draw well-grounded conclusions, and to make theoretical contributions to the discipline of SLA.

IV Conclusion

In this article, I reviewed research on L2 Chinese acquisition and examined the findings in the light of SLA in general. Then I pointed out problems facing this area and prospects for future development.

As the idiom goes, we cannot see the wood for the trees. This could be a reminder to L2 Chinese researchers that they should keep the whole discipline in mind. L2 acquisition of Chinese, as L2 acquisition of any other language, is a tree in the wood of SLA. It has contributed to and will continue to enrich the discipline with more research and new findings.

Notes

- 1 As an anonymous *Second Language Research* reviewer points out, apart from these characteristics, we need to look into the design and methodology adopted in the L2 Chinese studies reviewed in this article to see to what extent they are reliable. In other words, research methodology used in these studies may be a factor that brings out conclusions different from those based on L2 studies of European languages.
- 2 The main purpose of the article is to see to what extent L2 Chinese acquisition can contribute to the broader discipline of SLA. Therefore, studies reviewed are those in connection with findings based on L2 acquisition of other languages. Most of these studies were published in well-established journals, or were theses written in English.

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