An Investigation of How Mandarin Speakers Learn Conditional Sentences

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Abstract: This essay investigates the challenges encountered by junior high school students in China when learning Conditional Sentences in English, particularly focusing on the difficulties stemming from L1 transfer and form-focused teaching. Drawing on previous research that highlights the complexities of Conditional Sentences, the study identifies two primary learning difficulties: the back-shifting of tenses and the oversimplification of teaching conditional sentences. A qualitative analysis of these challenges reveals that L1 interference significantly contributes to errors in Conditional Sentence usage. Furthermore, the essay discusses the implications of form-focused teaching, which may hinder the natural acquisition of grammar. To address these issues, two pedagogical strategies are proposed: adopting the sociocultural approach in teaching and obeying the developmental sequence and mastering the prerequisite knowledge before learning conditional sentences.

Keywords: conditional sentences, L1 transfer, form-focused teaching, back-shifting; grammar, junior high school students

1. Introduction

Conditional Sentences are statements describing hypothetical or known factors in the if clause and their consequences in the result clause. There are three semantic relationships in Conditional Sentences, namely factual, hypothetical and counterfactual[1]. Each type of the Conditional Sentences has different forms, time-tense relationships and meanings, which makes it difficult for second language learners to acquire the grammar knowledge[2]. Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman [3] also demonstrate that the complexities of syntactic and semantics are difficult for ESL/EFL learners to acquire Conditional Sentences. For learners whose first language is Mandarin, Conditional Sentences are also one of the most challenging grammars to acquire.

There has been adequate research shedding light on the analysis of acquiring Conditional Sentences for L2 learners [4][5]. Laksana conducted descriptive qualitative research among the eleventh-grade students and found that lacking enough vocabulary and a negative attitude towards learning grammar are the main reasons leading to the learning difficulties. Hammadi did a comparative study of Conditional Sentences between English and Arabic and found that the back-shifting of tenses in Conditionals is the main obstacle for L2 learners. However, there is still a lack of research to date that investigates the difficulties of learning Conditional Sentences for Mandarin speakers, especially for the new learners of Conditional Sentences in Junior High Schools. Thus, based on the previous findings, this essay aims to explore the difficulties and struggles of learning Conditional Sentences for junior high school students in China and raise pedagogical suggestions to help overcome the challenges.

This essay will be divided into 5 sections. Section 1 is an introduction to Conditional Sentences with brief summaries

of previous research findings. Based on the discussion of previous research, a research gap is also defined. Section 2 is a discussion of two learning difficulties, namely the back-shifting tenses in English Conditionals and form-focused teaching. Section 3 analyzes the two difficulties from a theoretical perspective, which are L1 transfer effects and the acquisition order of Conditional Sentences. Section 4 provides two pedagogical suggestions to help students overcome the difficulties of learning Conditional Sentences. Section 5 concludes the essay.

2. Difficulties Encountered by Learners

2.1 Back-shifting in tenses

Back-shifting in tenses means "the use of a morphologically past tense with present (or future) time reference and of pluperfect with past time reference" [6]. In other words, it means the change of the tense from present to past or past to past perfect. For example, in Type 2 Hypothetical Conditionals, "*If I could win the lottery, I would buy a big house*". As this is a hypothetical Conditional Sentence for the *present* situation, the use of "*could win*" and "*would buy*" are seen as back-shifting in tenses from present to past. For learners whose L1 does not have back-shifting tenses features, processing back-shifting might require more cognitive efforts [7]. For the junior high school students, back-shifting is challenging because Mandarin does not have such a grammar rule.

Moreover, L2 learners are confused with the back-shifting tenses as the past tense in the *if- clause* does not indicate the events that happened in the past but the possibility for the conditions to be fulfilled. For example, "If I had money, I would donate some to the charity". In this sentence, "had" does not mean past tense but represents a low probability for the condition to be fulfilled. As students have found the form of back-shifting cognitively demanding, understanding the meaning of back-shifting is more challenging for them.

2.2 Oversimplified teaching of Conditional Sentences

Maule[8] suggests that it is difficult for learners to demarcate three types of Conditional Sentences when the teacher explains the grammar in an oversimplified way. It means that teaching students only the *form* of Conditional Sentences provides insufficient input for them to understand and use Conditional Sentences. To improve teaching efficiency, some teachers choose to teach three types of Conditional Sentences within several classes by only introducing the forms *without meanings* to the students. In this way, students learn Conditional Sentences by memorizing the forms such as "If I + past tense…, I would/should/could"; but they could not appreciate the *meanings* of this structure (i.e. low probability of the event). As a result, they may find it difficult to understand why past tense is used in a present situation. Thus, the oversimplified approach to teaching grammar makes it more difficult for learners to acquire Conditional Sentences.

3. Theoretical Issues

3.1 The Influence of L1

The two challenges mentioned previously are closely related to the influence of L1 to some extent. Besides the back-shifting tense which is unique to English, as Chinese Conditional Sentences do not have various verb-tense patterns to convey different degrees of predictability such as factual, hypothetical or counterfactual. Unlike English, there are different grammatical characteristics of verbs such as *do/did/done* to indicate the time reference and truth-value of events. For example (see **Table 1**), present tense is used in Type 1 Conditionals to indicate that the condition is highly likely to be fulfilled while in Type 2 Conditionals, past tense is used to suggest that there is little possibility as in **Table 1 Example 2** indicates that I could never be you.

Table 1. Comparison between Type 1 and Type 2 Conditionals in English

Type of Conditional Sentences	Examples
Type 1 – High Possibility	If it *rains* tomorrow, I will bring an umbrella.
Type 2 – Low Possibility	If I *were* you, I would donate the money.

In Mandarin, as there is only one type of verb in Chinese, the hearer does not infer the degree of hypotheticality from the use of verb-tense patterns but from the following three linguistic devices , which are temporal references, aspect markers and rhetorical interrogatives. Temporal reference words which indicate time such as *zao* and *zuotian* are the most commonly used linguistic devices in Chinese Conditionals. The sentence "zuo tian, ni yao shi yue ta de hua, ta hui qu de (昨天，你要是约他的话，他会去的)" can be translated into English as "If you had invited him, he would have gone."

From the example, it can be seen that the translation of "*zao*" is missing in English Conditionals. This is because time has been indicated by the verb-tense patterns "*had helped*" and "*would have gone*", temporal references are rarely used in English Conditionals. Moreover, aspect markers such as "*le*" which suggest the completion of actions are also hardly used in English Conditionals. The sentence "shi wu yao shi lai *le*, wo *zao* jiu tong zhi ni le(食物要是来了，我早就告诉你了)" can be translated into "If the goods had arrived, I would have notified you long ago". In this sentence, aspect markers *le* and temporal references *zao* are unique in Mandarin.

Another linguistic device unique to Chinese Conditionals is the use of rhetorical interrogatives. The sentence "*yao bu shi* wo de bang zhu, ta hui you jin tian? (要不是我的帮助，他会有今天的成就)can be translated into "If it were not my help, could he achieve what he has now". Obviously, the direct translation to English does not sound native, which indicates that rhetorical interrogatives are hardly used in English Conditionals.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that English Conditional Sentences rely on the verb-tense patterns while Chinese conditionals depend on three unique linguistic devices such as temporal references, aspect markers, and rhetoric interrogatives. According to Serlinker's [9] language transfer theory, negative transfer of L1 knowledge may interfere with the acquisition of L2. When Mandarin speakers convey meanings in English Conditional Sentences, they need to overcome the influence of Chinese conditionals and process the complex verb-tense patterns and back-shifting at the same time, which increases many difficulties to acquire Conditional Sentences.

3.2 Acquisition Order of Conditional Sentences

O'Grady[10] proposes the Developmental Law that X cannot be learned before Y, if X is more complex than Y. Based on this Developmental Law, Chou conducts a study with 20 native speakers and 36 Chinese speakers to investigate their acquisition order of Conditional Sentences. His research findings align with O'grady's Developmental Law, which indicates that the sequence of learning Conditional Sentences should be followed by 1) Factual Conditionals; 2) Hypothetical Conditionals; 3) Counterfactual Conditionals. This is because in Factual Conditionals, only present and future tenses are used, which are the easiest tenses for Mandarin learners to acquire. In Hypothetical Conditionals, past tense is required in the *if-clause*. In Counterfactual Conditionals, past perfect tense, present perfect tense and different modal verbs should be used and thus it is the most difficult type of Conditional Sentence to learn[11] [12].

Based on the discussion of L1 transfer effects and the sequences of learning Conditional Sentences, Zobl[13] suggests that L1 transfer does not change the normal language developmental sequences, but the pace of passage through the developmental sequences might be modified. According to Zobl, there are three phenomena that may happen in the interlanguage development process of learning Conditional Sentences. First, when the learners prepare to proceed to the next developmental stage, a delay might occur in the restructuring of the language forms. For example, when students start

to learn Counterfactual Conditionals, they may use past tense instead of the correct form - past perfect tense. This is because their interlanguage system is still influenced by the last developmental stage - Factual Conditionals. Second, it is commonly seen that learners over-produce certain forms as they are influenced by the present developmental structures. Third, learners tend to use the form with the smallest rule change compared to what they are learning now. Based on the author's teaching experience with the junior high school students, when they learn Counterfactual Conditional which is the most difficult type of Conditional Sentences, most of them do not use past perfect tense but use past tense in the *if-clause*. Moreover, another acquisition order suggested by Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman is that before students learn Conditionals, they should develop a good understanding of the modal auxiliaries and the tense-aspect system in English as they are prerequisite knowledge of Conditional Sentences. Without a fully developed English linguistics system of modal auxiliaries and the tense-aspect system, it is even more difficult for Mandarin speakers to choose the correct forms of verbs in Conditional Sentences to express themselves.

4. Pedagogical Suggestions

4.1 Adopting the Sociocultural Approach in Teaching

The analysis above indicates that the complex verb-tense patterns and back-shift tenses in English Conditional Sentences are challenging to Mandarin speakers. It has also been found that the form-focused teaching approach has made the acquisition of Conditional Sentences even more difficult for senior high school students in China. Thus, it is suggested that language teachers design more interactive and authentic activities when teaching students conditionals. According to the sociocultural theory, meaning-making is the core of language learning and skills should be taught to students in an interactive and authentic context[14][15]. In light of the sociocultural theory, a teaching activity such as Conversational Shadowing can be employed to teach Conditional Sentences [16]. Conversational Shadowing is not the same as traditional Shadowing which is repeating and imitating the speeches and conversations. Rather, as shown in **Example 1**, it is a more authentic learning activity through which a speaker selects the most important information from the interlocutors and elaborates on the ideas to continue the conversation. Meanwhile, they focus on the specific grammar such as three types of Conditional Sentences throughout the activity.

Example 1: Conversational Shadowing Examples between Two Students

Student B: What would you do if you had lots of money?

Student A: **What would I do**? I think… If I have lots of money, I would buy a big house.

Student B: **If I have lots of money**?

In this conversation, Student A first selects the most important information from Student B and repeats it. Then Student B makes confirmation checks to remind that Student A has used the form wrongly. By using Conversational Shadowing, listeners can focus on the specific part of the conversation and practice Conditional Sentences in a meaning-focused context. Furthermore, learners are engaged in meaningful interaction with their peers in Conversational Shadowing, which can elicit more authentic responses.

4.2 Obey the Developmental Sequence and Master the Prerequisite Knowledge Before Learning Conditional Sentences

First, as discussed in the previous sections, the developmental sequence for learning Conditionals Sentences should be: Factual Conditionals, then Hypothetical Conditionals and lastly Counterfactual Conditionals. Based on the author's learning experience, teachers tend to teach Hypothetical Conditionals and Counterfactual Conditionals at the same time, which makes it hard for learners to demarcate these two types of Conditionals. Zobl proposes that when learners prepare to proceed to the next developmental stage, a delay might occur in the restructuring of the language forms. Thus, it is important that three types of Conditional Sentences are taught to students in different stages and more opportunities should

be provided to students to practice each type of Conditional Sentences.

Second, due to the back-shifting tenses and verb-tense patterns, it is important that learners master the prerequisite knowledge of Conditional Sentences before starting to learn Conditional Sentences. Thus, teachers should help students review the tense systems and raise students' consciousness of the back-shifting features in the English grammar system. Furthermore, a clear and thorough understanding of the English tense systems may reduce the negative L1 transfer influence and thus help students acquire Conditional Sentences in a shorter time.

5. Conclusion

Mandarin speakers find learning Conditions Sentences challenging due to the complex verb- tense patterns and back-shifting tenses. Moreover, the negative transfer from Mandarin to English makes it more difficult to acquire Conditional Sentences. To overcome those difficulties, it is suggested that language teachers design more meaning-focused activities such as Conversational Shadowing and obey the developmental sequence of Conditional Sentences in their teaching.

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