A dynamic approach to the development of lexicon and syntax in a second language
Chan, Belinda

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Chapter 1

Introduction
Chapter 1: Introduction

This book focuses on learning English in Taiwan, where English language teaching (ELT) shows a number of specific context characteristics. The first is that the focus of teaching is primarily on translation, and many of the characteristics of the traditional grammar translation methods are still visible. This means that there is little room for speaking and listening skills, since reading and writing (to a lesser extent) prevail. English teachers translate every word and sentence in the textbook into Chinese; students are trained to translate English into Chinese or Chinese into English for the purpose of learning. The medium of teaching is done primarily Chinese, even in English classes.

The second main characteristic is that although English is becoming increasingly important as a means of communication in trade, commerce and higher education (Feng, 2012; Nickerson, 2005), English input outside instructional settings is limited. Except for the English input from the school setting (eight hours per week), Taiwanese students are rarely exposed to any type of English input as most of the media resources (TV, advertisements) are dubbed in Chinese, and they are not aware of the potential benefits of using English resources from the Internet (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, online games). So beginner learners of English in Taiwan are seldom exposed to authentic English input within and outside the school setting.

As a result of the ELT style, students’ development of written and oral language is unbalanced. These beginner learners of English in Taiwan begin their written language earlier than their oral language as most of the English input is from the written form (reading textbook), and little of the English input is in spoken form. Many of these students are not able to speak at all, but are already able to write complete sentences.

The above characteristics of ELT in Taiwan have led to the main purpose of this dissertation: to investigate the development of different linguistic aspects in the conditions with and without extra English input in the written and oral form. Vocabulary assessments were collected three times over a period of eight months from a group of learners, and, in addition, written texts and oral recordings were collected from a smaller number of individuals, who were followed more intensely over a longer period of time.

Theoretically, the study is built on two interlinked approaches. The first is a usage-based approach to language development in which input and frequency are the major drivers (Ellis, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2002). Over time with the added exposure to English input, learners are expected to improve their English in a number of dimensions. In terms of vocabulary,
they may use more difficult and varied words; and in terms of grammatical structures, they may develop more varied, complex, and accurate sentences. Therefore, lexical complexity and syntactical complexity have been studied extensively in this dissertation as they are important indices of language development (Lu, 2010, 2012; Ortega, 2003; Ortega & Byrnes, 2008).

The second theoretical underpinning for the present dissertation is the Dynamic System Theory approach to second language learning (De Bot, 2008; De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007). In this approach, learning is seen as an iterative process in which input and internal self-organization are the main drivers of development. While the application of a DST approach to second language learning is a relatively recent development, it has been used widely in other disciplines, including child development and learning (Van Geert, 2004, 2008). The DST “toolbox” contains various analytical techniques that can also be used in the study of foreign language learning (Verspoor, de Bot, & Lowie, 2011). In particular, the dynamic modelling procedures are very promising for the study of language development. In this dissertation, various types of dynamic modelling analyses are applied to the longitudinal time series data.

As L2 learners become more proficient, they expand their degree of lexical or syntactical use in their productions, which means learners must possess a large number of vocabulary items and multi-word expressions. From a usage-based perspective, language learning is driven by input through which learners encounter the words and sentences. However, it is not easy for these beginner learners of English in Taiwan to develop lexical and syntactical complexity for the reasons mentioned: firstly, these learners do not have enough English exposure within or outside the school setting. Secondly, these learners only focus on the translation of L1-L2 or L2-L1 as a result of classroom instruction. Their vocabulary comprehension is limited to the translation. This also means that learners only know how to use the word in a limited number of contexts and thus do not develop a rich vocabulary.

The development of complexity can be observed through two types of output: written and oral productions. These two types of output develop differently in L1 and L2. In L1 acquisition, learners develop their oral language before beginning school and then later develop their written language in the school setting. Conversely, L2 acquisition does not necessarily begin with the oral language and then the written language. In the Taiwanese setting, the opposite seems to be true. As a result, some L2 learners are able to read and write but are not able to speak.
Chapter 1: Introduction

There are two foci of this dissertation. The first focus addressed in this dissertation is whether these beginner learners are able to enhance their knowledge of more complex words when naturally given extra English input (enhanced input)- as it increases the frequency of encountering the words and the varieties of contexts the words are used in. We may reasonably expect these learners to use more difficult words and to use words with other words in differing contexts when they are exposed to enhanced input. The second focus is to observe the development of the written and the oral language of these beginner learners in two related linguistic dimensions, lexical and syntactical.

The structure of this dissertation is as follows. After a chapter (Chapter 2) on the theoretical background of a dynamic system theory in second language acquisition, there are four empirical chapters. Chapters 3 and 4 report on the first focus of the dissertation: the effect of enhanced input on vocabulary learning. Chapters 5 and 6 report on the second focus of the dissertation: the comparison of L2 written and oral language in the lexical and syntactical dimensions.

The first study reported in Chapter 3 is a group study which focuses on investigating whether enhanced input may help the beginner learners of English in the acquisition of in-depth vocabulary knowledge, in particular the acquisition of lexical collocations and associations. The second, third, and fourth studies are longitudinal studies using the same written and oral data of the same participants. The second study concentrates on how enhanced input promotes the use of more difficult words in writing productions over time and has been accepted by *Culture and Cognition in Bilingualism*. The third study focuses on investigating the lexical development of written and oral language and has been published in *Actes des 16èmes Rencontres Jeunes Chercheurs en Sciences du Langage: Modèles et modélisation dans les sciences du langage* (*RJC 2013*). The fourth study investigates the syntactical development of written and spoken language and has been accepted by *Language Learning*. 