CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will review the related literature. In section 2.1 the concept of interlanguage will be described. Then in section 2.2 the SLA theories related to interlanguage studies and my theoretical framework developed from these theories will be introduced. Next in section 2.3 some empirical studies regarding the topic structures in L2 learners’ interlanguage will be reviewed. Finally in section 2.4 the summary of this chapter will be made.

2.1 The Concept of Interlanguage

The term “interlanguage” is coined by Selinker (1972), referring to both the internal system revealed by L2 learners at a single point in time and to the series of interconnected systems developed by L2 learners’ progress over time. Alternatively, it is termed “transitional competence” (Corder, 1967) or “approximative system” (Nemser, 1971). Thus interlanguage, as the term reveals, is independent of L1 and L2. It is a dynamic process which starts from L1 and proceeds all the way to L2.

In contrast to the contrastive analysis (CA) tradition in the 1960s, which attributes learners’ errors to differences between L1 and L2 and regards errors as old
L1 habits to be abandoned, the interlanguage position claims that learners’ errors reflect learners’ current rules formulated via a hypothesis-testing process on the basis of input data (Corder, 1981). Thus the concept of errors has been replaced by the term ‘dialect (p.15)’, in that every utterance of learners is rule-governed in their ‘dialect’.

Also in contrast to error analysis (EA) in the 1970s, which replaces CA and focuses only on the errors actually produced by L2 learners at a single point in time, the interlanguage position also accounts for the correct responses of L2 learners, their development over time, and their avoidance phenomena (Ellis, 1994).

According to Selinker (1972), three processes and three strategies are at work in the interlanguage system:

1. **Language transfer process**: Some rules of the interlanguage may be transferred from learners’ L1.

2. **Transfer of training process**: Some components of the interlanguage may be attributed to the special emphasis in the input made by the textbook or the teacher.

3. **L2 overgeneralization process**: The overgeneralization of L2 features.

4. **Strategies of second language learning**: The deliberate attempt of the learner to learn L2, such as rote repetition.

5. **Strategies of second language communication**: Learners adopt these strategies when they have difficulty in expressing their thoughts given the limited L2
knowledge.

6. **Strategies of simplification**: such as reducing two forms of present tenses to one.

Therefore, the source of interlanguage is not limited to L1 or L2. The interlanguage system itself is also responsible for the outcome. That is, the concept “interlanguage system” is similar to universal grammar (UG), or the language acquisition device (LAD) proposed by Chomsky (1986). This interlanguage system has to make sense of the input data and restructures itself whenever the input data is found to be in conflict with the current interlanguage grammar.

In sum, unlike CA and EA, the interlanguage position renders L2 learners a more active role of rule-creator, rather than a passive one of habit-carrier. Interlanguage as a whole is rule-governed, systematic, and is constantly changing accompanied by the exposure to input and the possible subsequent restructuring of the whole system.

Besides, not only correct and incorrect responses, but also production and underproduction are to be considered in analyzing learners’ interlanguage.

### 2.2 SLA Theories and My Theoretical Framework Developed from Them

The study of interlanguage in second language acquisition has been investigated mainly from three perspectives: L1 influence (Lado, 1957; Corder, 1981; Schachter and Rutherford, 1979; Rutherford, 1983; Selinker, 1983), the existence of UG (Chomsky, 1981, 1986; White, 1989a; Cook, 1985), and the subset principle (Wexler
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and Manzini, 1987; White, 1989b; Yip, 1995; Ayoun, 1996). In this section the three theories and the relevant empirical studies will be introduced in section 2.2.1, 2.2.2, and 2.2.3 respectively, and my theoretical framework developed from the three perspectives will be described in section 2.2.4.

2.2.1 L1 Influence

According to the behaviorist theories on which CA is based, the main difficulty of L2 learning is attributed to prior L1 knowledge (Brooks, 1960). The extent of difficulty lies in the similarities and difficulties between L1 and L2. That is, when L1 and L2 features are equal, L1 positive influence will take place and facilitate L2 learning, but when L1 and L2 features are different, L1 negative influence will occur and inhibit L2 learning. The positive influence comes in the form of positive transfer, and the negative one in the form of negative transfer or avoidance (of L2 difficult forms) or over-use (of L2 simple forms) (Ellis, 1994). Positive transfer is the facilitative effect of L1 in L2 learning revealed by learners’ fewer number of errors and their faster rate of learning (Ellis, 1994). Negative transfer, on the other hand, is the L1 properties shown in erroneous L2 production because of their deviance from the target forms (Selinker, 1983). Avoidance is the underproduction of L2 forms due to the perceived difficulty because of differences between learners’ L1 and the L2; over-use of L2 simple forms often results from avoidance of L2 difficult forms.
However, empirical studies have shown that the differences between L1 and L2 do not necessarily lead to difficulties in L2 learning, and in fact the similarities between them are problematic for learners; in addition, structural equivalence between L1 and L2 do not necessarily induce positive transfer either (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991). L1 is found to influence SLA in more complex ways. Namely, L1 transfer generally interacts with developmental processes, and is constrained by various kinds of linguistic markedness (pp.106-107).

As for developmental processes, L1 transfer is promoted when L1 features conform to developmental errors (Zobl, 1980), but is reduced when L1 features are strongly dissimilar to them. The promotion of L1 transfer is reflected in the delayed progress of a developmental stage, and the reduction of L1 transfer is shown in the higher speed of passage through a developmental sequence.

As for markedness, unmarked forms are more transferable than marked ones. There are two types of markedness—typological markedness (Zobl, 1984) and universal markedness (Chomsky, 1986). Typological markedness assumes that L1 must meet three criteria to be unmarked and thus transferrable—productive in L1, frequently used, and not be historically endangered of disappearing. On the other hand, universal markedness differentiates core rules and peripheral ones. The former
consists of marked (i.e., idiosyncratic rules) and the latter includes both marked and unmarked rules. Both the two types of markedness claim that unmarked forms are more likely to be transferred.

In sum, L1 influence is not solely attributable to the similarities and differences between L1 and L2. Both positive and negative effects of L1 influences can be better understood when developmental stage and markedness are also considered.

2.2.2 The Existence of UG

Universal grammar (UG), according to Chomsky (1986), is the language acquisition device available in L1 acquisition. This device consists of a set of principles regulating the choices of parameters, and is triggered by children’s exposure to the relevant L1 input. It ensures the uniform success of L1 acquisition. However, whether UG continues to operate in L2 acquisition has been a controversial issue until recently. There were mainly two main branches and three sub-branches of hypothesis about the existence of UG in L2 acquisition (White, 1989a), as outlined in Table 1.
Table 1: the hypotheses about UG in L2 acquisition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Sub-branches</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. UG is dead</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>UG is not active in L2 acquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1) Direct access</td>
<td>Initial state: L2; parameters can be reset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to UG</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Indirect access</td>
<td>Initial state: L1; parameters can be reset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to UG</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. UG is not dead</td>
<td>(3) Partial access</td>
<td>Only the part of UG which is exemplified in L1 is active;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to UG</td>
<td>L1 parameters <strong>cannot be reset</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If UG is dead or partially dead, L2 learners will not be able to reset the parameters for the L2. By contrast, both the direct and indirect accesses to UG enable learners to reset L1 parameter for L2. The access to UG is indirect if it proceeds with the initial L1 influence, and is then followed by possible parameter resetting. On the other hand, the access to UG is direct if L2 learners start with the L2 input, without L1 influence.

Empirical studies have shown that the nature of input is important to trigger UG in L2 acquisition (Lightbown and Spada, 1990; White, 1991; White et al, 1991). Therefore, it has been proposed that the positive input should be enhanced in order to make it more salient (White et al, 1991; Sharwood Smith, 1993).

In sum, UG is undoubtedly available to L1 acquisition, but its role in interlanguage development is closely related to the nature of L2 input.

**2.2.3 The Subset Principle**

The UG hypothesis only mentions the setting of parameters, but it does not mention how to guide the direction of parameter setting. The subset principle, on the
other hand, is a learning principle guiding the way parameters are to be set (Ayoun, 1996). According to Wexler & Manzini (1987), the subset principle functions when two grammars are in a superset-subset relationship. This principle is motivated by an attempt to solve the learnability problem found in L1 acquisition—overgeneralized grammar—and it interacts with UG in guiding the direction of parameter resetting (White, 1989a; Yip, 1995).

This learning principle is based on the assumption that acquisition can be achieved through 'positive evidence only' and denies the existence of negative evidence. The operation of it is to avoid overgeneralization and wild grammar by choosing the more restricted parameter setting first and then generalize it to the target parameter setting, as illustrated in figure 1.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1**: the subset principle in L1 acquisition

The subset principle can also apply in L2 acquisition where L1 parameter setting forms a subset of L2 setting as a superset, but problems arises when the L1 parameter setting forms a superset of L2 setting as a subset. This causes a serious learnability problem since the L1 parameter setting cannot be restricted to the narrower setting
only by positive evidence, as shown in figure 2.

![Figure 2: the subset principle in L2 acquisition](image)

Figure 2: the subset principle in L2 acquisition

In the absence of negative evidence, the original parameter setting A (L1) seems unable to be reset for B (L2). In order to solve this problem, Wexler & Manzini (1987) propose that learners will map L2 input data with the smallest value compatible with it; Yip (1995), on the other hand, argues for another learning principle: preemption, i.e., uniqueness—one-to-one mapping of form and function.

However, empirical evidence has shown that the subset principle does not successfully explain L2 acquisition (White, 1989b; Rutherford, 1989; Finer & Broselov, 1986)¹, and indeed negative evidence exists in L2 formal instruction and will trigger the process of L1 parameter resetting for the L2 (White, 1991). Thus, there is no need to stipulate either Wexler and Manzini’s L2 value mapping or Yip’s preemption.

In sum, the subset principle which is based on ‘positive evidence only’ hypothesis successfully explains L1 acquisition, but it cannot explain L2 acquisition.

¹ Both White (1989b) and Rutherford (1989) found that the predictions of the subset principle does not work since their subjects cannot reset the parameter setting of the L1 superset, and L1 transfer better explains these cases.
when L1 already forms a superset of L2, resulting in learnability problems—L1 transfer. Thus negative evidence has its role in solving such learnability problems.

2.2.4 My Theoretical Framework of the Operation of Interlanguage System

My theoretical framework of the operation of interlanguage system is developed from the above three SLA perspectives. The perspective from L1 influence states that L1 influence does not necessarily result in L1 transfer, and that markedness and developmental stages should be considered in order to determine the effect of L1 influence; the perspective from UG claims that access to UG in L2 acquisition is largely determined by the nature of input; the perspective from the subset principle infers that when L1 generates the superset of L2, learnability problem in the form of L1 transfer will occur.

Based on these three SLA perspectives, my theoretical framework of the operation of interlanguage system is formulated, as illustrated in figure 3 and hypotheses 1-2.

![Figure 3: my theoretical framework of the operation of interlanguage system](image-url)
Hypothesis:
1. L1 transfer occurs if any of the following conditions is met:
   a. L1 features are unmarked
   b. L1 features overlap with the outputs of a developmental stage
   c. L1 features form a superset of L2 subset
? the more conditions the L1 features match, the more transferable these features are.
2. Direct input (explicit triggering data for parameter resetting) and indirect input
   (implicit triggering data) determine the relative difficulty of incorporating L2 inputs
   into the interlanguage system. That is, direct inputs enter the interlanguage system
   more easily than do indirect ones. L2 inputs can be made more direct (explicit) via
   input enhancement or other techniques. Only when the L2 inputs enter the
   interlanguage system will UG operate in L2 acquisition

   This framework assumes that the interlanguage system consists of two major

processes-- L1 transfer and UG. However, some conditions must be met before the
two processes actually operate. For L1 transfer to occur, there are three possible
conditions. The more the matched conditions, the more likely L1 transfer will happen.

On the other hand, for UG to take place, the nature of input is important. The more
direct (explicit) the input is, the more probable it will enters the interlanguage system.

2.3 Empirical Studies of the Topic Structures in Interlanguage

   The topic structure (i.e., topic-comment structure) in L2 learners’ interlanguage
has been investigated based on the three theories discussed above—L1 influence, the
existence of UG, and the subset principle. I will review the three sets of empirical
studies in section 2.3.1, 2.3.2, and 2.3.3, respectively.

2.3.1 L1 Influence on Topic Structures

   There are five studies investigating the topic structures in L2 learners’
interlanguage in terms of L1 influence—Zhang’s (1987), Schachter and Rutherford’s (1979), Rutherford’s (1983), Green’s (1996), and Xiao’s (1998) studies. Among these studies, most of the L2 setting is ESL (i.e., English as a Second Language), except for Zhang’s (1987) study, which is EFL (i.e., English as a Foreign Language). Their subjects range from school-age child learners (Xiao, 1998) and high school learners (Zhang, 1987) to adult learners (Schachter and Rutherford; Rutherford, 1983) or to advanced learners (Green, 1996). Except for Xiao’s longitudinal oral data, all of the data they elicit is cross-sectional written data. In terms of the subjects’ linguistic background, all the studies investigate Chinese learners, whose L1 is topic prominent. However, Schachter and Rutherford (1979) and Rutherford (1983) also investigate L2 learners from other linguistic backgrounds, including Japanese, Korean, Arabic, and Spanish.

Despite the methodological differences, they all conclude that the topic-comment structure in learners’ interlanguage is attributable to the transfer of L1, which is a topic prominent language. The examples of topic structures are shown in (1)-(5).

(1) *To do this/ must have patience.* (Zhang, 1987: 74) Topic comment

(2) *These ways/ almost can classify two types.* (Schachter and Rutherford, 1979, cited from Rutherford, 1983: 360) topic comment

(3) *A man choose a wife/ is a man’s business.* (Rutherford, 1983: 360) Topic comment

(4) *China people/ live conditions very poor.* (Green, 1996: 121) Topic Comment
However, as mentioned in the previous section, L1 transfer is promoted when it is identical to the feature typical of a developmental stage, causing a delay of developmental passage through this stage. In fact, there are empirical studies which have found that topic structures in learners’ interlanguage reveal a universal topic-comment stage in early stage of L2 acquisition (Huebner, 1983; Fuller and Gundel, 1987; Sasaki, 1990). Therefore, in the case of Chinese learners learning English, whose L1 is topic prominent, the L1 transfer of topic structures is promoted and the early stage of topic prominence may be prolonged.

In sum, transfer of L1 topic structures is found in the interlanguage of learners whose L1 are topic prominent languages. Since the topic-comment structure is also typical of a developmental stage, the transfer of it is enhanced and will cause a delay of passage through this developmental stage.

2.3.2 UG on Topic Structures

The set of studies which claim an early developmental stage of topic-comment structure (Huebner, 1983; Fuller and Gundel, 1987; Sasaki, 1990) show evidence of the operation of UG. Aside from these studies, there is also one study which discusses the effect of UG on the topic structure of the interlanguage—Yuan’s (1997) study, but focuses on parameter resetting.
These studies include both EFL (Sasaki, 1990; Yuan, 1997) and ESL settings (Huebner, 1983; Fuller and Gundel, 1987). They investigate high school (Sasaki, 1990) or adult learners (Huebner, 1983; Fuller and Gundel, 1987) or a combination of levels including middle school, university student, and university teachers (Yuan, 1997). The nature of their investigation is longitudinal (Huebner, 1983) or cross-sectional (Fuller and Gundel, 1987; Sasaki, 1990; Yuan, 1997). The data they collect is naturalistic oral data (Huebner, 1983; Fuller and Gundel, 1987) or elicited written data (Sasaki, 1990) or metalinguistic judgment data (Yuan, 1997). The subjects they select come from either single linguistic background--Hmong (Huebner, 1983), Japanese (Sasaki, 1990), and Chinese (Yuan, 1997)--or multiple linguistic backgrounds--topic prominent languages: Chinese, Japanese, and Korean and non-topic prominent languages: Arabic, Farsi, and Spanish (Fuller and Gundel, 1987).

Despite the methodological differences, they conclude that the early stage of L2 acquisition reveal the topic-comment structure, as shown in (6)-(9).

(6) yu / nais. (Huebner, 1983:70, transcription of oral data)

\*Topic/\*comment

\*‘It’s really nice for you.’\*

(7) The boy/ he didn’t see the cat. (Fuller and Gundel, 1987: 6)

\*Topic / comment

(8) Shoes / is tiger give. (Sasaki, 1990:340)

\*Topic/\*comment

(9) a. I once met John’s girl friend. Ø/ was very beautiful (Yuan, 1997:480)

\*Topic/\*comment
b. When you finish using the computer, please let me use Ø for a while.

Yuan’s (1997) is different from the other studies in that he also examines how UG operates in the unlearning of the topic-comment structure. He proposes a [+topic drop] parameter of Chinese setting, and claims that Chinese learners of English have to reset the parameter as [-topic drop] for English. He also finds that Chinese subjects have asymmetric responses to null subjects and null objects, the former responses being better than the latter ones. He attributes the better responses in null subjects to the positive evidence provided by tense and agreement in English, and the worse responses in null objects to the lack of informative evidence. However, he does not mention one point that, since his subjects are speakers of Chinese, a topic prominent language, L1 transfer is promoted and the topic-comment stage is predicted to be prolonged.

In sum, the early topic-comment stage in the interlanguage of L2 learners is universally found. This stage will be prolonged when learners’ L1 is a topic prominent language. In order to learn L2 as a non-topic-prominent language such as English, the L1 parameter needs to be reset on the basis of positive evidence.

2.3.3 The Subset Principle on Topic Structures

I will review two studies based on the learnability account of topic structures in interlanguage—Yip (1995) and Ou (1997), the former being experimental and the
latter being observational. Their L2 setting is ESL (Yip, 1995) or EFL (Ou, 1997).

Their subjects are college students (Ou, 1997) or graduate students (Yip, 1995).

The nature of their investigation is longitudinal (Ou, 1997) or cross-sectional (Yip, 1995). The data they collect is written production data (Ou, 1997) or an additional metalinguistic judgment data (Yip, 1995). The only thing in common is their subjects’ linguistic background – Chinese as L1.

Despite the methodological differences, they both find similar topic structures in their learners’ interlanguage, as shown in (10). Yip also found another type in (11).

(10) New cars/ must keep inside.     (Yip, 1995b:17; Ou, 1997)
    Topic   / comment

(11) There’s a lot of people/ find their husband or wife in parties.  (Yip, 1995a: 192)
    Topic   / comment

The example in (10) is called pseudo-passive, and that in (11) is called existential pseudo-relatives (Schachter and Ruterford, 1979; cited from Yip, 1995a: 30), referring to learners’ failure in their attempt to produce correct English passives and relative clauses. They all represent the overgeneralization of L1 topic structures. According to Yip (1995a), the superset-subset relation of the two structures in Chinese interlanguage and English is shown in figure 4.

A
B

A: Chinese interlanguage topic structures
B: English topic structures

Figure 4: topic structures in Chinese interlanguage and English  (Yip, 1995a: 121)
Yip (1995a) claims that English topic structures are restricted to the colloquial left-dislocation and the more formal or archaic topicalization which is contrastive in nature, while Chinese topic structures include the more prevalent use of the two structures in addition to the double-subject construction. Thus English topic structures form a subset of the Chinese as a superset, creating the learnability problems for Chinese learners to recover from the superset grammar only on the basis of positive evidence. As mentioned in the previous section, L1 transfer will override the subset principle in this case—L1 as a superset of L2.

In sum, the subset principle account of topic structures in interlanguage emphasizes the superset-subset relation between L1 and L2, which in turn decides the learnability of the topic-comment structures. Chinese learners’ problems in unlearning topic-comment structures arises from their L1 being a superset of the English L2.

The above research on topic structures in interlanguage is outlined in Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L1 influence</td>
<td>Zhang (1987)</td>
<td>EFL</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schachter &amp; Rutherford (1979)</td>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>TP and non-TP</td>
<td>Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rutherford (1983)</td>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>TP and non-TP</td>
<td>Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Green (1996)</td>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xiao (1998)</td>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>7-8 year old</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Oral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Huebner (1983)</td>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Oral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fuller and Gundel (1987)</td>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>TP and non-TP</td>
<td>Oral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sasaki (1990)</td>
<td>EFL</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yuan (1997)</td>
<td>EFL</td>
<td>Teenagers/adult</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Intuitional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be observed easily, most studies focus on ESL setting, those which investigate EFL setting are relatively few. Moreover, most studies choose adult learners as their subjects, while few studies choose junior high school students. In addition, most studies collect only one type of data, being oral or written. Since different type of tasks may produce different results (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991), more than one elicitation technique should be employed. Therefore, the present study will focus on junior high school students in EFL setting and will use three different kinds of tasks to elicit interlanguage.

On the other hand, although all of the related studies find the topic structures in learners’ interlanguage, most studies have not provided a comprehensive framework to describe the exact nature of topic structures, as shown in table 3.

Table 3: the topic structures found in the related research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Topic structures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subset principle</td>
<td>Yip (1995a, b)</td>
<td>Written &amp; Intuitional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ou (1997)</td>
<td>Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1 influence</td>
<td>Zhang (1987)</td>
<td>subject-less sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schachter&amp;Rutherford (1979)</td>
<td>putative-passives² and serial verbs with existentials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rutherford (1983)</td>
<td>putative-passives and serial verbs with existentials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Green (1996)</td>
<td>coding of topic in sentence-initial position/ null subject/ double subject/ left-dislocation/ serial verb with no subjects &amp; existential/ pseudo-passive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² Putative passive is another term for pseudo-passive—the failure of learners’ attempt to produce passives and this failure lead to non-target forms.
Only Green’s (1996), Xiao’s (1998) and Fuller and Gundel’s (1987) studies offer a relatively more comprehensive framework to describe the topic structures in interlanguage. However, they don’t adopt exact terminologies to classify them. Therefore, the thesis will provide a comprehensive framework to describe the topic structures in Chinese learners’ interlanguage based on a comparative study of Chinese and English topic structures, and use definite terminologies to name these topic structures.

2.4 Summary of Chapter 2

I have discussed the concept of interlanguage in section 2.1 and mentioned the differences of it from CA and EA, in that it gives learners a more active role as a rule-creator and it considers errors together with non-errors, and production as well as underproduction. Besides, in section 2.2 I have described three related linguistic

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3 Pseudo-existential is the non-target form made by learners in an attempt to produce existentials.
theories on interlanguage studies—L1 influence, the existence of UG, and the subset principle—and developed out of them the present theoretical framework of interlanguage system. Finally in section 2.3 I have reviewed the empirical studies on the topic-comment structures in interlanguage based on the three theories and found that most studies investigate adult learners in ESL setting and adopt only one way of data collection without classifying topic structures under a comprehensive framework. Thus, further studies are needed to incorporate more ways of data collection in the EFL setting with respect to different types of topic structures under a comprehensive framework and exact terminologies, and to choose younger learners.