

Chapter Five

Conclusion

In this chapter, the conclusion of the present study will be presented. The main points and findings will be presented in section 5.1. In section 5.2, some limitations of the present study as well as suggestions for further research will also be provided and discussed.

5.1 Summary of the Present Study

The present study aims to investigate whether “age” is a crucial factor influencing Chinese-speaking preschoolers’ acquisition of cohesive devices. If so, which syntactic and semantic features of these conjunctions appear to be more difficult to the preschoolers?

Syntactically speaking, the results of our comprehension task (i.e. the picture identification task) showed that preschoolers by the age of three could generally comprehend the meaning and the use of both coordinators and subordinators. However, macro-syntactic conjunctions were a difficult type for most Chinese-speaking preschoolers at the age of three, four and five. Semantically speaking, causal conjunctions were the easiest for the preschoolers while adversative conjunctions were the most difficult and complicated of all. Based on the average scores of the subjects in the PI task, the difficulty levels for the other three types of semantic conjunctions such as additive, adversative, and temporal were similar, with adversative the of lowest score, indicating the difficulty level.

On the other hand, the results of our production task (i.e. the story-retelling task) showed that temporal conjunctions, which contributed a large proportion of the use of coordinators, were frequently used. Compared with additive conjunctions as well as coordinators, other types of conjunctions were seldom used by the preschoolers. We

believed such results might have to do with the text (a storybook) that we adopted, since most pictures of our task and the interactions between the characters in the story were sequenced.

As for the accuracy of the use of conjunctions, it was found that all subjects, regardless of their age, did not misuse conjunctions. For example, they did not use causal conjunctions for temporal, additive, or adversative relations. There were no significant differences among the three groups of subjects in terms of their “accuracy” in using conjunctions. However, for the three syntactic types and four semantic types of conjunctions, five-year-olds generally outperformed four-year-olds and three-year-olds both in the PI task and used conjunctions more frequently in the SR task.

Finally, as far as the methodological effects are concerned, the tendency between the PI and SR tasks were quite similar. However, the PI task seemed to better serve as an indicator of the preschoolers’ competence in Chinese conjunctions as it was an objective task.

5.2 Limitations of the Present Study and Suggestions for Further Research

In the past, there have been relatively few empirical studies on the acquisition of conjunctions of Chinese-speaking preschoolers. The present study is preliminary, but our findings would definitely be of some contributions to those who are interested in first language acquisition. There are some limitations of the present study as presented below can be good follow-up research topics in the future:

First of all, there were only a small pool of subjects participated in the present study. It would be interesting to see if the results would be different if more subjects are involved. In addition, “age” was a crucial variable in the present study, and we indeed found some group effects in the comprehension task. However, we are still not

sure whether such differences in age groups in response to discourse cohesion will apply for kids older than five. Therefore, to examine the discourse cohesion competence in elementary school children would be a topic worth exploring, too.

Second, since the present research is a cross-sectional study, not a longitudinal one which tends to observe subjects for a long period of time. It would also be a promising topic to do so and compare the results with the present findings.

Third, in the present study, we focused on preschoolers' comprehension and their actual use of conjunctions. However, "conjunction" is not the only device that serves the function of discourse coherence. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), there are totally nine major types of cohesive devices in English such as ellipsis, anaphora, reference, substitution, lexical cohesion, etc. Similarly in Chinese, conjunctions are definitely not the only linguistic device that strings ideas together. Therefore, it is suggested that subsequent researchers who are interested in first language acquisition can examine Chinese preschoolers' comprehension and production of other cohesive devices (e.g. anaphora) so that the overall picture of the development of cohesion can be clearer.

Finally, while the PI task is an objective task, the SR task, comparatively speaking, is subjective. In the SR task, the subjects were allowed to make up their own stories based on the pictures in the storybook. However, since the story contained sequentially-related events, it was not surprising to elicit more additive conjunctions than other types of conjunctions. We cannot get a clear picture about whether the preschoolers can produce other types of conjunctions to connect clauses with different logical relationships. Therefore, it is suggested that an "act-out" task, which is usually used to elicit one sentence focusing on the use of a specific type of conjunction at a time, be considered in the follow-up study.