



**ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH DITRANSITIVE CONSTRUCTION
BY ADULT MALAYSIAN CHINESE SPEAKERS**

By

SHARON CHONG YEE LING

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
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Chair : Assoc. Prof. Zalina binti Mohd Kasim, PhD
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This study addresses a pressing issue among adult Malaysian Chinese university students, specifically focusing on their challenges in acquiring the English ditransitive construction. It is imperative to understand why this problem persists and its significance to various stakeholders. Adult Malaysian Chinese university students often struggle with mastering the English language, particularly in acquiring the ditransitive construction. They produce sentences like "I give to her a book" instead of "I give her a book" or "I give a book to her". Similarly, they may say "I stole her a book," intending to express "I stole a book from her" rather than "I stole a book for her". To elucidate the research problem, the theoretical frameworks of the Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH), Interpretability Hypothesis (IH), Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (FRH), and Bottleneck Hypothesis (BH) were employed. This research centers on the absence of uninterpretable functional features required by the target second language, which are absent in learners' first language. However, a knowledge gap exists regarding whether uninterpretable functional features present in learners' Chinese language but unnecessary in the target English language also pose challenges, particularly in acquiring and producing the English ditransitive construction. Apart from the underlying problems, potential solutions to these problems were also the focus of the study as well as the differing degrees of learning difficulty. To substantiate the claims made in this study, an ex-post facto non-experimental study involving 115 adult L1 Malaysian Chinese university students was conducted through the administration of four types of tests: Oxford Placement Test (OPT), Acceptability Judgment Test (AJT), Ditransitive Judgment Tests (DJTs), and Ditransitive Translation Tests (DTTs). The findings of this study reveal four key insights: (1) Participants' English proficiency ranged from elementary to upper-intermediate levels; (2) Features were transferred from the participants' first language to the second language, but missing and unwanted uninterpretable functional features caused difficulty; (3) During production, interpretable functional features were accessed, and feature reassembly was engaged to produce correct target language constructions; and

(4) Different levels of learning difficulty were observed, with the "provider" feature being the most challenging. The implications of the findings have significance for educators, learners, and curriculum developers, offering insights into effective strategies for addressing these language acquisition and production issues.

Keywords: adults, Generative Linguistics, language divergence, language learning, Second Language Acquisition

SDG: GOAL 4: Quality Education



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PEMEROLEHAN PEMBINAAN DITRANSITIF INGGERIS OLEH
PENUTUR CINA MALAYSIA DEWASA**

Oleh

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Kajian ini membincangkan isu yang mendesak dalam kalangan pelajar universiti penutur Bahasa Cina Malaysia dewasa, khususnya terhadap cabaran mereka dalam memperoleh pembinaan ditransitif Bahasa Inggeris. Kajian ini penting untuk memahami sebab masalah ini berterusan dan kepentingannya terhadap pelbagai pihak berkepentingan. Pelajar universiti penutur Bahasa Cina Malaysia dewasa sering menghadapi kesulitan dalam menguasai Bahasa Inggeris, terutamanya dalam pemahaman konstruksi ditransitif. Mereka menghasilkan ayat-ayat seperti "*I give to her a book*" daripada "*I give her a book*" atau "*I give a book to her*". Demikian juga, mereka mungkin berkata "*I stole her a book*," untuk membawa maksud "*I stole a book from her*" dan bukannya untuk membawa maksud "*I stole a book for her*". Bagi menerangkan masalah penyelidikan ini, rangkaian teori *Representational Deficit Hypothesis* (RDH), *Interpretability Hypothesis* (IH), *Feature Reassembly Hypothesis* (FRH), dan *Bottleneck Hypothesis* (BH) digunakan. Penyelidikan ini memberikan tumpuan tentang ketiadaan fitur-fitur tugas yang tidak boleh diinterpretasikan yang diperlukan oleh bahasa sasaran kedua tetapi tidak terdapat dalam bahasa pertama pelajar. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat kekurangan pengetahuan tentang sama ada fitur-fitur tugas yang tidak boleh diinterpretasikan yang terdapat dalam bahasa Cina pelajar tetapi tidak diperlukan oleh bahasa Inggeris sasaran juga membawa kesukaran, terutamanya dalam memahami dan menghasilkan pembinaan ditransitif Bahasa Inggeris. Selain masalah tersembunyi, penyelesaian yang berpotensi dan juga tahap kesukaran pembelajaran yang berbeza tentang masalah ini turut menjadi tumpuan kajian ini. Bagi menyokong tuntutan yang dibuat dalam kajian ini, satu kajian *ex-post facto* bukan eksperimen melibatkan 115 pelajar universiti penutur Bahasa Cina Malaysia dewasa telah dijalankan melalui pentadbiran empat jenis ujian: *Oxford Placement Test* (OPT), *Acceptability Judgment Test* (AJT), *Ditransitive*

Judgment Tests (DJTs), dan *Ditransitive Translation Tests* (DTTs). Kajian ini mendedahkan empat penemuan utama: (1) Penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris peserta berkisar daripada tahap asas kepada pertengahan atas; (2) Fitur-fitur telah dipindahkan daripada bahasa pertama peserta kepada bahasa kedua, tetapi fitur-fitur tugas yang tidak boleh diinterpretasikan yang hilang dan yang tidak diperlukan mengakibatkan kesukaran; (3) Semasa penghasilan bahasa, fitur-fitur tugas yang boleh diinterpretasikan diakses, dan proses penyusunan semula fitur berlaku untuk menghasilkan pembinaan bahasa sasaran yang betul; dan (4) Wujudnya tahap kesukaran pembelajaran yang berbeza, dengan fitur tugas "pemberi" menjadi yang paling mencabar. Kesimpulannya, penyelidikan ini mengungkapkan cabaran yang berterusan yang dihadapi oleh pelajar universiti penutur Bahasa Cina Malaysia dewasa dalam pembinaan ditransitif Bahasa Inggeris. Implikasi penemuan ini mempunyai kepentingan bagi pendidik, pelajar, dan pembangun kurikulum kerana kajian ini menyalurkan pengetahuan yang berguna dalam pembangunan strategi berkesan untuk mengatasi isu penguasaan dan penghasilan bahasa tersebut.

Kata Kunci: dewasa, Linguistik Generatif, perbezaan bahasa, pembelajaran bahasa, Pemerolehan Bahasa Kedua

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	Page
ABSTRAK	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
APPROVAL	v
DECLARATION	vi
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xvi
CHAPTER	xvii
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background of the Study	1
1.2 Statement of the Problem	3
1.3 Purpose of the Study, Research Objectives, and Research Questions	6
1.3.1 Detection of Problems at the Superficial Level	7
1.3.2 Detection of Problems at the Underlying Level	7
1.3.3 Detection of Solutions at the Underlying Level	8
1.3.4 Detection of Learning Difficulties	9
1.4 Research Variables	10
1.5 Significance of the Study	11
1.6 Scope of the Study	13
1.7 Operational Definitions	14
1.8 Organisation of the Thesis	16
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	17
2.1 Introduction	17
2.2 Review of Previous Studies on the Importance of English Language for Employability	17
2.3 Review of Previous Studies on the Challenges Faced in Learning and Teaching of English Language as a Second Language in Malaysia	18
2.4 Review of Previous Studies on Adult Second Language Acquisition from a Generative Linguistic Approach in Malaysia	20
2.5 Review of Previous Studies on Adult L1 Chinese L2 English Acquisition from a Generative Linguistic Approach in Other Countries	22
2.6 Review of Previous Studies on Adult L1 Chinese L2 English Acquisition of Ditransitive Construction	24
2.7 Theoretical Framework	28
2.7.1 Generative Second Language Acquisition (GenSLA)	28
2.7.2 Second Language Acquisition and Production	30
2.8 Linguistic Properties	47
2.8.1 English Ditransitive Construction	47

	2.8.2	Chinese Ditransitive Construction	50
	2.8.3	Linguistic Comparisons	53
	2.8.4	Minimalist Programme (MP) Account	54
	2.9	Linguistic Assumptions	60
	2.10	Conclusion	61
3	METHODOLOGY		63
	3.1	Introduction	63
	3.2	Research Design	63
	3.3	Research Setting	64
	3.4	Respondent	65
	3.5	Sampling Method	68
	3.6	Research Instrument	69
	3.6.1	Oxford Placement Test (OPT)	69
	3.6.2	Acceptability Judgment Test (AJT)	71
	3.6.3	Ditransitive Judgment Test (DJT)	73
	3.6.4	Ditransitive Translation Test (DTT)	76
	3.7	Research Instrument Validity	78
	3.8	Research Instrument Reliability	81
	3.9	Data Collection	81
	3.10	Data Analysis	85
	3.11	Pilot Study Report	87
	3.12	Conceptual Framework	88
	3.13	Conclusion	90
4	RESULTS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION		91
	4.1	Introduction	91
	4.2	Results and Findings	91
	4.2.1	Research Objective 1 (RO1) and Research Question 1 (RQ1)	91
	4.2.2	Research Objective 2 (RO2) and Research Question 2 (RQ2)	93
	4.2.3	Research Objective 3 (RO3) and Research Question 3 (RQ3)	109
	4.2.4	Research Objective 4 (RO4) and Research Question 4 (RQ4)	124
	4.3	Discussion	129
	4.3.1	Levels of English Language Proficiency	129
	4.3.2	Feature Transferability	130
	4.3.3	Feature Accessibility and Feature Reassembly	134
	4.3.4	Feature Learnability	137
	4.4	Conclusion	139
5	CONCLUSION		140
	5.1	Summary of the Study	140
	5.2	Implications of the Study	141
	5.3	Contributions of the Study	143
	5.4	Suggestions for Further Study	144

REFERENCES	145
APPENDICES	157
BIODATA OF STUDENT	166
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	167



LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1.1 Ditransitive Construction Uninterpretable Functional Features of English and Chinese Languages	10
2.1 Studies and Findings on RDH	35
2.2 Studies and Findings on IH	38
2.3 Studies and Findings on FRH	41
2.4 Studies and Findings on BH	46
2.5 Linguistic Comparisons between English and Chinese Ditransitive Constructions	53
2.6 Characteristics of the Functional Features [to], [for], and [from] in Ditransitive Constructions	55
3.1 Number of Universities in Malaysia	65
3.2 Levels of English Language Proficiency Based on OPT Scores and Level Descriptors	71
3.3 AJT 20 Stimuli and 10 Fillers	72
3.4 Scheme of Marks and Grades Applicable for Judgment Tests	73
3.5 Research Instruments	78
3.6 Validation Ratings for the Five Tests	79
3.7 Split-half Test Results for Four Tests	81
3.8 Data Analyses for the Present Study	87
4.1 OPT Data and MCE Data Distribution, Dispersion, and Central Tendency	92
4.2 English Language Proficiency Levels of 115 Target Respondents and 50 Comparative Respondents	93
4.3 Data Distribution for Acceptability Judgment Test (AJT), Ditransitive Judgment Test (English to English EDJT), and Ditransitive Judgment Test (English to Chinese CDJT) of 115 Target Respondents' Scores	95

4.4	Data Distribution for Acceptability Judgment Test (AJT) and Ditransitive Judgment Test (English to English EDJT) of 40 Native Respondents' Scores	95
4.5	Means and Standard Deviation Scores of AJT Uninterpretable Functional Feature Recipient [to] Judgments	97
4.6	Means and Standard Deviation Scores of the EDJT Uninterpretable Functional Feature Recipient [to] Judgments	98
4.7	Kruskal-Wallis Test Results for the Uninterpretable Functional Feature Recipient [to]	99
4.8	Means and Standard Deviation Scores of AJT Uninterpretable Functional Feature Benefactive [for] Judgments	101
4.9	Means and Standard Deviation Scores of the EDJT Uninterpretable Functional Feature Benefactive [for] Judgments	103
4.10	Kruskal-Wallis Test for the Uninterpretable Functional Feature Benefactive [for]	104
4.11	Means and Standard Deviation Scores of AJT Uninterpretable Functional Feature Provider [from] Judgments	106
4.12	Means and Standard Deviation Scores of the EDJT Uninterpretable Functional Feature Provider [from] Judgments	107
4.13	Kruskal-Wallis Test for the Uninterpretable Functional Feature Provider [from]	108
4.14	Means and Standard Deviation Scores of the DTJT	110
4.15	Frequency Count for DTPT Recipient (to) Stimuli Translation	111
4.16	Frequency Count for DTJT Recipient (to) Stimuli Translation	113
4.17	Means and Standard Deviation Scores of the DTJT Uninterpretable Functional Feature Recipient [to] Judgments	113
4.18	Mann-Whitney U Test for the Uninterpretable Functional Feature Recipient [to]	114
4.19	Frequency Count for DTPT Benefactive [for] Stimuli Translation	116
4.20	Frequency Count for DTJT Benefactive [for] Stimuli Translation	117
4.21	Means and Standard Deviation Scores of the DTJT Uninterpretable Functional Feature Benefactive [for] Judgments	118

4.22	Mann-Whitney U Test for the Uninterpretable Functional Feature Benefactive [for]	119
4.23	Frequency Count for DTPT Provider [from] Stimuli Translation	120
4.24	Frequency Count for DTJT Provider [from] Stimuli Translation	122
4.25	Means and Standard Deviation Scores of the DTJT Uninterpretable Functional Feature Provider [from] Judgments	122
4.26	Mann-Whitney U Test for the Uninterpretable Functional Feature Provider [from]	123
4.27	Ranking According to Means Scores for AJT, DJTs, and DTTs Test Variables	125
4.28	Scoring Based on Key Linguistic Variables	129

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
2.1	L1 Instantiated Functional Features	57
2.2	Functional Feature Percolation	58
2.3	Functional Feature Convergence	59
3.1	Research Design of the Study	64
3.2	Respondents of the Study	67
3.3	Sampling Stages, Methods, and Procedures	69
3.4	Data Collection Processes and Procedures	84
3.5	Conceptual Framework of the Study	89
4.1	Pyramid of Second Language Learning Difficulty	125
4.2	Features Ranking	127
4.3	Features Labels in Hierarchy of Learning Difficulty	128

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AJT	Acceptability Judgment Test
AC	Adpositional Construction
BH	Bottleneck Hypothesis
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference
CS	Computational System
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
CPH	Critical Period Hypothesis
DV	Dependent Variable
DO	Direct Object
DC	Ditransitive Construction
DJT	Ditransitive Judgment Tests
DTJT	Ditransitive Translation Judgment Test
DTPT	Ditransitive Translation Performance Test
DTTs	Ditransitive Translation Tests
DOC	Double Object Construction
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
ELER	English Language Education Reform
ELL	English Language Learning
CDJT	English to Chinese Ditransitive Judgment Test
EDJT	English to English Ditransitive Judgment Test
FFFH	Failed Functional Feature Hypothesis
FRH	Feature Reassembly Hypothesis
L1	First Language

FLA	First Language Acquisition
EFL	Foreign Language
FTFA	Full Transfer Full Access Hypothesis
GLM	General Linear Model
GenSLA	Generative Second Language Acquisition
GB	Government and Binding Theory
IVs	Independent Variables
IO	Indirect Object
IL	Interlanguage Grammar
IH	Interpretability Hypothesis
LAD	Language Acquisition Device
LF	Logical Form
LMEs	Logistic Mixed-effects Models
MCE	Malaysia Certificate of Education
MUET	Malaysian University English Test
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MVs	Measured Variables
MP	Minimalist Programme
MSIGH	Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis
MCH	Morphological Congruency Hypothesis
NPRH	No Parameter Resetting Hypothesis (NPRH)
O	Object
OV	Outcome Variable
OPT	Oxford Placement Test
PF	Phonetic Form
POS	Poverty of Stimulus

PP	Prepositional Phrase
PP	Principles and Parameters Framework
R	Recipient
RDH	Representational Deficit Hypothesis
RO1	Research Objective 1
RO2	Research Objective 2
RO3	Research Objective 3
RO4	Research Objective 4
RQ1	Research Question 1
RQ2	Research Question 2
RQ3	Research Question 3
RQ4	Research Question 4
L2	Second Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SPRT	Self-paced Reading Task
SVCs	Serial Verb Constructions
SD	Structural Description
S	Subject
VS	Subject-Verb
T	Theme
L3	Third Language
TOJT	Traditional Offline Judgment Task
UG	Universal Grammar
V	Verb
VP	Verb Phrase
VS	Verb-Subject

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a brief overview of the status quo of English language learning in Malaysia, which serves as the basis for defining the statement of the problem for this study. Then, the purpose of the study is informed and the research objectives are formulated to investigate the central issues of the study. These inquiries lead to the formulation of research questions that direct the investigation. Before delving into the specific contents of the subsequent chapters, its significance, scope, operational definitions, and an overview of the study are discussed to conclude this chapter.

1.1 Background of the Study

English has been an important language in Malaysia (formerly known as Malaya) since the British colonial era, despite the nationalisation of the Malay language (Foo & Richards, 2004). Not only has the importance of the English language increased, but it is also gradually becoming a language on which the country's residents must rely in order to advance with the rest of the world until another global lingua franca emerges (Foo & Richards, 2004). According to Thirusanku and Yunus (2014), it is necessary to select appropriate instructional methods and materials based on these realities. In addition, Pillai and Ong (2018) stated that the ministries of education and higher education, as well as scholars, researchers, and even users of Malaysian English, should collaborate to advance the development of the language.

As a result, the government implement its plan for English Language Education Reform (ELER). This is because the Malaysian government places a high priority on English language education and learning, as evidenced by the shift from rote learning to self-access learning using a structural-situational approach to the communicative method and to the adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) with a single objective: to effectively teach the language to second language learners (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021).

The Malaysian government adapts and implements the Common European Framework and Reference (CEFR) (Ali et al., 2018), a global language policy that has been accepted by numerous nations (Ahmad et al., 2019) to its English language education. The implementation and development of the CEFR have increased interest and enthusiasm for language study not only in Malaysia, but globally as well, signifying a worth considered framework and reference to be used (Nawawi et al., 2021). According to Pillai (2021), the CEFR incorporates all four language skills and divides them into three primary bands (Basic, Independent, and Proficient) with six levels to provide a comprehensive English language education.

Notwithstanding this, a phenomenon has been identified in which, despite numerous efforts, the English proficiency level of Malaysian students remains far from adequate even at the tertiary level, which is the final educational tier, as numerous English language learners continue to struggle with very few achieved proficient level or a near native like attainment while majority achieved a non-native like attainment which gives negative impact academically and later professionally (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021).

Considerable scholarly effort has been devoted to the identification of the factors that contribute to the difficulties encountered by Malaysian students as they strive to attain proficiency in English as a second language at every educational level, ranging from primary to tertiary. A number of factors are ascribed to learners, including motivation (Thang et al., 2011), preferences (Yahaya et al., 2011), attitudes (Ahmed, 2015), perceptions, families, and ethnic identities (How et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that these factors exert an influence on second language acquisition but in a way that is attributed to external factors. What if part of the influence on second language acquisition comes from internal factors attributed to the language faculty? What do intrinsic factors entail? An apparent scarcity of scholarly investigations exists regarding the internal factors that contribute to the challenges experienced during the process of acquiring and learning a second language in Malaysia. Such an endeavour is essential for attaining a comprehensive understanding of second language acquisition especially among the adults. An examination of the language proficiency of the learners reveals that the learners' native tongues may be regarded as a pedagogically significant factor that warrants consideration, as stated by Rahman et al. (2018).

Nevertheless, scholarly inquiries into the fundamental composition of the language faculty within Malaysian context, which aim to ascertain the extent of first language (L1) influence on second language acquisition, have been scarce. It is of the utmost importance to investigate the impact of variations in first language (L1) on the acquisition and learning of English as a second language (L2), particularly among older learners (adults), because it is difficult to implement language planning and instruction in a multilingual society like Malaysia without a comprehensive understanding of these differences.

Hence, it is the goal of this research endeavour to contribute empirically supported results to the expanding corpus of knowledge regarding the particular foundational linguistic variations present in the language faculty of adult learners, which are claimed to influence the likelihood of English as a second language acquisition success.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Malaysian Chinese is one of the communities in Malaysia who speak the Chinese language (Mandarin) or Chinese dialects (e.g., Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, Teo Chew, and others) as their first language (L1). However, these speakers also need to learn English, which is widely used in official matters and communication, as their second language (L2). They start learning English as early as the age of four in preschools and continue learning the language from the primary level until tertiary level as claimed by Wong and Quek (2007). Learning English as the second language should be successful at this point since there is early exposure and continuous learning.

Nonetheless, a typical phenomenon occurs in the acquisition of English as a second language by adult Malaysian Chinese speakers, even after early exposure and years of learning. These learners fail to achieve proficient attainment and often fossilise in their learning of the English language, a claim by Kwan and Wong (2016). What could be the problem?

Could it be, as claimed by the Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH) (Hawkins, 2005a; 2005b), that input received which is inadequate after a critical period (postulated to be as early as the age of seven (Smith & Tsimpli, 1995) and as late as the age of seventeen (Hartshorne et al., 2018)) would not be able to trigger the resetting of parameters even when adult Malaysian Chinese speakers receive early exposure to the English language at the age of four?

According to How et al. (2015), 81.6% of Malaysian Chinese students in Chinese vernacular schools speak Mandarin as their native language, 80.2% speak Mandarin as their community language, and 84.6% as their best language. How et al. (2015) reported also that only 2.38% of Chinese vernacular primary schools utilised English because the medium of instruction is Mandarin. This circumstance results in inadequate input, despite the fact that this community would have begun their education at the Kindergarten level at the age of four.

As a consequence, adult Malaysian L1 Chinese speakers who are L2 English learners can only receive more exposure to English language input when they enter colleges or universities at the age of eighteen to nineteen. This is because the medium of instruction in colleges and universities is in the English language. In addition, learners can enhance their English language learning through language proficiency as well as language for specific purposes courses offered by the universities or colleges. Finally, learners can also interact with other mates who are proficient in the English language in colleges and universities. At this point, adult Malaysian Chinese university students, having better cognitive ability and more maturity, should have better English language proficiency because of the exposure to English language and language learning opportunities.

Nevertheless, more exposure, learning, and interaction at this point in time (adulthood) do not seem to complete the English language learning of adult Malaysian Chinese university students. On the other hand, the English language learning process has become slow and requires great effort for this community. More frustratingly, the outcome of their learning diverges from proficient attainment (Pandian & Baboo, 2013). Such a condition could have a negative impact on their studies and careers, particularly in international arenas if the issues are not thoroughly understood and addressed.

Hence, it is imperative to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the English language acquisition divergence within this community, particularly among university students who are at a pivotal stage in life, striving for success in their studies and careers. This investigation requires an exploration of the implicit language knowledge within the language faculty of adult Malaysian Chinese university students leading to the understanding of the current state of their English language acquisition divergence, underlying problems, and potential solutions they may encounter.

Studies conducted by Chik (2009), Yoke (2011), Malaiappan (2014), Muin (2016), Premala and Jacob (2018), and others have explored language differences or divergences among various L1-L2 pairs and different linguistic properties within the Malaysian context. These investigations primarily focused on identifying divergences associated with the inaccessibility of Universal Grammar (UG) and the absence of uninterpretable functional features within the language faculty. These factors have been found to pose obstacles in the acquisition process, particularly for individuals from various ethnicities, albeit with limited attention to their implications for Malaysian Chinese learners.

However, the impact of unwanted uninterpretable functional features in the acquisition of a second language has been largely unexplored, especially in the context of Malaysian Chinese learners. Notably, such features are present in Chinese ditransitive constructions but are not required in English ditransitive constructions.

This observation is evident in the language production of adult Malaysian Chinese university students. For instance, when expressing ditransitives in English, they may construct sentences like "I give to her a book" to convey "I give her a book" or "I give a book to her." It is also noticeable that when expressing "I stole her a book," they intend to convey "I stole a book from her" rather than "I stole a book for her" (refer to Chapter 2 (2.8) for further elaboration). Such a condition is perceived to be a form of language divergence from a linguistic perspective, potentially hindering success in learning English as a second language by the adult Malaysian Chinese university students if the issue remains unknown and unresolved.

Such a conundrum requires assessment not just at the surface structures but also at the deep structures exclusively. This leads to the employment of four hypotheses, i.e., the Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH) (Hawkins, 2005a; 2005b), the Interpretability Hypothesis (IH) (Tsimpli & Mastropavlou, 2007), the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (FRH) (Lardiere, 2008; 2009), and the Bottleneck Hypothesis (BH) (Slabakova, 2006; 2008; 2013; 2014; 2019), to explicate within the language faculty, the underlying problems encountered by adult Malaysian Chinese university students as well as underlying solutions available in the acquisition of English ditransitive construction.

If the claim of RDH is true, it would mean that adult Malaysian Chinese university students have failed to reset their parameter setting from L1 to L2 due to insufficient exposure before the critical period, with missing uninterpretable functional features no longer accessible. To be specific, adult Malaysian Chinese university students might have failed to reset their L1 Chinese ditransitive parameter setting that consists of a recipient feature [+], no benefactive feature [-], and a provider feature [+] to L2 English ditransitive parameter setting that requires a recipient feature [+], a benefactive feature [+], and not a provider feature [-]. If this is truly the case, adult Malaysian Chinese university students would encounter a problem acquiring the missing feature, i.e., benefactive [+] feature that is necessary for their L2 but is not instantiated in their L1 (Refer to Chapter 2 (2.8) for more elaboration).

However, if the IH claim is true, persistent adult Malaysian Chinese university students who continue to learn English would be able to use certain means to remedy the situation. However, these means, which are nevertheless constrained by UG, are different from native speakers at the underlying representation due to no parameter resetting available. In the context of the acquisition of English ditransitive construction by adult Malaysian Chinese university students, dative construction and non-default ditransitive construction that carry compatible interpretable feature benefactive [for] should be the solutions (Refer to Chapter 2 (2.8) for more elaboration).

Yet, if the FRH claim is true, adult Malaysian Chinese university students would need to analyse the morpho-lexical equivalency from their already-assembled lexical items in L1 Chinese at the initial stage to acquire their L2 English first. After that, these learners would move on to acquire their morphological competence, which is the knowledge of which forms go with which features, gradually through Universal Grammar (UG) interaction with L2 English input at the subsequent stage. In English ditransitive construction production, adult Malaysian Chinese university students would need to remap their Chinese dative and Chinese non-default ditransitive constructions to the right L2 English ditransitive or dative construction to produce the target English ditransitive or dative construction. This is known as feature remapping or feature reassembly, which does not involve parameter resetting (Refer to Chapter 2 (2.8) for more elaboration).

Such effort, however, comes with different levels of difficulty, ranging from free to macro-parameter, meso-parameter, micro-parameter, and to nano-parameter, according to BH. If this is true, adult Malaysian Chinese university students would encounter different hierarchical levels of learning difficulty in remapping L1 compatible features with L2 features that belong to the functional morphology category, reaching the bottleneck in the acquisition of English ditransitive construction.

Succinctly, RDH provides an account that explicates the underlying problems in adult second language acquisition within the language faculty, IH and FRH explicate the underlying solutions to the problem in adult second language acquisition, whereas BH explicates the different hierarchical levels of learning difficulty in adult second language acquisition due to L1 missing uninterpretable functional features that are needed by target L2.

Yet, it is uncertain from the explanations provided by the four hypotheses whether an additional uninterpretable functional feature, which, however, is not needed by target L2, would also be an impediment to successful adult second language acquisition. This is because there is an existence of an uninterpretable functional feature in Chinese ditransitive construction that is not needed by English ditransitive construction. This feature is known as the uninterpretable functional feature provider [from], resulting in a knowledge gap in adult second language acquisition within the generative approach.

Hence, to find out the answers to the community language acquisition problem and solution as well as to bridge the knowledge gap, this study is set to investigate the acquisition of English ditransitive construction by adult Malaysian Chinese speakers who are university students from a generative linguistic approach. The findings of this study are key not only to provide an answer to the problem of the study but also to further refine the explication of adult SLA from a generative approach, which is also known as GenSLA.

1.3 Purpose of the Study, Research Objectives, and Research Questions

The primary purpose of this research is to investigate the challenges inherent in the adult second language acquisition process, specifically focusing on language divergence, which denotes incomplete acquisition by learners. The study aims to explore the extent of deviation from native-like proficiency, recognising that achieving native-like proficiency is not mandatory; however, significant divergence poses language barriers. In other words, the primary emphasis is not on achieving native-like proficiency but on understanding the extent of the deviation from native-like proficiency. These inquiries provide crucial insights into the difficulties experienced by adult Malaysian Chinese university students in attaining proficiency in English as a second language focusing on the acquisition of English ditransitive construction contributing to challenges in using the language in academic and professional contexts.

Nonetheless, the purpose of this research is to explore not only the divergences that hinder adult second-language acquisition but also the underlying solutions that address them. These inquiries provide learners with significant insights into the methods by which they can enhance their proficiency in the English language, particularly in the area of ditransitive construction. Additionally, the study investigates the varying degrees of difficulty associated with learning English ditransitive construction in relation to divergences, thereby shedding light on pedagogical approaches that can be utilised to improve English proficiency. The study aims to contribute insights that can lead to effective strategies that can enhance language proficiency to a level that aligns with the requirements of standard English, without necessarily reaching native-like fluency. These efforts aim to narrow the gap between acquired language proficiency and employability expectations.

In order to commence the inquiries into this study, the following research objectives and questions are formulated:

1.3.1 Detection of Problems at the Superficial Level

It is crucial to first investigate the levels of English proficiency among the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students by measuring their English language proficiency levels at the time of the study in order to grasp their English language mastery before tapping into their English language competence for language divergence.

1.3.1.1 Research Objective 1 (RO1)

To verify the levels of English language proficiency achieved by the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students in order to know their English language mastery.

1.3.1.2 Research Question 1 (RQ1)

What are the levels of English language proficiency achieved by the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students?

1.3.2 Detection of Problems at the Underlying Level

After determining the degrees of English language proficiency attained by the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students, the study investigates their English language competency based on their levels of English language proficiency, focusing on linguistic divergence. The investigation taps into the

deep level of the language faculty to examine the state of uninterpretable functional features transfers from L1 Chinese to L2 English. This is to find out if the transfer of L1 “instantiated”, “missing”, and “extra” uninterpretable functional features of ditransitive construction to L2 is evident in causing divergence in second language acquisition.

1.3.2.1 Research Objective 2 (RO2)

To measure the extent of the L1 uninterpretable functional features transferability in the acquisition of English ditransitive construction based on the levels of English language proficiency of the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students.

1.3.2.2 Research Question 2 (RQ2)

What is the extent of the following L1 uninterpretable functional features transferability in the acquisition of English ditransitive construction based on the levels of English language proficiency of the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students?

- A. The transfer of L1 instantiated uninterpretable functional feature recipient [to] to target L2.
- B. The transfer of L1 missing uninterpretable functional feature benefactive [for] to target L2.
- C. The transfer of L1 extra uninterpretable functional feature provider [from] to target L2.

1.3.3 Detection of Solutions at the Underlying Level

Next, the study investigates the accessibility of interpretable functional features and the process of feature reassembly that the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students use to resolve problematic uninterpretable functional features, based on their levels of English language proficiency. The intention is to determine if these strategies are effective in remedying the divergence of English language acquisition. Therefore, the study examines the state of access to interpretable functional features and the process of feature reassembly of L1 Chinese within the language faculty to produce L2 English ditransitive construction by the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students.

1.3.3.1 Research Objective 3 (RO3)

To measure the extent of L1 interpretable functional features accessibility and features reassembly in the production of English ditransitive construction based

on the levels of English language proficiency of the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students.

1.3.3.2 Research Question 3 (RQ3)

What is the extent of the following L1 interpretable functional features accessibility and features reassembly in the production of English ditransitive construction based on the levels of English language proficiency of the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students?

- A. The access and reassembly of interpretable functional features compatible with L1 instantiated uninterpretable functional feature recipient [to] for target L2.
- B. The access and reassembly of interpretable functional features compatible with L1 missing uninterpretable functional feature benefactive [for] for target L2.
- C. The access and reassembly of interpretable functional features compatible with L1 extra uninterpretable functional feature provider [from] for target L2.

1.3.4 Detection of Learning Difficulties

Finally, the study investigates on the hierarchical levels of learning difficulties in acquiring and producing the English ditransitive functional features by the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students of different English language proficiency levels based on their judgment and performance in the tests of this study. This is to find out what features are evidently easier or harder to be learned in the acquisition and production of English ditransitive construction by the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students.

1.3.4.1 Research Objective 4 (RO4)

To identify the hierarchical levels of learning difficulties in acquiring and producing the English ditransitive functional features by the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students of different English language proficiency levels.

1.3.4.2 Research Question 4 (RQ4)

What are the hierarchical levels of learning difficulties in the acquisition and production of English ditransitive functional features by the selected adult Malaysian Chinese university students of different English language proficiency levels?

1.4 Research Variables

This study applies the definition of variables as proposed by Mackey and Gass (2005) to categorise research variables into two main groups: measured variables and outcome variables. Measured Variables (MVs) are not identical to independent variables (IVs) utilised in experimental research but they fulfil a comparable function by supposedly impacting other variables, specifically outcome variables but without any treatment or intervention imposed by the researcher. Conversely, Outcome Variables (OVs) fulfil a comparable function to dependent variables (DVs) in the context of experimental research. It is postulated that the measured variables exert an influence on these variables.

This study examines the impact of four measured variables (MVs) on the outcome variable (OV), which is the acquisition of English ditransitive construction by a sample of adult Malaysian Chinese university students using a non-experimental approach. The four measured variables that have been identified are as follows: (1) feature transferability; (2) feature accessibility; (3) feature reassembly; and (4) feature learnability.

Feature transferability is delineated by the assertion put forth by the Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH). It is asserted that the transfer of an uninterpretable functional feature instantiated in the L1 of adult L2 learners facilitates second language acquisition, whereas the absence of such a feature in the L1 of adult L2 learners is said to impede second language acquisition in the context of RDH attaining native-like proficiency. Additionally, this study postulates that the attainment of native-like proficiency in a second language would be impeded if the L1 of adult L2 learners contained an undesired functional feature that is not interpretable. In order to assess the impact of feature transferability on the acquisition of the aforementioned English ditransitive construction, this study investigates three distinct categories of uninterpretable functional features, i.e., [to], [for], and [from]. These features are illustrated in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 : Ditransitive Construction Uninterpretable Functional Features of English and Chinese Languages

PARAMETER SETTING	ENGLISH		CHINESE	
	UNIVERSAL	PARAMETRISED	UNIVERSAL	PARAMETRISED
PRESENT IN [L1]	[TO]	[FOR]	[TO]	[FROM]
ABSENT IN [L1]		[FROM]		[FOR]

As shown in Table 1.1, a universal feature [to] and a parametrised feature [for] are selected and set in the English language parameter setting, whereas in the Chinese language parameter setting, a universal feature [to] and a parametrised feature [from] are selected and set in the Chinese language parameter setting

instead. The feature [for] is absent from the Chinese parameter, while the feature [from] is unwanted in the English parameter.

Feature accessibility is delineated by the Interpretability Hypothesis (IH), which posits that functional features that are compatible and interpretable, and are instantiated in the L1 of adult L2 learners, are accessible to serve as substitutes for absent features. Regarding unwanted features, this research postulates that interpretable functional features that are compatible and instantiated in the L1 of adult L2 learners are also accessible in the target L2 for the unwanted features by the target L2. In order to assess the impact of feature accessibility on the acquisition of the aforementioned English ditransitive construction, this study investigates three distinct categories of interpretable functional features i.e., [to], [for], and [from].

Feature Reassembly is identified by the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (FRH), which states that feature reassembly i.e., matching the correct L1 features with the correct L2 features, must occur at the computational system prior to the production of a language construction; otherwise, the language production is considered to be producing interlanguage grammar that is not grammatically correct. In order to assess the impact of feature reassembly on the acquisition of the aforementioned English ditransitive construction, this study investigates 3 distinct categories of constructions i.e., the ditransitive, the non-default ditransitive, and the dative constructions.

Feature learnability is a variable identified by the Bottleneck Hypothesis (BH), which posits that it is associated with various hierarchical levels, spanning from free parameter to the nano-parameter level. In order to assess the impact of feature learnability on the acquisition of the aforementioned English ditransitive construction, this study investigates on the learnability of the aforementioned three uninterpretable functional features, the three interpretable functional features, and the three constructions in the acquisition of English ditransitive construction by the selected Malaysian Chinese university students.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research investigates the practical ramifications of the study's results and assesses their importance and suitability for diverse stakeholders within the domains of applied linguistics and linguistics.

Language educators and language planners can extract practical advantages from this study. The present study aims to identify specific language properties that adult second language learners often encounter challenges with as a result of disparities between the target language and their native language (L1) (L2). Developing more effective pedagogical strategies and lesson plans for teaching adults a second language is possible with the aid of this data. Educators and

policy planners may employ the results of this research to develop interventions that are tailored to the hierarchical learning challenges encountered by their students.

Furthermore, the study's practical implications transcend the aforementioned benefits and permeate the language learners themselves. Equipped with the knowledge obtained from this study, individuals learning a second language acquire a more comprehensive comprehension of the particular obstacles that may arise due to the distinctions between their mother tongue and the desired language. Gaining self-awareness can enable individuals to develop focused approaches to surmounting these obstacles, thereby promoting a more streamlined and customised process of acquiring a language.

In addition, language learners can optimise their study routines by applying the study's findings. Through the prioritisation of identified language properties that present frequent challenges, individuals learning the language can enhance their proficiency in a more focused and efficient manner. By adopting this customised methodology, individuals can effectively distribute their time and exertion, thereby expediting their advancements in the acquisition of a second language.

This study is also significant for Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers, in addition to the practical implications of its findings. It offers crucial perspectives on the distinctions and variations encountered by adult second-language learners. This study specifically examines the impact of the inclusion or exclusion of specific functional features from the learners' native language (L1) on their acquisition of the second language. This information is crucial for developing a comprehensive understanding of adult second-language acquisition. Scholars can derive advantages from the results by utilising them to enhance current SLA theories and construct novel models that more adequately address these linguistic barriers.

Researchers specialising in Generative Second Language Acquisition (GenSLA) can ultimately benefit from this study. It enhances the precision of Hawkins' hypothesis of Representational Deficit (RDH) (2005a; 2005b). This study specifically contributes by emphasising that uninterpretable functional features of L1 that are not wanted in the target L2 may have a significant impact on the level of difficulty and divergence that adult language learners encounter. This comprehension has the potential to facilitate progress in the RDH framework and generate models for second language acquisition that are more inclusive in nature.

Furthermore, this research offers cognitive linguists significant knowledge regarding the cognitive processes that are involved when adult second-language learners confront diverse language properties. The cognitive mechanisms involved are clarified through the identification of language properties that require cognitive intervention. This data has the potential to enhance cognitive

linguistics research and facilitate scholars' exploration of the cognitive dimensions of language acquisition.

Fundamentally, this research not only confers advantages upon educators, planners, researchers, and linguists but also furnishes language learners with invaluable knowledge and resources to more efficiently navigate the complexities of second language acquisition.

1.6 Scope of the Study

In order to achieve academic and professional success, Malaysian Chinese university students are required to possess a proficient command of the English language. However, despite much effort, they encounter persistent obstacles in reaching the desired level of English proficiency, including those with advanced degrees.

To address this issue, the current study delves into the linguistic challenges faced by this community by analysing the underlying representation of the language faculty of the learners. The objective of this study is to contribute scholarly insights to the field of English as a second language acquisition, providing valuable perspectives for stakeholders involved in language acquisition.

The impetus for this research stemmed from the identification of English ditransitive construction as a difficulty for adult Malaysian Chinese university students. The research centres on the uninterpretable functional features [to], [for], and [from], associated with ditransitive constructions in the English and Chinese languages, respectively.

A thorough year-long investigation is dedicated to examining the linguistic environment of Malaysian Chinese university students. Chapter 3 (3.4) provides a comprehensive description of the criteria used to select or exclude research participants. The primary focus of this study is the intricate relationship between the acquisition of English Ditransitive Construction, the outcome variable (OV), and the measured variables (MVs): feature transferability, feature accessibility, feature reassembly, and feature learnability. To achieve this, an ex-post facto non-experimental research design is employed. A representative sample of 115 individuals was selected from a private university in Selangor, Malaysia, to cover a range of topics.

By incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the research methodology aims to achieve a holistic understanding of ongoing phenomena. Statistical analyses are conducted on quantitative data using judgment tests, while production tests reveal qualitative insights through Minimalist Account

analyses. Chapter 2 (2.8) provides an explanation of the Minimalist Programme (MP) account.

Utilising well-established academic theories, including the Representational Deficit Hypothesis, Interpretability Hypothesis, Feature Reassembly Hypothesis, and Bottleneck Hypothesis, this study develops a comprehensive theoretical framework that aids in the analysis and interpretation of the collected data. Chapter 3 (3.12) outlines the Conceptual Framework of the study.

The scholarly inquiries contribute significantly to the understanding of the language acquisition process within the specific demographic under study. By grounding the study in well-established theories, nuanced insights are gained into how Malaysian Chinese university students navigate the complexities of English Ditransitive Construction in the present context.

1.7 Operational Definitions

To achieve clarity in the context of this study, operational definitions are provided for several key terms.

A gradual, implicit development of language competence is the hallmark of the natural subconscious process of language acquisition, which is referred to as **acquisition**. On the other hand, **learning** is a methodical, supervised process of acquiring a language that requires instruction and conscious effort (Krashen, 1982). In this study, the terms "acquisition" and "learning" are used interchangeably to refer to different stages of language learning—subconscious and conscious—whenever they are discussed together. For instance, when adult Malaysian Chinese university students acquire Chinese language unconsciously, the term "acquisition" is used, whereas when they consciously learn English language in a classroom, the word "learning" is used.

In this study, the **pre-critical period** refers to a window in which parameter setting or resetting is still feasible. In contrast, the **post-critical period** denotes a period in which parameter setting or resetting is no longer possible. According to the age-related study conducted by Hartshorne et al. (2018), there is a critical threshold of approximately 17.4 years for English language acquisition after the ages of 10 to 12 years. Consequently, for the Chinese English learners in this study, the post-critical period is the phase beyond which the L1 parameter setting cannot be reset to the L2 parameter setting due to insufficient exposure. This typically occurs after the age of 18 for the Chinese English learners in the present study.

This study consistently refers to the participants as **Chinese-language speakers** who are **English-language learners**. This terminology differentiates

the various levels of proficiency within their language faculty. The Chinese language is considered their first language (L1), native language, or mother tongue. It encompasses the initial language or dialect to which they have been exposed from birth or within the critical period. English, on the other hand, is regarded as their second language (L2), for which they must make conscious learning efforts and learned after the critical period (Bloomfield, 1993).

Second language acquisition refers to the process of learning a language other than one's native tongue, with the learning taking place after the critical period, resulting in no parameter resetting. In this study, the focus is on the acquisition of L2 English for the subjects. **Third and subsequent language acquisition, including foreign language acquisition** refers to the process of acquiring languages beyond the second language. It is important to note that a second language is distinct from being bilingual. In a bilingual environment, the acquisition of a second language typically does not lead to the loss of the native tongue. This is especially true when the acquisition occurs before the critical period, allowing parameter setting to remain available (Bloomfield, 1933). Bilingual acquisition is considered successful, as it poses no challenges to language acquisition, hence it is not the concentration of the present study.

Instead of double object, the term ditransitive is used throughout this study to describe the investigated construction. A **ditransitive construction** consists of a verb that requires both an indirect and direct object (theme) mirroring the structure found in English ditransitive construction, Chinese ditransitive construction, and Chinese non-default ditransitive construction. This terminology is used to ensure precision, as certain **double-object constructions** may also include one object of a transitive verb and one object of a prepositional phrase resembling the structure seen in dative construction.

In the context of Chinese learners of English, **feature transferability** refers to the ability of grammatical or lexical language features to be transferred from the learner's native language (L1), which is Chinese, to their target language (L2), which is English. This transferability may result in linguistic similarities or distinctions between the two languages. Understanding how linguistic elements are carried over or adapted during the second language acquisition process is dependent on the transferability of features, especially for Chinese learners of English who frequently face unique linguistic challenges during this process (Hawkins, 2005a; 2005b).

When applied to Chinese English learners, **feature accessibility** refers to the ease with which specific Chinese linguistic features which are interpretable, can be accessed and utilised in the English language production and comprehension processes. It consists of the cognitive and linguistic mechanisms that facilitate or impede the availability of these features during language use. Understanding the accessibility of linguistic features is crucial for addressing the unique needs and obstacles of English language learning among the Chinese speakers (Tsimpli & Mastropavlou, 2007).

Feature reassembly is the reconstruction and recombination of linguistic features during the language production and comprehension processes. This variable refers to how Chinese learners manipulate and assemble various linguistic elements to construct meaningful and grammatical English utterances, a process that can be influenced by the differences between Chinese and English linguistic structures (Lardiere, 2008; 2009).

In the context of Chinese English learners, **feature learnability** refers to their ability to acquire and internalise specific linguistic features of the English language. It entails the cognitive processes and mechanisms involved in the acquisition and maintenance of these characteristics. The learnability of features is of particular interest because it sheds light on how Chinese students navigate the distinctive English linguistic landscape (Slabakova, 2006; 2008; 2013; 2014; 2019).

English language proficiency levels are a categorisation of an individual's proficiency in the English language, ranging from basic or elementary proficiency to advanced or near-native fluency. These levels typically include speaking, listening, reading, and writing skill descriptors, providing a comprehensive overview of a learner's language abilities and indicating Chinese learners' progress in mastering English (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001).

Hierarchical levels of learning difficulties are a classification system that hierarchically categorises the challenges faced by these learners. It examines the varying levels of complexity and abstraction associated with various English linguistic features. These hierarchical levels aid in identifying and prioritising the challenges Chinese speakers face at various stages of their English language acquisition journey, thereby shedding light on the need for tailored pedagogical approaches (Slabakova, 2006; 2008; 2013; 2014; 2019).

1.8 Organisation of the Thesis

The organisation of the thesis is as follows: Chapter 1 provides the background, statement of the problem, purpose, research objectives, research questions, significance, and scope of the study. Additionally, it provides operational definitions for some key concepts used in this study, as well as an overview of the entire thesis organisation. Chapter 2 reviews previous studies related to this study. It also reviews previous studies related to the establishment of the theoretical framework of this study, and the derivation of the linguistic assumptions of this study. Chapter 3 reports on the methods used in this study, while Chapter 4 reports on the results of the analysed data and discusses the findings of this study. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the overall study by providing a summary of the study, implications of the findings, contributions of the study, and suggestions for further studies.

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