

An Event-Related Potentials Study on the Processing of English Subjunctive Mood by Chinese ESL Learners

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Abstract : Event-related potentials (ERPs) technique helps researchers to make continuous measures on the whole process of language comprehension, with an excellent temporal resolution at the level of milliseconds. The research on sentence processing has developed from the behavioral level to the neuropsychological level, which brings about a variety of sentence processing theories and models. However, the applicability of these models to L2 learners is still under debate. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the neural mechanisms underlying English subjunctive mood processing by Chinese ESL learners. To this end, English subject clauses with subjunctive moods are used as the stimuli, all of which follow the same syntactic structure, "It is + adjective + that ... + (should) do + ..." Besides, in order to examine the role that language proficiency plays on L2 processing, this research deals with two groups of Chinese ESL learners (18 males and 22 females, mean age=21.68), namely, high proficiency group (Group H) and low proficiency group (Group L). Finally, the behavioral and neurophysiological data analysis reveals the following findings: 1) Syntax and semantics interact with each other on the SECOND phase (300-500ms) of sentence processing, which is partially in line with the Three-phase Sentence Model; 2) Language proficiency does affect L2 processing. Specifically, for Group H, it is the syntactic processing that plays the dominant role in sentence processing while for Group L, semantic processing also affects the syntactic parsing during the THIRD phase of sentence processing (500-700ms). Besides, Group H, compared to Group L, demonstrates a richer native-like ERPs pattern, which further demonstrates the role of language proficiency in L2 processing. Based on the research findings, this paper also provides some enlightenment for the L2 pedagogy as well as the L2 proficiency assessment.

Keywords : Chinese ESL learners, English subjunctive mood, ERPs, L2 processing

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