Second Language Transfer in Third Language Acquisition: An Empirical Study of Chinese English Majors Learning German as Third Language

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Abstract: Guided by the theory of language transfer, this paper examines the transfer of English (second language) in the early stages of the acquisition of German (third language) by Chinese English majors. The results reveal that English has both positive and negative effects on German acquisition, especially on German pronunciation, vocabulary and sentence learning. On the basis of these findings, some suggestions are also put forward in order to improve the efficiency of third language (German) teaching, namely, English-as-a-vehicular-language teaching, contrastive teaching and corpus-based teaching.

Keywords: Language transfer; Third language acquisition; Language teaching; German; English

1 Introduction

Third language acquisition (Hereinafter referred to as TLA) refers to the acquisition of a non-native language by learners who have previously acquired or are acquiring two other languages (Cenoz, 2003)[1]. The advent and advancement of the theory of language transfer as well as the development of research on second language (Hereinafter referred to as L2) acquisition has enabled the new area of TLA research to be emerged. In recent years, great progress has been made in the study of TLA, including theoretical innovation and specific acquisition practice, which fully demonstrates the expansion of its research domain and multidimensional characteristics of its research perspective (Fan, 2019)[2]. For Chinese students majoring in English, English is L2 and the new foreign language (German) to be learned is the third language (Hereinafter referred to as L3). With *Proto-Indo-European* established as the "great-grandmother" to show the lineage of many modern languages, it is commonly accepted that modern English and modern German probably have a common ancestor in what has been labeled the Germanic branch of Indo-European. The kinship between English and German provides favorable conditions for the application of the theory of language transfer.

2 Language Transfer

Up until now, it is still difficult to reach a certain consensus regarding the definition of language transfer in the linguistic community. The terminology "transfer" coined from the field of psychology. Discussions of transfer began with the work of American linguists in the 1940s and 1950s, studies followed the behaviorism in the outset. Traditional behaviorists viewed language as a kind of behavior and believed that language learning was simply a matter of imitation and habit formation. Lado[3] (1957) referred to language transfer as "the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult", which was one of the most widely accepted definitions. From the perspective of behaviorism, the degree of transfer greatly depended on the similarities or differences between the native and target language. This view was prevalent before the 1960s, after that it

was under challenge and criticism for its deficiencies discovered later.

In the late 1970s, the view of cognitivism prevailed. In contrast to the theory of behaviorism, Faerch & Kasper[4] (1987) argued that typological similarity or difference cannot on its own serve as a predictor for language transfer, but interacts with other factors. As to the cognitive factors, the cognitive strategies may influence the acquisition of the target language. Cognitive strategies include strategies involved in analyzing, synthesizing, and internalizing what has been learned. Based on these discoveries, Odlin[5] (1989) offered his working definition of transfer as "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other knowledge that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired", which broke the limitation of behaviorism and furthered the language acquisition study.

Ever since 1990s, language transfer research has experienced unprecedented development no matter in depth or breadth. New perspectives of transfer were developed as "the influence of a person's knowledge of one language on that persons knowledge or use of another language" (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008)[6]. As every medal has two sides, on the one hand, learners may be able to benefit from the positive transfer. On the other hand, negative transfer (also known as "interference") would cause much inconvenience and even errors.

3 Study Design

3.1 Research Questions

An empirical study was conducted to figure out answers to the following three questions:

(1) What is the role of English as L2 in German as L3 acquisition in terms of language transfer?

(2) What kind of transfer will there be, if any?

(3) What are the specific manifestations of the transfer?

3.2 Participants

Totally 36 English majors in a German class from a university in Anhui Province, China, whose mother tongue is Chinese and the second foreign language is German, were taken as the research subjects. They were junior students with at least 12 years of English learning experience. In this university, German courses start from the junior year, students take the class for 3 hours per week. Therefore, though the students had been studying German for four months at the time of this research, they were still in the early learning stages due to the limited class hours.

3.3 Research Approach

In this paper, empirical research method, in addition to qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis methods, is used to collect and analyze data from students' in-class oral productions and their writing materials generated from in-class exercises.

3.4 Research Procedure

This investigation was mainly divided into two parts, from September 2019 to January 2020, lasting for four months. The first part was to record all the oral expressions produced by the respondents in German classroom activities, these data were both in written and audio form. Besides, in-class exercises were used to check their language learning, including reading comprehension, translation (German to Chinese) and writing. In order to ensure that all the collected data were naturally-occurring, the two parts were completed in class time, hoping to obtain the most timely and authentic information.

4 Major Findings

After analyzing all the collected data, it is found that 100% of the 36 students are influenced by English in their early stages of German learning. These influences are both positive and negative. Furthermore, the results also indicate that these influences are mainly reflected in students' pronunciation, vocabulary and sentence learning.

4.1 Positive transfer of English (L2) in German (L3) acquisition

4.1.1 Pronunciation

It is noted that students have a great advantage in learning German pronunciation by referring to their English pronunciation knowledge. All German speech sounds are either vowels or consonants like English. Monophthongs (e.g. /i/ in *Zimmer*, /u/ in *Duft*,/o/ in *Koch*) and diphthongs (e.g. /au/ in *Baum*, /ai/ in *Mai*, /eu/ in *Eugen*) can be found in German speech sounds. Besides, consonants could be further classified into voiced (e.g. /b/ in *Bild*, /d/ in *Dame*, /g/ in *Glut*) and voiceless (e.g. /f/ in *Frau*, / p/ in *Nippel*, /t/ in *Tier*) as in English. Given these, students master the pronunciation of some German speech sounds (like /i/, /ai/, /d/, /t/) more quickly in terms of where they are

articulated and how they are articulated. What is more, it is also found that students often take the initiative to try to pronounce those German phonetic symbol which also occur in English during the process of pronunciation teaching, sometimes they are capable of making the correct sounds themselves. For example, when the German phonetic symbol */b/* is represented in class, some students recognize the similar part occur in English as *b* in *book* and then actively try to pronounce */b/* in German word *Buch* in the same fashion before the standard pronunciation is shown by their teacher.

4.1.2 Vocabulary

(1)Spelling

It can be found that many German words are spelled similarly or identically as English words and some of these two kinds of same or similar spellings are also identical in meaning. In the light of the answers of reading comprehension and translation exercises that students did after learning the first four units *(Klick auf Deutsch, Vol.1, 2nd Edition)*, it is demonstrated that though students had only learned about 400 German words, most of them (93%) had little difficulty understanding the texts we provided. One of these texts is given below among which the words that had not been learned are marked in bold, which clearly shows how easy it is for these students to guess the meaning of German words through the English language they have acquired previously:

*Es ist ein **Garten** (garden) für alle. Im **Japanischen** (Japanese) **Teehaus** (teahouse) kann man eine **Teezeremonie** (tea ceremony) erleben, am Chinesischen **Turm** (tower) findet man im **Sommer**(summer) einen **Biergarten** (beer garden) und im **Winter** (winter) einen **Weihnachtsmarkt** (Christmas market). Viele **Touristen** (tourists) gehen auch gerne auf den **Monopteros** (monopteros), einen großen **klassizistischen** (classical) **Pavillon** (pavilion), der sich auf einem **Hügel** (hill) **befindet** (foud).*

(2)Word-formation

Apart from spelling, both German and English share many ways in which words are formed. For example, some of the commonest German compounds consist of noun+noun (*Lehrwerk*), adjective+noun (*Hochschule*), preposition+noun (*Nachmittag*) and so forth. When teaching the word *Nachmittag*, once the teacher tells that *Mittag* means "noon"and *nach* means "following something in time", the students are able to construct the meaning of the compound word as "afternoon". In addition, new German words could also be created

by derivation. The word *Leser* (reader) is correctly translated by nearly 85% of the students despite the fact that they have just learned the verb form *lesen* (read), that's probably because the suffix "*er*" is usually affixed to a verb to form agent nouns with the meaning of "one who performs an action (once, or habitually)" both in English and German.

4.1.3 Sentence

Most English sentences conform to the SVO word order, and this kind of word order also exists in a majority of German sentences which are made by students in compositions and oral expressions. Since these students have already been familiar with how to apply SVO word order to English sentence-making, they express fluently in German class with many sentences in SVO word order. Examples are:

(a)*I (S) love (V) you (O).*
  Ich (S) libe (V) dich (O).
(b)*She (S) has (V) a brother (O).*
  Sie (S) hat (V) einen Bruder (O).
(c)*Who (S) studies (V) German (O) ?*
  Wer (S) lernt (V) Deutsch (O) ?

4.2 Negative transfer of English (L2) in German (L3) acquisition

4.2.1 Pronunciation

There are many words in German that are spelled exactly the same as English, but the pronunciation are different. The negative transfer of English pronunciation will cause students to unconsciously use English pronunciation methods to read German words. Examples are illustrated to show how students are influenced by English when they read German words in class (Table 1).

Table 1. Different pronunciation of words

	AmE	German	Student's
Bus	/bʌs/	/bus/	/bʌs/
Japan	/dʒə'pæn/	/'ja:pan/	/'dʒa:pan/
Man	/mæn/	/man/	/mæn/
Name	/neɪm/	/'na:mə/	/na:m/
Station	/'steɪʃn/	/ʃta'tsio:n/	/'staʃn/
Mantel	/'mæntəl/	/'mantl/	/'mantəl/

4.2.2 Vocabulary

(1)Spelling

When memorizing German words, students might misspell them because of the similarity between

German words and English words. In addition, it is often neglected by students that German is different from English in that the first letter of nouns are capitalized no matter where they are in sentences. These influences are evidently shown in their compositions as follows:

(a)My mother is a secretary.

*Meine **mutter** ist **secretärin**.

(Meine Mutter ist Sekretärin.)

(b)This university is six hundred years old.

*Die Universität ist **sechx** hundert **yahr** alt.

(Die Universität ist sechs hundert Jahre alt.)

(c)She drinks neither coffee nor tea or wine.

*Sie trinkt weder **Koffee** noch **Tea**, noch **Wine**.

(Sie trinkt weder Kaffee noch Tee, noch Wein.)

(2)Meaning

Between English and German, there are many "false friends", words and phrases which are rather similar in spelling and sound yet different in meaning and function, students often misunderstand the meaning of these word when doing reading comprehension and translation exercises. For example, the German word *Gift* means "poison", *Handy* means "telephone", *Chef* means "boss", etc.

4.2.3 Sentence

The word order in German sentences is much more flexible, students are sometimes misled by the way of making sentences in English. When students put words in the wrong order, the result is an incorrect or ambiguous sentence. For instance:

(a)In German, when temporal adverbial is at the beginning of a sentence, the verb still takes the second place:

*Today we **go** in the city.*

*Heute wir gehen in die Stadt.

*(Heute **gehen** wir in die Stadt.)*

(b)In German, when object is at the beginning of a sentence, the verb still takes the second place:

*We (S) don't like **her brother** (O).*

*Wir mögen seinen Bruder nicht.

(Seinen Bruder (O) mögen wir (S) nicht.)

(c)In German, when subordinate clause precedes main clause, the verb still takes the second place in the whole sentence :

*Whether she's married we don't **know**.*

*Ob sie verheiratet ist, wir wissen nicht.

*(Ob sie verheiratet ist, **wissen** wir nicht.)*

5 Suggestions

The influence of English in the early stages of L3 German learning should not be neglected, English transfer can directly affect the process of German acquisition. In the process of teaching, teachers should be tolerant of the mistakes made by students, and try their best to help students to avoid negative transfer. At the same time, teachers also need to highlight the positive role of English in assisting German learning. Here, some teaching methods are recommended:

5.1 English-as-a-vehicular-language teaching

In view of the fact that these students are English majors who have a good English foundation, teachers can purposefully utilize English to teach in German courses. Students who have gone through the process of learning English are more experienced and may have their own psychological advantage in German learning. They can relate their prior English learning skills and strategies to German acquisition and draw on the similarities between the two languages to remove some of the strangeness of German. In this way, German learning will be more easily, more conveniently and more quickly for them.

5.2 Contrastive teaching

Contrastive analysis has often been done for pedagogical purposes, it is a method to distinguish between what are needed and not needed to learn by the target language learner by evaluating languages (Gass & Selinker, 2008)[7]. Contrastive approach serves as a way of comparing forms and meanings between languages, it can be used to locate the mismatches or differences so that teachers can predict the possible learning difficulty learners may encounter. By looking for the correlations between English and German, students can develop familiarity with German language thus raise interest in German acquisition. For another, the process of German learning would also be simplified and accelerated by referring to English linguistic system properly.

5.3 Corpus-based teaching

The latest achievements in Corpus Linguistics might also be applied in L3 acquisition. Reppen[8] (2010) de ined the corpus as "a large and principled collection

of naturally occurring texts (written or spoken) stored electronically". Today, corpora can contribute in learning languages whether a first, second or foreign language. With the help of corpora, learners could become language detectives to explore authentic language data and infer meanings and grammatical rules themselves. Moreover, it also enables teachers to investigate actual usages or the characteristics of certain genres so as to improve syllabus design and infer more appropriate and effective classroom exercises.

6 Conclusion

To encapsulate, teachers should fully understand the theory of language transfer to effectively guide students to make good use of English in German learning and avoid the potential interference. Besides, it is also hoped that more attention will be paid to study what will happen as learners develop familiarity with German in their later stages of learning.

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