

The Function and Influence of L1 Transfer in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: This paper explores the function and influence of L1 transfer in second language acquisition, with a specific focus on English learning within the Chinese context. Language transfer acts as a dual force in the learning process; while inter-lingual commonalities rooted in universal grammar can facilitate positive transfer and boost learner confidence, the structural and conceptual differences between languages often trigger negative transfer, leading to language errors and learning difficulties. Focusing on English writing instruction, this study demonstrates that the tracks of L1 negative transfer are highly conspicuous across vocabulary, grammar, and cultural thinking dimensions. Specifically, students frequently misapply word forms due to differences in plural concepts, omit necessary subjects because of the distinct subject-predicate relations in Chinese, and produce rigid “Chinglish” expressions by directly applying native thinking habits to English sentence building. To address these issues, the paper suggests that teachers should provide targeted guidance—such as analyzing typical mistakes, contrasting sentence patterns, and cultivating target-language thinking—to effectively minimize the negative interference of the mother tongue and progressively improve students’ comprehensive writing literacy.

Keywords: L1 transfer; Second language acquisition; Negative transfer; English writing teaching; Chinglish

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1. Introduction

With the development trend of international integration, the issues of second language acquisition have attracted more and more scholars’ attention, especially in recent years. With the deepening of language research, people have realized that the factors of language transfer in two-language acquisition cannot be ignored.

In view of the many similarities and differences between Chinese and English^[1], there is a phenomenon of positive or negative transfer in the process of language learning. The paper shows that both migrations had different effects on two-language acquisition. Moreover, taking English learning in the Chinese context as an example, the corresponding teaching measures are put forward according to the role of positive transfer and negative transfer of the mother tongue, aiming at improving the efficiency

of students' two-language acquisition ^[2]. Based on the previous research and related studies, this paper discusses the role of mother tongue migration in the process of second language acquisition and points out that the transfer of mother tongue will have both positive and negative effects on the second language acquisition.

2. Theory associated with the topic

"Migration" is a psychological term, according to the psychological language school, which is defined as follows: "It is a term that is used extensively in the first half of the twentieth century and refers to the psychological process whereby prior learning was carried over into a new learning situation" ^[3].

Psychologists believe that "migration" refers to a psychological process in which people have prior knowledge transposed to the new knowledge environment, and they analyzed the connotation of "migration" from the psychological point of view. In fact, people not only transfer old knowledge to the new knowledge environment ^[4]. From a physical point of view, if a person has the ability to play tennis, when he plays table tennis for the first time, he will use the knowledge and skills for tennis when playing table tennis, because the two kinds of balls are similar in some ways. Therefore, we can say that old knowledge or skills can be migrated to new knowledge. Slight's migration experiment on language learning in 1911 found that it was easy for learners who recited the "prior experience" of poetry to recite prose.

The theory of "language transfer" related to foreign language learning was put forward in the early years of the century, referring to the phenomenon that learners try to express their thoughts using the phonetic, meaning, structural rules, or cultural habits of their mother tongue when communicating in the target language (L2). In the discussion of the role of the mother tongue in second language acquisition, supporters of the contrastive analysis hypothesis held that mistakes in foreign language learning mainly stem from the interference of the natural language system ^[5]. The goal of comparative analysis is to find the same part of the system by contrasting the mother tongue and the target language in order to create the conditions for learners to achieve positive migration more smoothly and successfully, and to find out the different parts, prevent or reduce the occurrence of harmful migration interference so that learners can consciously avoid or make fewer language mistakes. By the 60s in the 19th century, with the deepening of error analysis, the mistakes made by learners were seen as problems in the learning process but as a function of language transfer. Those who agree with Chomsky's general grammatical view deny the existence of the phenomenon of language transfer. Nowadays, the role of language transfer in second language acquisition has been widely recognized and has formed a more comprehensive theory.

Behavioral linguistics, on the other hand, states that the phenomenon of "language transfer" is caused by the accumulated knowledge and habits over a long period of time. The more knowledge and skills a person receives, the more likely it is that the new knowledge they learn will have the characteristics of previous experiences and activities ^[6]. Because the culture and habits he has had before will create resistance and shock to the new content they are learning, they will learn so that the learner, to a large extent, chooses to give up. So, for adults, training them in the transfer of old knowledge to new knowledge is an essential part of learning. For a child, if he were sent to live and study in a target language country before the age of five ^[7], he would progress very quickly in second language acquisition, especially in listening and speaking. For the reason that when children learn a second language, they will be less affected by the negative migration of their mother tongue.

3. Current empirical research

In the book *Language Transfer* compiled by Odin (2001), it is mentioned that “language transfer has been the central issue in applied linguistics, second language acquisition and language research for at least a century.” As a result, it is vital to study second foreign language acquisition to understand the influencing factors in the process of acquisition. While in the primary stage of second language learning, it is often the case that learners cannot master the grammar rules of the target language skillfully, but unconsciously use the rules of their mother tongue to process the information of the target language. This is mainly because the mother tongue and the target language usually have certain similarities in some basic concepts and common usages, which to a large extent can help learners to learn and apply the L2. However, with the continuous deepening of learning, learners need to achieve the ideal proficiency, especially in oral English; that is, it is not easy to have a fluent conversation with foreigners and freely express their ideas, but there are often many errors in understanding or expression. Most of the reasons are that learners use the target language according to the thinking and habits of their mother tongue, which more or less affects the acquisition of the second language. Such influence is negative and hinders the learning of the target language.

Many people hold the negative transfer of their mother tongue as the main reason for not being able to learn a foreign language well ^[8]. It is thought that English and Chinese belong to different language families, which are far apart in terms of pronunciation rules, sentence structure, and mode of thinking. The “shadow” of the mother tongue influences students’ achievement in English learning and also causes them to have concerns and hesitation when communicating in English. Therefore, many teachers deny the role of the mother tongue in English learning and strive to oppose the mother tongue in the classroom, emphasizing the use of foreign language conversation to implement foreign language teaching.

Students are also afraid to open their mouths because of their concerns about saying so-called “Chinese English.” If the teacher only emphasizes the difference between the mother tongue and the target language in the teaching activities, only requires the learner to guard against the negative transfer of the mother tongue, then the formula of “interlingual = difficulty” put forward by Lado (1957) and widely accepted by linguists will come into effect, and the learner’s mind is the negative influence of the mother tongue in foreign language learning.

Negative transfer can often lead to language errors and learning difficulties ^[9]. For example, the plural of nouns in Chinese is generally embodied in the corresponding quantifiers, which results in students in English expression will often forget to add “-s” or “-es” after the noun; “我非常喜欢……” (I like very much) is also easy to be said literally as “I very like ...”. Another example is that the Chinese often use “请” (please) when expressing politeness. Therefore, Chinese students are accustomed to speaking English with “please” to express politeness but rarely use other expressions such as “Would you ...?” “Could you ...?” “Do you mind ...?” These are common language errors in everyday communication. The traditional linguistic view is that the mother tongue has only a negative effect on foreign language learning, or that the mother tongue interferes with second language acquisition.

As Fromkin and Rodman pointed out in 2018 that the more linguists are doing with the survey of thousands of languages in the world, the more detailed the differences between them are described ^[10], the more they find that these differences are limited, and the common phenomenon of language (linguistic universals) involves all grammatical components, including the interrelationships between them, as well as the manifestation of grammatical rules. These principles constitute universal grammar, while universal

grammar is the basis of the specific syntax of each language for human beings ^[11]. According to the study of language typology, the language of the world has many commonalities, such as the form of expressing negation, doubt, and causality, while the explicit structural rules are different. Although there are many differences in structure between Chinese and Indo-European languages in the Han and Tibetan languages, they are far apart in linguistic types, because of the existence of universal grammar, the commonness between them will still promote the study of the second language. This makes native Chinese speakers aware of the commonality between Chinese and English and encourages them to use their indigenous language knowledge to promote their English learning. The commonness of inter-lingual can enhance learners' learning confidence and learning motivation. When learning a foreign language, we should not and cannot isolate the target language from the mother tongue. Chinese can play a distinctive role in English learning; learners' English level and mother tongue performance are generally positively correlated. It also illustrates the progressive migration of the mother tongue.

4. Proposed application in teaching

The cultivation and exercise of writing ability are an essential category in language teaching. Writing skill is also an intuitive reflection of a student's comprehensive language literacy. As a senior high school English course, in the process of training students' writing ability, it is often found that students are influenced by the negative transfer of their mother tongue and there are usually some Chinglish expressions in students' writing. Whether in the application of vocabulary, grammar, or writing thinking, these traces of L1 transfer are very obvious. Teachers are liable to gradually deepen the guidance of students to avoid the negative transfer of students, so as to improve students' overall writing ability progressively.

4.1. Vocabulary transfer

First of all, L1 transfer can be demonstrated by the application of vocabulary in students' writing, which is very common ^[12]. There are many different significant differences in the way of expression as well as usage between Chinese and English. If students only choose the appropriate vocabulary according to numerous inaccurate situations, there will be some issues like abuse of words. Teachers should be skilled at collecting students' typical mistakes in teaching and use the analysis of examples to deepen students' impression. Only in this way can students slowly correct some inappropriate word usage and let students have more accurate language expression in their articles.

In Chinese, actually, “ 们 ” is often added after nouns to express the forms of singular or plural. However, there are countable and uncountable nouns in English, and uncountable nouns have no plural form, which most Chinese students miss when changing the form of nouns ^[13]. The errors in understanding and use of vocabulary, as well as the influence of L1 transfer, will lead to improper use of words in students' exercises. Teachers are required to pay more attention to some common problems of students and gradually correct students' cognitive deviations so that students can slowly develop accurate comprehension and application ability of vocabulary.

4.2. Grammar transfer

Grammar is not just a framework to help students construct sentences, but also an essential factor in determining whether the sentences in students' exercises are smooth and whether the meaning is accurate.

Many students may have many grammatical errors in their practice, and many of these errors are due to the transfer of their mother tongue. Teachers should also have an in-depth understanding of this problem, but also in peacetime to guide and correct some typical issues ^[14]. They should also guide students to construct sentences in English thinking.

Given many apparent differences in grammar between Chinese and English, only by target language thinking instead of their L1 language habit as a guide. This is also a feasible way to avoid the negative transfer of the mother tongue to grammar.

In Chinese sentence expression, there is no rule that there must be an issue; that is to say, the relation between subject and predicate is not very intimate. However, there must be an issue in English so that the meaning of the sentences can be explained. It is for these reasons that students usually omit the corresponding subject in the process of writing, so that the meaning of the sentence is not clear enough. Such a problem is quite common, and many students will encounter it in their exercises. Teachers must conduct in-depth analysis when they encounter such examples so that students are better aware of the correct mode of using grammar knowledge ^[15]. In my class, I will first explain the differences between Chinese and English sentence patterns, which will be emphasized in subsequent teaching. According to the theory of mother tongue transfer, second foreign language learners are vulnerable to the negative transfer of their L1 and discuss problems with students when they make mistakes.

4.3. Thought and cultural impacts

Students are also vulnerable to the influence of their mother tongue on their thinking and culture when writing, which is one reason why there are many very typical “Chinglish” expressions in their articles ^[16]. A large number of Chinglish expressions are obtained under the guidance of Chinese thinking habits and sentence-building methods. In such a process, the language expression will naturally have a lot of errors and unreasonable places. Teachers should change students’ thinking and avoid students’ thinking habits in Chinese as a guide in English writing. Only in this way can students write more authentic expressions and improve students’ comprehensive writing literacy.

Influenced by Chinese culture and corresponding thinking, students will create some Chinglish usage by themselves in the process of writing, namely, to translate English into Chinese according to Chinese usage and language structure. For example, a Chinese idiom “人山人海” (describing “huge crowds of people”) is usually translated into “people mountain people sea” in English thoughtlessly. This kind of problem is prevalent in students’ work, which is also a significant factor influencing its quality. Teachers can be suggested to deepen their guidance to students and make every effort to avoid students’ Chinese expressions in their articles. Only in this way can students write more standardized and accurate articles, which is also a teaching process to promote students’ writing ability. In my class, I will try to avoid the use of Chinese thinking but directly utilize English thinking to organize ideas and article structure.

5. Conclusion

Mother tongue transfer has many direct effects on senior high school English writing teaching. Helping students avoid the negative transfer of the mother tongue is also an important goal of writing teaching ^[2]. Teachers should give further targeted instructions to students in terms of vocabulary use, sentence expression, and writing thinking. They should try their best to reduce the undesirable transfer of the mother tongue and help

students avoid some typical problems. Only in this way can students' writing level be exercised, and the quality of writing teaching be improved in an all-around way.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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