

The Negative Influence of Chinese L1 on English L2 Writing

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Abstract: L1 is, generally, believed to affect the acquisition of second language negatively. Because there is likely to be a negative transfer from L1 to L2, when the learner lacks sufficient knowledge for communicating his or her ideas in L2 and then draw upon the L1. The transfer includes both positive and negative transfer. However, the role of L1 is more often viewed as negative, causing negative transfer that results in a variety of errors. Generally, English and Chinese do not have many of the shared syntactical features. Hence the syntactic transfer is predictable when using the L2. This may lead to such errors as those in the noun phrase, in the verb phrase and various omissions. This paper analyses those errors in English writing, which represent the negative syntactic transfer from Chinese to English. Moreover, it discusses in details the particular causes for that transfer and propose improving the awareness of the syntactic distinction between these two languages in Chinese students.

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1 Introduction

This paper aims to investigate the the influence of L1 Chinese on L2 English with regard to syntactic transfer. Whenever the L2 learners have difficulties applying the rules of L2, the negative transfer of syntax may take place from L1 to L2 resulting possibly from lack of sufficient knowledge of the target language (Ellis, 1985). More evident is this when the L1 and L2 are so different, such as English and Chinese, that triggers off errors. Although there

exists both positive and negative transfer, in SLA studies the transfer caused by L1 is more likely to be perceived as negative (Ellis, 1985). The negative transfer will be discussed on the basis of transfer theories, hoping to address such questions as: (1) What does “negative transfer” refer to ? (2) Why does the “negative transfer” occur, specifically from Chinese to English? (3) Under what condition does it take place? (4) What impact does it have on the L2 learning, especially on writing? (5) Why and how does the syntactic transfer cause Chinese students to commit errors when writing in English?

Besides, given the population of China, it seems to boast the largest number of English learners than any other nation, many of whom are struggling with English*, particularly in writing. Writing accounts for the lowest scores among the four modules—listening (5.8) , speaking (5.3) , reading (5.9) and writing (5.2) . It may be to a large extent due to the negative transfer from L1 (Chinese) to L2(English) when composing, particularly in relation to syntactic transfer.

English differs from Chinese in construction, with each having its own syntactical features.

Due to the influence of L1, Chinese learners frequently transfer unconsciously Chinese syntactic patterns to English, which leads to a variety of errors. Therefore, this paper will discuss in depth the negative transfer of syntax from Chinese to English, in the hope of facilitating Chinese students writing in English to produce less errors.

1 Negative Transfer from L1 to L2

1.1 Theories of Language Transfer

According to behaviorist learning theory, leaning a new language means developing a new habit

when the stimulus-response of L1 differs from that of L2. Behaviorist saw SLA as a process of habit-formation (Ellis, 1985). With regard to SLA, 'the grammatical apparatus programmed into the mind as the first language interferes with the smooth acquisition of the second' (Bright and McGregor, 1970:236; cited in Ellis, 1985:22). It is the proactive inhibition, concerning the means by which previous learning prevents the learning of new habits, that result in interference. In SLA, if the first and second language share a meaning but expressed in different ways, this may evoke a negative transfer, which is likely to cause an error because the realization device from L1 will be transferred to L2. However, there, of course, exists instance where L1 and L2 have the shared means for expressing the meaning. In such case, an error is less likely to occur, as the realization devices are the same in the two languages. Therefore, the difference between L1 and L2 make large contributions to learning difficulties resulting in errors. In contrast, similarities between L1 and L2 help speed up the learning of L2 (Ellis, 1985).

The Contrastive Analysis(CA) originated from the practical need to teach L2 efficiently.

Lado (1957, cited in Ellis, 1985) indicates that a pedagogy may be more effective and useful, if taking into account the disparities and similarities between L1 and L2. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis(CAH), as the fundamental theory of the psychological aspect of CA, suggests that where the L1 and L2 are similar, there is a higher chance of success in L2 learning, resulting in "positive transfer". On the other hand, where the two languages are different, the learning will more or less be difficult. CAH also claims that the degree of difficulty L2 learners experience is directly related to the difference between the L1 and L2. As the difficulty takes the form of errors, the greater the difficulty is, the more errors will occur. The pedagogic purpose of CA is "to predict the area of difficulty that learners with specific L1 would experience, so that teaching could provide massive practice to eliminate the chance of errors induced by the first language" (Ellis, 1985:28). Researchers, however, who are opposite to this view, argue that many of the errors produced by L2 is not related o L1 (Ellis, 1985). Later, CA is challenged in terms of the ability to predict errors, of the feasibility of making comparison between languages and of the applicability to L2 teaching. According to Ellis

(1985) , the revised CAH reveals:(1) The difficulty CA predicts may be put down to avoidance other than error. (2) The interference is more likely to take place when there is some similarity between L1 and L2 items than when there is total difference. (3) Multiple factors make contribution to errors and interference, interacting in complex ways with one another.

1.2 The Negative Transfer form L1 to L2

Negative transfer is also called 'interference'. As Lee (1968) puts it that the learner's native language, which results in interference, is taken as the prime cause of difficulty and errors in L2 learning. Some researchers further argue that the process of SLA is that of eliminating the impacts of the native tongue on target language (Ellis, 1985).

It is assumed that , the greater the difference, the greater the difficulty and the more errors will be made (Ellis, 1985). Finnish-speaking learners of English, for example, encounter more obstacles and produce relatively more errors in learning English, when compared with their Swedish-speaking counterparts, whose native language is closer to English. As Finnish is not related to English or other Germanic languages, a Finn cannot infer a given English word he has not met before, for the mother tongue he can draw upon to infer rarely shares lexical items with English (Ringbom, 1986).

Conversely, a Swedish-speaking Fin, whose 'basic knowledge of Swedish can easily be extended to an automatized receptive knowledge of a related Germanic Language' (Ringbom, 1986:153), can more easily infer its meaning in the light of its similarity or partial similarity to this word in his L1. In addition, the lack of formal similarities of articles and prepositions in Finnish leads to a negative transfer , resulting in more errors in both translation and guided composition. As Ringbom(1986) notes: 'Finnish case endings have a number of important functions other than those expressed by English prepositions, and (in)definiteness in Finnish is expressed by a complex network of lexical, morphological and syntactic (e.g. word-order) devices'. Compared to Finns, Swedes can more easily develop a receptive competence through the established crosslinguistic simplified equivalence, while Finnish learners of English may suffer frustrations in understanding high-frequency words like prepositions, not existing in their L1. Based on what has been mentioned

above, it is normal to draw the conclusion that those whose native language is closer to the target language will be able to understand a spoken or written text in that language more quickly and better. Although, the difference resulting from the distance between L1 and target language rests mainly on the development of receptive competence, this competence provides the basis for the development of productive competence such as writing. (Ringbom, 1986)

However, it is not always true that the greater difference between L1 and L2, the greater

difficulty the learner of L2 will encounter, and the more errors will appear. When the L1 differs utterly from the L2, the learner may experience little interference, because there is little previous knowledge in the L1 he can draw upon to facilitate the learning of unrelated language. Lee (1968), cited in Ellis (1985) reported that he experienced little interference when learning Chinese, which is so different from his mother tongue-English.

Not only does the difference cause negative transfer, but the similarity also does. The similarity between the native language and the target language is normally believed to facilitate rapid and easy learning of the new language. However, interference is in fact more likely to take place when there is "a crucial similarity measure" (Wode, 1976; cited in Ellis 1985). English learners of German L1, for example, may produce errors in post-verb negation (e.g. "Kobe play not basketball?") and in inverted full verb interrogatives (e.g. "Go John shopping today?"), both of which are attributed to the similar structure of German. Skaggs and Robinson (1927), cited in Ellis (1985), even argue that "interference is greatest when there is a certain degree of similarity".

Briefly, the distance between L1 and L2 may trigger off interference or errors, whereas if the two languages are extremely different, there may be little interference because they share little in common, either in lexical items or syntactic structures. On the other hand, the similarity is also believed to be able to cause errors in some cases.

2 The Syntactic Negative Transfer from Chinese to English

2.1 Types of Errors caused by Syntactic Transfer

It is when the L2 learners have difficulties applying the rules of L2, or lack sufficient knowledge about the

rules of the target language, that a syntactic transfer from the native tongue to the target language may occur. This is because the distance existing between the two languages, particularly if they are not related such as English and Chinese, is likely to trigger off errors, as a result of 'negative transfer'. This section will analyze those errors in English writing, which represent the negative syntactic transfer from Chinese to English.

Firstly, errors in the use of noun phrases are largely concerned with the use of articles. With regard to modern English, the article serves as a modifier, used before a noun to specify or generalize it. The article and the noun are supposed to comprise noun phrases. English articles consist generally of three types: the definite article 'the', the indefinite articles 'a' and 'an' and zero article. Chinese students come across considerable difficulty in using articles properly. This is because such grammatical items do not exist in Chinese and the usage of English article itself is extremely complicated, with plenty of exceptions to the rules of the use of English articles. Undoubtedly, this leads Chinese-speaking learners of English to produce such errors as omission, redundancy, and miss-selection of articles. That 'they will learn a lesson that is not good habit to waste money' (Guo, 2011), for example, is erroneous because of omitting an 'a' before "habit" which is a singular countable noun. Secondly, there has been errors in prepositional phrases. Prepositions exist both in Chinese and English. English, defined as an analytic language, cannot overlook the importance of prepositional phrases which, as Bander notes (cited in Lian, 1993), reveals the relation of a noun or substitute for a noun to a given word in a sentence. In Chinese, however, verbs are used on the basis of its function. Consequently, prepositions are more frequently used in English than in Chinese. Chinese-speaking learners, as are influenced by native tongue, are more prone to errors in whether or not use a preposition and in choosing an appropriate one. For example, the miss-selection about the preposition is engendered in the sentence that there is a piece of appalling news on today's newspaper that an earthquake of magnitude 7 took place in Sichuan, China. Next, the difference in the use of verb phrases between English and Chinese can also cause errors. English verbs are categorized into transitive and intransitive. The former is supposed to be followed by objects

directly while the latter must collocate with a given preposition. This phenomenon, however, does not exist in Chinese, that is all of the verbs can realize the purpose by themselves, but rather must function with a given preposition. Unsurprisingly, this difference will produce a abundance of erroneous sentences. For instance, the sentence that Participating school activities can help to develop social skills drops “in” before “school” because the Chinese verb that “participate” correspond to is not necessarily with a preposition to function.

Besides, Chinese is a dynamic language, whereas English is a relatively static one. In

English, a sentence normally comprises of merely one predicate. Even if more than one action is needed to express, only one verb will be then chosen as the predicate, whereas the others will be used as non-predicate forms like the participle or the infinitive. In Chinese, there is no limitation on how many verbs can be used in a sentence, requiring no form variation. Hence, Chinese L1 learners tend to produce an English sentence with more than one what English-native speakers regard as predicate, such as the sentence-These students study very hard will have a good grade in their final examination of this semester.

Sharing the basic SVO typology (Subject–Verb–Object), English and Chinese have much in common in relation to word order. Compared to Chinese, English has more flexible word order. Therefore, although these two languages share the basic SVO order, other elements in a sentence are often in different positions. It is predictable that Chinese learners tend to produce a English sentence according to the word order of Chinese, which often result in errors, such as: Jack also can tackle this thorny problem.

Omission refers to a word being missing when it should be used in a sentence. The omission of certain words means the omission of sentence constituents, which leads to unclear meaning and broken clauses. When the predicative is in Chinese an adjective or prepositional phrase, the copular verb might be omitted, while it is quite another matter in English. Influenced by mother tongue, Chinese students may commit the errors as omitting the copula or auxiliary verbs, for example: ‘Don’t_ afraid of reading the original texts of Shakespeare’.

Finally, Chinese-English sentences refers to

English sentences produced by Chinese students, which can be traceable to Chinese, often not being compatible with English rules. Also, it is the result of literal translation, seeking counterparts to the Chinese meanings. This may cause misunderstanding or cannot get one’s words across. Such as: (1)Long time no see you. (2) The price is very suitable for me.

Based on these instances above, there is no denying the fact that numerous errors are attributed to the negative transfer of syntax. It will be beneficial and of great help to L2 learners, if they are aware of the syntactic distinction between their mother tongue and second language.

2.2 Discussion of the Negative Transfer from Chinese L1 to English L2

There are two possible causes accounting for the ‘negative transfer’ from Chinese L1 to English L2. First, Since L1 influences the way people ‘perceive, organize and communicate’(Yang 2010:34), Chinese-speaking students are used to Chinese thinking patterns. As Yang (2010;51) argues : ‘Negative transfer of syntactic knowledge is in fact that of thought patterns’. The way people think is associated with language and implies their thought patterns. This is because the language is a significant means by which to simplify and categorize human experience, the experience which can be interpreted as “thought patterns”. Speakers of Chinese, having different ways of thinking for speaking than English-native speakers (at least at syntactic level), may adopt different ways of thinking, which leads to negative language transfer. Besides, the lack of comprehensible input may also cause ‘negative transfer’. In China, people cannot acquire the knowledge of English in the same way as they do of Chinese, as English is learned as second language in China. More important, learners have few opportunities to use English to communicate with or write to a native-speaker in everyday life. The less you practice, the less proficient you are. Hence, Chinese students tend to draw upon Chinese Syntax when they speak or write English due to lack of practice in real life (Yang, 2010).

Improving student’s awareness may of syntactic difference between Chinese and English may reduce the errors ascribed to syntactic transfer. That is, grammar teaching is of great importance for Chinese students to improve their English writing. Taught grammar, Chinese students would master the rules

and though patterns which are in accordance with those in English. However, the traditional grammar instruction in China lays much emphasis on the explanation of words, rules and the constructure of sentences. Consequently, students may produce sentences without grammatical errors but read unnatural by English-native speakers. Therefore, teachers should make a change in order to make up for the drawbacks of traditional grammar instruction. One of the methods feasible can be to analyze the difference between Chinese and English in relation to word usages, sentences structures, paragraph development and other syntactic factors (Yin, 2006).

3 Conclusion

L1 is, generally, believed to affect the acquisition of second language negatively. Because there is likely to be a negative transfer from L1 to L2, when the learner lacks sufficient knowledge for communicating his or her ideas in L2 and then draw upon the L1. The transfer includes both positive and negative transfer. However, the role of L1 is more often viewed as negative, causing negative transfer that results in a variety of errors.

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