

Migration and Reconstruction: A Study on the Positive Transfer Effect of Chinese Thinking on the Cognitive Understanding of English Etymology

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Abstract: In the field of second language acquisition, mother tongue transfer has long been a heated research topic. Starting from the positive boosting effect of Chinese thinking on English etymology cognition, this paper explores issues in English vocabulary teaching and etymology learning, helping students sort out the evolutionary context of English etymological semantics and reconstruct the overall cognitive framework of English etymology, which conforms to students' cognitive laws and the needs of language ability cultivation. Based on this, this paper analyzes the positive transfer effect of Chinese thinking on the cognitive understanding of English etymology from the perspectives of phonetic thinking, word-formation thinking, semantic thinking and cognitive mode, clarifies the boundary between positive transfer and negative transfer, and puts forward English etymology teaching strategies to exert the positive transfer effect of Chinese thinking, aiming to promote the high-quality development of English education.

Keywords: Chinese thinking; English etymology; Positive transfer; Language acquisition

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The English vocabulary system is huge with complex etymological structures, including a large number of derivatives, compounds and cognates. Students tend to fall into the dilemma of fragmented vocabulary memory and vague etymological understanding, making it difficult to establish a systematic vocabulary knowledge system. Teachers need to explore effective teaching methods to help students break through the bottleneck of vocabulary learning. Studies have found that different languages share certain similarities in expression and thinking modes. By reconstructing English etymology cognition based on the common points of Chinese and English etymology evolution rules, students can effectively reduce learning difficulty,

providing a new idea for teachers to innovate teaching methods. However, traditional English teaching emphasizes the interference of Chinese on English learning, such as the negative transfer caused by word order differences and part-of-speech changes, and rarely pays attention to the positive transfer value derived from their commonalities^[1]. How to exert the positive transfer effect of Chinese thinking and improve students' English etymology cognition ability by deeply exploring the commonalities between Chinese thinking and English etymology is a question that front-line teachers need to explore in depth.

1.2. Research purpose

Define the core concepts of Chinese thinking, English etymology, cognition and language positive transfer, and sort out the internal logical relationship among the three.

- (1) Systematically analyze the specific positive transfer manifestations of Chinese thinking on English etymology cognition, and discuss the positive transfer effect combined with typical etymology cases.
- (2) Clarify the applicable boundary of positive transfer and put forward targeted teaching and learning strategies.

1.3 Research methods

- (1) Literature research method: Sort out relevant literature on language transfer theory, cognitive linguistics, English etymology and English-Chinese contrastive studies to lay a theoretical foundation for subsequent research.
- (2) Contrastive analysis method: Compare the similarities and differences between Chinese and English in the phonetic system, word-formation mode, semantic evolution and cognitive mode, and extract their commonalities to provide a theoretical basis for positive transfer analysis.
- (3) Case analysis method: Select English words of different etymologies and word-formation types, disassemble etymological structures combined with the corresponding logic of Chinese thinking, and analyze the promoting effect of positive transfer on etymology cognition.

1.4. Research significance

- (1) Theoretical significance: Enrich the application scenarios of language transfer theory and expand the research scope of cognitive linguistics and English-Chinese vocabulary contrast theory.
- (2) Practical significance: Put forward targeted English etymology teaching strategies and provide a reference for teachers to carry out teaching innovation.

2. Core concept definition and theoretical basis

2.1. Core concept definition

2.1.1. Chinese thinking

Chinese thinking refers to the unique way of thinking formed by people with Chinese as their mother tongue in the process of cognizing, understanding and expressing the world. It is influenced by many factors such as Chinese language structure, cultural tradition and social environment.

2.1.2. English etymology cognition

English etymology cognition refers to learners' understanding of the origin, evolution, composition and

meaning development of English vocabulary. It is the basis for students to sort out the context of meaning evolution, deeply understand and flexibly use vocabulary, which is crucial for students.

2.1.3. Language positive transfer

Language positive transfer is a core concept in second language acquisition, referring to the positive promoting effect of mother tongue language rules and thinking modes on target language learning.

2.2. Theoretical basis

2.2.1. Language transfer theory

Derived from behaviorist psychology, language transfer theory holds that learners will unconsciously transfer the knowledge system and thinking mode of their mother tongue to second language acquisition. This transfer is divided into positive transfer and negative transfer. The type of transfer depends on the similarity between the mother tongue and the target language: the higher the similarity, the greater the possibility of positive transfer, and vice versa ^[2,3].

2.2.2. Cognitive linguistics theory

Cognitive linguistics emphasizes that language is the product of human cognitive activities, and language structure is highly consistent with the way humans cognize the world. This theory provides a perspective for studying the positive transfer effect of Chinese thinking on the cognitive understanding of English etymology. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, English and Chinese share common thinking, and the acquisition of any language needs to follow certain cognitive laws ^[4,5].

3. Positive transfer manifestations of Chinese thinking on English etymology cognition

3.1. Positive transfer of phonetic thinking: Consolidating the cognitive basis of etymological pronunciation

Although Chinese and English belong to ideographic and phonetic writing, respectively, their phonetic systems have certain correspondence. The Chinese pinyin spelling and syllable division thinking can be positively transferred to English phonetic symbol spelling and etymological phonetic tracing. For example, Chinese pinyin forms syllables with initials and finals, and English phonetic symbols also similarly form pronunciation units. Transferring the thinking of splitting syllables and coherent spelling in Chinese pinyin to English phonetic symbol learning helps students accurately understand the pronunciation rules of English words. In addition, some ancient Chinese pronunciations coincidentally correspond to English word pronunciations, which can open a new window of etymology cognition for students and assist them in memorizing etymologies. For instance, the English word “tea” originates from the pronunciation of Southern Min dialect. Teachers can guide students to pay attention to this phonetic connection, enabling them to intuitively feel the link between English etymology and Chinese, thus enhancing the memory of English word pronunciation ^[6].

3.2. Positive transfer of word-formation thinking: Solving the core logic of etymological structure

Chinese word formation mainly adopts the mode of “root + radical/affix” to form diverse vocabulary. In

English, a large number of words are composed of roots, prefixes and suffixes. The root carries the core meaning, prefixes change word meaning, and suffixes change part of speech, which is consistent with Chinese word-formation logic. This word-formation thinking can be transferred to English etymological cognition to help students understand the core logic of English etymological structure^[7]. For example, the Chinese prefix “老-” (old) is used in words like “老师” (teacher) and “老人” (elderly), indicating seniority and respect. Similarly, the English root “sen-” means senior, as in “senior” and “senate”. In addition, the compound word-formation thinking in Chinese can also be transferred to the etymological cognition of English compounds. For example, “足球” (football) and “火车” (train) are combined by two roots, and English words like “bookstore” and “football” follow the same logic. Teachers guiding students to transfer the word-formation logic of Chinese compounds to English etymology cognition helps them understand the etymological composition and core meaning of compounds^[8].

3.3. Positive transfer of semantic thinking: Sorting out the evolutionary context of etymological semantics

Chinese semantic extension follows the rule of “from concrete to abstract, from literal to figurative”. For example, the original meaning of “道” is road, extended to abstract meanings such as principle, method and law. This semantic evolution logic in Chinese is highly consistent with the semantic evolution path of English etymology, providing a reference for students to understand the root and evolution of English word meanings. Many English words also evolve from concrete to abstract. For example, “root” originally means the root of a plant, extended to abstract meanings such as origin; “face” originally means the concrete thing of face, later extended to abstract meanings such as surface and aspect^[9,10]. Meanwhile, the semantic contrast thinking of synonyms and antonyms in Chinese can also realize positive transfer in English etymology cognition, helping students accurately distinguish the subtle differences between cognates and synonymous words and improve the accuracy of vocabulary understanding. For example, “快” (fast) and “慢” (slow) are typical antonyms in Chinese, and “fast” and “slow” are also antonyms in English. Teachers guiding students to explore the semantic differences of English antonyms combined with the semantic relationship of Chinese antonyms reduces the difficulty for students to understand word meanings^[11].

3.4. Positive transfer of cognitive mode: Reconstructing the overall cognitive framework of etymology

Chinese thinking focuses on overall cognition and comprehensive understanding, accustomed to building connections between things from the core meaning and grasping the whole picture^[12]. This cognitive mode plays an important positive transfer role in English etymology cognition. The positive transfer of cognitive mode helps students solve the problem of fragmented memory of English etymology and build a systematic etymology cognitive framework. Compared with the traditional English etymology cognition method of mechanically memorizing single words as completely independent individuals, the new model, drawing on Chinese overall thinking, enables students to connect related derivatives, compounds and cognates with roots as the core, forming an organic vocabulary network and significantly improving memory efficiency. For example, teachers guiding students to connect words like “visit”, “visible,” and “television” with the root “vis-” helps students draw inferences about other cases in English etymology cognition^[13]. In addition, the contextual meaning thinking in Chinese also provides a reference for English etymology cognition and realizes positive transfer in students’ learning. For example, “深” (deep) has different meanings in different

contexts in Chinese, and the same is true in English; the same word changes semantically in different contexts. Teachers can guide students to draw on Chinese contextual meaning thinking to understand word meanings combined with specific usage scenarios, enabling students to accurately grasp the actual meaning and usage of English words.

4. Boundaries of positive transfer of Chinese thinking

Chinese and English belong to different language families with significant differences in language essence, which determines that the positive transfer of Chinese thinking to English etymological cognition is not unlimited. It is necessary to clarify the transfer boundary in teaching and learning to avoid excessive transfer turning into negative transfer. Firstly, English is an inflectional language with strict part-of-speech, tense and singular-plural changes, while Chinese is an isolating language without morphological changes, which should be noted in the positive transfer of Chinese thinking.

Secondly, English etymology includes loanwords from multiple language families, and the semantics and word-formation logic of some words are quite different from Chinese, so it is necessary to avoid forcibly applying Chinese thinking to interpret English etymology cognition.

Finally, different cultural backgrounds endow languages with unique cultural connotations, and Chinese cultural semantics cannot directly replace English cultural semantics.

5. English etymology teaching strategies based on positive transfer of Chinese thinking

5.1. Construct an English-Chinese word-formation contrastive teaching system to strengthen root and affix transfer

Teachers should improve the effect of English etymology teaching by constructing an English-Chinese word-formation contrastive teaching system. That is to guide students to compare the word-formation logic of Chinese radicals/affixes and English roots/affixes, extract the commonalities between them, and disassemble English etymological structures by drawing on Chinese word-formation thinking. For example, the Chinese prefix “老-” indicates seniority. Teachers guide students to memorize words by comparing similar word-formation methods in Chinese and English, helping them master word meanings and structures more quickly^[14].

5.2. Carry out associative etymology teaching based on the commonality of semantic evolution

Combined with the commonalities of Chinese and English in semantic thinking, teachers can take Chinese semantic extension cases as teaching materials, guide students to contrast the semantic evolution paths of English etymology, and help them master the universal semantic rules of English “from concrete to abstract”. Teachers guiding students to explore the core etymological meaning of English words, combined with the thinking habit of Chinese semantic extension, and gradually expand the understanding of word meanings to extended and figurative meanings, help students accurately grasp word meanings and build a knowledge network of word semantics^[15].

5.3. Define the transfer boundary and carry out contrastive error correction teaching

In the process of exerting the positive transfer effect of Chinese thinking, teachers should guide students to

distinguish and summarize the differences between English and Chinese etymologies, such as setting error correction exercises to help students distinguish the applicable scenarios of positive transfer.

6. Conclusion and prospect

To sum up, Chinese thinking and English etymology cognition are not opposites but share common thinking, which determines the positive transfer effect of Chinese thinking on the cognitive understanding of English etymology. Specifically, the positive transfer effect of Chinese thinking is mainly reflected in four dimensions: phonetic spelling, word-formation logic, semantic evolution and cognitive mode. Teachers analyzing the positive transfer effect of Chinese thinking on the cognitive understanding of English etymology from the perspectives of phonetic thinking, word-formation thinking, semantic thinking and cognitive mode, and adopting measures such as the English-Chinese word-formation contrastive teaching system and contrastive error correction teaching to strengthen the positive transfer effect of Chinese thinking, help improve students' learning efficiency. In the future, with the deepening research of cognitive linguistics and English-Chinese vocabulary contrast theory, teachers can further expand the application scenarios of positive transfer of Chinese thinking in English etymology teaching, combined with modern teaching technologies and methods.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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