

Negative Transfer and the Teaching in College English Writing

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In learning a second or foreign language, the learners' mother tongue has a big effect on it. The influence of the mother tongue is called language transfer in foreign language research. The language transfer can be positive or negative transfer. Negative transfer quite common in writing is a weak point for students and also a difficult teaching point for teachers. In this paper, the common errors which are due to the negative transfer of mother tongue in the process of writing in English are collected and analyzed in lexical, syntactic, and discourse aspects. Then, some possible ways to avoid negative transfer in English writing are suggested.

Keywords: negative transfer, errors, English writing

Introduction

In educational psychology theory, transfer refers to a learned behavior which is transferred from one situation to another one. The research on language transfer started at the 1950s. Lado in his *Linguistics Across Culture* (1957) pointed out that language learners tend to transfer the language patterns and meanings of their mother tongue and culture into the ones of another foreign language they are learning. The transfer can be shown both in their speaking and behaviors concerning the learned foreign language and in the process of understanding the foreign language and its culture. Selinker (1972), when talking about the five factors having effect on the building of interlanguage system, put the language transfer in the first place. It is believed that the original habits in their mother tongue sometimes promote the second language learning (that is positive transfer) and sometimes hinder it (that is negative transfer). Language transfer really exists in the process of second language learning. Students' writing is language output materials, which provide good chances to do research on second language learning. In this paper, the common errors which are due to the negative transfer of mother tongue in the process of writing in English are collected and analyzed in lexical, syntactic, and discourse aspects in order to find out possible ways to avoid negative transfer in English writing.

Mother Tongue Transfer in the Second Language Acquisition

Language learning is a process to cultivate thinking pattern. Once a thinking pattern is built in one's brain, it will be printed on the brain and influence one's language expression forms. Thinking is composed of language. Without language, there is no thinking. It is mother tongue that first forms thinking pattern in the brain. And after it is formed, the thinking pattern of mother tongue will intentionally or unintentionally has an effect on foreign

language learning. The thinking pattern of mother tongue and the thinking pattern of the foreign language have not only something similar but also something different.

So the thinking pattern of mother tongue has both positive and negative transfer to foreign language learning. For adults, learning a second language is different from their first language. Before the second language learning, plenty of mother tongue conceptions, a certain thinking pattern and language habits are formed in the adults' mind. In the course of foreign language learning, adults naturally use their mother tongue to help understanding and apply the foreign language. Since the mother tongue and the foreign language have some common points in basic concepts and regular usages, the learners master the foreign language in a certain degree by their mother tongue. For example: with some vocabulary, learners are easy to translate such sentences: (1) 他教我法语 (He teaches me French); and (2) 她是一个漂亮的女孩 (She is a beautiful girl). Such positive transfers are very common and really help their foreign language learning in a large measure, especially at early stage. But as the learning goes further, it is found that although some learners feel good at a foreign language, there are still many obstacles in understanding and expressing while they communicate with foreigners. The cause is that they apply what they learn by their mother tongue thinking pattern and usages. That is to say, the negative transfer of their mother tongue appears in the communication. Both positive and negative transfers go with learners and play a role in their own ways at different stages. Positive transfer is an advantage while negative transfer is a disadvantage.

The Influence of Negative Transfer on Chinese Students' Writing

Chinese negative transfer results from the difference between English and Chinese, which lies mainly in culture background and linguistic knowledge. The acquisition of new knowledge or new techniques is bound to be affected by mastered knowledge or techniques. In the acquisition of second language, the negative transfer is a big problem, which brings difficulties and mistakes in learning. *College English Teaching Syllabus* (1999) pointed out that the purpose of college English teaching is to cultivate students to possess the strong ability of listening, speaking, writing, and translation, which makes them communicate better with English. So writing plays an important role in college English teaching. Although students work hard on writing, their writing level is far from satisfactory. A case in point is that the average point of writing in College English Test (band 4 or 6) is below the normal standard. So the main task in teaching is to assist students to write directly, coherently, and naturally in English with correct usage of words, sentences rather than do Chinese translation.

According to the analysis of the errors in students' writing, the negative transfer is one of the main obstacles in writing. The writer makes a survey of 90 first-year students' writings and finds out that the negative transfer results in most of the errors apart from some errors of poor command of English language knowledge.

The Error Analysis of Students' Writing in the Aspect of Negative Transfer

English is different from Chinese in expression habits and thinking patterns, but students unconsciously impose Chinese language regulations on word choices and sentence making in English writing. The influence of negative transfer is quite inevitable. Negative transfer has been one of the main problems to Chinese students and it is also a tough problem to teachers. The appearance of negative transfer has something to do not only with learners' cognitive competence but also with ignorance of developing students' relevant ability in teaching.

English writing tests students' ability of English application. What we call "Chinglish expressions" results from thinking pattern of mother tongue. The transformation of the thinking pattern starts from lexical, syntactic, and discourse aspects, which are the key points to write in English successfully.

Negative Transfer in Lexical Aspect

Negative transfer in word meaning. Ringbom (1987) found out that during the research on vocabulary learning of second language, the main errors result from the equal transfer with one-sided meaning to another language. In the course of vocabulary learning of second language, a new word in the second language is usually identified with the old one in one's mother tongue on the basis of his original concept in mind, and the concept difference and semantic boundary are overlooked¹ (see Example 1).

Example (1) * He has been doubted theft. (他被怀疑有偷窃行为。)

In Chinese, "doubt" and "suspect" are both given Chinese definition—怀疑. But in English, "doubt" means to not believe, and "suspect" means to have an idea that sb. is guilty of sth., without having definite proof. For an English word, there is an exact, partial, or no Chinese equivalent in meaning. Students tend to focus on a word's Chinese definition, but have no clear idea about a word's literal meaning and implied meaning, which leads to negative transfer. So the correct sentence should be:

◆ He has been suspected of theft.

Example (2) * "Please open the television." (请打开电视。)

Example (3) * to see a book (看书)

Example (4) * to eat medicine (吃药)

Such errors in the usage of words are due to the fact that students apply a word or a pattern from Chinese mechanically to English, which causes the negative transfer (see Examples 2-4).

Negative transfer (confusion) in part of speech. Halliday (1993) once pointed out that in Chinese scientific literature, there are many cases that nouns are used as verbs and adjectives are used as verbs. Since there are no affixes to indicate part of speech in Chinese, it is difficult to distinguish the part of speech of a Chinese word. One Chinese word usually has different syntactic functions with different parts of speech. Chinese students tend to transfer the feature of part of speech in Chinese words to the English word learning, which results in errors in English word application (see Example 5).

Example (5) * She found it extreme difficult to get a job.

In English, an adverb is used to modify an adjective. So adverb "extremely" should be used before adjective "difficult". So the correct sentence should be:

◆ She found it extremely difficult to get a job.

Example (6) * On the train, please careful.

In Example (6), the student mistakes an adjective for a verb. The error lies in the influence of one word with several parts of speech. So the correct sentence should be:

◆ On the train, please take care.

Improper word collocation. Word collocation refers to the combination relation among words. The meaning of a collocation is composed of all kinds of associations from the combination of different words.

¹ Notes: The following sentences with * are sentences from students' writing. The sentences with ◆ are the corrected sentences.

But the meaning of an English word collocation can not be guessed simply by the meaning of each word in the collocation (see Table 1).

Table 1

Different Understanding Between Chinese and English for One English Collocation

Chinese meaning	English collocation	English meaning
画室	Drawing room	客厅
艰苦劳动	Hard labor	苦役
拖后腿	Pull sb.'s leg	开玩笑
休息室	Rest room	厕所

Example (7) * Because it is very urgent, so we must stop it immediately.

Example (8) * Though we have made progress, but we still have a long way to go.

In English, “because” and “so” or “though” and “but” can not appear in one sentence at the same time (see Examples 7-8). But in Chinese, it is natural to have the two words in one sentence. So students base their English translation on Chinese thinking, which results in negative transfer in word collocation.

Negative Transfer in Syntactic Part

Null subject sentence. Null subject is an important difference between English and Chinese in syntactic structure. A subject is needed in an English sentence, except some rare cases (for example: imperative sentence). But in Chinese, if a subject is a pronoun and is clearly indicated by grammar and pragmatic relation, the subject can be omitted. English is a subject prominent language. It requires clear sentence formation and puts emphasis on complete grammar structure. There should be a subject in a sentence. However, Chinese is a topic prominent language. It focuses on the meaning of a sentence and if a Chinese sentence meaning is expressed clearly, a sentence without a subject is accepted. So there are many sentences without subjects in students' writings and they use topic prominent sentences to replace subject prominent sentences (see Examples 9-10). The negative transfer in syntactic part mainly results from the difference between English and Chinese discussed above.

Example (9) * When get on the bus, you should offer your seat to the old.

Example (10) * If have no money, you can do nothing.

So the correct sentence should be:

- ◆ When you get on the bus, you should offer your seat to the old.
- ◆ If you have no money, you can do nothing.

More than two verbs in one sentence. Concurrent structure refers to the fact that there are two or more collateral predicates in a sentence, which has no indication to show their relations. The commonly used structure is: NP1 + V1 + NP2 + V2 + NP3 (NP: a noun expression; V: a verb). This kind of sentence structure is common in Chinese. Influenced by the structure, there are many cases in students' writings in which there are two or more than two collateral verbs in one sentence. As we know, English is a subject prominent language. It is not accepted to have two or more collateral predicates in a sentence (see Example 11).

Example (11) * There are many people are ready to help others in our daily life.

So the correct sentence should be:

- ◆ In our daily life, there are many people who are ready to help others.

A comma instead of a conjunction in a sentence. In Chinese, it is allowed to use a comma to connect two simple sentences with full grammar structures while there should be a conjunction to join two sentences. In English, run-on sentences will appear without a conjunction (see Example 12).

Example (12) * The air is fresh, the water is clean.

So the correct sentence should be:

◆ The air is fresh and the water is clean.

Copula omission. Copula omission is another syntactic negative transfer, which appears frequently in students' writing. In Chinese, an adjective can be used as predicate. So in English writing, students tend to omit "be" and use an adjective as predicate directly (see Examples 13-14).

Example (13) * Beijing will more and more beautiful.

Example (14) * I very embarrassed and sorry for myself.

So the correct sentence should be:

◆ Beijing will become more and more beautiful.

◆ I was very embarrassed and felt sorry for myself.

Agreement in subject and predicate. The negative transfer of agreement in subject and predicate lies in the disagreement between subject and predicate and between noun and pronoun. Agreement problem does not exist in Chinese while in English a verb should keep agreement with the subject in person and number (see Example 15).

Example (15) * Food are thrown away everywhere in the dining room and there is a lot of useful things in the litterbins.

So the correct sentence should be:

◆ Food is thrown away everywhere in the dining room and there are a lot of useful things in the litterbins.

Negative transfer in word order. Some word orders of sentences in English seem to be inversion sentences in Chinese. Students usually make errors in word order of an English sentence. For example (see Examples 16-17):

Example (16) 你是谁? Who are you?

Example (17) 一些吃的东西 something to eat

Negative Transfer in Discourse Aspect

Even though some students' writings are very good from the lexical and syntactic points, the negative transfer in discourse aspect is usually found. According to the research by CAI (2001) on argumentative writing in English and Chinese, it comes to the conclusion that there are 90% of argumentative writings in English which point out the topic or theme directly while there are only 60% of argumentative writings in Chinese. Chinese argumentative writings are implicit in expressing the themes and requiring the readers to realize them. The writings rarely point out the topics directly.

Chinese thinking pattern is circular thought pattern which goes through the following steps: offering background information, listing objective conditions, illustrating the causes of a problem, and finally coming to a conclusion. Westerner's thinking set is linear thought pattern in which direct communication is preferred. That is, opinions or topics are given first, and then the background information, conditions, causes, proof, or analysis is followed.

Example (18) is the beginning part from a student's application letter:

Example (18) * My name is.../I graduated from.../My major is...

Just from the beginning, it is clear that students tend to express something according to Chinese thinking habits, the circular thought pattern. After a long information introduction, the theme or topic will appear. However, English prefers to state the topic (the problem or the case) directly instead of revolving around it. So the beginning of the letter should be:

◆ I would like to apply for the position advertised in...

◆ I am applying for the position of a receptionist you have advertised...

It is better to indicate the purpose of the letter directly.

Ways to Deal With Negative Transfer

Up till now, the errors of the negative transfer in students' writings have been discussed and analyzed. What are the effective ways to deal with the problem and help students avoid errors?

A Positive Attitude to Negative Transfer

The attitude to mother transfer in second language acquisition is important to tackle the problem of negative transfer. Cognitive psychology thinks that learning is a initiative cognitive process during which new knowledge is acquired, transformed, and tested. The human basic cognitive method is to get to know, to understand, and to describe new things, based on his original life experience and perception. Ellis (1994) regarded language transfer as a learning strategy which second language learners use to make up their lack of second language knowledge. Stern (1992) referred to mother tongue transfer and interference as a premise of foreign language learning, and pointed out that learners take their mother tongues as a reference. So learners should not be afraid of "Chinglish", especially to beginners in writing. They should learn to live with some "Chinglish" and take an active attitude to the negative transfer in writing. During writing, they should relax themselves, reduce worries, develop confidence, and cultivate their interest in writing. Teachers should encourage them to keep practicing and reducing their dependence on their mother tongue.

Contrastive Analysis Between English and Chinese

As an intercultural communication activity, writing shows not only learners' ability in English syntax and vocabulary, but also their pragmatic competence. When it comes to contrastive analysis, the analysis between English and Chinese should focus on not only phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary, but also their thinking patterns and cultures. When they understand all these differences, learners will follow English-thinking pattern to organize thoughts to achieve a nice combination of words, sentences, and passages.

In teaching, teachers are supposed to use contrastive analysis method to make students aware of the existence of the negative transfer. Through contrast and practice, students will realize and understand the differences in expression between English and Chinese. Teachers should point out and analyze the errors in negative transfer which students are likely to make in their writing, help them correct the errors, and offer them the proper usages.

Introduction to Western Culture and Thinking Pattern

Writing is an intercultural communication activity and thinking is the carrier of language. The difference between China and Western countries in cultural habits, thinking patterns, values, and languages becomes an

obstacle to Chinese students' writing. So introduction to Western culture and thinking pattern is a better way to overcome the influence from the negative transfer of mother tongue.

Encouragement to Students About Extensive Reading

Writing ability results from large amount of consciously initiative reading, based on interest and happiness. Teachers can help students choose some moderate English reading materials or encourage them to select what they like to read to broaden their horizons and enhance language sense. Through reading, they not only master some new words, but also sense the context of words. They can also learn natural and proper English expressions and passage structures. If they can apply what they learn from reading, the influence of negative transfer in their writing will be reduced a lot.

Conclusions

From the discussion above, the negative transfer of mother tongue really exists in Chinese college students' writing and has influence on students' writing in lexical, syntactic, and discourse aspects. For students, the negative transfer is the main cause to the errors in their writings. In order to avoid the negative transfer, the students should understand what their errors are and what the cause to these errors is. Only by understanding the errors and the causes, can they avoid repeating the errors again. For teachers, in the course of teaching, they should make analysis between English and Chinese, and introduce the difference between Chinese and Western cultures. Teachers also should give students some feedback on their errors in writing so as to reduce the negative transfer of mother tongue and finally improve their writing level.

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