

Study on the Influence of Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue on Junior High School Students' English Writing and Its Coping Strategies

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Referring to the questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview, this paper explores the negative transfer of mother tongue in junior high school English writing and analyzes the existing problems. The results show that the negative transfer of mother tongue has a significant impact on junior high school students' English writing. The main errors are found at four levels: morphological level, lexical level, syntactic level and textual level. In order to deal with the errors caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue in students' English writing, it is suggested that teachers create an English language environment for students as far as possible and help students form English thinking, use contrastive analysis teaching strategies, making a comparison between English and Chinese expressions and cultural differences and pay attention to the training of students' basic knowledge of English to help students improve their English writing ability.

Keywords: mother tongue, negative transfer, English writing

Introduction

With the education reform becomes more and more advanced in China, the time of initiation of English learning for Chinese people has been increasingly emphasized from the earlier years of junior high school, transitioning to the third grade of primary school, to the first grade of primary school today in some municipalities and provinces. Among the basic skills of English learning, writing enables the continuous consolidation and internalization of what has been learned and facilitates the overall development of English skills.

In recent years, as the reform of the English curriculum for middle school students continues to progress, a number of problems have emerged in the teaching English writing. Among them, negative transfer of mother tongue has consequences on junior high school students' improvement in English writing skills. Due to structural differences between Chinese and English, such as word properties, morphology, and syntax, as well as disparities in cultural backgrounds, historical customs, and language expressions, Chinese students often encounter interference from their mother tongue when writing in English. Based on the results of previous research, this

paper will focus on the phenomenon of negative transfer of mother tongue among junior high school students in China, analyze the problems of negative transfer of mother tongue in their English writing, and put forward corresponding suggestions and strategies.

Theoretical Background

Definition of Language Transfer

Language transfer is a phenomenon in which the learner uses the pronunciation, meaning of words, structural rules or conventions of the mother tongue to express ideas in a second language. From the 1950s to the 1990s, a large number of scholars wrote about language transfer, for example, Vildomec (1963), Gass and Selinker (1983), Kellerman and Sharwood Smith (1986), Ringbom (1987), Dechert and Raupach (1989), Odlin (1989), etc. Among them, Odlin's book, *Language Transfer*, is of great significance. It is the most comprehensive and insightful summary of language transfer. It is also one of the most frequently cited books in current language transfer research. Odlin (1989) defined transfer as the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired (and perhaps imperfectly acquired).

Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue in Teaching English Writing

Domestic and foreign scholars have done a lot of researches on the phenomenon of negative transfer of mother tongue in English writing from different perspectives.

At the syntactic level, Dulay and Krashen (1982) pointed out that errors in lexical order in English writing were often caused when learners translated according to the methods and habits of their mother tongue when using the target language to create sentences. Negative transfer of word order in English writing increases if the sentence structure was completely different between the two languages; conversely, it decreased. Due to the similarities and differences in sentence structure between Chinese and English, errors in word order also often occur in English writing. At the discourse level, Kaplan (1968) argued that the transfer of rhetorical patterns from learners' language learning to English writing resulted in negative transfer from the mother tongue. Uzawa (1989) argued that when students learn a new language, they usually wrote using native language thinking, so that the native language was transformed into the target language. At the vocabulary level, Anthony's (2018) study of second language learning revealed a link between native language and second language learning that produces negative transfer. He analyzed the pedagogical and practical implications arising from these errors through a study of the lexical errors made by Chilean Spanish speakers as a result of negative native language transfer.

In China, the phenomenon of negative transfer of mother tongue has gradually become a focus of research since the late 1990s. Xie Huiru (2006) categorized and analyzed the errors commonly made by Chinese students in English writing and concluded that students had negative syntactic transfer due to the differences in sentence structure and grammatical rules between the English and Chinese languages. Dong Sufen (2010) pointed out that students were influenced by the negative transfer of Chinese in English writing in terms of vocabulary. This was mainly reflected in the singular and plural nouns, changes in tense, person and number of verbs, improper use of coronals or prepositions, improper lexical collocations, misuse of lexical properties and assumption of semantic equivalence in Chinese. Guo Jia et al.'s (2022) study pointed out that in teaching English writing, it was important to strengthen the training of language forms that are relatively absent in Chinese but more common in

English, so as to effectively reduce the frequency of low-level errors in writing. Teachers could start by observing the lexical and syntactic complexity of students' writing output to help students eliminate the interference of their native language thinking in English writing.

These previous research results show that Chinese and other foreign scholars have made relatively comprehensive researches on the phenomenon of negative transfer of mother tongue. On the basis of previous research results, this paper will focus on the negative transfer of mother tongue of junior high school students in China, analyze the negative transfer of mother tongue in their English writing, and later put forward corresponding suggestions and strategies.

Research Design

Research Questions

There are two questions below of this research. They are:

- (1) What are the specific aspects of the negative transfer of mother tongue in junior high school students' English writing learning?
- (2) What are the existing problems of junior high school English teachers in writing teaching and how to solve them?

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, Wenjuanxing (an online questionnaire collection platform) was used to collect questionnaires. SPSS 25.0 was used to analyze the questionnaire data. With the permission of the teachers interviewed, the teachers' interviews were recorded by a tape recorder.

Participants

A total of 209 students from a junior high school in Jilin Province, China, were recruited to participate in the survey, including 119 girls and 90 boys. The majority of students who participated in the questionnaire were from Grade Seven, accounting for 48% (N=100). The proportion of Grade Nine students is 36% (N=75), and 16% (N=34) students from Grade Eight were also participated. In addition, seven English teachers were invited to conduct semi-structured interviews.

Instrument

Questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview were adopted in this study. There were 21 questions in the questionnaire. Two of the questions were about basic information about the participants. Two questions were asked to investigate students' use of native language thinking in English writing. The remaining objective questions relate to the types of errors or mistakes students make in English writing. There were also three subjective questions in the questionnaire. Seven English teachers were invited to be interviewed.

Results and Discussion

Statistical analysis of the objective questions in the questionnaire was used to derive the current situation of English writing in junior high school. The subjective questions in the questionnaire were combined to analyze the reasons. In addition, interviews with teachers were conducted to provide a basis for summarizing the reasons for teachers' major problems in teaching writing.

Current Situation of Junior High School Students' English Writing

Writing with the Aid of Mother Tongue Thinking for Conception. Among the junior high school students surveyed, few of them can directly conceive and write in English thinking, and most of them need the assistance of Chinese. In order to make students better understand the negative transfer of their mother tongue, students must have an understanding of their English writing thinking. Questions about the use of native language thinking strategies in English writing are designed as follows, shown in Table 1.

Table 1
The Use of Native Language Thinking Strategies in English Writing

NO	Questions	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
3	Planning ahead to organize articles using Chinese thinking	57(27.3)	64(30.6)	64(30.6)	14(6.7)	10(4.8)
4	Writing in English while thinking in Chinese to organize articles	43(20.6)	69(33.0)	64(30.6)	23(11.0)	10(4.8)

Table 1 shows that 57.9% students (N=121) are used to planning ahead to organize articles using Chinese thinking before writing in English, and 53.6% students (N=112) are used to writing in English while thinking in Chinese to organize articles. This shows that most junior high school students use Chinese thinking to assist them in the process of writing English compositions, and then translate them into English compositions.

These phenomena indicate that junior high school students often resort to their mother tongue for assistance in the composition process. Thus, they are susceptible to the negative transfer of their mother tongue. They are unable to use English in a standardized way for conceptualization and expression so that they usually make mistakes.

The above findings show that junior high school students are inevitably disturbed by their native language thinking in the process of English writing. Teachers need to consciously guide students to adopt English thinking in the process of conceptualizing and composing, so as to mitigate the influence of mother-tongue thinking on English writing.

Morphological Level Error. Junior high school students write directly in Chinese thinking, resulting in misuse of punctuation and capitalization errors. In order to explore students' error in morphological level, questions are designed as follows, shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Morphological Level Error Summary

NO	Questions	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
5	Do you make mistakes in forgetting the capital G and the small g?	20(9.6)	23(11.0)	68(32.5)	77(36.8)	21(10.0)
6	Do you use punctuation marks such as commas indiscriminately in English writing?	22(10.5)	20(9.6)	47(22.5)	76(36.4)	44(21.0)

Table 2 shows that most students rarely make errors at the morphological level. However, it can be seen that 20.6% students (N=43) still have difficulties with capitalization and a further 20.1% students (N=42) make errors in punctuation. Chinese characters do not have proper nouns capitalized, initials capitalized, etc. Thus, students may have problems with which letters should be capitalized. For example, in the sentence, He went to university.

University is a common noun, so it does not need to be capitalized. However, in the sentence, He went to Oxford University. *Oxford University* is a proper noun, so it needs to be capitalized.

In Chinese writing, the title of a book is marked with “《》”. In English writing, it is often italicized. In Chinese the ellipsis is (*six dots*), while in English it is ... (*three dots*). These are all cultural differences because of the different cultural environments of China and Western countries. This shows that at the morphological level, junior high school students' writing is influenced by Chinese thinking.

Lexical Level Error. Junior high school students tend to ignore the changes in tenses, parts of speech, singular and plural forms of English vocabulary in English writing. In order to explore students' errors in lexical level, questions are designed as follows, shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Lexical Level Error Summary

NO	Questions	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
7	Do you use Chinese word combinations directly to English in English writing?	19(9.1)	41(19.6)	65(31.1)	56(26.8)	28(13.4)
8	Do you use the wrong type of article in English writing?	19(9.1)	28(13.4)	81(38.8)	64(30.6)	17(8.1)
9	Do you ignore the plural form of nouns in English writing?	13(6.2)	21(10.1)	79(37.8)	70(33.5)	26(12.4)
11	Can you recognize if a verb is transitive or intransitive?	18(8.6)	29(13.9)	94(45.0)	61(29.2)	7(3.4)
12	Do you ignore tense changes in verbs?	13(6.2)	21(10.1)	100(47.9)	61(29.2)	14(6.7)
16	Do you have trouble distinguishing word class and keep only the meaning of sentences correct?	14(6.7)	32(15.3)	82(39.2)	66(31.6)	15(7.2)
17	Do you make improper use of personal pronouns in English writing?	17(8.1)	21(10.1)	87(41.6)	58(27.8)	26(12.4)

Table 3 shows that junior high school students also make mistakes in lexical level. Some students use Chinese word combinations directly to English, accounting for 28.7% (N=60). Some students use the wrong type of article, accounting for 22.5% (N=47). There are many differences between Chinese and English vocabulary in terms of usage and change of part of speech. Compared with Chinese vocabulary, the changes of English vocabulary rules are more diverse. Students often confuse the use methods and change rules to produce negative transfer of vocabulary. For example, in the sentence, I am reading books. Students will forget *am* due to the influence of Chinese thinking. Under the influence of this kind of thinking, students will ignore the changes of vocabulary in different situations.

It can be seen that 16.3% students (N=34) ignore the plural form of nouns. There are no singular and plural nouns in Chinese vocabulary, while English nouns have quantitative changes and irregular forms.

Some students can't recognize if a verb is transitive or intransitive, accounting for 32.6% (N=68). There is no choice of transitive or intransitive verbs in Chinese, but it is often necessary to use intransitive verbs with the help of prepositions in English.

16.8% students (N=34) ignore tense changes in verbs. Besides, it also shows that 22% students (N=46) have trouble in distinguishing word class and keep only the meaning of sentences correct and 18.2% students (N=38) make improper use of personal pronouns. If Chinese junior high school students mechanically map the Chinese thinking into English, there will be a large number of expression errors caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue.

Syntactic Level Error. In English writing, when students meet sentence structures they don't know, they tend to use native language sentence patterns or use simple sentences. Although there are some similarities between the syntactic structures of Chinese and English, there are actually great differences. The difference between English syntax and Chinese syntax is mainly reflected in the use of subordination construction and coordinate construction. In English, the connection between sentences is realized through the use of conjunctions. In Chinese, it is more realized through meaning and context. In order to explore students' error in syntactic level, questions are designed as follows, shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Syntactic Level Error Summary

NO	Questions	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
10	Do you translate word for word according to the main writing points?	31(14.8)	60(28.7)	73(34.9)	35(16.8)	10(4.8)
13	Do you often use simple sentences in English writing?	35(16.8)	61(29.2)	84(40.2)	23(11.0)	6(2.9)
14	Do you ignore the principle of subject-predicate agreement in English writing?	15(7.2)	24(11.5)	81(38.8)	66(31.6)	23(11.0)

Table 4 shows that 43.5% students (N=91) translate word for word according to the main writing points. It can be seen that 46% students (N=96) often use simple sentences in English writing. Some students are unable to master more sentence patterns because of their weak English foundation. In addition, 18.7% students (N=39) ignore the principle of subject-verb agreement. Subject-predicate agreement means that the subject and predicate of a sentence should be consistent in person and number.

The sentences lack predicate elements or subject, object and other elements. Students also have the phenomenon of confusion in word order caused by translating Chinese directly into English and splicing words without considering the meaning.

Textual Level Error. In English expression, the connection between sentences needs connectives. In order to ensure the logical relationship between sentences and paragraphs, words, phrases or clauses in sentences are closely related in form. However, in Chinese expression, the unity of meaning is required. Only the internal meaning of a sentence or paragraph is needed to realize their connection. Due to the lack of accumulation of English compound sentences and complex sentences, junior high school students usually turn to Chinese thinking in English writing. They try to avoid using compound sentences or complex sentences, using simple sentences instead. In order to explore students' error in textual level, questions are designed as follows, shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Textual Level Error Summary

NO	Questions	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
15	Do you pay attention to the use of conjunctions between sentences when you express your views?	27(12.9)	62(29.7)	82(39.2)	32(15.3)	6(2.9)
18	Can you express your views in authentic English?	17(8.1)	54(25.8)	88(42.1)	41(19.6)	9(4.3)

Table 5 shows that 57.4% students (N=120) pay little attention to the use of conjunctions between sentences when they express their views. It can be seen that 66% students (N=138) cannot express their views in authentic English. Most of the conjunctions used by students in their compositions are relatively simple and repetitive, showing a single feature as a whole. The quality of the composition thus written will not be very good.

According to the sample of subjective questions collected, it is found that most junior high school students know nothing about negative transfer of mother tongue. The errors marked by teachers are mainly grammatical errors. They don't know whether these errors are caused by negative language transfer. As for the improvement of writing ability, many of them think that they should practice more in English writing, but they seldom seek other ways to develop their writing ability.

The Existing Problems of English Teachers in Teaching Writing

In terms of the frequency of using English in classroom teaching, all seven teachers indicated the English-Chinese combination was generally adopted. In terms of teaching about the cultural background of English-speaking countries, two teachers said that they would integrate relevant cultural knowledge into their daily teaching. Five teachers believed that junior high school students had limited knowledge and that too much cultural knowledge was not very useful for their teaching. The following conclusions are found in the following open-ended interviews with seven teachers.

In order to meet the needs of examination, seven teachers said that they spend a lot of time and energy on explaining language points while explaining texts, but pay little attention to cultural background knowledge. They encouraged students to expand their vocabulary and master complex grammatical knowledge, thus improving their English skills, without providing students with a real English context. Due to the limitations of objective conditions, students have little opportunity to communicate in English environment. Even if they have the opportunity, they dare not express themselves. This has caused difficulties to students' writing.

In the process of teaching, teachers have a little use of the differences between Chinese and English. Teachers lack awareness of negative transfer of mother tongue. Only two teachers said that they would often compare the cultural differences between Chinese and English in the teaching process. In the process of teaching English writing, teachers lack of induction of the writing errors caused by the influence of Chinese thinking on junior high school students' English writing. At the same time, there is little comparison between Chinese and English ways of thinking and culture. Teachers only directly correct the grammar errors of junior high school students' writing, resulting in the negative transfer of mother tongue in their writing that has not been effectively corrected for a long time.

Teaching Strategies on Improving Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue

Creating an English Language Environment

Learning English requires a long period of accumulation. Only by having an adequate environment for language input can students develop their overall language skills. Teachers can set a specific cultural context in class so that students can learn and use English in an authentic environment. Teachers can increase students' English language input by communicating with them in English more often in class. At the same time, teachers should help students to reduce the impact of negative native language transfer in the language environment. Most students in China do not really appreciate the cultural differences between China and Western countries due to teaching conditions. Therefore, teachers can guide their students to read English newspapers, magazines, books, etc. to broaden their vocabulary and expand their knowledge of English cultural background and help them to develop an English mindset.

In addition, extra-curricular learning activities are also an integral part of English language teaching. Teachers can encourage students to make full use of internet resources outside class to expand their English learning approaches and exercise their English thinking. Teachers can also organize English competitions or activities to enable students to improve their ability to use English for communication and to enhance their sense of English.

Using Contrastive Analysis Teaching Strategies

English and Chinese belong to two different language families, English belongs to the Indo-European language family and Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. Due to this difference, there are bound to be some difficulties for Chinese students in learning English. Therefore, teachers need to guide students to understand and appreciate this difference. In the process of teaching, teachers can compare and analyze English and Chinese sentences, paragraphs and passages to help students understand the differences in language, thinking the result from different modes of thinking. In daily lessons, teachers can select typical texts that reflect the way of thinking of native English speakers and lead students to analyze sentence structures, paragraphs or chapters so that they can improve their writing skills in an English context.

In addition, teachers need to strengthen the cultural quality aspects of the students. Chinese students are inevitably influenced by Chinese cultural patterns of thinking in their English writing. As a result, they often write many “Chinglish” passages in English. English passages are generally straightforward, they usually have a topic sentence in a paragraph. However, Chinese passages do not show the topic directly, but narrate around the topic (Liu Sitong, 2008). After reviewing students' compositions, teachers can summarize the mistakes caused by the cultural differences between Chinese and English and discuss them with students so as to improve their English thinking. In addition to the teacher's guidance, students should also learn to observe the differences between the two languages on their own, analyze and summarize them, so as to avoid using Chinese thinking in the process of writing.

Focusing on the Training of English Basic Knowledge

Learner's vocabulary level affects their English writing ability. Low vocabulary is one of the main difficulties affecting students' English writing. There are also some words translated into Chinese with the same or similar meaning. Students are unable to distinguish them according to collocation or usage and make mistakes in their writing. Therefore, teachers can guide students to master vocabulary through continuous practice in their regular teaching and encourage them to use vocabulary in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Only when their vocabulary is improved can they have something to say in English writing. In the case of words with similar meanings, teachers can use their collocations to guide students to distinguish. After teachers have given the explanation to the students, they should reinforce the training on word collocation so that the students can find the differences between English and Chinese. Therefore, students need to be careful in choosing vocabulary. In addition, for words that students have not learned, teachers can incorporate word formation and guide students to add affixes. Strengthening basic vocabulary collocations and word formation is important in vocabulary learning. It is also a fundamental way to develop and improve students' English writing ability.

Students are not as familiar with Chinese as they are with English, some students will use Chinese grammatical structures for their writing when they meet a sentence structure that they cannot express. Teachers

should focus on syntax training and strengthen students' mastery of the five basic sentence patterns. In addition, it is also important to master compound sentences and special sentence patterns. In daily teaching, teachers can ask students to recite example sentences from the text and make imitations based on these sentences. With continuous and intensive practice, students can master sentence patterns.

Teachers should strengthen students' analysis of textual structure. In the process of students' writing, teachers should ask students to reduce the use of simple sentences instead of using more compound sentences and clauses. In the daily teaching of the texts, teachers can guide students to discover the connecting words and teach them the usage of the connecting words so that they can use them effectively in their writing and enhance the coherence of the texts. Teachers should make students aware of the differences between English and Chinese in the expression of topic sentences. Teachers can assign appropriate exercises to develop students' ability to summarize the topic of a paragraph in order to improve their writing ability.

Conclusion

In this study, it is found that the negative transfer of mother tongue has a significant impact on junior high school students' English writing. On the basis of relevant theories of language transfer, this paper makes a specific analysis. The main errors are found at four levels: morphological level, lexical level, syntactic level and textual level. Through semi-structured interviews with teachers, it is found that teachers do not provide students with real English context, and there is less comparison between English and Chinese cultural differences in the teaching process.

Finally, this paper puts forward teaching strategies to deal with the negative transfer of mother tongue. The limitation of this study is that due to the limitation of conditions, it is impossible to collect students' real writing cases so as to analyze the current situation of students' negative transfer of mother tongue more clearly. Among the teachers interviewed, the average age is 37, and there are fewer young teachers. In future research, more representative samples can be collected to explore how to deal with negative transfer of mother tongue. When selecting the teachers to be interviewed, the differences in age can be taken into account to avoid the old teachers' lack of progress.

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