

RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE TRANSFER IN ENGLISH WRITING

BY CHINESE STUDENTS

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Abstract

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Language transfer has long been a key issue in second-language acquisition research. The topic of the first language, which influences the second language, is mostly focused on by language teaching researchers. Recently, people attach greater importance to English writing; however, the result of an English writing exam is far from satisfactory. This paper begins with a brief introduction of the significance of English writing and the reasons for the low quality of student achievement in English compositions in China. It then reviews the stages that transfer theory has experienced, the different interpretations of language transfer, as well as the definition of language transfer. Through the analysis of frequent mistakes in student writing, the author has found that language transfer occurs at all levels: from lexicon to syntax, from sentence to discourse, from culture to the thinking mode. Then he proposes that special instructions are needed in order to facilitate positive transfer and to reduce negative transfer. Finally, the author works out some pedagogical implications for the EFL learning and teaching in China.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Among the four skills in language learning, writing is usually considered to be the last acquired skill because most students consider listening and speaking as being the most important skills. Most school students are not able to write a complete and appropriate English paragraph after having studied English for a long time. However, it is of vital importance for foreign language learners to develop their abilities to write. One important reason is that writing helps our students to learn (Elbow, 1994).

Writing, the expression of ideas in written words, as one of the most important means of communication, has always played a significant role in conveying people's ideas and feelings. Many people attach greater importance to English writing. English writing has been regarded as a vital factor in the four language skills, because it involves not only language itself, but also thinking.

In most schools, training in writing is integrated into intensive reading courses. The teachers assign a topic for students to write about after class every week or every other week, and then they correct student compositions, even every mistake intensively. The writing process is thus much simplified. Therefore, most teachers fail to guide, or don't know how to guide students in learning how to write. As a result, when Chinese students are required to write in English, the students simply resort to their mother tongue, and apply the Chinese discourse patterns and writing styles to their English writing with little knowledge of the difference between Chinese and English. Undoubtedly, their compositions are for the most part not native-like and incomprehensible. Thus, this paper intends to explore the necessity and feasibility of Chinese transfer into English writing and to examine a common error in high school English writing so as to facilitate a positive transfer.

This paper consists of three parts. Chapter 1, the Introduction which presents the background and significance of the study on language transfer in the teaching of English writing. Chapter 2, Literature Review on Language Transfer, begins with a definition of this central term, such as positive transfer and negative transfer, including overproduction and underproduction. Then it goes on to deal with the Universal Grammar Theory proposed by Chomsky, which is important because it is still exerting influence on SLA (second language acquisition) studies today. In the Analysis of Negative Transfer in English Writing, the author analyzes native language transfer in high school English writing in terms of lexis, syntax, discourse and culture so as to find out the factors that contribute to negative transfer. In Chapter 3, Implications for English Writing Teaching in High School, the author first illustrates how to raise the consciousness of the differences between the two language cultures and how to make good use of native language in English learning and writing, including the instruction on some transfer strategies. Then the author elicits a few pedagogical implications from the study for English writing. In the last part, the author concludes the whole paper and points out that further research in this field is absolutely necessary if we want to make full use of positive Chinese transfer and reduce its negative transfer in English writing.

Statement of the Problem

Most students are not able to write a complete and an appropriate English paragraph after having studied English for a long time. However, it is of vital importance for foreign-language learners to develop their abilities to write. How can we motivate the students with regard to improving their writing skills in English? What things interfere with the writing of Chinese students?

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this paper is to complete an analysis of native language transfer in English writing that may be of use for the purpose of providing a study for English, students who are invested in language transfer when they are in the access of their own English compositions.

Significance of the Problem

In most schools, training in writing is integrated into an Intensive Reading Course. The teacher just assigns a topic for students to write about after class every week or every other week, and then corrects their compositions, even every mistake intensively. The writing process is thus much simplified. As a result, most teachers perhaps don't know how to guide students when it comes to good writing. Therefore, when required to write in English, the students simply resort to their mother tongue, applying the Chinese discourse patterns and writing styles to their English writing with little knowledge of the difference between Chinese and English. Thus, their compositions are mostly not native-like and incomprehensible. Therefore, this paper intends to explore problems that are a product of Chinese transfer into English writing and to classify the errors in high school English writing so as to facilitate a more positive transfer.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this paper, it was assumed that all research and review of the current literature was accurately reported. It is also assumed that the literature will make recommendations on how best to use the research available.

Delimitations of the Research

The research was conducted through the Library at the South Central University for Nationalities and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over a thirty day (30) period. Key search topics included "*Language Transfer in Language Learning*",

“Teaching language Communication”, and “Teaching and Researching Writing”.

Definition of Terms

Language transfer. The origins of the term go back to Behaviorism and its view that the first/native language habits influence the acquisition of the second/foreign language habits. Although it was later discredited, the notion of transfer has been revived again and remains one of the most fundamental concerns in L2 acquisition research ((Odlin, 1989)).

Positive transfer. Means any facilitating effects on acquisition due to the influence of cross-linguistic similarities (Odlin, 1989).

Negative transfer. Refers to the interference of the mother tongue into L2 acquisition. Negative transfer of the mother tongue can be found at all the levels of language structure (Odlin, 1989).

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Definition of Language Transfer

Language transfer is also called cross-linguistic influence (Ogilby, 1989). The origins of the term go back to Behaviorism and its view that the first/native language habits influence the acquisition of the second/foreign language habits. Although it was later discredited, the notion of transfer has been revived again and remains one of the most fundamental in L2 acquisition research (Wei, 2006). Generally speaking, language transfer is divided into two types: positive transfer and negative transfer (Li, 2007). Positive transfer occurs when the prior knowledge benefits the learning task---that is, when a previous item is correctly applied to a present subject matter (Ney, 1973). According to Ney, when both the native language and the target language have the same form, pattern or rule, the transfer facilitates learning. Positive transfer is termed as it facilitates learning. Negative transfer, also termed as interference, hampers learning. It occurs when the first language interferes with the foreign language learning, or the previous performance disrupts the performance on a second task and leads to errors. Foreign language learners often use native language patterns or rules in assembling the sentences, which results in errors or inappropriate forms in the target language.

Classification of Language Transfer

Transfer is usually classified into positive transfer and negative transfer, including overproduction and underproduction.

Positive Transfer

Positive transfer means any facilitating effects on acquisition due to the influence of cross-linguistic similarities. Arndt points out that the facilitative effects can only be observed when learners with different native languages are studied and learner comparisons are carried out.

Such comparisons often show that cross-linguistic similarities can produce positive transfer in several ways. Similarities between native language and the target-language vocabulary can reduce the time needed to develop good reading comprehension. Similarities between vowel systems can make the identification of vowel sound easier. Similarities between sentence structure systems can make the identification of assembling sentences easier.

Negative Transfer

Negative transfer refers to the interference of the mother tongue into L2 acquisition. Negative transfer of the mother tongue can be found at all the levels of language structure. A speaker's foreign accent in L2 learning is evidence of negative transfer at the phonological level (Marx & Mehlhorn, 2010). Morphological negative transfer is common. For instance, under the influence of the Chinese language, some students will say "big rain" rather than "heavy rain". Negative transfer at the syntactical level also exists. For instance, in replying to the tag question, "This house isn't large, is it?" Influenced by Chinese language rules, many students will say: "Yes, it isn't large." Or "No, it is larger." It is not hard to find evidence to show the negative transfer at the discourse level.

For instance:

- The English teacher says, "Your English is very good."
- The Chinese student responds, "No, no, my English is not good at all."

The Chinese student's reply is grammatically correct, but it is not appropriate to the communicative rules of English-speaking people. The error is due to the influence of Chinese communicative rules.

Analysis of Errors in Students' English Compositions

Lexical Transfer

Chinese words are written in characters, whereas English words are written by means of alphabetic letters. The two languages share hardly any cognate vocabulary with each other in form. Therefore, this great distance reduces a Chinese learner's tendency to learn lexical transfer.

Sometimes learners invent their own words or phrases. Those words are familiar with and the rules of word formation that they have learned. They make up phrases word for word from Chinese expressions just like "teaching-learning building" (classroom building), "working building" (office building), "school garden" (campus) and so on. And transfer can also occur when word forms are not similar, but the meanings are (Odlin, 1989). For instance, Chinese "浓" is roughly equivalent to English "thick". While it is right to say "thick ink" or "thick smoke", it is incorrect to say "thick tea" (浓茶), the correct form of which should be "strong tea". This kind of error is produced when students are unaware of the fact that, while two words from two languages may be semantically similar, there are often grammatical and habitual usages found in one language but not in the other, and such restrictions can cause difficulty.

Chinese students can make additional mistakes, or mistakes of omission as well. They add or omit a preposition after a verb such as "serve for the people" (serve the people), "marry with her" (marry her), "arrive Beijing" (arrive at Beijing), and "listen music" (listen to music). Students always ignore the fact that some verbs are transitive in English but intransitive in Chinese.

Syntactic Transfer

To give a better understanding of how the syntactic transfer works, I offer a contrastive analysis of the five syntactic structures below in discussion.

The Copula

The copula verbs corresponding to the English “be” in Standard Written Chinese are “是”. When used as a linking verb between the subject and its nominal complement, the Chinese copula is similar to the English verb to “be”. He is my good friend. (她是我的好朋友.) However, unlike the English verb to be, the Chinese copula does not co-occur with many of the auxiliary verbs such as “can”(能), “will”(将) (Chan, 2004), especially when the subject complement is not nominal and there are no particular affirmative or emphatic functions. Such a subtle difference between the use of the English and Chinese copulas often causes difficulty for Chinese learners.

The brackets would be correct.

- He should is very tired/He should very tired. (He should be very tired.)
- He will is late/He will late. (He will be late.)

Placements of Adverbs

In Chinese, adverbs that modify verbs often occur before the verb in a sentence. That is, in the predicate position after the subject or the topic----as do auxiliary verbs (Li & Thompson, 1981). When a sentence contains both an adverb and an auxiliary verb, the adverb always precedes the auxiliary and comes immediately after the subject. In English, however, some adverbs are preverbal, some are postverbal, and when the verb contains an auxiliary, the adverb usually occurs after the first auxiliary. Adverbs that often come in front of the main verb are typically adverbs of indefinite frequency (e.g., always, continuously, usually), or adverbs of indefinite time (e.g., finally, previously, recently), adverbs of degree (e.g., entirely, almost, absolutely), or focusing adverbs (e.g., even, only, really) (Murphy & Smalzer, 2000). The contrastive examples that follow demonstrate the differences:

Preverbal in both languages:

- He recently finished his graduation thesis. (他最近完成了他的毕业论文。)

Post verbal in English and Preverbal in Chinese.

The brackets would be correct.

- He very likes watching TV. “他非常喜欢看电视。” (He likes watching TV very much.)
- He only can speak Chinese. “他只会说中文。” (He can only speak Chinese.)

Relative Clauses

Whereas English uses different relative pronouns, such as who, which, that, whom, where, and so forth, depending on the context and the function that pronouns play in the sentence, there are no explicit relative pronouns in Chinese and Chinese also differs. Many Chinese learners have problems with complex English sentences involving relative clauses. Imitation seems to be a common strategy used to cope with the problems for Chinese students.

I haven't got you wanted stamps.

For instance:

- 穿着红裙子的女孩. The wearing red skirt girl. (The girl who is in red skirt.)

Different Modes of Thought

The following 7 sentence forms are ignorant of different modes of thought between Chinese and English. Students always like to use the Chinese-style of English.

For instance: The brackets would be correct.

1. “我想他不会来了”。 I think he won't come. (I don't think he'll come.)
2. “谢谢你的帮助”。 Thank your help. (Thank you for your help.)
3. “昨天鲍勃打了我的脸”。 Yesterday, Bob hit my face. (Yesterday, Bob hit me in the face.)

4. “那个老人的眼睛瞎了”。The old man's eyes are blind. (The old man is blind.)
5. “你最好把那颗牙齿拔掉”。You'd better pull out the tooth. (You'd better have the tooth pulled out.)
6. “他们在晚会上玩得很愉快”。They played happily at the party. (They had a good time/ enjoyed themselves at the party.)
7. “不知不觉，夜幕降临”。We didn't know evening had fallen. (Evening came before we realized it.)

A learner's idea should have been expressed directly in English without Chinese as its medium. However, due to their limited experience of English, high school students have not yet formed the habit of thinking in English, which actually is almost impossible. On the one hand, what they want to express is very rich and complicated, while on the other hand, they are limited by their English grammar skills. Therefore, once they begin to write an English sentence, they are actually carrying on a mental translation from Chinese to English. And the sentences they construct are word-for-word translation from Chinese to English.

Discourse Transfer

Language transfer at the level of discourse is a major factor contributing to what are labeled as communication breakdowns and communication conflicts (Odlin, 1989). It is found that in the EFL writing there are certain sentence structures which are grammatically acceptable but are considered very unnatural in the eyes of native speakers when analyzed in the discourse context. Discussions in this section will be mainly focused on how those unnatural sentences are subject to the influence of the learner's first language.

For instance

- Formal: I haven't seen you for a long time.

- Informal: Long time no see.

Cultural Transfer

Our use of language involves not only words, but also the way that we think for language and thought exercises in tandem (Tishman & Perkins, 1997). Language usage follows culturally determined patterns, which not only influence the order in which people use words to form phrases but also influence thinking. Learner thought patterns, as the major components of culture, can influence language. And conversely, language can reflect thought patterns. Therefore, based on the interaction between culture, thought and language, we will analyze English and Chinese sentence structures and discourse organizational patterns that form a cultural perspective.

Cultural Patterns

Culture is a system of knowledge (Plessis & Raza, 2004). The system of knowledge includes a particular people's beliefs about interpersonal relationship and the relationships between humankind and society, or nature and so on. These beliefs are embodied in not only communicative behaviors but also in language structures.

Chinese culture highly values the harmonious relationship between mankind and nature (Zhu, 2008). To the people, almost nothing is impossible when scientists, engineers and inventors put their minds to a task or problem. It is believed that reality can be rationally ordered by humans and that such an ordering, using the scientific method, allow people to predict and control much of life.

1 Thought Patterns

From the discussion above, we have come to know that different cultures produce different views on the man-nature relationship. As a result, these different views may lead to different thought patterns. To be specific, the oneness of man and nature in Chinese culture

results in the thought patterns of synthesis, imagination, and idealism, whereas the dividedness between man and nature in Anglo-American culture results in the thought patterns of analysis, abstraction and realism(Kelley & Tseng, 1992).

2 Imagination vs. Abstraction

Imagination refers to the thought pattern that depends on analogy, metaphor, simile and symbol. Chinese people are good at imaginative reasoning, because imagination is closely related to synthesis, which emphasizes entirety without the analysis of parts.

Abstraction is synonymous with logic, which is a process of thinking by means of concept, judgment and reasoning. Anglo-American people place much stress on logic. To some extent, we may say that logic is embodied in English and English is dominated by logic (Kelley & Tseng, 1992).

3 Idealism vs. Realism

Idealism puts greater stress on subjective ideas than on objective facts. Chinese people tend to think introspectively and do not show too much interest in the precise details of factual events. In this sense, they are subjective in thinking (Kelley & Tseng, 1992).

In sharp contrast, realism is the predominant thinking pattern of Westerners. Realism specificity puts its focus on objective facts. People with this thinking pattern value objectivity, and precision. They like to enumerate details to focus on issues.

Sentence Structures

The Chinese sentence structure follows a topic-comment sequence (Shi, 2000). The topic is the subject matter to be talked about while the comment refers to what the speaker comments on when a subject is presented to be talked about. For example, in the following sentence: I today have thing. “我今天有事”. (I have business today.)

“我” is the topic and “今天有事” is the comment. A“我” is also the subject of the sentence. But in daily conversation, Chinese people often omit the subject “我” by saying “that” “今天有事”, because the subject is usually considered as a piece of given information. Although there is no subject in the sentence, it is still a typical topic-comment sentence, in which“今天”, is the topic and“有事” is the comment. It is worth mentioning that the topic-comment sequence in Chinese sentence structures reflects the Chinese synthetic thought pattern.

Under the influence of the synthetic and imaginative thought patterns, Chinese are more apt to use verbs in many cases where the English would most probably use nouns. A Chinese person who writes in English is naturally inclined to write “I went out when it was raining” instead of “I went out in the rain”, or “the meeting ended and everybody felt bitter” instead of the meeting ended in bitterness.

In this chapter, we can see that the mother tongue transfer, especially its negative part, may occur at all levels: from lexicon to syntax, from sentence to thinking mode to discourse.

Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

Implications for English Writing in School

Pay Attention to the Study of Lexicon

The basic of writing is found in the lexicon (Stotsky, 1983). The teacher could ask students to recite words every day. In the study of lexicon, a teacher should ask the students to remember the meaning and to transliterate the lexicon, and to ask them to remember the relationship of the words in order to help students to remember. For example, to learn the word “strong”, a teacher could give the adverb “strongly” to student. These two words have different a usage,

- I feel strong enough to carry the box upstairs.
- I feel strongly that you have made the wrong decision.

In addition, the teacher could ask students to prepare a book and to write words which can be found in books. The teacher should check them every week. As time passes, the students will find the words in their notes.

Enhance Conversion of Sentence Type

The sentence is the basic structure of writing, so the teacher not only asks the student to write correct sentences, but also to write different types of sentences.

For instance:

- The little boy is clever and diligent. Everyone likes him.

Change it to:

- Everyone likes the little boy, for he is clever and diligent.

And For instance:

- The meeting was attended by five thousand people. It was held in a park.

Change it to:

- The meeting, which was held in a park, was attended by five thousand people.

(This is a parity expression.)

- Wuhan is the capital of Hubei province. It's famous for the Yellow Crane Tower.

Change it to:

- Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, is famous for the Yellow Crane Tower.

Developing Discourse Competence through Reading

Ann Raimes points out that reading serves as a good source of writing that enables students to engage actively in new a language and culture. The more they read, the more they become familiar with the vocabulary, idioms, sentence patterns, organizational flow and the native speakers of the language (Raimes, 1983, p.50). Since reading and writing are so interactive with each other in language learning, to develop writing competence will inevitably involve reading. Through reading, students will have a clear idea of what a discourse pattern is, and obtain knowledge of the structure. Through extensive reading of different types of writing, students will obtain the knowledge of the organization of different types of writing, such as a descriptive type, a narrative type, an expository type, an argumentative type, an instructive type, and a procedural type (Hirvela, 2004). For example, the form of an English argumentative essay has its special structure. Let's look at the structure of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson begins it by presenting the issue: the obligation of the people of the American colonies is to tell the world why they must separate from Great Britain. Next, Jefferson states his thesis that, because of the tyranny of the British king, the colonies must replace his rule with another form of government. In the body of the Declaration of Independence, he offers as evidence twenty-eight examples of injustice endured by the American colonies. Following the evidence, he explains

how, time and time again, the colonies have appealed to the British for redress, but without result. In his concluding paragraph, Jefferson restates the thesis and reinforces it. The Declaration of Independence generally follows the classical pattern: an introduction, a thesis statement, an outlines of the argument, a support of the thesis, a refutation of opposing arguments and conclusion (Zinsser, 2001). Although not all arguments follow this pattern, the typical argumentation essay usually presents evidence, connects the evidence with the thesis by induction, deduction, or a combination of the two, and refutes opposing evidence and arguments. It can be illustrated as follows (Zinsser, 2001):

- Introduction: In which the author brings up the issue and states the thesis.
- Body: In which the author offers evidence to support his position by way of induction and deduction, or the author states the argument against the thesis and refutes them.
- Conclusion: In which the author summarizes his argument or restates the thesis and ends the essay with a forceful closing statement. Sometimes, if the thesis is especially controversial, the refutation of opposing arguments may come first.
- In conclusion, reading extensively is conducive to acquiring knowledge of text of structure, which is the prerequisite of good writing.

Only when students are aware of the discourse pattern of English writing, can they follow the pattern while they are writing, so that their English writing will read like an English writer rather than the translation of a Chinese version.

Making Use of Positive Transfer in English Teaching

Of all the factors affecting the transfer in English writing, the teaching method is of exceptional importance. It is impossible to shorten the learning process and achieve satisfactory results unless the method fits the characteristics of the content to be learned, and the group

environment and the learner. Without this condition, the learning effect will be affected in various ways and to a serious degree, and will be so frustrating that the learner may lose all interest in foreign language.

In short, both behaviorist theory and cognitive theory admit the existence of transfer although they have different focuses. Transfer is the process of using knowledge of the first language in learning a second language. In English teaching and learning, positive transfer is the process in which the mother tongue has a positive affect on English writing and so does the acquired knowledge on successive learning. This kind of transfer can help the students to comprehend and master English faster. Evidently, to improve English teaching, recognizing and using positive transfer are helpful. Thus, the next part is a brief explanation of how to make good use of positive transfer.

The results of the study also showed that, for students in the experiment, the most serious problem was that they often strayed away from the point in their argumentative essay because they tended to think about the essay in a Chinese way and organized the supporting details according to Chinese writing habit. That is to say, they developed their essay in a spiral pattern instead of the linear pattern and organized their paragraphs emotionally instead of logically. Next to the problem of straying away from the point, the students made too many grammatical mistakes which is also a severe problem, especially in terms of articles and prepositions which are not included in their native language Chinese.

It is popular that, in China the investigations of researchers into English writing are based more on the composition products instead of the writing process. In this way, this study not only helps to show how to improved a Chinese student's English writing ability, but it also contributes to the theories of comparative language teaching.

This study can be considered as a starting point for evaluating the negative influence of the Chinese language on a college student's English writing. Further studies may be made to research into more detailed differences between Chinese and English writing. The results from this study can be used in studying comparative language teaching.

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