Exploring native language interference of Chinese learners in acquisition of English as a second language on cases in composition of college level students

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Abstract. Under the dominating phenomenon of mandatory English learning among most of Chinese university, students are commonly criticized unnatural Chinglish in their compositions. Thus, it has been a widely studied topics to discover the nature of first language influence on foreign or second language learning. This study investigates the impact of native language interference on the English writing proficiency of Chinese college students. By examining a large body of student papers collected at a corpus created and maintained by Beijing Foreign Studies University, the study aims to identify common grammatical errors and non-standard language that arise when Chinese students switch to English. Another element of the study that tries to identify and illustrate Chinese students' mental processes while they write in English is the semi-structured interview. Observation and analysis reveal that interference from the original tongue often manifests as errors in sentence construction, misuse of articles and agreements, and excessive use of personal pronouns as subjects. This leads to descriptive inappropriate language usage and prescriptive grammar errors in composition. The study emphasizes the necessity for focused pedagogical approaches to deal with these issues, with the ultimate goal of improving English as Second Language (ESL) instruction techniques and raising Chinese learners' confidence and language competency.

Keywords: ESL, native language interference, prescriptive grammar error, descriptive inappropriate usage.

1. Introduction

Language learning is an arduous task, particularly when it entails mastering a second language as complex as English. For Chinese learners, this journey is further complicated by the interference of their native language, which can profoundly affect their capacity to comprehend and produce syntactically complex sentences in English. Such interference is not merely a linguistic phenomenon; it poses a pedagogical challenge that necessitates careful examination and thoughtful intervention.

The research delves into this challenge by scrutinizing the specific mechanisms through which Chinese syntax impedes the acquisition of English writing skills among college-level students. The researcher has identified two distinct categories of errors that Chinese learners of English make when writing in the language: prescriptive errors, which deviate from standard English grammar rules, and descriptive errors, which include expressions that are grammatically correct but do not follow native English conventions. By providing a thorough examination of these interference patterns as seen in the compositions of Chinese college students, this work seeks to close the research gap.

The significance of this research is manifold. It not only satisfies an academic curiosity but also carries practical implications for ESL pedagogy. By pinpointing the specific areas where interference occurs, educators can refine their teaching methods to confront these issues more effectively, thus bolstering the linguistic proficiency and confidence of Chinese learners in English writing. The observation and findings aspire to enrich the discourse on second language acquisition, presenting a detailed understanding of the role that native language interference plays in the learning process and how it can be mitigated.

2. Literature Review

The acquisition of English as a second language by Chinese learners is full of challenges primarily due to the significant differences between the syntactic structures of Chinese and English. Syntactic transfer, particularly from Chinese to English, has been identified as a significant factor affecting the English writing proficiency of Chinese college students. Traditionally, language transfer has been seen as the outcome caused by the similarities and differences between other languages previous acquired and target languages [1]. According to previous research in related discipline, native language has inevitable influence on second language acquisition [2]. In particular, it has been found that Chinese learners frequently use certain sentence structures in their language production. For instance, they frequently overuse the "there be" construction, which is directly a reflection of the Chinese topic-comment sentence structure and causes errors in English existential sentences [3] [4]. The misuse of this term and the misunderstandings that follow emphasize how important it is to develop instructional strategies that deal with these syntactic differences. Building on this basis, the observation and study explore the intricacies of syntactic transfer, scrutinizing not just overt faults but also minute nuances of language interference that impact Chinese learners' writing skill.

Moreover, the flexibility of Chinese sentence structures, which often lack a strict subject-predicate order, has been justified as a widely observed error in English writing. It is reported that Chinese learners frequently omit subjects in English sentences, leading to sentence fragments or run-on sentences [5] [6]. This issue underscores the importance of understanding the underlying grammatical principles of both languages to avoid such errors. The research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these issues by analyzing a diverse range of writing samples and conducting semi-structured interviews to uncover the cognitive processes behind these errors.

The misuse of the subjunctive mood by Chinese learners, is another critical area of syntactic transfer. Chinese learners struggle with the nuanced use of the subjunctive mood in English, often employing it incorrectly in conditional sentences or to express wishes, which are more straightforward in Chinese without the need for morphological changes [6]. And semantic transfer errors occur when Chinese learners directly translate from Chinese to English, leading to inaccuracies in meaning due to structural and expressive differences. This direct translation approach can result in a loss of semantic precision, which can be problematic in academic and professional writing contexts [7].

The findings revealed that students often directly translated Chinese phrases into English, leading to errors in meaning, form, and sentence structure. The cultural norms also influenced their oral expressions, making them indirect and overly polite, which further contributed to the persistence of "Chinglish." There is still room for improvement, despite the fact that numerous academics and linguists have worked very hard to demonstrate language transfer and how it affects second language acquisition. Few studies have examined the issues with articles, prepositions, and agreements that students may run into when completing writing assignments; these issues may also be brought on by linguistic interference. Furthermore, very little research addressed the kind of sample that presents potential situations of native language interference and discussed them in relation to the genre of the texts that were collected.

The research also intends to contribute to pedagogical issues helping students avoid negative transfer. As what have been proposed in previous studies, teach should have advanced understanding on the cross-linguistic differences between Chinese and English and intrinsic motivation and interests of the learners to trigger their awareness on language transfer [8]. It is also widely agreed that the input, cultural awareness, and cognitive system of target language play important role in lowering the impact of negative language transfer [9]. Based on that, teaching philosophy nowadays has been evolving more and more cultural aspects, but still, it is to be clarify which cultural knowledge has the capacity to improve students' language competence and how effective they are.

3. Methodology

3.1. Date Collection

The approach adapted in the research is qualitative, and the data is collected from interviews with college students and the Corpus Research Group, Beijing Foreign Studies University's The TECCL Corpus. The corpus is named Ten-thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners (the TECCL corpus) (Version 1.1).It started out with about ten thousand pieces, but nine thousand compositions remained after instances of plagiarism and compositions that were too advanced for the students were removed. The corpus materials are specifically the most recent ones from 2015 and contain around a thousand different composition subjects written by authors who are usually undergraduate students but can range in age from primary school pupils. The resources, which include group collaboration works, exam compositions, homework assignments, and in-class assessments, are sourced from multiple provinces and regions.. The corpus provides a large number of real-life language use examples, aiding researchers in analyzing the language performance of second language learners in natural contexts. It facilitates the analyst's quantitative and comparative analysis of linguistic phenomena or errors, and comparisons among English users at different levels.

The interviewed college students' situation: senior undergraduate student (female), IELTS writing score of 6.5. The interview topic is the interference of language transfer present in her writing sample and the corpus writing samples analyzed in this research. The main objective is to identify which cases marked in her sample are caused by her native language and which are not from her perspective.

3.2. Sampling strategy in writing sample selection

A series of factors were carefully considered when choosing the writing samples among hundreds of others, comprising student background, year of complete, length, and genre of the text. From the researcher's point of view, the samples that stand out the most in the corpus are those that were written by college-level students in 2015, the most recent update of the corpus, and are therefore closer to the present than any other. The main reason the researcher decided to focus on argumentation was that argumentation is widely and typically used in college students' academic lives. The researcher chose to concentrate on argumentation samples where students had to express their arguments and support them with evidence and explanation requiring logic, facts, and objectivity.. The total ten selected samples have an average length of 306 words, with the maximum of 468 and the minimum of 246, in four to six paragraphs, discussing the merits and demerits of the rocketing online shopping in 2010s and how the public should react to it.

This dual-method approach guides the research to distinguish between prescriptive errors, which are clearly grammatically incorrect and indicative of a lack of linguistic competence, and descriptive errors, which are more subtle and reflect a cultural and cognitive divergence from native English expression. In a sense, case analysis is synonymous with qualitative research methods. From the viewpoints of both researchers and learners, the qualitative research method has several characteristics: thorough descriptions of the research subjects; a thorough and systematic study of the functions of social entities within the social system; the ability to discover new patterns or rules; and an emphasis on natural observation [10]. A review of how analogical, quantitative, and qualitative methodologies are used in linguistic research. It is hoped to use the corpus to find typical problems of most students and through interviews to obtain the most authentic situations directly and truthfully.

4. Findings: Possible cases of language interference and analysis

Among all cases that was found possible to be caused by native language interference, the researcher tends to classify them into two major categories, that is, prescriptively ungrammatical ones that violet English grammatical rules and descriptively inappropriate ones that could read unnatural or weird in the specific text type. This paper will discuss them respectively in the following paragraphs.

4.1. Prescriptively ungrammatical cases

Due to the differences between Chinese and English grammar, it is widely observed that Chinese students have trouble in producing certain expression with detailed grammatical rules and structures that beyond their language competence. In the ten written samples, the researcher found a number of mistakes, such as improper word order and improper use of articles or agreements, which were thought to be significantly impacted by the writers' original tongue..

4.1.1. Incorrect word order

The presented case below was identify to have the error of word order where the author tended to describe a common phenomenon that customers are widely suffering from over advertising of online shops with their misleading introduction and pictures.

Case 1. You may buy a good different from you saw the one online.*

Correction. You may buy a good different from the one you saw online.

The researcher intends to consider native language interference, over other factors, as the major reason why the student made the mistake. Because of the influence of the Chinese word order, it is likely that the students first created a Chinese statement in their minds before translating it word for word into English. However, they neglected to switch and fix it. This is an uncommon error that only occurred once in the shortest sample with the lowest performance of the ten studies examined. This could indicate that college students, who typically have an intermediate proficiency level, are capable of identifying and avoiding this kind of interference.

4.1.2. Misuse of articles or agreements

Unlike the Chinese word order that dominates students' critical period of language acquisition, which may lead to interference that drives them to make mistakes when producing English sentence, misuse of articles or agreements is considered to be driven by another kind of language interference. The non-existence of corresponding structure in the native language can also lay negative impact on second language producing.

After carefully identifying, the researcher found that the misuse of definite or indefinite articles took place in eight of the ten samples, most of which presented more than once.

*Case 2. People's leisure lives are continually eroded also because of *ubiquity of modern technological tools.*

Correction. People's leisure lives are continually eroded also because of the ubiquity of modern technological tools.

Case 3. In addition, we can't see the things while we are shopping.*

Correction. In addition, we can't see things while we are shopping.

The researcher notes that the overuse and misuse of definite articles in the writing samples are not surprising and that this may be due to students not having enough guidance when deciding whether or not to use them, particularly if their proficiency is not advanced enough to master a small but important grammar point for which their native language does not have a corresponding.. And similar phenomenon can also be observed in agreements, yet only three of samples have that problem.

Case 4. Let's talks about the advantages and disadvantages of online shopping.*

Correction. Let's talk about the advantages and disadvantages of online shopping.

Case 5. For example, a buyer gave a negative common on a shop so the shopkeeper online puts her private information on a marriage-seeking web and threatens* the girl.*

Correction. For example, a buyer gave a negative common on a shop so the shopkeeper online put her private information on a marriage-seeking web and threatened the girl.

It is quite hard to keep caution in detailed personal or tense agreements while constructing argumentative essays, especially for those students whose native language does not keep reminding them on this task, but it is assumed that because agreements are less ambiguity than the rules of article usage, college level Chinese students actually perform better, making less error in agreements.

4.2. Grammatical but descriptively inappropriate cases

Students are compelled to look for an expression when they need to produce something in their native tongue and then transfer those expressions into target language, not necessarily translation, because of the native language's dominance and the inputting of native language sources, such as history, myths, stories, essays, and other types of sources. However, because target and native languages are not the same genres, this transformation may lead to ambiguity, misunderstanding, and confusion. .

4.2.1 Transferred Chinese patterns

It is observed that certain patterns that are highly possible to have Chinese origins were chosen by multiple students. The researcher, a Chinese native speaker, is capable to comprehend them in no time and to assume their possible original Chinese version, yet there could be doubt whether a reader without Chinese background can comprehend the expression as easy as Chinese people do.

Case 6. On the other hand, as we all know, the real information is sharply different from the ones that the sellers described about the product.

Case 7. Some would regret this impulse shopping and want to chop their hands.

The chunk ‘as we all know’ is observed in three out of the ten samples to express an idea or claim is widely known or accepted in a certain range so that it is not necessary to justify or explain more, which usually takes place in the beginning of a Chinese argumentation leading author’s major claim with a widely known facts or heated discussion topic. It might be unclear to individuals unfamiliar with Chinese reasoning genre, though, why "we" all know and to whose organizations the "we" alludes. Additionally, the phrase "chop one's hands" refers to an online Chinese phase that was very popular during the 2010s Chinese online shopping boom and meant to spend a lot of money or buy expensive products while buying, resulting in financial issues or financial stress. Chinese students frequently use it while talking about online buying, but without further explanation, it could be exciting for readers from different backgrounds.

4.2.2. Overuse of personal pronoun

It is usual and appropriate to use personal pronoun, especially first personal singular pronoun ‘I’ and ‘me’ in the beginning and the end of an argumentative essay, to directly present claim or calling for action for or against some social phenomenon. However, total seven out of the ten samples used ‘we’ and ‘you’ frequently in body paragraphs where students are supposed to provide facts and explanation objectively to support their claims.

Case 8. And then we can get more detailed information and compare with other shops quickly to choose the best one.

Case 9. For example, we may choose a wrong size so we have to change another one.

Case 10. We can't see the things while we are shopping, so we are not sure whether they are good or not. If you are careless, it will bring you some trouble.

The overuse of personal pronoun as subject of sentences in argumentative essays could harm the objectiveness that is considered one of major factor of argumentation, and at the same time, cause lexical ambiguity that confusing readers who exactly are ‘we’ or ‘you’. Take case 10 as an example, ‘we’ and ‘you’ in that case both could refer to customers who choose to shop on online platforms, and the author used two different subjects that are even opposite in some term, which harms comprehending a lot.

4.3. Interview on intended interference cases in writing sample

Other than corpus-based data analysis carried out to identify the composition issues that is possible to be caused by native language interference, a semi-structured interview was conducted to justify the causes from learners’ perspective. A senior undergraduate English learner whose native language is Chinese and whose valid IELTS writing score was 6.5 was asked to submit a writing sample regarding the proper use of generative artificial intelligence that she had recently written for one of

her academic writing assignments. The researchers pointed out a few grammatical errors and inappropriate descriptive expressions in the sample and asked the student to discuss the process of writing the marked sentences and whether or not the use of the Chinese language affected her while she was writing. .

The major purpose to conduct the interview is to testify the hypothesis this research proposed as corpus-based data analysis only presents results that are considered over-objective from the relatively narrow view of a group of researchers. There is no access to the detailed imagination of how learners thought when they are making compositions, and the only way to reach it is to let them review the writing process and talk about their thought directly. By comparing students' voice and the undergoing thesis concluded by sample in the corpus, the arguments can be reinforced, disproved or remained questionable.

In the 1390-word long composition about the academic usage of generative artificial intelligence, less than ten descriptively unnatural and prescriptively ungrammatical cases were identified and categorized into three types that analyzed and discussed in last section of this study, misplaced personal pronouns, misuse of articles and prepositions, and direct translation of Chinese structure.

4.3.1. Misplaced Personal Pronouns

The researchers noticed that the interviewee chose to use the second-person pronoun 'you' as subject in the subordinate clause of the first sentence besides a quota of previous studies. Then, she immediately shifted the subject in the next sentence and no other personal pronouns, 'you' or 'we', took place in this composition.

Case 11. Generative Al can read and acquisition knowledge from the references which you put in and then produce academic text to satisfy your order. For instance, if a student give(s) Generative Al some papers.

The researchers postulated that she originally thought of a statement in Chinese before translating it into English based on this pattern and the corpus analysis. The lexical ambiguity in her sentence was generated by the prevalent usage of generally-referential personal pronouns (i.e., using "you" to refer to the broader public). And because of her reasonably sophisticated knowledge of academic genre and English writing, she was able to alter the topic and avoid using personal pronouns in the subsequent lines quite quickly-almost subconsciously. However, the interviewee suggested that the subject choice has very little to do with Chinese interference, and she justified that the main reason why to use second person pronoun there as subject was trying to avoid repeated subjects because her academic writing teacher told her to, and she failed to come up with one that was more appropriate to be placed there at that time. And more significantly, she did not started the paper with a Chinese sentence in mind and then wrote down the English translation. In accordance of her reflection, the hypothesis is less accurate than the researchers think it could have been. There is apparently more complex reasons behind this cases, at least for students who have relatively higher proficiency in English writing, but whether or not Chinese interference drives students with lower proficiency to keep the preference of using personal pronouns as subject still remains to be justified.

4.3.2. Misuse of Articles and Prepositions

Most of grammar errors in the interviewee's sample can be categorized into this type, and the she confirmed that this kind of problems bother her a lot in academic writing even if it is so detailed that can rarely affect the structure of composition of delivery of ideas. Although she had not previously considered the issue from this angle, she also concurred that the native language played a significant role in these minor grammatical errors. Because there is no equivalent grammar in the local tongue, third person singular agreement is frequently omitted, and articles and prepositions are misused. This may be because the native language has a critical moment in its history. These English grammatical problems virtually never arise during the time when native language proficiency swiftly increases and accounts for the majority of human language use..

4.3.3. Direct Translation of Chinese Structure

Direct translation of Chinese structure was very rarely observed in the interviewee's writing sample due to her advanced writing competence. Only one case of prescriptive grammar error in her sample can be considered as the result of direct translation.

Case 12. because of it has been trained on numerous data from many sources so* it has a (an) abundance knowledge base, therefore generate (generating) ideas is easy for it.*

Correction. because it has been trained on numerous data from many sources, it has a (an) abundance knowledge base, therefore generate (generating) ideas is easy for it.

This case, two adverbial clauses connected together without main clause, contains complex causes combining language interference and deficient grammatical knowledge. The interviewee acknowledged that the corresponding Chinese structure, which demands that "because" and "so" occur in a single sentence in order to present the logic of reasons and results, had a significant influence on her. However, she also acknowledged that her understanding of the main clause and adverbial subordinate clause was lacking, which may have contributed to her error. Because of this, the research can only partially ascribe it to native language influence; further cases of this type should be examined and debated in order to support this conclusion..

5. Discussion

With the corpus-based analysis and semi-structured interview, which represent the opinions of the researchers and learners respectively, the study intend to draw its conclusion on which prescriptive grammatical errors and descriptively unnatural expressions that Chinese college level students make are based on native language interference.

Compared with those of unnatural expressions, the researchers have clearer views on the cases of grammatical errors. Firstly, it is strongly agreed that the grammatical points without corresponding Chinese grammar, such as misuse of articles and prepositions, mistake of personal agreement, and tense-aspect errors, have close and solid relation to language interference. Learners find it difficult to develop a strong understanding of these grammatical concepts due to the absence of native language grammar, particularly while engaging in productive writing and speaking activities. Through corpus sample and interview analysis, it is double-confirmed. Another class of grammatical errors, which includes direct translation, subject omission, and multiple verbs connected by commas, are likewise significantly influenced by the source language; nevertheless, the underlying mechanism is the equivalent grammar. Employing previously mentioned articles or figures as subjects in phrases without actually presenting them, or employing several verbs connected by commas under parallel or sequential logic, are both technically correct and natural for a Chinese speaker or writer. Students with relative lower proficiency of English tend to make mistakes of this kind more often, which can be presented by the difference of corpus samples where one or two cases present in average every one hundred word and the interviewee's sample where only one case takes place in the 1390-word composition.

The descriptively unnatural but grammatically correct cases, in opposite, seem to have complex or combined causes that need to be further studied. The interviewee partially agreed with the researchers' suggestion that native language interference has a significant impact on direct translation cases found in the corpus, but she also stated that her lack of knowledge and production of advanced grammar, such as complex adverbial clauses, led her to search for equivalent expressions in Chinese, which resulted in an error. Additionally, the interviewee disagreed with the researchers' notion that the use of personal pronouns as subjects indicated that, based on their study of corpus samples, the statement was typical Chinese syntactical utterance.

6. Conclusion

The major motivation to conduct the research is to justify the impact of native language interference in Chinese college students' composition, in order to match concise and targeting teaching methods to improve their writing competence. Whereas, the data and interview suggest that the proficiency of second language may play a significant role differentiating the undergoing mechanism that drives learners to produce sentences or chunks of this kind. Learners with lower proficiency have stronger intention to subconsciously transfer native language when they are assigned production tasks than student with higher proficiency who have overcome the impact of inter-language by larger quantity of training. This phenomenon may insist that formal English writing teaching and learning can help student get rid of the negative impact of native language interference. When dealing with articles, prepositions, agreement, and pluralization-all of which are absent from Chinese grammar systems and are not taught there-it might be less helpful. Based on the findings of this study, filling in the blanks and internalizing these recently learned grammar rules may be the subject of future research. A number of factors, including major (in English or not), studying abroad experience, out-of-school training experience, and English class teaching methods, can be categorized and controlled to make the agreement more succinct and persuasive because of the limited time and resources the researchers encountered. This helps to further justify the origin of language interference. Class observation can be conducted and feedbacks can be given to teaching practitioners optimize their work experience and teaching outcomes, and that can complete the original purpose of this study.

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