

Analyse on Second Language Learners Learn English Without Native Language: A Case Study of Chinese Learners

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Abstract. Second language acquisition is a common phenomenon around the world. People around the world started to learn English after it became the universal language. Language transfer occurs between the target language and the mother tongue. In order to reduce the negative transfer between the different languages, the argument of how to deal with native language and target language is an intense discussion among linguistics. This paper focused on the relationship between the native language and target language among different ages, with a case study of Chinese learners who study English as a second language. The research was done by questionnaire and collected 126 responses. After collecting and analyse the data through chi-square, the result shows that there is no strong evidence to prove there has a significant relationship between language transfer with the different ages. But it shows an interesting point that it is necessary to promote the target language environment and mindset among the different ages no matter what motivation persuades the learners to study English.

Keywords: Language, acquisition, transfer, awareness, language, chi-square.

1. Introduction

In the modern world, there are many people who acquire and use bilingual or multilingual forms which have become a common social phenomenon, especially when English became the universal language. In many countries where English is not the native language, they consider studying English as their second or third language. There is no doubt that learning one language will affect the subsequent learning of another whether positively or negatively [1]. While if there is a statistical correlation or probabilistic relationship between the use of a language learner's target language and any previously acquired feature could be seen as language transfer [2]. Moreover, cross-lingual influence refers to the influence of one's knowledge of one's language on one's knowledge or use of another language [3]. This may come to a question based on the influence of language transfer, how should language learners deal with their native language and target language.

At the same time, the research on second language acquisition (SLA) is also of more academic value. There are 132 journals on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) from the year 2001 until 2022, which include 58 journals of language transfer related [4]. In order to avoid negative transfer, many language educators abandoned the native language during their classes since the direct method of teaching appeared in the 20th century [5]. However, linguisticians hold the opinion that being against the native language during class limits the possibilities of language teaching [6]. So it is necessary to figure out whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages of learning a second language without a native language or the opposite. This paper will analyze the discussion through a case study of Chinese learners learning English as their second language.

2. Method

2.1. Research Objects

The questionnaire research invited adults who studied English as a second language to finish. They were aged 18-60 with different jobs, study motivations and times of study. In the research, they were invited to finish a questionnaire online to collect their English learning experiences and test their English comprehension ability.

2.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire investigation was divided into two sections, the English learning experiences and English comprehension abilities. There were 6 questions in the English learning experiences section including the motivation for English learning, the time range, English level, and how they studied English (i.e. whether they studied English with pure English or with some native language). In the English comprehension section, the researcher set up 5 questions to test their awareness of English words, phrases, conversation, and translation between English and Chinese mandarin.

2.3. Research Procedure

The questionnaire was designed online through a Chinese website named Wenjuanxing. After the questionnaire finished designing, it created a poster with a QR code. The researcher promoted it on WeChat and asked relatives and friends to help promote it on their social websites to gather the responses. The questionnaire was published a month and 126 respondents had been collected with 100% efficient responses.

2.4. Data Analyzed

The data was analyzed based on the chi-square test theory. Chi-square test aims to use cross-over analysis whether there has a difference between the samples X (definite) and Y (definite) [7]. The data was calculated by the SPSS (Statistical Package of Social Science) software [8]. If the final result p-value is less than 0.05 or 0.01 that means there shows a significant difference between the two elements, otherwise, there shows no significant difference [9]. In this study, the researcher focused on analyzing the relationship between the basic information and their English comprehension abilities through the final p-value.

3. Results

In these 126 samples, there were 80 respondents in the age range of 19-30, 32 respondents in the age of 31-45, and 14 respondents in the age of 46-60. Based on these respondents' basic information, they were from different provinces of China with different education qualifications from junior high qualification to doctor qualification, while the largest proportion was a bachelor's degree and master's degree of 42.86% and 34.13% respectively. 50 respondents were full-time students and others worked in different areas (i.e. service, education, business, and other career fields). Most of them had been studying English for over 5 years, which takes up 72.22% of the total samples. So the respondents were random instead of a specific group of people, which can be more representative of the study.

Table 1. English Vocabulary Awareness

Item	Categories	Age Group			Total	x ²	p
		19-30	31-45	45-60			
'We should not cut down trees and build conservation areas.' What does 'conservation' mean in this sentence?	对话	10.00%	21.88%	14.29%	13.49%	22.102	0.001**
	保护	82.50%	43.75%	85.71%	73.02%		
	习俗	5.00%	18.75%	0.00%	7.94%		
	转换	2.50%	15.63%	0.00%	5.56%		
Total		80	32	14	126		

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01

Table 1 presented the result of English vocabulary awareness through word discrimination which had a significant difference between the word awareness with different ages (p=0.001). During SLA, lemma and lexeme may both cause language transfer [10]. So this question aims to prove both levels of word transfer in different ages that respondents were asked to choose the correct Chinese meaning of the word 'conservation', which is “保护” in categories. The researcher also provided three

interference items that respondents might misunderstand the word ‘conservation’ as the word ‘conversation’ (对话), ‘convention’ (习俗), or ‘conversion’ (转换). According to the result, although most respondents picked the right answer “保护”, only 43.75% of respondents chose the right answer in the age group 31-45, the other three wrong answers were very evenly distributed.

Table 2. English Phrase Awareness

Item	Categories	Age Group			Total	x ²	p
		19-30	31-45	45-60			
‘The chaos were _____ off by the arrest of a local leader.’ Which word should be filled in the blank?	sparked	33.75%	28.13%	50.00%	34.13%	9.106	0.168
	gone	17.50%	12.50%	0.00%	14.29%		
	made	13.75%	25.00%	0.00%	15.08%		
	put	35.00%	34.38%	50.00%	36.51%		
Total		80	32	14	126		
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							

Table 2 was also tested in the English vocabulary transfer of L2 learners. This question is targeted at the collocation understanding in a sentence. While from the table above, data showed that the most option the participants chose was ‘put’ which took up 36.51% of the total, then the right answer ‘sparked’ came later as 34.13% in total. However, after the calculation, there is no significant difference between the phrase awareness with different ages ($p=0.168$).

Table 3. Conversation Awareness

Item	Categories	Age Group			Total	x ²	p
		19-30	31-45	45-60			
‘You know I wish you to be happy, don’t you?’ The correct answer to this question is	Yes, I do.	78.75%	65.63%	42.86%	74.13%	10.563	0.103
	No, I don’t.	5.00%	9.38%	7.14%	6.35%		
	Yes, I don’t.	8.75%	18.75%	35.71%	14.29%		
	No, I do.	7.50%	6.25%	14.29%	7.94%		
Total		80	32	14	126		
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							

Table 3 shows the English learners’ consciousness of how they transfer their expressions into another language. The question focuses on how to answer the disjunctive question. This shows a completely different way of thinking between Chinese and English. Although there is no significant difference between the conversation awareness with different ages ($p=0.103$), and most respondents picked the right answer, it was obvious that comparing the wrong answer ‘Yes, I don’t.’, there were 18.75% of respondents aged 31-45 and 35.71% of respondents aged 46-60 who chose this answer. This means that some learners over 30 tend to use Chinese thinking to communicate in English.

Table 4. English-Chinese Translation

Item	Categories	Age Group			Total	x ²	p
		19-30	31-45	45-60			
‘You finally broke the ice.’ The correct translation for this sentence is	你终于打坏了冰。	0.00%	3.13%	0.00%	0.79%	3.506	0.477
	你终于打破了僵局。	96.25%	93.75%	100.00%	96.03%		
	你终于破了冰。	3.75%	3.13%	0.00%	3.17%		
Total		80	32	14	126		
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							

Table 4 focused on English to Chinese Translation of L2 learners. It is obvious to see that in total 96.03% of respondents chose the correct answer “你终于打破了僵局”, which means it is easy for Chinese to choose the right answer for English to Chinese translation. However, within the respondents aged 19-30, there were still 3.75% and 3.13% of respondents aged 31-45 who made a direct translation “你终于破了冰”, as the word ‘broke’ means “打破” in Chinese, and ‘ice’ means “冰” in Chinese. This means they did not think about the expended meanings of an English sentence.

Table 5. Chinese-English Translation

Item	Categories	Age Group			Total	x ²	p
		19-30	31-45	45-60			
‘给你一点颜色瞧瞧。’ How to translate this sentence to English?	I will show you some colour.	6.25%	25.00%	21.43%	12.70%	21.591	0.001
	I will give you some colour to see.	1.25%	12.50%	14.29%	5.56%		
	I will teach you a lesson.	46.25%	43.75%	50.00%	46.03%		
	I will give you a lesson.	46.25%	18.75%	14.29%	35.71%		
Total		80	32	14	126		
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							

The data in Table 5 showed an interesting point on how Chinese translates to English. There is no doubt that the result shows a significant difference (p=0.001). However, there were only 46.03% of the total respondents picked the correct answer ‘I will teach you a lesson.’, which was less than half. The first two options researchers set were disturbance terms which were direct word to word translation. While in the age 31-45 group of participants, over 40% of them picked the disturbance terms.

4. Discussion

4.1. Overall

Linguisticians once mentioned that ages are one of the seven retraining factors of language transfer [10]. Based on the *Result* section, the chi-square test shows that the significant difference of different ages was only predicted in English vocabulary pragmatic transfer, which means it has a relationship between the ages with the vocabulary awareness and Chinese to English translation. However,

although there are no significant differences between the different ages and English phrase awareness, conversation awareness, and English-to-Chinese translation, it also presents that the English learners were strongly affected by the morphophonological and semantic transfer [11]. Next, the author will analyse each awareness by different ages.

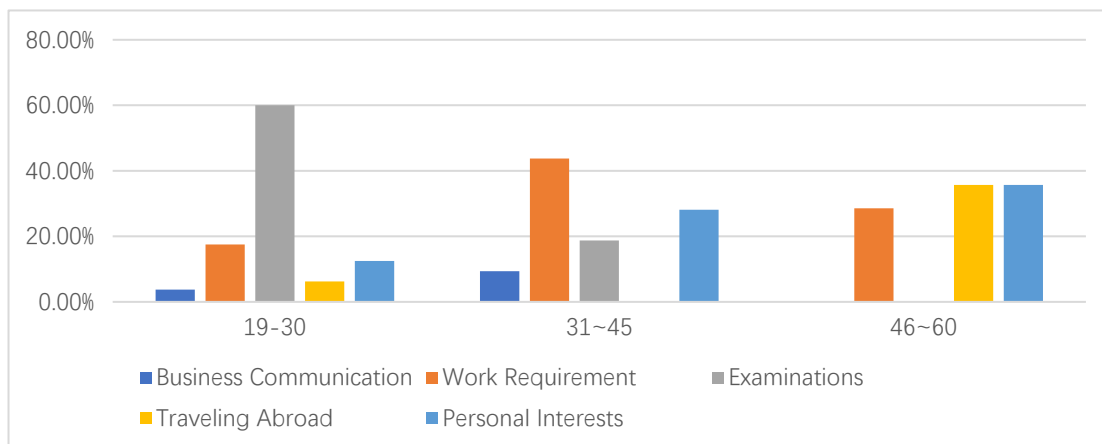


Fig. 1 Study Motivation

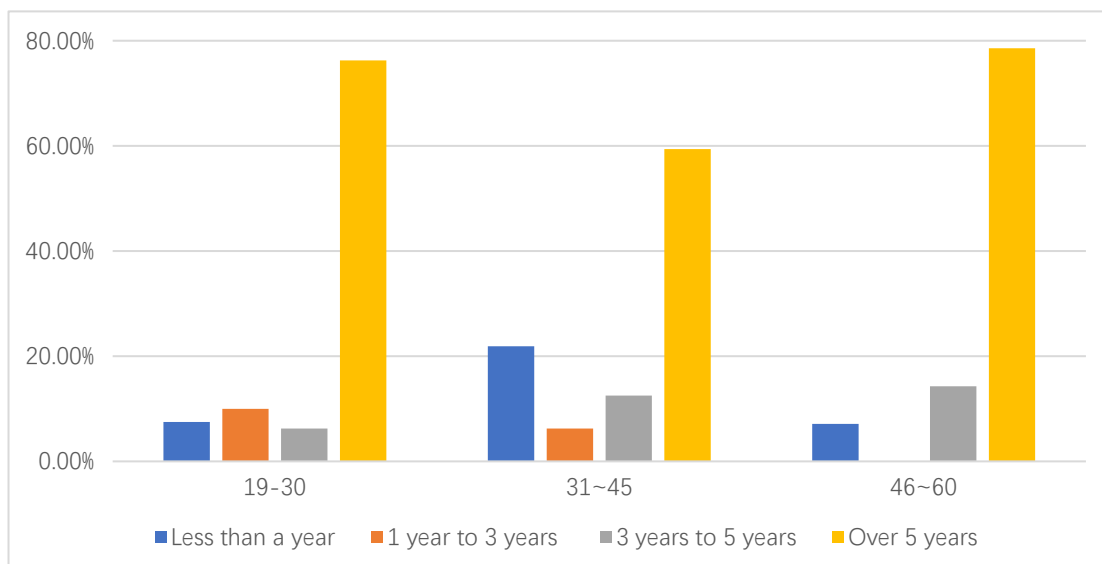


Fig. 2 Study Periods

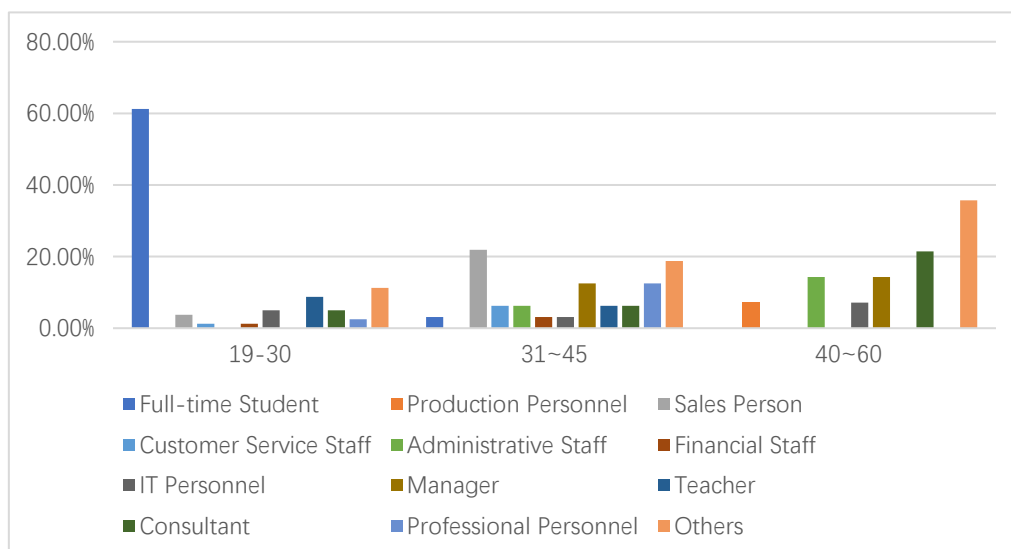


Fig. 3 Job Distribution

4.2. Learners in Age 19-30

In the 80 samples of age 19-30, there were over 60% of respondents are full-time students (see Figure 3) and learning English because of exams (see Figure 1), with over 75% of them have been studying for over 5 years (see Figure 2). In this case, they were more likely to choose the correct answers. One of the respondents told the author that when they studied English at school they were asked to study English for passing the exams, so what they learned was repeating the vocabulary and grammar items. They used to do multiple choice questions well, as in the comprehension section of the questionnaire. However, the two questions with the lowest accuracy at this age are the phrase awareness and Chinese to English translation (shown in Tables 2 and 5), with only 33.75% and 46.25% accuracy. In the phrase 267referred, there was 35% of respondents in the age 19-30 who chose 'put' as their answer, which rate was more than the correct answer 'sparked', even though the answer 'put off' made no sense in this question. This reflects that for more Chinese English learners, 'put off' is more common than 'spark off', respondents 267referred to choosing the answer they were familiar with without understanding the meaning of the sentence. As for the question of Chinese to English translation, the rate of choosing the answer 'teach a lesson' and 'give a lesson' was the same with 46.25% of 80 respondents. Although these two answers were correct, while 'teach a lesson' was more authentic in English. The reason why there are still around 35 respondents who chose 'give a lesson', the author guessed that they made a mistake in translating the Chinese character “给”, which corresponds to 'give' in English.

4.3. Learners in the Age 31-45

The author collected 32 responses from the age of 31-45. Among them, the most reason for them to study English is because of the work which took up 43.75% of the total, while 59.38% of them have been studying English for over 5 years. The results showed that except for the conversation and English to Chinese translation awareness, the other four questions were not accurate enough with less than a 50% of accuracy rate. While in the first question, vocabulary awareness, there were only 43.75% of them chose the correct, and 21.88% of them chose the answer “对话”. The author believed that 21.88% of respondents confused 'conversation' with 'conservation', as there only very little difference between 's' and 'v', and the former word has a higher frequency than the latter. To analyze the reason caused this result, the author checked their English learning experience and found that over 40% of respondents in this age group except for learning and working, they never use English in their free time. The way they learned English was similar to the way they learned at school. For example, when they tried to remember a word, they only remembered the pronunciation, the spelling and the meaning of a single word, as for how to use or make sentences, it was not what they care about. This explained why there were 21.88% of respondents confused the word 'conservation' with 'conversation'. They learned English to separate grammar from the vocabulary.

4.4. Learners in the Age 46-60

While the respondents who are aged 41-60 were more likely to learn English for travelling abroad or for personal interest, these two options took 70% of respondents, and most of them were not asked to study English for exams. What they study tends to be more communicative. However, the sample for this age group was limited with only 14 answers. English was not as popular as nowadays in their teenage times. So the author found that this group of respondents with over 78% who learned English over 5 years, but they did not learn enough at their school and during working periods. Some of this group of respondents are facing retirement, which means what they learned was more like English thinking, with oral speaking, high-frequency vocabulary, and simple grammar being more important for them.

5. Conclusion

According to the Discussion section, there have different negative language transfers at different ages. It is obvious that a significant difference is shown in vocabulary awareness and Chinese-to-English translation. However, even though the other three comprehensions do not show any significant difference through the chi-square test, it proved that phrase awareness is a common issue through different ages. Overall, no matter what motivation they are, it is a good way to use English to learn English, which improves the thinking of English and learn more authentic English. Especially for learners who are weak in phrases, the author suggests that understanding the whole sentence with an unknown phrase is much better than only remembering the Chinese meaning of a single phrase.

However, this research has some limitations. It is limited by the unicity and lack of samples. There are not too many people who choose to study a second language at the age of 45-60. The questionnaire has its limitation which are the questions the author set only present a group of learners instead overalls, and due to the macro-environmental conditions, the questionnaire is lack an important section of the language, speaking. Thus, in further studies, the author plans to enlarge the age ranges that increase the number of kids and teenagers from the age 6-18, and expand the sample ranges to ensure the study is more scientific.

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