Mandarin as the First Language Causes Negative Transfer in English Writing to Non-English Major College Students

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Abstract. L1 transfer represents the process that mother tongue would impact learners' second language acquisition. Prior knowledge from their first language would be consciously and unconsciously applied to their target language learning as an aid. Furthermore, positive and negative influences would be asserted in this process. To be specific, negative transfer or interference would be the focus foci of this article. Considering numerous research done by linguistics and educators from home and abroad, English writing in China has faced serious barriers mainly due to the mother tongue negative transfer, such as phonological, morphological, lexicon, syntax, and discourse errors. Therefore, this article concerns some typical errors that non-English major Chinese college students would make in writing. The house of error analysis regards that language transfer covers a majority of errors, which could be used as lubricants to facilitate Chinese college students' English writing skills. Hence, it is of significant essence that at the end of this article, several suggestions with reference value are advanced, desiring to contribute to the improvement of Chinese college students' writing capacity.

Keywords: L1 transfer, Negative transfer, English Writing, Errors, Chinese English learners.

1. Introduction

Along with the development of globalization and integration worldwide, English as a lingua Franca, flourish in every country, including China, Japan, and other Asian countries. Learning English has become an inevitable task for citizens desiring to gain diplomas, curving out business, and hoping to succeed. However, although a small portion of people learn languages simultaneously at a very young age, which makes them speak and use both languages without difficulties and ambiguities, many are positively and negatively influenced by the first language they learned sequentially, which we call "transfer." There are countless theories and definitions in terms of transfer, most of which were originated from the 1940s and 1950s in the United States. Chronologically speaking, the word "transfer" emerged initially in the field of psychology, under which it states the situation of previously existing knowledge being extended and expanded to the process of gaining new knowledge, i.e., the influences that the process of acquiring and memorizing one thing occurred upon acquiring and memorizing of other things [1,2]. In 1946, Charles E. Osgood claimed that it is without doubt that learning one set of material will affect the subsequent learning of another whether positively or negatively [3]. Besides, he coined the term of proactive and retroactive inferences. After the term of language transfer jumped into the public, the issue became crucial in SLA research, which arrived at its peak in the 1950s. in the 1960s, Contrastive Analysis, of which the fundamental claims are that transfer explains all errors and on this basis it is possible to predict all errors, reached its heyday with the work of Fries (1945) and Lado's landmark work (1957) [4]. Lado expresses that the phenomenon of transfer was that "Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture" [5], which stands for "carrying over the habits of his mother-tongue into the second language" [6]. Ellis also suggests that the psychological foundation of CAH is transfer theory, substituting the first language for the prior learning and the second language for the subsequent learning [7]. For Selinker (1966), language transfer maintains "a process occurring from the native language to the foreign language if frequency analysis shows a statistically significant trend in the speaker's native language" [8]. After the two, in 1989, with the theory of contrastive analysis hypothesis, Odlin

popularizes the term by identifying that "transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" [9]. Nowadays, language transfer generally represents the situation in that people would utilize their logical thinking and mindset in their first languages to consider problems in second languages. According to these statements, language transfer will occur among all the languages we learned before. However, in this article, we mainly focus language transfer on L1 transfer or mother tongue transfer. Specifically, we discuss Mandarin or Chinese as the first language, which sheds several impacts on English learning as a second language. As mentioned above, language transfer could be categorized into both positive and negative transfer primarily based on the similarities or differences between the first language and the second language we learned. In 1957, Lado claimed that in second language learning, it is more advantageous to learn the similarities of the L1 and L2, but challenging to learn the differences between them. Generally speaking, the more similar between the two languages, the more possibility that the transfer between them is positive or facilitating since students possess the capacity to distinguish and adapt its uniqueness and differences with the primary first language he has already known. By contrast, if differences are too colossal, such efforts need to be taken to learn a brand-new language system.

Since Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family while English belongs to the Indo-European language family, disparities between the two target languages are so tremendous that speakers whose native language is Mandarin find it arduous to learn English remarkably, especially in the field of writing. Writing is the embodiment of the comprehensive ability to use English. It is an extremely versatile tool which can be used to accomplish a variety of goals and is also an indispensable tool for learning since it's a vehicle to gather, preserve and transmit information widely [10]. On the one hand, writing compositions not only requires proficient language skills, but also profound insights about relevant issues; while on the other hand, writing is pivotal for college students for its enormous advantages. For instance, it entails students to express themselves and construct logical thinking models, in which improvements could be lubricants to facilitate other language skills, such as reading and comprehension. It assists language development at all levels: grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and discourse [11]. Although college students have studied English for at least 12 years, there are many mistakes and errors in writing, and a large part of these errors are interfered with by their mother tongue. Because students are not proficient enough in English, they will unconsciously adopt the knowledge system and way of the thinking mode of their mother tongue in the process of English expression, and the phenomenon of mother tongue negative transfer will appear as assistance. Additionally, because it is more visible, tangible, and concrete for us to record mistakes and errors students make in compositions rather than speaking in English, performance mistakes occur much more frequently, and it is complicated to distinguish between mistakes and errors. Given that Chinese students, even English teachers in China, are still confronted with the trouble of writing, we urgently need to clarify why writing in English would cause immense confusion in foreign countries and solutions and suggestions in accordance with these problems. Regrading to the aspect of writing, this article would focus L1 negative transfer on three dimensions: lexicon, syntax, and discourse aspects.

2. Error Analysis

2.1. Lexical Errors

2.1.1. Errors in word choice

Word choice errors are ubiquitous among second language learners due to interference from the writer's first language. They sometimes are called false-cognate, or translation errors, representing those words are semantically unacceptable but grammatically acceptable in the given linguistic context [12]. Broadly, there are two main reasons for errors in word choice. On the one hand, given the fact that there exist knowledge gaps between first and second language and causes the

unavailability of word choice in the second language since vocabulary in the first language could not directly translate or correspond entirely to the words in the second language. Sometimes, on the other hand, phrases coined by non-native speakers are sound awkward in that native speakers would not utter words in this strange way. According to the data collected and analyzed in considerable research, word choice is the most frequent error that second language learners make, especially for some synonyms having similar meanings but different usages in English. For example, alone and lonely are similar and substitutable when being translated into Mandarin Chinese, but in English, "alone" stands for the situation of being isolated from others with a neutral feeling. By contrast, "lonely" suggests the mood of unhappiness when being alone. From this perspective, choosing the wrong word in a specific sentence results from the fact that L2 learners lack the information and knowledgeability to distinguish differences between synonyms in English. Secondly, considering the capacity of being intermediate level for most L2 learners, it is under colossal possibility to be overgeneralized. Extending words meaning in lexical respect is a way of overgeneralization. For instance, the prefix "un-" does not express the negative meaning of "easy". Thus, the word "uneasy" is not equivalent to "not easy," but it connects with "anxious" and "worried."

2.1.2. Errors in the derivation

The derivation is the most common avenue in English to create new vocabulary by adding a suffix to a word, rare in Mandarin. There are diverse derivative morphemes, such as "-ness," which will switch the meaning of the original root into a different part of speech. Besides, different vocabulary in English are homographs since the verb and the noun shares the same word-formation. Therefore, it is without a doubt that Chinese students remembering vocabulary stiffly would ignore the existence of the different parts of speech and thus make predictable errors in writing. Take the grammatically wrong sentence "Maybe we will loss the game" as an instance, "loss" is a noun whose corresponding verb is "lose." A verb should be added after the auxiliary verb "will" rather than a noun in this sentence. Nevertheless, considering the factor of negative transfer of Chinese, L2 learners usually recite the explanation paralleling its meaning in English, and "lose" and "loss" are semblable in word-formation. Their Chinese meanings are like each other, and it is natural to find this type of error in compositions Chinese students write.

2.1.3. Error in collocation

It has been agreed that collocation is the most challenging part of a language. Most researchers define *collocation* as a lexical unit consisting of a cluster of two or three words from different parts of speech [13]. In 1957, Firth put forward collocations in a habitual company are words. Collocations are generally divided into grammatical and lexical collocations in accordance with open and restricted collocations. When it comes to writing in English, in most cases, students will hunt for words and sentences that are semantically equivalent to their mother tongue, which will lead to misunderstandings even though painstaking efforts are devoted to it. Additionally, restricted by limited knowledge and cultural background of English-speaking countries, it is an immutable truth that without adequate exposure to the English environment and ambiance, students in China are incapable of following the idiomatic or habitual usage of certain words in English collocations. For instance, "Jiao Tong Yong Ji" (交通拥挤) would be translated into "crowded traffic" if Mandarin interferes, which is grammatically acceptable but semantically strange. Native speakers prefer "traffic jam" when it refers to traffic congestion on road networks.

2.2. Syntactic Errors

2.2.1. Errors in the use of verbs

Tense is a central grammatical point when Chinese students learn English. There are four types of tense: present, past, future, and continuous tense, all of which are achieved through transformations from auxiliary verbs and meaningful verbs according to the aspect of time. However, in terms of Mandarin Chinese, native speakers attach light importance to the form of tense but to the meaning reflected in words and sentences, which is the main culprit for students usually ignoring or forgetting

to focus on tense when the negative transfer is involved in. Plus, the tense could indicate feelings and actions in English, which is reputedly significant. However, speakers whose mother tongue is Chinese would use keywords such as "Guo"(过), "Le"(了), to represent past events without changing the original words. Therefore, it is no surprise that many Chinese EFL students would omit the inflection of English verbs and make countless tense errors and when writing in English. Besides, in English, subject-verb agreement is governed by a simple rule: a singular subject requires a singular verb while a plural subject requires a plural verb [14]. The subject-verb agreement does not exist in the Chinese language system. Students in China consistently forget this rule due to L1 negative interference. It's quite understandable for Chinese EFL students to be confused about subject-verb agreement for several reasons. First, regardless of the fact that non-English major students in China achieved certain level of English proficiency, the problem of distinguishing is" "are", "was" "were" cannot be neglected. In addition, collective nouns, such as "people" "family" are complicated for Chinese EFL students. Therefore, on the one hand, the subject-verb agreement is quite complex in English; on the other hand, it's a lack of awareness and conscious about the specific rule that gives rise to this type of error.

2.2.2. Errors in word order

Ruifang Fang (2007) pointed it out that English was a morphological language in which the sentence was subject-predicate-oriented [15]. There is a natural order of words in sentence formation in English, which often goes with subject, predicate and object. Nonetheless, it has a softer, more flexible and changeable word order in Chinese. There are various ways for EFL students to produce this type of error since in Chinese, people prefer to speak and write in simple sentences, while clauses and complicated sentences are used widely, such as subject clause, object clause, predicative clause, or attributive clause. As Zhiliang Liu mentioned in his article, more than 90% non-English majors used the simple sentences, not the complex ones in English writing [15] . For instance, students in China would feel confused about relative pronouns. These words, such as this, that, what, who, why… are all relative pronouns used to connect clauses or phrases. Here is a typical mistake Chinese students would make— "I know who the girl won the debate." It is standard for Chinese students to make such a mistake since there are no relative pronouns or clauses in Mandarin. The word "also" in "I also can do the exercise tomorrow morning" is falsely placed before the auxiliary verb "can" through word-by-word translation from Mandarin to English.

2.3. Discourse Errors

Consistent with the difference between Chinese and English speakers' general personalities and habitual manners, the Chinese thinking model is spiral while English is linear. Shuhua Tong wrote: Robert B Kaplan thought that the organization and development in an English discourse were linear [16]. People possessing the linear thinking model would directly point out the main topic they want to discuss, and then arguments would be reasoned with details step by step. Nevertheless, as is known to all, the Chinese are so implicit that denotations are often utilized when expressing ideas and opinions. In most cases, a relevant phenomenon would be carried out first by Chinese students with detailed explanations of why this phenomenon would happen and how it could happen, and eventually, Chinese authors would shed light on the theme of this topic by deductions, which is the spiral thinking model. The different thinking models would immensely influence the organization of discourse in writings. Students deeming Mandarin as their mother tongue do not commit themselves to the coherence of writing since there is not any strict rule in Mandarin. However, every sentence and paragraph should be linked together with a meticulously logical connection in English.

3. Implications for improving english writing

3.1. From teachers' perspective

3.1.1. Creating a western culture atmosphere

Foreign language ambiance is an essential element for students to plunge into the atmosphere in which students are accessible to utilize various contexts when learning and using English as a language tool. There are many avenues to create a proper cultural environment, such as English role-plays, surveys, and other English activities getting through the entire English class, all of which are lubricants to motivate students to learn much more about foreign cultures.

3.1.2. Making contrastive analysis

The negative transfer is part and parcel of bilingualism or multilingualism. Thus teachers should be aware that differences between languages exist and will not disappear. They should take analyzing differences between native and second language as a priority so that teachers could have a deeper insight into why students make that specific mistakes and better instruct them to avoid and correct their errors and misunderstandings.

3.1.3. Promoting writing through reading

Nowadays, most researchers in China are believed that readings could promote writing since students are accessible to familiarize miscellaneous types of vocabulary, acquire great styles of writing, and gain invaluable knowledge and insights towards issues, all of which would become the impulses for students to write superior compositions. Therefore, providing students with multiple readings is pivotal as an input, which could be transferred into output as a form of writing if they consciously appreciate, contemplate, and ruminate.

3.2. From students' perspective

3.2.1. Accumulating abundant vocabulary basis

Reputedly, a weak vocabulary base is the main obstacle for errors in word choice. Hence, a solid vocabulary is of the essence for choosing the most appropriate word in specific contexts. However, even with accumulating a certain amount of vocabulary, if EFL students cannot master words' meanings in English but rather memorize their equivalent translations in Chinese, it is inevitable for them not to master words flexibly. Therefore, as second language learners, not only should they memorize connotative meanings, but more crucial is denotation meanings and their extended meanings in foreign language contexts.

3.2.2. Fostering initiatives to expose themselves to foreign culture

When learning English in China, students have limited exposure to English, both speaking environment and culture. Hence, it is students' responsibility to immerse themselves in the English environment, which would become a catalyst for understanding western cultures, such as watching British or American TV series and films. Besides, students should be voluntary rather than compelled to write compositions in English to become accustomed to writing in English as a habit, such as writing diaries in English.

4. Conclusion

Negative transfer is an inevitable process for bilingual or multilingual students when they are learning a target language. The transfer could be positive and negative according to several aspects mentioned before, such as the disparity between the first language and the target one, awareness of the disparity, students' level of the target language, etc. Nevertheless, by no means could pin these external factors, like the colossal differences between the target language and the first language, on the only source of the negative transfer process, which is a drawback of this article since it concentrates on language differences in general without the consideration of the internal factors

bringing to the negative transfer. Besides, we should be conscious that transfer is an inevitable process that we cannot ignore, but what we can do is accept it and be committed to avoiding negative transfer at most and manipulate positive transfer into our language learning so that more progress could be achieved and more minor errors caused.

Meanwhile, according to the curriculum reform enacted by the Ministry of Education in recent years, four ability skills, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, are attached much more significance than ever before, especially writing and writing to college students as water to fish. College students possessing salient writing abilities in English are more accessible to own more complex and multiple ways of thinking about one particular issue, and in the long run, it enables them to gain a much more prosperous job. Therefore, this article hopes to assist both students and teachers to recognize the viewpoint that negative transfer in an EFL country does seem to be troublesome, and it does require all of us to be devoted to distinguishing and studying both external and internal factors in respect of negative transfer between Mandarin Chinese and English. However, undoubtedly, it is much more worthwhile than one could expect.

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