

Common Problems in Acquiring English Collocations: A Study of Chinese English Learners

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Abstract: English collocation is a crucial aspect of English language acquisition, as precise and appropriate English collocational usage enhances linguistic expression, rendering it more natural and authentic, thereby improving communicative effectiveness. However, Chinese English learners often encounter a series of challenges in acquiring English collocations due to differences in language background and culture. This article aims to explore common problems faced by Chinese learners in acquiring English collocations. English collocation represents a significant and intricate facet of English language learning; for students, mastering English collocations involves not only the application of grammar and vocabulary but also directly influences the naturalness and accuracy of language expression. Taking the perspective of Chinese learners into account, this paper analyses a range of potential problems that may arise during the process of acquiring English collocations. Furthermore, it proposes teaching implications from the perspective of teachers, with the intention of providing valuable references for English language education and instruction.

Keywords: English collocations, English learning, Lexical proficiency, Language transfer.

1. Introduction

Palmer (1938) was the first to introduce the term collocation in his dictionary, *A Grammar of English Words*. A collocation is a mainly lexical relationship between words and are susceptible to arbitrariness from common usage rather than rules (Benson, Benson, & Ilson, 1986). Selinker (1972) believes that language transfer means that learners use the rules and forms of their native language to recognize the target language, and its essence is the result of the native language system potentially affecting the way learners recognize the target language. Language transfer is divided into positive and negative. If the native language and the target language have similar or similar language rules, it will have a positive transfer to the target language acquisition, if there is a big difference between the native language and the target language, it will have a negative transfer to the target language acquisition. After the difficulty of the knowledge of the target language learned by L2 learners increases, the mother tongue will hinder the formation of new language structures and theories in language learning to a certain extent, and negative transfer will be produced (Ellis, 1989). Unfortunately, Chomsky (1986) proposed that it is impossible to completely avoid the transfer of mother tongue in the learning process of a L2. Ellis (2008) believes that even if collocation learning is an important part of language learning, due to the complexity of the vocabulary, many L2 learners cannot fully master the vocabulary, and they often make mistakes of native language transfer in the oral and written output of the L2.

Shu (1996), most of the mistakes made by Chinese students whose mother tongue is Chinese in English learning came from the influence of Chinese. The main influence of mother tongue on learning English collocations is the emergence of Chinglish, due to the influence of this Chinese-style English and the rigid English rules and habits of Chinese English learners and users, this kind of English is often incomprehensible or unacceptable for people in English-speaking countries (Gao, 2010). Wei (2014) examined how

semantic transfer affects advanced Chinese learners' mastery of English collocation knowledge. It turns out that semantic transfer can promote the mastery of productive and receptive knowledge of lexical and grammatical collocations and this effect will increase as the level of collocation knowledge increases.

2. Literature Review

Regarding previous researchers' research on Chinese English learners in the learning of English collocations, researchers can collect sufficient data through relevant methods to study, and then elaborate on Chinese English language learners' problem of collocations and its cause. A study on collocations of Chinese English learners was carried out by Qi (2008), this study found and discussed the distribution of collocation errors among Chinese English learners, and the similarities and differences in collocations among learners of different proficiency level. In this study, the author uses The Chinese English Corpus as the basis and selects three corpora, namely ST2, ST5 and ST6. Among them, ST2 stands for Chinese beginner English learners, ST5 stands for Chinese intermediate English learners, ST6 stands for Chinese advanced English learners, and the corpus in this study comes from the compositions of Chinese English learners from high school students to college students. The author searches the corpus in this study and finds out the English collocation errors, and then conducts a quantitative analysis. Finally, the author finds that the impact of L1 on the collocations learning of Chinese English learners decreases from beginner learners (ST2) to advanced learners (ST6). The main influencing factor of Chinese English learners' English collocation errors is L1, Chinese students' English collocation errors are due to the differences between Chinese and English, and similarity between English and English or the similarity between Chinese and Chinese.

In order to demonstrate the influence of Chinese on the use of English collocations by Chinese English learners, Zeng (2010) conducted a survey of thirty Chinese college students

with intermediate English proficiency. The study was conducted in two parts. The first part is In the English-Chinese translation test, the second part is the Chinese-English translation test, both of these tests allow students to translate short sentences containing English collocations, and the number of questions in the two tests is the same, in order to ensure that the test results can reflect the negative transfer probability of Chinese language to most Chinese students in learning English collocations, the time of these two tests is strictly controlled. In addition, the difficulty of these two tests is also in line with the intermediate level, in order to prevent the test results from being inaccurate because the difficulty of the test does not meet the students' English proficiency. It is found that the English collocations used by Chinese English learners is not authentic enough. Moreover, Chinese English learners have a relatively high probability of negative Chinese transfer when they understand and use English collocations. Chinese language is indeed effective for Chinese students in learning English collocations. In addition, the author also found that the reasons why Chinese students have difficulty with English collocations. Firstly, Chinese students lack a comprehensive understanding of the connotation of vocabulary, and they can only learn English collocations mechanically, without paying attention to the cultural connotation. Secondly, Chinese students believe that the definitions of English and Chinese vocabulary are completely equivalent, and they do not learn English collocations by comparing the differences between Chinese collocations and English collocations.

There is a study conducted by Cao (2017). The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of negative transfer of mother tongue on students' English collocation proficiency, forty college students were asked to complete two sets of sentence translations from English to Chinese and Chinese to English. It is worth mentioning that none of the students participating in this study have had the experience of studying or lived in English-speaking country, and their English proficiency gap is not large, and their gender and age gap are not significant. During the test, students were required to complete the test within the specified time and cannot access information or discuss with each other, so the accuracy of the test results is guaranteed. Through the analysis of the students' mistranslations, the author found that the collocation errors caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue are very significant in both English-Chinese and Chinese-English translations, and the error rate of collocations in English-Chinese translation is lower than that of Chinese-English translation. In addition, the author also found that the differences in the cultural connotations of Chinese and English words have led to obstacles for Chinese English learners in learning English collocations.

3. Project Description

To explore the common problems of English collocations for Chinese English language learners, I interviewed an advanced English learner whose mother tongue is Chinese, this interview consists of two parts. The first part allows interviewees to translate the Chinese meaning of English collocations within a specified time by means of Chinese-English translation, the second part is for interviewees to translate English collocations into Chinese. Besides, the interviewee has lived and studied in the UK for more than ten months, this is because previous studies focused more on

English learners in schools in China, as stated in the study of Cao (2017). In terms of interview, the interviewer and interviewee talked in English throughout the interview, except when the core Chinese words were mentioned in translation from Chinese to English or from English to Chinese, but these Chinese words were presented in the form of Hanyu Pinyin. To make it more intuitive, the Pinyin in transcription are accompanied by a later addition of the correct English translation. In this paper, I can compare the results of my interview with the literature I have read before, and to make the results more comprehensive based on the study of Cao (2017).

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The interview data is divided into two parts. The first part is the result of the interviewee's translation from Chinese to English, and the second part is the result of the interviewee's translation from English to Chinese. In these two parts, all conversations in the interview are recorded in the form of text.

Through the analysis of the wrong translation of the interviewee and the correct translation of a small part, in this test of ten Chinese to English translations, the interviewee only correctly translated two of them, and the remaining eight parts were all incorrectly translated. I found the fact that as described in the research results of Qi (2008), it is because of the differences between Chinese and English that Chinese students cause collocation errors. The analysis of students' English collocation errors due to the differences between Chinese and English is as follows: In Chinese, "Tu mo" can represent both the "Wear" in "Wear sunscreen" and the "Spread" in "Spread the chocolate on the toast". However, in English, the "Wear" in "Wear sunscreen" cannot replace the "Spread" in "Spread the chocolate on the toast". Besides, "Eat soup" and "Drink coffee" use different but appropriate verbs to indicate that humans ingest a certain liquid in English. However, in Chinese, the "He" used in "He tang" and "He ka fei" are both correct and common. In addition, in Chinese, the "Zuo" in "Zuo zuo ye" is different from "Do" and "Make". In Chinese, "Zuo" can be used for both ambiguous physical tasks and specific outcome. Interestingly, the accurate Chinese meaning of "Enjoy life" is "Xiang shou sheng huo", that is to say, "Enjoy" in "Enjoy life" and "Xiang" in "Xiang shou zhe kou" have the same meaning, obviously, "Enjoy" cannot replace "Get" in "Get a discount" and "Get discounts". In Chinese, the difference between "Pen" (wear) and "Ca" (spray) is whether the matched part is liquid. However, in English, "Pen" in "Pen xiang shui" can only be replaced by "Wear" in "Wear perfume". In this regard, if Chinese students do not compare Chinese collocations and English collocations, it is difficult to detect their errors in English collocations (Zeng, 2010).

Due to the similarity between English and English or the similarity between Chinese and Chinese, Chinese students also have English collocation errors (Qi, 2008). As we all know, "Yang cheng" (raise) can be used in "Yang cheng yi shi" (raise consciousness). However, due to the difference between Chinese and English, and there is not much conceptual difference between "Habit" and "Consciousness", Chinese English learners tend to erroneously translate "Make a habit" into "Raise a habit". Even if the differences between Chinese and English cause English collocations errors, through the answers of the interviewees, we can see that this kind of problem can be solved. For example, regardless of whether the hair color of the person mentioned is innate or

not, the color of blond hair in Chinese is "Jin" (golden), but in English, only non-natural blond hair is called "Golden hair" in certain circumstances. In addition, we can find that because the interviewee is different from some Chinese English learners who have not lived or studied in an English-speaking country. Therefore, even "Red" means "Hong" in Chinese, the interviewee can still correctly translate "Hong cha" as "Black tea", it may be because the language context that the interviewee is exposed to in English-speaking countries is not comprehensive, the interviewee still mistranslated "Blood bank" as "Blood store".

In the process of English-Chinese translation, the interviewee correctly translated most of the English collocations, and only three English collocations were translated incorrectly. Regarding the correct translation of the interviewee, since the interviewee is a Chinese English learner who is close to an advanced English learner, "Have a ball" and "At the ball" can still be correctly translated as corresponding Chinese meaning, even if the two collocations have similarities. However, it is interesting that the interviewee incorrectly translated "Catch a plane" as "Jie chi yi jia fei ji" (Hijack a plane), mainly because the interviewee misunderstood the connotation of these collocations. In addition, the interviewee mistakenly translated "There are five staff on duty" into "You wu ge gong zuo ren yuan zai shou shui" (There are five staff members collect duty/tax), which is because the interviewee did not have a comprehensive understanding of the word "Duty". The conclusion of Qi (2008) is confirmed. When the similar collocations of "Put on", "Put in" and "Put off" appear at the same time, the interviewee's English collocation errors are generated.

Through the above content, we can find that the conclusion of Cao (2017) is reflected that the accuracy of Chinese English learners' translation from English to Chinese is higher than that from Chinese to English. In addition, Zeng (2010) believes that Chinese English learners are more likely to have negative Chinese transfer when they understand and use English collocations, this view is also reflected in the above content.

5. Teaching Implications

The results of this study revealed that even if Chinese English learners with an advanced level of English and have experience of studying or living in an English-speaking country, there are still some problems in using English collocations without any preparation. In particular, the accuracy of the interviewee's translation of Chinese into English collocations is far lower than the accuracy of the interviewee's translation from English to Chinese. Therefore, I designed a classroom activity for Chinese English learners to learn English collocations by task-based language teaching.

This classroom activity is divided into three stages. In the first stage, the teacher can split each collocation into specific words, and then mix them out of order with the English words from other collocations, and then let the students learn these words. Specifically, students need to fully understand the common meaning of each word. In the second stage, the teacher asks the students to try to integrate these split English words into a complete English collocation. Then, after the teacher announces the correct answer, the students modify their assembled English collocations. After that, the teacher asked the students to carefully compare the meaning of collocation and the meaning of each word composing the

collocation. In addition, students are also asked to compare the differences between each English collocation and the corresponding Chinese definition of vocabulary. Then, after ensuring that the students have basically completed the corresponding tasks, the students are required to carry out the English-Chinese and Chinese-English translation training of English collocations under the same requirements. In the third stage, students are asked to conceive an essay, and the composition must include some of the collocations they were impressed with in this classroom activity, and all the parts that made collocations use errors in the second stage. Chinese English learners can compare similar English collocations, and they can also compare the differences between Chinese and English, and they can also carefully study the cultural connotation of each collocation and the connotation of the words in this collocation. In this way, Chinese English learners will be less affected by the negative transfer of their mother tongue when learning English collocations, in addition, students' English-to-Chinese or Chinese-to-English abilities can be equally valued, which can also reduce their English collocation errors to a certain extent.

6. Conclusion

This paper describes the common problems encountered by Chinese English language learners in the process of learning collocations, whether they are Chinese English learners with advanced or beginner English proficiency, and whether they are Chinese English learners with English-speaking County experiences, in the process of learning English collocations, they all affected by their native language to varying degrees. However, I believe that if English teachers can pay attention to this problem and adopt appropriate teaching methods to teach English collocations for Chinese English learners, such as task-based language teaching, and use clear and effective tasks to help students learn with the formation of the results, the problems caused by the negative transfer of the mother tongue that Chinese English learners encounter when learning English collocations will be reduced. Although this study has certain limitations, the English collocations errors of advanced Chinese English learners may be different due to their different learning experiences, and Chinese students with learning experiences in English-speaking countries also have different situations in English-speaking countries. Therefore, even if students with more different experiences should be covered in the future study, this study is expected to be a helpful case for the future comprehensive study.

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