

The Influence of Negative Transfer of Mother Language on Syntax in Students' English Writing

Mingda Li

School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing, China

Abstract: The language transfer theory postulates that a learner's mother language would either positively or negatively impact his acquisition of a foreign language as a second language. When there are similarities between the native language and the target language, the transfer functions positively, while in case of differences, it functions negatively. Writing is one of the five basic skills of English learning, which is the most intuitive reflection of students' overall ability level. This paper first analyzes the phenomenon of negative transfer of mother language and English writing, and then analyzes the impact of negative transfer of mother language on students' English writing from the syntactic level. Based on the analysis, this paper proposes countermeasures from four aspects: strengthening comprehensible language input, enhancing the comparison of Chinese and English, applying the diversified writing evaluation feedback methods, and guiding students to develop writing strategies, in order to help students overcome the interference of mother language and improve their writing ability.

Keywords: English Writing; Mother Language; Negative Transfer; Syntax.

1. Introduction

Language acquisition is one of humanity's fundamental characteristics [1], because non-humans do not communicate by using language [2]. Now, most learners have to learn a second language after they have acquired their mother language. The process of their learning a second language is the process of second language acquisition [3]. Second language acquisition, formally established itself as a discipline around the 1970s, refers to the systematic study of how one person acquires a second language subsequent to his native language [4]. In the course of this period, the mother language will surely have an influence on the second language. This is the language transfer. The word "transfer", which comes from the Latin word "transfere", means "to carry, to bear or to print, impress, or otherwise copy" something from one surface to another [5]. Transfer originally is a psychological term that refers to the effect of previous learning or skills on subsequent learning or skills. Linguistic transfer is the process by which learners apply or generalize what they already know about their mother language to aid in their acquisition of a target language. Language transfer has been a central subject in applied linguistics, second language acquisition and language learning [6]. The theory of language transfer has seen ups and downs since its inception in the 1960s, coinciding with the shift in the dominant theory in second language acquisition.

It is universally acknowledged that the five basic skills of English learning are listening, speaking, reading, seeing and writing. Writing is a crucial component of English language competency and one of the best ways to assess and improve students' language skills. It also provides the most accurate indication of students' total English proficiency. Many factors influence students' capacity to write better, but the language transfer seems to be especially prevalent when it comes to writing progress [7]. The transfer occurs at the level of lexis, syntax and discourse. This paper only refers to the syntactic level.

Due to the linguistic and cultural disparities between English and Chinese, students often face challenges in

overcoming the influence of their native language, which hinders their writing skills and undermines their confidence. By analyzing the negative impacts of language transfer of mother language on writing from the syntactic level, this paper proposes countermeasures from four aspects: strengthening comprehensible language input, enhancing the comparison of Chinese and English, applying the diversified writing evaluation feedback methods, and guiding students to develop writing strategies, so as to mitigate the negative effects of language transfer on students' English writing and improve their writing ability.

2. The Effect of Negative Mother Language Transfer on the Syntax in Students' English Writing

Syntax is the rule of forming words and sentences. Influenced by many factors such as the thinking pattern, cultural background and language style, learners often suffer from the negative transfer of Chinese, resulting in a large number of syntactic errors in English writing. The types of sentences used by students in English writing are quite special, forming a unique style of Chinese students' English writing [8]. Chinese syntactic relations are mainly expressed by the word order and semantic relations, not pursuing formal integrity, often only seeking to achieve the meaning; English grammatical components have independent roles, paying more attention to the formal integrity of sentence structure and logical rationality, while English grammar components have their own patterns [9]. Chinese is a topic-prominent language, and the thought and the order of words naturally mingle together. In a sentence, first come the topic and then the comments. English is a subject-prominent language. The English sentence obeys the syntax structure strictly, so the order of the words is restrained by many rules, and most of the meaning is implied in the sentence. So there are great differences between the two languages in sound, syntax, semantics, and so on. According to the Chinese learners, the rules of the mother language are ineradicable which they usually unconsciously apply in English learning. Because of

the great distinction between Chinese and English, negative transfers are inevitable in writing.

2.1. Subject Omission

The subject in English sentence cannot be missed. And the predicate is taken as the centre; the subject is mutually restrained by the predicate. Nevertheless, the subject in Chinese sentence can be missed. So we can miss the subject when conveying something and there exist a lot of zero subjects in Chinese sentences. Therefore, when learners try to write in English, the negative transfer from the mother language will influence the interpretation of subject.

2.2. Position of Adverbial

Although the word order in both English and Chinese is “subject-predicate- object”, the two languages still have very obvious differences in the sentence structure [10]. In Chinese, the gerund can be located in the middle of the subject-predicate-object structure, while English sentences usually place the gerund before and after the subject-predicate-object structure. If students ignore this difference in English learning, they will have many problems in writing. For example, “He studies hard in his room every night” should be translated as “He studies hard in his room every night”, rather than “He every night in his room hard reads books”.

2.3. The Location of Negative Object

In Chinese, the negative words like ‘bu’, ‘fei’, ‘mei you’ are all directly put before the object. However, in English, although ‘not’ is put together with the predicate verb to deny some other parts of the sentence. So, it is not directly put before the negative object. Therefore, it comes the problem of locating negative object. The meaning of the whole sentence will be misled or mistaken by making an incorrect location of the negative object. There are also some negative meanings in the complex sentence. The negative word in Chinese sentence is naturally put before the object word, while the negative word in corresponding English sentence can only be put before the verb. Chinese students cannot get into the habit, which does not obey the normal order of Chinese words and they frequently make mistakes. Many subjects have made such mistakes with the influences of the mother language, and they make a sentence like this: I think all he has done is not for money. The correct version should be: I do not think all he has done is for money.

2.4. Sentence Fragment

A non-complete sentence uses a part or component of a sentence as if it were a complete sentence. Chinese sentence structure is often more loose and casual, from the formal point of view, there is no morphological difference among the components of a Chinese sentence, sentence components are more commonly omitted. As a result, Chinese students often use incomplete sentences in their English compositions. They either lack a subject, or a predicate, or are just a separate subordinate clause. As an example, students might write in this way: You can study at home or office, only need a computer. The correct version should be: You can study at home or office only with the aid of a computer.

2.5. Non-parallel Sentence

Parallel structure is a structural arrangement in which two or more words, phrases, or clauses are ordered in strings to represent comparable actions, ideas, and concepts. These

ideas are expressed in similar grammatical forms. The words have related meanings, the same hierarchy, and the same syntactic function. The most important characteristic of parallel structure is the consistency of syntactic structure among the parallel components. Parallel structure can have various degrees of parallelism in composition, ranging from the parallelism of words and phrases to the parallelism of subordinate clauses. It can also have equal structure in different word classes in the language. The most significant feature of parallel structure is the consistency of syntactic structure among parallel components. Therefore, when writing, we must avoid the inconsistency of grammatical form among parallel components. Since there are no obvious changes in word forms and structures in Chinese, students are not good at or make mistakes when writing in English due to the interference of Chinese expression habits. For example, students might write in this way: The young woman is pretty and has brains. The correct version should be: The young woman is both pretty and smart. What’s more, it can also be: The young woman has both looks and brains.

2.6. The Choice of Pronoun-subject or Non-pronoun-subject

Chinese always hold the idea that man and nature mingle together, so Chinese intend to make themselves as the start to narrate object things and are used to taking the pronoun as the subject [11]. However, in the western philosophy, object is emphasized and it is believed that man and nature are separated. So western people intend to express things from an object view and are used to taking non-pronoun such as things or abstract concept as the subject. The choice of pronoun-subject or non-pronoun-subject between Chinese and English will lead to negative transfer of mother language, which will result in an inaccurate interpretation of the topic [12].

The Chinese students are easily influenced by the pronoun-subject sentence. They write the English sentence mechanically according to the Chinese type sentence. For example, students might write in this way: You only study it carefully; you will find where the problem is. Although there is no grammar mistake, it is somewhat Chinglish rather than idiomatic expression in English. So the sentences should be like this: Careful study of them will show you where the problem is.

2.7. Run-on Sentences

There is a distinction among the sentences of Chinese and English. In English, there exist many conjunctions, preposition, relative pronoun, three non-predicate forms and sixteen tenses, which makes the English sentence very complex [13]. However, there is no participle in Chinese. Words like conjunction, preposition and relative pronoun are not rich, and verbs are exceptional. If you put two independent clauses together without proper punctuation, you have made an error called a run-on sentence, which can also be called a fused sentence. Run-on sentences are generally created when you attempt to coordinate sentences but do not use the correct punctuation. Incorrect use of run-on sentences is the common problem among subjects due to the influence of the Chinese. Run-on sentences are sentences that two main clauses are connected without a connecting word or punctuation. The data shows that run-on sentences are affected by Chinese sentences structure. However, such a sentence structure is allowed in Chinese while forbidden in English. For example, some students write these sentences

like this or similar ones: It is not rainy today; we can go out to play. In Chinese, although there is no conjunction 'because', we can still understand the former part of the sentence is the cause of the latter. While in English, without a conjunction in the sentence is prohibited. The correct version should be: It is not rainy today, so we can go out to play.

2.8. Redundancy

From the view of informative theory, redundancy is the necessary part in language communication [14]. During the process of delivering information, there is always some interruption of noises. So in order to keep the accuracy, it is important for the message sender to add some proper redundancy. But both too much and too little of it will definitely lessen the efficiency or make the sentence look dull. Chinese and English belong to two different symbol systems, so there are many differences in the ways of expression. The redundancy coming from the mother language will affect the Chinese-English translation with many Chinglish. There are many habitual collocations in Chinese. If they are literally translated into English, the excessive redundancy would appear, and it would not be in accordance with simple and convenient style of English. Take noun for example, there are a lot of category words used to indicate category and property. Although they do not have practical meaning, they are essential in Chinese expression. When they are translated into English, most of them must be missed. For example, some students translate these sentences like this or similar ones: All the universities and colleges must solve the problem of controlling the inflation in the restaurant. In order to avoid redundancy, correct version should be: All the universities and colleges must control the inflation in the restaurant.

3. Enlightenment of Negative Transfer on English Writing Teaching

The majority of linguists think that breaking the habit of first-language acquisition is the most effective approach to address the issue of language transfer. When students write in English, due to their limited knowledge of the language, their expressions and ways of thinking are disturbed by their mother language. Thus, it is necessary to adopt appropriate methods to reduce the negative transfer of mother language and improve students' writing skills.

3.1. Strengthening Comprehensible Language Input

Krashen [15], a famous linguist, has pointed out that there are many factors affecting students' second language acquisition, among which, language input is necessary to enable language acquisition. He holds that the quantity of language input is the fundamental requirement and basis for language acquisition for those learning a second language, and that language knowledge can only be attained by extensive listening, reading, or both. Language input should be comprehensible, otherwise there is no way to talk about language acquisition. This requires teachers to enhance comprehensible language input in their teaching.

As we all know, among the five basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, seeing and writing in English, speaking and writing are skills of language output. Language output is based on language input [16]. However, the reality is that most students can only use classroom time for English language input, and they do not have many opportunities to

encounter English in their daily lives. At the same time, the heavy workload of various subjects and the teaching schedule leave little time for students to experience English language on their own. On the one hand, students' language input is limited in various ways. Furthermore, students rely too much on their native language in learning English, and inevitably experience negative transfer of mother language. However, language input relying on unilateral input from teachers is not very effective, students also need to be motivated [17]. Teachers ought to help students take the initiative in their learning, so that they can motivate themselves by accepting more input and exploring more expressions outside of class time. The author finds that oral composition training is very useful. We can use short-duration and high-content English language materials. As supplemental materials, we can use English speeches or broadcasts from organizations that are relevant to the lives of the students, like TED and VOA. By combining speaking and listening, we can help students become more perceptive, logical, and expressive writers. For the part of listening, we select different topics to train students according to their English foundation. Because of the high demanding of forms, teachers only conduct this practice in classes with good English proficiency. The frequency and difficulty of the exercises are controlled so as not to demotivate students [18]. In addition, teachers should try to use English in our English classes and provide students with maximum English input. For the part of reading, teachers should set up reading groups in the class and hold reading exchange activities. To enable children to read at a deeper level, teachers provide tiered education, individualized coaching, and materials that are chosen based on the students' proficiency in English. Moreover, teachers can assign students the task of reading Bible stories, Greek myths, or even world-famous books [19]. In this way, students can broaden their horizons, learn about English from texts outside the classroom, and build their knowledge of the language.

3.2. Enhancing the Comparison of Chinese and English

Students have the misunderstanding that English and Chinese can correspond one-to-one, and the traces of Chinese influence in their writing are everywhere [20]. In fact, English and Chinese are two different languages, and there are various differences between them. For the purpose of helping students get out of that, in addition to teaching language knowledge in the teaching content, the comparison of Chinese and English should be made so that students can understand the variations between the two languages in terms of language characteristics and culture. Only when students have a comprehensive understanding of the differences between English and Chinese can they understand English more deeply, feel the charm of English and enhance their writing ability. In teaching practice, teachers should adopt single-sentence translation training, requiring students to translate one sentence of Chinese each day and use a few minutes to present and evaluate it before class. This approach allows students to appreciate the similarities and differences between the two languages, and this method of turning whole sentences into pieces is more effective than reviewing whole essays. Single-sentence translations also increase the participation of students who are relatively weak in English. It is a bit of a stretch to ask them to think entirely in English during the writing process. However, teachers should use a variety of materials in our teaching to guide students to compare and

analyze English and Chinese so that they can recognize the reasons for their errors in writing and consciously avoid such errors.

3.3. Applying the Diversified Writing Evaluation Feedback Methods

In writing, the general process of reviewing students' work is to circle the errors and then give a score, with little opportunity to have a face to face communication with students and to help them fully understand their errors and try to correct them [21]. After recognizing the research on the impacts of negative transfer on writing, the author believes that optimizing writing teaching evaluation is a proven method, mainly to ensure diversification of evaluation subjects and evaluation methods. First and foremost, teachers develop writing self-assessment forms for students as examples and instruct students to conduct self-assessment training according to writing standards. Subsequently, after the self-assessment is completed, students then assess each other and set up groups for public assessment and appreciation. Finally, teachers analyze and comment on the common problems in students' writing in the writing class. The teacher provides individualized guidance and instructions to students, and tries to ensure that students' problems are solved. In the English writing class, teachers can guide students to conduct self-summaries and supplement the corresponding exercises according to the problems that arise. The self-summary process can be carried out with reference to the structure of the discourse, topic sentences, language expressions, and good words and phrases. In this way, they can improve their English writing skills gradually.

3.4. Guiding Students to Develop Writing Strategies

In the writing process, teachers can give guidance in vocabulary, sentences, paragraphs, and layout [22]. For example, in the use of vocabulary, they must be precise and avoid semantic misuse; they should encourage students to use a variety of sentence structures and avoid simple sentences; in the overall layout, they should have an overall plan to ensure the function of the essay, and consciously pay attention to the connection between sentences and paragraphs, and between paragraphs. In regard to the structure, students are supposed to use the connecting words reasonably. Students are required to develop the habit of checking their writing after it is completed [23]. Meanwhile, it is important to summarize the different types of compositions and conclude their characteristics. There is no doubt that teachers are responsible for strengthening training and increasing the frequency of writing lessons appropriately.

4. Conclusion

All in all, when learning English writing, it is inevitable that the mother language will interfere with students' English writing. Negative transfer of mother language is responsible for it. After analyzing some cases, it can be concluded that Chinese learners have quite a few problems in English writing. In this paper, many examples are shown to illustrate the different English writing problems in different situations. Some solutions are put forward accordingly as well, including strengthening comprehensible language input, enhancing the comparison of Chinese and English, applying the diversified writing evaluation feedback methods, and guiding students to

develop writing strategies. At the same time, learners themselves and teachers ought to attach great importance to English writing. It is strongly believed that through long-term adherence and scientific training, learners' English writing will be improved. But this paper has some deficiencies. As is known, these English writing problems of Chinese learners can't be rooted out. Learners can only make great efforts to decrease the influence of negative transfer of mother language. Since this paper is just an exploratory research of negative transfer of mother language, more studies need to be furthered and carried out. More experiments need to be conducted to check out the feasibility of these solutions.

References

- [1] Friederici, A. 2011. The Brain Basis of Language Processing: From Structure to Function [J]. *Physiological Review* (4): 1357-1392.
- [2] Kosslyn, S. & Osherson, D. 1995. *An Invitation to Cognitive Science* [M]. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- [3] Ellis, R. 2013. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [4] Dai, Weidong & Zhaoxiong He. 2016. *A New Concise Course in Linguistics for Students of English* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [5] Ellis, H. 1965. *The transfer of learning* [M]. New York: Macmillan.
- [6] Odlin, T. 1989. *Language Transfer* [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Wang, Wenyu & Qiufang Wen. 2002. Mother language thinking and bilingual writing [J], *Journal of the PLA Foreign Studies Institute* (04), 64-67.
- [8] Yang Yuchen & Wen Zhaorong. 1994. Sentence types and analysis of Chinese students' English writing [J]. *Modern Foreign Languages* (1).
- [9] Bi, Jiwan. 1994. *Culture and Communication* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [10] Zhu Rongying. 2005. Negative transfer of mother tongue to college students' English writing and teaching countermeasures [J]. *Journal of Lujiang Vocational University* (3): 107-111.
- [11] Zhang Yanyan. 2016. Negative transfer of mother tongue at the syntactic level of English writing [J]. *Journal of Northeast Agricultural University: Social Science Edition* (6): 71-76.
- [12] Jiang Shan & Huiping Zhang. 2023. The acquisition of English long passives by Chinese learners from the perspective of syntax-pragmatics interface [J]. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages* (1): 96-103.
- [13] Guo Jia, Lei Yang & Shuang Wang. 2022. A study on the relevance between L2 Writing Complexity and L1 transfer [J]. *Contemporary Foreign Languages Studies* (3): 140-148.
- [14] Wang Dandan. 2023. A study on the error types and influencing factors of negative transfer of mother tongue in English writing [J]. *English Square* (13): 124-128.
- [15] Stephen D. Krashen. 1988. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* [M]. London: Prentice Hall.
- [16] Ma Jing. 2012. A survey on the current situation of English writing ability of senior high school students in Panzhihua City and teaching countermeasures [J]. *Overseas English* (8): 53-55.
- [17] Zhang Mei. 2022. The influence of negative transfer of mother tongue on college students' English writing and its countermeasures [J]. *English Square* (31): 35-39.

- [18] Liu Qiyu. 2021. The effect of the negative transfer of mother Language on the wrong combination in English writing [J]. GaoKao (9): 109-110.
- [19] Cen yue & Xinyu Zhang. 2023. A study on negative transfer of mother tongue in college students' English writing [J]. Overseas English (23):7-10.
- [20] Wang Chengxia. 2013. Analysis and countermeasures of negative transfer of mother tongue in English writing [J]. Journal of The Chinese Society of Education (S1): 85-86.
- [21] Fan Xiaodi. 2014. Negative transfer of mother tongue in English writing and its teaching implications [J]. Journal of Teaching and Management (3): 118-120.
- [22] Wang Taofeng. 2020. The influence of negative transfer of mother tongue on college students' English writing and its countermeasures [J]. Journal of Suzhou Education Institute 23(1):84-86.
- [23] Zhou Guanqiong. 2011. An empirical study of negative transfer errors in English writing [J]. Adult Education (8): 113-114.