A Case Study on the Effect of Chinese Negative Transfer on English Writing

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Abstract—**Language transfer has always been a hot topic in the study of second language acquisition. Most language learners are easily affected by their mother tongue while learning a foreign language. This paper will mainly focus on Chinese negative transfer and its influence on English writing. It lists some common errors which Chinese middle school students made on English writing. Moreover, the author also gives suggestions on how to avoid such negative transfer on English writing.**

Index Terms—**language transfer, second language acquisition, English writing**

I. INTRODUCTION

First language transfer in second language learning is always a major issue. Over the past years, a huge number of English teachers in China often complain about the reoccurrences of some mistakes and errors in students' writing. Among the basic skills in language learning, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, writing is often regarded as the last one to be required because it is the most difficult one. As for second language acquisition, language transfer is commonly listed as the most influential factor. As English learners, we all get the feeling that we can't control the influence coming from our mother tongue when we learn it. This kind of feeling is especially obvious when writing compositions and doing translation works. For example, we may translate "*green-hand*" into "*fresh-hand*"; we may forget to add an "*s*" to a sentence like "*He want to have a piece of cake now*".

Psycholinguists thought that it is unrealistic and useless to avoid transfer in the process of learners' interlanguage development. Transfer, a type of cognitive activity, is just as helpful as learning strategies for language learners. According to the language transfer theory, during the learning process of a second language, the learner's mother tongue would show a great influence on the acquisition of his or her second language.

This paper will mainly concentrate on Chinese negative transfer and its influence on English writing. In this paper, we will first review how linguists in this field see this phenomenon. Then we will report an investigation that we have carried out in a middle school in China. It consists of paper writing, data collecting, error analyzing. After reporting our findings, we will compare those data we have already obtained and find solutions to avoid negative language transfer in our English writing.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Transfer, as an important notion in second language acquisition (SLA), is a basic concept in psychology. In psychology, it refers to "the phenomenon of previous knowledge being extended to the area of new knowledge, i.e. the influence which the learning or remembering of one thing has on the learning and remembering of another thing." (Sajavaara, 1986, p.123) It is Sajavaara (1989) who first introduced this notion into the area of linguistics. He first used it to refer to cross-linguistic influence. However, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that this term became popular among linguists. Transfer has been used by educational psychologists and educators to describe the use of past knowledge or experience in new situations.

A. *Historical Review of Language Transfer*

The theory of language transfer has been developing for a long period of time. Since the middle of the twentieth century, the cross-linguistic influence has been the most important argument discussed for several decades in the study of second language acquisition. It is one of the basic conditions for learning because the subsequent learning depends greatly on what has been learned in the past (Sawrey and Telford, 1977). Generally speaking, the study of language transfer has experienced three periods: behaviorist, mentalist and cognitive period.

Language transfer was first proposed in contrastive analysis theory in the 1950s. The term "transfer" is closely

related to L2 acquisition. In the late 1960s, under the influence of Chomsky's universal grammar, its importance waned while learners' errors were seen not as evidence of language transfer but as evidence of creative construction process (Chomsky, 1965). From the 1970s, a more balanced perspective has emerged in which the role of transfer is acknowledged and transfer is seen to interact with a list of other factors which are not fully understood yet.

In the research of language transfer, contrastive analysis, morpheme order study and markedness theory are the representatives. Language transfer has been increasingly regarded as a cognitive process. Odin focused greatly on cross-linguistic influence to support his research on language transfer. In the 1980s, Chinese scholars applied Western transfer theories to Foreign Language Learning (FLL) to test this theory's validity in Chinese acquisition. The transfer theory has been further improved since it is combined with language universals, cognitive theory and social factors.

B.   Definition of Language Transfer

In the study of applied linguistics, different researchers would like to define a term from their own perspective. The tern transfer is one of these.

The most commonly cited definition of transfer is proposed by Odlin. "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." (Odlin, 2001, p.75) He offered this "working definition" of "substratum transfer" as a foundation for his own research. He also assumed that transfer is not simply a result of habit formation or interference, or a falling back on the native language.

In fact, with the time passing by, the notion of "language transfer" is also experiencing great changes. The notion of "language transfer" was closely related to the behaviorist theories at first. Fries (1945) and Lado (1957) introduced the term into the field of second language (L2) learning. They assumed that learners tended to transfer the characteristics of their native language and cultures into the foreign languages and cultures that they were learning. Therefore, the learning of a second language was seen as an increase of a "behavioral repertoire." (Corder, 1973, p.27)

Sharwood Smith and Eric Kellerman (1986) suggested that the term should be restricted to "those that lead to the incorporation of elements from one language into another." (p.82)

Faerch and Kasper (1987) defined transfer "as the process by which L2 learners' active L1 knowledge in developing or using their interlanguage (linguistic system between L1 and L2), and they also pointed out that the process may either support (positive transfer) or defect (negative transfer) from learning." (p.25-34)

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) regarded transfer as "the use of previous linguistic or prior skills to assist comprehension or production." (p.89-97)

Language transfer, also called cross-linguistic influence, is one of the key factors contributing to learners' interlanguage. It refers to the influence of the mother tongue (L1) on the learner's performance in the development of a given target language. This definition, although somewhat vague (as Odlin admits), is still widely accepted. As a result, the definition of "transfer" has been considerably broadened in the field of contrastive linguistic studies.

C.   Classification of Language Transfer

Basically, language transfer could be scientifically classified as positive, negative and zero transfer. Positive transfer refers to the fact that learners use their former knowledge to avoid making mistakes in the language learning process. That is to say, the transfer helps or facilitates language learning in another situation, and may occur when both the native language and the target language have the same form. In contrast, negative transfer refers to the fact that learners use their former knowledge and make mistakes and errors when learning the target language (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Specifically, it refers to the use of native language patterns or rules which leads to an error or inappropriate form in the target language. Zero transfer refers to those situations where no transfer occurs.

For the reason that positive transfer is hard to distinguish and the study of zero transfer is of little significance, this thesis tends to study the negative transfer appearing in middle school students' writings. Many linguists and researchers have done an abundance of studies on negative transfer. Rod Ellis (1985, p.123), for example, offered the manifestation of negative transfer as "errors", and errors are the results of negative transfer.

Odlin noted that language transfer is the outcome produced by cross-linguistic similarities and differences. He provided a classification of outcomes which include positive transfer, negative transfer, and differing lengths of acquisition. Among the three outcomes, he paid much more attention to the outcome of negative transfer. Thus, he points out that although negative transfer tends to be equal to production errors, there are other ways in which an individual's second language performance may differ from the behavior of native speakers. In Odlin's book he divided negative transfer errors into underproduction, production, overproduction and misinterpretation (Odlin, 2001).

Underproduction errors means learners may produce very few or no mistakes of a target language. For example, Chinese and Japanese students are inclined to use accumulative simple sentences in an attempt to avoid relative clause. As for production errors, Odlin declared that three types of errors are likely to arise from similarities and differences in the native and target languages: (1) substitutions, (2) calques, and (3) alternations of structures. The last type is misinterpretation. It refers to native language structures which can influence the interpretation of target language messages, and sometimes that influence may leads to learners inferring something very different from what speakers of the language would infer.

Knowing that errors are the main manifestation of negative transfer will make the research more authentic and

reasonable.

III. INVESTIGATION

In the present study, we have carried out an experiment about the errors made by Chinese students in their English compositions. And there is also a supplementary   experiment which was used to investigate one specific negative transfer phenomenon in the first experiment. All the subjects in this study come from a senior middle school named Shanghai Middle School in Yichang. It is an ordinary middle school where I taught in 2012. In order to make sure not to be influenced by different teaching methods, all of them are in the same class - Class 2, Grade 3. And their ages ranged from fifteen to sixteen. There were 30 boys and 24 girls in the group. They have learned English for 5 or 6 year. I choose this group of students because they have a good acquisition of English after years study so the mistakes made by them are typical and deserve research.

A. Research Design

This section includes research purpose, research instrument and research questions. As for the methodology, both quantitative and qualitative methods are adopted in this study. Quantitative research is to find out the frequency and variables of Chinese transfer identified in the data. In this study, quantitative research is employed to find out the errors, which are made by the students in their English writing from cognitive ability aspect, while qualitative research is employed to describe and analyze the samples of with Chinese transfer, and give the possible reasons from the specific cognitive habits aspect.

1. Research Purpose

When I had a part-time job as an English teacher, I found a common phenomenon in Chinese students' English compositions which had interested me a lot. There have been existing variable errors in Chinese English learners' writing, and the reasons for that are not only the differences between the two independent language families but also the differences between those two different cultures.

By describing and analyzing the errors caused by negative transfer of Chinese in English writing, this paper plans to get people's attention to the problems caused by language transfer in Chinese students' writing and thus to provide pedagogical implications for English teachers.

2. Data Collecting

54 Chinese students in this class were asked to write a paper on the title of "Making a difference" in about 100-150 words within 30 minutes. The main idea is: many people think that only those who hold important positions can make a difference in the society. Do you agree with it? What is your point of view?

The whole writing process was observed by myself in my regular class, and the students were not informed of the title in advance and they made no preparation, which made the data more reliable. The samples can reflect natural, spontaneous language use which is generally preferred.

In the study, we only counted the grammatical mistakes caused by the interferences of their mother tongue. In the following table, we list different kinds of mistakes and the times of their frequency of occurrences.

TABLE 1

Classification	Types of mistakes	Times	Proportion
Grammatical mistakes	Singular and plural of nouns	30	26.8%
	Predicate verbs	22	19.6%
	Cohesion of sentences	47	30.2%
	Omit or misuse of articles	6	5.4%
	time tense	39	28.5%

B. Error Analysis

1. Singular and Plural of Nouns

According to the above table, there are 30 such kinds of mistakes in 54 papers; almost every student has made one. And both the learners and the English teachers should pay much attention to this kind of mistake. In fact, the English learners are required to acquire this rule at the very beginning of their learning process. But why do they still make this kind of mistakes even after years of English study? Let's have a look at those mistakes first:

Every day we can receive so <u>much</u> information.

But in some rural <u>area</u> in China, the situation is quite different.

Both Chinese and English have the concept of singular and plural of nouns. The difference lies in that we only add plural suffixes to personal nouns in Chinese. It is unnecessary to add plural suffixes to those nouns which refer to objects. For example, in Chinese, "book" has no plural form, it can be used to refer to one book or two books. But in English, "book" has a plural form. There exists a semantic blank, which makes it difficult for Chinese students to acquire plenty of English affixes.

It is especially obvious when we realize that nouns in English can be divided into countable nouns and uncountable nouns, but in Chinese we don't need to consider this question. "Information" is a good example: it is an uncountable noun in English, but in Chinese, we can say "a piece of information" or "two pieces of information". Then the Chinese

students would regard this word as a countable one. Here, we can see, if the students judge from their mother tongue, they would make mistakes in telling a countable noun from an uncountable one. All of those mistakes are due to the negative transfer of the students' source language.

2. Predicate Verbs

Similarly, the students also made a lot of mistakes in using predicate verbs. In English, verbs, auxiliaries and modal verbs can be used together to express the tense and tone of verbs. But this kind of phenomenon does not exist in Chinese. So the students often neglect the variation of predicate when writing sentences. For example:

In my opinion, it will <u>leads</u> to a polarized society.

English and Chinese have the same sentence order: subject-verb-object, but the formation of the predicate in those two languages is quite different. The sentence above is in the future tense: according to the English grammar rules, we should use the original form of "lead" after "will" in spite of the third person singular "it" appears here, so "leads" in the sentence should be changed into "lead". In Chinese, it shall be much easier: no matter how the tense and subject change, the predicate "lead" won't have any change of form.

3. Cohesion of Sentences

Students made a large amount of mistakes in the cohesion of sentences, the percentage is 30.2%. About the cohesion of sentences, the students often use conjunctions like "because, so, not only...but also... ". Those conjunctions also occur in Chinese. In English we only need one conjunction to connect a sentence, while in Chinese we can use two conjunctions or even more in one sentence. For example, a student wrote a sentence like this:

<u>*Because*</u> *Internet includes much knowledge, <u>so</u> we should make good use of it.*

However, the student only needs to use either "because" or "so" according to English grammar. This kind of mistake is also caused by the negative transfer of Chinese.

4. Omission or Misuse of Articles

The reason why Chinese students make mistakes in using articles is also understandable: there is no article in Chinese. Those students whose mother tongue has articles acquire this grammatical rule better than those whose mother tongue has no articles. As there is no counterpart in Chinese for the students, they may find it difficult to acquire the use of articles. For example:

Every global citizen know existence of computer, but not everyone has seen or used it, especially <u>in rural areas</u>.

In this sentence, the students totally don't know how to use articles in a correct way. So the correct version of this sentence should be like this:

Every global citizen know the existence of computer, but not everyone has seen or used it, especially <u>in the rural areas</u>.

5. Time Tense

Tense is a grammatical category, typically marked on the verb, which refers to the time of the event or state denoted by the verb in relation to some other temporal reference point. The huge difference between Chinese and English tense leads to the occurrence of many errors in students' compositions. Since some Chinese students are quite aware of the English tense and undoubtedly they turn their mother tongue for help, i.e. Chinese tense. Therefore, errors are made because of Chinese interference. In English, tense is used for many reasons: some are supposed to indicate time; some are meant to stress, or attract readers' attention; while the others refer to implications. For example:

She <u>is being</u> nice.

In this example, the students used present progressive tense to stress the fact that she is beautiful. According to the English tradition, we don't use the present progressive to express a person's being beautiful at the time being, which may sound quite absurd for the listener. So we should change this sentence into this version:

She is nice.

C. After-writing Feedback

A feedback followed the writing task immediately. The purpose of the feedback is to gather some information on the participants' writing background and whether the results obtained from the sample writing are consistent with what the students have felt. Then the participants were asked whether they used their knowledge of Chinese in the process of writing. And if they did, give the example and tell us the percentage of their writing contained translation.

The results coming from the feedback are basically consistent with those I obtained from the participants' composition, out of the 54 participants, 47% of the participants used their Chinese knowledge throughout the whole process of their writing, 20% of them used translation in more than half in the process of their writing. This study shows that translation plays an important role in the process of the participants' writing and to some extent it has become a common strategy that Chinese senior middle school students use in their English writing.

D. Supplementary Experiment

For the tested students made a lot of mistakes on cohesion, here we added a sentence combination test for the tested students. The purpose of the test is to investigate the production ability of the participants. It is borrowed from the tests made by Eckman (1977), Doughty (1991) and Hamilton(1994). Because their tests are considered as classical ones, thus they are frequently cited. The original test is made up of twenty pairs of sentences which are easy to understand. They are designed in this way: every four sentences represent one relative clause type. Among these sentences, two are

embedded into the subject position and the other are attached to the position of object. This paper will just borrow some examples from the classical ones for the time is limit.

Test (1)

The tested students are required to meet the following requirements: combine the two single sentences in each pair into a relative clause by using the relative pronouns "that, which, who, who, whom" or "whose". Omitting any information or changing the form or meaning of sentences is judged as incorrect. The sentence A is the main clause. The tested students need to attach sentence B to sentence A. That is to say, the combined sentence should start with sentence A.

(1) Sentence A: That little boy has a good friend.
    Sentence B: His friend's name is Xiao Ming.

Following the above directions, (1) should be "That little boy has a good friend whose name is Xiao Ming". There are several different versions of this sentence combination task.

Version one: *That little boy's good friend's name is Xiao Ming.*

Version two: *That little boy has a good friend and his name is Xiao Ming.*

Those two versions changed the original meaning and did not use the relative pronouns. The first version doesn't quite suit the English grammar. The native speakers seldom use possessive case twice in one sentence. Some students said they don't know how to add the relative pronouns so they went against the requirement of the test.

Test (2)

(2) Sentence A: The tourists didn't follow the instruction.
    Sentence B: The tourists were injured.

According to the requirements, the relative sentences will be "The tourists who/that were injured didn't follow the instruction". While the most common version given by the tested students is "The tourists who didn't follow the instruction were injured". Although it is a correct sentence in grammar, it violates the direction that Sentence B is always the sub-clause. Therefore, such sentence is treated as incorrect.

Test (3)

(3) Sentence A: Mr. Li is the chairman of the organization.
    Sentence B: Mr. Wang is older than Mr. Li.

Loss of points may occur when participants have the form or meaning of the sentence changed, which is forbidden in the test. The right combination of these two should be "Mr. Li whom/that Mr. Wang is older than is the chairman of the organization". Because it is a relative clause, the subjects may change the meaning or form semantically as "Mr. Li who is younger than Mr. Wang is the chairman of the organization". Because of the changed form, this sentence is also scored zero. Besides, omitting or changing relative pronouns wrongly is considered incorrect.

IV. SUGGESTIONS

In the present study, we have only talked about the grammatical part, but we need to understand that second language writing is more than a cross-language behavior, which also includes the exchange of thinking modes and culture modes. That the Chinese students use English to express themselves is also a transfer from the original Chinese thinking modes and culture modes to the newly English thinking modes and culture modes. During the confused exchanging process, many factors may influence the students' mother tongue, which will lead to negative transfer in their writing and make some mistakes in the composition. Here, the paper provides the following suggestions for the second-language teachers and learners.

A. Enlarge Vocabulary and Strengthen Grammatical Exercise

In order to acquire English well, learners first need to make preparations for vocabulary, which is the step-stone of all language learning. But the learners also need to pay attention to the differences between Chinese and English words: although many words in these two languages have similar meanings, there is difference between connotative and denotative meanings. What's more, many words in these two languages have different collocations. For example, the Chinese may say "see a newspaper", which is due to the negative transfer of their first language. And the correct expression is "read a newspaper" in English. The more a student reads, the better his or her writing becomes. Reading widely is one of the best ways to acquire native English. So, after-class reading with various kinds of materials should be done.

Perhaps this is best way to get rid of the control of the negative transfer of Chinese for English learners. Grammar rules are the base of sentences formation. There are great differences between English grammar system and Chinese grammar system. The arrangement of grammatical components in English is much flexible than that of Chinese. Practice makes perfect. In this way, learners can have a better understanding of the grammatical structures they have already acquired and overcome Chinglish in their writing.

B. Get a Better Understanding of Cultural Differences

The purpose of learning a language is for communication. But Chinese students are learning English in a non-natural environment, which means they have been greatly influenced by Chinese culture. As analyzed in previous chapter, it is

found that the students are greatly affected by their mother tongue and thinking modes when writing. During writing, they would like to use literal translation. They always think about their ideas in Chinese and then translate them into English. Therefore, reducing the interference of the mother tongue is a key point in learning English now that the degree of interference concerns closely with the quality of English writing.

English teachers should help Chinese students adapt to English thinking way. In China, learning English is influenced inevitably by the Chinese environment. Although there are some changes about learning English environment recently, it is unlikely to transform basically and greatly in the mother tongue environment. So in order to improve their writing skills, the teachers also need to teach them the English culture, including the society structure, history, culture, geography and even customs. Only in this way, can the students get a comprehensive understanding of connotative meaning of English and avoid negative language transfer. In the English teaching, the teacher should add an cultural introduction part to their teaching task.

C.   Make Comparison between L1 and L2

Due to a large number of inter-lingual errors, teachers should cultivate students' insights and sensitivity to the differences between two languages by the means of contrasting, inducting and analyzing. The reason is that mother tongue transfer is a most difficult problem in the progress of acquiring second language. Therefore, the differences between L1 and L2 need to emphasize. During the class, teachers should help students to explore differences so that they can make the English sentence actively and conscientiously. Teachers choose to compare and contrast between Chinese and English by teaching materials. If teachers often do that, the students will do it in the same way. So teachers can work out some examples aiming at kinds of differences in morphology, syntax and discourse. With this type of regular practice and training, students may have deeper understanding of their mother tongue and English, and would avoid committing errors consciously while writing English composition.

In a word, to better understand and distinguish the similarities and differences between these two languages can shorten Chinese learners' way to a better acquisition of English.

V.   CONCLUSION

Though the data in this research are extensively collected, there is a need to replicate this study with many different populations and at different levels of English ability. As the limitation of one research, it can not cover so many subjects that the data collected may not be universal. In addition, because of the limitation of time and experiment and the author's ability, the analysis and classification of Chinglish may be subjective and incomplete. The stock will be enlarged throughout constant efforts to collect various data.

By both quantitative and qualitative analysis, we found that Chinese students' mother tongue does have a negative influence on their English learning. From my point of view, different thinking modes in English and Chinese are the major causes of Chinglish expressions and other grammatical errors. Since one's thinking mode is deeply rooted in his or her mind, it is very difficult for us to change it. So as second language learners, if the we students want to improve our English writing, we must train ourselves more and acquire more English culture. We should realize the importance of writing in our study and life, even in our future work.

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