

On the Function of Mother Tongue Transfer in English Vocabulary Acquisition

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Abstract—The theory of mother tongue transfer refers to that the habit of the first language will directly influence the acquisition of the second language, and play its positive and negative functions. As a Chinese learner, English vocabulary learning is inevitably influenced by the Chinese ways of pronunciation, cognitive styles and thought patterns. Based on the language transfer theory, this paper will analyze the influences of Chinese on English vocabulary learning from the positive and negative transfer respectively, and reveal the positive and negative effects of Chinese in the process of English vocabulary acquisition. What this paper intends to convey is to improve the efficiency of English vocabulary learning by investigating the main forms of transfer and finding the reasons of them. It presents some suggestions that language learners should make full use of positive transfer and avoid negative transfer.

Index Terms—mother tongue transfer, vocabulary acquisition, positive and negative transfer

I. INTRODUCTION

The term “transfer” is first defined by behavioral psychologists to refer to the process of automatic, uncontrolled and subconscious use of past learned behavior in the attempt to produce new responses. According to them, the main impediment to learning was interference from the prior knowledge. Psychologists use the term to refer to the influences imposed by a learner’s possessed linguistic knowledge and skills upon the subsequent learning of new linguistic knowledge or skills.

The English linguist D. A. Wilkins (1972) said that, “Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed”. Vocabulary as the foundation of language learning plays an important role in second language acquisition. And the improvement of language competence depends on the acquired vocabulary. Thus, the learning of vocabulary, which occupies a very basis and important position in language learning, can be viewed as the core of English learning.

For Chinese learners, who are eager to master their second language, English vocabulary learning is undoubtedly the very basis for their future development in communication. However, as a foreign language learner, it is usually of great difficulties to learn the new words of a different symbol system due to the impact of his or her native speech. And the reason of which is partially because of the involvement of language transfer. So, it is a key factor to understand the function of language transfer in English vocabulary acquisition.

Based on the theories of language transfer, it is generally believed that the learners’ native language can bring either a positive or a negative impact in the process of second language acquisition due to the support or interference of existing learning experience (Ellis, 1985). Specifically, the students’ native language will promote the learning of a foreign language when the rules of the mother tongue seem to be similar to that of the target language; otherwise, it will act negatively when there are great differences between the learners’ native speech and their foreign language.

Therefore, under the guidance of the relevant theory of language transfer, the focus of English vocabulary acquisition which is to be covered in this paper is of special values and practical significance. Based on that, the thesis will attempt to discuss the potential impact of language transfer on the learning of English vocabulary and to identify some suggestions in order to make full use of the language transfer theory.

II. THEORY OF MOTHER TONGUE TRANSFER

A. Definition of Language Transfer

Transfer is a psychological item originated from behavioristic psychology which indicates that the already knew knowledge or technical ability of the first language will influence the new knowledge or techniques. Until 1950s, linguists adopted the term “transfer” in the studies of second language acquisition, and after that more and more people began to explore the role of mother tongue in second language learning.

The term of language transfer is first put forward by Robert Lado (1957) based on the theory of behaviorism: Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings of their native language to the foreign language both productively

and receptively. After that, in the 1950s and early 1960s, the effect of transfer on language learning was widely recognized and always integrated with behaviorism.

Many linguists have defined the language transfer. Such as, James, C. (1980) had defined it from this aspect: The first language learning affects the second language learning. Faerch, C. and Kasper, G (1987) claimed that language transfer is a psychological process for the language learners who stimulated their mother tongue to use the interlanguages. Schachter (1974) hold the view that language transfer is some kind of constraint for language learning process imposed by the acquired knowledge.

Among various definitions, the most commonly accepted one is Odlin's (1989): Transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and the differences between the target language and any other languages that have been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired. His definition gave a better explanation to language transfer that emphasized not only on the native speech but any other factors would affect the second language learning. Compared with the previous definition, this one provides the more details. And it points out that the production of transfer is caused by the similarities and the differences between languages. It is a great progress in the study of language transfer.

Actually, language transfer can be seen in the process of building a second language system where learners regard their mother tongue as the starting point. By comparing the similarities and the differences between native language and target language, learners can transfer the native language forms and rules to the second language, so as to influence the acquisition of second language.

It is an important part to study language transfer in the second language acquisition research. And language transfer has been a central issue in applied linguistics, second language acquisition and language teaching for at least a century. The development of the theory of language transfer has undergone three stages. The first stage, in the 1950s, behaviorism played a predominant role in the field of linguistic theories. The function of transfer was fully recognized and always integrated with behaviorism, thus it became the theoretical basis of comparative analysis. The second one is from the 1960s to the end of the 1970s. During this period, due to the influences caused by Chomsky's language theory, theory represented by behaviorism was severely criticized. Scholars tried to follow the cognitive theory and get rid of the impact of behaviorism. The third refers to the period from the beginning of the 1980s up to now. At this stage, people became increasingly interested in transfer phenomenon. The word "transfer" did not merely refer to the mechanical transfer from the native language to the foreign language. It was treated as a kind of important learning strategy in language acquisition, and a complicated cognitive procedure that is influenced by various factors.

B. *The Classification of Language Transfer*

There is a popular classification about the effects of language transfer, positive transfer and negative transfer. It is important for foreign language learners to know the definition of the two sorts of transfer. Psychologists tell us that transfer refers to the influences that previous individual knowledge and experience exerts on the new knowledge, and it contains helpful and obstructive aspects respectively. Both types of transfer refer to the automatic and subconscious use of old behavior in new learning situation.

On the function of transfer, it can be concluded that positive transfer has positive effects on the learning if and only if two languages have similarities. Otherwise, the negative transfer occurs when two languages have great differences. So, the differences between the negative transfer and the positive transfer rest on that, the negative transfer hinders the learning, while the positive transfer facilitates the learning.

1. Positive Transfer

Positive transfer may occur when both the native language and the target language have similar forms. It also means the use of prior items to assist the comprehension of the second language. It refers to any contributory effects on the acquisition of second language, based on the similarities between the first language and second language. That is to say, a previous knowledge is appropriately applied to the learning task.

When the first language and the second language share the same rules and patterns, the positive transfer will contribute to the acquisition of target language and make the learning easier. For instance, English and French both belong to the Indo-European language system, so it is much easier for English native speakers to learn French.

Although Chinese and English belong to two different language systems, the mother tongue-Chinese also plays its positive effects in English learning. Such as in phonetic, it is easy for Chinese learners to pronounce constant sounds like /b/, /p/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/ and others. Because it is similar in the ways of pronunciation between Chinese and English. Also at the lexical level, such words as *sofa*, *coffee*, *tofu*, *pizza* and so on, they are also easily to be acquired. Because the meanings of these words are related with their pronunciation. Besides, English and Chinese also share the same sentence structure — SVO. All of these examples prove that Chinese has a positive transfer in English learning.

2. Negative Transfer

The negative transfer is also called interference of the first language. Specially, it refers to that the use of native language rules will lead to error forms in the target language. According to behaviorists, negative transfer can damage, hinder and delay the acquisition of second language. Because Chinese and English belong to different language systems, the differences of them certainly influence the acquisition of English. And many linguists argue that the effects of negative transfer of Chinese outweigh than the positive transfer.

Negative transfer can be found at all levels of language structure. A case for that can be found at the phonetic level, which a speaker's foreign accent occurs when in the process of foreign language learning. It can be explained by that

Chinese learners are restricted by geographical dialect. In addition, Chinese learners often make mistakes in the collocation of words. For instance, maybe some students tend to say “look TV” rather than “watch TV”. And the negative transfer exists at syntactical level, textual level and cultural level as well. The main reason for this phenomenon is that some words in English are hard to find the corresponding words in Chinese. The contrastive analysis is a more effective way to prevent the negative transfer of mother tongue.

As above mentioned, one’s native language plays a vital role in second language acquisition, and the mother tongue transfer is an unavoidable phenomenon in the second language learning. Thus, as a Chinese learner, he/she should take full advantages of the positive transfer of mother tongue and take measures to reduce its negative effects in English learning.

C. *Relevant Theories of Language Transfer*

1. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

Before the second language acquisition was established, researches from the 1940s and the 1960s conducted contrastive analysis, systematically comparing the first language and the target language.

In the 1900s and 1950s, the contrastive analysis developed and prevailed as its main concerns, which is based on the theory of behaviorism and structuralism. It is the systematic study of a pair of language with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities. It is the comparison of the linguistic system between two different languages. It mainly directs at establishing the areas of learning difficulties to help the learners overcome the negative effects of the first language transfer (Lado, 1957).

From the behavioristic perspectives, the main obstacle to second language acquisition is the interference from the native language. The difficulty in mastering certain structures in second language depends on the degree of the differences between the first language and second language. So, it is believed that the learners’ potential errors and difficulty in learning can be predicted through the contrast between native and target language. Based on the different views, contrastive analysis hypothesis was formulated in Robert Lado’s (1957) *Linguistics across Cultures* in 1957. In this book, Lado claimed that “those elements which are similar to the learners’ native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult.”

It is widely accepted that the publishing of the book marked the establishment of the theory of contrastive analysis hypothesis. In this book, Lado (1957) considered that contrastive analysis can predict the learning difficulties, and assumed that learners are likely to transfer the pattern of language previously acquired to the target language. Other linguists argue that the difficulty experienced by learners will manifest itself in errors, the greater the difficulty is, the more frequent the errors are.

Although contrastive analysis played a significant role in understanding the theory of transfer, it faced lots of questions and criticisms due to the shortcomings of itself in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There exists a strong and a weak version of contrastive analysis hypothesis. The strong version claims that all the second language errors can be predicted by identifying the differences between the native language and the target language, while the weak version claims that errors only can be explained or diagnosed. However, this claim could not be sustained by empirical evidence, which reveals that the differences of two languages do not always lead to negative transfer and the majority of errors committed by learners is not caused by the first language interference. In consequence, contrastive analysis fell out of favor and is replaced by error analysis and interlanguage theory gradually.

2. Error Analysis Hypothesis

With the constant development of the research on foreign language teaching and the contrastive analysis losing its favorable position, the theory of error analysis become more and more popular. In 1970s, error analysis replaced the contrastive analysis, which aims at predicting errors by comparing the differences between the target language and the second language. Error analysis is a theory which aims at providing feedback for teachers and learners by analyzing the errors made by L2 learners.

There are several different definitions about language error. Errors refer to the regular patterns in the learners’ speech, which consistently differs from the target language model (Corder, 1967). Error is the usage of a linguistic item in a way in which fluent or native speaker of language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning (Richard, 1985). Error is a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar condition of production would, in all likelihoods, not be produced by the speakers. An error can be defined as deviation from the norms of the target language (Ellis, 1994)

In the field of second language acquisition, errors arise because the correct form or use of a target item is not part of a speakers’ or writers’ competence, whereas mistakes arise even though the correct form or use is a part of the users’ competence. Since as for in the mother tongue language people can distinguish the correctness and the error. But, as for leaning a second language, people can not mark off clearly. Errors are different from mistakes.

3. Interlanguage Hypothesis

The term of interlanguage was first used by Larry Selinker (1972), which refers to the systematic knowledge of language which independent of both the learners’ L1 and L2 system he is trying to learn. Selinker once pointed out that the independent linguistic system of language learners is a language variant existing between L1 and L2, which distincts from L1 and L2, and it is a transitional language between L1 and L 2 produced from learners attempted production of norms or knowledge about a language which is independent of both their L1 and L2 system they are learning. As a

process of second language learning, interlanguage is an unavoidable phenomenon.

The reason of this phenomenon is that before their proficiency of the second language, the second language learners including adults and children will tend to adopt a transitional form of speech to express their ideas unconsciously, which is an independent, developing and changeable system which is close to the L1 but not equals to the L1. Interlanguage theory, is a theory which implies the important role of the language learners' first language in second language acquisition. It is based upon the complexity and differences between the L1 and the L2, which also suggests that the process of second language learning cannot be finished in a short period.

Thus, this phenomenon makes the study of the role of the L1 in second language acquisition mainly covering negative transfer and positive transfer more meaningful and useful.

III. THE POSITIVE TRANSFER OF MOTHER TONGUE AND ITS INFLUENCES ON ENGLISH VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

When the relevant units or structures of both languages are similar, the transfer of native speech can result in correct language forms of the target language, which is called positive transfer. The effect of positive transfer has not aroused people's attention, thus it is less often discussed. Nevertheless, the positive transfer plays an important role in second language learning. Generally speaking, the more similar two languages are, the more positive transfer occurs. Actually, English and Chinese have in common with certain aspects in vocabulary.

A. *Positive Transfer of Phonetic*

There are many similarities in pronunciation of phonemes between English and Chinese. The pronunciation of Chinese characters and the English words are both made up of syllables. The Chinese pinyin is composed of the initial and final, and the final can be divided into the single vowel and compound vowel. The English phonetic alphabet is divided into vowel and constant, and the vowel can be classified into monophthong and diphthong. On the face of it, we could perceive the Chinese initial as the English constant that is placed in the beginning of syllables, and the Chinese final as the English vowel. For instance, the Chinese words “你好/ni hao/” and “美丽/mei li/”, the Chinese initials /n/, /h/, /m/, /l/ amount to the corresponding constants of English, and the /i/, /ao/, /ei/ can be seen as the English vowels. At this point, the phonetic transfer of Chinese can facilitate English vocabulary learning (Cha, 2007).

And the pronunciation of the most English constants is similar to the ways of Chinese pronunciation. They share a lot in common in the place of articulation and the ways of pronunciation. When Chinese learners pronounce the same phonemes of English as those of the native language, they can pronounce these phonemes accurately. Therefore, when Chinese students learn these phonemes which can be found in both Chinese and English, it will be easy for them to master these phonemes, that is, Chinese facilitates their English learning. For instance, all such phonemes or sounds as English constants /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/, /f/, /h/, /m/, /n/ can be found the same pronunciation in the phonetics of Chinese.

B. *Positive Transfer of Word Formation*

Usually, there are similar rules in word formation between English and Chinese language, which is very helpful for students to understand the English words when they learn the corresponding words in Chinese.

English and Chinese share common techniques in the word formation. In the ways of derivation, both of them possess the pattern like “prefix + stem” and “stem + suffix”. For instance, the words like “非正式(informal)”, “不结盟(non-aligned)”, “重申(reaffirm)”, “软件(software)”, “主观主义(subjectivism)”, “童年(childhood)”.

From the perspective of semantics, English and Chinese both take advantage of the ways of subject-predicate, polarized and verb-object to construct the compound words. For example, the words of “earthquake(地震)”, “raincoat(雨衣)”. The types of English compounds can be illustrated as follows:

- (1) Compound Nouns: weekend(周末), daybreak(黎明), afternoon(下午)
- (2) Compound Adjectives: snow-white(雪白的), man-made(人造的), ever-green(常青的)
- (3) Compound Verbs: sleep-walker(梦游), white-wash(粉刷), overthrow(打翻)
- (4) Compound Adverbs: hotfoot(匆忙地), beforehand(事先), everywhere(到处)

The imitative words, loan words and transliterated words are easy for Chinese learners to acquire them. The pronunciation of them is related with their corresponding meaning of Chinese. For instance, the words like ding-dong, ping-pong, coffee, sofa, pizza, kung fu, Confucius, Mah-jongg, Tai-chi and so on. It seems to be very simple for Chinese learners to master them.

In short, the similarities between English and Chinese in word formation can be conducive to acquire English vocabulary for Chinese learners. It is needed for native speakers actively to summarize the similar points between the first language and target language, so as to make full use of the positive transfer of native language.

IV. THE NEGATIVE TRANSFER OF MOTHER TONGUE AND ITS INFLUENCES ON ENGLISH VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

According to the theory of language transfer, when the first language and the second language have a great difference, the learning difficulties will arise. And when the learners improperly use models or rules of native speech in second language learning, errors resulting from negative transfer are likely to occur and lead to wrong expressing forms of the

target language.

Word is the smallest unit that can be used, by itself, as a complete utterance. It plays a significant role in communication, so the mastery of vocabulary is the key to the success of second language acquisition (Deng, 2006).

For Chinese students, because they have formed the mode of thinking of their mother tongue, which indicates, the rules of their native language will influence or impose on the acquisition of new knowledge. A case for this point is that there exists one kind of languages — Chinglish in China. Chinglish refers to spoken or written English language with a strong flavor of Chinese. It can be proved that Chinglish is caused by the incomplete knowledge of the rules of target language. Especially at lexical level, Chinese learners tend to think that the meaning of English words is equal to the Chinese equivalent of these words. Thus, it is easy for learners to misuse the English words in communication.

A. *Negative Transfer of the Comprehension of the Meaning of English Words*

According to the British linguist Leech, G. (1983), meaning of English words, in its broadest sense, can be classified into seven types: conceptual, connotative, social, affective, reflective, collocative and thematic meanings. And in the process of lexical learning, in often, Chinese learners only focus on the literal meaning of words and neglect the other meanings. However, only having understood the full meaning of words can learners avoid the misuse of these words. Next, we will discuss the negative transfer of mother tongue from the following four aspects:

1. *Connotative Meaning*

Connotative meaning is the communication value that a word or a combination of words has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual content.

It is said that, when we study English words, what we remember firstly is their conceptual meaning. Compared with conceptual meaning, connotative meaning is peripheral, and relatively unstable, that is, it may vary according to culture, historical period, and the experience of individual. Therefore, connotative meaning is an additional part above the literal meaning, rather than a basic component of language (Liu & Wen, 2006). For instance, a group of words “grin, beam, smile, smirk”, share a similar conceptual meaning based on types of smile. But, the real differences between them lie in their connotative meanings. For example, “beam” is a smile which means happiness; “smirk”, a smile which connotes gloating of some kind. So, second language learners may easily produce incorrect forms in speech due to incomplete knowledge of the target language.

The connotative meaning of words implies people’s attitude towards them. Such as, the Chinese word “喜鹊” is always related with the meaning of “auspicious” or “lucky”. However, in English, “magpie” has such underlying meanings as “nagging” or “troublesome”. In other cases, “bamboo” means “lofty morals and noble character” in China, but it has nothing associative meaning in English. The Chinese character “黄” may connote the meaning of “delicate” and “tender”, like Chinese words “黄毛丫头”, “黄花闺女”. But, it is replaced by “green” to convey such meanings in English, such as, “a green hand”, “green good” and “a green old age” and so forth. And the Chinese word “白手” means the one has nothing at all. However, in English, “white hand” can only be understood as “pure” or “clean”.

Therefore, only in the specific cultural context can learners master and understand the full meaning of words. It must involve the context of western cultures and values in the process of learning English vocabulary.

2. *Social Meaning*

Social meaning is the meaning which an expression conveys about the context or social circumstances of its use. It chiefly includes stylistic meaning of an utterance.

Take the following words as an example, all of which have the same conceptual meaning: steed, horse, nag and gee-gee. “Steed” is poetic in style, and would be appropriate in a literary work about the Knights of the Round Table; “horse” is the common word, which can be used in any context; “nag” is slangy and is usually used in colloquial English; while “gee-gee” belongs to the nursery and is used by children. However, the Chinese character “马” can be used in any social circumstances, which causes Chinese learners to use this item in all contexts in English and leads to the negative transfer of the social meaning of words.

Also, the English words “cast, throw, chuck” share the same conceptual meaning. But they must be used in different context, for instance, “cast” is normally used in literature; “throw” is a general word which can be used in any context; “chuck” is slangy, which should be used in casual contexts. However, in Chinese, it has no differences of the meanings of these words.

In fact, it rarely exists such words with both the same conceptual meaning and stylistic meaning in English. Thus, it is necessary for learners to distinguish and identify synonyms and master their specific usages in English learning.

3. *Affective Meaning*

The level of meaning that conveys the language user’s feelings, including his attitude or evaluation in shaping his use of language is called affective meaning or emotion meaning.

“China” is a word with special meaning for Chinese people, as it embodies our country and the whole nation. As well as, “communism” carries our great ideals, and it is the belief that is shared by every Chinese people. That is to say, different people have different ideas of the same word. Also, the words like “colonialist”, “anarchist”, “individualism”, “landlord”, are the neuter words in English. But, the corresponding words “殖民主义”, “无政府主义”, “个人主义”, “地主” have a strong derogatory meaning in China. In English, “nigger”, originally a word denoting a certain race, has virtually become a term of abuse or contempt. In addition, some words have different affective meanings, though they

have the same conceptual meaning. Take “politician” and “statesman” for example, the former has a derogatory sense while the latter does not.

The differences of ideology and political system between two nations do not only make a different conceptual meaning of the same word, but also present a different affective meaning.

4. Collocative Meaning

The associations a word gets because of the meaning of words which tend to occur in its linguistic context are called collocative meanings.

If you look up the adjective “clear” in a good dictionary of contemporary English, you will probably find it will list at least ten different meanings, depending on the linguistic context in which it is used, from “clear conscience” and “clear sky” to “clear case”. In each instance the meaning of “clear” is slightly different: “clear conscience” means “without guilt”, whereas “clear” in “clear case” means “unmistakable”. The differences between them come from the words “clear” collocates with.

For instance, the Chinese word “大雨”, “大风”, “大雪”, maybe most of Chinese learners will translate “大” into “big” directly. Actually, we could only use “heavy rain”, “strong wind”, and “heavy snow-fall” to express the corresponding meaning. The English phrase “the man in the street” which means “ordinary person” can not be interpreted as “街上的人”. In fact, each language has a particular rule of collocation of words. If learners fail to understand the usages of words, the incorrect forms will occur. Such as the Chinglish words: “raining chicken (落汤鸡)”, “small school (小学)”, “day day up (天天向上)”, “seven up eight down (七上八下)” and so on.

The negative transfer of collocative meaning will cause the misuse of English words. As many Chinese learners are puzzled at such usage of words, there provides some suggestions for them: Firstly, have a deeper understanding of western culture and expand the reading materials. Secondly, summarize and collect the special usages of words consciously. Thirdly, analyze the similarities and differences between Chinese and English at the lexical level.

B. Negative Transfer of Culture

It has long been recognized that language is an essential and important part of a given culture and that the impact of culture upon a given language is something intrinsic and indispensable. Of the aspects leading to language transfer, especially negative transfer, the environmental factors really deserve people’s attention. Actually, learning a language is more than learning the linguistic rules and patterns of the target language, and more significantly, it is the penetration and acquisition of a new culture.

Language is an indispensable carrier of culture, and different language forms reflect different cultural backgrounds. Negative transfer of culture includes the negative transfer of intellectual culture and communicative culture. Intellectual culture refers to that different people will have different interpretation on a certain word in that they share the different backgrounds in communication. And the communicative culture means that the one will misunderstand some words due to the lack of relevant knowledge of them. The improper diction is the result of the negative transfer of culture, and the negative transfer of communicative culture involves the pragmatic failures (Yuan, 2000).

Proverbs epitomize the essence of culture and the value system of society. The most obvious negative transfer of culture can be found in the collocation of idioms. A ready example is found in English “Love me, love my dog”. An equivalent in Chinese will be “Love me, love my bird” (爱屋及乌). These two proverbs reveal different attitudes English and Chinese speakers cherish toward these pets. This disparity, if not cautioned, will invite unpleasantness in society (Hu, 2011). Other cases, the Chinese word “力大如牛” is interpreted as “as strong as horse” rather than “as strong as bull”. In China, “pig” has the meaning of “avarice”, “stupid” and “laziness”, but, in English, people tend to use “as stupid as goose” rather than “as stupid as pig”.

The differences of aesthetic value orientation between Chinese and Western cultures lead to a fact that there are many different views on the same word. In Chinese, “dragon” is the symbol of China, which stands for the emperor and the whole nation in ancient times. So, there are many idioms like “望子成龙”, “龙凤呈祥” to express people’s best wishes. However, “dragon” refers to a kind of ferocious monster in English.

It has become axiomatic to state that there exists a close relationship between language and culture. Culture finds a better representation through language use. Language plays a decisive role when we have a conversation with others, and we may even state that cultural stereotypes and conflicts come in when we communicate with others with no real understanding. Therefore, no effort should be spared to cultivate students’ cross-cultural awareness, which is of special importance.

V. CONCLUSION

Language transfer is inevitable in second language acquisition. After having discussed the function of language transfer in English vocabulary acquisition, we can reach a balanced point that both positive and negative transfer are important equally. Both of them should deserve people’s attention. The main purpose of this research is to investigate the phenomena of mother tongue transfer in English vocabulary acquisition by Chinese learners and further to explore some effective means to improve the efficiency of English vocabulary learning.

A clear knowledge of the difference between Chinese and English semantic systems will no doubt facilitate second

language acquisition. The positive functions of phonetic and word formation can assist the comprehension of the meaning of English words, and the negative transfer of culture can hinder the English words learning. So, in the process of lexical learning, we should spare no effort to exploit the positive transfer of Chinese, and avoid its negative transfer.

After having analyzed the function of mother tongue in English vocabulary learning, this paper provides some suggestions for Chinese learners to adopt in the later learning. To begin with, learners need to have a clear understanding of the differences between two languages. It is necessary for learners to understand the differences and similarities between the L1 and L2, for only by doing this, they will have that kind of awareness of finding the differences and similarities and making use of the mother tongue. The potential difficulties can be predicted by contrastive analysis. And the ability to understand and react to the difficulties between two languages plays a decisive role in avoiding the interference from native language. In addition, learners should cultivate the cross-cultural awareness. It is necessary for learners to acquire a second language under its cultural context, instead of only focusing on the books. Only in western cultural context can we master the full meaning of words. Therefore, the knowledge of western culture will contribute to having a better understanding and memorizing of English words.

Vocabulary is the foundation of language learning. It is sure that the mother tongue will do some kind of help and inhibition in learning a second language. So, second language learners should pay attention to summarizing the target language rules, utilizing positively transfers properly and avoiding the interference of negative transfer.

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