

A Study on the Negative Effect of Language Transfer to University Students' English Writing

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Abstract. Negative transfer of mother tongue is a difficult point for second language learners, because they can be influenced by the knowledge and habits they have acquired in the process of first language learning. This research is based on the error analysis theory, collecting compositions from Chinese college students and categorizing the errors picked out from the text by analyzing and interviewing. The research finds out that the main error types are "Confused Meaning", "Article Misuse" and "Verb Forms", and these types of error are the easiest to be influenced by negative transfer of mother tongue as well. The author conducted a survey on students' habit of using dictionaries as well and found that students tend to search the interpretation in Chinese merely, which is not helpful to impair the negative influence of language transfer. Students are advised to be aware of the existence of negative transfer of mother tongue. Some specified advice for students is to strengthen the memory of grammatical knowledge and change the habit of looking up the dictionary, enhancing the grasp of knowledge to compensate for the lack of language environment.

Keywords: English writing, language transfer, error analysis theory.

1. Introduction

English is an important part of the education system in China, demanding students to acquire the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among these language skills, English writing is a comprehensive reflection of students' language proficiency. Chinese students are affected by the habits they acquire in Chinese, their mother tongue, when learning English, bringing the knowledge and habits of the First Language (L1) to the Second Language (L2). The phenomenon is called language transfer, and the transfer has both positive and negative influences on students' English writing. This research is based on the error analysis theory, seeking to study the negative mention of language transfer in English writing of Chinese university students. The research will find out which kind of errors students usually have in their compositions and explore the further caused behind them.

This research adopts the method of text analysis and interview, aiming to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of errors do Chinese university students usually make in their English writing? And which types of errors have a high frequency of appearing?

2. Why do students make these errors? Do the errors relate to the negative transfer of their mother tongue Chinese?

Generally, the research is to find out which aspects of English writing are prone to be affected by negative transfer of Chinese among college students, and to provide some advice for students to improve their writing capacity.

2. Literature Review

The study of language transfer can be traced back to the 1950s. Influenced by behaviorism, language transfer is recognized as a process of forming a habit, which means the habit formed in the process of L1 learning will affect the learning of L2. Lado stated that language transfer is a major blockage in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and put forward with the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which regards the differences between L1 and L2 as the difficulty of SLA. This

hypothesis is impacted by innatism, which proposes that children have a specific and innate capability to acquire language [1]. However, the CAH is still a significant theory in studies of SLA nowadays.

The CAH has its boundedness that the difficulty in SLA cannot be analyzed reasonably and comprehensively. Under this theory, all the errors that appear in the learning process are reckoned to be inappropriate. Corder classified the errors in a more definite way. He divided them into mistake, the inadvertent one that can be made by both L1 learners and L2 learners, and error that caused by grammatical deviation [2]. The latter reflects the language capacity of learner, and can be further divided into intralingual error and interlingual error. The interlingual error is always resulted from the disturbance of mother tongue, cultural diversity and inappropriate learning strategy, which has relationship with the negative transfer of L1. The interlingual error is also the major point of this research. Odlin defined the language transfer as an influence caused by the differences between the target language and the language that has been acquired already, which is the most acceptable concept for researchers [3]. Besides making a clear definition of language transfer, Odlin proposed that the influence of transfer is both positive and negative. Brown gave the explanation of negative transfer as the interference of the former learning process to the new learning process [4]. Jarvis & Pavlenko divided the transfer into the following levels: phonics, spelling, lexicon, semantics, morphology, syntax, discourse, pragmatics and sociolinguistics [5]. This research is based on these classifications.

Feng interpreted the respective effects of positive transfer and negative transfer to English writing of senior high school students, and divided the negative transfer into obstructive interference and interventional interference, which provides a systematic angle to analyze the negative transfer of Chinese in English writing. This thesis analyzes the bad influence resulted by the absence of the respective linguistic features of English and Chinese in the context of the other language [6]. Du used the framework of error analysis theory to analyze the English writing of Chinese senior high school students, and found that the students at different language levels are all prone to misuse articles, prepositions, and non-finite verb [7]. Xue, Hu, Zhu, Qi listed the error types in English writing of Chinese university students. They also analyzed the differences in language rules between Chinese and English, and connected the differences with error types [8]. He pointed out that the reason for language transfer is the similarity and difference between English and Chinese in dimensions of lexicon, sentence, discourse, and pragmatics, and she supposed that the positive transfer should be enhanced, meanwhile the negative transfer should be overcome to improve student's English capacity [9]. Khaled and Nassaji summarized the specific embodiments of first language transfer in second language writing, including the similarities of writing strategies, translation strategies and L2 proficiency, which inspires learners to improve the writing strategies of L1 to transfer to L2 smoothly [10]. Yang summarized that though the current articles provided some strategies for teachers to improve their teaching method, little research paid attention to the perspective of language learners to deal with the negative transfer of their mother tongue when they write an English essay [11].

This research, based on a former study of language transfer, adopts error analysis theory as the fundamental framework and uses writing tests to build a corpus, and uses interviews to categorize the errors appearing in the English writing of Chinese university students. It compares the frequency of different types of errors and analyzes the specific manifestations of negative transfer of Chinese in English writing. The purpose is to help Chinese university students become aware of the differences between Chinese and English and the phenomenon of language transfer, and help them improve their language proficiency.

3. Research Design

To answer the two questions put forward at the beginning of this essay, the research was implemented in the following steps.

The author selected 6 Chinese university students from a non-English major as the subjects of this research. The selected students are required to pass the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), a standardized language requirement for Chinese university students, indicating that they possess at

least an average level of English proficiency. This helps to minimize the collection of invalid data due to differences in language proficiency levels and guarantees the practical value for English learning at a Chinese university.

The first step of this research is to collect essays from the selected 5 students as research cases. According to the author's demand, these students should hand in one piece of writing which was completed after they had passed CET-4 in order to guarantee that the research cases are of universal representative of Chinese university students. For the purpose of having an overview of Chinese university students' writing content, the selected students were required to hand in all kinds of essays as long as the word count of the essay is over 120. The essays received can be mainly divided into the following types: writing task from the final exam, writing practice of CET 4, and writing practice of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), all of which are major writing tasks for university students.

The second step is to ask two teachers, impairing the influence of the teacher's subjective judgment when there is only one teacher who grades the paper, and pick out the errors according to the standards following. The teachers are required to hold the English Teacher Qualification Certificate issued by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Besides, the teachers should have at least 3 years of first-line teaching experience in order to make sure that they are familiar with common errors in students' English writing. The two teachers were asked to pick out the errors from three aspects: lexical error, syntactic error, and discourse error, and each aspect is further divided into several situations, which is shown in table 1. After two teachers had finished correcting the mistakes, they were asked to discuss together about the errors that were found out by the other while they did not notice by themselves to make sure the errors they found are actually accurate.

As a result, 30 errors were picked out in the selected essay in total, and the number and percentage of each kind of error are recorded in Table 1. All the errors below are strictly corrected.

The third step is to interview the students to explore how these errors were generated and make a classification. The author made another classification, based on the error analysis theory, which divided them into mistakes and error. The latter can be further divided into intralingual error and interlingual error. Among these types, the mistake and the intralingual error will be neglected, for it has no relationship with negative transfer. The outline of the interview is as followed: first, correct the error in the essay and explain the relevant knowledge point to the student; then, ask students whether they have made this mistake due to carelessness. If so, define the error as "mistake". If not, the interviewer would point out the difference between Chinese and English of the relative knowledge point and ask students if they suppose that they were affected by the Chinese language rules when organizing the sentences, or if they just have some confusion about the grammatical rules of English. If the situation is similar to the latter, the error would be identified as "Intralingual Error". If the students believed the generation of the error is influenced by the difference between Chinese and English, the error would be classified as "Interlingual Error". The statistics are listed in Table 2.

The last step is to find out what kind of errors in Table 1 are contained in intralingual error in table 2, and calculate the percentage of each type. According to the cases of this research, the statistical result is listed in Table 3.

4. Result

Table 1 shows the 30 errors picked out from 5 students' essays, and were divided into 9 types in 3 levels: lexical error, syntactic error and discourse error. Among these error types, 7 instances of "Confused Meaning" were found out, accounting for 23.33%, which are the most frequent errors in students' essays. In the second place is "Article Misuse", whose proportion is 16.66%, and next to "Confused Meaning" is "Verb Forms", accounting for 13.33%. Students are more prone to making mistakes in the level of lexicon, accounting for 56.66%, far higher than syntax and discourse.

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Each Type of Error

Error Type		Example	Number	Percentage (%)
Lexical Error	Article Misuse	The first data group presented over 60 percentages of local residents went to a cafe for coffee or tea in last 4 weeks.	5	16.66%
	Preposition Misuse	Many people complain of about the rapid pace of modern life and I would recommend small cities to them, where life is slower and people are not in such a hurry.	1	3.33%
	Pronoun Misuse	Generally, the data can be roughly divided into: Melbourne, Sydney and Hobart, and another related to Brisbane and Adelaide.	1	3.33%
	Numbers of Noun	Secondly, the genuine connections between human are being increasingly overlooked.	3	10.00%
	Confused Meaning	Then we will not get lost in our way, because we definite our suppose.	7	23.33%
Syntactic Error	Verb Forms	Meanwhile, in the small cities we could buy a house far more easily and having have a bigger house at the same wage level.	4	13.33%
	Incorrect Voice	On the other hand, AI will heart us if it not used reasonably.	2	6.66%
	Incorrect Tense	Recently, there is a hot topic which discussed about that whether college students should us use AI to study.	1	3.33%
Discourse Error	Cohesion and Coherence	Melbourne went to a cafe for drinks in the last 4 weeks account for 64%...	3	10.00%
Other	Spell Error	First of all, AI has penetrated into all aspects of our lives.	3	10.00%

Through the interview with the students, the 30 errors were categorized as mistakes, intralingual errors and interlingual errors. According to Table 2, the interlingual errors account for 53.33%, the largest proportion of the three types. Intralingual errors take a large proportion as well, accounting for 36.66%. There are a few mistakes in these essays, all of which are spelling mistakes.

Table 2. Number and Percentage of Mistake, Intralingual Error and Interlingual Error

Error type	Mistake	Intralingual Error	Interlingual Error
Number	3	11	16
Percentage (%)	10.00%	36.66%	53.33%

On the basis of error analysis theory, interlingual errors are relative to negative transfer of mother tongue. In Table 3, the author recorded the errors that can be classified as interlingual errors from the error types in Table 1. According to the statistics, all the errors of “Article Misuse” are be defined as interlingual errors, whose proportion is the highest. After the “Article Misuse” is the “Verb Form”, accounting for 18.75%, and the “Confused Meaning”, accounting for 12.50%. Some instances in other types of errors are interlingual as well, but the proportion is comparatively low.

Table 3. Number and Percentage of Each Type of Error in Interlingual Error

Interlingual Error	Error Type	Number	Percentage (%)
	Article Misuse	5	31.25%
	Preposition Misuse	1	6.25%
	Pronoun Misuse	1	6.25%
	Numbers of Noun	1	6.25%
	Confused Meaning	2	12.50%
	Verb Forms	3	18.75%
	Incorrect Voice	1	6.25%
	Incorrect Tense	1	6.25%
	Cohesion and Coherence	1	6.25%

As a result, the major error types in students' essays are "Confused Meaning", "Article Misuse" and "Verb Forms". The reason why students make these errors includes: carelessness, confusion of grammar rules, and the influence of mother tongue. The "Article Misuse", "Verb Forms", and "Confused Meaning" are the most relevant types to negative transfer of mother tongue.

5. Discussion

According to CAH, the differences between L1 and L2 determine the level of difficulty of SLA. The error types that are more prone to be influenced by mother tongue can all be connected with the difference between English and Chinese. In Chinese, there is no article to show definiteness and generality of nouns, while in English the countable nouns cannot be used without articles in most situations. An article plays the role of modifying a noun. During the interview, one student mentioned that the sentences seem fluent without an article in Chinese, so he cannot notice the same absence in English. The verbs in Chinese do not need transformation in different conditions; however, in English, there are systematic rules of verb transformation for various usages. A student made an error of a non-finite verb in her essay, using "and" to connect a predicate verb and a non-finite verb. She said that there is no verb transformation in Chinese, so she sometimes overlooks it when writing English sentences, and the difference between the two languages intensifies her confusion about grammar rules. Along with exploring the reason behind the errors in the essays, the author proposed another question in the interview, knowing more about students' habit of going through a dictionary. Most students mentioned that they nearly search for the English explanation in dictionary, and look up in the electronic dictionary only for the Chinese interpretation, which leads them to ignore the differences among synonyms and results in the "Confusion Meaning".

To solve the problems above, students should be required to memorize the grammatical knowledge accurately to prevent from bringing the knowledge of L1. Besides, they should search for more details of a word when looking up dictionary, to find out the accurate usage of the word. Teachers should emphasize the difference between English and Chinese when explaining knowledge to students, helping them to be aware of the existence of negative transfer of mother tongue and correct it with consciousness.

6. Conclusion

This study is based on the error analysis theory, exploring the frequency of major error types in Chinese college students' English writing and how the error types are connected with negative transfer of the mother tongue. Text analysis and interviews are used in this study to arrive at the current result. Due to the limitation of workload, the sample English writings from Chinese college students are not enough to draw a more universal conclusion. There are other types of error not included in this research, though exist in students' compositions, and the amount of each error is of little quantity, which could impact the accuracy of the research statistics. Besides, the study only covers the analysis of language knowledge, while the learning habit is ignored. The survey for language study habits did not interview in detail, merely referring to the habit of using a dictionary. In the future study, more cases are expected to be analyzed to give a wider view to the English writing level of Chinese college students and provide more targeted suggestions. More questions of language learning habits are also compulsory since the habits formed during the L1 language learning process led to the language transfer as well as the knowledge.

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