Study on the Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue on College Students

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Abstract: As an overwhelming field in the study of second language acquisition, language transfer will have both positive and negative effects on second language learners. This negative effect is called mother tongue negative transfer. From the perspective of second language learners, the negative transfer of mother tongue has a great impact on them and will hinder their further language learning in the future. Although many people at home and abroad have done relevant research, it is still necessary to further explore this issue. On the basis of summarizing the transfer theory, this thesis combines the specific forms of negative transfer of mother tongue in college students' English learning, analyzes its causes and discusses the impact of language transfer on foreign language teaching, so as to help learners acquire authentic English and teachers carry out effective teaching. Additionally, through comparative analysis and questionnaire survey, it is also confirmed that Chinese thinking is ubiquitous in the process of foreign language learning. Therefore, it is very important to find effective solutions.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, Negative mother tongue transfer, Foreign language learning, College students

1. Introduction

1.1. Background Information

The second acquisition theory has been developing for a long time. Especially in recent years, because of the rapid development of the economy, the process of globalization has kept accelerating rapidly so that foreign language learning is particularly important. Listening, speaking, reading and writing are four skills in second language acquisition. Additionally, language, as a bridge for people to communicate, plays a significant role in people's daily life. That's why Language Transfer theory and Second Language Acquisition theory have been becoming hot topics and more and more researchers begin to focus on them [1]. However, because of the differences between Chinese and English, many learners are suffered from the negative mother tongue transfer and cause misconstructions in their daily life and study. According to the theory of "mother tongue transfer", the habit of using mother tongue will not only directly affect the acquisition of foreign language, but also impede the ability of acquiring other language in the process of learning a foreign language. Moreover, Ellis says that it is a popular belief that second language acquisition is strongly influenced by learner's first language, namely mother tongue [2]. In conclusion, the negative language transfer should not be neglected and it is necessary for teachers to find some effective and efficient method to solve problems.

1.2. Significance and Purpose of the Study

When it comes to significance and purpose of the study, learning a foreign language involves learning new sounds, new grammatical rules, new thought patterns and cultures that we will use them in listening, communicating, reading and writing. In fact, there is no denying the fact that teachers put the emphasis on explaining grammars as well. Even so, L2 learners are inevitably influenced by mother tongue since they have established a mature mother tongue thinking system in their minds. At the same time, because the second language learning is coupled with the poor learning environment, the negative transfer of mother tongue will aggravate the impacts. In order to avoid the further repercussion, writing which is regarded as the most difficult one of other communicative skills and can best reflect the overall level of students' English ought to be given extra precautions. What's more, during the process of actual English teaching, teachers ought to take different teaching measures for different student groups, such as combining theoretical knowledge with practice, so as to not only improve students' English writing level, but also teach students effective writing strategies. Under such circumstance, their capability of SLA can

be promoted.

To sum up, based on relative theories as well as a detailed analysis of the questionnaires and compositions written by college students, this study is conducted to investigate the relationship between English writing and L1 transfer. It is hoped that teachers can have a better understanding about the difficulties students face and the mistakes they make, and seek more effective teaching methods of English writing. It is hoped that by identifying and analyzing these L1 transfer phenomena, college students can make use of positive transfer, overcome negative transfer and improve their English learning ability. Therefore, it is extremely vital that finding out useful ways to avoid the negative influence of mother tongue.

2. Literature Review

In foreign language acquisition, language transfer is at the center of second language acquisition research. This kind of transfer is called L1 transfer, which a common phenomenon on language learners and has attracted more and more attention in academic circles in recent years. From the development of the world history, the study of language transfer began in the 19th century and it didn't really become a research topic of language teaching until the 1950s [3]. Furthermore, with the acceleration of globalization, the influence of mother tongue transfer and appropriate language learning strategies have been concerned by more and more scholars. Because of the continuous research results, it is necessary to make a summary of these to give enlightenment to teachers and make innovations in this aspect.

2.1. Development of Language Transfer

Throughout the theories of mother tongue transfer at home and abroad, there are three representative theories.

The first one is Comparative Analysis and Contrastive Rhetoric [4]. The concept was put forward in the theory of contrastive analysis in the 1940s and 1950s. For example, Behaviorism linguistics initially regarded learning as a process of habit formation. Fries and R. Lado first introduced the word "transfer" into the study of second language acquisition, and pointed out that mother tongue transfer is an influence of mother tongue habit on second language learning [5]. On this point of view, they consider that due to the inevitable differences between the mother tongue and the second language, the negative impact of mother tongue on second language learning is greater than the positive impact. Mother tongue is more likely to interfere with the second language learning. The difficulty of second language acquisition depends on the distance between the mother tongue and the second language.

The second one is Creative Constructive Model, which emphasis foreign language learning is restricted by grammar. Learners with different native languages learn a second language in roughly the same process and sequence. Therefore, there is no significant process of native language on second language acquisition. With the deepening of the study on transfer, the transfer of mother tongue has experienced a tortuous and repeated process, from the prosperity of the early 1950s to the decline of the late 1960s and 1970s, and then to the rise of the middle and late 1980s. At first, teachers find that not all the mistakes made by second language learners are due to the disturbance of their native language and behaviorism is challenged by cognitivism. During this period, with the development of cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology, based on Chomsky's universal grammar theory [6], Faerch and Kasper propose that second language learning is a process of using the inherent universal grammar learning mechanism, which is almost unaffected by mother tongue transfer [7]. Therefore, language transfer theory lost its dominant position. Then, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, error analysis theory and interlanguage theory emerged in the field of Applied Linguistics. People began to put comparative analysis and error analysis within the framework of interlanguage to explain the phenomenon of language transfer.

After the 1980s, with the deepening of the research, the concept of transfer has changed. Transfer is no longer a mechanical transfer of the mother tongue to the target language, but a complex cognitive process influenced and restricted by many factors. At this stage, the third theory was put forward by some scholars which is represented by Common Underlying Proficiency. It holds an opinion that the positive effects of the native language on the second language are much greater than the negative effects and the improvement in native language proficiency can help with second language acquisition. Cummins uses the "double iceberg" model to simulate cross language transfer [8]. Although the mother tongue and the second language have their own language structure on the surface, they overlap and share the common

principles and restrictions of language. Therefore, the relevant concept knowledge, thinking skills and writing skills can be transferred to the second language through common potential cognitive ability.

2.2. Two Types of Analysis Methods

There are two typical analysis methods in the field of second language acquisition: Comparative Analysis and Error Analysis.

Comparative Analysis means that people can define similarities and differences with comparing two language. By doing this, the potential influence of mother tongue on second language can be inferred. Teachers are able to determine the key points and take preventive measures to help students avoid the negative transfer of mother tongue.

Error Analysis is supported by behaviorism. Learners' errors are regraded as causing by their bad verbal behaviors. Corder is the first people raising the error analysis [9]. In his opinion, through analyzing errors, teachers can obtain many psychological activities and learning strategies of second language learners, so as to study the influence of mother tongue on second language.

3. Research Design

This research aims at finding out how language transfer interferes college students. In order to obtain effective and sufficient data, the author adapts the way of giving questionnaires and doing interviews. Both Contrast Analysis and Error Analysis are applied to analyze the data collected.

3.1. Research Subjects and Questions

The subjects in this study are students of grade four from different province in Xi'an International Studies University, whose English level is basically at the medium level. The proportion of male and female is basically balanced. There are 49 males, accounting for 49% of the total sample and 51 females, accounting for 51% of the total sample. Their mother tongue is Chinese. One hundred questionnaires were distributed during the actual measurement with an efficiency of 100%.

The tool of this study is distributing questionnaires. The first five questions are true or false questions which mainly focus on the differences between Chinese and English. The research questions are listed as follows.

1) When a Chinese-English translation is to be finished, I prefer to write in Chinese firstly and then translate it into English.

2) When a English-Chinese translation is to be finished, I find it troublesome to seek out a suitable corresponding word.

3) I find it difficult to totally understand a passage because of the discrepancy between English and Chinese.

4) It is very difficult to remember all kinds of tense deformations and use them correctly.

5) When writing in English, I seldom use conjunctions and pay attention to the relation between sentences.

Among these questions, the first three questions are the most typical ones. And students' answers are mostly correct.

In the latter part, it mainly through interview survey with individual students to propose some teaching methods to solve the existing problems. Furthermore, during the process of interviewing, many students admit that they just learn English by rote without comprehending theories. For this reason, forgetting always happens. What's worse, students' actual English writing ability is neither completely acquired nor promoted.

3.2. Procedures of Data Collection and Analysis

In the process of conducting error Analysis, the author is strict in collecting information by following the procedures proposed by Coder: collection, identification, description, explanation and evaluation.

First of all, the author collected compositions that written by Grade four English major students from

Xi'an International Studies University. Secondly, by carefully analyzing the obtained materials, all the errors can be classified into six categories: word-for-word translation error, word collocation error, part of speech error, word order error, subject error and sentence structure error. And these errors can also be separately attributed to vocabulary negative transfer and syntax negative transfer.

Thirdly, according to the statistics of the survey, it is widely accepted that negative transfer of mother tongue impedes second language acquisition. From the perspective of students, they usually use Chinese words to mark English words when learning English. Therefore, it is obvious that students generally believe Chinese has a certain influence on English learning and the negative effect is greater than the positive effect. Other than, due to the uniqueness of languages, one language has almost no corresponding words in another language, which also produces some negative transfer effects. Most English words and Chinese words are not one-to-one correspondence, but English learners tend to make a correspondence between Chinese and English, which may lead to misunderstanding of the meaning of some English words due to different cultural backgrounds.

To sum up, it is hard for English learners to totally prevent the influence of negative mother tongue because they are easily affected. It is necessary to raise and utilize high-effective methodologies in order to help students get rid of the negative transfer of mother tongue.

4. Results and Discussion

After a brief introduction of the phenomenon of negative transfer, we can see that it is the different language systems that the two languages belong to that negative transfer of mother tongue occurs. Except for the different language systems, the difference of culture and civilization influence the second language acquisition. Under the context of international development, mastering English has become an important means of communication. Therefore, it is important to find the specific influences and effective ways to avoid the negative transfer.

4.1. The Influence of Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue

During the process of learning, most English learners are accustomed to solving English problems with using Chinese Thinking. As thus, the impact of negative transfer of mother tongue will become more and more obvious. The influence is mainly reflected in three aspects: word choice, word order and tense.

4.1.1. Influence on word choice

In the process of translation, we usually face the difficulty of word choice. The first difference between English and Chinese is that Chinese is a language with no morphological changes, while English is a language with morphological changes. The second reason that can affect the choice of words is that English has prefixes and suffixes, but there is no prefixes and suffixes in Chinese. English words can form different words by adding prefixes and suffixes, but their fundamental part of speech remains unchanged. If we classify affixes with reference to their function, we have the following two types: inflectional affixes and derivational affixes. Inflectional affixes serve to indicate grammatical relations, such as number, gender, tense, aspect, case and degree. For instance, "-s" represents plural. "-er" indicates comparison and "-est" indicates superlatives. "-s" in books, "-ed" in studied, "-ing" in (he is) working, "-'s" in Tom's and "-er" in faster are all inflectional affixes. The root meaning of these words has not changed, but the state has changed. Besides, when morphemes are conjoined with other ones, they never produce new words nor do they cause any change in grammatical class. And, usually, no two inflectional affixes can coexist in the same word at the same time with the exception of the combination of plural number marker and possessive case marker (e.g.students' reading room, teachers' job). In contrast, derivational affixes can create new words. For example, "-ment", "-al" and "-tion" represent a noun. "-ly" represents adverb. "-ful" represents an adjective. And "un-", "in-", "im-" and "dis" have a negative meaning. If we prefix a word, such as agree, with "dis-", the meaning of the word will be opposite, but the lexical nature remains the same. Except affixes, there are two kinds of morphemes in English: free morpheme and bound morpheme. Free morphemes are those which can exist as individual words. In other words, they can be used separately. For example, the word "bookstore" is composed of two morphemes: book and store, which are both free morphemes. It's the case with the words like playground, blackboard, football and so on. In English, the lexical morphemes make up the largest part of the vocabulary. They are open classes since we regularly add new words to these classes. The need for new nouns, adjectives adverbs and verbs arises frequently in daily life, and in addition to these categories

occurs freely. Bound morphemes are those which cannot occur on their own as separate words. They are always joined with other morphemes to form words. For example, the various affixes like "de-", "dis-", "ir-", "-tion", "-ly", "-ful" are bound morphemes. The word "unhappy" contains one bound morpheme: "un" and one free morpheme: "happy". And in the word "agreement", the first part "agree-" is free while the second part "-ment" is bound. However, Chinese words lack inflection. People usually use the same words that express distinct part of speech. Therefore, it is certainly a great obstacle for many elementary English learners even some advanced English learners. Several English words with the same root can have same meanings in Chinese. Therefore, it is tricky for most English learners to correctly distinguish the part of speech and meaning. With lacking the concept of affixes, learners will be puzzled at the beginning of learning English. This also explains some grammatical mistakes that students often make. Actually, it is the negative transfer of mother tongue that leads to the appearance of such problem, which has a certain influence on learners' actual learning and is not conducive to the formation of learners' cross-cultural consciousness.

Last but bot least, negative transfer of mother tongue not only exists in simple word usage but also in translating idioms. Idiomatic expressions are mainly composed of proverbs, idioms and phrases, which are produced in people's daily life and work. It is created by common people and belong to the wisdom of the masses. It is the different historical background that different countries and nationalities have their own special idiom systems, which form special cultural colors and cultural deposits. This explains why people in different countries have the opposite understanding of the same word. From the perspective of civilization development, it can be seen that due to the regional cultural differences between the East and the West, there are certain differences in people's idioms. When learners think about the translation of idiomatic expressions, they are very vulnerable to the direct influence of negative transfer of mother tongue, which will affect their translation learning. For example, "dog" represents loyalty in China, but we seldom call someone a dog to praise him for his virtues. However, in English, people are accustomed to using "a lucky dog" to demonstrate a person with good luck. At the same time, there are great differences in the interpretation of "dragon" in idioms between the East and the West. In eastern countries, "dragon" is regarded as a symbol of power and has good expectations. Thus, people recognize "dragon" spiritually. By contrast, western countries have a special understanding of "dragon", believing that "dragon" is a symbol of evil and violence. That's why western people avoid using "dragon" in their everyday expressions. In addition to this, when western people want to describe a heavy rain, they prefer to call it "rain cats and dogs", which shows they like to use animals to describe people or things as well. But in China, we are more likely to say "it rains heavily" to demonstrate the climate. These examples are based on the different meanings given to animals. Except animals, some colors have totally distinct meanings in China and western countries. In Chinese traditional concept, "red" can be considered as jubilation and auspiciousness. Oppositely, western people think "red" as a symbol of threats and dangers. Therefore, due to the cultural differences between the east and the west, the situation and background of idioms should be considered to ensure the feasibility and rationality of idioms translation so as to decrease the influence of negative transfer of mother tongue.

4.1.2. Influence on word order

The negative transfer of mother tongue is evident in the grammatical items of relative clauses in terms of word order. Word order refers to the linear arrangement rules of words and sentences, which to some extent reflects the national customs and thinking patterns of different language users. It embodies the relationship between words and expresses the inner meaning of language at the syntactic level. From the perspective of language typology, although English and Chinese both take the form of SVO structure, the word order of modifiers varies widely. That's because there is no relative clause in Chinese. It is this difference that causes Chinese students to habitually use the word order of their mother tongue and speak some Chinglish in the process of English learning. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze and discuss the similarities and differences between English and Chinese word order from the perspective of word order.

In Chinese, when modifying a noun, all the attributive modifiers are put before the noun instead of using the structure of subordinate clauses. However, there are a lot of relative clauses in English, such as attributive clauses. When the attributive part is too long, people tend to put it after the noun it modifies. For example, when Chinese people want to describe that a boy in a blue shirt is my brother, people place the modifier "wearing a blue shirt" in front of a noun, which fits the Chinese custom of word construction. However, in English, the sentence should be "The boy who wears a blue shirt is my brother." In this sentence, western people use an attributive clause to modify the noun, putting the attributive clause after the noun it modifies. It can be seen that Chinese and English are inconsistent in the use of attributive positions, so mother tongue will have a negative impact on English learning, which is not conducive to the acquisition of attributive clauses. Meanwhile, auxiliary verb takes a significant place in English.

When English learners start to learn English, they are taught to use auxiliary verbs to complete a sentence structure when there is no "be" verb in a sentence. Nevertheless, there is no concept of auxiliary verb in Chinese so that many English learners are lack of a knowledge that where to place it. The problem of word order confusion also arises. Another special sentence pattern is inversion. Actually, in Chinese, there are inverted sentences as well, but the form is quite different from that in English. Chinese people prefer to put the predicate and other elements before the subject. For example, the normal order of a sentence is "Did you eat?". But some Chinese people may place "eat" before "you". It is obvious that there is no such expression in English. English inversion sentences can be divided into partial inversion sentence and full inversion sentence. The meaning of full inversion sentence is the sentence that puts all the predicate verbs before the subject. And the meaning of partial inversion sentence is when a part of the predicate, which is usually an auxiliary verb or a conjunction verb be, comes before the subject. People also sometimes use auxiliary verbs if they want to rewrite a sentence in the correct word order into a partially inverted sentence. For an advanced English learner who master English grammar and rules, the word order in partial inversion may not cause some difficulties. Yet, for an elementary English learner or a child who has studied English for a long time, the word order of inverted sentences may be an insurmountable gap. That's because they cannot understand the sentence elements and the corresponding rules. In this way, mother tongue will have a negative impact on English learning and is not conducive to learners' acquisition of word order as well as relevant grammar items. As for English learners, when they encounter such learning difficulties, they will avoid using such grammatical items. These results go against the English learning.

4.2. The Enlightenment for Teaching

After listing and analyzing the collected data, it is easily proved that negative mother tongue does have bearing on second language acquisition. The aim of this thesis is not only to reveal the problems, but also to bring up available and effective methods so as to help English learners avoid the influence. Based on the realistic situation nowadays, there are some enlightenment under the guidance of pedagogy.

4.2.1. Treating mother tongue transfer properly

As previous studies have shown, mother tongue is a common phenomena. To be second language learners, students are not exposed to an English environment, so it is impossible to completely get rid of the interference of negative transfer of mother tongue. At this time, teacher should play a role of a guider to guide students treating negative mother tongue properly.

First of all, teachers ought to show positive attitude towards English so as to set an example for students. According to many researches [10], the degree of students' interest in the language is positively correlated with their proficiency. If teachers show positive attitude to a language, students can be effected by them. Despite the negative transfer of mother tongue often happens, students should not be afraid of making mistakes and nor can teachers discourage students' willingness to learn and speak English. By means of speaking more and practicing more, students' mistakes can be timely solved. Therefore, the negative transfer of mother tongue will be decreased, which can also stimulate students' interest in learning English. Only by doing this can students uphold an open and inclusive awareness to take the initiative to embrace foreign cultural and promote their English level.

Secondly, during the learning process, English learners should give prominence to the degree of attention to the language itself and avoid using Chinese thinking mode to learn English. This process not only needs students' self-regulation, but also needs teachers' correct guidance and participation. Before the formal teaching, teachers should take the initiative to introduce the background of the current and the trend of the world. These are appropriate way to make students be conscious of the status of English. In addition, in order to shorten the cultural gap between students and language, teachers can also select some aspects that students are interested in to improve their enthusiasm. For instance, teachers can use some videos or pictures to introduce some western traditional festivals or customs which can show the characteristics of western culture. Besides, it is wise to adapt some western popular singers and actors to immerse students in English culture. By doing this, the distance between teachers and students is shortened and students' enthusiasm is further stimulated.

In conclusion, the dominant position of English can be highlighted and students' sense of English can be improved through these ways. Gradually, students' cross-cultural consciousness will be formed. In the process of English learning, learners need to feel the connotation of English culture, find the sense of happiness and gain in English learning in order to continue to stimulate learners' English learning potential. By doing this, students can reasonably overcome the negative impact of mother tongue transfer

and achieve expected learning goals.

4.2.2. Reducing the negative transfer of mother tongue

As the author said at the beginning, it is extremely important to establish a good attitude. But the next things teachers should do is to help students reduce the occurrence of negative transfer of mother tongue.

First of all, during the actual teaching process, teachers, the organizers and guiders, should help students change the inherent learning thinking mode and improve learners' English learning efficiency in order to avoid the long-term negative transfer of their mother tongue. A comparative analysis of English content and Chinese content shows that the English content focuses on the front end of thinking while the Chinese content focuses on the back end of thinking. For example, when combing English logical thinking, teachers should highlight the facts and conclusions and then take relevant discussions to analyze the facts. In view of the particularity of English learning content, in the process of English learning, students should do their level best to change the learning thinking mode, break through the learning thinking constraint of negative transfer of mother tongue, construct a reasonable and efficient learning mode with the help of teacher. Furthermore, teachers should take advantage of the learning mode built up by students themselves to mobilize learners' learning enthusiasm and promote them to actively carry out English learning thinking so as to improve learners' comprehensive English learning ability.

Secondly, teachers can combine education with recreation. Regardless of their age, students are more inclined to learn knowledge in some interesting activities rather than listening to teachers explaining speculative knowledge dully, which is a appropriate pointcut for teachers. With taking advantage of the characteristic of students, teachers can show some meaningful videos so as to make students immersed in an English environment. Besides, teachers can raise some questions related to the video. After watching it, teachers can divide the whole class into several groups and ask them to exchange their opinions and discuss their answers. During this process, teachers can function a role as participants that participate in students' activities and correct the mistakes which are influenced by negative mother transfer as an ordinary peer instead of a authority. What's more, when students return to class discussion, the teacher can ask a particular student to share some of the differences he has observed between English and Chinese in front of the class so that students will pay more attention to their further English learning to reduce the influence of negative transfer of mother tongue.

Moreover, except for teachers' guidance, students are able to take some effective measures to monitor their second language learning to reduce the negative mother tongue transfer. Some students with a high degree of initiative in self-study take the initiative to look up some grammar materials or watch some English films to Learn some authentic English expressions to reduce the negative transfer of mother tongue. However, this means is totally up to students. Because only students with strong learning initiative will try their best to solve problems, while for some students with weak learning initiative, this independent learning method has no impact.

5. Conclusion

Generally speaking, negative transfer of mother tongue is a very common and complex phenomenon in second language acquisition. In order to make the research more effective and persuasive, after a brief introduction to the transfer theory, the author employs the method of Error Analysis and Comparative Analysis to explain how the negative mother tongue transfer influences college students. And making questionnaires and conducting interviews are two effective and intuitive ways to reflect students' own feelings.

On account of the ultimate goal, the author not only analyzes the causes of negative transfer of mother tongue but also puts forward some teaching suggestions. On the contrary, when students' English knowledge is not enough to understand the task and communicate with others, mother tongue also can be used as a kind of relying on resources, teachers should also be dialectical view on the migration of the mother tongue to help students overcome the impact of negative transfer of mother tongue.

In brief, we must realize that overcoming the negative transfer of mother tongue and improving students' English learning ability can not be accomplished overnight. There still a long way to go. Only by combining theory with foreign language teaching can we carry out teaching activities better and achieve the expected teaching objectives.

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