

Effects of L1 Transfer on English Writing of Chinese EFL Students

CHEN Yuanhua^{[a],*}; LI Xiaoling^[b]

^[a]Human Resource Department, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.

^[b]School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 14 December 2015; accepted 10 March 2016

Published online 26 April 2016

Abstract

L1 transfer, or mother tongue transfer, is the influence of the knowledge of the first language of humans on their target language learning or acquisition. English writing is always the weakness of Chinese students in their learning of English. The main cause is mother tongue transfer. L1 transfer can be divided into two parts, positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer is a transfer that can help in learning, while the negative transfer is the one that hinders the learning process. This study mainly focusses on the errors in English writing of Chinese students caused by the L1 transfer and how to deal with errors or how to use transfer as a tool in English writing learning process. Hope to promote the teaching of English writing and enhance the competence in writing of Chinese English learners through utilizing positive transfer and reducing negative transfer.

Key words: L1 transfer; English writing; Chinese English learners; Positive transfer; Negative transfer

Chen, Y. H., & Li, X. L. (2016). Effects of L1 Transfer on English Writing of Chinese EFL Students. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 12(4), 50-53. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/8281>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8281>

INTRODUCTION

The *Syllabus* pointed out that the goal of Chinese English teaching is to cultivate students' abilities in listening,

speaking, reading, and writing, so that students can communicate better using English. So writing plays an important role in English learning. But though students work hard in writing, the result is far from satisfactory. There are many problems for students faced with in writing, such as vocabulary problems, grammar problems, syntactic problems and so on. According to the error analysis, negative transfer is one of the blocks in English writing of Chinese English learners.

“Writing is the process of selecting, combining, arranging and developing ideas in effective sentences, paragraphs, and often, longer units of discourse, an extremely complex activity.” Writing plays exactly important part in the learning process of Chinese EFL learners, for it asks the learners' integrated skills and it requires the writer has the ability to control a number of variables. So the teaching of English must value the teaching of writing.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Language Transfer

What is transfer? Contrastive Analysis claims that there are both positive and negative transfer. However, the explicit definition of transfer is put forward in the “language transfer” theory, which defines transfer as “the carryover of previous performance or knowledge to subsequent learning.” Also transfer includes positive and negative one. Language transfer, also called cross-linguistic influence, is one of the key factors contributing to one's interlanguage (linguistic system between L1 and L2). Krashen (1983) considers transfer as “the result of falling back on old knowledge, the L1 rule, when new knowledge is lacking.” Faerch and Kasper (1987) points out that the process may either support or detract from learning, that is, positive transfer and negative transfer. There are four manifestations of transfer: facilitation

(positive transfer), errors (negative transfer), avoidance and over-use.

1.2 Theories Related to Language Transfer

1.2.1 Contrastive Analysis

The research of “L1 transfer” begins in 1940s and 1950s in the US. In the middle of 20th century, people affirmed the function of mother tongue in L2 acquisition, based on the Behaviorism. According to the Contrastive Analysis, mother tongue is the main obstacle in the acquisition of L2. The difference between L1 and L2 is proportional to the difficulties in the acquisition process. The bigger the difference, the bigger the difficulty is. Contrastive Analysis also claims that a positive transfer is possible if there are similarities between the two languages, while a negative transfer may occur when there are differences between the L1 and the target language. However, the predictive power of Contrastive Analysis is limited. In fact, it is partial similarities that often cause difficulties.

1.2.2 Interlanguage

After the Contrastive Analysis, the interlanguage hypothesis rose to prominence. Interlanguage, is the term for a dynamic linguistic system developed by a learner of L2 who has not become fully proficient in the target language. It is defined as “the language of the learners produce while he is in the process of learning another language” in *Langman Dictionary of applied linguistics* (Richards, Platt, & Platt., 2000, p.232) The interlanguage rules are claimed to be shaped by several factors by Selinker, including: L1 transfer, transfer of training, strategies of L2 learning (e.g. simplification), strategies of L2 communication (or communication strategies like circumlocution), and overgeneralization of the target language patterns. Among these factors, language transfer is considered an important source in L2 acquisition. Interlanguage is a natural systematic language, reflecting the learners’ attempts to acquire such particular language items.

1.2.3 Error Analysis

The early stage of Error Analysis is centered on the difference between L1 and L2, that is, the interference of L1 to the target language (language transfer). Language transfer covers the majority of learner’s L2 errors and these errors are treated as interlingual. With the development of Error Analysis, linguists begin to pay more attention to the errors caused by other factors, not language transfer. They are: over-generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and the false concepts hypothesized. Error Analysis gives a deeper perspective on the analysis of errors. It has profound guiding significance in both teaching and learning process in L2.

From those research and analysis we can see the L1 transfer has a great influence on the SLA.

2. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Error Types

Errors can have many sources and in order to make these studies better guide the teaching and learning of English, teachers and students must know the error types definitely. Commonly errors consist of errors in word usage, errors in a sentence, and errors in writing mechanism.

2.1.1 Errors in Word Usage

Errors in word usage, also called morphological errors, are the errors of words. The morphological errors contain many parts: a) errors concerning word class; b) errors concerning the use of nouns; c) errors concerning verbs....

2.1.1.1 Errors Concerning Word Class

This kind of error is caused by the incorrect use of the word class, like using adjective where there should be a noun, or using adverb where there should be an adjective. For example:

- a) My mother has much confident (confidence).
- b) Students must have the ability of society (social) communication.

2.1.1.2 Errors Concerning the Use of Nouns

In this kind of error, the number, case, and gender are important. A key concept in number is countability, which makes nouns consist of countable nouns and uncountable nouns. As for countable nouns, the plural form is to add “-s” as a suffix of the noun. However, many students cannot deal with it correctly in their writing:

- a) There are many apples (apples).
- b) People in different countries have different attitude (attitudes) toward the football.

2.1.1.3 Errors Concerning Verbs

Errors concerning the verbs are mainly the incorrect use of verbs in sentence, like the errors concerning tense and voice:

- a) If you study hard, you succeed (will succeed) in the future.
- b) Teenagers thought that money is (was) easy to save.

For the errors concerning voice, there are also examples:

I told my friend that I used to help (be helped) by a young handsome boy in the university.

2.1.2 Errors in Sentence Writing

Errors in sentence writing, also called syntactic errors, include many parts: errors in the use of phrases, omission, predicate errors, and errors in word order....

2.1.2.1 Errors in the Use of Phrases

In English, phrases contain noun phrase, verb phrase, preposition phrase and so on. In the writing of learners, you can also find many errors in this kind:

- a) It is not (a) good habit to waste money.
- b) College students still regard themselves (as) kids.

2.1.2.2 Omission

Omission means that a word or phrase necessary is missing in a sentence, including omission of subject,

omission of auxiliary words, omission of preposition and so on:

- a) Time is not that easy to get.
It is not easy to get time.
- b) Don't (be) confused.

2.1.2.3 Errors in Word Order

In English, there is a natural order of words in sentence-formation. And it has a more flexible word order than Chinese. In English writing, Chinese students also have some errors in this part:

- a) We can through practice get more experience.
- b) I also can do the exercise tomorrow morning.

2.1.3 Errors in Writing Mechanism

The errors in writing mechanism include the errors in capitalization and punctuation mark. In English, some letters in certain position should be written in capital, but in Chinese not. So Chinese students often make errors:

- a) Internet is popular around the world now.
- b) There are many developed countries in the world, like America and Canada.

The punctuation system in English is different from that in Chinese. For example, in English, there are not “、” and “<< >>”. In English, it's “.” not “。”. Chinese students are always confused in punctuation in English writing:

- a) We should do it well.
- b) I like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

2.2 Sources of Errors

The first step of study errors is to identification and description of errors. There are many sources of errors, but the two main sources are transfer errors and intralingual errors.

2.2.1 Transfer Errors

Transfer error means the error caused by mother tongue transfer in the SLA process. Transfer is defined as the effect of the previous experience on the subsequent learning.

When there is difference between the native language and the second language, the influence occurs negatively, that is, the negative transfer. Negative transfer causes transfer errors in the writing of learners. This kind of error includes structure errors, grammar errors, and so on. Here are some examples:

- a) 北方出产小麦
A. The north grows wheat.
B. Wheat is grown in the north.
- b) A. Her English speaks well.
B. She speaks English well.

2.2.2 Developmental Errors

Developmental errors, are “the errors caused, not by the mother tongue transfer, but by the incorrect application or overgeneralization of rules of target language”. There are four types of the errors: over-generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized:

- a) Overgeneralization:
A. I followed my teacher.
B. I goed out the classroom.
- b) Ignorance of rule restrictions:
A. I will try to serve the people.
B. I will try to serve for the people.
- c) Incomplete application of rules:
A. I wish I could make it.
B. I wish I can make it.
- d) False concepts hypothesized:
A. I like looking newspapers.
B. I like reading newspapers.

3. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

3.1 Summary of Major Findings

This study mainly focuses on the transfer effects of mother tongue on the learning of L2 of Chinese English learners. In the above chapters, it analyzes the transfer in word, sentence and writing mechanism. The transfer of Chinese in English can be both positive and negative. The transfer of Chinese can also play a positive role in English writings. However, compared with negative transfer, the positive effect of Chinese is not so obvious.

3.2 The Implications for Improve the Competence of Writing

3.2.1 Treating Mother Tongue Transfer Properly

Mother tongue transfer is an inevitable phenomenon in the SLA process, including the writing process. Both students and teachers should have a scientific attitude towards transfer. In this study, we find that L1 cannot be rejected totally in SLA classroom. It has both positive transfer and negative transfer. For the positive transfer, it should be considered an important and indispensable element. And for the negative transfer, teachers and students should hold a positive attitude towards it.

3.2.2 Utilizing the Positive Transfer of Mother Tongue

First, mother tongue is useful in the effective thinking plan. Their mother tongue can help them in brainstorming or idea generation in writing, so that they can get a good and creative idea about their writings. Second, Chinese and English have some similarities in sentence patterns, that is, SV, SVO, SVP and so on. It can help students to learn these structures in English and improve their writings. Third, translation is an effective way in utilizing positive transfer. Teachers can let learners do some translation to improve their writing competence.

3.2.3 Reducing the Negative Transfer

Negative transfer can has much bad influence on the learners' writing competence, so it is necessary to reduce the effects of negative transfer. First, students must build a solid linguistic foundation. A solid foundation is the basis of English learning. Second, teachers should combine

writing and reading in the teaching process. Third, teachers should strengthen their English culture teaching. Teaching English in the culture of English can reduce students' Chinese thinking mode and the interference of mother tongue. It is an effective way to improve learners' writing competence. Fourth, errors should be correct properly, either by pair work or teacher correction.

CONCLUSION

Language transfer is inevitable in SLA process. The purpose of this study is to provide implications for teaching and learning of English writing in Chinese. Through the analysis of transfer, including positive transfer and errors caused by negative transfer, this study hope to make students and teachers have a better understanding of the effects of mother tongue transfer in English writing. As a consequence, they can better utilize the positive transfer can reduce the negative transfer in order to improve the English writing competence of Chinese English learners.

REFERENCES

- Brooks, A. (1993). *Translation as a writing strategy for intermediate-level French composition*. Department of French and Italian, Vanderbilt University.
- Cook, V. (2000). *Linguistics and second language acquisition*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Corder, S. P. (1981). *Error analysis and interlanguage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Krashen, S., & Terrell, T. (1983). *The natural approach*. Oxford: Pergamon/Alemany Press.
- Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics across culture: Applied linguistics for language teachers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Odlin, T. (1989). *Language transfer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Selinker, L. (1992). *Redicovering interlanguage*. London: Longman.