

Negative Transfer of Mother Language in English Compositions by Jiujiang University Students

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Abstract. Apart from the basic target language knowledge, the mode of thinking of mother tongue is the main factor to interfere students' improvements in English writing, which has been a hot topic in linguistics and second language acquisition for a long time. Based on Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and Interlanguage Theory, the author becomes interested in negative transfer in English writing by consulting the related domestic and foreign theories and experiment research. The data used in this paper come from sixty three-year college students in their second year from Jiujiang University, majoring in English Education. The data were collected by writing tests. Based on analysis of the data, the following findings are obtained.

Keywords. English writing; negative transfer of mother tongue; composition errors

0 Introduction

Writing is a thinking activity, an expression way, which is also one of the standards to measure teaching effects. Of the five basic skills, writing is commonly considered of the most difficult, the hardest to be improved in language. Language transfer has been an important issue in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching research. But in the past decades, many researchers focused on the status and role of language transfer in second language acquisition. Today language transfer refers to the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired.

Based on Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and Interlanguage Theory, the author becomes interested in negative transfer of attributive clause in English writing by consulting the related domestic and foreign theories and experiment research. The paper will address the following questions:

(1) How many attributive clause errors for negative transfer commonly occurred in Chinese students' English compositions?

(2) How do those interferences influence the Chinese students in English writing?

The data used in this paper come from sixty three-year college students in their second year from Jiujiang University, majoring in English Education. The data were collected by writing tests.

According to linguistics theory, comparing the sentence level differences between the English-Chinese languages, the author will discuss the negative transfer of

mother tongue in English writing. The author will also put forward the corresponding teaching strategy, which can help students to avoid the composition mistakes caused by the negative transfer in the future.

This paper has certain enlightening significance on attributive clause teaching and research. It will guide students learn English attributive clause correctly and encourage students use them boldly. It will help teachers know the differences of attributive clause between English and Chinese. It will also help teachers understand the factors why students made mistakes, such as: the low output, even avoidance of using attributive clause. Thus, it can help learners master the attributive clause more comprehensive.

1 Literature review

1.1 Language transfer

1.1.1 Definition of language transfer

The current popular definition of the term is from Odlin (1989): "Transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired". He stressed that language transfer was a kind of "cross-language implication". Learners would judge some parts of target language consciously or unconsciously, which did not conform to the actual situation.

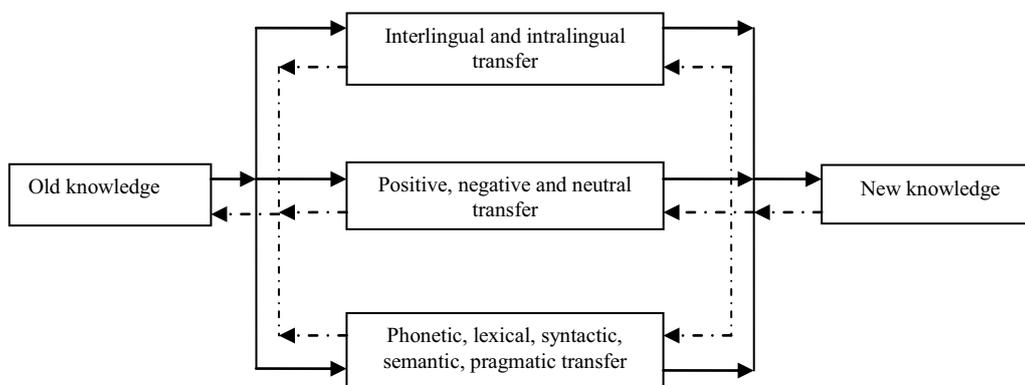
There are mainly three forms of language transfer: positive and negative transfer; borrowing transfer (where the second language influences the first language) and

substratum transfer (where the first language influences the second language); communication transfer and learning transfer.

Thus, to classify clearly language transfer, the author depicted a complete framework by using a direction and three dimensions in psychology. According to the direction of language transfer, it was divided into forward transfer by following the full line arrow direction in the

Table 1 and backward transfer by following the dotted line arrow direction in the Table 1. Among them, from the view of the source, language transfer could be divided into intralingual transfer and interlingual transfer. From the results, it might be divided into positive, negative, and neutral transfer. From the levels, it might be divided into phonetic, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic transfer.

Table 1. The classification of language transfer.



Note: Excerpted from *Some Reconsiderations of Language Transfer Study in Second Language Acquisition* by Huang Huaifei (2010)

1.1.2 Relevant theories of negative transfer

The relevant theories of negative transfer could be divided into three categories: Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA), and Interlanguage by Xiong Jinfang in 2007. Actually language fossilization theory was covered in Interlanguage theory, which could be regarded as a branch of Interlanguage theory. There is a certain relationship between labeled language phenomena and native language transfer. The transfer phenomena from native to target language would not occur if mother tongue, not target language was labeled. But if target language, not mother tongue was labeled, negative transfer phenomena would occur. If target and native language were both labeled, but different, negative transfer phenomena would also occur.

2 Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to analyze mother tongue interference in English writings. The author, as a Chinese teacher teaching English in a university, becomes interested in language transfer while evaluating students' English compositions.

The study will address the following questions:

- (1) How many errors for negative transfer commonly occurred in Chinese students' English compositions?
- (2) How do those interferences influence the Chinese students in English writing?

In order to get first-hand data and information to find out the answer to the questions listed above, the author made a survey in Jiujiang University. The author hoped this paper will be of some help to both language teachers and learners.

2.1 Subjects

All the subjects taken in this experiment are the second-year English major college students from Jiujiang University. Their ages vary from nineteen to twenty-one. They have similar English learning background. Most of them have been studying English for eight or more years. There are total two classes (60 students), including 8 males and 52 females. The author collects their English scores of college entrance examination. The highest score is 119 points. The lowest score is 35 points. The average score is 92.4 points. There are 32 students who passed English examination.

2.2 Instruments

The study requires all the students to write a composition of no less than 150 words about "Getting to Know the World outside the Campus" The composition should be finished in 30 minutes in class. The students cannot use dictionaries (for the composition of CET4 test standards).

There are so much data in the investigations of linguistic phenomena. So, it is impossible to calculate them all by hands. In nowadays, many researchers do the statistical analysis on computer. There are many software packages to be widely used, such as Minitab, SAS, and SPSS and so on. The author will analyze the data by using the SPSS computer software in this study.

2.3 Research procedure

Firstly, data will be sorted out jointly by the author's counting, with the computer software, and attributive clauses will be recognized and classified. Secondly, the author will identify the wrong attributive clauses, and

collect the frequencies of those mistakes. Thirdly, the author will analyze the possible reasons of those negative transfers.

3 Results and discussions

In this chapter, besides the results of interview, the results of the writing tests are presented.

3.1 A general description of the test results

In the writing test, the students were asked to write a composition. The author examined all the compositions carefully. There 1231 sentences totally in 60 compositions. The average number of the sentences is 20.52 in every passage.

Then the author selected all the complex sentences from these 1231 sentences. There are 326 complex sentences used by the students, which taking up 26.5% of all the sentences in the compositions. The author found an interesting phenomenon in the test. The students who

studied English well were accustomed to using more complex sentences to write down what they would like to express. And they used them more freely and fluently than other students. Generally, there were six kinds of complex structures in their compositions. They are adverbial clauses, attributive clauses, object clauses, subject clauses, predicative clauses and appositive clauses. Attributive clauses were used in 138 sentences, which were 42.4% in the total complex sentences and were 11.3 % in the whole compositions. In attributive clauses, restrictive attributive clauses were used more frequently than the nonrestrictive attributive clauses. And relative pronouns and the relative adverbs were used differently by the students. Relative words such as “which, who, that” were used more commonly than “but, whose, who, whom, where, when, etc”. “Which” was the most commonly word used by the students.

The findings of the writing test are summarized in the following Tables. Table 2 is the statistics concerning the frequency and percentage of complex sentence structures in the compositions.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of complex sentence structures in the test.

Patterns	Frequency	% in six complex sentence structures	% in total sentences
Attributive	138	42.4	11.3
Complex	326	100	26.5
Total	1231		100

Table3. Numbers and percentage of Attributive Clauses in the test.

Restrictive Attributive Clauses		Nonrestrictive Attributive Clauses		Attributive Clauses
Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number
100	72.5%	38	27.5%	138

Table 4. Numbers and percentage of Relative words in Clauses in the test.

Relative Pronouns	Number	Percentage
which	70	50%
that	23	16.7%
who	9	6.5%
where	20	14.5%
whose	3	2.2%
whom	0	0
ellipsis	13	9.4%
total	138	100%

3.2 Error analysis and discussion of the writing test

The investigation of the writing tests revealed that the students varied significantly in their use of attributive clauses. The proficient students used attributive clauses

significantly more freely and fluently than the less proficient students. And 25 students in the writing test showed a strong preference to use a certain type of attributive clauses (SU). And 36 students avoided consciously or unconsciously using some certain types of attributive clauses (OCOMP, GEN).

Table 5. Numbers and percentage of Interference and Non-interference Errors.

Interference Errors		Non-interference Errors		Total Errors	
Number	Percentage of total errors	Number	Percentage of total errors	Number	Percentage of total attributive clauses
29	82.9%	6	17.1%	35	25%

4 Conclusion and implications

By analyzing and studying the data collected from the 60 compositions, the author found 29 errors, which were

82.9% in the total errors, were connected closely with negative transfer of mother tongue. The author would like to make a conclusion about the two proposed questions.

(1) How many errors for negative transfer commonly occurred in Chinese students' English compositions?

By analyzing the data, the author found that there were five categories errors caused by negative transfer. They were underused attributive clauses including avoidance strategy, redundant pronoun or antecedent, omission preposition, underused, misplaced or redundant relative words.

(2) How do those interferences influence the Chinese students in English writing?

Based on analysis of the previous chapter, transfer errors occurred in students' writing for students consciously or unconsciously turn to their mother tongue. Many students had a tendency to translate every English word with the Chinese meaning on all occasions. When they wrote, they would constantly form their hypothesis of equivalents in their thoughts between English and Chinese.

There are several limitations in this study. First, it was constrained to only one Chinese university and only 60 subjects of college students were investigated. It only represented a one-side picture of second language learners in China. Second, the data and analysis of this study were solely written English output. So, the results of the study might not apply to oral output. Third, the writing

test was held in formal classroom situations. The interviewees' attitudes and motivation might not be sufficient, careful, and serious. As a result, it might not show the true competence of interviewees in the target language.

Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for the rest of his life. It would be better to teach students the way of fishing than to give students fish. This is an old Chinese saying emphasizing learning method guidance in teaching.

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