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AN ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCES OF MOTHER TONGUE'S NEGATIVE TRANSFER ON
LEARNERS' ENGLISH WRITING

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ABSTRACT

For many non-English majors, writing is quite difficult although they may have learnt English for many years. Many factors influence learners' writing competence. The major obstacles in writing for Chinese learners are poor grammatical knowledge, the lack of accumulation of vocabulary, insufficient reading, mother tongue's transfer and so on. Among these factors, language transfer is a common phenomenon that cannot be neglected in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Mother Tongue's transfer on SLA can be positive or negative. This paper will focus on the influences of mother tongue's negative transfer on English writing for Chinese non-English majors from three perspectives: vocabulary, syntax and discourse. It also proposes the corresponding teaching strategies for teachers and aims to help learners decrease the influences of the mother tongue's negative transfer in their writing.

Key words: English writing; writing competence; negative transfer; language proficiency

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the basic language skills which plays a crucial part in English learning. Writing skill is a comprehensive skill that can reflect a learner's overall language proficiency. To write out beautiful essays, one has to read more and has to have an all-round command of English. Though most college students have learnt English for many years, some of them can neither fully understand the essays written in English, nor can they write a proper paper. Many factors influence their writing abilities. The major obstacles in writing for Chinese learners are poor grammatical knowledge, the lack of accumulation of vocabulary, insufficient reading, mother tongue's transfer and so on. Among which, language transfer is an unavoidable phenomenon in SLA. Mother Tongue's transfer on SLA can be positive or negative. This paper will analyze the influences of mother tongue's negative transfer on non-English majors' English writing from three aspects, vocabulary, syntax and discourse. And it will propose several suggestions on how to reduce these influences to improve learners' writing proficiency.

1. The definitions and types of language transfer

The word “transfer” is also called “transfer of learning” from the perspective of psychology, which refers to the influences of one language on another language. American applied linguist Odlin (1989:27) thinks transfer is “the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and the language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired”. Grass (1996) defines transfer as “the use of the native language (or other language) information in the acquisition of a second language (or additional language)”. Krashen (1983) deems that transfer is generated when learners seek help from the native language while communicating with others because of the lack of knowledge of the target language to express their ideas clearly. Corder (1967) regards that language transfer is a communicative strategy. That is, language transfer is the phenomenon that learners convey their thoughts by using the pronunciation, the meaning of a word, the sentence structure or the idioms of the native language in the process of SLA.

There are two types of language transfer: positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer will occur when the knowledge of the native language has positive and simulative influences on the second language learning. Negative transfer means that the knowledge of the native language hinders or restrains the acquisition of the second language, so negative transfer is actually the interference for SLA. In other words, positive transfer occurs when the rules and characteristics of the target language and the native language are similar. On the contrary, negative transfer occurs when the rules and characteristics of the target language and the native language are quite different. Negative transfer will bring about more difficulties to learners’ learning and they are easy to make more errors when negative transfer occurs.

2. The influences of mother tongue’s negative transfer on learners’ English writing

In the process of English writing, non-English majors are often influenced by the thinking styles and writing patterns of their native language. Hence, there are many Chinglish sentences in their compositions. The following parts will analyze the influences of mother tongue’s negative transfer on non-English majors’ English writing from three aspects, that is, vocabulary, syntax and discourse.

2.1 The influences of mother tongue’s negative transfer on vocabulary

In English, some words can be very confusable although they have complete different definitions or parts of speech such as adapt and adopt, affect and effect, principle and principal or personal and personnel. And there are many words which have different meanings when used in different context. Learners will make mistakes very easily if they only memorize their literal meanings. Take the word “look” for instance. In Chinese, it is defined as “看”, which sometimes can be misused by learners for “read” or “see” because these two words can also be translated into “看” in Chinese. Hence, learners will write down sentences like this occasionally: “He often looks newspaper” or “He looked the doctor yesterday.” In fact, no matter which one (look, read, or see) is used in these sentences, the Chinese equivalents for them have no difference at all. Take another word “heavy” for example. For the expressions of “a heavy rain”, “a heavy meal” and “a heavy heart”, the Chinese equivalents are respectively “大雨”, “难以消化的食物” and “沉重的心情”. The word “heavy” is translated differently according to the different objects it modifies. Among these expressions, “大雨” is the most difficult one for Chinese learners since they are not sure which one, “heavy rain” or “big rain”, is more correct in English, especially the latter one seems to be more appropriate for Chinese translation. So is the case for Chinese.

At times, one Chinese word has to be translated into different English words. For example, the word “青” can be translated into either “green” or “blue”. The English equivalent for “青梅” is greengage, “青山” is “green hill” while “青天” is “blue sky”. The translation for this sentence “这个小孩脸色发青” is “This boy was blue in his face.” This sentence “His hands were blue with cold” is translated as “他的手都被冻青了”. Literal translation is inappropriate in many cases as both the Chinese and English words can have very different meanings in different contexts.

Also, for the Chinese word “移民”, its English equivalents (immigrate and emigrate) have totally different definitions. Since in English, “immigrate” is defined as “migrate to a new environment” while

“emigrate” means “leave one’s country of residence for a new one”. Similarly, no matter which one is used, “borrow” or “lend”, it is translated into “借”, however, the usage of these two words can be very different in English.

Besides, in English, just as in Chinese, there are many fixed collocations. For some collocations, learners are likely to catch the meanings of the words literally from the context and make mistakes while translating. For example, “eleventh hour” means the latest possible moment, but not eleven o’clock. “Pull one’s leg” equals to the phrase “make fun of”, “pull one’s socks up” means “pull oneself together” and the list goes on. Learners need to pay special attention to these collocations.

2.2 The influences of mother tongue’s negative transfer on syntax

In Chinese, such expressions as “虽然.....但是.....”, “因为.....所以.....”and “.....的原因.....是因为.....” are all acceptable since they can express the complete meanings. While in English, it is quite inappropriate to say “Although...but...”, “Because...so...” or “The reason why... because...” But still, in many compositions, it is not rare to see these sentences: “Although he is 35, but he is not mature” or “The reason why he was late was because he didn’t catch the school bus.” For many students, even the ones who have learnt English for many years, the Chinese sentence structure is easy to be adopted into English writing.

The expressions and meanings of Chinese sentences depend largely on the internal logic or the internal connections of the words, however, the correct expressions for English sentences obey to strict grammatical rules. The clear classifications of words, well-organized sentence structures and concise sentences are crucial to English writing. Learners are likely to get confused in their writing process owing to the different expressions, logic systems and sentence structures between Chinese and English. Take the sentence “在她两岁时,她爸爸当上了工程师” for instance. According to the Chinese sentence structure, it can be easily translated into “At the age of two, her father became an engineer” whereas the correct translation should be “When she was two, her father became an engineer.”

Another difficult grammar point for Chinese learners is the change of English tenses. Sometimes, such sentence as “Heexercise in the gym from time to time” may appear in the student’s composition. In Chinese, there is no concept about the change of the verb tense, therefore words that represent time (last year, tomorrow, already) are used to indicate when the event happens. However, in English, there are past perfect tense, past tense, present tense, future tense and so on. These tenses are all presented through the changes in verbs. For example, “昨天阳光灿烂”, in English the sentence is “It was sunny yesterday.”

In addition, the position for negative words in English is different from Chinese. The Chinese words such as “从不” and “几乎没有” are generally put in front of the verbs they modify. But English negative words are often put in the main clause. Hence, the translation for the sentence “我想他应该还没有完成工作” is “I don’t think he has finished his work.”

2.3 The influences of mother tongue’s negative transfer on discourse

In Chinese, it is very common that there is no conjunctions between two or more sentences such as “有的学生在操场上,有的学生在教室里,还有的学生在图书馆”. If the sentence is translated into English like this “Some students are on the playground, some are in the classroom, others are in the library”, then it is inappropriate for the lack of the conjunctions (and or while).

In terms of writing, English writing often requires the authors to come straight to the main points and state their viewpoints directly at the beginning of their writing. While for Chinese writing, authors always like to illustrate some standpoints that have something to do with the theme, and gives their opinions after that. Learners need to pay attention to these differences to improve their writing proficiency.

3. Some suggestions on how to decrease the influences of mother tongue’s negative transfer in English writing

For Chinese English learners, no matter they are willing to or not, they have to face the influences of mother tongue’s negative transfer. As teachers, they need to take some effective measures to decrease the influences of negative transfer on learners’ English writing.

3.1 Cultivation of learners' abilities to think in English

To decrease the influences of mother tongue's negative transfer and improve the learners' writing competence, the cultivation of thinking-in-English is very important. The reinforcement of the training for listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation is crucial to cultivate learners' abilities to think in English. For teachers and students, they need to work together to find out as many ways as possible to increase students' language input, for example, listening to English songs, watching English films, reading English novels both in and out of class. More input will help learners accumulate rich vocabulary and improve their language competence. For more output, teachers can hold various group activities (English evenings, debates) or encourage students to take part in English corners to enhance learners' more communications with their classmates and contemporaries. More writing in English is also important for language output. Remind students to be careful with the English phrases and fixed collocations. Interpretation and translation can also help a lot for the cultivation of learners' abilities to think in English.

3.2 The employment of comparative analysis in English teaching

Language is the carrier of its culture. Learning a foreign language is equal to learning its culture. Chinese and English are different in many aspects (politeness principle, the usage, values and communicative principles) as they have different histories, customs and traditions. So teachers need to cultivate learners' awareness towards these differences. In students' compositions, there are many mistakes due to Chinese negative transfer and teachers can collect these mistakes, ask students to analyze and correct them. Also, teachers can require students to compare the original composition with the revised one to analyze their strengths and weaknesses to be improved. Besides, more practice in translation from Chinese to English, or conversely, from English to Chinese is quite important for learners. What's more, teachers can choose some good model essays for students to analyze, to memorize and to learn from to improve their writing competence.

3.3 Development of learners' cross-cultural communicative competence

To develop learners' cross-cultural communicative competence, teachers need to help students realize the cultural differences in different countries. Reading extensively is one of the most effective ways to develop learners' cross-cultural communicative competence. Chinese ancient people once said: "After reading up three hundred Tang poems, you can at least intone poems even if you can't compose them." This saying not only shows the importance of extensive reading, but also indicates that readers can benefit a lot from extensive reading. Hence, universities can offer optional courses about the culture of English-speaking countries, and teachers can choose some good books on western culture for students to read after class to help them learn more about the western culture systematically. Teachers can also require students to recite some well written parts in those books. Reading extensively and recitation together can enhance learners' language sense and help them learn the sentence patterns and decrease their pragmatic failures in English writing.

4. Conclusion

The phenomenon of language transfer cannot be avoided. Language transfer occurs wherever and whenever language learning happens. A learner's learning for a new language will definitely be influenced by his acquired knowledge, thinking styles and learning approaches of his native language. For non-English majors, some will even indiscriminately imitate the Chinese ways of writing when writing in English. Their ingrained Chinese thinking models and writing styles are responsible for the Chinglish sentences in their compositions. To decrease the pragmatic failures brought by negative transfer and help learners improve their writing proficiency, teachers need to take some corresponding teaching strategies, spare no effort to perfect their teaching methodologies, develop learners' reading competence, cultivate their ability of thinking in English and foster their awareness of cultural differences.

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