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LANGUAGE TRANSFER AND EFL TEACHING IN CHINESE CONTEXT

JILIANG CHEN

China West Normal University, School of Foreign Languages, No.1. ShiDa Ave. Nanchong, Sichuan,  
People's Republic of China

Correspondence email: 771218895[at]qq.com



JILIANG CHEN

ABSTRACT

language transfer, as a psycholinguistic procedure, can make second language learners activate their prior knowledge in developing or using their interlanguage. Positive language transfer facilitates the learners' learning while negative transfer often results in difficulties and errors for learners. Based on the theory of language transfer, this paper is intended to analyze the language factors that affect the positive and negative transfer for Chinese EFL learners' English language learning and propose some important countermeasures to promote positive transfer and prevent the occurrence of negative transfer in the English teaching in Chinese context.

**Key words:** Language transfer, positive transfer, negative transfer, countermeasures

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1. Clarification of concepts

Transfer" is originally a basic concept in psychology. In psychology, it refers to the phenomenon of previous knowledge being extended to the area of new knowledge. Language transfer has long been a central issue in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and language teaching. Odlin (2001:27) offers a definition of language transfer:

Language 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.

The notion of "language transfer", at its birth, was closely related to the behaviorist theories. It is assumed that learners tend to transfer the characteristics of their native languages and cultures into the foreign languages and cultures that they are learning. Accordingly, it can be reasonably argued that when we make errors in second language learning, most of the errors are the results of the interference of our mother tongue because of differences between the two.

Odlin (2001:26) argues that transfer is not simply interference. Much of the influence of native language (or of some other previously learnt language) can be very helpful, especially when the differences between the two languages are relatively few. Similarities between the native language and foreign language, on the other hand, are believed to facilitate the learning of the foreign language. Facilitation as such is called positive transfer. It may help or facilitate language learning in another later situation, and may occur when both the native language and the target language have the same form.

In the field of second language acquisition research, language transfer has long been of great interest to teachers, educators, and linguists. When transfer happens, the degree of difficulty is believed to depend primarily in the text to which the target language pattern is similar to or different from a native language pattern. Where the two are identical, learning usually takes place easily through positive transfer of the native language pattern, but where they are different, learning difficulty may easily arise and errors resulting from negative transfer are likely to occur. Such errors or bad habits are considered harmful for successful language learning because they prevent the correct formation of the target language habits. In fact, in the process of learning a foreign language, learners will try to overcome the negative influence of the native language and make good use of the native language, so as to improve their target language abilities to reach a native—like degree. In the real teaching practice in China, people are more concerned with errors that are caused by negative transfer while ignoring the effect of positive transfer upon the target language learning. Chinese learners cannot avoid being influenced by the language habits of their native language when they are studying English as a foreign language. Their former experience about Chinese will inevitably come into their present English language learning. So a new language formed in the process of English learning mainly comes from the mutual transfer and interaction between Chinese and English. This new language can be called interlanguage that is different from both Chinese and English. Learners' interlanguage is in the process of continuous development through the learners' successful or unsuccessful English learning. Both positive and negative transfer could take place during that process.

The effects of positive transfer are only determinable through comparisons of the success of groups with different native languages (see Odlin 2001:28, for example). Such comparisons often show that cross-linguistic similarities can produce positive transfer in several ways. Similarities between native language and target language vocabulary can reduce the time needed to develop good reading comprehension. Similarities in syntactic structures can facilitate the acquisition of grammar. Learners may sometimes pass through an early stage of development where they manifest correct use of a target-language feature if this feature corresponds to an L1 feature and then, subsequently replace it with a developmental L2 feature before finally returning to the correct target-language feature (Ellis, 2000:303). In such a case, the effect of positive transfer is evident.

## **2. Language factors causing constraints on language transfer**

Many language factors can contribute to promoting or inhibiting transfer at language level.

### **2.1 Phonological constraint**

There is a widespread recognition that transfer is more likely to happen at the level of sound system. As Purcell and Suter (1980) have shown, the L1 of learner serves as the best predictor of native speakers' evaluations of their speech.

Learners are capable of modifying their production of sounds so that their pronunciation comes closer to the target language. The modifications often do not result in the attainment of target language norms, but rather in approximations that are neither fully native-like nor target-like (Flege, 1980). The differences about the phonemic system often result in Chinese learners' negative phonological transfer. For instance, Chinese EFL learners often mispronounce *thin* as *sin*, *blow* as *below*. These negative transfers of pronunciation result from the lack of English phoneme /θ/ and the combination of consonants /bl/ in Chinese. What's more, Chinese EFL learners are very likely to add a vowel after the consonant of a closed English syllable. So *work* is mispronounced *worker*, and *bet* *better*.

The negative phonological transfer is everlasting. It becomes difficult for a Chinese learner to achieve the native-like pronunciation and intonation.

## 2.2 Lexical constraint.

It is true that not every Chinese character can have a corresponding English translation because of the different cultural backgrounds. Even though some Chinese characters have corresponding English translations, they are different in terms of connotation of meaning and conditions of usage or collocation.

The first case is that the Chinese character and its corresponding English translation have different coverage of concept meaning, which will result in negative transfer when learners use English. For example, the learner may use "lover" to refer to his wife (ai ren in Chinese). So learners will encounter a negative transfer when referring to it. Another case is that though a Chinese word has a similar concept meaning with its corresponding English translation, they may have different connotations. That often poses negative transfer in practice. The English word *propaganda* and the Chinese character "xuan chuan", for example, are different in connotation. Propaganda is pejorative in meaning in the west while "xuan chuan" is neutral in Chinese. One more case is about the word collocation. Different languages have different ways of word collocation. That difference is likely to pose negative transfer in lexical expression. For example, Chinese students are used to using "to learn knowledge" to refer to the Chinese character "xue xi zhi shi" while it should be "to acquire knowledge".

## 2.3 Syntactical constraint

In dealing with English word order, relative clauses, and negation, transfer acts as an important factor. Learners are very likely to use English in the Chinese way (sometimes this is called Chinglish). He may say "I very like the book" or "That very easy". They are also used to using the conjunctions *because and so, although and but* together. "Because the time is limited, so we cannot finish the work right now." "Although he worked hard the last term, but he failed in the final term exam." Those sentences would seem strange to the native-English speakers. They are the production of the negative influence of Chinese language.

## 2.4 Discourse constraint

Transfer involving discourse often occurs in English language learning. The differences between English and Chinese can cause misunderstandings and may also lead to English language speech and writing that differ greatly from the discourse norms of English. Chinese students are different from English native speakers with regard to the principles of discourse to organize its presentation.

Misunderstandings related to politeness and coherence are also dangerous for cross-cultural communication. One of the basic challenges in the study of politeness is to understand the differences of interpretation that certain kinds of behaviors are required in different cultures. An apology in one culture may be seen as an expression of thanks in another, and what constitutes a proper request in one culture may seem very rude in another (Odlin, 2001:49). Without noticing the great differences existing at the discourse level between the two languages, Chinese EFL learners are very likely to make errors when using English.

## 3. Countermeasures to prevent negative transfer and promote positive transfer in EFL teaching

It is very useful to apply the language transfer theory for English teaching in Chinese context. In the real teaching practice, countermeasures should be taken to prevent the negative transfer and promote the positive transfer.

### 3.1 To create English language environment for Chinese EFL learners

Language acquisition is referred to as a process of picking up a second language through exposure, while the term "learning" is used to refer to the conscious study of a second language (Ellis, 1999:6). English is a foreign language for Chinese learners and so they do not have the language environments for the acquisition of English. Learning means the formal instruction through a systematic way. In China, the environment for learning English occurs most probably in classroom. In this way, learners don't have the natural language and cultural settings. Learners follow their teachers to practice English carefully in class, and they would often use Chinese after class without being exposed to English.

Language is the tool for communication. If language use is separated from the real environment of it, a great distance between the classroom learning and the real application of the language will arise. Then negative transfer will most probably occur and that can be the reason for learners' failure to apply what they've learnt in class into their real communication.

Therefore, the creation of real language environment for English learning is helpful for learners. English corner and the use of foreign language teachers are very useful and practical for the English language learning and teaching because they can create real language environment for language use. Teachers should create a language atmosphere of English by using English as much as possible and at the same time, encourage learners to use English both in spoken and writing forms. In this way the positive transfer will most probably occur in learning.

### **3.2 To help learners to develop English language abilities fully**

Language is complex system. English reading and writing are important, but listening and speaking are important as well. So an all-round development of English language abilities is very important for Chinese EFL learners. Furthermore, the cross-cultural awareness is important in language learning. Without knowing or just a surface touching upon other language's culture would be greatly harmful for language learning.

English and Chinese are greatly different from each other. By employing contrastive analysis, learners can have a better understanding of the similarities and differences between English and Chinese. They must know the language rules and at the same time, they should know where and how to use language properly.

So the findings of nature of English language can most probably promote positive transfer of Chinese to English language learning. On the contrary, ignorance of the language nature would usually lead to learners' errors.

### **3.3 To help learners to develop a deeper awareness of using learning strategy**

Learning is the 'learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner.' (Cohen, 1990:5). Teachers should emphasize the importance of learning strategies and encourage learners to develop the awareness of using English in daily life so that learners can consciously contrast and analyze the differences between the English language and Chinese language. Learners are required to employ the effect of positive language transfer in their learning. If teachers only pay attention to the learners' recitation and practice of simple sentences or words without teaching them how to use strategies, then the learners' learning would be mechanical and separated from the real application. Learners would find it difficult to apply what they have learnt and would usually make errors in daily life. On the contrary, effective learners can realize the importance of positive language transfer and they are motivated to employ it.

### **3.4 To help learners to develop a sound personality toward English language learning**

One person's personality is an important factor that affects his English language learning. One common phenomenon in English learning is that when Chinese learners use English, their abilities for expression and comprehension would be always weaker than when using their mother tongue-Chinese. So learners are very likely to feel awkward and frustrated, and these feelings would usually happen to many English learners. For those who are initiative and self-confident, they will regard these feelings as incentive to drive them to face the reality and then take active measures to conquer these feelings. Effective learning strategies will be taken to improve their English learning. On the contrary, for those who don't have enough self-confidence, these feelings can surely hinder their English learning and make them feel tired of English and finally refuse to use English. Personality can affect the whole learning process and can surely affect language transfer. In English teaching practice, teachers should help learners to build up confidence in learning English so that positive transfer would occur to promote their English learning.

## **4. Conclusion**

Learning English as a foreign language in China is difficult for learners because English and Chinese are completely different. The similarities and differences between the two languages will bring language transfer for English learners when they apply their knowledge about Chinese into English. Some applications are positive transfer to facilitate English language learning while some other applications are negative transfer to do harm for their learning. Teachers should take the factors that affect learners' English language learning into consideration and encourage learners to develop effective learning strategies and a sound personality. The active use of English by learners should be praised and the errors made by learners during application be corrected. As to the problem of positive and negative transfer in learning, teachers should guide learners to

develop an awareness of language learning and use, so that learners can become active and effective for English language learning in the Chinese context.

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