The Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue in Non-English Majors' Compositions from the Perspective of Syntax

Xiaoping Yu

College of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology

Qingdao 266061, Shandong, China

E-mail: cyg819@yahoo.com.cn

Abstract

This paper is an effort to explore the transfer problem at lexical level in the compositions of non-English majors. The negative transfer of Chinese sentence patterns in Chinese non-major students' English compositions reflects negative transfer of Chinese thought patterns. Three kinds of different sentence patterns are discussed respectively. A statistics is conducted here to calculate the frequency of three kinds of erroneous sentences typical of Chinese sentence patterns in non-major students' English compositions.

Keywords: Negative transfer, English, Chinese, Contrastive analysis, Sentence pattern

1. Introduction

Language transfer has been a controversial topic in the second language acquisition, within the last few decades; its importance in foreign language learning has been reassessed several times. Odlin (1989), Lado (1985), Corder,S.P (1967), The negative transfer of Chinese sentence patterns in Chinese non-major students' English compositions reflects negative transfer of Chinese thought patterns. Contrastive analysis of different thought patterns in these two languages should be applied in English teaching to help the students raise awareness of English thought patterns to improve their writing proficiency.

2. Research

2.1 Aim

The aims of this research are to discover how negative transfer at syntactic level has an effect on students' writing and search for the causes of the negative transfer of syntactic knowledge.

2.2 Subjects

The students in three levels have learned English for at least 6 years in classroom before passing a highly competitive college entrance examination. Their general level of English ability varied from low intermediate to low advanced, with the majority falling in an intermediate area. The students are divided into three groups. The primary group is the freshmen of 62 persons, the secondary group is the sophomore of 60 persons, and the third group is the junior of 37 persons. The reason to choose 3 different levels is to test whether improvement in English writing proficiency reduce negative transfer.

2.3 Procedure

2.3.1 Data collection

There are 62 writings in freshman group, 60 in sophomore group and 37 writings in junior group. Those sentences recognized as ungrammatical and erroneous in students' English writings are ignored. Three kinds of different sentence patterns are calculated and discussed respectively. The first is Chinese topic-comment sentence and English subject-predicate sentence. The second is a Chinese sentence with two or more verbs and an English sentence with a great number of abstract nouns and prepositions. The third is Chinese paratactic sentence and English hypotactic sentence. Those similar to Chinese sentence patterns discussed above are selected and analyzed in different categories.

2.3.2 Statistic Analysis

The frequency is calculated. Of all 1878 English sentences, there are 914 sentences of typical Chinese sentence patterns.

Among them, 233 sentences are typical of Chinese topic-comment sentence pattern, 205 sentences of Chinese multi-predicate sentence pattern and 476 paratactic sentences. The respective frequency is 25.4%, 22.4% and 52.1%. When it comes to different group, in all 744 sentences written by the freshman students, there are 358 sentences of Chinese sentence patterns, the frequency of which is up to 48.1%. While in sophomore group, there are 276 out of 720 sentences, the frequency of which is to 38.3%.And in junior group, there are 280 out of 444 sentences, the frequency is 63%. The frequencies of the respective transfer sentence patterns are listed in the following table.

Insert Table 1 Here

2.3.3 Interview

After the analysis of the data, I have an interview with some of the students in these classes on how much Chinese they thought they were using in their minds while they were writing in English. Among the interviewed students, over 89% reported that they first thought in Chinese and then translated the ideas into English. Only less than 11% students managed to write in English way. They said they tried to think directly in English as they were advised by their English teacher that it is better to write in English to improve their writing proficiency. However, whenever they found it difficult to write in English or they couldn't search for the suitable expression, they would resort to word-for-word Chinese translation.

It is clear that most students seek for the help of their mother tongue in organization of the sentences and paragraph. They initially thought in Chinese and then mentally translated them into English before they write down. That's why there are so many Chinese sentence patterns occurring in their compositions. Even if they want to think in English, whenever there is difficulty, their intuition leads them to resort to their native language. Incorrect sentences were transferred from Students' speech confirmed that those Chinese.

3. Result Analysis

3.1 Language Transfer

There are various manifestations of the errors in three kinds of transfer sentences including (1)passive voice without "be", (2)redundancy of the topic, (3) subjectless sentences, (4)omission of linking verbs and auxiliary verbs, (5)inconsistency of the actor and action, (6)there-be structure as the topic, (7)two or more predicate verbs, (8)comma splices, (9)fragment sentences. Among them, (1)-(6) belong to topic-comment sentence, (7) is mufti-predicate sentence and (8)-(9) belong to paratactic sentence.

3.1.1 Analysis of topic-comment sentence

Students ignored the grammatical relationship of the subject and the predicate under the rule of accordance in number, person, voice and tense. The errors include (1) passive voice without "be", (2)redundancy of the topic, (3)subjectless sentences, (4)omission of linking verbs and auxiliary verbs, (5)inconsistency of the actor and action, (6)there-be structure as the topic. According the calculation of frequency, subjectless sentences top the list (10.3%). The sentence in which the actor and action is inconsistent lists the second (5.5%), and the next is sentence of there-be structure as the topic (5.2%).

3.1.2 Analysis of mufti-predicate sentence

The following sentences show that students tend to use two or more predicate verbs in their compositions. They are incorrect mufti-predicate sentences.

1. There are some people think that money makes the world go around.

2. Cell phones can be used play games.

3. Final exam is coming, but there are still some problems can't takle.

4. It is not wise that let students rely on copying answers rather than think of questions by themselves.

5. he have to eat, have to drink, have to be dressed.

Each of these sentences consists of two or more predicate verbs. However, in an English sentence there exists only one predicate verb. As in Chinese it is popular to use two or more verbs as predicates, these sentences are transferred from Chinese. In the second sentence " Cell phones can be used play games ", the series of verbs such as "use", "play" can not all be used as predicates, so the forms of other verb or use cohesive tie to connect these verbs. Then the correct sentence is "Cellphones can be used to play games" Similarly, a more idiomatic English sentence to the fifth sentence should be "Dressing, eating and drinking as well are equally important to him". In this sentence, "he have to eat, have to drink, have to be dressed.", "have to eat, have to drink, have to be dressed." are all verbs and used as predicate verbs in Chinese sentence. So on the basis of Chinese structure, the student translated it into English "he have to eat, have to drink, have to be dressed". Obviously, the students transfer Chinese mufti-verb sentence into English For verbs are predicates in English, these sentences are wrong mufti-predicate sentences. The cause of negative transfer of

mufti-predicate sentence lies in the influence of Chinese mufti-verb sentence.

3.1.3 Analysis of paratactic sentence

The erroneous sentences include comma splices and fragment sentences, in which comma splices occupy a majority. The frequency of comma splices amounts highly to 42.3 percent. The first five sentences are comma splices. Each of them consists of two or more sentences running together with a comma between them. The sixth sentence is a fragment, an incomplete sentence.

As we know, each English sentence is a cubic architecture with the trunk of subject-predicate structure and the kernel of predicative verb. There is only one subject-predicate structure in a sentence. However, in these sentences there are two or more subject-predicate structures and there are no connectors between these clauses to produce a compound or complex sentence. A connector is needed here to indicate the cause-and-effect relationship of these two clauses. The common quality of these sentences is that they are composed in temporal and natural sequence without cohesive ties to connect them, which is frequently seen in Chinese. It reflects Chinese paratactic sentence pattern. Therefore, from the analysis we can see clearly that those students transfer their Chinese paratactic sentence into English. This negative transfer is caused by the influence of Chinese paratactic sentence.

According to what the author has analyzed, there are many factors that might have influenced the transfer errors. Firstly, also the most important, learners' first language, a language that has already been rooted in learners' mind, has caused so many errors in students' writing. There are a lot of differences between the two languages that make learners feel depressed. According to the results of the study, English is the sentence-centered language, and a sentence is a complete grammar unit, a subject-prominent grammar, and subject-predicate relation plays the leading role in explaining the basic sentence structures; as for the division of Chinese sentence, it is not that clear and can be called topic-prominent language. Relationship of theme-rheme could account for basic sentence structure.

According to the syntactic character of verbs, English sentence structures could be basically classified into seven types: SVC, SVA, SV, SVOA} SVO} SVOO and SVOC.(Quirk et al 1972) The western grammar is rigid and has no elasticity; Chinese grammar is soft and full of elasticity, every English sentence must have a subject, and it is necessary to build the sentence structure in the English sentence even when vocabulary meaning is enough. Chinese grammar aims at understanding meaning, and form is not much important (Li and Hompson 1976, 1981). Thus, it is easy for Chinese students to understand English sentence in the way of .understanding the softness of Chinese, and make out ungrammatical English sentence.

3.2 Negative transfer of Chinese thought patterns on English writing

The way people think is language-specific and is the manifestation of their thought patterns. The way in which human experiences are organized, grouped, and communicated will vary from one speech community to another. Thus the natives have developed particular sensitivity to some particular details, which are usually ignored or neglected by speakers of other linguistic community. The set of grammaticized distinctions in the language guide the people to attend to certain features of events while speaking, and that this grammatical organization affects the ways in which they think when they are speaking. As Dan. I. Slobin (1996) noted, the language that we learn in childhood are not neutral coding systems of an objective reality. Rather, each one is a subjective orientation to the world of human experience, and this orientation affects the ways in which we think while we are speaking. Everyone is brought up in this community and, in acquiring his native language, he picks up particular ways of thinking for speaking, the on-line organization of the flow of information and attention to the particular details that receive linguistic expression(Slobin,1996). Brought up in China, Chinese students are used to Chinese thinking patterns. Negative transfer of syntactic knowledge is in fact that of thought patterns. Then the negative transfer of Chinese thought patterns on students' English writing will carefully be examined.

3.2.1 Negative transfer of Chinese global thought on English writing

Global thought means uniting different parts into a whole in thought or integrating its different nature, respects, relations and so on. The global people begin with the whole picture, which means Chinese people see things as a whole and understand them by association. Chinese topic-prominent sentence reflects Chinese global thought. The sentence "When we play basketball often feel very enjoyable." is from Chinese. "we" as the topic in the clause, can be omitted, as it's been mentioned in the subordinate clause, so that this sentence "often feel very enjoyable" is logic in Chinese, which doesn't confuse the Chinese readers. Because in Chinese grammar, the subject is usually omitted when it's been previously mentioned or obscurely known. So a subjectless sentence is frequently seen in Chinese where the subject is omitted(Wang Li, 1985).

3.2.2 Negative transfer of Chinese imaginational thought on English writing

Chinese imaginational thought can be seen from multi-verb sentence, for verbs give an impression of some concrete image. The fact that Chinese like to use two or more verbs reflects that Chinese prefer concrete imagination. The

Chinese multi-verb sentence focuses on the concrete and vivid description of the acting by utilizing a series of verbs, which certifies that Chinese-speaking people get used to stating abstract concepts by the methods of concrete imagination. Ignorant of abstraction in its pure sense, they pay great attention to the experience directly perceived through the senses based on sensation, perception, and idea. So Chinese demonstration tends to be more concrete and abstract content is conveyed by concrete imagination. Therefore Chinese-speaking people favor imaginational thought. On the other hand, English-speaking people prefer abstract thought, for prepositions and nouns present more abstract impression. A large number of abstract nouns and prepositions in English multi-prepositional noun sentence are the evidence that the English-speaking people are good at expressing concrete things by means of abstract concepts. They think highly of the application of the abstract thought capacity.

3.2.3 Negative transfer of Chinese dialectical thought on English writing

The negative transfer of paratactic sentence pattern results from Chinese dialectical thought. For example, the wrong sentence "My teacher is a kind person, my life is taken care of well by her." is from the Chinese sentence. In Chinese the cohesive tie is frequently omitted which won't be misunderstood by Chinese readers. English hypocratic sentences attach importance to all kinds of formal connectors to achieve the completeness of linguistic forms which is strictly controlled by its logic form. However, influenced greatly by Chinese dialectical thought, students tend to compose many comma splices and fragments. The highest frequency of paratactic sentence in those students' compositions offers the evidence. A conclusion can be drawn that negative transfer of paratactic sentence results from that of Chinese dialectical thought.

3.3 Psychological Explanation of Chinese Language Transfer

Chinese are deeply rooted in their mind and there is a strong relationship between Chinese and the cognitive activities. Before the students learn English, their original cognitive schema exists in terms of Chinese. Since the students have been using Chinese for over 18 years in every aspects of communication in their life, the intimate relationship between Chinese and objective concept makes it difficult for the conjunction of English and objective concept. Thus English establish certain relationship with objective concept via Chinese. What's more, Chinese has closer proximacy with processes such as logic and judgment, analysis and inference in their highest level cognitive processing. Chinese thinking patterns exist in fixed probabilistic pattern in learners' brain and are easily activated. English appears often by means of translation and reorganization of Chinese. So they organize ideas mostly in Chinese way. As a matter of fact they extend their existing Chinese syntactic rules instead of constructing English rules. This is not real English grammar but rather an extended Chinese grammar in a different linguistic symbol. If students do not know how to organize English in English way, how can they build English grammar? The effective method is to construct their own English grammar via L1, not on L 1.The students should construct English grammar in English way. At the start of English learning, students don't know how to organize this new language in its own way on their limited vocabulary and grammar. What they can do is to tend to transfer existed Chinese grammatical rules to perceive and produce English. According to linguistic typologies, Chinese and English have SVO as their basic word order. Both have the identical simple sentence. So this similarity leads to students' dependence on Chinese for a long period.

4. Implication and Conclusion

The findings of this study on EFL learner's strategy and transfer problems may be beneficial to EFL teachers who are concerned with transfer in students' L2 writing and to the students who are aware of the problem. Learners' awareness of the contrasts between their native language and the target language should be promoted. As EFL learners are less exposed to authentic English learning and natural learning environment, they need knowledge of contrastive linguistics to enhance the native-likeness of heir target language. This requires EFL teachers to draw upon CA in their practical teaching to raise students' awareness and knowledge of language differences .

References

Corder, S.P. (1967). The Significance of Learners' Errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, (5): 161-69.

Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics Across Cultures: Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan.

Li, Thompson. (1981). *Modem English in a Typological Point of View. Linguistic the Berichte. Odlin, Terence. Language Transfer---Cross-linguistic Learning*. Oxford: Cambridge University Press.

Quirk e1 al. (1972). *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. London: Longman Group Ltd.

Slobin, D. I. From "Thought and Language" to "Thinking for Speaking".

Table 1. Error frequency of three kinds of transfer sentences

	Topic-prominent Sentence	Multi-predicate Sentence	Paratactic Sentence
Freshman Group	114 (14.5%)	92(11.9%)	152 (21.1%)
Sophomore Group	48(4.8%)	51(4.8%)	177(15.4%)
Junior Group	71(6.1%)	62(5.7%)	147(15.6%)
Total sum	233 (25.4%)	205 (22.4%)	476(52.1%)