A Probe into the Negative Writing Transfer of Chinese College Students

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Abstract

Although Chinese college students have studied English for many years, they still have much difficulty in writing a good paper. There are many factors resulting in their inability to write well, such as students' lack of vocabulary, having a poor knowledge of grammar, language transfer, and so on. But, of these factors, the negative transfer of Chinese is a main factor that cannot be neglected. It influences their writing in diction, building of sentence and discourse structure, and as a result impedes improving their English writing ability. So this thesis will, based on the review of some theories related to the negative transfer of a native language and on a detailed analysis of the negative transfer of Chinese on college students' English writing, such as its negative transfer in lexicon, in sentence structure and in discourse structure, put forward some practical effective strategies for decreasing the negative transfer of Chinese so as to improve college students' English writing, like raising students' awareness of the negative transfer of Chinese, increasing comparative analysis in classroom teaching, and introducing the cultures of the English-speaking countries.

Keywords: English writing, language transfer, negative transfer of Chinese, strategies

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the four skills a learner needs to master when learning a language. It is not only a comprehensive skill to present learners' language knowledge but also a dominating way to communicate with others.

Although Chinese college students have learnt English for many years, it's not easy for most of them to write a good paper. There are many factors resulting in their inability to write well, such as students' lack of vocabulary, having a poor knowledge of grammar and writing strategies, language transfer, and so on. Of these factors, language transfer is a main factor to influence second language learners' writing.

Owing to the similarities and differences between a native language and a second language, language transfer occurs now and then. Language transfer refers to "speakers or writers applying knowledge from their native language to a second language" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_transfer). Doing research on the negative transfer of a native language is important for second language learners, which has been realized by many scholars both at home and abroad. Now, more and more scholars at home are devoting themselves to studying the language transfer and hope to find out methods to cope with the negative transfer of Chinese in Chinese English learners' writing. They have written lots of papers about it and have achieved significant results. However, many scholars focus on various writings of exams, such as CET4, CET6 and so on, whose results are a little bit partial. Because some learners cannot do themselves justice in lots of exams on account of anxiety, overstrain and so on. So this thesis will analyze some phenomena of the negative transfer of Chinese in college students' English writing and put forward some strategies for improving their writing.

2. Literature Review

This part provides some theories related to the transfer of a native language, including language transfer theory,

contrastive analysis theory, error analysis theory, and inter-language theory.

2.1 Language Transfer

Generally, the study of the language transfer is divided into three phases. Firstly, in the 1950s and 1960s, language transfer was a main obstacle of second language acquisition. It played an important role in second language acquisition theory, which was closely related to the dominant behaviorist learning theory, based on which contrastive analysis hypothesis formed and was used to predict errors. Then, from the late 1960s to 1970s, owing to the influence of Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG), many linguists raised an objection to contrastive analysis hypothesis and language transfer. The importance of language transfer was degraded. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, language transfer became a hot topic again in the language teaching community.

Opinions about language transfer vary from person to person. Krashen (1983) holds that, in the process of language learning, learners fall back to the native language and apply rules of the native language into a second language because of lacking of target language knowledge when learners convey their ideas to others. Corder (1967) acclaims that language transfer is a communicative strategy, namely borrowing. He also thinks that language transfer belongs to behaviorist learning theory. Odlin (1989) deems that language transfer is an influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired. Grass (1996) considers that "transfer is the use of the native language (or other language) information in the acquisition of a second language (or additional language)." In short, language transfer means that speakers or writers use knowledge of their native language in the process of second language learning.

There are two types of language transfer: positive transfer and negative transfer. The former means that the knowledge of a native language helps learners to learn a second language well; the latter means that the native language hinders and distracts learners from learning a second language. That is to say, for one thing, the similarities between a native language and a second language will facilitate learners to acquire a second language; for another, the differences between a native language and a second language will hamper learners from acquiring the second language.

2.2 Theories Related to the Negative Transfer of a Native Language

In order to find resolutions to help English learners to study English well, it's necessary to have some knowledge of the theories related to the negative transfer of a native language.

2.2.1 Contrastive Analysis Theory

In 1927, Charles Fries put forward contrastive analysis hypothesis theory and designed the method of comparison language teaching. In 1957, Lado, an American linguist, raised that second language learners unconsciously transferred native language, culture, words' meanings, and the word order to the target language. Researchers in the field of second language acquisition were deeply impressed by him.

In the 1950s and 1960s, contrastive analysis hypothesis subjugated many linguists and teachers and had great effects on foreign language teaching. Fries held that the native language was the main obstacle to second language learning. Some common errors and difficulties could be predicted by comparing the native language and the second language. Meanwhile, differences and similarities between a native language and a second language can be gotten through contrastive analysis hypothesis, which can maximize the positive transfer and minimize the negative transfer.

Contrastive analysis theory consists of four main aspects. Firstly, language belongs to behavior. The process of second language learning is that learners acquire the second language and convey their thoughts to others freely. Secondly, learners' making mistakes is chiefly due to the native language. From the differences between a native language and a second language, scholars find reasons why learners make mistakes. Then, learning about the differences between a native language and a second language is the primary task of second language learning because similarities between a native language and a second language don't have negative effects on second language learning; instead, it can help learners to learn the second language well. Finally, the difficulty of second language learning is determined by the differences between the two languages. Generally, the more differences there are, the more difficulties students may have.

Every coin has two sides. Of course, contrastive analysis has defects. For example, it's not scientific for Fries to equal differences between a native language and a second language to second language learners' difficulties.

However, its advantages outweigh its disadvantages. Thus, second language learners had better use contrastive analysis to improve their English writing on the condition that they don't completely depend on it.

2.2.2 Error Analysis Theory

Owing to the limits of contrastive analysis theory, scholars concentrated on errors that learners make in the process of second language learning. Gradually, error analysis theory took the place of contrastive analysis theory.

According to cognitive psychology, Corder (1967) elaborated the characteristics, significance and types of errors and came up with error analysis theory, which laid a solid foundation for error analysis. Corder thought that the native language was not the only source of errors that was not predictable. Furthermore, it was partial to understand errors only according to the standards of the target language or the language proficiency of learners in his or her teachers' eyes. The prime distinction between contrastive analysis theory and error analysis theory is that error analysis theory stresses the errors made in the process of second language learning, which could make learners or scholars find reasons easily; contrastive theory put emphasis on the differences between the native language and the second language.

Error analysis theory certainly has its positive aspects and negative aspects. On the one hand, error analysis extricates itself from contrastive analysis theory's defects. For instance, some errors are caused by language transfer. On the other hand, it can't analyze all the problems and difficulties in the process of second language learning. What's more, error analysis theory can't explain the common phenomenon that learners are afraid of making mistakes and then try to avoid using some words and structures they are not familiar with. Besides, error analysis theory pays attention to the errors but neglects their correct forms.

Although error analysis theory has shortcomings, it exerts great influence on the second language learning and foreign language teaching and helps learners and scholars understand language errors correctly. Teachers should adjust their teaching strategies according to students' errors, which can not only help teachers develop a correct attitude toward the errors made by the students, but also improve their writing.

2.2.3 Inter-Language Theory

An inter-language is a transitional language system between a native language and a target language developed by a second language learner, which is approximating to the target language. Because some second language learners incorrectly summarize some rules of the target language, an inter-language comes into being gradually and some language items, grammar rules and systematic knowledge tend to be rooted in the second language learners' minds. An inter-language is not changeless but a developmental and successive language system. With the improvement of learners' language proficiency, an inter-language will be close to the target language. Certainly, an inter-language and the target language can't coincide because fossilization of a language will occur in the process of learning. That is, fossilization stops an inter-language from getting close to the target language.

3. The Negative Transfer of Chinese in College Students' English Writing

Because Chinese college students acquire English knowledge mainly in class and have very limited input of English, they, therefore, have to depend much on their mother tongue, Chinese, to express themselves whenever they write or whatever they write about. So their English writings are full of Chinese marks in lexicon, sentences, discourse structures, and so on.

3.1 Negative Transfer in Lexicon

3.1.1 Improper Use of Parts of Speech

In Chinese, the parts of speech rarely change while those in English do. Thus, Chinese college students barely consider the parts of speech of words when they write something. Here are some examples.

(1)   Giving up smoking can make you **health.**

(2)   Some people are for this idea, while others **against** it.

(3)   Some reasons **as follows**.

(4)   You will **success**, if you insist.

In Sentence (1), the verb "make" should be followed by an object and a complement. So the word "health" should be changed into "healthy". In Sentence (2), the learner regards "against" as a verb, but "against" can be a

preposition or an adjective. The word "against" can collocate with main auxiliary verbs "am""is" and "are" to be a verb. So Sentence (2) should be "Some people are for this idea, while others are against it." In Sentence (3), "as follows" should go with the auxiliary verbs "am", "is", and "are." Thus, the auxiliary "are" should be added after the word "reasons." In Sentence (4), "success" should be changed into "succeed." Knowing the differences of parts of speech between Chinese and English is good for learners to avoid such errors as mentioned above.

3.1.2 Improper Use of Words

It's a very common phenomenon that in English a word has many meanings. An English word has no exact Chinese equivalent and it has to be translated in different ways in different contexts. In fact, it is very difficult to find two words that have exactly the same meaning, carry the same implication, are used in the same collocations, or have the same stylistic value. For example, although "chuckle" "giggle" "grin" and "sneer" all mean "smile" or "laugh", they are not exactly equal. "Chuckle" means "laugh quietly." "Giggle" means "laugh nervously or embarrassedly." "Grin" means "laugh pleasantly with lips drawn back to show the teeth." "Sneer" means "smile contemptuously."

On the other hand, college students don't pay attention to the English explanations and the usages of words. Thus, many college students have difficulty in choosing the appropriate words to use when they write English essays. For instance, there are many English words for "大的": big, huge, humorous, enormous, and so on. If students don't know their differences, they will make mistakes，such as "big wind", "big rain", "big fog", and so on. In fact, "big wind" should be "strong wind". "Big fog" should be "thick fog". "Big rain" should be "heavy rain." Similarly, Chinese college students and English native speakers may translate the following Chinese sentences differently.

1)   他已经吃药了。

Chinese students: He has already **eaten medicine.**

English native speakers: He has already **taken medicine**.

2)   房价高。

Chinese students: The price of houses is **expensive**.

English native speakers: The price of houses is **high**.

3)   我去车站接你。

Chinese students: I will go to the bus station to **take you**.

English native speakers: I will to go to bus station to **meet/ pick up you**.

4)   你最好听取我的建议。

Chinese students: You'd better **accept my advice**.

English native speakers: You'd better **take /follow my advice**.

3.1.3 Improper Use of Collocation

Because of the vast differences between Chinese and English, college students frequently and unconsciously make collocation errors. For instance,

1)   Wrong: Students go to school to **learn knowledge**.

Right: Students go to school to **acquire/accumulate/obtain/gain/absorb knowledge**.

2)   Wrong: The notice on the wall **says** that a meeting will be held tomorrow at 9:00 o'clock.

Right: The notice on the wall **reads** that a meeting will be held tomorrow at 9:00 o'clock.

3)   Wrong: The young lady **puts on a yellow dress**. ("puts on a yellow dress" expresses an action.)

Right: The young lady **is in a yellow dress**. ("is in a yellow dress" is in a state.)

4)   Wrong: She resolved to **raise** his level of English knowledge.

Right: She resolved to **improve/ advance** his level of English knowledge.

5)   Wrong: I can **say** English very well.

Right: I can **speak** English very well.

6) Wrong: I think that the bicycle is easy to **learn**.

Right: I think that the bicycle is easy to **handle**.

3.1.4 Improper Use of Culture Images

Different countries have different culture images. Culture images are the culture symbols that crystallize the wisdom of a country's people, history and culture. Owing to the different living conditions and culture traditions in different countries, every country gradually generates its unique cultures images. So people in different countries will use different culture images to present one thing. Moreover, Chinese and western people have obviously different thought patterns. Western people prefer to say something directly, while Chinese prefer saying something in a euphemistic way. So when western people and Chinese express one meaning, they may use different images as the following examples show.

1) 三个臭皮匠顶个诸葛亮

English: Two **heads** are better than one.

Chinese: Two **persons** are better than one person.

2) 一箭双雕

English: Kill two birds with **one stone**.

Chinese: Kill two birds with **an arrow**.

3) 木已成舟

English: It's foolish to cry over spoilt milk.

Chinese: The wood has made into a boat.

4) 不入虎穴，焉得虎子

English: Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Chinese: If you don't go into tiger's den, you will not catch little tiger.

5) 他们是夜猫子

English: They are **night owls**.

Chinese: They are **Night cats**.

It's good for Chinese college students to know the differences between Chinese images and English images. When they know a lot of culture images, they can not only speak English proficiently but also write good compositions by sometimes using appropriate culture images.

3.2 Negative Transfer in Sentence

3.2.1 Improper Arrangement of Words

The way of thinking determines the word order of Chinese and English. Chinese would rather describe things from whole to part, from the macroscopic to the microcosmic. On the contrary, English native speakers prefer to describe things from part to whole, from the microcosmic to the macroscopic. This is especially true for adverbial of time and place. For instance,

Chinese: 李明于 **1989 年 9 月 4 日早上五点**生于**四川成都眉山**.

English: Lingming was born in **Meishan, Chengdu, Sichuan, China at 5 am. on September 4, 1989**.

Elements of a Chinese sentence don't have a fixed order. A verb can be followed by a noun or a verb, and can be placed before a noun or a verb; however, elements of an English sentence have a fixed order. For example, the adverbial of place, generally, is placed before the adverbial of time. In English, a verb must be followed by a noun or a noun form.

Besides, the Chinese language lays stress on parataxis, while English emphasizes hypotaxis. Chinese writers rarely employ conjunctions and connectives in their writing; the readers need to figure out what writers are driving at. However, English writers use some linking words to make sentences unified, although English has changes in tense, voice, person and number. In addition, the main point of an English sentence is often placed at the end of a sentence. For example, in the sentence "We face an arduous task to narrow the urban-rural and

interregional gaps in development and promote balanced economic and social development (缩小城乡、区域发展差距和促进经济社会协调发展任务艰巨)"（鲍明捷，2010：70），the main part "to narrow the urban-rural and interregional gaps in development and promote balanced economic and social development" is placed at the end.

3.2.2 Preference for Sentences with Animate Subjects

Chinese differs from English in preference for animate subjects or inanimate subjects. English speakers have an objective attitude towards everything and get accustomed to estimating everything objectively, analyzing and settling everything imperturbably. They focus on the difference between subjects and objects. They think that which element, person or object, should be the subject of a sentence depends on which one is emphasized in a certain situation. Western people also prefer to use inanimate subjects, which means they like to use objects to be the subjects of sentences. However, Chinese people think that human beings are better than the other creatures and support the harmony between man and nature. Thus they prefer using animate subjects, which means they often use person to be the subject of a sentence. Now let's compare the following three pairs of sentences to have a better understanding.

1)   **The mirror** is superior in quality. (This sentence uses an inanimate subject "the mirror" to express objectivity.)

I think that the mirror is superior in quality. (This sentence uses an animate subject "I think" to express subjectivity.)

2)   **A college** with a lake and a library on campus is very beautiful. (This sentence uses an inanimate subject "a college" to express the fact that a college with a lake and a library is beautiful.)

We believe that a college with a lake and a library on campus is very beautiful. (This sentence uses an animate subject "we believe" to express subjectivity.)

3)   **It** has been raining hard all night. (This sentence uses an inanimate subject "it" to express objectivity.)

He acclaimed that it had been raining hard all night. (This sentence uses an animate subject "he acclaimed" to express subjectivity.)

3.2.3 Improper Use of Conjunctions

In English, in order to make sentences move from one to another smoothly native English speakers make full use of conjunctions, various clauses, and pronouns. But Chinese people use few conjunctions; instead, they stress parataxis and the logical order of things. So English is more logical than Chinese both in forms and inner structures.

What's more, in general, we Chinese often use a pair of conjunctions at the same time to reveal the logical relationship between two or more parts in a complex sentence. However, there is only one conjunction in an English sentence. Thus, owing to the influence of the negative transfer of Chinese, college students often make sentences without using conjunctions, or using two conjunctions or using conjunctions improperly. For example,

1)   Wrong: Tom is very mean, John can't bear him any more.

Right: Tom is very mean **and** John can't bear him any more.

2)   Wrong: **Although** he wants to save money to afford a computer, **but** he spends money in playing games on the internet.

Right: **Although** he wants to save money to afford a computer, he spends money in playing games on the internet.

3)   Wrong: "**Like** is often pointed out, knowledge is a two-edged weapon which can be used equally for good or evil" (Huang, 2012:222).

Right: **As** is often pointed out, knowledge is a two-edged weapon which can be used equally for good or evil.

3.2.4 Neglect of the Subject-Verb Agreement

When someone begins to study English, he/she will learn how to find the main structure of a sentence, which means finding the subject and the verb of a sentence. In English, subjects and verbs are closely related and the verbs have inflection forms , such as, do→does, adj. → adj.-er. Nonetheless, in the Chinese language, verbs don't have such inflection forms. Subjects and verbs are not closely related either. Moreover, Chinese sentences have no subject-verb agreement but English sentences do. With the negative transfer of Chinese, college students

often neglect the agreement between subjects and verbs in their English writings. Here are some examples:

    1) He **ask** me to lend him a hand.

    2) There **are** a linguist and educator.

    3) A number of people **is** going to taking exercise in the morning.

3.3 Negative Transfer in Discourse Structure

Negative transfer in discourse structure is mainly caused by the different ways of thinking between Chinese and native English speakers. English speakers generally believe in the motto that time is money. They spare no efforts to save time in expressing their views. "By and by, they formed the direct way of thinking." In general, native English writers will express "their main ideas or point of view at the very beginning with a statement, known as the topic sentence of the paragraph, or the thesis statement of the essay" (Shi, 2010). Then they will illustrate their main ideas directly by offering lots of arguments. Finally, they will make a conclusion, which may restate or sum up their main ideas.

However, we Chinese often speak or write in an implicit way. Generally speaking, "we would start from beating about the bush when we speak or write, worrying that a direct true-to-fact speech might make others feel unhappy or cause a trouble. We would turn and turn from unrelated material to ideas of minor importance and at last make the point" (Shi, 2010). Chinese college students ignore the different thought patterns between Chinese and English speakers and write English compositions according to the way of spiral thinking, which make structures of their compositions very loose. Of course, it will be difficult for readers to make sense of their compositions.

Now that it is inevitable for Chinese college students to be affected by their mother tongue in their English writing, what's the most important is how to make full use of the language transfer. Teachers and students can work together to minimize the negative transfer and maximize the positive transfer. Specifically, we can employ the following strategies to achieve our purpose.

4. Strategies for Decreasing the Negative Transfer of Chinese in College Students' English Writing

4.1 Raising Students' Awareness of the Negative Transfer of Chinese

Every coin has two sides. It's necessary for teachers and students to familiarize themselves with the negative transfer of Chinese.

It's true that, to some degree, the negative transfer of Chinese will influence college students' English writing, but college students can turn the negative transfer to positive to improve their English writing, if teachers could guide them to know the negative transfer of Chinese as a communicative strategy or a study strategy. Specifically, when teachers face the negative transfer of Chinese in college students' communication and English writing, they can tell students what mistakes they have made and why they have made the mistakes, and how they can correct their mistakes. If teachers can raise the students' awareness of the negative transfer of Chinese in their English writing and help them find out the reasons, students are sure to improve their writing in the shortest possible time.

4.2 Increasing Language Input and Output

Input of a language is very crucial for college students and most Chinglish writings are attributed to college students' limited input of English. Only when students have enough input can they output efficiently. So teachers had better encourage students to increase their English input.

There are a lot of ways for college students to increase the input of English. On the one hand, students can choose a way that they are keen on, such as watching English movies, American and British TV series, listening to English news (BBC, VOA, CNN…), listening to English songs, reading original English novels and so on. Furthermore, they can make good use of English dictionaries, in which lots of idiomatic usages can help students understand words better and lay a solid foundation for further study. On the other hand, teachers can encourage or enforce students to recite some good writings, which is also a good way to improve students' English input. By reciting good writings, students can not only practice their pronunciation but also know the structure of writings better, which can help them to organize their writings in an English way.

If learners have had enough input, teachers need to highlight the importance of output because output can reinforce what students have learnt. On the one hand, teachers can ask students to make sentences with the

important words they have studied in a new unit. Most words have more than one part of speech and more than one meaning, so students can choose one part of speech or one meaning of a word to make a sentence as they like. By learning from each other and studying on their own, students can not only increase their input of English knowledge but also improve their output. On the other hand, teachers can ask students to write an essay once a week, by which teachers can not only examine students' writing ability, but also collect some mistakes and analyze the mistakes to improve students' English writing. Besides, teachers can inspire students to take every opportunity to communicate with foreign teachers, by which students can learn to think in English as time goes by.

4.3 Increasing Comparative Analysis in English Writing Teaching

Now that learners have known clearly the differences between Chinese and English, teachers can guide students to compare and analyze the differences and similarities between English and Chinese on purpose.

On the one hand, by contrastive analysis, students can maximize the positive transfer of Chinese and avoid the negative transfer efficiently. What's more, by comparing Chinese with English, learners can avoid translating word by word in English writing and improve their ability to analyze discourse patterns. On the other hand, teachers can guide students to collect and sort out the errors they make in their writings, which may help students avoid making the same mistakes again in their later writing. In a word, comparative analysis is an efficient way to decrease the negative transfer of Chinese. Some examples are below.

1) 乘客止步

    a. Passengers please don't come in. (Chinglish)

    b. Crew only.

2) 别管我

    a. Don't monitor me. (Chinglish)

    b. Leave me alone.

3) 一些小孩没有礼貌。

    a. Some children don't have politeness. (Chinglish)

    b. Some children don't have good manners.

4.4 Introducing English-speaking Countries' Cultures in Teaching

As is known to all, learning a foreign language actually means learning its culture. To know more about the culture of English-speaking countries benefits learners in that they can learn to think in English and then learn English well. For instance, the following sentences express that someone knows some place really well.

A.   1) I know that city **like the back of my hand**.

      2) I know **every nook and cranny of that city**.

B.   I'm familiar with that city.

If students don't know the English-speaking countries' cultures, they may not make sense of A, and certainly they can't use them in their writing.

As Chinese strategist Sun Zi said, "Know yourself and know your enemy, you will win every war." That is true for college students' English learning. When students know more about the culture of English-speaking countries, they can express themselves freely and proficiently. Thus, it's necessary for teachers to introduce the cultures of the English-speaking countries in class. Here are two more examples:

a.   I don't want to be **the third wheel**. ("The third wheel" is a way of saying a third person joining a couple in a social context.)

b.   They are **a match made in heaven**.

5. Conclusion

As is discussed above, how to improve Chinese college students' English writing effectively is a problem that many English teachers and scholars are concerned about. They have tried to find out some practical ways to deal with this problem, such as increasing students' vocabulary, teaching English grammar systematically, analyzing

the reasons why students make errors in their English writing, and so on. But this thesis mainly discusses the negative transfer of Chinese in Chinese college students' English writing, and offers some suggestions to overcome the negative transfer of Chinese, such as raising the students' awareness of the negative transfer of Chinese, increasing their English input, introducing the cultures of the English-speaking countries, and so on. Anyway, language transfer exists, so what teachers and Chinese college students can do is work together to decrease or avoid the negative transfer of Chinese efficiently and try to find more available ways to improve students' English writing.

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