

The Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue in College English Writing and Teaching Countermeasures

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Abstract:

Mother tongue negative transfer is a common phenomenon in Chinese college students' English writing. Adopting text analysis and error classification, this study explores the manifestations of mother tongue negative transfer at lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels on the basis of authentic student compositions. The results show that negative transfer mainly lies in inappropriate collocations, ungrammatical sentence structures and loose discourse logic. Corresponding teaching countermeasures are finally put forward to reduce negative transfer and improve students' English writing competence. It is hoped that this study can provide practical references for college English writing teaching.

Keywords:

Mother Tongue Negative Transfer, College English Writing, Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis

1. Introduction

Although Chinese students have been exposed to English learning from an early age, they perform better in receptive skills like reading and listening than in language output such as speaking and writing. English writing remains a major challenge for them, especially for non-English majors who lack long-term professional English training. When performing writing tasks, most students tend to organize ideas in Chinese first and then translate their thoughts into English word by word [1]. According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis [2], linguistic differences between languages are likely to cause learning difficulties and transfer errors. Given the huge differences between Chinese and English, such writing habits produce obvious Chinglish expressions and grammar mistakes. Odlin defines language transfer as linguistic influences resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and languages that learners have already mastered [3]. For Chinese students, such interference mainly stems from the negative transfer of their mother tongue [4].

Previous studies in this field mainly focus on theoretical discussion and single-dimensional analysis, while systematic research based on real writing samples is relatively insufficient [5,6]. To fill this research gap, this study selects freshmen from four non-English major classes in Guangzhou Institute of Science and Technology as

participants. Students are required to write a 150-200-word essay starting with the sentence “Staying up late has become a common habit for many young people, yet keeping a regular sleep schedule can bring surprising benefits to both body and mind”. By analyzing their English writing assignments, this study explores the negative transfer of mother tongue at lexical, syntactic and discourse levels, analyzes the underlying causes, and finally puts forward feasible countermeasures [7].

The present study aims to address the following three research questions:

(1) What types of mother tongue negative transfer affect non-English majors in English writing?

(2) What are the main causes of mother tongue negative transfer among non-English majors?

(3) What measures can be taken to reduce the influence of mother tongue negative transfer?

2. Literature Review

To explore the negative transfer of mother tongue in the English writing of Chinese non-English majors, this section reviews the core theories in second language acquisition, including language transfer, error analysis, interlanguage and fossilization. This section aims to lay a solid theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis of this paper.

2.1. Language Transfer and Contrastive Analysis

Language transfer serves as a crucial influencing factor in second language acquisition. According to Odlin [3], language transfer stems from the similarities and differences between the target language and learners’ already acquired languages. Lado [2] put forward the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, holding that the similarities and differences between the mother tongue and the target language exert influences on second language learning.

Language transfer can be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer [4]. Positive transfer refers to the favorable effects of linguistic similarities on second language acquisition. It helps learners to master the target language quickly. By contrast, negative transfer means interference in language learning caused by linguistic discrepancies. It is also the major source of errors in the participants’ compositions. Theories concerning language transfer can help have a better look at and predict errors in students’ writing.

2.2. Error Analysis

As Corder proposed, learners’ linguistic errors genuinely reflect the process of their second language acquisition [8]. Language errors are generally divided into two types, intralingual errors and interlingual errors [5]. Intralingual errors result from learners’ inadequate understanding and mastery of the rules of the target language itself. Intralingual errors are usually irrelevant to mother tongue. In contrast, interlingual errors come from language transfer from learners’ mother tongue. This study mainly focuses on interlingual errors, namely the negative transfer of the mother tongue manifested in students’ English writing.

2.3. Interlanguage and Fossilization

Interlanguage refers to the transitional linguistic system formed by learners between their mother tongue and the target language. Selinker put forward the concept of interlanguage, and further elaborated on the phenomenon of fossilization [9]. Fossilization means that certain linguistic errors, even after repeated learning and correction, will become fixed in learners' language use and are difficult to get rid of completely. This theory also explains why the negative transfer of the mother tongue reflected in Chinese students' English writing exists for such a long time and is often hard to get rid of.

3. Typical Manifestations of Mother Tongue Negative Transfer

This section explores the typical manifestations of mother tongue negative transfer in Chinese students' English writing. The negative transfer will be discussed at lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels.

3.1. Lexical Level

At lexical level, the mother tongue negative transfer is mainly reflected as collocation errors and article omission in students' writings.

(1) Collocation errors

Word collocation errors represent the primary type of mother tongue negative transfer at the lexical level. Collocation errors are mainly reflected as improper verb-object collocations. More than half of the students directly translate Chinese verb-object structures word for word in their English compositions, resulting in inappropriate English expressions.

Example 1: "Now many young people like staying up late to play phones or watch videos."

Analysis: The expression "play phones" in this sentence is typical Chinglish. Nevertheless, a large number of students use this phrase in their writing. This is because "玩手机" is a fixed verb-object collocation in Chinese. Students tend to first form the Chinese structure in their minds and then literally translate it into the English phrase "play phones". However, in English, the verb "play" is usually followed by games, musical instruments, sports and similar items, and it cannot be directly used to refer to using mobile phones. Appropriate alternatives include "play on phones" or "use mobile phones". This clearly reflects mother tongue negative transfer, where collocations in Chinese are directly transferred to English [10].

Example 2: "I can't listen teacher carefully."

Analysis: In this example, the expression "listen teachers" is also typical Chinglish. It comes from the Chinese verb-object structure "听老师", which means following the teacher's advice or listen to what the teacher says attentively in class. Such a collocation sounds natural and acceptable in Chinese. However, the English verb "listen" cannot be directly followed by an object. To indicate paying attention to someone's words, the correct structure should be "listen to someone". When students think in Chinese first and then search for equivalent English expressions, they are highly likely to be influenced by negative native language transfer and generate this kind of output.

(2) Article omission

Article omission is also a significant type of negative transfer at the lexical level. English has a complete article system, whereas Chinese has no articles at all. Due to this fundamental difference, students often fail to use necessary articles in English writing, a typical result of the negative transfer of mother tongue [11].

Example 3: “Also, good sleep helps us think clearly and study better.”

Analysis: Chinese nouns can be used without articles, which conforms to native linguistic conventions. When writing in English, students tend to literally translate the ideas or sentences they formed in Chinese into English without making any adaptive adjustments. While such zero-article structures are grammatically valid and logically fluent in Chinese, they do not conform to English grammatical norms. The singular abstract noun “sleep” in students’ writing lacks a required article, and the standard and authentic expression should be “a good sleep”. Affected by the negative transfer of mother tongue, students fail to supplement indispensable articles in English sentences due to the absence of an article system in Chinese. The same type of error occurs frequently. For example, the phrase “keep a regular schedule” is already given in the writing directions. Nevertheless, when students mention this phrase again in their writing, they often omit the article “a” and use the singular noun “schedule” alone.

3.2. Syntactic Level

At syntactic level, negative transfer in students’ writing mainly manifests in three typical errors: subject-verb disagreement, tense confusion and run-on sentences [12]. Such syntactic mistakes largely stem from the direct transfer of Chinese syntactic habits into English production.

(1) Subject-verb disagreement

Subject-verb disagreement mainly arises from the differences between Chinese and English. In Chinese, subjects and predicates require no grammatical agreement. By contrast, English predicates must change their forms according to the person and number of subjects.

Example 4: “It help us keep healthy and study well.”

Analysis: This typical example reveals obvious subject-verb disagreement. The pronoun “it” is a third-person singular subject, yet the predicate verb fails to undergo corresponding inflection. Students actually know that there should be an agreement between subjects and verbs, and they are aware that singular subjects require singular predicate verbs. Even so, they remain unaccustomed to making corresponding adjustments in practice as a result of fossilization [9]. Since Chinese verbs have no changes in person or number, students often ignore such grammatical inflections in English. In this example, “help” should be corrected to “helps”.

(2) Tense errors

Tense errors are also a typical problem in their English writing. Since Chinese verbs have no tense markers and never change with tense shifts, students often transfer this expression habit to English [12]. When switching between past and present tenses, they fail to adjust verb forms accordingly.

Example 5: “I used to stay up late every day. I feel tired in class.”

Analysis: In the first sentence, the student correctly adopted the structure “used to” to describe a regular past activity of staying up late. The phrase “feel tired” in the second sentence also refers to a past event. It is the result of staying up late regularly in the past and it occurs simultaneously with staying up late. However, the student shifted to the present tense in the subsequent sentence and incorrectly used the original form of the verb “feel”. The appropriate form should be “felt”. Chinese requires no such changes, so this expressive habit negatively affects students’ tense consistency in English output.

Example 6: “Last month, my teacher tell me to change my sleep time.”

Analysis: In this example, the obvious time marker “last month” clearly indicates a past event. Nevertheless, influenced by the Chinese language rule that requires no tense variation for verbs, the student chose the simple present verb form “tell”. Even regardless of the time clue, the form “tell” is grammatically inappropriate after the singular subject “teacher”. Moreover, with the explicit past time marker “last month”, the incident undoubtedly occurred in the past. Therefore, the simple past tense “told” should be used. Although students have been repeatedly instructed on the language rules and various verb tense changes and many of them can recite a wide range of tense-related grammatical rules when asked, they are still affected by deep-rooted mother tongue interference and often overlook grammatical tense rules in practical use.

(3) Run-on sentences

Paratactic in nature, Chinese is a typical language that emphasizes internal semantic logic rather than rigid grammatical forms [11]. As a representative Chinese sentence pattern, run-on sentences feature flexible subjects, which can be omitted, shifted midway, or even entirely absent. Meanwhile, such sentences have vague sentence boundaries and are commonly connected by commas.

Example 7: “Many of my classmates often stay up late, they play phone or study until midnight.”

Analysis: This English sentence is a typical example influenced by Chinese run-on sentences. It shows obvious characteristics: two complete independent clauses separated only by a comma, with no coordinating conjunctions in between. In Chinese, it is acceptable to connect two or even several complete clauses merely with commas as Chinese relies on internal semantic logic. Much as they have been told repeatedly that English works differently, deeply influenced by native linguistic habits, students tend to transfer this pattern to English writing directly. However, English follows different grammatical rules. English does not allow two independent complete clauses to be separated merely by a comma. If a comma is used, a conjunction must be added. To revise the sentence, the comma should be replaced by a full stop, or a proper conjunction should be added to connect the two clauses [6].

3.3. Discourse Level

Negative transfer from the mother tongue is mainly reflected as logical jumps and unclear focus at the discourse level [10]. This is mainly because Chinese discourse follows a topic-based progression with a relatively loose structure, requiring readers to infer the underlying logic and theme on their own. In contrast, English requires a clear focus and explicit logical links.

(1) Logical jumps

Logical jumps refer to a lack of necessary preparation and reasoning steps, leading to abrupt conclusions. While this pattern is acceptable in Chinese, English requires clear causal markers or transitional sentences.

Example 8: “Besides, good sleep can make you happy, take away your worry, and ... I used to stay up late every day, so I always feel sleepy and After I go to bed early every night, I become... All in all, we must stop stay up late and keep a regular sleep habit to live a healthy life.”

Analysis: In this example, the student listed various benefits of regular sleep such as better state of mind, increased energy, and improved study efficiency, shared his own experience of shifting from staying up late to sleeping regularly and the positive changes brought by this change. Then he suddenly jumped to a call for everyone by stating “In short, we must stop staying up late.” There is a gap between the benefits of a good sleep and his own experience, requiring readers’ inference. And the conclusion cannot be naturally derived from the preceding benefits and personal experience, as necessary reasoning and connections are missing [7]. Chinese argumentation permits flexible subject shifts and implicit logical gaps, leaving unstated reasoning for readers to infer naturally. By contrast, English strictly requires explicit logical coherence. For this reason, transparent reasoning bridges must be built between the evidence and final conclusions.

(2) Unclear focus

Unclear focus refers to the frequent shifts of subject or perspective, making it difficult for readers to identify whom the writer is discussing or what argument is being made. Topic shifts are flexible in Chinese, but English discourse requires a consistent focus.

Example 9: “Many of my classmates often stay up late, they... They think it is cool or they have no time in the day. But they often ... I also stay up late before, I feel very bad. I often want to ... Then I decide to ... We should not stay up late anymore.”

Analysis: In this example, the student frequently shifted subjects within the same paragraph. The student began with “many classmates” to describe their state of staying up late and its negative effects, then abruptly switched to “I” to talk about personal experience and changes, and finally turned to “we” to make a suggestion. With constant shifts in perspective, readers can hardly tell whether the writer aims to analyze students’ problems, share personal experience, or give advice to others. Affected by negative transfer from their mother tongue, students naturally write paragraphs in this way, without realizing that such writing is inappropriate in English [5].

This section identifies, classifies, and analyzes negative mother-tongue transfer at lexical, syntactic and discourse levels. The errors made by students are not accidental, and many of them occur with high frequency. This reveals fundamental differences between Chinese and English in thinking patterns and expressive habits. Such differences inevitably lead students to unconsciously transfer Chinese expressive conventions to English writing.

In fact, these errors do not simply result from a lack of grammatical knowledge. Basic rules concerning articles, punctuation and other grammar points have been taught to students for a long time. Therefore, solving these problems cannot rely merely on memorization of grammar rules. Targeted measures should be adopted to reduce the impact of negative mother-tongue transfer.

4. Teaching Countermeasures

In view of the problems at three levels in students' writing caused by mother tongue negative transfer, the corresponding teaching countermeasures are put forward as follows.

To address lexical errors, teachers can focus on illustrating differences in English and Chinese verb-object collocations in teaching and strengthen the instruction of lexical chunks [13]. Fixed phrases should be explained and practiced as a unit. This helps prevent students from literal word-for-word translation caused by native language negative transfer, which may result in errors such as article omission and improper collocations. Furthermore, comparative exercises and blank-filling exercises can raise students' awareness that Chinese has no article system, whereas articles are grammatically required in English. In this way, students can learn these collocations as chunks. During language output, they are able to produce authentic English directly, rather than thinking in Chinese first and then translating it into English. This may effectively reduce the negative transfer of Chinese.

In terms of errors at the syntactic level, teachers can focus on the explanation of subject-verb agreement and organize targeted repetitive practice with high-frequency sentence patterns to guide students to use correct verb forms. Meanwhile, students should be required to self-check after finishing exercises and writing tasks, which helps them develop sensitivity to tenses. In terms of run-on sentences, teachers ought to elaborate on differences in punctuation use between English and Chinese. It is feasible to assign revision exercises based on students' original run-on sentences, training them to convert such sentences into standard and grammatically correct English expressions. This helps students get rid of the habits of forming English sentences by using Chinese logic.

As for errors at discourse level, teachers should guide students to build logical bridges between evidence and conclusions, and use explicit transitional words commonly adopted in English to connect the reasoning steps. Meanwhile, students should be trained to write in accordance with the framework of claim-evidence-reasoning-conclusion. In addition, teachers need to emphasize consistent perspective within each paragraph to avoid confusion caused by frequent perspective shifts. Students should also be trained to make an outline before writing, clarifying the central idea of each paragraph. Making an outline helps students have a clear topic in mind all the time, maintain a consistent perspective and avoid straying from the central idea.

Another essential strategy is to increase students' exposure to authentic English texts through listening, reading and other approaches [14]. Students are susceptible to native language interference because, despite their mastery of grammatical rules, collocations and punctuation rules, insufficient English input makes them unconsciously rely on mother-tongue thinking in practical language output. Furthermore, teachers may select high-quality model essays with clear structure, accurate grammar and advanced expressions for students to imitate. Such imitation practice can effectively improve students' English output and reduce the interference of negative mother tongue transfer [15]. Students can learn from these samples in terms of textual cohesion, perspective consistency and other writing skills.

5. Conclusions

By analyzing English compositions written by freshmen non-English majors, this study identifies the specific manifestations of the negative transfer of Chinese at lexical, syntactic and discourse levels, as well as frequently-occurring writing errors. These errors mainly stem from the differences between Chinese and English in thinking patterns, sentence structures and grammatical rules.

This study verifies that negative mother tongue transfer acts as a major obstacle in second language acquisition. Corresponding teaching countermeasures are put forward, which can offer practical guidance for English teachers' instruction and students' English writing learning.

Nevertheless, this research has certain limitations. The research participants are not sufficient and relevant quantitative data are lacking. Such shortcomings are expected to be addressed in further related studies.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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