

# On Chinese Language Negative Transfer and College English Teaching

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**Abstract:** Negative transfer which refers to the negative influence on foreign language learning if the language rules of the mother tongue do not conform to foreign language habits is a normal phenomenon in second language learning. Because huge cultural and language differences exist in Chinese and English language, and Chinese learners learn English as a foreign language without an appropriate real English learning environment, it is a common phenomenon that Chinese negative transfer has a profound influence on learners' English learning, which impedes learners' English improvements in the form of aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax and cultural thinking. Even to Chinese college students, negative mother tongue transfer is still prevalent among them, which is detrimental to students' English achievement. This paper analyzes the connotations, displaying forms and countering strategy of negative mother tongue transfer on college students' English learning, aiming to improve college students' English pragmatic ability and cross-cultural ability, which can provide some relevant reference for college English teaching and enhancement of English teaching effect and efficiency.

**Keywords:** language negative transfer; college English Teaching; culture differences

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the field of second language acquisition research, the influence of mother tongue on second language acquisition is one of the important issues that experts and scholars discuss. When learners are learning a foreign language, the language rules and expression habits of their mother tongue will be applied to the phenomenon of second language acquisition. Generally speaking, the closer the mother tongue is to the foreign language, the more likely it is to produce positive transfer. For example, the English of people in European countries is generally good, because their mother tongue is very close to English in pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax. At this time, the mother tongue has a positive transfer effect. But for China and other Asian countries, due to the great difference between native language and English, mother tongue plays a more negative role in transfer. Chinese belongs to the Sino Tibetan language family, belongs to the analytical language, while English belongs to the Indo European language family, belongs to the comprehensive analytical language. There are some similarities between the two, but there are many more differences. Therefore, in the process of learning English, learners will inevitably be interfered by our mother tongue and especially negative transfer occurs frequently consciously or unconsciously.

## II. NEGATIVE LANGUAGE TRANSFER

“Language transfer” refers to what occurs when people who are in the process of learning a new language transfer the applications from their native language, or their first language, to the new language. It means that the people learning the new language use some of the aspects that are applicable to the previous language while learning the new one as part of the process of understanding or learning the new language. It is caused by the similarities and differences between languages impact, which can affect different levels of language, such as phonology, vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and etc (Odlin, 1989). Language transfer can be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer refers to the transfer of facilitation to the successor. In the process of foreign language learning, learners will have an influence on foreign language learning due to the grammar rules of their mother tongue. And that effect is good for learning a foreign language, jointly with the foreign language learning rule has a part is called positive transfer. Negative transfer means the impeding of learning or performance in a situation by learned responses carried over from another situation when students learn a foreign language, if mother tongue and language rules are not beneficial to learn a foreign language; it makes a negative influence on the foreign language learning, which is called negative transfer. As in China, there is no real English speaking environment, it is common for students to encounter negative mother tongue transfer phenomenon.

### **III. IMPACT OF NEGATIVE LANGUAGE TRANSFER**

The specific impact of negative transfer of mother tongue on college students' English learning is actually a complex and systematic project, which is influenced by vocabulary, syntax, grammar, thinking mode, and cultural differences. But at the same time, English writing learning and using is also a form of artistic creation, which is often ignored by the majority of teachers and students in college English teaching, especially the impact of negative transfer of mother tongue on English production like writing and speaking, as shown in the following aspects:

#### **3.1 Phonology Transfer**

Many Chinese students are influenced by the negative transfer of Chinese. Speaking English in the Chinese way leads to nonstandard pronunciation of spoken English, strange rhythm of intonation, and improvement of English communication ability. Phonetic transfer is mainly reflected in the following two aspects: 1) negative transfer of pronunciation: because Chinese pinyin and English letters are similar in writing and pronunciation, but there are many differences, influenced by the negative transfer of their mother tongue consciously or unconsciously, students are inclined to spell English words in the way of Chinese pinyin. Many students are very easy to make mistakes in lip and tooth sounds, long and short vowels and consonants in English. 2) Negative transfer of tone and rhythm: Chinese is the tone language, English is the tone language, and English is different from Chinese, with special pronunciation rules such as linking, skimming, swallowing, etc., but Chinese students are very easy to transfer the Chinese tone mode to English learning, their English tone is too flat, without any ups and downs, or they are not sure about the rising and falling tone of English and their English is too sonorous and powerful, which sounds unnatural and has a Chinese accent.

#### **3.2 Morphology Transfer**

Vocabulary is the basis of language like bricks to the grand language building. Only by mastering a large number of vocabularies can we lay a good foundation for English skill improvements. Because of the great influence of the mother tongue environment, especially in the specific language environment from the primary school stage, what teachers teach students is the rigid mechanical language expression; many students are accustomed to using the mother tongue thinking to choose vocabulary when applying vocabulary. English words and Chinese are not exactly corresponding but they are of complex relations. For example, beginners like to use "open a car" to express "开车", use "he" to refer to female in speaking, and they often use whatever words they think of. They understand English words according to Chinese meaning, and this situation is the process of negative vocabulary transfer. In the example, the author picked out a few incorrect sentences, for example:

- a. \* since we can look movie with roommates... (watch)
- b. \* You will not have a good rest, because someone could excuse you. (disturb)
- c. \* If you have a roommate, you won't find it hardly to finish your homework. (hard)
- d. \* In addition, they can help us in many positions of life. (aspects; situation)

In Sentence a, the common meaning of "look" is "turn your eyes towards something, so that you can see it" rather than "to look at someone or something for a period of time, paying attention to what is happening". If the students want to express the meaning of "观看", "watch" or "see" should be used in this sentence. Examples b, c and d have similar mistakes. Students use inappropriate words, and the teacher can find that some sentence is right in the structure but contains errors, which is caused by the Chinese negative transfer. Students like to choose the word flashing in their brain soon to describe their views and ignore the English language phonology system.

#### **3.3 Syntactic Transfer**

English emphasizes "hypotaxis", in English, there are abundant transitional words with a simple subject sentence. With the help of various conjunctions, relative words, prepositions, pronouns, appositions, parentheses and etc. It can form a long and difficult sentence, which is closely linked. Whereas Chinese emphasizes "parataxis", that is, to organize language through internal logical relations. Therefore, there are many stream-flowing sentences in Chinese, and there are no visible connecting means between phrases and clauses, which can be spread out in a certain time and logical order. English pays attention to object thinking, and sentences are mostly inanimate subject sentences, mostly with inanimate, gerund or abstract noun as subject.

- a. \* I very like you. (I like you very much.)
- b. \* There are one sheep and two cows. (There is one sheep and two cows.)
- c. \* She awaken me and I decide I will live with roommates rather than live alone.

(She awakened me and I decide I will live with roommates rather than live alone.)

d. \*We need cherish our family time, it is very important.

(We need cherish our family time, which is very important.)

In Example a, Chinese learners often transfer Chinese way and word order to express it, if in the Chinese way, “very” should be changed to “quite”, but often English tends to put degree adverbial phrase at the back of the sentence. In Example b, as there is no subject-predicate agreement grammatical phenomenon in Chinese, English learners are prone to make mistakes. In Example c, because English verbs have different tense forms and person forms, the sentence should use the past tense. In Example d, the two sentences are loose in structure and there are two predicates, therefore there should be a conjunction or relative word to connect the two sentences and make the whole sentence tight and elegant.

### **3.4 Cultural Transfer**

Negative cultural transfer refers to the cultural interference caused by cultural differences, which is manifested in the subconscious use of native language cultural norms and values different from the target language to guide their own words, deeds and thoughts in communication or foreign language learning. People in different regions who have been influenced by different cultures for a long time will inevitably form different ideologies and values. Therefore, the negative cultural transfer of ideas and values has a great impact on college English learning, which is an important part of college English teaching. In cross-cultural communication, cultural differences between China and foreign countries are important aspects that requests attention. To learn to seek common ground while reserving differences, we should avoid some sensitive topics and improve the communication effect.

a. \* white elephant battery (Baixiang battery)

b. \* Luoyang, named for being located on the sun side of Luohe River.

(Luoyang is named for being located on the northern side of Luohe River.)

c. \* She is red-eyed because her best friend got the first place.

(She is green-eyed because her best friend got the first place. )

d. \* I come from China, Nanchang city and Shangrao county.

(I come from Shangrao county, Nanchang city of China.)

There is a brand of battery called “Baixiang”, once translated to “white elephant”, which is detrimental to its overseas market sale. Because white elephant means “something that is valuable but useless.”. The expression comes from India. Because Indians adore elephants very much, and they regard them as gods, especially white elephants. According to Indian regulations, white elephants are not allowed to kill or work. Families with white elephants should treat them well until they die. So people regard white elephant as a kind of burden, so it will have the meaning of white elephant. In Example b, “sun side” actually refers to the northern side of a river and the south side of a hill or mountain in the Chinese culture, and here it can not be literally translated into “sun side” or “Yang side”. In Example c, in Chinese culture, people use red-eyed to mean jealousy, but English uses green-eyed monster to mean it. In Example d, as Chinese emphasizes collectivism and rank things according to the importance, degree or size, from large to small, but English just do it oppositely.

## **IV. STRATEGY TO ALLEVIATE NEGATIVE LANGUAGE TRANSFER**

### **4.1 Improving Teachers' Intercultural Communication Literacy**

In order to cope with the negative transfer of culture in college English learning, teachers should pay attention to improving their own English culture level as well as strengthening their English culture learning. On the one hand, teachers should learn English cultural knowledge through various ways, constantly enrich and improve themselves and improve their own cultural accomplishment, so as to provide more abundant teaching resources for college students in teaching. On the other hand, teachers should change their way of thinking. Many teachers usually explain and translate at the same time in the teaching process, which reflects the Chinese thinking in teachers' sub consciousness. This teaching method will make teachers instill the Chinese thinking mode into college students, which will cause college students to be deeply influenced by Chinese in the process of English application, and increase the influence of negative cultural transfer. Therefore, teachers should change their own way of thinking and teaching, try to teach in English as much as possible, so that students can be immersed in the English context and form the habit of thinking in English.

### **4.2 Improving Grammar Teaching Methods**

The traditional English teaching in China focuses on grammar and ignores the cultivation of language pragmatic ability. Students just learning mechanical rules of grammar, they cannot acquire complete meaning of a new word and swift thinking between Chinese and English language, because the difference of understanding

is not enough, the insufficiency of the ability of practical application of language. Grammar teaching can not only stay on the list of English grammar phenomena and rules, should be in compared between English and Chinese expressions each other, so that the students understand the differences in Chinese and English mode of thinking, and consciously in the English writing of two kinds of mode of thinking. In the process of English writing, teachers should guide the students to use the language habit of using English to express their views and eliminate the influence of Chinese thinking on English writing. Find a typical sentence in a student's textbook or extracurricular reading material, and let the students preview and memorize it. In addition, teachers can also train students to practice different translations of a sentence in English, train their ability to draft sentences in English, and inspire students' writing ideas. When writing, you can choose your own confident sentences to express the same content and minimize mistakes. Teachers should correct these problems and cultivate and regulate the students' English expression ability.

#### **4.3 Cultivating Students' Intercultural Communicative Ability**

In the case of the coexistence of Chinese and British cultures, we can deal with the negative transfer of culture through the improvement and innovation of teaching methods. On the one hand, teachers can use contrastive teaching method to compare Chinese and foreign cultures, and teachers guide students to observe and think, so that college students can understand the differences between the two cultures, and on this basis, understand the use of relevant English knowledge. Through comparison, college students can be more impressed, so that they can be more proficient and accurate in the future application process, and better eliminate the impact of negative cultural transfer. On the other hand, the school can set up cross-cultural courses to improve Chinese and Western cultural literacy, so that students can master professional knowledge and have good western cultural literacy at the same time.

#### **4.4 Increasing Students' Language Input Accumulation**

Students should increase reading volume and pay attention to effective input and accumulation. Before writing, students must also collect sufficient materials, actively read a large number of extracurricular reading materials, consolidate and expand their vocabulary, cultivate their good sense of language and ability of thinking in English. Besides, students should write and practice more, and look up English Chinese dictionaries frequently. To improve the level of writing, students should write more. When correcting compositions, teachers should pay attention to praising students' advantages, enhancing students' self-confidence and accumulating students' typical mistakes. In the process of explanation, different ways of thinking in Chinese and English can be used to explain the differences. The teacher should create a good environment for extracurricular learning. As college English class time is limited. In addition to giving timely feedback to students' output in class, teachers should also make full use of online and offline resources to provide more authentic input for students after class and create a good language learning environment. For example, students are encouraged to listen to English radio, watch English movies and imitate them repeatedly every day.

### **V. CONCLUSION**

Due to the great differences between Chinese and English languages and cultures, and due to the lack of real or semi-real English teaching environment in China, the English language sense of Chinese students is generally poor. Students are very vulnerable to the influence of mother tongue Chinese, resulting in negative transfer of mother tongue, greatly hindering the production of English learning, reducing the self-confidence of learners and to a certain extent affecting the learners English comprehensive application level. Therefore, in college English teaching teachers can adopt such strategies as improve teachers' intercultural communication literacy, improving grammar teaching methods, cultivating students' intercultural communicative ability, and increasing students' language input accumulation to alleviate the negative transfer impact of Chinese on English learning and using.

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