# Negative Language Transfer Reflected in ESL Learners' English Writing

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## 1. Introduction

Generally speaking, cross-linguistic influence is the major factor in language learning. Native language influence or "language transfer" is an important factor in the acquisition of a target language. The American language scholar, Terence Odlin [1] (p.12), holds that "Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired." Pedagogical practice reflects the fact that the more similar the writing systems of two languages are, the less time learners need to develop basic encoding and decoding skills. But in the case of Chinese, a language with a writing system far more intricate than English, the consequences for acquisition take far more effort to achieve. This means more similarities between two language systems produce more positive transfer, whereas more language distance may lead to more negative transfer.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Subjects

The subjects involved are 87 third-year non-English major college students in a northern university in China, and all of them are Chinese native speakers. They are all above 20 years old and have had formal English education for about ten years.

### 2.2 Materials

The materials used to detect problems in English writing are 30 samples randomly picked out of 87 essays written by Chinese subjects (CS). The essays are taken from their placement test. The type of writing is of exposition on two topics: "Influence of Modern Gadgetry on Society" and "Urbanization". The average length of each essay is around 300 words. Another 30 essays used for comparison are randomly selected out of 80 essays from a book entitled "The Collection of Genuine Entrance Exams for Doctoral Candidates Selected from Key Chinese National Universities". The essays are also of exposition with about 300 words long on average and written by English native speakers (ENS).

### 2.3 Data collection

The data collected for analysis are categorized into three kinds: One concerns the number of sentences from the essays of the two groups. Another aspect involves the form of errors picked from the essays by CS. And the last covers the type of negative transfer that errors are categorized into.

### 2.4 Theoretical basis

The applied theory is "Negative Transfer" included in the "classification of outcomes" put forward by Terence Odlin [1] (p.36), which largely involves: a. underproduction, b. overproduction, c. production errors.

### 2.5 Researchers

In order to be relatively objective, two researchers are involved to obtain relatively proper analytic outcomes. Both researchers teach English at the university where the Chinese subjects study.

## 3. Findings

**Table 1 Number of concerned sentences**

| writers | essays | total sentences | simple sentences | | complex sentences | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CS | 30 | 582 | 462 | 15.4/essay | 120 | 4/essay |
| ENS | 30 | 474 | 171 | 5.7/essay | 303 | 10.1/essay |

Table 1 shows that the total number of sentences in the 30 essays by CS is about 100 more than that by ENS. The table also reveals that the number of simple sentences made by CS is three times more than that by ENS, that is, about 6 simple sentences are used in each essay by ENS, while twice that many are used by CS. As for complex sentences, CS make less application than ENS, namely, CS employ 4 complex sentences in each essay, whereas about 10 complex sentences are used in each essay by ENS.

**Table 2 Form of errors in 30 essays by CS**

| aspects of errors | forms of errors | percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **lexis** | misuse of words which are similar in meaning but different in usage | 70% |
| | misuse of collocation | 60% |
| | confusion in part of speech | 95% |
| | improper use of articles | 100% |
| | lack of logical connectors | 56% |
| **syntax** | run-on sentences | 42% |
| | disagreement in number and tense | 96%, 44% |
| | incorrect form of passive voice | 50% |
| | incorrect form of comparative degree | 40% |
| **discourse** | indirect presentation of information | 68% |
| | illogical relationship between paragraphs | 46% |
| | repetition of similar patterns and similar rhetorical means | 55%, 47% |
| | improper shift of personal pronouns | 52% |

Table 2 reveals that the errors CS make mainly lie in three aspects: lexis, syntax and discourse. And the different presentation of errors in each aspect is clearly shown in Table 2. What has come to notice is that all these errors take place in, at least, more than 40% of the essays, and misuse of articles occurs in all the 30 essays.

Finally, the research categorizes all the errors into three types of negative transfer: "underproduction", "overproduction" and "production errors". Production errors mainly appear in the form of calques.

## 4. Discussion

According to Yu [2] (p.77), in second language acquisition, the knowledge obtained from the first language is bound to take effect on learning a second language. The influence arises from learners' conscious or unconscious judgment. As a result, cross-linguistic similarities and differences produce some varied effects: positive transfer, negative transfer and the like. Oldin [1] (p.36) believes negative transfer involves divergences from norms in the target language. In determining negative transfer, James [2] (p.109) puts forward the "equivalence of translation", namely, comparing whether the two forms from both native language and target language are of equivalent translation so as to decide on the interference of the form of native language with the other one.

### 4.1. Underproduction

Underproduction means learners may produce very few or no examples of target language structure. It results from either of the two factors: inability of producing examples of target language structure, or avoidance which means if learners sense particular structures in target language are very different from counterparts in native language, they may try to avoid using those structures [1] (p.36). The findings in the study, i.e. less use of complex sentences by CS can best illustrate this underproduction, since there are no exact complex sentence patterns in Chinese. Besides, 46% of the essays by CS have the problem of illogical relationship between paragraphs. The reason for unsmooth connection between paragraphs lies in that Chinese is an ideographical language, which usually realizes coherence and cohesion by meaning, not by logical connector [2] (p.84).

### 4.2. Overproduction

Overproduction is sometimes simply a consequence of underproduction [1] (p.36). In L2 learning, learners may try to avoid using certain forms, structures, or words. Instead, they make excessive use of what they believe to be correct, thus resulting in overuse of certain forms or words, which also violates norms of written prose in English. Overuse of simple sentences by CS is definitely the result of avoidance of using complex sentences. Repetition of similar patterns and similar rhetorical means in respectively 55% and 47% of the essays offers more good evidence for overproduction. For example, one of the mostly repeated patterns is the paragraph beginner: "firstly, secondly, thirdly, and finally"; or "with the development of". A rhetorical means of similar form used repeatedly is "Everything has two sides", or "All things have two sides". Some Chinese students do so for fear of misuse of unfamiliar paragraph openers and other sayings of similar meaning.

### 4.3. Calques

According to Odlin [1] (p.37), substitutions, calques, and alterations of structures constitute most forms of production errors. Of these three forms, the errors in Table 2 are largely in the form of calques. Calques are errors that closely reflect native language structure. For instance, in the application of lexis, a sample writer says "Urbanization bring many society problem". The corrected sentence should be: "Urbanization brings about many social problems". The improper sentence involves calques in several areas, one in collocation. In Chinese, the verb "dailai" (带来) alone is used to mean "bring about". Thus, the student writer takes "bring" as the equivalent but neglects the preposition "about". Another area concerns disagreement in subject and verb, i.e. "bring" is misused for "brings", as in Chinese verbs have no inflectional endings; another area of disagreement lies in number of countable nouns, i.e. "problem" is misused for "problems". In Chinese only nouns referring to person can be made plural by adding another character, for example, "xiong di *men*" (兄弟们). One more area of calques is found in the wrong use of part of speech, i.e. "society" is used instead of "social". The choice of the noun over the adjective indicates that in Chinese, many nouns can be made into adjectives either by using themselves or by adding an auxiliary character "de" (的) to them. Calques also occur in the application of articles. Because Chinese is an isolated language, basically, there is no such category as articles to go with the language.

Calques are found to be present in syntax, too. One form of them is "run-on sentences". Passive voice is also an aspect of syntax in which exist phenomena of calques. In Chinese, passive voice tends to be expressed by adding an auxiliary word "bei" (被) before a verb which has no inflectional forms. Such way of presentation is easily found in English essays by CS. The error concerning comparative degree offers another evidence of calques in syntax. In Chinese, comparative degree can be expressed by adding the word "geng" (更) before the word which is being compared. In comparison, the English word "more" looks more like the equivalent of "geng" (更) than adding the morpheme "-er" to the original form.

Calques in discourse made by CS largely rest on three aspects: presentation of information, means for coherence and cohesion, and personal pronouns. In discussion of a topic, Chinese students do not get to the point directly. This indicates the thinking pattern of the first language exerts an important effect on the discourse production of the second language [3]. Wang [4] (p.58) has generalized Chinese way of thinking as curved, but western way as linear. Another obvious form of calques concerning discourse is lack of means of coherence and cohesion in essays by CS. As English is a phonographic language, discourse largely needs grammatical means. In contrast, Chinese is ideographic and heavily relies on means of semantics for cohesion and coherence.

One more form of discourse transfer is improper shift of personal pronouns. In a sample, three personal pronouns – you, I and we – are used alternatively. The frequent shift of personal pronouns often leads to confusion. According to Cai [5] (p.77), the pronoun "we" is used more frequently in Chinese than in English for reasons of different cultures and political beliefs. Westerners emphasize individualism and individual freedom, whereas Chinese have formed a tradition of not being inclined to risk telling what they really think because of a long history of feudalism in the old China [2] (p.105).

## 5. Implications

It is undeniably true that cross-linguistic influence has considerable potential to affect the course of second language acquisition. Furthermore, the present study justifies the influence of negative transfer on Chinese L2 learners. Therefore, helping students to avoid negative transfer should be taken into serious consideration.

Since transfer is part of learning process, and the influence of thinking pattern is substantially part of culture transfer, much emphasis placed on the learning process is bound to result in effective production.

In summary, the findings of the study shed light on underlying causes behind the errors made by CS. Therefore, efforts to help students with effective writing should be made in language teaching. And awareness should be cultivated by taking advantage of language transfer and cultural differences to improve English writing. The research also indicates there is not only one type of theory that is proved to be helpful with effective writing. Therefore, efforts to explore new horizons should always continue.

## References

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