The Negative Transfer in Sentence Pattern in Chinese English Interlanguage

Yunling Yu

Harbin Institute of Technology (China)

yuyunling2005@126.com

Abstract

This paper firstly reviews the history of second language acquisition at home and abroad briefly, and points out that interlanguage and transfer theories play important roles in the whole process. Interlanguage theory emphasizes that second language learners are forming their own self-contained linguistic systems. That is to say, second language learners have the special language system which exists as the intermediate state between native language and target language. And it will also develop and approach to the target language along the IL continuum during learners' second language learning.

While the transfer theory believes when learners experience difficulty in expressing an idea because of lack of the necessary language knowledge, they will turn to their native language for help. The more knowledge about the target language acquired, the less influenced by the learners' native languages. The influence will not disappear as the learner's proficiency grows until it reaches the end of the IL continuum. According to the general fact that one's knowledge of the first language may facilitate or interfere with the learning of something new, transfer is further dichotomized into positive transfer and negative transfer. Because different phases in interlanguage have different contents, here the author is just taking interlingual and intralingual transfer in syntax into consideration.

As an English teacher for non-English major postgraduate students in a Chinese university, the author often finds that Chinese students tend to produce English in a mode of Chinese thinking, and their interlanguage is full of typical Chinese sentence patterns. Therefore in order to detect the strong and weak points in language learning of the students, the author investigates their language output by analyzing the source of the errors in CEIL (Chinese English Interlanguage) among college students and categorized into six kinds as Subject-Predicate (S-P) Predicate Sentences, Existential Constructions, Front-weight Principle in Chinese, Serial Verbs Constructions under Different Subjects, Serial Verbs Constructions under One Subjects and overpassivization. In this research, a questionnaire is designed aiming at the effects of negative transfer in terms of syntax. The purpose is just to find out the percentage of each kind of grammatical feature's occurrence in learners' CEIL. After explicit charts showing this and a syntactical and psychological analysis, the paper then concludes with a discussion of the results and some implications for second language teaching and IL studies.

1. Interlanguage and Chinese-English Learners' Interlanguage

Studies of second language acquisition play an important role in linguistics over the past 50 years. In the field of second language acquisition, one concept has always remained its significant status: the notion of "interlanguage". Linguistics consider that learner language develops systematically. This system known as interlanguage refers to a language between two (or more languages), i.e. target languages that a learner is trying to master and his first language.

By a gradual process of trial and error and hypothesis testing, learners slowly and tediously succeed in establishing closer and closer approximations to the system used by native speakers of the language. A number of terms have been coined to describe the perspective which stresses the legitimacy of learners' second language systems. The best known is interlanguage, a term introduced by Selinker [1]. He defined the term as: "the separateness of a second language learner's system, a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target languages."

The term Chinese-English Interlanguage (CEIL) was first mentioned by Yip [2]. It considers IL as showing features of both learners' native language (here is Chinese) and their target language (in this case is English), attempts to discover the transitional language characteristics of Chinese English learners, assessed Chinese learners' IL from the viewpoints of constant competence transition along the IL continuum during Chinese English learners' learning.

2. Transfer

Transfer has long been a controversial issue, but many recent studies support the view that cross-linguistic influences can have an important impact on second language acquisition. It becomes clear that not a single definition of language transfer can be reached until we understand language learning process. Odlin has claimed that an adequate definition of transfer presupposes "adequate definitions of many other terms, such as strategy, process, and simplification," as well as "a fully adequate definition of language".[3] Here I want to cite a most commonly used working definition of transfer proposed by Odlin:"Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired." [4] Transfer can be positive, when a first-language pattern identical with a target-language pattern is transferred, or it can be negative, when a first-language pattern different from the target-language pattern is transferred. In the latter case, L1-induced errors occur." [5]

Researchers (see especially Taylor 1975)[6] have found that the early stages of language learning are characterized by predominance of interference (interlingual transfer),which is caused by the learner's native language, but once learners have begun to acquire parts of the new system, more and more intralingual transfer--- generalization within the target language ---is manifested. In students' compositions, we can often find such errors as in this sentence, "This event I am the witness." "In the cage shut five hens." Actually all these errors are attributed to negative interlingual transfer in terms of sentence pattern. Negative intralingual transfer, or overgeneralization, can be illustrated in such sentences as "I love him to be simple and hardworking."

3. Research Design and findings

In order to detect the strong and weak points in language learning of the students, I intended to analyze the type and source of the errors in CEIL among college students. In this research, a questionnaire was designed aiming at the effects of negative transfer in terms of syntax. The purpose is just to find out the percentage of each kind of grammatical feature's occurrence in learners' CEIL. The subjects chosen for this study are second-year undergraduates from several departments in HIT (Group 1), and first-year post-graduates in HIT (Group 2). The questionnaires are distributed to about two hundred subjects (sophomore: 110; post-graduates: 100), with 192 of them returned.

The questionnaire comprises two tasks, totally 39 questions (including 5 distracters) concerning 6 kinds of erroneous sentence structures which are considered resulting from interlingual and intralingual transfer. These sentences were designed based on very frequently committed errors collected and then classified from students' compositions. The distracters serve their conventional purpose of disguising the target sentences. The sources of the six kinds of erroneous sentence structures can be divided into two kinds: interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer. The first three belong to interlingual transfer while the rest three belong to intralingual transfer. They are as follows:

(1) Subject-Predicate (S-P) Predicate Sentences in Chinese

Ex.3-1

Yuyan tianfu zhiyou renlei yongyou.

语言天赋只有人类拥有。

* The gift of speech man alone has.

Ex. 3-2

Daolu guize renren yinggai zunshou.

道路规则人人应该遵守。

*The rules of the road everyone should observe.

(2) Existential Constructions in Chinese

Ex. 3-3

Longzili guanzhe yizhi qiangzhuang de laohu.

笼子里关着一只强壮的老虎。

* In the cage shut a strong tiger.

Ex. 3-4

Zuotian louli banlai yijia xinzhuhu.

昨天楼里搬来一家新住户。

* Yesterday in the building moved a new family.

(3) Front-weight Principle in Chinese

Ex. 3-5

Anwei pinkun nongcun de renmen chengle wo de yizhong manzu.

安慰贫困农村的人们成了我的一种满足。

*To comfort the people in the poor countryside was a satisfaction to me.
Ex. 3-6
Gaosu yi chengnian de haizi biefan cuowu shi meiyong de.
告诉已成年的孩子别犯错误是没用的。
*Telling grown-up children not to make mistakes is no use.
(4) Serial Verb Constructions under Different Subjects
Ex. 3-7
Ta baoyuan ta dui ta culu.
她抱怨他对她粗鲁。
*She complained him to be rude to her.
Ex. 3-8
Wo ai ta jianpu qinlao.
我爱他简朴勤劳。
*I love him to be simple and hardworking.
(5) Serial Verb Constructions under One Subject
Ex. 3-9
Ta liuzhe lei shangche qule.
她流着泪上车去了。
*She was in tears and got on the bus.
Ex. 3-10
Ta kanshu kanlei le.
他看书看累了。
*He read the books and was very tired.
(6) Overpassivization
Ex. 3-11
Wo burenwei zheyang qiguai de yijianshi hui fasheng zai yige basui nanhai shenshang.
我不认为这样奇怪的一件事会发生在一个八岁男孩身上
*I don't think such a strange event should be happened to a 8-year-old
boy.
Ex. 3-12
Women de houdai jiang zaoshou huanjing wuran.
我们的后代将遭受环境污染。
* Our descendants will be suffered from the environment pollution.

The two tasks center around these six sentence structures. The first task comprises 35 sentences concerning the six sentence structures. The participants are required to identify them according to the given scales: a. Clearly good English b. Probably good English c. Probably bad English d. Clearly bad English. The purpose of task 1 is to check on the learners' knowledge about these six structures and to probe into the negative transfer.

Because the situation of passive voice is so complex that the second task aims only at this structure. Only four sentences are given in this task, every two of them aimed to test the same verb that appeared in two different contexts. The rationale of this task is that grammaticality is highly context-dependent, that is to say, different sentences have different levels of acceptability in and out of the context. Generally speaking, participants are supposed to take 10-15 minutes to complete the two tasks. Moreover, an interview is conducted to elicit the information about what is going on in the minds of the subjects when they are identifying the sentences given in the questionnaire.

During the process of analyzing the results, the paper only takes those definite identification (grammatical English and ungrammatical English) into consideration, and the results of calculation of the ratio of the correct answers are reflected in the Table 1:

Table 1 CORRECT INDENTIFICATION RATIO

Sources of interlingual and intralingual errors	Correct identification ratio (%)	
	Group 1	Group 2
S-P predicate sentences in Chinese	35	39
Existential constructions in Chinese	31	42
Front-weight principle in Chinese	12	13
Serial verb constructions under different subjects	24	30
Serial verb constructions under one subject	18	19
Overpassivization	21	33

From this table, we can see the correct identification rates of CEIL for group 1 are lower than those of group 2. This shows that group 1 has relatively less consciousness of these CEIL constructions than group 2. This shows CEIL is an intermediate state between native language and target language, and will develop and approach the target one along the CEIL continuum during learners' L2 learning. Please look at the following graph based on the table which more directly reflects this.

Graph 1

Ratio of negative transfer indentification in CEIL
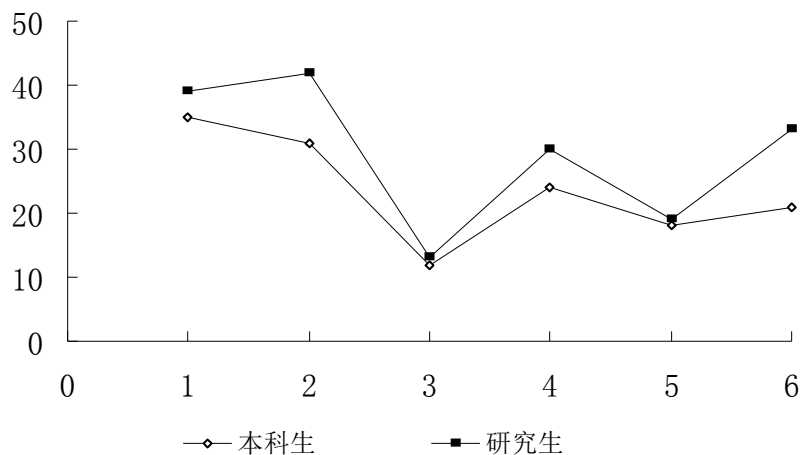
1= S-P predicate sentences in Chinese
2= Existential constructions in Chinese
3= Front-weight principle in Chinese
4= Serial verb constructions under different subjects
5= Serial verb constructions under one subject
6= Overpassivization

In the diagram, the upper broken line represents the graduates' correct identification ratio of these constructions, while the lower one stands for the second-year college students' correct identification ratio of these six sentence structures. This again clearly shows that group 2 is more sensitive than group 1 in these CEIL constructions. But the directions of both of the two broken lines coincide with each other on each sentence structure because we can see the upper line developed almost based on the lower one. This further proves the constantly approximate development of CEIL towards the target language. Also, we can see from the diagram that the correct identification ratio of the existential constructions is the highest one, while that of the front-weight constructions is the lowest.

As for the situation of passive voice with context which is reflected in task 2, the correct identifications for group 1 and group 2 are both very high, 84% and 91% respectively. This is within the author's assumption according to the rationale that grammaticality is highly context-dependent.

4. Implications for the Second Language Teaching

In students' interlanguage, they can not avoid being influenced by their native mode of thinking more or less, the above research can best reflect the typical errors in this case. But how can they get rid of the interference of the mother tongue and try to avoid the negative transfer in syntactic terms?

Firstly, we teachers should be aware of the negative transfer in teaching and inform the students that L2 learning is different from their L1 learning, which could be inevitably affected by negative interference from their previous knowledge of language and learning strategies. Secondly, teachers should compare the different modes of thinking between Chinese and western nations from time to time. Thirdly, teachers should also compare the different language macroscopic structures between Chinese and English. Fourthly, explain the translation skills in reading pedagogy. Fifthly, ask the students to read extensively. Students can meet with a large number of real, idiomatic English language by reading extensively and they can accumulate English idioms and habitual exressions consciously, so that they can minimize the interference of the mother tongue automatically by a vast amount of input gradually.

References

[1] Selinker, L. "Interlanguage". International Review in Applied Linguistics 10 (1972): 1,3.Long, M. and Sato, C. "Methodological Issues in Interlanguage Studies: an Interactionist Perspective". In: Interlanguage: Proceedings of the Seminar in Honour of Pit Corder. ed. Davies and Criper. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984:198.
[2] Yip, V. Interlanguage and Learnability. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995: 113.
[3] Odlin, T. Language Transfer: Cross-linguistic Influence in Language Learning. Cambridge University Press, 1989: 28.
[4] Odlin, T. Language Transfer: Cross-linguistic Influence in Language Learning. Cambridge University Press, 1989: 27.
[5] Ellis, R. Understanding Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
[6] Taylor, Barry P. "The Use of Overgeneralization and Transfer Learning Strategies by Elementary and Intermediate Students in ESL". Language learning 25 (1975): 73-107.