

Negative Transfer of Grammar in Chinese Students' English Learning

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Abstract. In the present Chinese society, the population of second language learning students, especially English learners, is increasing due to the tendency of globalization. Because of different cultural backgrounds and language patterns, it is common for students to make grammar mistakes under the effect of negative transfer. Negative transfer in grammar can be divided into several features, including subject-verb disagreement, tense error, nouns and plural form error, incorrect use of prepositions, incorrect word collocation, and error in word order. The study of negative transfer is helpful to the development of English learning and English education. Therefore, this study reviews the Negative Transfer of Grammar in Chinese Students' English Learning. The main findings include 1) subject-verb disagreement: grammatical disagreement, meaning disagreement, and proximity disagreement, in which grammatical disagreement is caused by negative transfer. 2) tense error: verb transformation errors and sentence structure errors. 3) nouns and plural form error: errors of "s" using and the misjudgment of the singular or plural of the subject. 4) incorrect use of prepositions: errors caused by prepositions that have the same meanings in Chinese but are distinguished more strictly in English. 5) incorrect word collocation: errors caused by cultural differences. People from different cultural backgrounds tend to be influenced by the word composition of their first language. 6) error in word order: introduces more complicated sentence structure that leads to errors, including transformation between statement and general question and place of adverb.

Keywords: Negative Transfer; Grammar; Second Language Learning; English.

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA), also called second-language learning, is the process of people learning a second language in addition to their mother tongues. As the process of globalization developing rapidly in the present society, second language acquisition has become a compulsory course in China. Because of being widely used, English turns out to be the first choice of the second language among Chinese students. According to the research of Rining Wei and Jinzhi Su, the number of English learners/users in China has been estimated to be between 200 and 350 million [1]. As it is pointed out in Chinese Language Interference in Written English, Chinese students from different linguistic environments are still being influenced by their first language either directly or indirectly, though they have been admitted by City College [2].

During the process of SLA, various theories can be used to explain the positive and negative factors of language learning, including universal grammar, behaviorism, interlanguage, and language transfer. To be more detailed, language transfer can be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer. As Paul Lennon points out in *Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis, Interlanguage*, negative transfer is more expected when two languages of the learner have greater differences [3]. Therefore, due to the great difference between Chinese and English, it is common for Chinese speakers to make mistakes in grammar because of negative transfer, which can be reflected in various aspects, including pronunciation, grammar, and pragmatics. Errors in these aspects are acknowledged to be due to pronunciation ways of students' first language, logic and structure of first and second languages, and differences in culture.

During the process of English learning, the negative transfer would have an inevitable impact on learning, which reduces students' learning efficiency. According to *Negative Transfer of Chinese to College Students' English Writing*, the influence of negative transfer leads to errors, overproduction,

underproduction, miscomprehension, and other effects, which will become stumbling stocks in the process of second language learning [4].

Therefore, to improve the average teaching quality of English, it is necessary to analyze and study the negative transfer. Only after we understand the negative transfer of language will we have better ability and learning method to avoid mistakes in this part. Although there is research content on negative transfer in China, it has not formed a complete system but is still extensive. Therefore, the main goal of this paper is to summarize the feature of grammatical negative transfer in the learning process of Chinese students, including.

(1) Subject-verb disagreement: discuss different types of common errors caused by the disagreement between subject and verb, including the missing of “s” in situations of third-person singular subjects, and misunderstanding of the singular or plural of the subject.

(2) Tense error: discuss tense errors and verb transformation errors caused by grammar differences.

(3) Nouns and plural form error: discuss errors caused by the concept of countable and uncountable nouns, in which “s” can be missed or included mistakenly.

(4) Incorrect use of prepositions: discuss prepositions using errors caused by cultural differences.

(5) Incorrect word collocation: discuss word collocation errors caused by culture and interlanguage.

(6) Error of word order: discuss order error caused by differences in the sentence structure of Chinese and English.

2. Negative Transfer in Grammar

2.1 Subject-verb disagreement

Subject-verb agreement means that the verb agrees with the subject in person and number, including grammatical agreement, meaning agreement and proximity agreement, which requires the verb agrees with (1) its subject in singular and plural forms, (2) the singular or plural meaning of its subject, (3) the part of the subject that is near it. Subject-verb disagreement is one of the most common mistakes that Chinese students would make when they start to learn English. For example, students may forget to change the form of the verb when the subject is third-person singular.

The main reason why students make such a mistake is that verbs do not change forms with subjects in Chinese. For example, when English speakers say “he goes to the park” changing “go” into “goes”, Chinese speakers simply say “ta qu gong yuan (he go to the park)”, in which the verb “qu” never changes its form in any situation. In addition to the situation of third-person singular, there are other situations that cause confusion:

(a) When the subject is written as “many a + noun”, it has a plural meaning, but the verb will often be a singular form. For example, “many a worker has been hired”.

(b) When the subject is followed by phrases such as “as well as”, “along with” and “together with”, the verb agrees with the uppermost subject. For example, “He together with his brother has been to New York.”

(c) When plural nouns representing time, money, or distance are used as the subject, the verbs are commonly in a singular form. For example, “one million dollars is a lot of money”.

2.2 Tense error

It is commonly acknowledged by Chinese students, that tense is a confusing part for new English learners. According to the research of Saadiyah Darus and Khor Hei Ching, tense errors account for 12.1% of the total number of errors in the corpus of Chinese-speaking students, which is the second-highest percentage of errors in the study, right after errors of mechanics of writing (19.1%) [5]. The main reason of this phenomenon is that verbs and sentence structures in Chinese do not change their forms with different tenses. In other words, different from English, there are two ways for Chinese speakers to either imply or show the tense:

(a) Use time adverbial directly in sentences.

1) Wo qu xue xiao (I go to school) This sentence can be the standard structure of all following examples.

2) Ming tian wo qu xue xiao (Tomorrow I go to school.) It can also be written as “ming tian wo jiang qu xue xiao (Tomorrow I will go to school)”, but the character “jiang (will)” can be omitted since it is unnecessary.

3) Zuo tian wo qu le xue xiao (Yesterday I go+le to school.) In this sentence, the character “le” is commonly used to indicate that the verb happened in the past.

From the previous example, it is obvious that the tense in Chinese can be implied by context as follows:

4) Wo qu le xue xiao. (I go+le to school.) In this sentence, though there is no time adverbial directly used to show the tense it uses, the character “le” appears to imply that the verb “qu (go)” has been completed and is happened before this sentence is said. However, if the character “le” is deleted, the structure of this sentence will have no difference between the sentence in 1), and the verb itself will not change its appearance in any of the examples. However, different from Chinese, English verbs have various types of form changing, including suffix such as “s”, “es”, “ed”, and “ing”, and irregular verbs such as eat-ate, go-went, and understand-understood. Therefore, it is hard for non-native speakers to use such grammar patterns proficiently.

2.3 Nouns and plural form

A noun is defined as a word used as the name or designation of a person, place, or thing [6]. According to *English Errors and Chinese Learners* written by Abdul Rashid Mohamed, Goh Li Lian, and Wan Rose Eliza [7], errors in the use of nouns found in their study include:

(a) Errors involving countable nouns where the “s” is left out:

It takes 30 minute to get there.

(b) Errors involving singularly countable where the “s” is included:

I bought an apples in the store.

According to the explanation in *English Errors and Chinese Learners*, such errors are caused by learners’ subconscious learning strategy, that they “select the singular form for storage instead of retaining both forms” [7]. As native Chinese speakers, it is common for Chinese students to ignore the plural form of nouns since there is no grammatical rule for plural noun deformation in Chinese. This difference also causes other types of mistakes on countable and uncountable nouns:

(c) Countable nouns shift to uncountable nouns in certain situations. Certain nouns are commonly countable but also uncountable in certain situations, which can be confusing to new learners. For example, when the word “cabbage” refers to a plant, it is countable; but when it refers to a kind of food, it becomes uncountable.

(d) Errors involving uncountable nouns where the “s” is included:

There are two glasses of waters.

2.4 Incorrect use of prepositions

The definition of a preposition is an indeclinable word or particle governing (and usually preceding) a noun, pronoun, etc., and expressing a relation between it and another word [6]. According to the data collected in Darus and Ching’s research, prepositional errors account for 9.0% of the total number of errors in their corpus [5]. Prepositions that have similar meanings can be distinguished strictly in English. For example, prepositions “on” “over” and “above” shares a similar meaning of “higher than” but can further be distinguished from each other by the space relationship between objects. According to Oxford English Dictionary, the following are the definitions of prepositions mentioned above [6]:

(a) On: Above and in contact with; a rest on the upper surface of; above and supported by.

(b) Over: Above, higher up than. Used of position or motion within the space above.

(c) Above: Expressing position in or movement to a place that is higher. Directly overhead. Vertically up.

From the explanation in Oxford English Dictionary, it is obvious that using of the preposition “on” requires the contact of two or more objects, but “over” and “above” require space between objects. In addition, “above” differs from “over” because it requires an object to be vertically higher than another, but “over” does not. However, these three prepositions share the same character or word collocation in Chinese, which are “shang” and “zai...shang”, and the ellipsis can be replaced by objects.

There are various more similar examples. Therefore, when Chinese students begin to learn this part of English grammar, they will find it difficult to master the usage of similar prepositions. As their first language, Chinese does not require them to strictly distinguish between these prepositions.

2.5 Incorrect word collocation

The definition of collocation given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “the habitual juxtaposition or association, in the sentences of a language, of a particular word with other particular words, a group of words so associated. [6]” As it is mentioned in *Collocation in English Teaching and Learning* written by Manfu Duan and Xiaohui, Qin, J. R. Firth first introduced the concept of collocation in 1957, and “Robins (2000, p.64) argues that collocation is ‘the habitual association of a word in a language with other particular words in sentences’”. From the statement of Robins cited in Duan and Qin’s paper, there is a relationship between culture and collocation, which influences the word choice of people speaking different languages [8].

Therefore, as two languages from different cultural backgrounds, English and Chinese words are collocated in different ways. In other words, phrases that are correct in Chinese can become incorrect if they are directly translated into English. As Duan and Qin point out, Chinese students who do not have strong English ability are likely to try to use Chinese sentence patterns or rules while learning, leading to collocation errors in their writing, which is a characteristic of language negative transfer [8]. Chinese is more economical in vocabulary because it uses the same word (character) to express many different meanings, whereas English uses different words. Errors of collocation caused by negative transfer can be divided into two types:

a. Collocation error of verb and noun.

Take the word collocation “turn on the light” as an example, it is correct to say “kai deng (open the light)” in Chinese, which is a wrong collocation in English. Except for the meaning of “open”, the character “kai” has much more meanings in Chinese; according to *Xinhua Dictionary* [9], its meaning includes unfold, spread, separate, unclog, reveal, expand, exploit, begin, manipulate, establish, enumerate, boiling, hold (event), etc.

b. Collocation error of noun and noun.

In *Collocation in English Teaching and Learning*, the authors give examples of the use of the character “guan”, which means venue. When this character collocates with other nouns, the vocabulary will gain the meaning of “venue for certain usage”.

E.g.1. ti yu guan: Physical exercise venue, which means gymnasium.

E.g.2. tu shu guan: Book venue, which means library.

E.g.3. tsan guan: Meal venue, which means restaurant.

E.g.4. da shi guan: ambassador venue, which means embassy.

2.6 Error of word order

Though the basic sentence structure of Chinese and English is both Subject-Verb-Object (SVO), there are still differences shown in more complicated sentences, such as various subordinate clauses, interrogative sentences, etc. In contrast to Chinese, English has a relatively more rigorous grammar pattern, which leads to errors in the English learning process of non-native speakers.

Take the transformation between statement and general question as an example. The statement “ni xi huan ta. (You like it.)” can be changed into question form by adding the character “ma”, which is a modal particle expressing doubt, and a question mark at the end of the sentence, presenting as “ni xi huan ta ma? (You like it + ma?)”. In English, however, the transformation is completed by adding

auxiliary “do” and “does” before the subject. If the verb in the sentence is a be-verb, it should be moved to the beginning of the sentence to complete the transformation.

In addition, adverbs are often placed before the verb in Chinese while in English they can be placed after the verb. Wenjuan Shi mentions in her paper the difference in English and Chinese between the use of “hen”, which means “to a high degree” and “very much” [10]. In Chinese, this adverb is often placed before the verb, but in English, it is placed after the verb, and even at the end of a sentence, such as “I like it very much.” Moreover, when more than one adjective is used to describe an object, the adjectives are required to be listed in a certain sequence, but this rule will not be found in Chinese.

3. Conclusion

The previous analysis shows that grammar negative transfer is mostly caused by differences between cultures and patterns of two languages. While learning a second language, learners tend to apply their native language patterns to the second language in which they are not proficient. As a language of hieroglyphic origin, Chinese is different from English which belongs to the Germanic group of languages, leading to errors caused by negative transfer during the learning processes of students. In conclusion, these errors include subject-verb disagreement, tense error, nouns and plural form error, incorrect use of prepositions, incorrect word collocation, and error in word order.

By studying negative transfer in-depth, the education method can be improved to reduce its negative effect and increase students’ learning efficiency. However, this paper only discusses negative transfer in grammar but does not include other aspects of negative transfer. Therefore, future studies are suggested to the field of education of vernacular English and English culture, thus reducing the influence of negative transfer in other parts of negative transfer, including pronunciation and pragmatics.

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