



Negative Transfer of Chinese College Students' L1 on their English Writing

Jin Shengxia

School of Foreign Studies of Yangtze University, China

***Corresponding Author:** Jin Shengxia, School of Foreign Studies of Yangtze University, China

Abstract: English writing is always considered significant for Chinese college students either for their academic purpose or future career. The study aims to investigate the phenomenon of negative transfer of Chinese college students' first language(L1) in their English writing. The study explores the possible causes and consequences of negative transfer, as well as potential strategies to mitigate its impact on Chinese college students' English writing proficiency. The findings highlight the importance of understanding L1 interference for effective second language acquisition and pedagogy.

Keywords: negative transfer; Chinese college students' L1; English writing

1. INTRODUCTION

Language transfer, the influence of a person's native language (L1) on his or her second language (L2) acquisition, has been extensively studied in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Negative transfer, specifically refers to instances where the structures, vocabulary, or cultural norms of L1 negatively affect the acquisition and use of L2. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of Chinese college students' learning English as a foreign language, as Chinese and English belong to two different language families and Chinese culture is quite different from either English or American culture. On the one hand, Chinese students often encounter challenges due to the influence of their L1. In the eyes of both students and teachers, English writing is the most difficult to be acquired of the five basic English learning skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating). On the other hand, it is a necessary skill to be acquired for them either in their studies or in the job market. So it is obviously of great significance to examine the negative transfer of Chinese college students' L1 in their English writing. The study identifies the specific areas of interference and explores the underlying causes. It aims to shed light on the challenges faced by Chinese college students and provide insights into effective strategies to minimize the impact of negative transfer on their English writing proficiency.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1957, American linguist Robert Lado published "Linguistics across Culture" which is considered as the outset of modern contrastive analysis. In the book, the concept of language transfer was first put forward. In 1970s and 1980s, this theory gained popularity again in the academic community. Terence Odlin (1989: 27) stated how similarities and differences between languages can influence grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation acquisition in his book "Language Transfer: Cross-Linguistic Influence in Language Learning" in 1989. The concept of language transfer was defined by Jarvis & Pavlenko (2008:1) as "The influence of a person's knowledge of one language on that person's knowledge and use of another language". Many Chinese scholars have also been very interested in the theory and done a lot of research into the phenomenon. They hold a positive attitude to the theory of language transfer. When it comes to Chinese college students' English writing, negative transfer is attached even greater importance to in the circle of English educators. According to Su Dingfang (束定芳), 51% mistakes made by English learners whose L1 is Chinese derive from their mother tongue's interruptions.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study involved a sample of Chinese college students majoring in Non-English departments in Yangtze university in China. The 60 participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of proficiency levels and writing abilities. Data were collected through written assignment and interviews. As for the assignment, those participants were asked to write a composition based on the given directions within 30 minutes with words between 120 to 180 on the topic "How to succeed in college". The interviews gathered information on participants' perceptions of their writing challenges and their awareness of L1 interference.

4. DATA OF THE STUDY

Data are simplified. With the full mark of 15 points for the composition, only 8 of the 60 participants got 9-11 points; 39 of them were marked 6-8 points; the rest got 2-5 points. The standards for evaluation for 9 plus include (1) keep to the point;(2) the structure is sensible;(3)the arguments are clear and convincing; (4) there are not many grammatical or spelling mistakes. Among those who got 9 minus, their main problems were found in the structure of the composition, poorly supportive arguments and grammatical and spelling mistakes etc. Since arguments mainly depend on one's life experiences, perspectives and critical thinking ability, the present study focused on the participants' poor performance in other aspects which Chinese readers can obviously see they can be mainly attributed to the negative interference of the participants' native language (L1). To reinforce this assessment, interviews were made as a follow-up step. According to most of those participants, when they were thinking about the given topic, they did not have any idea about the general structure of a typical English writing. They were just thinking about "what can be done to succeed in college, or who is successful in college and what qualities he has". Then, when they began to write, they first thought or even wrote down their ideas in Chinese before their real English writing. After the writing was finished, they checked the sentences with their Chinese meaning in mind. The whole writing process was dominated by the Chinese writing mode except that the language was English.

5. CAUSES OF NEGATIVE TRANSFER IN ENGLISH WRITING FOR CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS

Negative transfer of L1 in Chinese college students' English writing is embodied in many aspects: their thinking mode, expressive styles, paragraph arrangement, sentence structures, tense usage, choice of words, etc. The main aspects will be discussed in the following.

5.1. Thinking Mode

From either those English texts for Chinese college students or the sample writings of all kinds of English tests, it can be easily seen that English writings by native speakers are very direct. A problem is put forward directly in the beginning; the following body part mostly starts with a topic sentence (an argument to explain or analyse the previous problem) followed by supporting details; the last part is usually a conclusion. The obvious feature is always being direct. In contrast, in Chinese people's culture, being too direct in many cases is not very acceptable. Sometimes it is even considered offensive or at least a sign of indifference to others' feelings. This cultural difference is perfectly reflected in Chinese college students' English writing. About 95% of the participants of the study did not use a topic sentence in the beginning of a paragraph to tell directly what they were going to discuss about in it. Instead, they tried to be euphemistic and modest. Showing that one is not very self-confident seems to be regarded as a virtue, which is demonstrated in many Chinese college students' writings. It is common for many students not to introduce a topic directly or tell what they are going to talk about in the beginning or come to a conclusion directly in the end. Instead, it is common for them to use a lot of other people's stories or quotes by famous people to introduce a topic or draw a conclusion. English writing tends to develop from a general statement to specific supportive details while Chinese writing tends to develop from individual cases to a general conclusion. It is somewhat reasonable to suspect that this phenomenon is related with China's long history of feudalism. Under the rule of those emperors who had the supreme power to kill anyone, people did not dare to offend them and had to take great care to express their opinions either orally or in written language. Anyhow it seems to have been many Chinese people's usual practice to "beat around the bushes".

5.2. Discourse Structure

In English writing habit, a passage usually consists of three parts and is usually developed in the order of opening, body and conclusive part. However, in Chinese writing, it seems that there are no such

strict requirements on discourse structure. Only if the writer's point is made clearly and the language is graceful enough, will the reader appreciate it. So, when the subjects were asked to write a passage on "How to Succeed in College", their discourse structure varied from person to person. Of the 60 writings, none had an open part. Thirteen of the participants began the composition with stories of examples of successful students and the stories made up almost the whole composition except that one or two sentences at the end to tell what those stories show on how to succeed in college. Thirty-two took the writing task as one of answering questions and made several suggestions on what to do in college. Some students had only one paragraph for the whole composition while some others had more than five paragraphs with some paragraphs bearing only one sentence. By contrast, in those model English writings, the discourse structure is more fixed and the reader can get the main idea of each paragraph and even the main idea of the whole passage easily by previewing. Compared with them, the discourse structure in Chinese writing is relatively casual. The writers can decide on different ways to begin their compositions. Usually the reader has to finish the whole passage to get to know what is discussed about, the developing method, in what way the supporting details are presented and what conclusion is made.

5.3. Sentence Structure and Order

In the book "Contrastive Studies of English And Chinese Languages" by He Shanfeng, it is pointed out that English emphasizes hypotaxis while Chinese emphasizes parataxis. This can be clearly seen in the different sentence structures and orders between English and Chinese. First, in a typical English sentence, a subject and a predicate verb are the basic parts. Long and complicated sentences may have such other parts as an object, an attribute, an adverbial modifier, a complement and an appositive. Sometimes, those parts may be clauses. However, in Chinese, there is no need for any of those parts to appear as a must. If the meaning of a sentence is understandable, the form does not matter. So many mistakes in the sample writings were made in the study because of this negative influence from Chinese. Here are some examples to demonstrate this. "Knowledge always beneficial". Chinese readers can understand what it means quite well even though it does not have a verb. "You will gain insights into many things when you reading books" is also quite understandable in Chinese readers' eyes despite the mistake in the adverbial clause. When it comes to the differences in sentence order between English and Chinese, we can also take one as an example. In English, "Mary met John in the street yesterday" is a correct sentence. However, in Chinese, the order may be "Mary yesterday in the street met John". So this negative transfer from different sentence order showed up in those participants' writings. "If you meet difficult not easy something" is typically English in Chinese way. Here are some more examples from the participants' compositions to show this kind of negative transfer. "Not only you should listen to your teacher, you also should do your assignments." "If you like what, you do it."

5.4. Tense

Tense is something quite English since there is no such thing at all in Chinese. Tense in English is very important in conveying the writer's meaning. In Chinese, whether it is something in the past, the present, or the future, the forms of the words are the same. People only add more words with meanings of "in the past" or "in the future" to indicate the times. So it is no wonder that Chinese students often make mistakes in English writing related with the usages of tense. There are two possibilities: either attention is not paid as in the sentence "people do not have the opportunity to go to college in the past" or too much attention is paid as in the sentence "We have known that college life is very colorful". In the study, almost all the participants made mistakes in the usages of tense.

5.5. Choice of Words and Expressions

Since most Chinese college students are thinking in Chinese when writing in English, not only are the discourse structure and the sentence structure in accordance with the Chinese writing style, but also the choice of words and expressions is a word-to-word literal translation process. It is hard for a native English speaker to understand the sentence "Body is the money of revolution", but if it is translated into Chinese literally, Chinese readers know it means a good health is essential for everything. Many students make mistakes in choosing appropriate words to express their real meanings due to two reasons. One is that when they memorize words, they only remember those words' meanings in Chinese without understanding those words' connotations in English and they do

not read much to know how those words are used properly. The other reason is that some Chinese words or expressions are hard to find exact counterparts in English. Negative transfer of L1 in Chinese college students' English writing due to improper choice of words can be clearly seen in the following examples from the sample writings of the study: (1) Learning can help us to open our horizon; (2) Playing computer games may spend our precious time; (3) Working hard in university can reflect one's good quality, etc.

5.6. Punctuation

Punctuation is also something that confuses Chinese students. In Chinese writing, the punctuation marks are made according to the expressive meaning. If the sentences express similar meaning, a comma is used after each sentence. A full stop is used only when you come to a new point. However, in English writing, if a sentence is complete, a full stop should be made. Because of this difference, the improper usages of punctuation is almost the most commonly seen mistakes in those participants' compositions, which they themselves did not take very seriously while interviewed.

6. STRATEGIES TO MINIMIZE THE IMPACT OF NEGATIVE TRANSFER

Since the causes of negative transfer in English writing among Chinese college students can be attributed to several factors: different thinking mode between English and Chinese people, different syntactic structures between Chinese and English, the influence of Chinese cultural norms and values and the limited exposure to authentic English writing, strategies to minimize the impact of negative transfer are suggested as follows.

(1) Language is said to be the carrier of culture. When teaching, teachers should often make a contrast to show the different cultures in different fields. No culture is better than the other but just people have different thinking mode and express them in different ways in either spoken or written language. Chinese people tend to come to a point by quoting famous people's sayings or by telling other people's stories. Students need to know it is more acceptable in English to come straight to the point.

(2) When lecturing on grammar, more importance should be attached to the sentence structure and order in English. Chinese students do a lot of reading comprehension exercises to prepare for tests. They are accustomed to memorizing new words to help them score high in reading comprehension. The structure of a sentence or the order of the speech parts is often ignored. To help students express themselves in correct sentences, teachers should let them know there are differences in the two languages' sentence structure and show them what the differences are.

(3) Students should be asked to read more. In Chinese writing, there is a saying going as "Having pored over ten thousand volumes, one can write with godly power", which means ample reading produces fluent writing. It makes sense in English writing too. By reading with a contrast of the two languages' differences in mind, students can not only improve their critical thinking ability, gain insights into the different writing styles between English and Chinese, but also they can improve their foreign language proficiency. The teachers can make use of the passages in textbooks as examples. It is also sensible to recommend some articles from English magazines or journals too. While reading, students should be reminded that some seemingly trivial things like the usages of punctuation and capital letters should also be paid attention to. Those factors matter too in a good writing.

(4) Practice is an important way to learn to do anything. In China, college English classes are usually big. Correcting students' compositions is hard for teachers, so some teachers would not like to assign an English writing task to their students. On the students' part, writing in English is a big headache too. Many Chinese students are only focused on exams in high school. Their deficiency in critical thinking ability shows up once they begin to write. Poor performance in English writing discourages them from trying again. Teachers can give some sample writings to students to help them build confidence in English writing. Some online programs can be used as a powerful teaching tool. They can feed quickly the problems in students' writings back to students, thus improving students' learning efficiency. Since the grades are kept secret to individual students, students are less pressured to try again and again. The teachers can also glance at students' performance and make instant encouragement online.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined 60 participants' compositions to analyze the causes of the problems in Chinese college students' English writing. The data indicate that most problems: the improper passage structure and sentence structure, confusing expressions, wrong choice of words, etc are due to negative transfer of college students' L1 in their English writing. What has caused the negative transfer is discussed about by comparing the different thinking mode, different discourse structure and sentence structure, different usages of tense, different connotations of words between English and Chinese, etc. In the end, some strategies are suggested to help improve the English writing teaching efficiency and the college students' English writing ability such as teachers' more focus on contrastive language teaching, students' reading more extensively and practising more with online software as a teaching tool to correct papers.

REFERENCES

- [1] Robert Lado (1957) *Linguistics across Cultures Applied linguistics for language teachers* [M] University of Michigan Press
- [2] Terence Odlin (1989) *Language Transfer Cross-linguistic influence in language learning* [M] Cambridge University Press
- [3] Jarvis, S & Pavlenko (2008) *A Crosslinguistic Influence in Language Cognition*[M]. New York: Routledge
- [4] 何善芬 (2002) *英汉语言对比研究*[M] 上海: 上海外语教育出版社

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Jin Shengxia, an associate professor in English, mainly teaching non-English majors in Yangtze University in China and specializing in applied linguistics.

Citation: Jin Shengxia. "Negative Transfer of Chinese College Students' L1 on their English Writing" *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, vol 11, no. 9, 2023, pp. 10-14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1109002>.

Copyright: © 2023 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.