

Minimizing “Chinglish” in the Light of Negative Transfer Theory

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Keywords: Negative transfer; “Chinglish”, EFL teaching.

Abstract. This paper analyzes the phenomenon of “Chinglish” in Chinese students’ learning English as their second language. By using the theory of negative transfer, the paper finds Chinese students’ mother tongue hinders them from writing or speaking English as fluently as native speakers. Therefore, EFL teachers should reduce Chinese language’s negative transfer on students’ English learning from phonetics, vocabulary, and syntax.

Introduction

Chinglish is a blend word for “Chinese-style English”. When Chinese people speak or write English, due to the influence and disturbance of Chinese thought pattern and culture, they will undoubtedly create a kind of distorted English, which is abnormal or not in accordance with expressive conventions of authentic English (Chang, 2013,65). Chinglish is a common phenomenon among Chinese English learners. Psycholinguist Steven Pinker, in his popular book *The Language Instinct*, considered the elements of linguistic knowledge to be innate (Steven, 1995). His idea is consistent with Chomsky’s concept about language acquisition in *Universal Grammar* (Vivian, 2007). Both of them agreed that there is a common underlying structure to every language. However there must be some differences between the first language acquisition and the second language acquisition. Especially, according to educational psychologists, there is a negative transfer in the second language acquisition. As for Chinese students who learn English as the second language, negative transfer of Chinese language on English learning will cause the special phenomenon——“Chinglish”.

Transfer refers to the learner’s behavior of transferring what has been learned from one context to another. Research on language transfer began in the 1950s. Lado pointed out in *Linguistics Across Cultures* that learners often transfers the forms and meanings of their native language to the foreign language they are learning (Lado,1957). This transfer is embodied in the learner’s oral expression and actions related to the foreign language culture as well as his process of understanding the foreign language and its culture. Lado and his followers believe that the original habits in the mother tongue sometimes hinder the learning of the second language. The negative effect of mother tongue on second language learning is called negative transfer. Negative transfer of Chinese language on English learning is mainly manifested in three levels: pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax. The following is an analysis of the performance of negative transfer of Chinese language on English learning at these three levels and some strategies to cope with them.

Negative Transfer in Speech

The English learning situation for Chinese students has the following characteristics: First, in most schools, English teaching is undertaken by Chinese teachers, and professional foreign teachers are inadequate. Second, although some Chinese students travel abroad to improve their English, most students live and study in Mainland China, they seldom have chance to practice English after class. Third, English belongs to the Indo-European language family, while Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. The two have huge differences in tone, syllable and phoneme, so the negative transfer effect of the mother tongue on English acquisition is very obvious. For example, most Chinese students have the following problems in English pronunciation: 1. When they pronounce labiodental sounds [F] and [V], most of them do not use their upper teeth to bite the

lower lips; 2. Most Chinese students fail to distinguish nasal sound [n] and lateral sound [l], nasal sound [ŋ] and velar nasal sound [ŋ]; 3. When they pronounce interdental sounds [θ] and [ð], most of them do not use the upper and lower rows of teeth to bite the tip of the tongue; 4. Some of them fail to distinguish /r / and /r/, [s] and [z]; 5. Some of them can not find the proper stressed syllable in polysyllabic words; 6. Some for them do not show the obvious difference between short vowels and their corresponding long vowels; 7. Diphthong is featured with one vowel sound gliding to another, but some Chinese students tend to pronounce only the former vowel sound and completely ignore the latter one, mistaking it as a “pure” vowel; 8. The consonant at the end of a word is often pronounced too deliberately; 9. Most Chinese students get used to uttering English sentences in a level tone, without changes of rising or falling tone.

Rod Ellis pointed out that voice transfer is the most active and solidified. After the critical period, it is almost impossible for any foreign language learner to speak “authentic” foreign language without his own accent due to the interference of negative transfer from mother tongue. Most above mentioned incorrect pronunciations come from Chinese students’ dialects. To avoid these hindrances, EFL teachers should make a survey about where their students are from and then design some specific programs to reduce the influence of local accents on their English pronunciation and intonation.

Negative Transfer in Vocabulary

People often compare vocabulary to the bricks that construct English language mansions. Vocabulary learning is a crucial part for EFL process. Theatrically, the larger the vocabulary is, the greater the language ability is. However, most Chinese students are satisfied with knowledge of some base form and common meaning of a word. They do not explore the connotation or extension of a word, let alone its collocation and idioms related to it. To compensate the lack of this knowledge, most Chinese students over-generalize some English words according to their Chinese meaning. The ignorance of part of speech, polysemy, hyponymy and transitivity leads to some improper expressions. Therefore, a variety of Chinglish expressions appear among Chinese students’ English writing, speaking and translation. The following are some typical misuses of English vocabulary among Chinese students.

1. Misuse of Part of speech: According to a corpus analysis by Xia Lixin, compared with English learners in Spain, France, Netherlands, Finland, and the Czech Republic, the errors on part of speech committed by English learners in China is 4.5 times that of the above mentioned learners in western countries (Xia, 2015, 104-117).

Chinese characters do not use suffixes to indicate their parts of speech, so a Chinese character is indistinguishable in terms of part of speech according to its spelling or calligraphy. For example, in the couplet “海水朝，朝朝朝，朝朝朝落；浮云长，长长长，长长长消”，the Chinese characters “朝” and “长” do not change in inflexion but they can functionalize as noun, verb and adverb in this context. Chinese students are used to this language convention, and thus frequently transfer this convention to English language, which causes many grammatical mistakes in their utterances. For example, if they are asked to translate “我习惯早起” into English, some may mechanically put it this way: “I habit get up early”. In this case, “habit” is regarded as a complete equivalence for “习惯”. The speaker pays no attention to the part of speech for English word “habit”. Here is another example, the road sign “注意安全，坡道路滑” is very common seen in China, but it is translated into “To take notice of safe, the slippery are very Crafty”. Obviously, it is translated simply according to the Chinese order and pattern. When “safe” is used as a noun, it does not equal to “safety”, so if we translate the English sign back into Chinese, it means “注意保险箱，湿滑的路是很狡猾的”.

Shen Jiakuan analyzed the reasons for so high frequency of Chinese students’ errors on part of speech. He attributed it to the different language convention between English and Chinese. He pointed out that “while noun and verb are in exclusive opposition in English, in Chinese they are in inclusive opposition, in which nouns constitute a super-noun category with verb as its sub-category.

In other words, all verbs in Chinese are in fact verbal nouns. The interference of this Chinese Nominalism in learning English as second language by Chinese students is deep and wide-spread, including various word class mistakes, missing of articles, missing and over-use of verb inflections, over-use of copula be, and mistakes in using and understanding negatives.”(Shen,2018,4) According to Shen’s analysis, the misuse of part of speech roots in Chinese language structure. As a qualified English teacher in China, one should not only understand English language, but also know well about his mother tongue and its influences on English learning.

To avoid this negative transfer of Chinese on English, EFL teachers must emphasis the importance of identifying part of speech for English words and properly employ traditional grammar-translation teaching method to build a grammatical structure for the beginners.

2. Misuse of synonymy and hyponymy: English words have seven types of meaning, namely conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflective meaning, collective meaning and thematic meaning. Some English words may share one or two meanings but are different in some other meanings. In most cases, Chinese students tend to look up some English-Chinese dictionaries and read the Chinese explanation of English words, which inevitably leads to misuse of English synonyms. For example, “crime” and “sin”, “family” and “home”, “interfere” and “intervene”, “high” and “highly”, “destroy” and “destruct”, “sympathy” and “pity”, “doubt” and “suspect”, “completed” and “finished” may mean the same to Chinese students and the shadows of meaning are often left unaware of just because they have the same Chinese rendering “罪行” “家” “干涉” “同情” “怀疑” and “完成”.

Ellis believed that the word equivalence between a foreign language and native language was usually superficial and partial, and their connotation difference could lead to pragmatic negative transfer (Ellis, 1997, 51). Misuse of synonyms is a typical negative transfer, while misuse of superordinates may be another. Hyponymy is a term that denotes a subcategory of a more general class. Superordinates are more general while hyponyms are more specific. Due to the limited vocabulary, Chinese students, sometimes only use some superordinates to indicate very specific things. For example, in the public sign in some Chinese supermarkets, “化妆品和香水” is translated into “cosmetics and perfume”. But denotation of “perfume” is extensive, not only referring to “香水”, but also referring to the whole category of products, including eau de toilette, eau de perfume, after shave, shaving balm. So perfume is a very general word here which can not exactly mean “香水”, its hyponym “fragrances” is relatively acceptable.

Although misuse of synonyms and superordinates is not as intolerant as misuse of parts of speech, it shows a distance between native speakers and Chinese English learners. To narrow the gap and improve Chinese students’ accuracy in their expression, the EFL teachers should help them form the habit of using English-to-English dictionary and reduce their dependence on Chinese explanation.

3. Confusion of transitive verbs and intransitive verbs: In English that is considered the hypotaxis-stressed language, sentences are mainly made up by means of inflections and conjunctions. What’s more, since there are many kinds of indefinite verbs and nouns used in sentences, it is essential to use lots of prepositions, kind of linking words, to express grammatical relations. Therefore, prepositions are far more frequently used in English than those in Chinese (Lin, 2017,30). According Crume’s summary, there are totally 286 English prepositions (Wang, 2003, 84) .While the fact is that Chinese language parataxis-stressed and dose not stress a verb’s transitivity, especially in ancient philology. There are only about 30 prepositions in Chinese language. Therefore, many Chinese students often follow an object directly after an intransitive verb in their English writing. This typical grammatical mistake is also caused by negative transfer of Chinese. To reduce this mistake, EFL teachers can adopt a comparative method to elucidate the differences between English and Chinese, helping Chinese students understand the necessity of prepositions and reminding them the different meaning for different collocations.

Lewis (1993) came up with the lexical approach and mentioned that lexical chunks played an important role in second language output. Teaching should emphasize those relatively fixed expressions (Sun, 2011, 32). Moralization of some prefabricated phrases can help them generate proper expressions in a short time so as to reduce negative transfer.

Negative Transfer in Syntax

Chinese language is compared to be a bamboo, while English language is compared to be a tree. That is to say Chinese language is parataxis while English language is hypotaxis. Chinese paragraph is formed by blocks of meaning without many link words, while English paragraph is formed by main clauses and many subordinate clauses, with multitude of link words to connect sentences and clauses. Since the expression of Chinese language is freer and more arbitrary, Chinese language is not as strict as English language in terms of grammar. Therefore, the use of English by many Chinese students is affected by the negative transfer of their mother tongue. Chinese students sometimes simply juxtapose simple sentences without adding any conjunction, which makes the expression less coherent and natural for English native speakers. To improve the coherence and cohesion, EFL teachers should first of all explain the big difference in syntax between English and Chinese and help Chinese students build a tree-like sentence structure instead of bamboo-like sentence structure.

Language is the carrier of thought, and thought is the backbone of language. Without language, thought cannot be shaped; without thought, language cannot deliver rich meanings. English and Chinese differ in thinking mode, including abstraction versus concreteness, aggregation versus divergence, object thinking versus subject thinking, formal logic versus dialectical logic, which causes huge differences in the deep structure. So when this deep structure is embodied by voice and words, some Chinglish expressions come into being. When Chinese students take part in role-plays in class, some of their Chinglish expressions clearly expose the negative transfer from Chinese thinking mode. For example, when Chinese students put on a performance to show their picnic in parks, Chinese students remind their peers “Do not tread on the lawn” “Do not” belongs to the imperative mood in English which has a strong tone and often cause misunderstanding. “Take care of the lawn” is the appropriate and polite way of expression.

Cultural difference is another factor to cause Chinglish. China and English-speaking countries differ in their geography and history, which gives rise to quite different cultures. For example, when Chinese students put on a performance to show their work in a shop, they translate the public sign “顾客就是上帝” into “We treats customers as god”. Xu analyzed this typical manifestation of neglecting cultural differences in this way: “In China, we are accustomed to call customers God, but from the perspective of Westerners, ‘上帝’ is the God which for worship, it is sacred and inviolable, so the westerners feel uncomfortable when they see this public sign translation, the most appropriate translated version can be ‘The patient is our first priority.’”(Xu,2008,141) When describing someone’s extravagance, some Chinese students often translate the Chinese idiom “挥金如土” into “to spend money like dirt”. But it is obscure for an Englishman, because England is an island country surrounded by oceans while China is largely in mainland. Actually, many English idioms are connected to water while Chinese idioms are connected with soil. So “to spend money like water” is more easily understood than “to spend money like dirt” for an English speaker. Here are some other instances, “他胆小如鼠” is literally translated as “He is as timid as a mice” instead of “he is as timid as a rabbit”; “天下着大雨” is translated into “it rains big rain” instead of “It rains heavily”; “我好热呀!” is translated into “I am so hot!” instead of “It’s so hot!”

From these examples, we can see that to avoid this kind of Chinglish caused by neglect of thinking modes and cultural differences, EFL teachers should create some communicative situation and take advantage of these activities to let the students understand the differences in thinking and culture. Only when students’ awareness of the differences of Chinese and English thinking mode and culture is improved, can they adjust their deep structure to a more native way and then make their surface structure shuffle off Chinese negative influences.

Conclusion

English teaching has always been inseparable from linguistic theories. Some English teachers in China have neglected the significance of linguistic theories in foreign language teaching. They

simply emphasize the need to talk more, listen more, and practice more to improve students' performance in examinations. This is tantamount to let a blind man ride a blindfolded horse. Although the practice of listening, speaking, reading and writing without guidance of linguistic theory can also promote English to a certain extent, the effect is often very limited. By understanding the theory of negative transfer of mother tongue, we can find the following effective strategies to help students get rid of the dysentery of "Chinglish".

Firstly, in the teaching of English, especially in the teaching of pronunciation and intonation, on the one hand, the proportion of foreign teachers should be increased to provide students with more opportunities to learn native English pronunciation and intonation; on the other hand, teachers should help students to analyze the negative influences of students' dialect on their English pronunciation.

Secondly, traditional grammar-translation class is not out-of-date and useless. It is useful to explain English grammatical rules. But to remedy the rigidity and alysis of traditional grammar-translation class, a variety of English activities after class should be held regularly. English drama festivals, English corners, dubbing competitions, speech and debate contests can make up for the limit of grammar-translation class and create a communicative situation.

Thirdly, familiarize students with English language structure, thinking mode and culture. Language can not be separated from its culture and tradition. EFL teachers should take chance to introduce the society and culture of those English-speaking countries to students to minimize their psychological distance from English.

Fourthly, comparative analysis is a very helpful way in English teaching. One's mother tongue has both positive transfer and negative transfer. If the teachers can find the similarities and difference between Chinese and English, the similarities can be made use of and the differences can be highlighted. Through comparing and contrasting, students' language ability and cross-cultural awareness can be improved and then Chinglish can be reduced.

Fifthly, in face of the reality that English has germinated into a global language and the influences of Chinese language also rise rapidly with its political and economic power, some scholars advocate that China should glocalize English language teaching by developing Chinglish into China English. China English is "a new English variety that maintains high intelligibility in the global context and incorporates rich local linguistic and cultural characteristics"(Xing Fang,2011,377). But after knowing the negative transfer theory, we should fully understand that Chinglish is usually some improper use of English language unconsciously, and it is irrelevant with cultural identity and confidence, while China English is some deliberate action to promote Chinese in the international community to prevent English learners in China from acquiring a global tongue at the expense of local indigenous languages and cultures. In a word, to differentiate Chinglish from China English is very crucial for EFL teachers.

Acknowledgements

This research was financially supported by "Exploration of English Teaching Modes in the Background of Chinese Culture Going out" (JY2018060) and "Ideological and Political Construction in English and Literature Teaching"(BKJX2019073) by Chengdu University of Information Technology. I am grateful to the fund to enable me to make research for this project.

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