Verbal Negative Transfer in Native Chinese Speakers' IELTS Writing

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of native Chinese speakers are taking IELTS, one of the most official and influential English proficiency tests, for further overseas study. Based on previous researches, observation and data analysis, five types of common verbal negative transfer in native Chinese speakers' IELTS writing are discussed, with their potential reasons unraveled in detail, aiming at offering inspirations and suggestions to IELTS teachers and Chinese test-takers to improve their IELTS writing.

Keywords: IELTS, writing, SLA, verbal negative transfer.

1. INTRODUCTION

Based on Contrastive Analysis (CA) [1,2], a systematic study between two languages aiming at distinguishing their similarities and differences [3], the concept of language transfer (also known as L1 interference, linguistic interference, and crosslinguistic influence) has been established. Language transfer is the "transfer" of the structural patterns of one's native language to a foreign language [4], which can be divided into different types such as positive transfer, negative transfer, conscious transfer, and unconscious transfer, of which negative transfer, a notion describing the inappropriate use of L1 structure in an L2 utterance [5], is most often discussed.

One of the main foci in studies on second language acquisition (SLA) is the development of writing skills [6]. Unanimously considered the most difficult skill to acquire (even in the first language (L1) context), writing has always been a challenge for many second language learners [7], for instance the international students [8]. Grauberg [9] noticed almost 37% of errors result from negative transfer by studying errors in free writing exercises of advanced students who had taken German as second language. Based on an analysis of compositions of students who took German as second language at the University of Michigan, Born [10] has confirmed the findings of Nickel [11] and Hopkins [12] that in SLA, the estimated percentage of negative transfer errors lie between 30% and 50% of total errors. Yu [13] analyzed the errors in CET-4 and CET-6 (College English Test Band 4 and Band 6) writing, the use of Chinese and English verbs, etc., and has claimed in native Chinese speakers' process of learning English, more than 70% of the errors are judged to be the results of negative transfer. Conclusion can be drawn from previous researches that the percentage of negative transfer errors in second language writing is considerably high.

Negative transfer in second language writing touches upon various branches, of which verbal negative transfer has received considerable attention from scholars. On one hand, verb, as one of the most important notional words in languages [14], plays an instructive role in lexicon and syntax, directly pointing to the interpretation of the whole discourse and communication. The statistics of lexical error corpus has manifested the importance of the correct use of verbs: verb errors may directly lead to misunderstanding or even complete failure in communication [15]. On the other hand, based on studies such as the analysis of Chinese university students' CET-4 writing (derived from CLEC (Chinese Learners English Corpus) [16], the analysis of the compositions of Chinese vocational

college students [14], the analysis of the compositions (derived from CLEC (Chinese Learners English Corpus) of Chinese mainland senior high school students [17], etc., verbal negative transfer is one of the main sources of errors in second language writing. Based on previous researches and observation, there are five types of common verbal negative transfer in native Chinese speakers' compositions, respective are, verb tense negative transfer, verb voice negative transfer, negative transfer related to subject-verb agreement, negative transfer related to non-finite verbs, and negative transfer related to part of speech.

In native Chinese speakers' IELTS writing, it is also unanimously considered that there are a great number of errors caused by the above-mentioned five types of verbal negative transfer. However, the number of related studies is small, and current researches have displayed several drawbacks. Several researchers have focused on seemingly broader issues, for instance "negative lexical transfer in native Chinese speakers' IELTS writing", but the analysis sessions of their researches have actually fallen into the category of "verbal negative transfer", showing that they have failed to narrow down the themes. In terms of other researchers, although they have focused on different types of verbal negative transfer in native Chinese speakers' IELTS writing, but have failed to reveal the reasons for this phenomenon and thus have failed to give innovative suggestions and insights to IELTS teachers and Chinese IELTS test-takers.

In light of the previous researches, this study has only focused on discussing the reasons for the five types verbal negative transfer, displaying a more targeted and detailed goal. In addition, considering that an increasing number of native Chinese speakers are taking IELTS, IELTS being one of the most influential English language proficiency tests, Chinese students' poor performance in it (according to the official white paper published in 2019, the average score of Chinese IELTS test-takers is around 5.6, which is below the global average score, 6.1, and doesn't meet the admission requirements for most universities that teach in English), and writing being the most difficult session among the four parts of IELTS (listening, speaking, reading, and

writing) [18], it's essential to find ways to help Chinese test-takers improve their IELTS writing. Therefore, this study has adopted a more rigorous approach--collecting and analyzing the IELTS writing samples of native Chinese speakers, and counting the number of occurrences and percentages of errors caused by different types of verbal negative transfer in their IELTS compositions, thus aiming at offering inspirations and suggestions to IELTS teachers and Chinese IELTS test-takers.

2. DESCRIPTION OF PRIMARY DATA

To ensure that the data is unbiased and the suggestions more applicable to most Chinese IELTS test-takers, IELTS writing samples of native Chinese speakers with different English levels have been analyzed.

More specifically, 45 IELTS writing samples (numbered W1-W45) of native Chinese speakers have been collected (derived from Baidu Documents) and classified into three sections in terms of score, 5-5.5, 6-6.5, and 7-7.5, of each section 15 samples have been analyzed.

Based on different score ranges, the number of occurrences and percentages of errors caused by different types of verbal negative transfer have been counted and analyzed in native Chinese speakers' IELTS writing samples.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study mainly focuses on five types of common verbal negative transfer in native Chinese speakers' compositions, respective are, verb tense negative transfer, verb voice negative transfer, negative transfer related to subject-verb agreement, negative transfer related to non-finite verbs, and negative transfer related to part of speech. The following part of this study illustrates the reasons for the above-mentioned five different types of verbal negative transfer and shows the percentages of errors caused by each type of verbal negative transfer (Table 1).

Table 1: The Number of Occurrences of Different Types of Verbal Negative Transfer

The Number of Occurrences of Errors caused by Different Types of Verbal Negative Transfer/ Score	5-5.5	6-6.5	7-7.5	Total	Percentage
Subject-Verb Disagreement	25	20	4	49	36.30%
Negative Transfer Related to Non-Finite Verbs	17	8	7	32	23.70%
Verb Tense Negative Transfer	20	4	3	27	20.00%
Verb Voice Negative Transfer	11	6	3	20	14.81%
Negative Transfer Related to Part of Speech	4	2	1	7	5.18%

3.1. Verb Tense Negative Transfer

Tense refers to the temporal information expressed in the grammar, and plays an important role in second language acquisition. Semantically, tense relates a situation to a time and thus has scope over the verb and its associated arguments [19]. Most of the world's languages have temporal expressions, but the expressions of time are different, and people don't have the same level of consciousness of time as well. Therefore, verb tense negative transfer may occur during second language acquisition. For instance, the expressions of time in Chinese are different from that in English, besides, native English speakers have stronger consciousness of time than native Chinese speakers. As a result, when Chinese learners write in English, verb tense negative transfer may occur.

In 45 writing samples, errors caused by verb tense negative transfer account for 20.00% of total errors caused by five different types of verbal negative transfer, ranking third in terms of proportion, which are instantiated in the following Chinese speakers' IELTS writing:

* Nowadays, many countries has been tried to develop the Advances items to solve the lack of food in the world by the way why many people around the world still go hungry. (W24)

* In 2000 there were 10% and in 2010 there are 15%. (W24)

*Nowadays, more than million tons of wastes have been being produced which from home everyday and some people claim that not enough of the litters is recycled. (W25)

*On the other hand, just 3.6% of people in the former country was 60 years old or more in 2000, while in the latter country this figure is represented with 24.1%. (W26)

*Lastly, the only difference that we will notice between the two groups is the percentage on the amount of students. (W27)

Two potential reasons may result in this phenomenon.

Firstly, there are discrepancies between English and Chinese in time expressions. English is rich in inflectional expressions, and it uses abundant inflections to express the corresponding temporal categories [20]. For example, English verbs add affixes like "d" and "ed" to show whether an incident might occur in the past (i.e the past tense). However, Chinese is an analytic language, which expresses grammatical meaning through function words and word order [20]. Chinese expresses the concept of time through the direct use of nouns that represent specific time periods, such as "zuó tiān" (昨天, meaning yesterday) and "jīn tiān" (今天, meaning today). Besides, as a typical analytic language,

verbs don't have morphological changes in Chinese. Therefore, when Chinese native speakers write in English, Chinese consistently casts a negative impact on their expressions of time in English, disabling them to accurately mark the tenses of English verbs.

Secondly, there are discrepancies between native English and Chinese speakers' consciousness of time. Native English speakers have stronger consciousness of time than native Chinese speakers [21]. Because of the relatively weak consciousness of time, under normal circumstances, native Chinese speakers would often see "time" with a "blurred" or "fuzzy" attitude. They wouldn't struggle to figure out the exact time of the occurrence of an incident when reading or writing a piece in Chinese, especially a piece with a long and changeable time span. Therefore, when writing in English, native Chinese speakers often fail to notice "When does an incident happen exactly? Does it occur in the future? Or did it happen in the past? Or does this past event have present consequences?" That causes confusion about the use of English verb tenses.

3.2 Verb Voice Negative Transfer

Voice describes the relationship between the action and the participants. When the subject is the carrier or executor of the action, the verb is in active voice. When the subject is the patient or undergoer of the action, the verb is in passive voice [22]. In both Chinese and English, passive voice is commonly used. However, passive voice is embodied and understood differently in these two languages, which causes the emergence of verb voice negative transfer in Chinese English learners' writing. Errors resulted from verb voice negative transfer have taken 14.81% of total errors caused by verbal negative transfer in 45 writing samples, which cannot be ignored. Typical examples are listed as follows:

*Another advantage of talents is that they will be saw_by more people. （W2）

*It can be said that there are lots of misconceptions. (W9)

*Their lives are compare_to books. (W9)

*The units divide into five parts about Coal, Oil, Natural Gas, Hydro Power and Nuclear Power. (W10)

*There is a car park which located in the east side of the hospital. (W16)

*The discovery was changed people's life. (W41)

This phenomenon may have two potential causes.

Firstly, English and Chinese differ in the formation of voices. When expressing a passive activity, in English, the structure "be+done (the past participle of a verb)" should be used. English, as a typical fusional language, the forms of its verbs needed to be modified

when describing something passive. However, in Chinese, prepositions such as "bèi"（被）are put before the verbs to express passive activities. Besides, as a typical analytic language, Chinese verbs don't have morphological inflections, so the forms of the verbs do not need to be modified when describing passive incidents. Therefore, many native Chinese speakers have difficulty in getting the "be done" structure and the morphological inflections of the English verbs right. The discrepancies in the formation of voices of English and Chinese lead to the phenomenon of verb voice negative transfer in native Chinese speakers' IELTS writing.

Secondly, native English and Chinese speakers understand voices differently in the two languages, for instance, passive voice in English and Chinese functions differently. In English, using passive voice can avoid pointing out the subject, thus showing an air of objectivity. In Chinese, however, passive voice is not used very often as it suggests something unpleasant might have occurred [23]. Therefore, when writing in English, many native Chinese speakers would be confused about the function of passive voice and tend to overuse passive voice in their writing.

3.3 Negative Transfer Related to Subject-verb Agreement

Most human languages exhibit agreement of one sort or another [24], and have different agreement systems [25].

Being a fusional language, along with syntactic agreements, English has morphological agreements, such as subject-verb agreement, which means that singular subjects take singular verbs, and plural subjects take plural verbs [26]. English verbs need to be modified in accordance with the number of subjects. Being an analytic language, however, Chinese is not inflected in the aspect of morphology, so it only has syntactic agreements such as the agreement of sentence final particles (SFP) with predicates [25], and the agreement of classifiers with nouns [27], and doesn't have agreement systems on morphological level, such as subject-verb disagreement. Verbs in Chinese don't need to be modified in forms according to the change of the subjects.

Conclusively, the morphological inflection leads to different agreement systems in English and Chinese, represented by the fact that Chinese doesn't have subject-verb agreement, which causes Chinese to cast a negative impact on English subject-verb agreement when native Chinese speakers are writing in English, leading to a typical error type--subject-verb disagreement.

In 45 writing samples, errors caused by negative transfer related to subject-verb agreement account for

36.30% of total errors caused by five types of verbal negative transfer, ranking first in terms of proportion. Typical examples are listed as follows:

*Talents is the essential requirement to be successful. (W2)

*Here are my own view. (W2)

*The main causes is the family and the school. (W4)

* Parents do not let them watch films which has fight or blood. (W4)

*When people come to university, most of them is more than 18 years old. (W9)

*The main features is city hospital. (W16)

*I gives one example of the development of science and technology. (W21)

*Heroin and marijuana have legitimate medical applications, while tobacco has none. (W36)

*A person never give up in adverse situations. (W42)

*Cheap air flight lead to the great consumption of nature resources. (W43)

3.4 Negative Transfer Related to Non-finite Verbs

Finiteness, as a grammatical concept, originated from the study of Latin language, which has rich morphology. Finiteness refers to: because of certain natures of a subject (person, number, etc.), the subject requires its corresponding predicate verb to be modified so as to reach an agreement [28]. For modern English, the concept of finiteness is narrowed down to the finiteness of verbs [29]. By far most English verb forms can be finite as well as non-finite [30]. Chinese is different from English in the distinction of finiteness and non-finiteness, besides, the different mindsets of native English and Chinese speakers lead to their different understanding of finiteness and non-finiteness, which lead to errors caused by negative transfer related to non-finite verbs in native Chinese speakers' IELTS writing.

In 45 writing samples, errors caused by negative transfer related to non-finite verbs account for 23.70% of total errors caused by five types of verbal negative transfer, ranking second in terms of proportion. Typical examples are listed as follows:

*There are lots of examples can also demonstrate it. (W2)

*Children can obtain higher degrees from universities will definitely have better future. (W8)

*The university provide student more practical training is very necessary.(W9)

*Producing rubbish bags can make it to have value.(W25)

*By attending concerts and visiting oil-painting exhibitions, our leisure time can be more interesting. (W41)

*Cheap air flight lead to the great consumption of nature resources makes sense to some extents. (W43)

The following part of this article illustrates the above-mentioned potential reasons in detail that may result in negative transfer related to non-finite verbs.

Firstly, there are discrepancies between English and Chinese in the distinction of finiteness and non-finiteness. As is mentioned before, finiteness in modern English is narrowed down to the finiteness of verbs. In English, traditionally, a finite verb is the form "to which number and person appertain" [31]. Non-finite verbs, most of them found in English are infinitives, participles and gerunds, do not show a particular tense or subject (Longman Dictionary). In English, the distinction between finite and non-finite verb forms is well-established [30], and rather clear. Chinese, however, has different ways to distinguish finiteness from non-finiteness: major theories are through the distinction of "controllable" verbs like "shuō" (say) and "uncontrollable" verbs like "zhǔn bèi" (prepare) [32], through modal participles in aspectuality [33], through the distinction of word order [34], and through the time information of an incident [35]. Therefore, the distinction of finiteness and non-finiteness is different in English and Chinese, with the distinction in Chinese more complicated and ambiguous, which leads to errors caused by negative transfer related to non-finite verbs in native Chinese speakers' IELTS writing.

Secondly, native English speakers have stronger consciousness of space than native Chinese speakers, which enables them to distinguish finite verbs from non-finite verbs more easily. Native English speakers have stronger consciousness of space. English sentences have distinct "layers" and focus more on the spacial structures [36]. An English sentence is generally composed of a "focal" part which contains major information of the sentence and is often in the main clause, and a "background" part which contains minor information of the sentence and is often in the subordinate clause [21]. Because native English speakers have stronger consciousness of space, they would naturally make the verbs in "minor information" part into non-finite verbs, so as to underscore or highlight the predicate verbs in the main clause. Native Chinese speakers, however, have relatively weaker sense of space. Chinese sentences are "flat", with fuzzy boundary of main and minor information [21]. Therefore, it is difficult for native Chinese speakers to distinguish which verb is the central verb, which verb is finite and which is not, which leads to errors caused by

negative transfer related to non-finite verbs in native Chinese speakers' IELTS writing.

Thirdly, native English speakers have stronger consciousness of separating subject from object, while influenced by the idea that "man is an integral part of nature", native Chinese speakers are relatively weaker in distinguishing subject from object, which leads to "dangling participles" errors, a typical type of errors caused by negative transfer related to non-finite verbs in native Chinese speakers' IELTS writing. Native Chinese speakers show their subject-oriented consciousness in certain ways: the whole event or an element in the whole event or the connection between different events is pure conjecture [21]. For example, in a Chinese sentence with two clauses separated by a comma, like W41, the subject of the first clause can be different from that of the second. The scene described in the first clause is observed from a human's perspective while the scene described in the second clause focuses on the objective world. Native Chinese speakers would somehow personify "our leisure time", representing their ambiguity of the boundary of the subject and the object world. In English, however, such sentences show typical "dangling participles" errors, which means the participle structure in one of the two clauses doesn't have a corresponding subject, and thus is "dangling". In W41, the subject of the participle structure (by attending concerts and visiting oil-painting exhibitions), instead of "our leisure time", should be "I" or "we", which is omitted, thus leading to the participle structure "dangling".

3.5 Negative Transfer Related to Part of Speech

Part of speech refers to a category of words (or, more generally, of lexical items) that have similar grammatical properties. In dealing with linguistic subjects, it is necessary to have names for the various classes into which words fall naturally, and which are generally, but not very felicitously, called "part of speech" [37]. The acquisition of the parts of speech of English words is extremely important for second language learners. The part of speech of a word is a combination of vocabulary and grammar, and it is the basis of the use of vocabulary. Therefore, the mastery of lexical part of speech is the prerequisite for English learners to analyze and understand the sentence structure, and to output correct English sentences in necessary condition [38]. There are various kinds of parts of speech, for instance, noun, verb, adjective, etc. However, different languages have different presentations and classifications of part of speech, which leads to negative transfer during second language acquisition. For example, there are differences between English and Chinese in the presentations and classifications of part of speech. When Chinese learners

learn English, negative transfer related to part of speech may occur.

In 45 writing samples, errors caused by negative transfer related to part of speech account for 5.19% of total errors caused by five different types of verbal negative transfer, ranking last in terms of proportion, which are instantiated in the following Chinese speakers' IELTS writing:

> * Starting give education at school so that when they growth up they will do easier. (W25)

> * In general, the government would restrain the liberty of criminals as a means of punishment. (W35)

> * The most of their life is compare with lots of books rather than practical training. (W9)

Two possible reasons may result in this phenomenon.

Firstly, there are discrepancies between English and Chinese in word formation. As an inflectional language, English has various ways to form words. For example, the word "arrange" in English is a verb, and its noun form is "arrangement". "-ment" is added to certain verbs to make them nouns. However, Chinese achieves this by changing syntactic functions without any modification in the form of the word itself. For example, "nǐ jīn tiān de ān pái shì shén me" (meaning "What's your arrangement today?") and "wǒ yào ān pái hǎo wǒ de cái wù" (meaning "I must arrange my financial affairs.") reveal that, in Chinese, the same word "ān pái" (安排, meaning arrange and arrangement) show different parts of speech by existing in different grammatical positions in sentences. Therefore, when Chinese native speakers write in English, Chinese would have a negative impact on their use of part of speech.

Secondly, there are discrepancies between English and Chinese in the classification of parts of speech, and the classification of parts of speech in English is clearer than that in Chinese. English is a member of the Indo-European family of languages with abundant morphological changes (nouns have singular and plural forms, verbs have conjugation, adjectives have grade conjugation, etc). Morphological changes of English can reflect the parts of speech to a large extent, so English can use morphological changes to classify parts of speech. Chinese, however, belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of languages, which means it has few changes in word forms. Therefore, English and Chinese are different in the classification of a parts of speech. For example, the word "run" can be used both as a verb and a noun in Chinese, but in English, it can only be used as a verb. Besides, it is also because English has much more morphological inflections than Chinese that the classification of parts of speech in English is clearer than that in Chinese. It is easier for individuals to know what part of speech of a word is in English than in Chinese. For example, in English, words ending in "-ment" are usually nouns, words ending in "-cal" are adjectives, and words ending in "-ly" are adverbs, but there are no such rules in Chinese. Therefore, negative transfer related to the part of speech occurs.

4. CONCLUSION

Faced with the fact that there is an increase in cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and western countries, and Chinese students poor performance in IELTS, one of the most important language proficiency tests, this research has unraveled the reasons for five types of verbal negative transfer (negative transfer related to tense, voice, subject-verb agreement, non-finite verbs, and part of speech) in native Chinese speakers IELTS writing, and by analyzing 45 IELTS writing samples of native Chinese speakers, counted the percentage of errors caused by different types of verbal negative transfer.

Based on the previous analysis and statistics, two inspirations and suggestions for IELTS teachers and Chinese IELTS test-takers have been put forward. Firstly, it is important for Chinese test-takers to understand the apparent and psychological reasons result in verbal negative transfer, thus avoiding errors caused by verbal negative transfer in their IELTS writing. A solution to cultivate a profound understanding of these reasons, or in other words, to better understand the discrepancies between English and Chinese, and between native English and Chinese speakers, is to create an authentic English learning environment. Chinese IELTS test-takers can start with reading native English novels, listening to English news on a daily basis, and keeping frequent and consistent interactions with native English speakers. Secondly, by analyzing the statistics, this research has found that the percentage of errors caused by negative transfer related to subject-verb disagreement is the largest, reaching 36.30%, followed by that related to non-finite verbs, reaching 23.70%. The percentage of errors caused by verb tense negative transfer also comes up to about 20%. Statistics has shown that native Chinese speakers are more likely to be affected by the above-mentioned three types of verbal negative transfer, which IELTS teachers should pay more attention to in their daily process of teaching.

A few imitations still exist in this research however. This research only investigates five types of verbal negative transfer, focuses only on native Chinese speakers' writing, and targets only on the IELTS test. Future researchers can provide more enlightenment on these aspects.

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