

Analysis on Negative Transfer of Chinese to Vocational English Practical Writing

Wei Chen^{1*}

¹Fuzhou Polytechnic, 8 Lianrong Road, Fuzhou University Town, Fuzhou, Fujian, 350108, China

*Corresponding author. Email: guanghua.ren@gecademy.cn

ABSTRACT

In China, vocational education has made great progress in recent years. English teaching is considered as an important part for vocational education system. How to improve students' ability of English practical writing has brought a heat discussion. The paper focuses on what the negative transfer of the first language brings to English writing in the primary level of second language acquisition. Negative transfer refers to the effect of the first language that forms obstructions on the second language learning, which will cause students to make errors when they do the English outputting. Primary writing errors such as comma splice, the mixing use of personal pronoun, incorrect verb tense and non-predicate error can be well explained by the negative transfer of the first language. These errors can function as a feedback for vocational students' English learning. English writing samples are collected from non-English major students in a Chinese polytechnic college. Negative transfer of Chinese is applied to explain why students will make these errors. Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis, it shows that the main writing errors in the primary phase originate from the negative transfer of the first language and therefore advocates that writing errors should be paid enough attention in vocational writing teaching.

Keywords: *Negative Transfer, Writing Errors, Vocational English Writing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the information era, English has evolved into a strong power to promote the global integration and accelerate the update of technology, and English education is treated as a very essential constituent in Chinese education system. In polytechnic colleges, English is a required course and students usually prepare to finish the course of English for careers in two or four semesters. The course is designed to improve students' practical performance of English including linguistic and practical skills in intercultural communication in the future and simultaneously to develop both learning strategies and the awareness of inter-cultural communication [1]. That provides an adequate account of what students need to complete in the course. English teaching in polytechnics for non-English majors should mainly focus on the practice of English that is related with their own majors and Lina He implicates that it is important to emphasize the instrumental motivation in vocational English education [2]. However, for the specialty of higher vocational education in China, the vocational English teaching is quite different from both college English teaching and

secondary English teaching. For example, Yaqiu Jin mentions that Vocational English Level A and B in polytechnic colleges require much less vocabulary than the requirements of College English Test Band 4 (CET4) or College English Test Band 6 (CET 6) in university [3]. Students usually start with a relatively weak English foundation. As a result, they generally present a bad performance referring to whatever listening, speaking, reading or writing. English writing is one of the most important practices in English education and Ying Liu indicates that English practical writing should work as the basic skill embraced with vocational features in polytechnic education system [4]. As a part of English skills, writing marks the comprehensive exercise of lexicons, syntax and grammar, etc. Jing Chen also discusses that writing ability of vocational English not only promotes students' all-round quality but also improves their ability of scientific research even to change their futures [5]. Vocational English writing is aimed at practical writing, including letters, internship advertisement, sick note and the like. For students with poor English basis in polytechnic colleges and the importance of English writing, as Yue Wang mentions, how to improve the education of English writing for

non-English majors is regarded as the common challenge for teachers in polytechnic colleges [6]. Under the background of English teaching reform, many teachers and linguistics attach great importance to the writing errors and consider errors as a breakthrough of advancing students' interlanguage.

Errors are an important linguist expression in students' writings during their primary phase of developing the second language. These errors in interlanguage writing in one part set a writing obstruction and, in another part, provide a way for students to improve written expressions. Errors are defined as "the results from learners' lack of the second language", which is different from mistakes as "the results from some kind of processing failure" [7]. Xiaoli Li make a comprehensive analysis about these errors in practical writings, including format errors, discourse structure errors and linguistic errors [8]. In addition, what to cause these errors are treated as interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, induced factors and lack of enough attentions [9]. When Chinese vocational students learn English for careers, errors occurring in their essays in part marks the inevitable influence from the first language for the great differences between Chinese and English. These errors mainly exist in the aspect of grammar. Teachers can identify the level of students' interlanguage through locating and analyzing the errors caused by negative transfer and adjust their teaching methods and syllabuses to help students figure out the negative transfer from the first language so as to avoid the negative transfer.

Now here comes to the first language negative transfer itself- a brief discussion of what the negative transfer in fact refers to and its relationship with writing errors and writing education. The word "Transfer" is brought from the area of psychology into the case of second language acquisition and evolves into a trend in the area quickly. It deals with "the transfer of elements acquired (or habituated) in L1 to the target L2 [10]. The transfer is generally divided into two parts, positive and negative. When we talk about positive transfer, we mean that both languages are approximate in some parts and L1 will promote L2 learning while the negative transfer, sometimes called interference, will result in obstructions in learning. Many people connect the negative transfer with the writing errors and apply it to promote students' writing skills. The negative transfer usually appears in the primary phase of second language learning and therefore teachers should pay more attention to the negative transfer so as to minimize the limitations [11]. There are many types of negative transfer explained by linguistics. Lian Li contributes a further understanding of the cause of Chinese negative transfer and thinks that negative transfer mainly comes from Chinese syntax and Chinese cultures [12]. Ying

Wu studies the negative transfer from phonetics, lexicons, syntax and pragmatics [13]. Since the influence of mother languages on the second language learning is always a focus for the research, errors from the aspect of L1 negative transfer in writing play an important role in improving the interlanguage. English writing education is a relatively weak and difficult part in English teaching, and Miao Li suggests that if teachers instruct students to conceptualize or systematize the norms of second language, students can avoid the negative transfer or transmit the negative transfer to positive transfer [14]. Based on these views, it is explicit that negative transfer makes a great influence in English writing and English writing education. Through those errors with the explanation of negative transfer, some hints can be provided to both teachers and students in second language learning.

In recent years, the negative transfer research in English writing improves considerably; however, the research on that of vocational students' English writing is limited and the data is not adequate. Therefore, the paper collects writings from students in the polytechnic college so as to further discuss the negative transfer appeared in the writing so as to better improve students' writing performances.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research collects 49 valid writings from 51 students (45 male/6 female), with average age of 18.4 (± 0.70), majoring in unmanned aerial vehicle in Fuzhou Polytechnic College. They are freshmen in the polytechnic college. The writing topic is to write an invitation as a practical writing exercise. Based on written essays, the paper makes a classification of writing errors to figure out main types and causes of these errors. The paper will study the main four types of writing errors as followings: 1) comma splice; 2) personal pronoun error; 3) verb tense error; and 4) non-finite verb error.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the research, subjects are required to write an invitation to invite friends to take part in the house-warming party. The analysis on students' writings is designed to find out the most frequent writing errors in practical writing for polytechnic students. Based on the data analysis, it is figured out that 48.98%, 44.90%, 42.86% and 36.73% students made the error of comma splice, personal pronoun, verb tense and non-predicate verb, respectively. According to the writing analysis collected from 49 subjects, the above grammar errors are major obstructions in the way to improve students' writing ability and what to cause these errors is mainly from the negative transfer of Chinese.

3.1. Comma splice

The most frequent error appearing in students' writings is comma splice. Comma is a very important and highly-frequent punctuation applied in English writing. According to Zhengling Tian, it refers to comma splice as the incorrect use of comma [15]. The comma splice exactly means that writers use comma to connect two complete sentences that contain the subject and predicate. What to cause comma splice in English writing is regarded as the negative transfer of Chinese as the mother tongue for Chinese vocational students. In Chinese, comma is applied in expressions relatively flexibly compared with that in English. Comma can link two complete sentences in terms of meaning or structures without any conjunction in Chinese. What's more, some Chinese writers can even apply the punctuation of comma to the whole passage without serious errors. However, if Chinese usage of comma is brought to English writings, the serious punctuation error of comma splice will result in wrong grammatical expressions, ambiguous syntactical meaning, vague syntactical logic, and the like. For example, in the research, student wrote the sentences that "We will have a lot of games on my party, we will sing, dance and play computer games, also we will eat a lot". It is obvious that the three complete sentences are coordinating and the correct form should be that "We will have a lot of games on my party, we will sing, dance, and play computer games, and also we will eat a lot". However, the student is affected by the negative transfer of Chinese comma use. The subject in the research also write the sentence like "I have just moved to a new house, I want to invite you to come my new house". There is a causal relationship between two sentences and in Chinese, and writers generally will express it by using comma rather than pointing out the relationship explicitly.

3.2. Personal Pronoun Error

Another typical error found in the writings is the misuse of personal pronoun. The misuse of personal pronoun mainly implicates that writers hold a vague conception of nominative pronoun, objective pronoun, adjective possessive pronoun and nominal possessive pronoun. As a result, writers may choose to put the pronoun of "me" that should be in the objective case into the nominative case. Students who take Chinese as the mother tongue generally will understand and well master the appliance of the nominative pronoun and adjective possessive pronoun while suffer a lot when they meet objective pronoun and nominal possessive pronoun. It can be well explained on the basis of the negative transfer from Chinese. In Chinese, writers will not tell the difference between nominative case and objective case, or adjective possessive pronoun and

nominal possessive pronoun. It means that the pronoun spelling form will be same in both nominative case and objective case. What's more, the nominal possessive pronoun will not be applied into Chinese writings. As a consequence, students will have difficulty in mastering the formula that the nominal possessive pronoun is equal to the adjective possessive pronoun followed by a noun. When this kind of pronoun appliance is transferred to English writing, pronoun errors will happen. In the research, student wrote the sentence "I look forward to you coming to my new home" to replace the correct form of "I look forward to your coming to my new home", which is the typical form of the misuse of objective pronoun and adjective possessive pronoun. The failure of nominal pronoun is that "And my have many foods and drink" which should be "And I have many foods and drinks". The sentence that "Would you like to come to my?" implicates the typical error of nominal possessive pronoun in which the word "my" should be "mine".

3.3. Verb Tense Error

Verb tense will be discussed in this part. In English, the expressions of verb tense are more complex than that in Chinese. There are three tense we need to mention in the paper including the present tense, the past tense and the future tense. In English, writers will implicate the tense depending on both the temporal adverbial and conjugations of verbs. Most of English verbs will contain five basic forms such as the base form, singular form in third person, present participle form, past form and past participle form by attaching different inflections. While in Chinese, people in most situations will rely on the context itself, the temporal adverbial or some auxiliary verb to express the tense. For instance, Chinese speakers will realize the past concept through adding the word "le", "zhe" or "guo" or even relying on the time markers like "zuo tian" (yesterday). There won't be different forms of verb telling different tenses. However, in English, it is necessary to apply different forms of verbs to distinguish tenses and sometimes the time adverb will be attached to the syntax. Therefore, another negative transfer of Chinese will take place during the primary learning for vocational students. In the research, the sentence "We will hold a farewell party for her which takes place from 18:00 to 19:30" takes the wrong form of "will held" to express the future tense, which indicates that student made a confusion between the future form and past form. The different verb forms will be a difficult point in the primary writing practice. Also, the sentence "In addition, I make delicious dinner for you" is described to show the future event in students' writing, which should be "In addition, I will make

delicious dinner for you” . It is difficult for students to form the habit to express tense mainly depending on the verb forms because of the negative transfer from their first language, Chinese.

3.4. Non-finite Verb Error

The appliance of non-finite verb is considered as a relatively difficult part for Chinese students during the process of second language acquisition. Based on the vertical comparison of non-finite verb, Hui Xu points out that non-predicate verb plays an essential role in “generative” sentences and it is uniquely prepared for the verb presentation in the non-verb zone [16]. If L2 learners want to better master English, it is inevitable for them to learn the correct use of non-finite verb. In English, non-finite verb mainly consists of three forms of infinitive, present participle and past participle. However, in Chinese writing, whatever the verb, the noun or the adjective can function as the predicate while in English there are more limitations in the predicate part. Besides, there is no non-predicate conception which means that one predicate verb can follow another one without turning one into non-predicate verb. From this point, when Chinese students gain English as a second language, they will suffer the negative transfer if they irresistibly bring Chinese inertia into English writing. In the research, the negative transfer of Chinese predicate presents as such “I want to invite you go my home take play part” , “I’ m writing the letter to invite you join us” , and “you can take bus come here” , which are regarded as the exact Chinese expressions.

Based on the analysis mentioned above, considering the four main types of writing errors of comma splice, personal pronoun, verb tense, non-finite verb, it figures out that in the primary learning, vocational students suffer the negative transfer of the first language when they conduct the practical writings. It provides some hints for us to better promote students’ English writing ability.

4. CONCLUSION

The paper is designed to come out with the underlying reasons for practical English writing errors for vocational students who take Chinese as their first language, and therefore some teaching strategies will be better implemented in the primary second language learning for those who have a loose English foundation in Chinese vocational colleges. In the paper, 49 writings are collected from vocational students in Fuzhou Polytechnic College and through the detailed comparisons, four types of errors are drawn as such the comma splice, personal pronoun error, verb tense error and non-infinite verb error as the top four errors appearing in the sample writings. The paper based on

the analysis on the four types of English writing errors figures out the negative transfer from Chinese to English functions a lot in the students’ practical writings. The four types of errors are well explained by the negative transfer from students’ mother tongue. First, some expressions existing in Chinese are not accepted in English like the run-on sentences or comma splice. Second, less limitations are set in Chinese than English in the lexical part, such as the personal pronoun. The final part can be explained that some grammars are not required in Chinese but function as the indispensable role in English just as the verb tense transformation or the non-infinite verb. The interlingual transfer, especially negative transfer from mother tongue should receive enough attention from both teachers and students because it maps to the phase of the second language acquisition and provides suggestions for both teachers and students in the strategies of the second language acquisition in Chinese polytechnic colleges. As Yu Fu mentioned, we should take the writing errors as the teaching feedback [17]. Based on the above discussion, in the teaching process, teachers should take a full advantage of the negative transfer. On one hand, the comparison between Chinese and English can be applied to the writing teaching and to the large extent to reduce the interference from Chinese. On the other hand, teachers should help students correct the errors through various approaches and instruct them to realize the internal accounts for their errors to transmit the negative transfer to positive transfer in their SLA. However, there are still some deficiencies in the paper and future researches can collect more data from different polytechnic colleges so as to offer a clearer and more profound analysis on the negative transfer in the aspect of vocational practical English writing.

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