

# A Study on the Influence of Negative Transfer of Chinese on Chinese College English Writing

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## ABSTRACT

English writing reflects the English level of Chinese college students and a process of comprehensively applying English knowledge. At the same time, English writing is also a communicative behavior across Chinese and English languages and cultures for Chinese college students. However, the influence of the mother tongue (i.e., Chinese) on the English writing of most Chinese college students is enormous and extensive. Based on the survey and questionnaire survey of Chinese college students' English essays of different IELTS levels, this paper introduces the relevant knowledge of negative Chinese transfer from the perspectives of English vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, and culture and comprehensively studies negative Chinese transfer. At the same time, this paper analyses the problems existing in Chinese college students' English writing and proposes some solutions.

**Keywords:** *Second-language acquisition, negative Chinese transfer, English writing, countermeasures*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

First language transfer has always been an essential issue in second language learning. As English learners, when we learn a foreign language, we feel that we have no control over the influence of our native language, which includes both intrinsic and extrinsic factors of the learner. This essay focuses on studying external factors, namely the learner's native language transfer.

American linguists between 1940 and 1950 proposed the concept of language transfer, and Odlin determined the basic idea of language transfer in 1989; that is, language transfer is the effect of the similarities and differences between the target language and any other acquired language[1]. Rod Ellis[2] further clarified language transfer, pointing out that in the presence of linguistic and cultural differences between the learner's native language and the target language, the learner's native language habits and grammatical rules will hinder the learning of the target language. This phenomenon is called mother tongue transfer, and the above process is called negative language transfer. Odlin[3] further pointed out that negative language transfer may appear in the second language learners' pronunciation and grammar learning process. Psychologists believe that it is unlikely to avoid transfer during learners' interlanguage development during the same period. Language transfer is a cognitive activity that is as helpful to language learners as learning strategies. According to the theory of language transfer, when learning a second language, the mother tongue significantly impacts acquiring the second language. Therefore, English is not the native language of Chinese learners, and they will encounter the problem of negative Chinese transfer.

English learning consists of four essential parts: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Writing is a comprehensive reflection of language ability, so it is the most difficult. At the same time, writing, as one of the standard methods to test the complete English ability of Chinese college students, is critical to the academic performance of Chinese college students. Therefore, this paper mainly studies the negative transfer of Chinese-English writing and the corresponding countermeasures.

## 2. MOTHER TONGUE TRANSFER

### 2.1 The definition of language transfer

Different researchers wish to define a term for themselves in applied linguistics research. Language transfer is one of them. Odlin[1] provides the most frequently referenced conversion definitions. He proposed a "working definition" of "matrix transfer" as the basis for his research. He also postulates that language transfer is not entirely habit-forming or due to native language dependence. The concept of "language transfer" has changed a lot over time. The idea of "language transfer" has initially been closely related to behaviorism.

Fries[4] first used the concept of language transfer in the field of second language acquisition. He explained that learners are more inclined to use the rules and habits of their native language to interpret the learner's target language and unconsciously use their native language culture to understand and transform the target language culture. Therefore, Fries sees second language acquisition as a complement to the "action repertoire."

Sharwood Smith and Eric Kellerman[5] further limited the scope of language transfer, arguing that the term language transfer should be limited to "those elements that lead to the incorporation of elements of one language into another (p. 82)".

Faerch[6] defined language transfer in more detail in learners' second language acquisition as "the second language learners develop or use their intermediary language (the language system between the first language and the second language)" the process of." He also points out that this process may support (positive transfer) or impair (negative transfer) learning (pp. 25-34)."

O'Malley and Chamot[7] see language transfer as "the use of a prior language or prior skills to aid in comprehension or production (p. 89-97)."

Language transfer, whose essence is the communication and conflict between two languages and cultures, can also be called cross-language influence. Positive language transfer is the crucial factor for learners to produce interlanguage in the process of second language acquisition. This definition is widely accepted. Thus, the purpose of language transfer has been dramatically expanded in contrastive linguistics.

**2.2 Reasons for mother-tongue transfer**

Rod Ellis[8] believes that the essential process of second language acquisition is not the resolution of differences between languages but the performance of learners' formation of language application habits in the target language and adaptation to cultural differences. According to the behaviorism theory in linguistics, one of the main obstacles to the second language acquisition process is the interference of the formed language knowledge and grammatical habits in the second language formation process. Active inhibition occurs when the native language's already fixed language habits prevent learning "new habits" in the target language. In this case, a "trade-in" is necessary. However, in the context of second language acquisition, the concept of "forgetting old habits" makes little sense because learners cannot acquire a second language at the high cost of forgetting their first language. In some cases, their native language May eventually disappear. Therefore, behaviorist theory emphasizes the concept of "difficulty" in second language acquisition: the price to be paid in second language acquisition. The degree of difficulty mainly depends on how similar or different the target language model is to the native language model. Under the same circumstances, the target language model is identical to the native language model. The resulting positive transfer makes learning the target language straightforward and fast for learners. But in different situations, learning can be complex and can go wrong because of negative transfer.

**3. INVESTIGATION**

**3.1 Data Introduction**

This essay uses Vygotsky's general grammar theory to study the phenomenon of negative Chinese transfer in the collected writing. This essay randomly selects Chinese students with IELTS scores between 5.5-8 for composition. These essays are very typical. I counted errors in these essays at the lexical and grammatical levels. The numbers are as follows.

**TABLE 1.** Statistics on the writing results of Chinese college students with different IELTS writing levels

Classification	Type of mistake	Proportion
Vocabulary	Spelling errors	7.65%
	Vocabulary errors	31.05%
Sentence Structure	Temporal error	43.68%
	Structural error	24.53%
	Grammatical errors	31.29%
Grammar	Discourse errors	58.12%

**3.2 Data Analysis**

Chinese and English belong to two language families in two different language systems, so Chinese college students make many mistakes or improper use of English in English writing due to the migration of Chinese. In Chinese, the content of each sentence and the meaning or concept it represents is crucial, but relatively speaking, Chinese form or sentence structure is not essential. The Chinese language can accept sentences with sense but lack a complete system. In English, the design of sentences, word order, and morphology are fundamental. Therefore, based on the differences between the two languages, Chinese transfer often affects the English writing of Chinese college students.

**3.2.1 Vocabulary**

Although Chinese and English word classification is almost identical, there are no verbs, adjectives, adverbs,

pronouns, prepositions, or articles. However, word formation and lingua franca have various linguistic rules and principles.

**Spelling errors.** The spelling is entirely different. Spelling-wise, Chinese is made up of strokes, such as "您," "中国," and "汉唐," while English words are made up of letters, like the words being used in this article. All vocabulary in English culture is composed of twenty-six different English letters, so the words that their arrangements can form are ever-changing, and in the process of Chinese college students' English writing, as long as one letter is wrong, it will be Cause the whole sentence to fail to reflect or to reflect the meaning it wants to express. Therefore, Chinese-speaking English learners can't memorize all English words, and it is challenging to remember most of the commonly used words and express them correctly. In addition, there are words like "there and them," "cup and cap", "cut and cat", and "compliment and complement". Just because one or a few letters are different, the whole world has an entirely different meaning. It is easy for learners to misuse similar words. Therefore, the primary problem of Chinese college students due to negative Chinese transfer is spelling mistakes.

**Vocabulary errors.** In addition to the different spelling of words, the impact of negative Chinese transfer on Chinese college students' English writing is also reflected in the use of different types of vocabulary. In the research, Yang Zhonghua[9] pointed out that negative Chinese transfer on second language acquisition is mainly reflected in the collocation and selection of English vocabulary, derivative words, articles, and singular and plural forms. In his view, most mistakes are the choice and misuse of collocations. When Chinese college students write in English, they subconsciously translate the main ideas from a Chinese perspective. Therefore, negative Chinese transfer leads to many sentences with Chinese as the formal structure and English words as the content when Chinese college students write in English. In their research[10], Li Xiaohui and Chen Wen found that Chinese and English have apparent differences in pragmatic habits and cultural manifestations. Therefore, English and Chinese belong to two different language systems. In the research of this paper, after a statistical survey, it is found that most of the wrong collocations in Chinese college students' English writing are related to preposition collocations. 31.05% of the students misused prepositions in their writing and did not use any prepositions in the vocabulary link. This is because prepositions are rarely used in Chinese pragmatic habits, and the frequency of using prepositions is much lower than in English. Therefore, the use of prepositions in Chinese does not clearly define where the preposition should be used in the sentence. Many Chinese sentences use many prepositions in a sentence with a fixed collocation or a specific language environment. For

example, in the following Chinese sentences "我在日本旅行", "我在去食堂的路上", and "我在晚上 10 点的时候背诵英语单词", All the prepositions in these Chinese sentences are "在", but in Chinese, this preposition "在", according to the context of the sentence and the language environment of the sentence, becomes multiple prepositions in the process of translation into English. In that case, the translations should be "I'm traveling in Japan", "I'm on my way to the cafeteria", and "I recite English words at 10:00 pm". Therefore, the Chinese character "在" is translated into different English sentences. Thus, the impact of negative Chinese transfer on Chinese college students' English writing is the problem of vocabulary and spelling, and the use of prepositions is also affected by the study of negative Chinese transfer.

### 3.2.2 Sentence Structure

**Temporal error.** Similarly, the use of predicate verbs in Chinese college students' English writing is also profoundly influenced by negative Chinese transfer. In English writing, changes in time and tone are often accompanied by changes in predicate verbs. In English, predicate verbs add auxiliary verbs, modal verbs, and tense changes of verbs to reflect the time of the entire sentence and the tone of the speaker. However, in Chinese, time and tone are not represented by predicate verbs but by the tone of voice and time point. Therefore, under the influence of negative Chinese transfer, learners often add time points by mistake to replace the change of predicates when writing sentences. E.g.:

In my opinion, it will leads to a polarised society.

在我看来, 这将导致一个两极分化的社会

Subject, predicate, and object, the main components of these three sentences, appear in both Chinese and English sentences, and the order of the three-sentence elements is the same, but the composition of the predicates in the two languages is entirely different. In the English sentence, "it" is the third person singular, so the predicate verb after the subject of "it" should use "leads", but "will" appears in this sentence, so the predicate verb "lead" after it should be used prototype. In Chinese sentences, there is no change in the predicate verb. This is because there are not so many predicate changes in the expression of Chinese sentences, and the predicate only expresses the single function of the subject action. Therefore, affected by the negative transfer of Chinese, students often ignore these changes in their writing.

**Syntactic errors.** The difference in sentence structure between Chinese and English is often a significant obstacle in foreign language teaching, Chinese-English translation and cross-cultural communication. Jing Niqian[11] pointed out that there has been research on

foreign languages and Chinese interference in foreign language learning. The results show that the same sentence pattern can improve students' comprehension of English sentences, while different sentence patterns can affect the speed of students' awareness of English sentences. The rate of comprehension can only be improved if the learner has mastered English sentences[11].

English is a subject-predicate oriented morphological language [12]. Subject and predicate are limited by grammatical consistency. She also believes that English sentences are closed. English usually has rigid stipulations in terms of grammar, while Chinese grammar does not have so many strict stipulations, which are often changed due to changes in the context of sentences in use. Therefore, under the influence of negative Chinese transfer, Chinese college students often cannot fully use English grammar rules in English writing. Consequently, they make all kinds of mistakes.

More than 90% of the students used simple sentences in their English writing in this study. In daily life in China, people's use of penalties is often based on simple sentences rather than complex sentences. Take the most basic "S + V + O", for example. Chinese often use it in dialogue or some simple written descriptions. For example, "小红正在做家务"。"我要去游览这座寺庙"。"它们不想晒太阳"。 Chinese college students have completely mastered the use of simple sentences. Therefore, in English writing, learners affected by the negative transfer of Chinese will prioritise using the simple sentences they are most familiar with for writing. However, the two languages are only similar or similar in the form of simple sentences. In English, native speakers often use subordinate clauses and compound sentences to express complex meanings, while in Chinese, except for adverbial clauses, they are rarely used. Most new English learners have never heard of subject, object, predicate or attributive clauses. These clauses are new to learners, and they should learn to master them if they want to use them in their writing. For these reasons, there are many mistakes in English writing. In the continuous learning of English, mistakes are not completely overcome, although some have been overcome. As mentioned earlier in this article, over 90% of students use simple rather than complex sentences in their English writing. This is precisely due to the influence of negative Chinese transfer.

Grammatical errors. There are still many mistakes in the sentence structure of Chinese college students in the process of English writing. This is also affected by the negative transfer of Chinese. Students' use of English grammar in writing is often unsatisfactory because there are not as many grammar rules as English sentences in Chinese sentences. E.g.:

Every global citizen know existence of computer, but not everyone has seen or used it, especially in rural areas.

In this sentence, the students have no idea how to use the article correctly. So, the correct version of the sentence would look like this:

Every global citizen know the existence of computer, but not everyone has seen or used it, especially in the rural areas.

### 3.2.3 Grammar

From a grammatical point of view, the lexical errors and sentence structure errors in the above errors often occur in a sentence or a word, but the content changes caused by them will have a devastating blow to the entire English writing. Tong Shuhua[13] wrote: Robert Kaplan argues that the organisation and development of English discourse are linear. English is characterised by direct description. Usually, the core content of an English paragraph is expressed or embodied in the first or second sentence of the section. And all the English sentences after that are there to show or explain the point of the first sentence. Each sentence in the paragraph joins each other to form a complete line. Therefore, sections in English are usually sorted inline style. Chinese paragraph ordering is just the opposite. The central sentence of a Chinese paragraph is often in the center of the paragraph and may even be at the end of the paragraph. The way the whole section expresses the content is a spiral, which the author introduces little by little and presents indirectly. In this way, Chinese college students who have been negatively transferred from Chinese will write in English, and the content they write will make the native speaker look very awkward, which will affect their expression.

## 4. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

### 4.1 introduction

Due to the impact of negative Chinese transfer on Chinese college students' English writing, although students know that their English writing scores have been low, they cannot find the reason. Therefore, some measures should be implemented to make students aware of the impact of Chinese on their English writing and arouse students' reflection and attention on negative Chinese transfer to allow students to improve their writing ability actively. Tao Feng[14] said: "The negative transfer of Chinese is temporary and can be overcome through practice". He believes that the influence of negative Chinese transfer on students' writing is based on certain conditions. Suppose students pay attention to these conditions and consequences in learning or writing. In that case, students can reduce the negative impact of Chinese to a certain extent if they consciously avoid them. The transfer effect on it even avoids the impact of negative Chinese transfer. Writing is a comprehensive

reflection of the results of second language acquisition. If teachers and students use some strategies in second language acquisition, the negative transfer should be reduced.

#### **4.2 Strategies for the Teachers**

Due to the limitations of Chinese classroom conditions and the popularization of Confucian culture, teachers are the centre of the entire teaching process. They play a leading role in teaching college students English writing. Therefore, measures should be taken first from the teacher's side. Although teachers are trained and prepared to know the mistakes students make in English writing, learning is a process, and teachers need more patience and tolerance to guide students to master and improve their English writing skills.

First of all, teachers need to accept all writing mistakes made by students peacefully and use a gentle way to make students recognize and understand these mistakes. However, some people believe that such a teaching method will make teachers less intimidating and thus unable to lead students' learning in teaching. However, due to the integration of modern communication and culture, today's students are more inclined to communicate with teachers on an equal footing, and students prefer to discuss with teachers the origin and causes of problems rather than unilateral reprimands. Secondly, modern college students generally have strong self-esteem. Students don't want their mistakes to be known to the majority, damaging their dignity. Therefore, teachers fully understand students' hearts and try to communicate equally.

Second, teachers need to remind or inform students of the existence of negative language transfer so that students themselves realize that negative language transfer is affecting their writing performance. Teachers should encourage and guide students to try and try to avoid the influence of negative Chinese transfer. As mentioned above, preventing certain conditions can reduce the impact of negative Chinese transfer. Therefore, teachers should create classroom environments where students can practice. For example, teachers can choose easy-to-understand English clauses for students to recognize and then let students repeat and imitate. Since second language acquisition is essentially habit formation in the target language, regardless of the form of practice or activity, the more English sentences and context students are exposed to, the closer they are to the writing of native speakers.

Finally, teachers should demonstrate the cultural differences between Chinese and English by showing the differences in Chinese and English expressions. To guide students to reflect on the impact of negative Chinese transfer on their thinking so that students can avoid it consciously.

#### **4.3 Strategies for the Students**

Although the teacher is a central role in the whole teaching process, the students still reflect the level of English writing. Therefore, students need subjective initiative to improve their English writing and avoid the influence of negative Chinese transfer as much as possible. Stern[15] stated that mother tongue transfer is a learning strategy for second language learners due to the lack of second language knowledge. Native language transfer is also the best place for learners to experience a markedly different target language. He also pointed out that learners use their mother tongue to reference foreign language learning. Stern believes that the native language, as the learner's creative behavior, is an essential part of the interlanguage system created by the learner before mastering the target language. Therefore, the students' attitudes and the strategies that need to be adopted are crucial in the English writing process.

First of all, students should develop their interests and hobbies in English. Behaviorist theory believes that interests and hobbies guide learning and the unobtainable power in the learning process. To some extent, interests and hobbies give students the strength to overcome the negative transfer of Chinese.

Second, students proactively address errors in their writing. Students should build up the self-confidence to overcome the negative transfer of Chinese, take the initiative to face essays, and use the courage to avoid the impact of the negative transfer of Chinese.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

To sum up, theoretically speaking, in the process of second language acquisition, negative Chinese transfer will impact language learners. However, under specific strategies and conditions, the impact of negative Chinese transfer can be gradually weakened and then wholly avoided with the efforts of teachers and students.

This paper mainly analyses the errors caused by the influence of Chinese on college students' English writing. According to the theory and data of this study, it is safe to say that negative Chinese transfer does affect the English writing of Chinese college students.

#### **5.1 Limitations of this study**

The classification of errors and errors is not so detailed, and the explanation of some mistakes is not so complete. It is difficult to explain all the errors in students' English writing. Only some examples can be selected to illustrate the negative transfer of Chinese to college English writing.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Because society is developing and human beings are progressing, old research should be redeveloped by a new generation to match reality. In a rapidly evolving globalized world, languages and cultures are changing rapidly—some differences between the two different languages. The influencing factors of negative Chinese transfer will also alter with improving learners' knowledge levels. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct detailed, comprehensive and new research on negative Chinese transfer. Thus, more studies with larger sample sizes should be completed in the future.

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