The Impact of Negative Language Transfer on English Writing of College Students: A Case Study

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Abstract. In the recent 20 years, a lot of research efforts have been made about the negative transfer of Chinese language in English writing. The research subjects of them were mainly college students and high school students. The hot topics include error analysis, learners' characteristics, thinking mode, teaching implications and strategies and so on. These efforts offered valuable insights to the teaching and research in this filed. But among all the research on the writing performance of college students, the research subjects were mostly from the long-established colleges. The performance of the students from the newly-established private colleges (the performance of whose students were comparatively not as good because of realistic reasons) is not given enough attention. To better comprehend the level of these students, this paper conducted an empirical research to analyze the types and distribution of these students' errors. It is found that the errors are largely syntactical, and most of the errors fall into the following categories: improper tense shift, mechanical translation, and punctuation. Suggestions are made to teachers such as making a more comprehensive study of the differences between English and Chinese, having more collections and analyses of the error types, paying more attention to the teaching of tense and so on. It is hoped that this research is valuable to teachers and researchers making a research in this field in the future.

Keywords: Negative transfer · English writing · Tense · Mechanical translation · Punctuation

1 Introduction

In the development of a learner's interlanguage, accuracy and appropriateness have always been very difficult. Many learners are not able to express their ideas with proper words and structures. When they have problems expressing their own ideas, they would always resort to their mother tongue consciously. For example, some students would

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borrow some words or structures directly from their native language without paying enough attention to grammar. In other cases, grammar and other features of their native language would influence a learner's interlanguage in an unconscious way. It seems that the influence of native language on a learner's interlanguage, whether positive or negative, conscious or unconscious, can never be avoided.

In the case of the author, he has been teaching Advanced English Writing for more than five years in college. When proofreading the compositions of his students, the author spotted many kinds of errors, most of which seem to be closely related to the mother tongue of the students. One kind of common mistake is that students would mechanically translate their Chinese ideas into English, causing a lot of grammatical mistakes. But as to how serious these problems are and into what categories they fall, not enough attention has been paid to it in the past, so in this paper, an empirical analysis of the errors is made, including the types and causes, hoping to gain some valuable insights to the teaching and learning of Advanced English Writing.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Language Transfer

When learning a second language (L2), a learner may apply the basic concepts and grammatical rules of his/her native language (L1) to help the expression of his/her L2. Psychologically, this is a kind of transfer. Though a wide range of research had been done on it, a universally accepted definition of it seemed impossible. Among all these definitions, the one put forward by Odlin had gained wide acceptance. According to him, "Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (p. 27) [5].

The development of language transfer is influenced by different schools of thought, and can be divided into 3 periods: behaviorist, mentalist and cognitive [2].

Based on the function of L1 to the acquisition of L2, language transfer can be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer. According to He and Niao, "The former means that the knowledge of a native language helps learners to learn a second language well; the latter means that the native language hinders and distracts learners from learning a second language" (p. 22) [3].

2.2 Negative Transfer in English Writing

Negative transfer is very common in the acquisition of a second language. To English learners, negative transfer seems impossible to avoid and mistakes related to it appear in large numbers. Consequently, this phenomenon has attracted the attention of a large number of scholars in this field.

In China, English writing courses are mainly taught by teachers with Chinese as their L1, and English writing teachers with English as their L1 usually do not have enough competence in Chinese. Due to these realistic reasons, research in this field is mostly done by Chinese scholars and in Chinese language.

Negative transfer in English writing can be found in many aspects including lexicon, syntax, discourse, logic and so on. A comparatively early yet influential research was by Zhu, who mainly discussed the negative transfer in grammar, diction, and English sentences in Chinese style. He argued that "negative transfer occurs when a learner resort to certain rules of his/her mother tongue which differs from the target language in certain aspects" (p. 28) [10].

Ye (2011) offered some suggestions on how to reduce negative transfer after analyzing it in the grammatical, contextual and pragmatical perspectives [8].

Jiang (2011) explored the relationship between writing and translating abilities with an empirical research, and made the following conclusion:

(A learner's) writing ability and translating ability are closely related to each other. The negative language transfer which exists in C-E translation also exists in English writing. So, improving a learner's translating ability can help improving his/her English writing ability (p. 101) [4].

Important research results about negative transfer in English writing can also be found out of China. Scholars from different countries have made research on the negative transfer of mother tongue in English writing. For example, Saffari et al. discussed "the negative transfer of mother tongue rhetoric in Iranian undergraduate ESL learners' writings from the perspectives of choosing rhetorical structure in English and Persian writing" (p. 23) [6]. Struc and Wood analyzed the "Crosslinguistic lexical transfer of English-based loanwords in English L2 writing by Japanese university students" (p. 5) [7].

Chinese scholars also published their works in English discussing negative transfer in English writing. Zhou offered some operative and effective methods with the aim of helping the non-English majors to distinguish between Chinese and English thought patterns and to master the English thought pattern so as to enhance their writing ability [9].

Bai analyzed the three aspects (idioms, cultural terms and conventions) of interference of the mother tongue on English writing, and discovered that thinking mode, aesthetic perception and religious belief are the main sources of negative transfer [1].

3 The Study

3.1 Research Purpose

The purpose of the research is to analyze the common mistakes in English writing from the perspective of negative transfer and to find some workable solutions on how to improve their writing abilities. Although the author has applied different teaching methods to teach students from different grades to improve their writing abilities in the past five years, it seems that students from every grade always have similar problems and commit similar mistakes. On the other hand, the traces of Chinese ideas and Chinese grammar are always obvious their works, so it is necessary for me to know the general situation of their writing and get a detailed understanding of the types of the mistakes, especially those concerning negative transfer.

3.2 Research Subjects

In this empirical study, the author carried out an experiment in order to find out the common errors in Advanced English Writing. A writing task was assigned to the students in October, 2020. All these students were senior students who had already had writing courses for two terms previously.

All the subjects are from a newly established private college with a history of 17 years. The average academic performance of the students in this school is comparatively low since their scores at the College Entrance Exam were just about 10–20 points higher than the cut-off line for undergraduates designated by the Education Department of Guangdong Province. Thus, the research may serve as a comparison to those done in elite schools.

3.3 Task

The task for the students is to write a brief narration of the beginning of a novel. It was given after the students had learned the basic knowledge of narration, which include point of view, conflict, order and elements of a narration. The beginning should provide information about the following aspects:

- What characteristics does the protagonist have?
- What is his/her task?
- What obstacles/difficulties does the protagonist have?
- What kind of world is the protagonist in?

The students were required to submit their works within 15 min after their discussion. There was no mandatory limit to the length of their works, but the students were suggested to write their compositions within 200 words. They were encouraged to bring their imagination into full play so as to make the narration as interesting as possible. In this way, the influence of the purpose of the experiment on the students' performance was ultimately reduced. Before they began writing, they were given an example.

3.4 Data Objectivity

The students were required to form groups in a voluntary manner and submit their works in the form of group work. The whole writing process was under the author's supervision in his regular classes. The students showed great interest in finishing the task since many students were fans of Internet novels and were willing to create a story on their own. The stories were diversified in plot and setting. In order to make the research more reliable, the students were informed the purpose of the experiment only after the submission. Altogether compositions of 28 groups were collected in the experiment. The detection of the errors was all conducted by me in a complete and careful way.

3.5 Research Steps

First, a task to test the real writing competence of the students was designed, and factors that could influence the performance of the students were reduced as much as possible.

Second, the task was assigned to the students and their writing process was supervised so that their writings were finished in a stable way.

Third, 28 compositions submitted by the students who turned in their works in groups were collected. The compositions were finished and collected on Lanmo Cloud Class, a massive online education app.

Fourth, the errors in all the 28 samples were analyzed and divided into 13 types.

Fifth, some workable suggestions on how to improve the teaching of Advanced English Writing based on the analysis of the mistakes were offered.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings

After a careful examination of the 28 compositions, 106 errors were detected, mainly syntactic and pragmatic ones. Though with a lot of diversities, these errors could be divided into 13 types.

According to "Table 1", the three major error types that the students committed are improper tense shift, mechanical translation, and punctuation. They account for 74.6% of all the errors. The rest of the mistakes fall into 10 types, taking up only 25.4%.

In "Table 2", improper tense shift, mechanical translation, and punctuation still rank the top three, with 60.7% of the groups committing tense mistakes, 50% resorting to mechanical translation and 32.1% making punctuation mistakes.

The detailed information is listed in the following tables.

Table 1. Error types and their time-based proportions

Serial number	Error types	Times	Proportion
1	Improper tense shift	34	32.1%
2	Mechanical translation	25	23.6%
3	Punctuation	20	18.9%
4	Capitalization	5	4.7%
5	Article	4	3.8%
6	Preposition	4	3.8%
7	Sentence member missing	3	2.8%
8	Unidentifiable elements	3	2.8%
9	Adjective	2	1.9%
10	Conjunction	2	1.9%
11	Verb-s	2	1.9%
12	Numeral	1	0.9%
13	Dual predicate	1	0.9%
		Total: 106	

Table 2. Error types and group coverage

Serial number	Error types	Groups	Group coverage
1	Improper tense shift	17	60.7%
2	Mechanical translation	14	50%
3	Punctuation	9	32.1%
4	Capitalization	5	17.9%
5	Preposition	4	14.3%
6	Article	3	10.7%
7	Sentence member missing	3	10.7%
8	Unidentifiable element	2	7.1%
9	Conjunction	2	7.1%
10	Adjective	1	3.6%
11	Verb-s	1	3.6%
12	Numeral	1	3.6%
13	Dual predicate	1	3.6%

Table 3. Improper tense shift and its group coverage

Error type	Times	Groups	Group coverage
Improper tense shift	1	7	25.0%
	2	4	14.3%
	3	5	17.9%
	4	1	3.6%

4.2 Error Analysis

4.2.1 Improper Tense Shift

According to "Table 1", the most frequently committed error is improper tense shift, which accounts for 32.1% of all the mistakes. According to Table 2, 17 groups have improper tense shifts, accounting for 60.7% of all groups.

More detailed statistics are listed in the following "Table 3".

As is listed in "Table 3", 7 groups of students have one improper tense shift, accounting for a quarter of all groups; 10 groups of students have two or more times of improper tense shift.

From the statistics listed above, it can be concluded that tense is the most serious problem for the students. As to why the students made so many mistakes, the negative transfer of the concept of tense in the Chinese language is the biggest reason.

Tense is one of the biggest differences between Chinese and English grammar. In the English language, there are 16 tenses; each has its regular use and form. Basically, the

expression of tense is based on the form change of verbs (with some exceptions). Yet, in standard Chinese (putonghua), the form change of Chinese characters rarely occur, and the expression of tense change is mainly based on the use of three Chinese characters (zhe, le, guo). For this reason, the Chinese students don't have enough tense awareness in expression although the knowledge of tense is repeatedly taught as early as they start learning English in primary schools. The following is an example:

As one of the nine gods of the fox tribe, he is going to the wedding today. He took a red umbrella with him before he went out (by group 14).

In this example, the students had an improper shift of tense in the second sentence.

A realistic reason for the prominence of tense errors is that in some stories, the protagonist crosses into some other worlds or goes into their dreams. This always involves a change of tense, which makes the choice of tense more difficult.

Another possible reason is that in some groups, the whole story was cut into many parts, and each student was assigned with one part to write by their group leader. When they put all the sentences together, they did not check their work carefully, thus the improper shifts of tense occurred.

4.2.2 Mechanical Translation

When expressing an idea, many students would first have a Chinese version of it, and then translate the Chinese version into English. This kind of expressions are not limited to Chinese-specific words; they can occur when the students do not have enough vocabulary, or when the idea is too complicated. It is possible that this kind of translation may accurately convey their intended meaning, since the modern Chinese language shares a lot of similarities with English. But in many cases, the intended meaning cannot be conveyed.

In this paper, mechanical translation refers to any word, phrase, clause or sentence in a piece of writing that is produced by translating the intended meaning into English using Chinese grammar or logic instead of producing it in English thinking mode. This kind of translation is always unable to convey the intended meaning accurately. Mechanical translation is a typical kind of negative transfer, since the students expressed the ideas in a Chinese way borrowing Chinese grammar, structure, and even culture.

As is shown in "Table 1" and "Table 2", mechanical translation is the second biggest problem. According to Table 1, altogether there are 25 mechanical translations, taking up 23.6% of all the errors. As is listed in "Table 2", 14 out of 28 groups of students resorted to mechanical translation when they didn't know how to express their ideas. More detailed information about mechanical translation and its group coverage is listed in "Table 4".

The following is a typical example of mechanical translation:

1) Originally, the world has changed… (by group 9).
Chinese version: 原来, 世界已经改变了……
Chinese version in pinyin: yuan lai, shi jie yi jing gai bian le……
The intended meaning: The fact is, the world has changed…

Table 4. Mechanical translation and its group coverage

Error type	Times	Groups	Group coverage
Mechanical translation	1	9	32.1%
	2	2	7.1%
	3	1	3.6%
	4	1	3.6%
	5	1	3.6%

This sentence is used to express the protagonist's realization of the situation that his world has changed after his sleep. Group 9 intended to express this realization. In short of a proper word, they resorted to its equivalent Chinese expression (yuan lai) and translated it into English. Yet in Chinese, yuan lai has more than two meanings. The word originally was not their intended one.

When the intended meaning is mechanically translated from Chinese into English, it is often changed in the new context. In one case, mechanical translation has caused amplification of meaning.

2) One day morning… (by group 28).
Chinese version: 一天早上……
Chinese version in pinyin: yi tian zao shang……
The intended meaning: One morning…

In this example, group 28 intended to express one morning. Yet when they expressed it they literally translated the Chinese version into one day morning, thus adding an unnecessary word (tian / day) into it.

Amplification of meaning is rare, since there is only one case of it, while omission of meaning is more common. When the intended meaning formed in the mind of the writer in Chinese is translated into English, it is very often for him to omit some structural elements. For example:

3)…whenever he is in a bad mood will cook… (by group 12).
Chinese version:……他只要心情差就会烹饪……
Chinese version in pinyin:……ta zhi yao xin qing cha jiu hui pen ren……
The intended meaning:…whenever he is in a bad mood, he will cook…

In example 3, the subject of the main clause (he) is omitted, resulting in a mistake. This omission occurs because in Chinese, when the subject of the subordinate clause and that of the main clause are the same, one of them is always omitted, without affecting the meaning of the whole sentence. But in English, omission of this kind is mostly considered as a mistake.

4.2.3 Punctuation

Punctuation ranks the third among all the error types. In sum, there are 20 punctuation errors; they distribute in 9 compositions. Most of the punctuation errors appear in run-on sentences. There are two types of errors concerning run-on sentences: comma splice and fused sentence. Most of the punctuation errors fall into the first type.

Comma splice is very common in Chinese and it is widely accepted as correct. When writing a Chinese paragraph, the writer can always use the comma to connect different clauses without giving much attention to the inner logic of each part, because the inner relationship between each part is to be understood according to the context, but in English comma splice is considered grammatically unacceptable. Because of the negative transfer of the Chinese way of using comma, students would habitually put a comma after a clause without paying enough attention to whether it is appropriate.

For example:
(1) My name is Mary Sue, I have big eyes, colorful hair, in the sun, my hair is blue, it can change through the change of the sun (by group 4).
Revised: My name is Mary Sue. I have big eyes, colorful hair. In the sun, my hair is blue. It can change with the change of the sun.

In the above example, the run-on sentence should be divided into four independent sentences, because the four parts are independent from each other.

4.2.4 Capitalization

Another type of negative transfer lies in capitalization. As a rule, the first letter of an English sentence should be capitalized. This is the most common type of capitalization in the English language. Capitalization is also necessary in proper nouns and headlines. But in the Chinese language, there is no grammatical rule like capitalization since the Chinese characters have no similar form change rules, so the Chinese students often make mistakes when capitalization is necessary.

There are 5 capitalization errors altogether. 3 of them are related to proper nouns, and 2 of them are probably caused by carelessness: the initial letter of 2 sentences is not capitalized. The following is an example about proper nouns:

(1) Every day I drive my stretch 888 sports car… (by group 3).
Revised: Every day I drive my Stretch 888 sports car…

In this example, Stretch 888 is the brand name of the sports car that the students in group 3 imagined (confirmed after communication), so the initial letter of it should have been capitalized. But the students in this group seemed not to be familiar with this rule, so they neglected it.

4.2.5 Lexical Errors

Before going to the details of lexical errors, I would like to confine the term by distinguishing between the lexical errors to be discussed in this part and the lexical errors in the

previously discussed mechanical translations. The latter may include lexical errors but they were committed following Chinese grammar or logic, yet the former was committed following English grammar.

There are 13 lexical errors detected in all the 28 compositions. In terms of part of speech, they include article, preposition, adjective, conjunction and numeral, with the number of each type ranging from 1 to 4 and the total of all the lexical errors accounting for 12.3% of all mistakes. Since the proportion of lexical errors is relatively small, we may conclude that the lexical errors are not a big problem. With some analysis of the part of speech of these words, the influence of negative transfer can be traced. These mistakes are made basically because there is a great deal of differences between Chinese and English concerning these word classes. In the following, two word classes will be discussed in detail.

First, in English, article is a word class; it can be divided into two groups (definite article and indefinite article). Yet in standard Chinese (putonghua), there is no such lexical category. So, it's very easy for the Chinese students to make article-related mistakes, especially when they are in the primary or middle stage. For example, students may choose to use a definite article when an indefinite article is more proper, or vice versa. Another common situation is that they may forget to use it when it is necessary. In the teaching experience of the author, such mistakes can also be found in the works of college students. The following is a case of forgetting to use an article.

(1)…my eyes are full of tears, which like the size of balloon. (by group 3).
Partially revised:…my eyes are full of tears, which like the size of a balloon.

In this sentence, to create an effect of exaggeration, group 3 exaggerated the size of a drop of tear to be that of a balloon, but the article *a* is forgotten. This is probably because of the negative transfer of the Chinese language, since in Chinese article as a word class does not exist, and a word with the function of *a* is not necessary in this context in Chinese.

Second, there are a lot of differences between Chinese and English prepositions, although they truly share a great deal of similarities. Students are negatively influenced by the differences between Chinese and English prepositions. They may have problems about which preposition to use in practical writing because of the minor differences between a Chinese preposition and the English preposition that has same basic meaning with it. In other cases, they may take a preposition as a verb, and wrongly use it as a predicate (see like in example 1 by group 3).

The students rarely made mistakes in the use of adjectives, conjunctions and numerals, with only five mistakes spotted. This indicates that the negative transfer of these three word classes is slight and that the students have had a good command of them. So they will not be discussed in detail in this paper.

4.2.6 Syntactic Errors

The students also made some syntactic mistakes. They can be divided into three categories, namely, sentence member missing, verb-s, and dual predicate. In total, there are 6 errors altogether concerning these three types, including 2 cases of missing predicate,

and 1 case of missing object. There are two cases concerning the form change of verbs (verb-s), and one case of dual predicate.

Since the number of these mistakes is not big, it's not very convincing to say that they are all caused by the negative transfer of Chinese, yet it's safe to say they are closely related. The two cases concerning the form change of verbs (verb-s) are typical because in Chinese there is no such change. The following example can also illustrate the negative transfer of Chinese:

After hearing, my eyes are full of tears… (by group 3).
Revised: After hearing it, my eyes are full of tears…

In the example above, the word hear is transitive, so it should be followed by an object, but in Chinese, the word ting (which means "hear") is intransitive when used in this situation. The students in group 3 are obviously influenced by the usage of the Chinese word ting.

5 Solutions

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that the negative influence of the Chinese language is huge in English writing, so how to reduce it has become a significant goal for English teachers. To better improve the writing level of Chinese students, the following solutions are suggested based on the above analysis.

First, students should be guided to have a more detailed study of the differences between Chinese and English so as to better avoid the negative transfer of Chinese to English. There are a lot of differences between the two languages, ranging from culture to grammar, and form to function. Apart from the aspects that have been discussed above, there are a variety of other differences, such as the differences in sentence structure, discourse pattern, and thinking mode. Though the students have learned a lot about these differences, there is no course that offers a comprehensive and detailed education about the differences between Chinese and English in the present education system. For this reason, the students should be given more guidance to learn knowledge in these aspects, and even a course that is comprehensive enough, if possible.

Second, writing teachers should be encouraged to collect and analyze the errors made by their students with a view to helping the students to avoid them. According to the feedback of the teachers teaching the same course, there appears to be a tendency that students of different levels are prone to certain types of errors although the errors made by students vary from grade to grade. Therefore, a detailed analysis of the proportion and categories of these mistakes can enable the teachers to make a distinction and focus on the more frequently committed mistakes. This will enhance the efficiency of the students as well as the teachers.

Third, more attention should be directed to the teaching of tense, especially the agreement of tense in a paragraph level. According to what has been discussed previously (see 4.2.1), improper tense shifts appeared in large number, and a lot of students have committed such mistakes due to different reasons. But these mistakes don't seem to be unconquerable. With more afterward check and tense awareness, these errors can be detected and corrected.

Fourth, a careful distinction of the differences and similarities between Chinese and English should be made so as to avoid the mechanically translated sentences in writing. As is illustrated in the previous chapter, mechanical translation is a big problem in writing. They occur because students have applied the Chinese grammar or Chinese thinking mode into writing English sentences. Though sentences formed in this way may not be necessarily wrong because Chinese and English share a lot of similarities, in many cases they can be faulty. Therefore, students should be clearer about the differences between them.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Summary of the Paper

In writing this paper, the compositions of 28 groups of students were analyzed in the perspective of negative transfer in an attempt to assess the general level of students, to find out the error types and find out the ways to improve the writing level of students. The negative transfer of Chinese to English in writing has always been a big problem to college students. According to the research of many scholars, such transfer occurs at different levels of the English language. It leads to not only lexical errors, but also syntactical errors in writing.

According to the research above, the most frequently committed errors include improper tense shifts, mechanical translations, and punctuation. They are mainly syntactical errors. Students also made some lexical errors, but they didn't show much statistical significance since there are just a few lexical errors.

As to how to deal with these problems, teachers are suggested to pay more attention to the differences between Chinese and English, and have a more comprehensive research on the errors of the students. Warnings about improper tense shifts and mechanical translations are given in particular since many such mistakes are made by the students.

6.2 Limitations and Suggestions

Though the paper is written with a careful attitude, surely there are some limitations.

First, the results of the research can be more reliable if more samples could be researched. At the very beginning, the author thought 28 samples could be enough, because there are around 100 words in each composition in average. But when this paper was being composed, the author gradually realized that the results can be more convincing if more samples were analyzed. With more samples, more details about the errors and error types could be clarified, thus, the problems of the students could be better dealt with.

Second, the compositions of the students were submitted by student groups instead of by individuals. This may have brought some differences to the results of the research. For example, if the compositions were submitted by individuals, maybe there could be less improper tense shifts. On the other hand, the students may have had some cross checks of their own compositions before submitting them. Although influence that is brought by these causes is believed to be not much because the students were given

only 15 min to finish the composition after a discussion, it cannot be totally ignored. If scholars in this field are willing to do a similar experiment, such influences should be put into consideration.

Third, due to the limit of time and energy, a horizontal comparison is not given. Many scholars have already done a lot of valuable research on the writing performance of college students. With a horizontal comparison with their works, more insights could be gained, and the students could get more valuable guidance.

Basing on this research, scholars who are willing to have more research in this field are suggested to analyze the research of other scholars as a basis and make a horizontal comparison so as to find more valuable results. If a similar research is to be done, it is better that in such a research students should submit their compositions in individuals so that a comparison with this research can be done.

Authors' Contributions. This paper is independently completed by Houqing Liu.

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