



Cross-Language Influence English Learning as Chinese Learners

Hantong Zhao^(✉)

Master of Education, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong
zhaohantongphdapply@outlook.com

Abstract. As an indispensable subject in the compulsory education system in China, it is of vital significance for every young learner to acquire English and gain proficiency in using the foreign language. However, because of the influence of L1, some typical challenges may arise during the learning process, which leads to inadequate performance in English acquisition. Therefore, this study will investigate these influencing factors and provide English teachers with practical solutions for reducing the negative impact of L1 and improving students' English performance.

Keywords: Second language acquisition (SLA) · English learners in China · Cross-language influence · Fossilisation

1 Introduction

According to previous research and statistics, English is the first language of approximately 430 million people. People who speak English as a second or foreign language range from 470 million to over a billion, with roughly 20 million people learning the language. As Jay Walker predicted in a TED talk in 2012, China would become the world's largest English-speaking country. Moreover, 25% of students' grade in the college entrance examination in Mainland China is based on English. The aforementioned evidence demonstrates the significance of English learning in China despite the potential obstacles arising from the different linguistic systems of Chinese as the first language (L1). Therefore, English learners in China may be confronted with numerous challenges when acquiring English as their second language (L2) due to the profound influence of their mother tongue. This phenomenon is now known as the cross-language effect in second language acquisition (SLA).

Much of the early studies focused on the impact of L1 or any other familiar languages on SLA. This paper will investigate this phenomenon from three different aspects: phonological learning, lexical learning, and syntactic learning. Before coming to a conclusion, diverse practical suggestions on teaching planning will be presented in order to reduce the negative effects of cross-language influence on SLA, thereby not only serving as a guide for English teachers in Mainland China in daily teaching but also allowing them to create effective classroom activities for students.

2 Literature Review

When researchers refer to the phenomenon of cross-language influences, the notions, such as interlanguage and fossilisation, are often mentioned. In this part, the general idea of these two main terms will be illustrated to support the following analysis of the cross-language influence on SLA.

2.1 Interlanguage

Selinker, known as “the Father of Interlanguage” [3], was the first to establish the notion of interlanguage. According to Hu Zhuang-lin [2], “the type of language constructed by second or foreign language learners who are still in the process of learning a language is often referred to as INTERLANGUAGE”. To illustrate, Chinglish is an interlanguage used by English learners whose L1 is Chinese, the linguistic system of which is independent from that of English.

2.2 Fossilisation

It is widely acknowledged that the level of L2 learners’ phonological, grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic competence can be unavoidably haunted when they have gained some degree of knowledge about this target language. This arrested progress in SLA is often called fossilisation. English learners whose first language is Chinese will acquire a tendency to use unclear expressions of interlanguage. Although some incorrect lexical terms or pragmatic statements will not always exert a negative influence on daily communication, it is considered imprecise and non-native-like. Correspondingly, Selinker (1972) named this phenomenon Interlanguage Fossilisation [4].

Ellis (1994) has described the primary contributing factors of fossilisation, including learners’ age, learning chances, the pressure on communication, and the significant effect of feedback on the use of L2 [1]. Interlanguage fossilization is often viewed as a practical and inevitable challenge that all foreign language learners must tackle. In order to grasp the phenomena and enhance the accurate usage of the language, some examples will be shown in the following part of this paper.

3 Cross-Language Influence in Phonological Learning

According to LI Ke & LI Shu-kang [2], the phenomenon of fossilization may affect the phonological, lexical, and syntactic acquisition in SLA, especially considering the fact that the fossilized pronunciation is the main reason to the so-called foreigner talk during the phonological learning process. Foreigner talk is a simplified and distinct expression used when native speakers converse with non-native speakers who do not have sufficient knowledge of the target language. It can also be regarded as the influence of language transfer on SLA. Originally, the term transfer was an academic psychological phrase; however, the notion in the linguistic realm was introduced in the 1950s, which refers to a phenomenon in SLA where learners constantly and unconsciously use the target

language with certain linguistic features of their mother tongue, such as the pronunciation and lexical meanings.

Positive language transfer and negative language transfer are two fundamental aspects of language transfer, which contributes to either beneficial or adverse effect on SLA. For English learners whose L1 is Chinese, the most insurmountable obstacle they encounter may be overcoming their dialects. In this part, examples of English learners from Shandong province, the north-eastern part of Mainland China, will be shown as evidence. Tables 1, 2 and 3 are from a previous study conducted by researchers from the Department of Foreign languages of Qufu Normal University, which vividly and clearly demonstrated how Shandong dialect influences English pronunciation in SLA [6].

Therefore, dialectal speech has exerted an obvious and profound influence on SLA, especially in phonological learning. The Shandong dialect not only leads to the incorrect pronunciation of vowels and consonants, which further causes erroneous pronunciation of a whole word, but it also affects the intonation and stress of a phrase or a sentence. To illustrate, people from Shandong province usually use a failing tone in spoken English, which is considered inappropriate in a native manner of speaking English.

Table 1. The detail information of Pronunciators

Research on Influence of Shandong Dialect on English Pronunciation Learning			
Number	Name	Hometown	Dialect
1	Chen	Dezhou City	Dezhou Dialect
2	Gao	Dezhou City	Mandarin
3	Wang	Qufu City	Mandarin
4	Zhou	Qufu City	Qufu Dialect
5	Jiang	Qingdao City	Qingdao Dialect
6	Xue	Qingdao City	Qingdao Dialect
7	Zhu	Weihai City	Weihai Dialect
8	Kong	Muping City	Muping Dialect

Table 2. The influence of Shandong Dialect on English vowels

vowel	single vowel	long vowel	/i:/	Generally, the interval is not long enough, and the pronunciators No. 1, No. 4, No. 5 and No. 7 are obvious, such as pronouncing the letter B as the “closed” sound of the mother tongue.
			/ə:/	Pronunciators No. 1 and No. 5 pronounce it like “ear”/ə/ in their mother tongue, and pronunciators No. 3 and No. 6 pronounce it as “hungry” in their mother tongue.

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

		/ɔ:/	Generally speaking, people's lips are not round enough and their muscles are not tense enough. Instead, they use the "Austrian" sound of their mother tongue, which is combined with /ɔ/ and diphthongs /au/ confusion.
		/ɑ:/	And /ʌ/ division is not obvious, and the tongue position is not backward enough, so it is replaced by the "A" sound in the mother tongue.
	short vowel	/i/	Sometimes it is confused with the long vowel /i:/ and easily confused with /ei/ in unstressed syllables. For example, No.1 pronounced the ri syllable in cherish as a "Rui" sound similar to its mother tongue.
		/e/	Generally speaking, some people speak to the degree of /a/, but others confuse it with diphthongs /a/, such as No. 2, No. 4 and No. 7, and pronounce it as "love" in their mother tongue.
		/æ/	Some people confuse it with /e/, such as No. 1, others with diphthongs /a/, such as No. 2, and others with /a/ before nasal sounds.
		Diphthong	/ei/
	/əʊ/		The pronunciation per capita confuses it with "European" in the mother tongue, and its lip shape is not flat enough. In American pronunciation, the lip shape of this sound is round, but it is still different from "European" in Shandong dialect.
	/aʊ/		Every pronunciation person confuses this sound with his mother tongue "Ao", and feels this sound and /ɔ:/ and /ɔ/ indistinguishable.
	/iə/		Pronunciators No. 1, No. 4 put this sound in curly tongue color, and words that don't end in r, such as idea, also roll their tongues.

Table 3. The influence of Shandong Dialect on English Consonants

consonant	voiceless consonant	/θ/	Except that /θ/ and /ð/, /s/ and /z/ are confused on the No. 8, most people have a good command of the two tones, which is not unrelated to the teacher's emphasis for many years.
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(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

	/ʃ/	Except for No. 7 and No. 8, which are standard in pronouncing this sound (there is this initial consonant in Donglai dialect), other speakers generally confuse it with the initial consonant of the mother tongue “Shu”, such as /S/, because there is no such thing in Qufu dialect, No. 4 confuses it with /s/.
	/tʃ/	Most speakers confuse it with the initial consonant of their mother tongue “Chi”.
	/tr/	People generally use the initials of “Jie” in their mother tongue instead of this sound.
	/h/	In English, this sound is throat sound, not tongue root sound in Shandong dialect. Almost all speakers pronounce it as the initial /x/ of “drink” in Shandong dialect 2.
voiced consonant	/b/	All the speakers except No. 3 are pronounced unvoiced and unvoiced. No. 6 can hear vocal cord vibration when reading letters, but the vocal cord vibration is not obvious when reading words and sentences. /d/, /g/ is similar.
	/v/	The pronunciation of No. 3 and No. 8 is accurate, and the rest are far from the standard. It is very common that the upper teeth do not bite the lower lip to pronounce V as the mother tongue “Wei”.
	/z/	Except for part of western Shandong dialect, there is no such pronunciation in other dialects in Shandong, but the pronunciation of this pronunciation is good. Only No. 6 pronounces this pronunciation as the initial consonant of the mother tongue Zi.
	/ʒ/	Most people pronounce it as the initial (z) of their mother tongue “day”, and pronounce it as /z/ on the 4th.
	/n/	It is not difficult at the beginning of the syllable, but not accurate at the end of the syllable. Although there is almost no expected nasalization, the mispronunciation of pronouncing N as the mother tongue “en” still exists.
	/ŋ/	Although Shandong dialect distinguishes the front and back nasal sounds, most speakers still can’t distinguish /n/ from /ŋ/ in English.
	/l/	At the end of the syllable (dark), pronounce it as the curling vowel /əʊ/ in the mother tongue on the 2nd, 4th, 6th and 8th, confuse it with the vowel /ɔ/ on the 1st, and omit it on the 2nd.
	/j/	When this sound is combined with /u:/, many people confuse it with the “excellent” sound of the mother tongue.

4 Cross-Language Influence in Lexical Learning

In terms of the lexical acquisition, cross-language influence plays the role of the dual-edged sword. The following sections will investigate the cross-language influence on lexical learning in two respective aspects.

4.1 The Positive Transfer

Although Chinese and English have two distinct language systems, they have certain lexical similarities. For example, both vocabulary systems of the two languages can be divided into nouns, verbs, prepositions, and so on, many of which even possess the same part of speech. Therefore, students can learn to utilize English vocabularies, lexical collocations, and phrases based on their prior knowledge of their native tongue.

4.2 The Negative Transfer

Due to the differences in language systems between Chinese and English, some concepts, which are significant in English, may be underemphasized in Chinese, so it may be easy for students to misunderstand the appropriate usage of some English words, such as the usage of prepositions. The example is as follows:

- (1) I arrived at the bus station.
- (2) I arrived in Beijing.

According to this example, the diverse uses of prepositions in Chinese have not been particularly emphasized compared with that in English. For example, in English, users must choose different prepositions depending on different types of place. Therefore, English learners whose L1 is Chinese may feel confused when they gain an insight into the usage of this group of words under the impact of their L1.

5 Cross-Language Influence in Syntactic Learning

Concerning its syntactic characteristics, Chinese is a hypotaxis language where it is obvious to identify the dependent or subordinate construction and the relationship of clauses with connectives; however, English is a parataxis language where the connection between sentences or within sentences is established by its semantic connotations. According to The World Book Dictionary, in Chinese, “the arranging of clauses one after the other without connectives can show the relation between them”. In other words, numerous structurally incomplete sentences can be commonly used in Chinese, which indicates using more than one comma-divided sentences to describe one event. This is usually considered socially unacceptable in English [3]. As a result, the disparity between Chinese and English in this aspect will have a detrimental impact on SLA, particularly

in writing. The following is an example of when students try to compose a narrative and translate it directly into English:

“五年前的花白的头发,即今已经全白,全不像四十上下的人;脸上瘦削不堪,黄中带黑,而且消尽了先前悲哀的神色,仿佛是木刻似的;只有那眼珠间或一轮,还可以表示她是一个活物。

The grey hair five years ago had been completely white now, it did not seem that she is only in her forties, her face is so thin, yellow tingled with black, with the air of sadness disappeared, the previous sad expression has gone away. As a woodcarving.”

Numerous differences between the Chinese version and the English one can be evidently identified. Firstly, in terms of grammatical structures, there is no need to consider tense or notional concord between subject and object in Chinese, and as a result, students are inclined to produce sentence fragments with a lack of subject and object in their English writing. Secondly, students often overlook the use of conjunctions and logical words in Chinese, which plays an indispensable part in English writing to link simple comma-divided sentences.

6 Methods to Decrease the Negative Aspect of Cross-Language Influence in SLA

According to the detailed analysis and argument above, students' deep-rooted awareness and knowledge of their first language have various detrimental consequences, so several practical methods should be proposed to mitigate this problem. Firstly, accurate and proper imitation is highly suggested to help students acquire correct and native-like pronunciation. This requires teachers to cautiously select appropriate radio or video learning materials according to learners' English proficiency and interests. Secondly, in terms of lexical learning, teachers should pay more attention to equipping students with the awareness of the different aspects between Chinese and English, thereby rendering their expression more native. Finally, typical grammatical mistakes commonly exist in learners' English writing should be taken into account.

Rather than employing the traditional way of focusing on the linguistic forms, teachers are responsible for combining the grammatical instructions with the communicative activities. In this way, learners can master these syntactic roles better. Last but not least, teachers should try to create more interactive opportunities for students to practice their authentic use of the language, thereby motivating them to learn with a positive attitude and increasing their learning confidence.

7 Conclusion

In summary, the cross-language influence is of vital significance in SLA. Despite the fact that the aforementioned negative influence may cause learners to have difficulty in learning English, it is inadvisable to ignore the positive aspects of cross-language influence in SLA. English educators in China should be aware of the positive and negative effects of cross-linguistic influence. Therefore, in daily teaching preparing, English

teachers should take the advantage of the positive influence of the cross-language to create practical teaching plans based on students' learning characteristics, and avoid the negative influence at the same time, in order to not only limit fossilization but also improve the equality of English teaching and learning.

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