



The Negative Transfer of Culture in Chinese College Students' English Learning

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Abstract. There is a close relationship between language and culture, and the interaction between language and culture is mainly reflected in the cultural transfer of second language acquisition. The English language system is completely different from that of the Chinese, and the culture behind it is also significantly different. Therefore, Chinese college students are often affected by the negative transfer of mother tongue culture in the process of learning English. This paper reviews the existing studies at home and abroad, and studies what role culture plays in second language acquisition for Chinese college students from the perspective of negative cultural transfer. Given the problems in English learning of Chinese college students, the author adopts a questionnaire survey, in-depth interview, data analysis, and other research methods, finding that there is a significant negative cultural transfer phenomenon in English learning of college students in terms of vocabulary, speaking, and writing. This is mainly caused by the differences in material culture and cultural traditions between China and Britain. Finally, because of the above phenomena and reasons, the author gives suggestions for improvement in the aspect of vocabulary, English thinking cultivation, and pragmatic environment shaping.

Keywords: second language acquisition, language transfer, negative transfer, culture

1 Introduction

Language is not isolated, which is rooted in the culture of a nation, but also the carrier of culture. Culture not only corresponds to a particular language but is also the basis of language formation and development. Therefore, language and culture influence and depend on each other. Language and culture are closely related, and it is significant to master certain cultural background knowledge for students to acquire and use language. Therefore, English teaching for college students should not only cultivate students' comprehensive language ability but also make students understand the cultural background differences between different languages.

Nowadays, as the world becomes a whole and English becomes more and more important, an increasing number of Chinese people begin to learn English. However, English and Chinese are formed on different cultural soil, so there is a huge gap between

them. English is an inflected language, belonging to the Indo-European language family, while Chinese is an analytical language, belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language family. Therefore, due to the differences between the mother tongue and the second language, Chinese students will encounter many obstacles when learning English. They are often unable to get rid of the influence of the mother tongue culture, nor can they thoroughly understand the thinking mode and culture behind the second language. It can be seen that the process of second language acquisition is affected by many factors, among which the transfer of mother tongue cannot be ignored.

Transfer, as one of the important concepts in second language acquisition, originates from psychology [1]. Sajavaara pointed out in 1986 that transfer is the influence of original knowledge on new knowledge learning [2]. Whitney was the first to introduce this concept into linguistics. Odlin proposes that language transfer is the effect of similarities and differences between the target language and any other previously acquired language [3]. Language transfer can be divided into a positive transfer, negative transfer, and zero transfer. Positive transfer refers to the promotion of existing knowledge to knowledge to be acquired, whereas negative transfer occurs.

In the study of second language acquisition, language transfer is always a significant part. Second language learners often have formed a complete language structure and language habits of the mother tongue. As a result, in the process of learning a second language, the existing language habits of the mother tongue will exert continuous influence on the learner and interfere with the acquisition of the second language. The deep-rooted mother tongue culture is rooted in the heart of the second language learners and has a counter-effect on second language learning. Therefore, cultural differences have a profound impact on the negative transfer of the mother tongue.

Cultural transfer originates from the difference between the target culture and the source culture. Same to language transfer, cultural transfer can be positive or negative. When one's native cultural norms are similar to the ones of the target culture, a positive cultural transfer occurs, whereas those norms are different, a negative cultural transfer occurs. Generally speaking, the more similar the two cultures are, the less the transfer will be, on the contrary, the more differences the two cultures are, the more the transfer will be.

Studies on the relationship between language, culture, and communication have been discussed as early as the 1850s. Sapir and Whorf, American scholars, recognized the close relationship between language and culture and believed that language is a mirror of national culture and customs [4]. The concept of negative cultural transfer can be traced back to 1957. Robert Lado wrote in *Cross-cultural Linguistics* that the cultural system of local culture can be compared with that of the target language to provide solutions when cultural transfer and cultural conflict occur [5]. Then, he put forward the concept of "negative cultural transfer" according to the theory of "cultural transfer". Unfortunately, this concept has been neglected for a long time. The negative cultural transfer has been paid attention to since the pragmatic studies in Britain and JIC. British linguist Jenny Thomas focused on analyzing the causes and specific manifestations of negative cultural transfer, making great contributions to the study of negative cultural transfer and laying a foundation for the study of cultural transfer [6].

For English learners who speak Chinese as their mother tongue, “cultural negative transfer” refers to the phenomenon that learners blindly use the pragmatic mode of their mother tongue to communicate in English due to the lack of understanding and value orientation of cultural differences between two language learners. The phenomenon of negative cultural transfer often occurs with cultural differences. Chinese college students are used to thinking with the help of their mother tongue when dealing with daily problems and interpersonal communication, and their knowledge reserve of English is small, so the negative transfer of mother tongue culture in the process of English learning is a common phenomenon. Many Chinese researchers have studied this phenomenon and put forward many meaningful viewpoints. However, overall, the research results are not fruitful, and no systematic cognition has been formed.

It can be seen that according to the introduction just now, the cultural research on second language acquisition in China is quite chaotic and no systematic understanding has been formed. Therefore, this article reviews previous studies that aim at the current situation of college students’ English learning and analyzes it from the perspective of culture. Based on non-English major college students as the research object, using the writing practice, the methods of questionnaire and interview, understand the basic situation of college students’ English learning, found the problem, analyze the reason, find countermeasures, from the perspective of cultural studies in the process of college students’ English learning culture phenomenon of negative transfer of specific manifestations and causes, and gives the solution. Specifically, this article will be discussed in the following directions.

Besides the introduction and conclusion, this article consists of four aspects. In the introduction, the author will introduce the background, purpose, and significance of this research, as well as the structure of this article. The first part mainly focuses on the theoretical basis supporting the thesis. In part two, this article will investigate the problems of college students’ English learning in the form of a questionnaire. The third section discusses the reasons for the negative cultural transfer phenomenon in the process of college students’ English learning from two aspects. The fourth aspect puts forward some suggestions to avoid the phenomenon of negative cultural transfer in college students’ English learning.

2 The Theoretical Basis of the Study

2.1 The Relationship Between Cultural and Language

There is a strong connection between language and culture. If a second language learner only learns a foreign language and ignores the culture behind the language, he will never really acquire a language. Conversely, a researcher cannot complete the study of a culture without language. Language and culture influence and depend on each other. Academic circles on the research of the relationship between language and culture have a lot of achievements, one of the most impressive is the “Sapir Whorf hypothesis”, It holds that one’s way of seeing the world and thinking about things is constrained by one’s language [7]. On the one hand, language determines cognition. How language describes the world determines how we see it. On the other hand, different languages

lead to different cognitive systems. “Sapir Whorf hypothesis” is not perfect, but its emphasis on the social nature of language and its research method of placing language in the context of social culture makes people realize the close relationship between language, culture, and thinking.

As an abstract symbolic system, language ADAPTS to people’s communication needs, has relative stability and social functions, and can reflect the correlation between external phenomena. Therefore, language is bound to be associated with culture. It is produced in culture and reflects culture to a certain extent. For example, “dog” in The Chinese context and “dog” in the English context, although the two words have the same signification, their pragmatics are quite different. The word “dog” in Chinese is mostly derogatory in the specific context, while the Word “lucky” is combined with the word “dog” in English to express the meaning of lucky people.

In a word, language is closely related to culture. Culture is the basis of language, and language is also the concrete reflection of culture to a certain extent. Culture includes language, and language is also the carrier of culture. Therefore, culture cannot be ignored in language learning.

2.2 Negative Transfer

Originally from psychology, the concept of “transfer” refers to the phenomenon that previous knowledge is extended to a new knowledge field, that is, the influence of learning or remembering one thing on learning and remembering another thing [2,69]. Odlin, an American linguist, believes that migration is due to the similarities and differences between the target language and the acquired language [8]. The Dictionary of Psychology divides transfer into positive transfer and negative transfer [9]. In linguistics, the influence of native language knowledge on target language acquisition is called native language transfer. There are positive transfers and negative transfers of the mother tongue. Positive transfer of the mother tongue is beneficial to the learning of the target language. On the contrary, the negative transfer of the mother tongue will hinder the learning of the target language by native speakers [10].

The phenomenon of negative transfer not only appears at the language proficiency but also at the cultural level, which is mainly caused by cultural differences. When people learn a second language or engage in cross-cultural communication, some elements existing in the source language culture are absorbed into the target language culture. However, due to the great differences between the source culture and the target culture, and the Linguistic distance and social distance caused by the differences in culture and language structure, the elements of the source culture cannot be assimilated by the target culture, resulting in misunderstandings and obstacles. This kind of situation is the manifestation of negative cultural transfer. The phenomenon of negative cultural transfer often occurs with cultural differences. Chinese native English learners often have problems with “Chinglish”. For example, “Study hard and make progress every day” is translated literally into “Good good study, day day up”, completely ignoring the mistakes in English grammar and vocabulary expression. It is the concrete manifestation of negative cultural transfer in the process of second language learning. Therefore, second language learners should understand the phenomenon of negative

cultural transfer and try their best to avoid it to effectively improve the efficiency and effect of language learning.

3 The Impact of Cultural Negative Transfer on College Students' English Learning

3.1 Problems in College Students' English Learning

In order to comprehensively understand the problems of college students' English learning and analyze the impact of the negative transfer of mother tongue and culture on college students' English learning, questionnaires were made to provide data for analysis. A total of 179 questionnaires were collected, including 173 valid data. The questionnaire mainly sampled Chinese college students learning English as a second language, and investigated the difficulties encountered by college students in learning English and its reasons, the impact of mother tongue transfer on English learning, the influence of cultural negative transfer on English learning, and the motivation of Learning English.

According to the collected data and in-depth interviews with some interviewees, the current English learning of college students has the following problems.

3.1.1 Poor Command of Vocabulary

Although vocabulary is the foundation of English learning, most college students do not have a solid grasp of vocabulary. However, this does not mean that college students lack vocabulary, on the contrary, after the baptism of various standardized language tests, their vocabulary is abundant. However, in terms of memorizing and understanding the polysemy of words, college students show obvious weakness. Because they do not know the root of the word or the cultural connotation behind the word, they cannot make clear the logical relationship between the many meanings of a word, so they can only remember the single meaning of a word. In addition, due to the lack of a pragmatic environment, college students also lack the accumulation of English idioms to a certain extent, and cannot really understand the cultural significance behind the idioms.

3.1.2 Lack of Pragmatic Environment and Poor Practical Ability to Use English

When asked about difficulties in learning English, 70.59% of respondents said they had difficulty in listening. The number of students with difficulties in speaking and writing accounted for 65.68% and 58.82% respectively, far outpacing those with difficulties in reading and translation. This shows that most college students have encountered difficulties in practical output and daily communication in English. In the question "What do you think are the specific reasons for the above difficulties in English learning?", as many as 82.35% of college students choose the option "lack of pragmatic environment and poor ability to use English", accounting for the highest proportion in all the options.

3.1.3 Lack of Understanding of English Culture and the Chinese Way of Thinking

In the topic “Which of the following English learning difficulties do you have caused by the cultural differences between China and the West”, the students who chose the option “Chinese thinking is often used in English writing or translation, which makes it difficult to express fluently and idiomatic” were the most, accounting for 70.59%. In addition, 76.47% of the students said that the reasons for their English learning difficulties are “not understanding English culture, lack of English thinking, poor English expression ability”. The lack of understanding of English culture and the influence of the Chinese way of thinking make many college students have serious problems with English learning. They cannot really understand the internal logic of English, so they cannot learn English well.

3.2 Cultural Negative Transfer in College Students’ English Learning

In the questionnaire, 70.59% of respondents said that the cultural differences between China and the West would have a negative impact on English learning, 82.35% of respondents said that their mother tongue would harm English learning, and 94.12% of respondents admitted that they had made mistakes like “Chinglish” in the process of learning English. These amazing figures undoubtedly demonstrate the great influence of negative cultural transfer on college students’ English learning.

3.2.1 Negative Transfer of Meaning

According to the questionnaire, 29.41% of the interviewees had difficulty in memorizing and using vocabulary due to the cultural differences between Chinese and English. Through in-depth interviews and investigations, it is found that most of these difficulties are caused by misreading and misuse of Chinese and English words due to their different cultural meanings. For example, the image of “dragon” in Chinese and English culture is quite different. However, some college students ignore the cultural differences and do not know the derogatory meaning of “dragon” in English, resulting in the misuse of the word.

3.2.2 Negative Transfer of Spoken Language

The negative cultural transfer also affects college students in English listening and speaking. Many respondents said they were unable to express themselves correctly in English communication situations. Influenced by their native language culture, they still retain their native language habits in communication, and cannot correctly use greetings, acknowledgments, and address forms in the English environment. Similarly, they cannot understand the meaning behind some idiomatic expressions of Native English speakers, resulting in misinterpretation.

3.2.3. Negative Transfer of Writing

In terms of English writing, 70.59% of respondents often adopt Chinese thinking in their English writing or translation, which makes them unable to express themselves in

authentic English. This is embodied in the fact that English articles are set up in accordance with Chinese writing logic, which leads to the way of expression of articles being too Chinese, rather than the linear logic of English writing. In addition, the negative transfer of college students' writing is also reflected in the use of sentence patterns. For example, in language, some sentence patterns have their own unique emotional color. In the Cultural context of Chinese, passive sentences are often used to express negative emotions, while active sentences are often used to express positive meanings. The cultural context of English is different from that of Chinese. Passive sentences bring readers more objective feelings, while active sentences are more subjective. Due to the influence of negative cultural transfer, some college students are unable to notice the difference between them, resulting in the deviation of the expression of emotional color.

4 A probe into the causes of culture negative transfer of English learning

4.1 Material Cultural Differences Lead to Negative Cultural Transfer

The emergence of cultural negative transfer originates from cultural differences [11]. The negative cultural transfer caused by material cultural differences can be directly reflected in language [12]. For example, in the process of college students learning English, the misinterpretation of the meaning of words, as well as the misuse of greetings and salutations in oral English, all result from the huge difference between Chinese and English material culture.

First of all, influenced by the material culture and expression of their mother tongue, some college students may misunderstand the cultural meaning of some English words or idioms when learning English. Sometimes, when students understand or use English words and colloquialisms, they ignore the material and cultural differences between Chinese and English and mechanically apply the cultural meanings of corresponding Chinese words to English words and colloquialisms. Students may even have difficulties in reading comprehension due to the lack of material and cultural background in English and completely fail to understand the meaning expressed in English. For example, when students read the English phrase "white night", if they do not understand the cultural significance behind the word, they will simply translate the phrase into "a night that has white color", unable to truly understand the meaning expressed by the phrase.

Secondly, due to the huge difference between Chinese and English material culture and the lack of a pragmatic environment, it may be difficult for college students to organize appropriate oral English expressions in practical English communication occasions, which hinders their oral English learning. There are great differences between China and Britain in terms of greetings, acknowledgments, and salutations due to their different cultural habits. Native English speakers, for example, tend to respond to compliments with open acceptance. In contrast, when praised, the Chinese habit of communication is polite and modest. If college students cannot get rid of the influence of the material culture of their mother tongue, they may make the interlocutors misunderstand

in English communication occasions by replying according to Chinese cultural habits. In addition, in terms of address, Native English speakers are used to addressing married women by their husbands' surnames, because usually western women marry with their husbands' surnames, but China does not have this custom. Therefore, if college students ignore the material and cultural differences in English learning, it will have a negative impact on English learning.

4.2 Cultural Tradition Differences Lead to Negative Cultural Transfer

The phenomenon of negative cultural transfer caused by the difference in cultural traditions is mostly reflected at the psychological level [13]. Chinese college students' learning and use of a second language will be affected by the negative cultural transfer, one of the important reasons is that there is a great difference between Chinese and English cultural traditions, which brings about different ways of thinking, values, and other aspects, leading to the phenomenon of negative cultural transfer in the learning process.

Language is a social phenomenon as well as a psychological phenomenon. At the same time, it is a social communication tool, but also a tool of human thinking. Therefore, in language, we can observe the cultural core of the nation using this language and discover the logic of the nation's thinking operation. On the contrary, cultural tradition and mode of thinking influence the way of language organization.

Chinese and English cultural traditions show different preferences for "practical" and "theoretical" respectively, and the differences between these cultural traditions lead to different ways of thinking in China and Britain [14]. A distinctive feature of Chinese cultural tradition is its emphasis on practicality. For example, Chinese classical philosophy takes solving the practical problems of social life as its starting point and destination and despises purely abstract rational speculation and detailed analysis. While eliminating anti-rationalism and weakening the religious sentiment of Chinese people, the tradition of practical application also hinders the development of rational thinking. Coupled with Chinese Confucianism's emphasis on the doctrine of the "mean" and "the unity of man and nature", Chinese people have gradually formed a holistic way of thinking, accustomed to a comprehensive view of problems rather than strict logic. On the contrary, advocating science is an important tradition of Western culture. As the origin of western culture, ancient Greek culture is full of rationality and speculation. Therefore, English has gradually formed a tradition of attaching importance to rationality and speculation and formed a linear and strictly logical way of thinking.

In the process of learning English, many Chinese college students are affected by the negative transfer of their mother tongue and learn English in a holistic way without establishing a logical thinking system. Therefore, there are traces of Chinese thinking in English expression, and they cannot use logical thinking to express themselves, resulting in learning difficulties in writing or translation.

5 The Implications of the Study Results for College Students

Only when the language expression is combined with its culture can its communicative and expressive functions be brought into full play. Therefore, in the process of language learning, it is also necessary to learn the culture contained in the language. A negative cultural transfer will hinder college students' English learning. Therefore, college students should take some targeted measures to actively understand the culture behind the language, grasp the language rules, and clearly recognize the differences between Chinese and English culture, so as to avoid the negative impact of the negative transfer of mother tongue culture.

5.1 Build Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the foundation of English language learning. Only by mastering as many words as possible can college students express themselves in English freely and flexibly. Therefore, a large vocabulary is essential in the process of English learning. At the same time, in order to reduce the negative impact of the cultural transfer of mother tongue, college students should pay attention to the polysemy of English words, consciously learn and memorize the meanings of words, and understand the cultural meaning of words when they accumulate vocabulary. Only in this way can they avoid the influence of cultural transfer of mother tongue and improve their English level.

5.2 Develop English Thinking

In order to avoid the influence of negative transfer of mother tongue culture, it is very important to change Chinese thinking and cultivate English thinking. Extensive reading helps to develop English thinking. Through reading, college students can directly feel the English thinking logic behind the language and have a more specific understanding of The English language and culture. This is a long process, and it takes a long time to persevere. In addition, watching more English movies and listening to English radio is also beneficial to understand English culture and cultivate English thinking.

5.3 Increase English Output

Nothing makes a person acquire a language faster than practical use. College students can learn the English language and culture from Native Speakers by making English pen friends and communicating with foreigners [15]. In addition, through cross-cultural communication, college students can practice their learning achievements, create an English pragmatic environment for themselves, increase their English output, correct their mistakes and make up for their shortcomings in the dynamic process.

6 Conclusion

Language is a social phenomenon, closely related to human society, and the carrier of social customs and cultural traditions. Language and culture are closely related to each other. If one cannot understand the culture behind the language, one cannot use a language accurately and fluently. Therefore, while learning a second language, it is necessary to pay attention to the culture of the language.

In the process of second language acquisition, negative transfer of mother tongue culture often occurs because of cultural differences. In China, due to various reasons, college students will be affected by the negative transfer of mother tongue culture when learning English. From a cultural perspective, this article studies the negative transfer of mother tongue culture in college students' English learning process with the help of questionnaires and other research methods. The questionnaire mainly sampled Chinese college students learning English as a second language to analyze the impact of the negative transfer of mother tongue culture on college students' English learning. With the help of a questionnaire survey and data analysis, the author finds that college students often have problems with vocabulary, practical use of language and language thinking, and show negative cultural transfer phenomena in the grasp of word meaning, oral organization and use, and writing.

After an in-depth analysis of the specific manifestations of negative cultural transfer in college students' English learning, it can be found that there are two reasons for the negative cultural transfer. On the surface, the material cultural differences between China and Britain lead to negative cultural transfer at the language level. This kind of negative transfer can be directly expressed in the use of language. The deeper reason lies in the differences between Chinese and British cultural traditions. The negative cultural transfer caused by such cultural differences is mainly manifested at the psychological level, rather than at the intuitive language level, such as Chinese thinking in English writing.

In view of the above situation, the article gives three suggestions to Chinese college students, so as to avoid the impact of the negative transfer of mother tongue culture as much as possible and improve the efficiency of college students' English learning. First of all, college students should improve their vocabulary mastery and proficiency. Secondly, the cultivation of English thinking is very important. Finally, the ultimate goal of Learning English is to use it. Therefore, in order to learn English well, college students should take the initiative to create a pragmatic environment to increase their English output.

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