The Negative Transfer of Chinese Syntax in English Writing: Evidence from Chinese ESL Learners' Written Materials

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ABSTRACT. Numerous studies have shown that language transfer is central to second language acquisition, and syntactic transfer is an important part of language transfer. At present, the research on syntactic transfer mainly focuses on theoretical errors or marked language analysis. However, it is not practical, as second language learners will still face various syntactic negative transfer phenomena. These phenomena would have an impact on their future writing level and correspondent solutions are in urgent need. Therefore, this paper analyzed the following syntactic categories: hypotaxis vs. parataxis, the subject-predicate structure vs. the topic-remark structure, Noun and preposition promotion vs. Verb promotion, and passive vs. active. Then, we added the phenomenon of Chinese students' avoidance of typical sentence patterns as the fifth category and explains the negative transfer phenomenon of the five categories with markedness theory. Based on these findings, Chinese English learners are suggested to put forward appropriate methods to avoid the obstacles of negative transfer of Chinese syntax to second language learning.

Keywords: Syntactic negative transfer, English writing, Markedness Theory.

1   Introduction

A large number of studies have shown that language transfer plays a central role in second language acquisition research. In the study of syntactic transfer, many researchers have contributed their theories. SLA as an independent discipline formed in the 1960s is a relatively new field of study, borrowing most of the methods from other related disciplines such as pedagogy at its birth. From the 1970s and 1980s to the 21st century, as research in the field of SLA has intensified, the scope of research on SLA has been broadened to include psychology, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and many other aspects. Among the many studies on SLA, one factor that cannot be ignored is language transfer. R. Wang. explained Ellis' s view: Based on language transfer theo-

ry, it is generally believed that learners' mother tongue will have positive or negative influence in the process of second language acquisition due to the support or interference of previous learning experience. [1] When the rules of the mother tongue are similar to those of the target language, the learner's mother tongue will promote foreign language learning, while when there is a big difference between the learner's mother tongue and the foreign language, the mother tongue will hinder foreign language learning.

The superficial reason for these errors is that students don't have a solid grasp of the Syntax rules of the target language, but the deep reason is the interference of Chinese language characteristics. The differences between Chinese and English are mainly reflected in:

(1) Chinese sentences are mainly reflected in the relationship between subject and topic, rather than the relationship between subject and predicate.

(2) Double-name structure. In Chinese, there are double-noun structures before verbs, while in English, double-noun structures (except for emphasis) are not grammatical.

(3) Sentence components are vacant. Chinese allows the topic, subject or object to be vacant, while English regards it as an error.

(4) Subject-predicate agreement. Subject-predicate in Chinese does not need to be consistent in person and number, but in English, subject-predicate is achieved by the change of verb form.

Scholars have expressed their views on form-harmony in various aspects. Li C.N. & S.A.Tompson pointed out in 1976 that parataxis and hypotaxis are the necessary means to form a language [2]. English is a subject-prominent language, while Chinese is a subject-prominent language. S. Lv, pointed out that the phenomenon of flowing sentences in Chinese has a migration phenomenon for Chinese students to learn English [3]. "There are many flowing sentences in spoken Chinese, one clause after another, and many places can be broken or connected." Researchers such as Krashen have argued that errors in word order are often due to learners generating target utterances substrates when translating the surface structure of the native language word by word [4]. Odlin & Greenberg argue that most human languages have their own basic word order, such as SVO (subject-verb-object), SOV (subject-object-predicate), or VS (predicate-subject-object) [5]. English usually adopts such word order as subject-verb-object, while Chinese usually adopts various forms depending on the meaning of the sentence, so the word order of Chinese is more flexible.

Research showed that "avoidance of typical sentence patterns" usually occurs in Chinese students' English writings. For example, as claimed by H. Ni., native English speakers often choose the pronoun "it" as the subject or object of a sentence in form [6]. But in Chinese, people usually imply the subject in the sentence. Therefore the differences between the two languages are usually ignored by Chinese translators. J. Yu，S. Yang. point out that the negative transfer phenomenon of active Chinese sentences can be found in the writing of Chinese students, they explain that this is because of the different structures of Chinese and English languages [7].

Markedness theory is based on the concept of markedness, which is an important principle in linguistics to analyze language systems. According to this principle, the

opposite language components or features are given different values, positive values are marked, and negative or neutral values are marked. The main purpose of markedness theory is to establish marked the markedness pattern of language by analyzing markedness phenomena in each subsystem of language. This theory was first put forward by Prague School in the 1930s, and it has experienced nearly seventy years of development.

Although the corpus-based study on language transfer has gained fruitful achievements since the 1990s, X. Tian pointed out that few studies analyze syntactic transfer in English writing of Chinese college students in detail. Therefore, the author selects 100 samples of writing from the corpus, using quantitative and qualitative research methods, and based on the theories of Language Transfer, Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis [8].

J. Yang pointed out that many scholars at home and abroad have focused their research on language transfer mainly on theoretical analysis or the influence of the mother tongue on second language acquisition, only a small amount of research has a connection with the syntactic transfer or the effects of awareness-raising of syntactic transfer [9]. Based on the language transfer, contrastive analysis, interlanguage theory, and markedness theory, the author asks two questions for research and uses four years of practical experience in IELTS writing training as a channel.

By analysing examples of syntactic transfer in students' English sentence and essay writing from more than ten years of English teaching experience, C. Cheng explores the influence of Chinese syntactic structures and rules on English writing [10]. Through these investigations and analyses, the authors found that both positive and negative syntactic transfer existed in Chinese students' writing.

In a brief summary, the research on syntactic transfer in language transfer mainly focuses on theoretical error analysis, but with the deepening of research, most researchers find that this is not practical. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the negative transfer of Chinese syntax in English writing from a more practical way, taking the written materials of Chinese English learners as an example, to avoid the obstacles of negative transfer of syntax to second language learning through appropriate methods.

2   Methodology

The selection of experimental objects has strict standards. 40 subjects were divided into two groups: the basic group and the advanced group. Their average age is 21±1 years old, the ratio of males to females is 1:1, and they all have undergraduate degrees in China. During their growing up, English is their only second language. The members of the basic group are not English majors, and they have not received professional English writing training in their college careers. The advanced group members are all English majors, who have received good professional English writing training over 4 years.

In terms of data collection, the original data collected can be divided into three categories: 1. Composition; 2. Speech; 3. English-Chinese translation exercises. Two

groups of students undertake these three kinds of assignments, each submitting 2,000 words, totalling 80,000 words. A large number of examples of marked sentences or errors have been collected, and attention has been paid to reasonably judging whether Chinese syntactic transfer is one of the reasons for marked sentences or errors.

In principle, the translation equivalence standard commonly adopted by analysts is adopted, and the syntactic forms of Chinese and English are matched to determine whether they meet the above standards.

Table 1. (Basic Group)

General classification	Inaccurate or marked category	Average frequency
Hypotaxis vs. Parataxis	Lack of consistency in sentence components	8.10
	Running sentences (diaspora sentences)	10.46
	Parataxis omission	2.35
	Formal subject	1.22
The subject-predicate structure vs. The topic-remark structure	Error in logical subject	5.23
	Subject part of speech is not standardized	2.35
	"There be" structure	3.46
	Wh-words-guided interrogative sentences	1.00
	Adverbial	1.02
Noun and preposition prominence vs. Verb prominence	Verb Advantage Transfer	13.28
	Multi-predicate construction transfer in Chinese	2.41
Passive vs. Active	Transfer errors of active expression (Chinglish)	2.22
	Semantic expression errors	1.89
	The verb form changes incorrectly	2.08
	Total syntactic interference items	57.07

Table 2. (Advanced Group)

General classification	Inaccurate or marked category	Average frequency
Hypotaxis vs. Parataxis	Lack of consistency in sentence components	7.23
	Running sentences (diaspora sentences)	9.26
	Parataxis omission	2.05
	Formal subject	1.00
The subject-predicate structure vs. The topic-remark structure	Error in logical subject	2.23
	Subject part of speech is not standardized	1.32
	"There be" structure	3.25
	Wh-words-guided interrogative sentences	1.00
	Adverbial	1.00
Noun and preposition prominence vs. Verb prominence	Verb Advantage Transfer	8.08
	Multi-predicate construction transfer in Chinese	1.51
Passive vs. Active	Transfer errors of active expression (Chinglish)	2.01
	Semantic expression errors	1.12

	The verb form changes incorrectly	2.01
	Total syntactic interference items	41.07

According to the comparison of the samples collected, we found that the frequency of syntactic transfer marked sentences or errors in the "advanced group" was lower than that in the "basic group" in all indicators. The above-mentioned explanation shows that specialized syntactic training can effectively help students avoid the phenomenon of negative syntactic transfer.

3   Hypotaxis vs. Parataxis

Li C.N. & S.A.Tompson pointed out in 1976 that parataxis and hypotaxis are the necessary means to form a language. English is a subject-prominent language, while Chinese is a subject-prominent language.

In English, the habit of making sentences mainly adopts the form method, that is, words or clauses in a sentence need to be connected by special form markers to express specific grammatical meanings and logical relationships. These marks include various morphological changes and different conjunctions, which are often indispensable in sentences.

In Chinese, the habit of sentence-making mainly adopts the paratactic method, that is, words or clauses do not need to be connected by linguistic means, but only rely on context and logic to express complete meaning.

By analyzing the corpus texts of the experimental subjects, it is found that the problems mainly focus on the following three points.

3.1   Lack of Consistency

The subject-predicate structure of Chinese is not obvious, so Chinese people hardly need to change any subject-predicate forms when using Chinese. Therefore, students often forget to change the form of words in English writing, which leads to inconsistency between the subject and predicate, or with other elements in the sentence.

e.g. Exploring unknown places are a great pleasure to the world.

The student took "places" as the logical subject. When a noun phrase is used as the subject, the third person singular of the verb should be used as the predicate, and similar infinitive phrases should be used as the subject. This sentence can be changed to:

Exploring unknown places is a great pleasure to the world.

3.2   Run-on Sentences

Chinese expressions often rely on semantics to express themselves smoothly. Hence, students often abuse simple sentences and hardly use any special morphological markers in the process of English writing, resulting in inconsistent content. This situation will lead to the phenomenon of "Run-on sentences" which is firstly proposed by S. Lv in 1979, that is, there are many running water-like sentences in oral Chinese.

e.g. I went to the canteen today, and I was going to eat, the food in the canteen was delicious today, but I wasn't going to eat much, I think it's more important to go back to study. (basic group)

Unclear use of punctuation and Chinese logic will lead to this phenomenon. When writing, students can try to use complex sentences and conjunctions to ensure the fluency of sentences, instead of language errors or marked language. This sentence can be amended to read:

Today I went to the canteen where the food is tasty to eat, but I don't plan to eat too much, the thing is that I think it is more important to go back to study.

3.3   Omission

Omission often appears in Chinese. Because the Chinese emphasize context, it doesn't pay special attention to logical subjects. Affected by this, students will confuse and omit the subject and other components in sentences when writing English.

e.g. Walking in the street, the water vapour in the air is refreshing.

When Chinese learners are learning English, they often find that they are trying to make sentences by using Chinese sentence-making logic. This often causes them to output marked English words. The example sentence can be modified to read:

Walking in the street, I felt the water vapour the air was fresh.

4   The subject-predicate structure vs. the topic-remark structure

Chinese and English are different types of languages. In Chinese sentences, the subject always is seen as the topic. Because the subject often is omitted owing to the context, so Chinese is a topic-remark structure language. English is different from Chinese because its sentences always contain subject and predicate. Due to the subject often acting as the main topic in an English sentence, and no sentence is formed without a subject, it is an indispensable component of a sentence. Therefore, English is a subject-predicate structure language.

4.1   Transfer marked sentences or errors in the topic-remark structure

Owing to the variation between Chinese and English, students whose native language is Chinese can easily make mistakes when writing in English. Here are three major marked sentences or errors in their writing: logical subject error, irregularity in the part of speech of the subject, and "there be" structure fault.

Logical subject error.

One problem that students often get wrong in writing is called Dangling Construction. When predicate verb phrases and prepositional phrases are used as adverbials,

their logical subjects do not agree with the subject of the main clause, resulting in logical problems. Here is an example:

Following the street, a tiny garden appeared.

In this sentence, the logical subject should be the describer. Then when the subject turns to a garden, it is no doubt wrong. This sentence can be correct as "Following the street, he saw a tiny garden".

Irregularity in the part of speech of the subject.

Compare with English which is a fusional language, Chinese is isolating language. In the Chinese sentence, there are not have the rules of the subject correspond with the predicate. But in an English sentence, the verb must keep consistent with the subject in person and quantity. Therefore, many students will write the wrong part of the speech on the subject in their writing. For example:

① My classmate made excellent progress during the summer holiday.

② Excellent progress has been made by my classmate during the summer holiday.

These sentences are all right but it has different subject in the context. When the translated demand to the subject is "my classmate", the second sentence is wrong; If the subject is "excellent progress" in the original sentence, there is no doubt that the first sentence is wrong. None of them has grammatical marked sentences or errors, However, the judgment of appropriateness or inappropriateness should be made according to the sentence to be translated.

"There be" structure fault.

At the "there be" structure, "there" is the formal subject, "be" is the intransitive verb as the predicate, and the noun after "be" is the real subject. Because its subject is not at the beginning of the sentence, students are prone to inconsistency in writing. An example is:

The desk has many delicious foods.

In this sentence, "food" is the real subject. But in the writing, students are prone to change the subject to "desk". So, the correct sentence should be: There are many delicious foods on the desk.

4.2   Confusion of language order

Marked sentences or errors in word order are often caused by word-by-word translation of the surface structure of the native language when learners generate the target utterance. English usually uses a word order such as subject-predicate-object, while Chinese usually uses a variety of forms depending on the meaning of the sentence, so Chinese word order is more flexible and varied.

Wh-words guided questions.

In Chinese, the word order of interrogative and declarative sentences is the same. Asking questions often requires only the use of punctuation or judgment based on

semantics. However, in English, the wh-word must be placed at the beginning of the sentence and the auxiliary verb must also be mentioned before the subject. Such as the wrong sentence:

Why does the dog bark at the boy?

In this sentence, there has a lack of elements. The correct sentence should be modified to say: Why does the dog bark at the boy?

Adverbial questions.
Chinese and English belong to different branching structures. The left-branching structure means that the centre component is located at the end of the sentence, and Chinese sentences always are this structure. On the contrary, most English sentences are a right-branching structure. This structure put the central component at the beginning of the sentence. When students are affected by the Chinese, they will put the adverbial before the verb in their English writing. An example is:

You can across the forest gain treasure.

In this sentence, the "across" as an adverbial should be put at the end rather than at the beginning. This sentence can be corrected to: You can gain treasure across the forest.

5   Noun and preposition prominence vs. verb prominence

Chinese sentences are often full of verbs, so it can be called Verby Language. Since English is dominated by nouns and prepositions, it is always regarded as Nouny Language. Due to the influence of the Chinese language which gives priority to verbs, there has two major negative transfers in students' writing: verb dominance transfer and Chinese multi-predicate parallelism transfer.

5.1   Verb dominance transfer

Although English has lots of nouns and prepositions to express the meaning of sentences, the student is always influenced by the Chinese which prefers to use verbs. For example:
① Seeing this movie, I felt deeply touched.
② This movie-watching experience made me touched.

These sentences are all right but it has different expressions in the context. Compare with the first sentence, the second sentence is more concise and more consistent with the English expression.

5.2   Chinese multi-predicate parallelism transfer

A multi-predicate sentence can exist in the Chinese language. While in an English sentence, only multi-preposition can be accepted. If a sentence has more than two or

more predicates, this sentence is wrong. This difference between Chinese and English will lead to this condition:

I push open the door, walk to the desk, pull out the drawer, take out a book and read it.

In an English sentence, there need a series of prepositions such as "open", "to", and "out" to express the complete meaning. But in Chinese, it is just using some words that indicate action to connect the whole sentence.

6   Passive vs. active

It is well known that both Chinese and English have active and passive sentences. However, the rules of passive sentences in Chinese and English are different. The most obvious point is that the verbs in English passive sentences always use the passive tense. However, in many cases Chinese passive sentences do not have the past tense of the verb or even any words that indicate the past. Many Chinese passive sentences are just implicit in logic. Chinese students will be affected by Chinese passive sentences and make mistakes when learning English. After analyzing the work of a large number of students, the students' mistakes can be divided into the following categories:

6.1   Transfer errors of active expression (Chinglish)

In hospital doctor treats her. (Chinglish)
She is being treated in hospital.(right）

Chinese students use active sentences more often than passive sentences in their English writing because passive sentences are rarely used in Chinese. When Passive sentences are used in Chinese, people usually express a bad thing or some kind of dissatisfaction, for example, *"他被车撞了" which means" he was hit by a car."，and"我被我最好的朋友背叛了"which mean "I was betrayed by my best friend."* The differences between Chinese passive sentences and English passive sentences and the infrequent use of passive sentences in Chinese make it difficult for Chinese students to understand the rules and context of using English passive sentences, so Chinese students often make grammatical mistakes or use Chinglish during their writing.

6.2   Semantic expression error

He has no culture.
He is not well educated .

Some words are hard to find in English with the exact same meaning in Chinese. Some Chinese students may ignore this when writing English sentences, and directly translate Chinese words into English and then simply combine them according to Chinese word order.

6.3   Error in verb form change

The price has raised. (wrong)
The price has been raised. (right)

The basic rule of English passive sentences is "be + v-ed" or "get + v-ed". However, Chinese students often forget this rule when writing English because Chinese students learn the active form of words first when they learn English verbs and the verbs in Chinese passive sentences do not change.

7   The Avoidance of typical sentence patterns

We can know that many kinds of sentence patterns appear both in Chinese and English. The rules of some sentence patterns are the same in Chinese and English. For example, the rule of declarative sentences is "SVO" in both Chinese and English. However, the rules of some sentences patterns are completely different in Chinese and English, such as inverted sentences, negative questions. And some sentence patterns even only exist in English, such as the "it" sentence pattern. It is very difficult for Chinese students to grasp the rules of these English sentences, so they avoid these sentences in order to avoid making mistakes in their usage. By analyzing students' homework, the avoidance of sentence patterns can be divided into the following typical types:

7.1   Negative sentences

Chinese students often make mistakes when changing active sentences into negative sentences, such as the active sentence "I think he is right". When changing this sentence to a negative sentence, some Chinese students will say *"I think he is not right"* instead of *"I don't think he is right"*. That's because *"I think he is not right"* matches the Chinese word order.

7.2   Inverted sentences

The bell rang. （more used by Chinese students）
There goes the bell.　（less used by Chinese students)

Both English and Chinese have the phenomenon of subject postposition and predicate preposition, but English can form an inversion sentence with an adverb and an auxiliary verb in advance, which does not exist in Chinese. And the English complete inversion sentence needs the leading words "there" "here" "neither" and so on. Therefore Chinese students rarely use inversion sentences because they are not familiar with the rules of English inversion sentences.

7.3   Usage of "it"

Learning English well is necessary. (more used by Chinese students)

It's necessary to learn English well . （less used by Chinese students)

Instead of "It's necessary to learn English well", Chinese students will say "Learning English well is necessary.", because the latter sentence is in the same order as the Chinese sentence. The rule of "it" sentence is "it + adj + to do." Therefore Chinese students deliberately avoid using it in case of forgetting this rule and making mistakes.

7.4   Antisense questions

I think that he has done his best, hasn't he?

Chinese students will avoid using the disjunctive questions because the rules of the disjunctive questions are completely unfamiliar to Chinese students and very difficult to grasp. Chinese students will wonder why they write "hasn't he" instead of "has he" or "doesn't he". Since they cannot understand the rules, they will avoid using disjunctive questions during their writing.

7.5   Subjunctive mood

If you came tomorrow, we would have the meeting.

Chinese students rarely use the subjunctive mood since the rules of verb tense change in a fictitious sentence are difficult to master. It is difficult to understand why they use "came" instead of "will come", or "come" when students learn the sentence above. In China, when students learn the rules of the subjunctive mood, they are taught to use different tenses of verbs according to three situations: the opposite of the present, the opposite of the past, and the opposite of the future. These rules are complex and difficult to remember. To avoid making mistakes, Chinese students often avoid using the subjunctive mood.

8   Solutions

Teachers should give enough encouragement to the diversity and innovation of syntax in college students' English compositions so that students' English levels can be improved rapidly.

1) Using comparative analysis of English and Chinese syntax, strengthen students' awareness of syntax, and let students know the differences and similarities between English and Chinese syntax. English teachers should pay attention to the influence of the mother tongue on Chinese college students' English writing, and help students realize the similarities and differences between English and Chinese syntactic structures.

2) Intersperse syntactic training in writing teaching. Teachers should make students develop in a balanced way in the accuracy and fluency of syntactic expression, help students overcome avoidance psychology, and encourage them to try boldly;

3) Let students combine reading and writing to expand the input of the English language. Only based on a large number of inputs, students can have a deeper under-

standing of the syntactic features of English, and then learn to use them. When judging English compositions, teachers should adopt an appropriate tolerant attitude towards mistakes.

4) Explore effective writing teaching modes and strategies. In the process of writing teaching, the teachers should pay attention to effective guidance and timely feedback, and encourage students to gradually learn authentic and diversified English expressions.

9   Conclusion

According to the comparison of collected samples, this article finds that the frequency of syntactic transfer errors or marked languages in the "advanced group" is significantly lower than that in the "basic group" among all indicators. This paper finds that these two groups of students have the following general problems in second language acquisition, although these problems can be gradually avoided in training: hypotaxis vs. parataxis, the subject-predicate structure vs. the topic-remark structure, Noun and preposition promotion vs. Verb promotion, and passive vs. active, as well as avoidance of typical sentence patterns.

In hypotaxis vs. parataxis, both groups of students were found that they were influenced by mother tongue transfer, which was caused by the thinking of hypotaxis in their mother tongue (Chinese). However, this paper found that this negative transfer did not decrease significantly through training, which shows that the negative transfer caused by hypotaxis is one of the problems that Chinese native speakers can hardly avoid when learning English. Although there are many similarities between Chinese and English in sentence structure, there are still many differences in usage.

In the subject-predicate structure vs. the topic-remark structure, students in the "basic group" often make mistakes in writing English sentences, such as errors in logical subjects, irregular parts of speech of subjects, and structural errors in "there be". Because students like to translate the mother tongue in different word order word for word, they often make mistakes in interrogative words leading questions and adverbial questions. However, the data of the two groups of students have changed greatly, which shows that the students who have been systematically trained have obviously improved in this aspect.

In noun and preposition prominence vs. verb prominence, the student has two major negative transfers in their writing. One is verb dominance transfer, and the other is Chinese multi-predicate parallelism transfer. The performance of the two groups of students in the data shows that they can get some improvement after certain training, among which verb advantage transfer has the greatest improvement, which shows that students can avoid this aspect to a certain extent through training and study.

In passive vs. active and the avoidance of typical sentence patterns, students make mistakes because they are affected by Chinese grammar, way of thinking and so on. The error rate of the advanced group is lower than that of the basic group. To some extent, it can be shown that classroom training can improve the English level, but it can not avoid students' mistakes to a large extent. It is necessary to continuously ex-

plore and summarize experiences to obtain more convenient and efficient ways to improve the English level of Chinese students.

The above data and experimental results show that specialized syntactic training can effectively help students avoid negative syntactic transfer. Moreover, this paper focuses on these five aspects to explore the performance of students' negative transfer from their mother tongue in writing but does not explain too much what causes these phenomena. On this basis, future research could collect more data and examine more syntactic phenomena to strengthen the validity of this issue.

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