



The Negative Transfer Confronted by Chinese English Learners: from the Perspective of Linguistics and Culture

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Abstract. In previous studies, much literature has demonstrated from different perspectives that the first language (L1) has certain effects on the second language (L2). Such effects are called negative transfer in second language acquisition (SLA). This study focuses on two types of negative transfer that could deeply affect the learning process: the linguistic negative transfer and the cultural negative transfer. In terms of linguistic perspective, the negative transfer is reflected in phonetics, lexical collocation, and word order. When learning a new language, L2 learners are often considered to be influenced by the speech habits and pronunciation patterns of their L1. The greater the difference between the language conventions of the two languages, the more pronounced the negative transfer will be. From the cultural perspective, the negative transfer of L1 is demonstrated particularly in social phrasing during cross-cultural communication, based on the cultural background of high or low context. When communicating in L2, learners are inclined to be influenced by the cultural etiquette preferred in L1. Based on these findings, learners and teachers are suggested to apply proper strategies to improve the learning process.

Keywords: Negative Transfer, Second Language Acquisition

1 Introduction

The 21st century is an era of internationalization. As international communication becomes more frequent, learning a second language (L2) is now a very common phenomenon. According to a global statistic survey by Elizabeth Gration [1], nearly 43% of the world's population is bilingual and can easily switch between two languages. And a majority of the bilingual population learns English as the second language. In the process of learning English as a second language acquisition (SLA), many factors can affect the mastery of a new language. Among all the factors, the effect of the first language (L1) on the second language (L2) is often discussed and studied from the perspectives of linguistics and culture.

Several previous studies have demonstrated that L1 has an impact on SLA. According to Odlin's theory [2], the influence of L1 on SLA is generally described as language

transfer, which typically refers to the learners trying to apply rules in the forms of L1 into L2. Learners' L1 facilitates SLA in many ways. When the linguistic rules of L1 are similar to those of the target language, the transfer of L1 will affect the target language positively and is referred to as positive transfer. As long as the various L2 linguistic rules are somewhat similar to those of L1, the linguistic knowledge of L1 will contribute significantly to SLA. Conversely, when the linguistic rules of L1 do not match those of the target language, it will have a negative impact on SLA, which is referred to as negative transfer. There is considerable evidence in the research findings published today that states that negative transfer from the mother tongue is evident in pronunciation. Differences in language families and pronunciation styles can lead to difficulties in learning the pronunciation of a second language. The difficulty in pronunciation lies not only in the intonation but also in the unconscious changes that learners make to the consonants, vowels and long and short sounds in L2 [3-5]. In addition, the negative transfer is particularly apparent in grammar and translation. Due to cultural differences, the mother tongue of L2 learners has been shown to have a significant negative transfer effect on lexical collocation in SLA [6-8]. In terms of translation, negative native language transfer is often reflected in word-for-word translations [9] and in some culturally specific vocabulary [10]. Moreover, the negative transfer is also observed in the word order of bilingual or multilingual learners. The effect of L1 on L2 in word order can be significant when L1 and L2 are in different language families [11].

Apart from the linguistic influence that L1 poses on L2, previous studies also find out that the negative transfer of L1 also embodies in cultural aspect. As an essential part of culture, language plays more than merely a role of cultural phenomenon, but a significant carrier as well, serving the means of cultural communication among the individuals in society [12]. Around the globe, different states and peoples possess their own unique culture, and language is the representative and reflection of the culture to which it belongs [13]. Language and culture are so correlative that without the comprehension of cultural setting regarding the target language correctly and thoroughly, chances are that negative transfer of L1 during conversation would occur, given that the use of language is not merely conveying or obtaining information, but with certain culture attached [12]. Certainly, different cultures have their commonality and individuality, and the former one contributes to the embodiment of positive transfer, whereas the latter one could to a certain extent inevitably lead to the embodiment of differences, and even misunderstandings, particularly in the daily use of language. And L2 learners, regardless of what level they are in, would possibly encounter the culture-based negative transfer of their L1 when acquiring the target language [14]. Previous researches mainly focus on the academic perspective of L1's negative transfer in culture, for instance, how it influences students' writing, listening as well as reading skills when learning L2 [15-17]. Many following studies choose college students as the target population, and countermeasures have been put forward. Apart from the analysis concerning the negative transfer of L1 in academic relevance owing to the existing cultural differences [18], other studies also probe into L1's negative transfer to L2 under the context of cross-cultural communication. Since cultures could be divided into high-context and low-context ones demonstrating the significant differences across cultures

in the ways and the extent to which people communicate through context [19], the different cultural backgrounds between L1 and L2 could lead to confusion and sometimes misinterpretation as well. In low-context culture, meanings are explicitly conveyed through language [20], and the social distance is relatively close. Whereas in high-context culture, the structure of social hierarchy exists clearly in social phrasing [21], and the indirect expression is valued. Consequently, when using L2 that comes from a quite different cultural context compared with L1, negative transfer could occur and bring out misconceiving.

Given the fact that the linguistic negative transfer and the cultural negative transfer could deeply influence Chinese students when they learn English as a second language, and previous studies failed to provide a systemic analysis of this dilemma, this article would therefore further analyse the negative transfer confronted by Chinese learners from both linguistic and cultural perspectives, and exploring the relationship between two languages.

2 The analysis of negative transfer from the Linguistic Perspective

2.1 Phonetics

Pronunciation is considered to be one of the most obvious examples of negative transfer in SLA. The transfer is usually more apparent when the learner's L2 is in a different language family from his or her mother tongue, such as a person whose L1 is Mandarin learns English. Each language differs to a greater or lesser extent in the way it is vocalized. For example, compared to Chinese, English has more pronounced pulmonic egressive sounds, Korean has more pronounced front nasals, Japanese has more pronounced back nasals, and Thai has more voiced consonants. According to He's research [4], there is no consonant cluster in Chinese, which means that a vowel must be present between two consonants. This explains why Chinese people habitually add vowels after consonants when learning languages with consonant clusters such as English. This phenomenon also occurs in other Asian people such as the Japanese. Influenced by the fact that Katakana is pronounced with vowels (except for the syllabic nasal "n") and the frequent use of wabi-sabi English and loan words, Japanese learners add vowels to almost all consonants when speaking a foreign language.

In addition, Chinese dialects also have a negative effect on the pronunciation of L2 in SLA. The negative transfer of dialect on L2 in terms of pronunciation is clearly evidenced in Niu Jie's study [5]. The study compared the differences between the pronunciation of dialects and English by administering questionnaires to university students of Henan origin and analysing the recordings of the students' speeches. It was found that the negative transfer was more pronounced in students with dialect accents than in Mandarin-speaking students. Because learners who use dialects often confuse some of the pronunciations used in Mandarin, students often fail to distinguish between long and short sounds, and add or change the vowels (e.g. [i] and [ei] are not distinguished, [en] and [ei] are not distinguished, the [i] sound is ignored in [ai], etc.) and consonants

(e.g. [l] and [n] are not distinguished, [θ] and [ð] are not distinguished, etc.), which are commonly used in dialects.

2.2 Lexical collocation

Errors in lexical collocation are common in SLA. Even advanced learners are still not guaranteed collocation accuracy. The negative transfer of collocation is often seen in writing and speaking. The main reason for collocation errors is the cultural influence of L2 from L1 and the direct use of the L1 collocations.

Take the phrase “eat apples” as an example. Since both the Chinese collocations and the English collocations are the verb “eat” plus the noun “apples”, there is no problem in translating this phrase directly from Chinese word by word. However, when we want to express the phrase “take medicine”, it is easy for Chinese learners to do word-for-word translation and express it directly as “eat medicine”. This is because in Chinese, the phrase “take medicine” is paired with the verb “eat”. Such problems are not only limited to translations between Chinese and English. In the case of Japanese, the verb would be “drink” instead of “take” or “eat”. Though English speakers usually use different verbs, there is no way to translate the collocation correctly word by word. Fan’s study [8] on verb-noun collocation also showed that the negative transfer of lexical collocation is not confined to beginners. Many advanced English majors still make mistakes. The study took a random sample of Chinese senior students’ compositions and it was clear from the results that verbs were used incorrectly in word collocations much more often than other vocabularies such as nouns and prepositions. Error rates are significantly higher when the collocation of the mother tongue and the target language does not match. In the case of verb-noun collocations, it is mainly a matter of accumulation. The negative transfer of lexical collocations usually remains evident in learners’ expressions until they become fluent in their L2.

2.3 Word order

Although compared to other factors, there has not been much specific research on the negative transfer of word order, it is also one of the modules that is considered to affect L2. For example, it is difficult for Chinese learners to learn an SVO order language. This is because Chinese is an SOV language and therefore negatively guides Chinese learners to learn an SVO language. For Chinese learners, learning the word order of English and French is relatively easy, but Japanese, which has a different word order, is relatively difficult to understand. However, such a division of word order is still too general. Chinese learners of English as an L2 can often feel that the word order of English is different from that of Chinese. This is because English and Chinese belong to different language families. According to Zhang [5]’s study, English speakers have developed an analytical mindset in the course of using English for a long time. They focused on the classification of grammatical concepts in terms of their grammatical categories, thus they formed various grammatical concepts such as the progressive tense, passive voice and so on. The internal components of English sentences are thus arranged through various grammatical concept categories, forming a grammatical order

that focuses on grammatical form. Chinese speakers, on the other hand, are integrative thinkers and focus more on semantics than on grammar, resulting in a language characterized by a focus on semantic expressions and a lack of grammatical form. Therefore, the grammatical features of English and Chinese are different. The [word order] of English cannot be equated with the [语序] of Chinese. It is precise because of the difference in grammatical features arising from their ways of thinking that negative transfer is evident in the process of SLA.

3 The analysis of negative transfer from the cultural Perspective

3.1 Negative transfer of L1 culture in greeting etiquette

As the symbolic presentation of culture [22], language used during communication often demonstrates the culture behind. The cultural difference could add barrier to cross-cultural social intercourse, and daily greetings serve as a great illustration. Usually the case would be, for instance, when Chinese students meet their American professor who has taught the class face-to-face throughout the who session, Chinese students would still start the greeting with the title of others, such as Dr. and professor. But the native students prefer to say hello to their professor with a relatively simple “sir” or “madam”, and sometimes greet on first-name terms or even nicknames preferred by the professor to narrow down the social distance with others. Hence the professors would perceive Chinese students to be very polite yet sometimes too courteous [23]. In fact, different states and peoples have formed varied speech etiquettes and the corresponding cultural norms through long-term historical development. As a high-context culture society, China has long been known as the land of ceremony as well as propriety [24]. For example, Chinese people worship the ethnical morality of seniority order, meanwhile advocate the traditional cultural virtue of honoring teachers and values the impartment of knowledge. In low-context culture, however, for instance the American culture in which the idea of egalitarianism is highly endorsed [25], people are inclined to talk relatively casually. And the concerns towards social hierarchy are relatively light. This does not mean that people from low-context culture would neglect basic politeness during the conversation. Instead it is more like they would worry less about the emphasis on rank and identity when talking in English. Under this circumstance, those who come from a society with high-context culture would lay stress on the formality as well as courtesy during a conversation.

Plus, given that the social hierarchy as well as ceremonial social phrasing have been deeply ingrained ever since childhood, when switching to a low-context culture, people who come from a high-context culture would still pay attention to word choice in order to convey politeness. They would also imperceptibly widen the social distance between people, or even provide others with a negative impression of somewhat difficult to approach. Thus this is where the negative transfer of L1 to L2 occurs. The foreign professors would consider the students from high-context culture to be profoundly courteous for sure. But those students could also be perceived as overcautious and to some extent

reserved, since the social distance is widened due to all the prudential politeness and honorifics as well [26]. In brief, the idea of politeness in greetings is addressed differently in varied cultures. Yet the social phrasing of L1 is carried onto L2 communication in which the cultural context is quite different, leading to the occurrence of negative transfer. When the social phrasing of L1 does not conform to the language habit of the target language, the barriers in cross-cultural context emerge. In this case, others from a different cultural context may find the individual too casual, or, probably too deferential, and both of which would to some extent reduce the effectiveness during cross-culture communication.

3.2 Negative transfer of L1 culture in gifting etiquette

As a common social phenomenon, gift giving serves as an indispensable part of human social life [27], highlighting friendliness and other varied interpersonal relationships. Due to cultural background differences, however, during the process of cross-culture gift offering, misunderstandings often occur. Supposed that a foreign friend from the US comes to visit his Chinese classmate's house, he prepares a delicate gift as an appreciation for being invited. When he presents the gift, to his surprise, his Chinese friend keeps waving his hands, mumbling that it is too kind and considerate for the guest to bring a gift. Meanwhile his friend also reemphasizes that it is actually unnecessary to prepare the gift at all. But as the visitor struggles to figure out whether the gift should still be given or not, the Chinese friend reaches out his hands and accepts the gift, notwithstanding that his attitude towards the present seems to be more of a gracious refusal. Under this circumstance, the recipient could be misinterpreted as flip-flopping, but in fact it is more like an indirect expression of social phrasing. In low-context culture where the message conveyed is identified as direct and precise [28], people tend to use straightforward expression more often. In the case of gifting etiquette, a direct and concise response would be something like, "thank you so much" with a rising tone of surprise. Praise may also be added for the gift, for instance "look how delicate it is", followed by a laconically expression of the sincere appreciation. Therefore, the present giver could easily feel the genuineness without all those twists and turns. In contrast, under the high-context culture, people are taught not to express their inner feeling directly, and this demand extends to varied aspects of sociocultural life. In the scenario of present giving, the perplexed behavior of half-declining and half-accepting, or seemingly mere refusal, is actually an embodiment of well-cultivated. And on the other hand the succinct acceptance is perceived as eagerness or worse, impolite in high-context culture. Accordingly, during the cross-cultural communication, the mindset of L1 could unconsciously be applied to L2 conversation, despite the indirect, sometimes ambiguous expression preferred in native context is no longer applicable in the straightforward as well as concise social phrasing in L2 culture. Thus there exists the negative transfer from L1 to L2, which in turn leads to confusion and sometimes misunderstanding between cultures, thus forming obstacles in cross-cultural communication.

4 Conclusion

When learning a second language, learners are easy to transfer their language habits and experiences from the first language to the second language. This phenomenon is called language transfer. This study demonstrated that the linguistic negative transfer and the cultural negative transfer are two main reasons that influence Chinese English learners in different ways and exhibit different features in the learning process. From a linguistic point of view, the negative transfer is evident in phonetics, lexical collocation, and word order. In terms of phonetics, learners are prone to add or change vowels or consonants to the pronunciation of the L2 according to the pronunciation conventions of L1. Word collocations and word order are more influenced by the culture of L1. L1 pronunciation patterns and speech habits are considered to be disruptive factors in learning a second language. The greater the difference between L1 and L2, the more pronounced the negative transfer. From a cultural point of view, during cross-cultural communication, the negative transfer of L1 often occurs, and could therefore interfere with the effectiveness of the conversation between different cultures. Under the influence of high or low context culture, the native speaker would address the word choice differently in terms of social distance, hierarchy, the explicit or vague expression and the like, thus using varied social phrasings based on L1 culture to initiate cross-cultural communication. Often people are accustomed to the social practices of the L1 culture, and unconsciously apply them to the conversation in L2, meanwhile to some extent lacking the sensitivity towards cultural difference. During the collision of multi-cultural backgrounds, people may inevitably misinterpret others, which could even lead to conflict, since the negative transfer from L1 to L2 is reflected clearly under the context of cultural difference.

Based on the above discussion, it is clear that the linguistic negative transfer and the cultural negative transfer exert manifold influences on Chinese English learners. In order to reduce these negative influences, teachers and learners could adopt targeted strategies in the learning process. For phonological problems that are most likely to affect SLA, it is important for language beginners to conduct pronunciation training with practice as the main focus and teaching as a supplement before learning the language systematically. The practice should focus on pronunciation rules, phonemic combinations, stress, intonation and other pronunciation elements to distinguish the speech habits of the native language, especially the dialect. For learners who have developed bad pronunciation habits, be sure to make loud sounds when practicing pronunciation, listen to the local speakers more often and imitate them appropriately. For learners whose pronunciation is difficult to correct, it can be effective to take detailed notes of the phonemes they are prone to make mistakes or have difficulty pronouncing. In terms of lexical collocations and word order, learners should get into the habit of checking the dictionary more often and focus on accumulation rather than blindly making words and sentences using the linguistic rules of their native language. From a cultural perspective, primarily it is of great significance to obtain a basic understanding of other cultures, particularly the social custom, which is widely used during cross-cultural communication. During cross-cultural communication, be sure to know where others come from, or in other words, whether they are from a relatively high or low context culture

compared with one's own culture. Meanwhile, L2 learners ought to be equipped with information concerning the social hierarchy as well as distance preferences in different cultures, hence behaving like native people during L2 conversations, whether face-to-face or via email and other social media platforms. This could to some extent prevent one from being perceived as too casual or fairly overcautious. The strategy works relatively similar when organizing one's social phrasing, for instance, whether L2 learners should express their inner thoughts in a straightforward way or rather indirectly. It all requires learners to identify the different contexts of varied cultures, and thus be able to respond naturally and appropriately, so as to enhance the overall effectiveness as well as mutual understanding under the cross-cultural context.

Moreover, as this study mainly focuses on the SLA process of Chinese English learners, future studies are suggested to consider language learners from other language and cultural backgrounds in order to provide a universal understanding of this issue.

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