Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue during English as a Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract. Writing is regarded as the core skill that can fully represent one's overall English proficiency during English learning. However, for Chinese high school students, the difference between Chinese and English makes it hard for them to perform well in English writing. The negative transfer of the mother tongue has become a significant aspect that influences Chinese high school students' English writing performance. Based on previous research, this paper tends to provide a general overview of this common phenomenon, exploring the development of this concept and the related theories in second language acquisition. Specifically, with a focus on Chinese high school students' writing situation, this paper also tries to analyze the common errors caused by negative transfer that takes place in senior high students' writings and its corresponding solutions.

Keywords: Negative transfer of mother tongue; Second language acquisition, Chinese high school students' English writing; Strategies of remitting negative transfer of the mother tongue

1   Introduction

During second language acquisition, the acquired mother tongue will inevitably have an impact on the mastery of the new language system. That is to say, when students fail to have comprehensive English knowledge, the negative transfer of their mother tongue will inevitably appear repeatedly in the process of English learning (Zhang, 2007)[1].

Despite different dialects in China, most Chinese people can only speak Mandarin as the sole language. However, due to the importance of English in international communication, English has now become the acquired learning second language in China and has an important role in different examinations. Under the situation of Chinese society, most students begin learning English after having a basic acquisition of their mother tongue. Moreover, the English learning process in China often does not happen in a pure English environment. Therefore, even though Chinese students start to learn English from primary school, most of them still fail to have good competence in English.

Out of the four basic skills of English, "listening, speaking, reading, and writing", writing is the one skill that can indicate the overall reflection of learners' English level (Wang, 2014)[2]. As an important part of the English college entrance examination (accounting for 20% of the total college entrance examination score), English writing attracts massive attention from teachers to students (Zhang, 2007)[1]. However, many teachers find that most Chinese students do not perform well in English writing during practical teaching. The core reason that leads to Chinese students' poor performance is the negative transfer of their mother tongue. Throughout the year, many Chinese researchers investigate this phenomenon. Thus, this paper tends to provide a general overview of the negative transfer of the mother tongue in Chinese high school students' English writing, hoping to give readers a systematical understanding of this phenomenon.

2   The Concept of Language Transfer

2.1   Definition of Language Transfer

The concept of language transfer was first put forward by Robert Lado in 1957 and exclusively referred to the transfer between mother language and second language during second language acquisition (Feng, 2017)[3]. Specifically, Lado (1957, as cited in Feng, 2017)[3] claimed in his book that during second language acquisition, learners would be affected more by the negative influence of the mother language rather than the positive effect. Therefore, it is clear that language transfer was not a neutral term at first. As a term originated from behaviorism linguistics, many scholars blame its limitation because they do not think "transfer" equal to "interference", and therefore "have advocated abandoning the term or using it only in highly restricted ways" (Odlin, 1989, as cited in Shi, 2005)[4]. Accordingly, different terms, such as cross-linguistic influence, and mother tongue influence, are created by different scholars; Unfortunately, given the fact that new terms are created by researchers in need of fulfilling their own research purpose, they are filled with specific preferences and thus failed to be accepted universally (Shi, 2005)[4]. Currently, a consensus on the definition of transfer is the definition given by Odlin (1989, as cited in Shi, 2005)[4], who defines transfer as "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired". This definition provided by Odlin breaks the limitation embedded behaviorist theories that somehow narrowed the research scope into a merely negative influence of mother language. Instead, Odlin's new definition of transfer comprehensively covers "a number of different kinds of influence from language other than L2" during language acquisition and, as a neutral term, gives room for more systematic sub-classifications and research (Eliis,1994)[5]. The study of transfer, according to Ellis (1994)[5], "involves the study of errors (negative transfer), facilitation (positive transfer), avoidance of target language forms, and their over-use". Specifically, this paper tends to focus on the negative transfer of mother tongue during second language acquisition.

2.2   Classification of Transfer of Mother Tongue

While the definition given by Odlin can refer to the transfer of target language and any other previously acquired languages, transfer of mother tongue specifically narrows the scope into a transfer between mother language and target language.

Generally, there are two popular types of transfer of mother tongue, which are positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer of mother tongue refers to the facilitation function of previously learned mother language can have during the learning of a second language. When the target language shares similarities with the mother language, positive transfer of the mother tongue can happen and benefit the second language acquisition. For example, vocabularies similarity can enable learners to improve reading comprehension ability more quickly, and the similarity of sentence patterns will allow learners to handle the grammar better (Yu, 2010)[6]. One quite evident facilitative effect, for example, is the fact that Chinese learners have more advantages in terms of vocabulary over other learners when trying to learn Japanese because Chinese and Japanese share some similarities in lexical level (Ellis,1994)[5]. However, it is worth noting that a positive transfer of mother tongue does not suggest that learners will no longer make mistakes due to the help of the mother language (Xia, 2005)[7]. The facilitation of the mother language reflects on the fact that learner can make fewer mistakes or speed up the learning process due to the similarities between the target language and the mother language (Xia, 2005)[7]. As Ellis (1994)[5] suggests, the similarities between mother language and target language can enable the learner to use certain features in the target language before learning the "correct target-language feature". (Ellis, 1994)[5]. That is to say, as the name suggests, positive transfer of mother tongue is beneficial in second language acquisition.

While Positive transfer can facilitate a learner's second language learning, negative transfer of mother tongue, on the other hand, will impede second language acquisition. Negative transfer of mother language refers to the situation when a previously learned mother language interferes with the learning of a second language, thus resulting in errors or inappropriate expressions. Learners tend to apply the rules of mother languages during the process of second language learning. This interference can happen at different levels of language patterns, such as phonological, lexical, and syntactic structure (Yu, 2010)[6]. For instance, French English learners might say "I am here since Monday" instead of "I have been here since Monday" due to the sentence rules in French (Xia, 2005)[7].

2.3   Manifestation of Negative Transfer

There is abundant evidence "for transfer in all aspects of language-phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics" (Ellis,1994)[5]. For a long time, researchers pay a lot of attention to the negative transfer of mother language, and conclude a series of manifestations of negative transfer of mother tongue.

Lexical Transfer.
Lexical transfer can include many aspects and influence spelling, semantic and lexical

collocation.

Though the similarity between two languages in terms of spelling might be helpful, it can also lead to a negative transfer. For example, English and Spanish share some similar vocabularies, but the similarity between spelling can be confusing sometimes. Cortés (2005)[8] investigated the Spanish letters written by British Spanish learners and found plenty of spelling mistakes due to the similar spelling between Spanish and English. For example, students may wrongly write the word "serioso" in Spanish as serious (Cortés, 2005)[8].

In terms of semantics, learners may try to understand and use the target vocabularies based on their mother language (Xia, 2005)[7]. A typical approach for learners is trying to find a corresponding part in their mother language during vocabulary learning and view them as equal (Xia, 2005)[7]. A Chinese English learner may write a wrong English sentence as "I am health" because the direct meaning of "health" in English is equal to the Chinese meaning of "healthy". Thus, a wrong assumption that "health" in English is just the same as "jiànkāng（健康）" in Chinese results in such a mistake.

Lexical collocation is also a quite evident example when referring to negative transfer. Ijaz (1986, as cited in Xia, 2005)[7] suggests that second language learning involves a one-to- one correspondence between two different lexical systems; but even though two different languages might have something in common in terms of word meaning, it is important to know that the functions they serve cannot be completely equal. Thus, due to the influence of the mother tongue, learners of a second language will think that some lexical collocations are exactly the same as their mother tongues, which will result in a negative transfer. For example, English Chinese learners who learn the quantifier"zhī只" (the meaning of "a" in English) and its related collocation such as "yī zhī bǐ一只笔"（a pencil）"yī zhī niǎo一只鸟"（a bird）. A lot of learners may then use the wrong collocation like "yī zhī zhuō zi一只桌子"，which is supposed to be "yī zhāng zhuō zi一张桌子". The reason lies in the fact that "a" in English is almost a universal article that can be used on nearly everything, but in Chinese, there are a lot of different articles, and some of them have special collocations. Even though different articles in Chinese may be translated into English as the same article, "a", it does not mean these two words are exactly the same.

Syntax Transfer.

The effect of the mother language can also be shown on the syntactic layer. Based on the real-life examples of English learners with different native languages, Odlin (1989, as cited in Wang, 2014) [9]concludes that transfer is evident at syntactic layer in many ways, including word order, relative clauses, articles, and phrasal verbs. Freeman (1976, as cited in Wang, 2014)[9] appeals that Japanese English learners are more likely to make mistakes in the article because there are no articles in Japanese. According to Wang (2009)[10], the lack of conjunction and relative pronoun in Chinese sentence structure leads to negative syntax transfer during the English learning process for Chinese learners. Run-on sentences like "It is not rainy today, we can go out to play" are common mistakes among Chinese English learners (Wang, 2009)[10].

Discourse transfer.

Besides the basic vocabulary and grammar, it is worth noticing that language is also "the expression of a certain world view that is manifested in the culture" (Kaplan, 1966)[11]. Thus, according to Kaplan (1966)[11], there are "different types of structures characteristic of a given culture world" in terms of reading or composition. Thus, when learners try to write in a second language, they tend to be constrained by their native language's thinking patterns (Kaplan, 1966)[11]. The development of passage in English, according to Kaplan (1966)[11], is linear and often follow either inductive or deductive reasoning. Hence, if the learner has a different thinking pattern in their mother language, their writing in English may fail to reach the expectation of native English readers (Kaplan, 1966)[11]

For example, the typical Chinese way of starting an article is first to say something that relates to the topic but does not directly mention the thesis, which is significantly different from the direct expression of the thesis in English. Thus, when Chinese students try to write an introduction part by using a Chinese article structure, the outcome may be unsatisfying for native English readers. Zhou (2009) [12]mentioned a Chinese high school student's writing in an English essay entitled "Students use of computer." The beginning part of this student's essay goes like this:

"With the development of the society, people's living standard has been improved. More and more electrical appliances come into our lives. Everything has two sides-so it is with a computer. A computer is a great invention. It has helped people to work out all kinds of difficulties" (Zhou, 2009)[13].

This is an example of using Chinese writing habits in English writing. In this beginning part, this student mentions the social background, the two sides of electrical appliances, and the benefit of the computer. Despite all these things, the students fail to touch upon the topic directly. Even though this structure may make sense to Chinese readers, it is pretty vague for English readers because the author's attitude regarding the issue is not mentioned at all. It is unclear whether the students hold a positive view towards students' use of computer or an opposing view.

3   Theories in Second Language Acquisition

The research on language transfer during second language acquisition (SLA) has gone through different periods. Contrastive analysis hypothesis, interlanguage, and error analysis are three quite famous theories in this field. Even though all three theories focus on investigating the language transfer phenomenon during SLA, they have different emphases.

3.1   Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

The contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) is one of the earliest theories in language transfer and has been widely used in foreign language teaching since the 1960s (Wang, 2014)[9]. It originated from Lado (1957, as cited in Yang,1992)[13] in his book *Linguistic Across Cultures*, with an attempt to "predict and describe the patterns

that will cause difficulty in learning…by comparing systematically the language and the culture to be learned with the native language and the culture of the student."

Under this theory, two different languages are comparable, and the comparison of two languages can predict the problems learners will face during second language acquisition. As Ferguson (1962, as cited in Whitman, 1970)[14] suggests, "a careful contrastive analysis of two languages offers an excellent basis for the preparation of instructional materials." Whitman (1970)[14] further breaks the contrastive analysis into four specific procedures "description, selection, contrast, and predication". By doing these four "must proceed" processes, Whitman argues that CAH will have the ideal capability of aiding teachers' instructions. Nevertheless, even though scholars of CAH think two languages are comparable, they disagree that "a unit in one language is typologically the same thing as a unit in another language" (Whitman, 1970)[14]. To be more specific, the purpose of comparing two languages under the contrastive analysis hypothesis is not about researching two languages at the linguistic layer but is for aiding the second language teaching process in practice.

Through comparison, CAH thus proposes that similarities between native languages and target learning languages will promote learners' target language learning, and the differences between two languages will interfere with the learning process (Han, 2016)[15]. The former refers to positive transfer, while the latter refers to negative transfer. The main focus of the contrastive analysis hypothesis, then, is to figure out the differences between the native language and target language and make full use of them to help learners overcome the negative transfer.

Even though CHA regards its practical usefulness in second language teaching, controversy still exists. Ellis(1994)[5], for example, views CAH as "too simplistic and too restrictive". It is worth noticing that the problem CAH predicts is not "difficulty of a general nature" (Whitman, 1970)[14]. Therefore, it might lead to problems when applying it in real life. With more and more research, many scholars blame its limitations and doubt whether the problems CAH predicts can successfully happen in second language learning. For example, Whitman and Jackson (1972)[16] do four independent tests on Japanese English learners and compare learners' mistakes with the difficulties predicted by the contrastive analysis theories. It turns out that the contrastive analysis "is inadequate to predict the interference problems of a language learner" (Whitman & Jackson,1972)[16]. Nevertheless, given all its weaknesses, it is undeniable that the contrastive analysis hypothesis indeed provides teachers a chance to foresee the difficulties students may encounter and to better understand students' problems (Whitman, 1970)[14].

3.2   Interlanguage

Interlanguage is an idea initially proposed by Larry Selinker in 1969. The "term" interlanguage suggests that during second language acquisition, "there are at least three linguistic verities to be considered: a native language, a target language and the learner's developing second language" (Odlin, 1993)[17]. The "learner's developing second language" is interlanguage, and it is "partially independent of the two languages in contact" (Odlin, 1993)[17].

This unique form of language can be regarded as a mid-stage during second language acquisition and is therefore changeable according to the increase of the learner's language input (Yu, 2010)[6]. In Selinker's (1972, as cited in Ellis, 1994)[5] later article, he further proposes five cognitive processes that account for the formation of interlanguage:

(1) "Language transfer": suggests that some elements in interlanguage are the product of language transfer of learner's native language

(2) "Transfer of training": some interlanguage elements result from how learners were taught

(3) "Strategies of second language learning": some interlanguage elements come from learner's way of learning

(4) "Strategies of second language communication": learner's identifiable way to communicate with native speakers of the target language

(5) "Overgeneration of the target language material": suggests that some elements in interlanguage are the result of learner's overgeneration of the target language.

From these five cognitive factors, it is clear that interlanguage has many different variables; thus, it is "a variety in its own way" (Odlin,1993)[17]. Its dynamic characteristic can be further understood through a chart from Zeng (2005, as cited in Yu, 2010)[6].
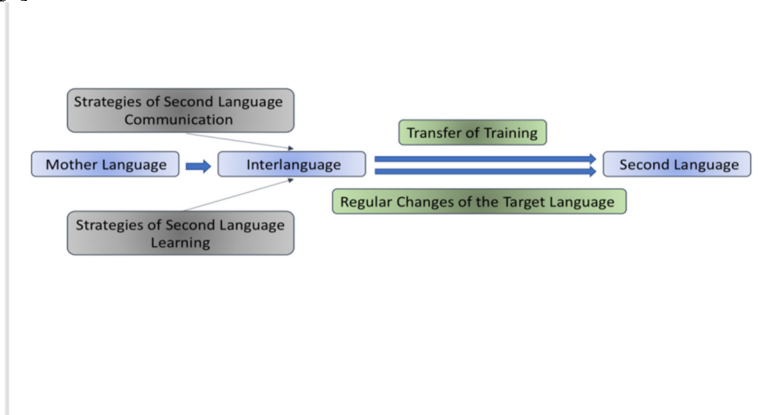

Fig. 1. Diagram of Interlanguage Relationship with Mother Tongue and Second Language[6]

3.3   Error Analysis

Errors Analysis (EA) was developed in the 1970s and was first proposed by S.P Corder. Before the errors analysis studies, errors are regarded as something bad during learners' second language acquisition. For example, the Contrastive analysis hypothesis advocates for preventing learners from the negative transfer. Interlanguage theory, although it holds a neutralized view of errors, does not focus on investigating them. On the other hand, error analysis studies emphasize the importance of error during second language acquisition and regard it as something beneficial. As Corder suggests (1971, as cited in Yu, 2010)[6], errors can reflect a learner's learning process and are especially informative. They enabled teachers to know how much learners had

learned, errors "provided the researcher with evidence of how language was learned", and errors also help learners to figure out the rules of the target language (Ellis, 1994)[5].

Under this theory, it is essential to distinguish between error and mistake. The error happens "when the deviation arises as a result of lack of knowledge", while mistake takes place "when learners fail to perform their competence" (Ellis, 1994)[5]. Though mistakes show an inappropriate use of target language, they do not certainly link to the learner's lack of competence of the target language. In the classroom, for example, learners may feel nervous under the pressure of trying to produce something accurately in the target language, which causes them to make mistakes in some familiar structures (Corder, 1967, as cited in Akhter, 2011)[18]. Thus, Corder (as cited in Ellis, 1994)[5] argues that Error Analysis should merely focus on the study of errors instead of mistakes. Specifically, Corder (1974, as cited in Ellis, 1994)[5] further classifies three different types of errors. They are-

• Presystematic errors: randomly occur when learners fail to know some specific rules in the target language.

• Systematic errors: occur when learners acquire the wrong rule of the target language and apply it.

• Postsystematic errors: "occur when the learner knows the correct target language but uses it inconsistently.

Error Analysis is quite influential in the foreign language teaching area. It changes people's recognition of errors from something that needs to be avoided and corrected to an incorporated part of the second language learning process (Yu, 2010)[6].

4   Current English Writing Situation of High-school English Learners in China

English is one of the most frequently learned second languages in Chinese society. Most Chinese students begin learning English when they enter primary school. Throughout the whole learning process of Chinese students, from primary school to high school, English is a must-learned subject and is always included in examinations. In Chinese English teaching, teachers focus mainly on developing four skills in English: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, it is worth noticing that there is an unbalanced development in the four skills of English. The ability to write is one of the most challenging skills to develop (Yu, 2010)[6]. Even though teachers and students spend a lot on training writing, the outcome is still upsetting. Sometimes, students writing may be grammatically correct but still fail to reach the standard of nature in English.

Especially, Chinese students' English learning situation in high school classrooms attracts huge attention. Under the pressure of the college entrance examination, people attach great importance to improving students' English proficiency. However, even after many years of learning English, Chinese high-school students still have problems with English.

As mentioned before, the differences between the mother language and the target second language will lead to the negative transfer of the mother tongue. When the differences are distinct, such phenomena tend to be more obvious. Since Chinese and English belong to Sino-Tibet Family and Indo-European Family, respectively, there are huge differences between these two languages (Zhou, 2009)[12]. Moreover, in high schools, most English teaching happens in a pure Chinese environment, meaning that in most cases, students seldom have a chance to experience English by themselves. In other words, Chinese high-school students' second language acquisition process is based on the knowledge of the mother language-Chinese. Therefore, when students express themselves in English and write in English, they experience a process of self-translation (Zhou, 2009)[12]. Thus, English sentences with a strong Chinese style are inevitable (Zhou, 2009)[12]. Undoubtedly, the negative transfer influence the Chinese English learners passively. Many researchers noticed this situation and did various studies on the negative transfer on high-school students writing learning, hoping to promote Chinese high school students' English learning.

5   Manifestation of negative transfer of mother tongue in high school English writing

For high-school Chinese English learners, negative mother tongue transfer reflects on many aspects of English writing, including lexical, syntax, and discourse.

Based on the investigation of high school students writing samples, Ren (2022)[19] comprehensively analyzes the manifestations of negative transfer of mother tongue from these three levels of lexical, syntax, and discourse. Based on the 128 writing samples the author collected from Chinese high school students, Ren (2022)[19] further classifies the negative transfer into more detailed types: eight types of errors under the lexical category (such as inappropriate lexical collocation, misuse of meaning, and so on), six types of errors under syntax category, and four types of errors under discourse category, which provides readers with a pretty comprehensive understanding towards the manifestation of negative transfer of mother tongue. Similarly, Zhang (2007)[20] also provides a detailed analysis of the negative transfer of mother tongue reflects on high school students' writings. Besides analyzing lexical, syntax, and discourse, she also investigates the errors brought by negative transfer that show in metaphor. Due to cultural differences, some Chinese students like to write metaphorical sentences with strong Chinese cultural influence, which might lead to confusion for native English readers (Zhang, 2007)[20]. For example, Chinese students may write a sentence like "sleeping like a dead pig" to refer to someone who falls into a deep sleep, which is not a common expression in English (Zhang, 2007)[20].

Other researchers tend to focus more on one specific side of the negative transfer of mother tongue. Lai (2021)[21] explores the misuse of part of speech in high school students' writing and compiles some real-life examples of different types of misuse of part of speech, such as misuse of adjectives as nouns, misuse of nouns as verbs, and so on. In Chinese, one character can be used in many different parts of a sentence without changing its part of speech, which is something unusual in English sentences

(Lai, 2021)[21]. Therefore, such differences lead to Chinese students' misuse of part of speech in English writing (Lai, 2021)[21]. For example, a Chinese student might write the grammatically wrong English sentence "I'm sure you will success" instead of "I'm sure you will succeed" because in the Chinese context, the meaning of "success" and succeed" are both involved in the same word (Lai, 2021)[21]. On the other hand, Xu (2019)[22] analyzes four inappropriate use of subject: subject omission, prepositional phrase acting as the subject, verb (phrase) acting as the subject and improper subject-verb collocation. Xu further (2019)[22] proposes that English is a language that stresses the subject while Chinese stresses the topic more. Therefore, such differences lead to Chinese students' inappropriate use of subjects in English writing. For example, Chinese students may write a sentence like "there will be famous paper-cutting artists teach us to cut paper" (Xu, 2019)[22]. The latter of the sentence, "teach us to cut paper" is not supposed to appear because the "be" in the "there be" sentence pattern is the predicate of the sentence, which suggests that verbs cannot be added to the sentence. (Xu, 2019)[22]. However, in the Chinese context, many people like to use expressions like "there will be many students play basketball" (Xu, 2019)[22]. Thus, students who use the Chinese sentence structure in English writing will have the problem of misusing the subject (Xu, 2019)[22].

Most studies of the manifestation of negative transfer of mother tongue reach a conclusion based on real-life high school students' examples. Even though students' character varies, as students might come from different provinces with different English teaching quality or different grades, various types of research share some similar conclusions about the manifestation of negative transfer of mother tongue. The similar classification of errors indicates a quite universal reflection of negative transfer of mother tongue on Chinese high school English learners.

6   Strategies of Handling the Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue

Facing the negative transfer of mother tongue, many researchers propose suggestions for high school English teaching.

At the lexical layer Zhou (2009)[12] proposes that students should enlarge their vocabulary through reading extensively, and teachers can guide students to pay special attention to the usage of different words. Wang (2014)[9] suggests that students can learn to use English-English dictionaries when learning English words. By doing this, students can set an English environment that enables them to memorize English words more beneficially (Wang, 2014)[9].

At the syntax layer, Xu (2019)[22] puts forward four suggestions for teachers based on high students' inappropriate use of subject in writing: making comparisons between English and Chinese sentences, conducting exercises specifically on the subject, teaching English syntax systematically, and enlarging English input. Besides learning the English syntax structure, Wang (2014)[9] points out that it is essential to practice translation between Chinese and English as the translation process can help students know the differences between the two languages in terms of syntax.

At the discourse layer, Zhou (2009)[12] suggests that teachers can use scaffolding instruction, trying to help students set a basic framework of writing and monitor students' whole writing process. Students can gradually improve their writing skills by asking students to mimic the sample framework (Zhou, 2009)[12].

There are also other researches trying to reduce the interference of negative transfer of mother tongue from a broader view. Wang (2005)[23], for instance, proposes a "length approach" in English writing. Instead of correcting the errors in students' English writing, the length approach asks teachers to shift their concentration from correcting to designing good writing tasks (Wang,2005)[23]. The main point of the length approach is to promote students' willingness in English writing and prompt them to write as long as possible (Wang, 2005)[23]. Students can progress in English writing with a certain amount of practice. Many empirical studies support the usefulness of the length approach. For example, Liu (2008)[24] conducted a sixteen-week experiment on the "length approach" and concluded that this approach eliminates the students' fear of mistakes. By enlarging the language output, students tend to make fewer mistakes. On the other hand, Zhou (2009)[12] puts forward that teachers' way of correcting the error is essential in releasing the negative transfer of mother tongue. She suggests that teachers should give hints for students to correct mistakes by themselves instead of directly pointing out the errors.

7   Conclusion

After analysis, it is clear that the concept of language transfer has evolved from a pretty simple concept that refers explicitly to the negative transfer of the mother tongue to a more comprehensive phenomenon in second language acquisition. As research goes further, many people have a better understanding of the negative transfer of their mother tongue. From the early contrastive analysis hypothesis to the interlanguage until the recent error analysis, scholars have a different understanding towards the errors during second language acquisition. Thus, the focus gradually transfers from preventing the errors to making full use of the errors.

Research on the negative transfer of the mother tongue in China is quite abundant. Scholars investigate this phenomenon with different focuses, either trying to provide a general overview or a detailed analysis of one side. Accordingly, many scholars also propose different strategies for easing the negative transfer of the mother tongue in Chinese high school students' English writing. While some suggestions are general, some specific approaches are also proposed by Chinese scholars.

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