



# The Influence of Chinese and Western Thinking Differences on English Writing A Case Study of Sentence Patterns

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**Abstract.** Thinking mode is the deep mechanism of language generation and development, and the difference between Chinese and Western ways of thinking is an important factor that causes language differences. This difference is also reflected in the sentence structure of English writing. Based on the difference between Chinese and Western thinking modes, this paper analyzes its influence on sentence structure in the process of students' second language writing, and puts forward countermeasures in this regard, in order to help students eliminate the interference of negative transfer of Chinese thinking in the future English writing teaching process., so as to write authentic English composition.

**Keywords:** language · thinking mode · sentence structure · negative transfer

## 1 Introduction

Language and thinking are mutually influencing and interacting. On the one hand, thinking affects the structure of language and determines the richness of language; on the other hand, language becomes the main carrier of thinking, which promotes the formation and development of thinking mode. Thinking is always reflected in a certain form of language, so the difference of thinking mode will inevitably lead to the difference of language. This situation is not only reflected in the characteristics of the language, but also reflected in the use of the language. For most Chinese students, English writing will inevitably be interfered with by Chinese thinking patterns.

In recent years, many domestic scholars have conducted relevant discussions on the influence of mother tongue thinking in the process of English writing. The research results show that Chinese students generally have problems such as lack of vocabulary and frequent grammatical errors in English writing, and in the sentence structure, it is manifested as chaotic logical relationships, lack of necessary cohesion, and word-for-word translation with Chinese thinking. It can be seen that understanding the characteristics of Chinese and Western thinking and their syntactic differences is very important to improve the level of English writing. This paper analyzes the factors that affect English writing by mother tongue thinking through examples, and puts forward corresponding countermeasures to help students write authentic English compositions.

## 2 Literature Review

A nation's thinking mode is closely related to the geographical environment, cultural background, and philosophical traditions in which the nation lives. Chinese culture is rooted in a closed farming society. In thought, Confucius and Mencius emphasized the stability of the country and ignored individual rights. This makes Chinese people tend to seek holistic, comprehensive and intuitive characteristics in terms of thinking mode and language outlook.

The ancestors of the Anglo- American people lived in a harsh marine environment, which shaped their idea of individual freedom. Westerners focus on speculative, empirical and logical analysis. Suzuki Dazhuo summed up this way: "The Western mind is analytical, individualized, objective, generalized, conceptualized, systematic, and so on."<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, due to the differences in thinking patterns between China and the West, Chinese students are often accustomed to first forming Chinese expressions in their minds when writing English, and then converting them into English sentences with the characteristics of native language thinking, which has a negative transfer effect on writing. The English sentences written will also have various problems.

## 3 Method

The research is based on English original works such as James Thurber's "Princess Moon", Margaret Atwood's "Bread", "South China Morning Post", "New York Times", "The Economist" and other English-language journals. The example sentences and Will Smith's apology letter are intercepted sentences that can clearly reflect the difference in thinking between Chinese and English. A total of 12 typical example sentences are compiled and made into a small corpus for Chinese college students to fill in. Ask students to express similar meanings in English, write according to their own thinking habits, and play freely. In this way, the typical Chinese thinking sentence structure that Chinese students appear in English writing can be collected and compared with the original English sentence. This method can clearly find the specific impact of Chinese and Western thinking differences on sentence structure in Chinese students' English writing process.

## 4 Results and Discussion

### 4.1 The Difference Between Hypotaxis and Parataxis

Consistent with the Western nation's habit of thinking that emphasizes rationality and form, English grammar presents dominant features. Eastern nations emphasize the organization of language through internal logical relations, and Chinese grammar is implicit. In Chinese, each short sentence and clause is usually expanded layer by layer according

<sup>1</sup> Suzuki, T, Fromm, E. (1986) *Zen and Psychoanalysis*. China Folk Literature and Art Publishing, Beijing. pp. 42.

to a certain time and logical order. Therefore, in the process of English writing, under the influence of subconscious Chinese thinking, students mistakenly apply Chinese grammar and syntactic rules to English writing. Although the sentences they write conform to the Chinese language expression habits, they go against the English writing habits. A series of English sentence mistakes. Mainly as follows:

### **Differences Between Associative Anaphora**

Western thinking emphasizes parataxis, and pays attention to the integrity of sentence structure. Each sentence component in English has an independent function. Because of paying attention to form and clarifying the logical relationship between sentences, the use of connecting adverbs is also quite frequent and various in English. For example, there are two sentences in the corpus:

The Royal Physician was worried so He sent for the king.<sup>2</sup>

Many just applaud Uncle's unparalleled strength despite his disability.<sup>3</sup>

These two sentences contain the conjunctions “so” and “despite”, which express cause and effect, respectively. In Eastern thinking, words and sentences rely on their own semantics and existing context to express their logical relationship. The grammatical binding force is not strong, the sentence pattern emphasizes the natural cohesion of the semantics, and there is usually a lack of connectives that can indicate the logical relationship. Therefore, in the practice of English writing, Chinese students mostly ignore the use of conjunctions according to Chinese thinking habits and Chinese expressions. The English sentences written by Chinese non-English majors are:

The situation did not look good, the doctor sent for the king.

Someone praised the uncle's extraordinary strength in his broken body.

### **Differences Between Subjective and Objective Tendencies of Sentence Patterns**

There is a difference between subject consciousness and object consciousness in Chinese and Western thinking. There is a strong sense of subject participation in Eastern thinking. Students use “in my opinion” or “according to our past experience and lessons” to highlight the subject's initiative. The animate subject occupies an absolute advantage, such as “I think”, “we believe”, etc. For instance, the following two sentences written by Chinese students:

And you remember a bowl.<sup>4</sup>

We easily feel scared and lose when meet with problem.<sup>5</sup>

These two sentences emphasize the subjective initiative of the two subjects, “you” and “we”, which are easy to show the author's subjective thoughts. However, Western philosophy advocates the strict separation of people from things and objects. Therefore, in language, English is mostly dominated by inanimate subjects, focusing on the role and impact of things on people. The original sentences of the above two sentences are:

It reminded you of a bowl.

During a setback, it's easy to get stuck in feelings of panic and disappointment.

<sup>2</sup> James Thurber, *The Princess Moon*.p85.

<sup>3</sup> South China Morning Post “Ordinary but great”.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Bread*.p90.

<sup>5</sup> The New York Times, “How to Cope When Everything Keeps Changing”.

The original sentences are all based on the inanimate subject “it reminded...”, “it is easy to...”. The sentence pattern emphasizes object consciousness and is more suitable for describing objective facts. In addition, the difference in the treatment of subject and object consciousness between Chinese and Western thinking is manifested in the use of active voice and passive voice. Chinese students normally use the active voice to emphasize subjective initiative, while Westerners mostly use the passive voice to describe objective facts. For instance:

- 1) The huge implications of global warming are often overlooked or underplayed.

Heatwaves are treated like the two in the Netherlands in 2018.<sup>6</sup>

These two sentences express “implication are overlooked” and “heatwaves are treated” respectively. Chinese students often write sentences expressing the same meaning as:

People ignored the huge consequences of climate change.

- 2) People are taking the same attitude to the heat wave as they did to the two heat waves that hit the Netherlands in 2008.

This is because most Chinese students are accustomed to writing sentences in the active voice. Although this way of expression has no grammatical errors, it does not conform to the English expression habits.

### **Difference Between Subject-Prominence and Topic-Prominence**

Shen Xiaolong believes that “Hypotactic English is a subject- prominent language, that is the topic is often the subject of the sentence.”<sup>7</sup> For example:

The video speaks to netizens for different reasons.<sup>8</sup>

The car ran on merrily with its cargo of hilarious youth.<sup>9</sup>

The subject of the first sentence is “video”, so as the topic. Also, the subject of the second sentence is “car”, so the topic is that “car brings joy to youth”. It can be seen that the English sentence is a subject-prominent sentence structure.

Shen Xiaolong also writes in the book, *Chinese Sentence Pattern Culture*: “Chinese is a topic-prominent language, and the topic of a Chinese sentence is often not the subject of the sentence.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Chinese students often write the topic of the translated Chinese sentence as the subject of English in the collected corpus. The English sentences written by Chinese students are:

After watching the video, netizens were deeply touched and mixed feelings.

The funny young man was riding along in the car.

<sup>6</sup> Economist, “Heatwaves are killing people?”.

<sup>7</sup> Shen, X. (1988) *Chinese Sentence Pattern Culture*. Northeast Normal University Press, Shenyang. p445.

<sup>8</sup> South China Morning Post, “Ordinary but great”.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Bread*.

<sup>10</sup> Shen, X. (1988) *Chinese Sentence Pattern Culture*. Northeast Normal University Press, Shenyang. p445.

The difference can be seen by comparison. The topic of the first sentence translated into Chinese is “netizens”, so the subject of the English sentence written by Chinese students also becomes “netizens” rather than “video”. Similarly, the topic of the second translated into Chinese is “man”, rather than “car”, thus the subject of the English sentence becomes “man”. Although there are no grammatical problems, these Chinglish sentences easily show monotonous changes, which is one of the reasons why Chinese students’ English writing is boring to read.

## 4.2 Differences in Expression Habits

Because Western culture emphasizes the individual, in English expressions, the sentence structure is habitually changed from the specific to the general, from the individual to the whole. The eastern culture emphasizes synthesis, and the sentence structure is habitual from general to special, from the whole to the individual. Chinese students usually write English sentences in the mode of Chinese thinking, which is mainly reflected in:

### Do Not Use the “There Be” Sentence Pattern

When expressing the semantics of “there is something somewhere”, Chinese students like to use predicate verbs such as “have” or “has”. But the expression habit in Western thinking is from part to whole, so most English sentences use “there be” sentence pattern. For instance:

- 1) There is no place for violence in a world of love and kindness.<sup>11</sup> This sentence puts “place” in front of “violence”, and most of English sentences written by Chinese students are: “In a world of love and good will, violence has no place.” They put “violence” in front of “place”, which is a typical phenomenon of literal translation of Chinese meanings.
- 2) There is something you know that you have not yet told.<sup>12</sup> “Something” means “some information”. In the original sentence, something represents some information, and the original English sentence puts “there is something” in front of someone. Most of the English sentences written by Chinese students are “You have inside information that you haven’t made public yet.” They are used to writing “someone have information”, which does not conform to English habitual expressions.

### Subject is Too Long

English sentences often go from unknown to known, but the opposite is true in Chinese. The subject part of a Chinese sentence is usually long, but the subject of an English sentence is required to be clear and short. For example, to express the following meaning:

Our major job is to develop the children’s capability to independent living.

Chinese students often write as:

To develop the children’s capability to independent living is our major job.

The problem is that the subject is too long and the meaning of the sentence is not clear enough. Similarly, there is a sentence in *The Economist* about Gu Ailing that writes:

<sup>11</sup> Will Smith’s apology letter.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Bread*.

- 1) Their resolve was steeled by a tragedy that preceded Gu's birth.<sup>13</sup> The subject of the original sentence is "Their resolve", while the English sentences expressed by typical Chinese students collected in the corpus are:
- 2) Their strict requirements and careful cultivation of Gu Ailing are also related to a tragic accident before her birth. It is obvious that Chinese students are used to writing English sentences according to the Chinese sentence structure.

## **5 The Enlightenment of the Research on the Difference of Thinking Between China and the West to the Teaching of Writing**

The differences between Chinese and Western thinking lead to great differences between Chinese students and authentic English users in terms of text structure and language characteristics. Combined with English teaching practice, and by analyzing the Chinese-style composition patterns in students' English compositions, I think that only by letting students familiarize themselves with and master the Western way of thinking can they consciously transform their thinking in the writing process, so as to write more high-quality essays. English essay. The following should be done in teaching:

### **5.1 Pay Attention to the Introduction of English Thinking and Cultural Content**

In the teaching process, teachers should compare the differences between Chinese and Western ways of thinking based on the teaching content, let students understand their differences, improve cross-cultural awareness, cultivate students' English cultural sensitivity, and help students overcome the influence of Chinese thinking in the process of learning English. Gradually develop the habit of thinking in English. In writing teaching, increase the input of English habit of thinking materials, introduce authentic English expressions, and strengthen the analysis of language rules from the perspective of culture and thinking, so that students can fundamentally master the rules of English language and truly learn to live. Language.

### **5.2 Strengthening Discourse Analysis Teaching**

Students' English reading ability and discourse comprehension have indirect effects on English writing. Therefore, teachers should make students understand the difference between Chinese and Western thinking modes through purposeful reading training, and explain to students the writing skills and methods of various types of articles during reading, so that students can establish a more three-dimensional understanding of writing. Then carry out targeted writing training to cultivate students' ability to organize language and construct articles with Western thinking, so as to gradually master the writing methods of English discourse.

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<sup>13</sup> The Economist.

### 5.3 Combining Grammar Teaching with Language Practical Application Ability

The traditional English teaching method stresses grammar than practical application ability. The result is that students lack feeling for the language they are learning. Students only learn vocabulary and grammar mechanically, and they do not understand the thinking characteristics and differences between English and Chinese. In teaching practice, students should be consciously trained to convert Chinese and Western thinking, understand the differences, find corresponding countermeasures, and carry out effective training, so that students can integrate what they have learned, flexibly apply it in writing, and write in line with style. Standard idiomatic English.

## 6 Conclusion

To sum up, in Chinese students' second language writing, the phenomenon of negative transfer of Chinese thinking exists objectively. In order to improve the level of students' English writing, it is necessary to have a comprehensive and correct understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western thinking. Sentences are the basic units for expressing thoughts and composing chapters. Objectively analyzing the impact of Chinese and Western thinking on syntax is conducive to the smooth development of English writing teaching and has a positive effect on students overcoming the negative transfer of their mother tongue. In the usual writing teaching, English teachers should make students understand the characteristics of English discourse from the root, be familiar with the rules of English writing, improve the ability to control the language, eliminate the interference of Chinese thinking habits on English composition, and write authentic, in line with British and American thinking. Custom articles.

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