



# The Influence of the Mother Tongue on English Listening and Reading Acquisition

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**Abstract.** With the trend of internationalization, there is a heated topic about the importance of learning a second language. In China, English is one of the compulsory courses for students to take. However, under the influence of the environment, the process of learning is bound to be influenced by the mother tongue of the learners. Therefore, it is important to analyze the impact of the mother tongue on second language acquisition. It is helpful for the learners to realize the difficulties encountered in the course of learning and then to adopt reasonable means to avoid difficulties or solve difficulties, and finally improve the efficiency of learning. More importantly, analyzing the impact of mother tongue on second language acquisition is necessary for educators. As in the process of second language education, there are many affecting factors of learning, in which the mother tongue is one of the most influential factors. The study of these influences is to improve the teaching method and improve the path of the education system. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyse the influence of the first language on second language acquisition, then think about the countermeasures, propose some suggestions for teaching methods, help Chinese English teachers improve the efficiency of their work, and help more Chinese students to master the language of English, which specifies in listening and reading.

**Keywords:** Mother Tongue · Second Language · Second Language Acquisition · Influences analysis

## 1 Introduction

With the development of globalization, it has become a practical demand of people in terms of how to master one or more second languages.

For the convenience of the following argument, it is necessary to explain a few nouns. Mother tongue is the first language or dialect that a person has been exposed to from birth or during the critical period [1]. Second language acquisition (SLA), is the procedure by which people learn a second language. It is also the scientific discipline devoted to studying that process. The field of second language acquisition is regarded by some but not everybody as a sub-discipline of applied linguistics but also receives research attention from a variety of other disciplines, such as psychology and education [2].

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Therefore, in the acquisition of a second language, the mother tongue will certainly exert influence from many aspects. We must pay attention to the influence of the mother tongue and analyse these influences in depth, so as to avoid the negative influence and maximize the positive influence of the mother tongue.

To study the influence of the mother tongue on second language acquisition is not only to make learners aware of the difficulties they will encounter in the process of learning. But more importantly, to provide certain guidance for second language teaching. The analysis of various influences, no matter whether it is positive or negative, will help teachers to make teaching plans and design teaching methods more targeted, so as to make them more suitable for local learners.

Therefore, the analysis in this study consists of the following three steps:

- (1) analyze the differences between the two
- (2) analyze the impact of affecting the discussion have based on these differences
- (3) propose targeted solutions based on these impacts

## 2 Influences Analysis

### 2.1 Listening

In listening, the difference between Chinese and English is mainly reflected in the phonology system. By comparing them, it is easy to see that they have the following three differences.

#### 2.1.1 Tonal Differences

Chinese is a tonal language, and English is defined as an intonation language. A tonal language is defined as a language where different words with different tonal inflections will convey different meanings.

Chinese is a four-tone language. The tone has the function of distinguishing and changing the word's meaning, using four tones to identify different meanings. The Chinese call the four tones Yin ping, Yang Ping, Shang Sheng, and Qu Sheng, respectively. Therefore, when Chinese people speak Chinese, they pronounce every word clearly and make sure the tone is accurate. For example, the Chinese words "妈(mother)" and "骂(scold)" have the same pronunciation, but the tone is different, which can make the meaning of the two quite different.

Table 1 shows the meanings of four Chinese characters with the same pronunciation but different tones in English.

Intonation languages use the pitch of the voice to show the speaker's attitudes. English does not have the four tones of Chinese. What influences the change of meaning and the emotional colour is the intonation of a sentence, including rising, falling, and rise-fall intonations. For example, when people say "Good morning" by using a rising intonation, the sentence will take on an emotional colour of passion, while falling intonation will show frustration and apathy. Therefore, in conversation, as long as people have a good command of English intonation knowledge, the listener can judge the speaker's tone, such as a question, irony, humor, surprise, exaggeration, sympathy, and indifference. In

**Table 1.** Differences Between Chinese and English

Tone	Characters	English meaning
mā	妈	mother
má	麻	numb
mǎ	马	horse
mà	骂	scold

**Table 2.** Answer with Different Intonations

Tone	The Content of “Sorry?”
Rising Tone	“I didn’t hear you. Could you say that again, please?”
Falling tone	show a refusal

addition, changes in the speaker’s tone and intonation can also help learners grasp the key points of what is said. For example, when someone asked two students, “Can you bring me the book?” (Table 2).

Because of this difference, during the process of English listening comprehension, Chinese native language students transfer the listening habits of Chinese to English listening, which has some influences. To be specific, Chinese middle school students cannot help but keep their thinking habits in Chinese when they are listening to English conversations. And because they always want to hear every word clearly and translate them to Chinese in their brain, they often can’t keep up with the speaker’s speed. When encountering a new word or an unintelligible word, they feel overwhelmed and anxious instead of guessing the meaning of the speaker based on the context, using the knowledge of English intonation. [3].

**2.1.2 Timing Differences**

English is a stress-timed language, while Chinese is a syllable-timed language.

Stress-timed language means that the amount of time between stressed syllables in a sentence tends to be equal. And the syllable-timed language means the duration of every syllable is equal.

Both English and Chinese have their rhythm, but the difference is that every stressed syllable in English always appears with “equal intervals,” with the stressed syllable as the main stem, the light syllable as the foil, and the stressed and light syllables alternating. The so-called “equal interval” rhythm mode means that “each stressed syllable occurs at roughly the same time interval, regardless of the number of unstressed syllables between stressed syllables.” [4].

Distinguishing which words are stressed in English sentences mainly depends on whether the part of speech is a content word. For example, adjectives, nouns, verbs, and so on, often imply the most important information contained in a sentence, so they are

the keywords in a sentence. Therefore, the number of unstressed syllables in English does not affect the length of time a sentence takes, but the number of stressed syllables in the sentence determines the length of time. However, in a Chinese sentence, one single word is a beat, and each syllable occupies roughly the same amount of time. The more syllables there are, the longer the sentence is.

The impact of this difference is that the Chinese cognitive habit of stressing every syllable is transferred to learners' English listening comprehension process, which makes learners unable to consciously distinguish unstressed words from stressed words in English sentences; that is, they cannot grasp key words, which increases the difficulty of listening. [5].

### 2.1.3 Phoneme Differences

The phonemes of English and Chinese correspond exactly or not because some phonemes of English do not exist in Chinese.

The basic units of English are phonemes, which are divided into vowels and consonants. However, the basic unit of Chinese is the syllable, which is made up of initials, finals and tones. Consonants act as initials, vowels are the main component of finals, and some complex finals (e.g., Nasal finals) are made up of both vowels and nasal consonants. Some consonant phonemes in the Mandarin pronunciation system are similar to those in the English pronunciation system, such as /n/ and /m/, but many English phonemes, such as long and short vowels and consonants /θ/ and /ð/, cannot be found in Chinese corresponding or similar syllables. When these phonemic differences are brought into listening comprehension, they will have the following effects on English listening comprehension:

English learners whose native language is Chinese often cannot hear English phonemes that do not exist in Chinese and distinguish between short and long sounds in the process of listening. In addition, there are no continuous phonetic phenomena in the Chinese language, such as linking, assimilation, and weak reading, etc., so Chinese native English learners often tend to focus on a vague syllable or individual word, forcing themselves to identify its meaning and missing the real key information, thus causing hearing impairment. [6].

## 2.2 Reading

In this section, the influence of the mother tongue on second language acquisition is also based on the difference between Chinese and English. Three main differences will be discussed below.

### 2.2.1 Glyph Differences

Generally, the term means any kind of purposeful mark, such as a simple vertical line incised on a building, a single letter in a script, or a carved symbol. Simply put, it can be treated as what the written forms of a language look like. [7].

Generally, Chinese characters are composed of strokes, and their shape of them is square. They are always displayed in two-dimensional form and are usually divided into



**Fig. 1.** Strokes of Qi (Photo credit: Original)



**Fig. 2.** Three dots (Photo credit: Original)



**Fig. 3.** Qi before simplified (Photo credit: Original)

upper and lower structures, left and right structures. And Chinese characters also have ideographic features; that is, to a certain extent, it is easy to see the meaning of a Chinese character from its shape of it. Hence, sometimes a Chinese character looks simple and clear, but the amount of information stored in it is large.

According to Fig. 1, this character is pronounced as Qi. By taking this character as an example, it is clear how it is written stroke by stroke.

Then, about the ideographic feature of Chinese, taking the same word as an example, it is obvious that there are three dots on the left of the character. Before Chinese characters were simplified in the last century, these three dots looked just like flowing water (Fig. 2), so characters with these three dots are basically related to rivers, lakes, and so on. Qi is also the name of a river in Henan Province, China (Fig. 3).

Compared with ideographic Chinese, English is phonetic, which is one-dimensional and linear and is relatively scattered. English is also an alphabetic script. 26 letters are arranged and combined to represent the pronunciation of words, and they do not contain their meanings themselves.

**Table 3.** Differences Between Chinese and English

Chinese	English
门	door

**Table 4.** Differences Between Chinese and English

English	Chinese with English Translation
Did you eat this morning?	今天早上你吃饭了吗? Today morning you eat?
	你今天早上吃饭了吗? You today morning eat?
	你吃饭了吗今天早上? You eat today morning?
	今天早上吃饭了吗你? Today morning eat you?

When conveying the same amount of information, Chinese occupies less space than English. For example, the Chinese character 门 not only looks more like a door but also looks more concise and helps people understand its meaning more easily (Table 3).

**2.2.2 Grammar Differences**

The two languages also have differences in grammar. In terms of the main body, both Chinese and English can be divided into the subject-predicate-object structure in grammar, but English emphasizes structure, and multi-length sentences, while Chinese emphasizes semantics and multi-short sentences. As in the example in the table, what is expressed in three short sentences in Chinese can be expressed in only one long sentence in English.

Example of Chinese:

最近，我看了一本有关语法的书。我花了很长时间才把它读完，因为它的内容很难，跟中文语法差异很大。但即便如此，我也不会放弃，一定会努力做到最好。

English Translation:

Recently, I read a book about grammar. *It took me a long time to read it because the content was very difficult and the grammar was very different from Chinese.* But even so, I will not give up and will strive to do my best.

In addition, the structure of English grammar is very logical, while the structure of Chinese grammar is quite loose. In the table, when expressing meaning in English, sentence patterns often need to follow strict grammatical rules. But in Chinese, Table 4 shows that the order of several parts of a sentence can be changed at will without affecting the meaning of the sentence.

Additionally, Chinese is composed of words, most of which directly express their meanings. One Chinese characters can be flexibly matched with another one to form phrases, so the repetition rate of Chinese characters is high; while English words is

composed of 26 English letters. Between words, articles, prepositions, or other conjunctions are needed to form grammatical phrases. In addition, spaces must be inserted between these English words to identify word-to-word boundaries for ease of reading and understanding. The English vocabulary is large and there are many similar words. In the comparison between Chinese and English, one single Chinese character corresponds to an English word, and one Chinese word usually corresponds to English phrases.

Since students' eyes and brains are not used to the glyph of the target language, it takes time to identify an English word and whether the word belongs to a phrase, which leads to slower reading speed. Therefore, the influences caused by glyph factor are:

Chinese students always have difficulty in learning English grammar. In the process of learning, when Chinese students encounter a long sentence, they must first find the main components of it, and then analyse its meaning of it. Otherwise, even if they know every word in the sentence, they may still misunderstand the meaning of the sentence.

### 2.2.3 Grammar Differences

According to the differences between reading materials. As language is the carrier of culture, there are differences in reading English and Chinese materials because of the differences in cultural background knowledge.

Chinese reading emphasizes the understanding of the connotation of the article, while English reading only requires the understanding of the ideogram of the article. Chinese people pay attention to the "beginning, transition and combination" in writing articles. The theoretical content goes from shallow to deep, and the process of expression comes naturally. Opinions are generally told to readers at the end of the article, which is very implicit. However, in English, on the contrary, the thesis will be pointed out at the beginning, and the first sentence of each paragraph is the central sentence, telling the reader the main content of the paragraph, and then gradually expanding the discussion. In addition, Chinese reading materials often use proverbs and famous quotes to imply the author's opinion. And most of the time, even if the author's own explanation is not clear, the reader will understand the text more quickly with these quotes. In English, however, too many citations are seen as lacking originality and should be avoided if possible. Authors are encouraged to use more of their own words to express ideas. [8].

Therefore, when learners just start to contact English reading, they often have reading difficulties because they are not used to the expression of reading materials. These effects include: a habitual desire to understand the content by reading the whole text, and a lack of awareness of finding keywords. In addition, because Chinese learners are used to the implicit expression in Chinese, when reading English materials, even if they find a key sentence, they will doubt my own judgment. They always think that a single sentence may be too one-sided, and then they will spend unnecessary time reading other contents, which will affect their reading speed and reading comprehension.

## 3 Proposed Strategies of Listening and Reading

To weaken these effects, teachers are suggested to take the following strategies.

### 3.1 Listening

Firstly, teachers should regard English phonological knowledge as a necessary supplement to listening teaching. The reason why students cannot quickly master the listening skill of a foreign language is that they are not familiar with the language habits and correct expressions of the target language, so they have to resort to their mother tongue in communication. Therefore, improving students' knowledge of English phonology is the fundamental way to reduce its influence of it.

Secondly, in the process of listening teaching, the combination of intensive listening and extensive listening can cultivate students' ability to distinguish sounds and capture keywords. The intensive listening training not only enables students to understand the listening materials accurately, but also improves their ability to distinguish speech sounds. By repeatedly listening to the recorded material, learners can practice distinguishing individual phonemes and hearing phonological continuity on purpose. Extensive listening practice can train students not to focus on individual words and grammar, practice using intonation to grasp the key points in the text, and use the keywords in the sentence to speculate the main idea of the listening material. The listening teaching strategy of a combination of intensive and extensive can fundamentally reduce the influence of student's mother tongue, so it is also a very important teaching strategy for teachers to help students improve their listening skills. [9].

### 3.2 Reading

First, teachers should choose suitable reading materials for students and train their reading speed step by step. Second, teachers should provide students with the cultural background knowledge of English. For middle school students, some novels, such as Harry Potter, are suitable for developing students' English reading ability. The content of these books is interesting, which can attract students' interest, and then slowly develop their English reading habit. As they grow older, the reading materials provided by teachers can not only be limited to novels, but also some articles about the history or cultural background of European and American countries. This can not only train students' reading ability, but also expand their horizons, so that they will not feel confused when encountering some common sense.

## 4 Conclusion

To sum up, this paper explores the influence of mother tongue in the listening and reading acquisition. The main findings of this paper were: 1) In terms of listening, mother tongue will have an impact on second language acquisition from tonal, timing and Phoneme. It mainly affects the learners' understanding ability and speed of what they have heard, and then affects their communication with native English speakers; 2) In terms of reading, mother tongue will have an impact on second language acquisition from glyph, grammar and materials. These factors will mainly affect learners' understanding of the content and cultural background of reading materials, and then affect their reading speed; 3) As our mother tongue, Chinese naturally affects or interferes with our acceptance of



another language with its own system. In English learning, the influence of Chinese on English learners is an objective existence. Only by correctly understanding this point and analyzing and understanding the possible influences of mother tongue in second language learning can we promote the learning more effectively.

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