



# A Study of How the First Language Interferes with the Process of Second Language Acquisition Among Chinese Learners of English – Focusing on the Speech Acts Apology and Compliment Response

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**Abstract.** The process of acquiring a second language (L2) takes place where the first language (L1) has already been established, so people more or less will experience L1 interference while learning the target language. Chinese learning English as a second language (ESL) have shown some linguistic issues related to their L1 interference, which has drawn many scholars' attention in this field. Previous research focused more on how L1 interfered with L2 in terms of language patterns. This study mainly investigated the interference at lexical, semantic, syntactic and pragmatic levels among Chinese learners of English to give a more comprehensive picture and view. L1 interference was examined based on four analytical tools Contrastive Analysis (CA), Interlanguage Analysis (IA), Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) and Error Analysis (EA). The data of speech acts, apology and compliment response, was collected through Discourse Completion Tasks. The findings showed that the output of L2 was influenced by L1 in terms of lexicons, semantics, syntax and pragmatics, which was evidenced by the high frequency of inappropriate direct translation from L1, grammar errors and punctuation mistakes committed in L2. In the end, this paper would give some potential suggestions, e.g. learning the target language in context, for achieving successful communication in the target language.

**Keywords:** L1 interference · L2 acquisition · Chinese learners of English · speech acts

## 1 Introduction

Many people have acquired English as their L2 for the purpose of work, education and business. With the growing number of ESL speakers in the world, even more than the total number of native speakers. The issues raised from acquiring L2 have drawn many educators' and researchers' attention. The study of L2 acquisition started in the 1960s and the research on the influence of L1 on L2 was initiated then [1]. Anyone who starts with L2 learning will come across an L1 transferring process. The role of L1 transfer

during second language acquisition (SLA) cannot be neglected. The transfer from L1 to L2 can be negative or positive [2]. There are two types of transfer: language knowledge and cultural knowledge [1]. While language knowledge consists of lexicons, syntax and semantics, cultural knowledge includes social norms or pragmatic rules of using one language in context. It is not easy for L2 learners to master the target language due to the interference with semantics, syntax and pragmatic functions in L1. Thus, most researchers have focused on negative transfer, which is unavoidable during L2 learning [3].

Chinese speakers of English as a large group of the L2 acquisition community have many linguistic issues related to the interference of their L1. In the process of producing L2 speech in English, Chinese learners tend to make language errors resulting from L1 interference [4]. There is a certain degree of Chinese ESL learners transferring grammatical rules and linguistic structures or patterns directly from L1 to L2 [5]. However, sometimes Chinese ESL learners cannot choose appropriate grammatical structures from L1 to L2, which are relevant to actual communicative contexts [6]. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how the various elements from L1 influence the language output of L2 and to what extent they have the influence on L2. Every language has a system to govern linguistic and social norms [6]. Native speakers of one language unconsciously acquire the system during their social interaction. To use the target language appropriately, learners need to not only acquire the linguistic patterns of the target language but also the pragmatic rules [7]. Al-Khateeb [8] argued that the success of cross-cultural or intercultural communication would not be achieved until L2 learners acquired the pragmatic functions of the target language. The aim of L2 teaching is to equip learners with linguistic skills and, at the same time, the speech act functions in the target language [9]. Scholars in the SLA field have agreed that lacking pragmatic knowledge regarding speech acts in L2 could lead to communication failure [6]. Pragmatic errors in L2 were usually caused by the overextension of pragmatic rules from L1 [6]. However, the pragmatic function related to SLA is under-researched. As mentioned by Bingjun [1], the research on SLA started in the 1960s, while the pragmatic issues had not been brought to scholars' attention until the 1980s. Hence, this study will explore L1 interference at lexical, semantic, syntactic and pragmatic levels by focusing on speech acts, apology and compliment response, to give a more comprehensive view. Speech acts were collected by Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), which were then analysed based on the approaches: CA, IA, CR and EA. In the end, according to the findings, this paper would give some possible suggestions for more successful communication in L2.

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Participants and Setting

Participants were students from a university in Beijing, which is one of the first-batch universities in China. According to the higher education system, there are three types of universities in China: first-batch, second-batch and third-batch universities. The first and second batches are usually owned and run by the government. The third batch universities are run privately by a third party. In recent years, the undergraduate enrolment rate for first-batch universities in Beijing is around 50%. Thus, in this study, the sampling

**Table 1.** Questions Designed for Eliciting Speech Acts

|   |
|---|
| Responding to Compliments   |
| 1: You occasionally ran into a friend on the street. After you said hello to each other. She said that you were much more handsome/more beautiful than before. What would you say to your friend? |
| 2: You were at a costume party and your friend said your clothes looked very nice and matched the theme of the party very well. How would you respond to the situation above?                     |
| 3: After you finished giving a speech about your research, your peers told you that your speech was great and they really loved it. How would you respond to the situation above?                 |
| Situations Requiring Apologies  |
| 4: You forgot to return a book to your professor on time. What would you say to your professor?   |
| 5: You have promised to hang out with your friend, but you cannot go because of study and work. What would you say to your friend?  |
| 6: You accidentally spilled some juice on a waiter. What would you say to the waiter?   |

participants were chosen from a university from the first batch, which could potentially be representative of most students in Beijing and the study results could be more generalisable to other similar university contexts. 60 participants majoring in nursing or clinical medicine were included in this study: 30 undergraduate students in year 1 and 30 in year 2. Their ages range from 17 to 20 years old.

**2.2 Data Collection Tools**

Data was collected by DCTs based on the questions designed in Table 1. The designed questions for compliment responses were adapted from Chen and Yang [10]. Questions designed for eliciting apologies were adapted from Xiang [11]. To see clearly how L1 interfered with L2, this study required participants to answer the questions both in English and Chinese. Students’ responses were used for the analysis of the extent of L1 interference. This task was distributed to students through Sojump a service provider engaged in online questionnaires, voting platforms and examinations. Students were encouraged to write as many thoughts as possible to complete their answers.

**2.3 Language Analytical Approaches**

L1 interference with L2 focusing on apology and compliment response will be examined in terms of CA, IA, EA and CR.

Initially, CA was designed to investigate how L1 interfered with the process of L2 acquisition. This approach was developed in the 1950s by Robert Lado to investigate the linguistic systems of L1 and L2, especially drawing attention to the grammatical patterns and sounds between the two languages, to predict the difficulties in acquiring L2 due to L1 intervention [12]. According to Richards and Schmidt [13], CA assumes that the major difficulties that L2 learners encounter are caused by their L1 interference and such

difficulties are predictable through the analysis of two language systems. In the SLA field, transfer and interference are not interchangeable. The negative transfer resulting from the differences in L1 and L2 linguistic systems is referred to as interference.

However, gradually scholars found out that not all difficulties could be predicted and result from L1 intervention. There are other factors, for example, the complex nature of the L2 language structures, which could also lead to linguistic errors in the target language. Therefore, during the 1960s, EA was developed as an alternative analytical tool to identify errors in L2 instead of predicting them [14]. Richards and Schmidt [12] grouped the errors into 7 categories: overgeneralisation, simplifications, developmental errors, induced errors, avoidance and overproduction errors.

In the late 1970s, CA and EA were criticised by some researchers for overemphasising the outer environment and neglecting L2 learners themselves. Consequently, interlanguage was coined by Selinker [15] as a term to describe the continuum between L1 and L2. IA requires the understanding that L2 acquisition is influenced by different processes, e.g. (1) borrowing patterns from the L1, (2) extending linguistic patterns from the L2, (3) expressing meanings from the vocabulary and grammar already acquired [12].

The approaches mentioned above mainly focus on the negative impacts of L1 on L2. By the late 1960s, Krashen's monitor model [16] argued that L1 did not necessarily have negative impacts on L2 learning. This model focuses on exploring similar language features or patterns between L1 and L2. Consequently, CR was developed to explore and compare the differences and similarities in the language structures and discourse across "genres and cultures" between L1 and L2 [17].

In this study, L1 intervention was examined at the lexical, semantic, syntactic and pragmatic levels based on the four approaches.

### 3 Results and Discussion

The following results and discussion will be around three main types of L1 interference that happened frequently in participants' language output. The analysis of the interference was at lexical, pragmatic, semantic and syntactic levels.

#### 3.1 L1 Interference (Direct Translation of Words, Phrases and Sentences from L1)

This study found out that the direct translation of lexical, phrasal and sentential expressions from L1 which are inappropriate in the target context happened frequently in participants' language output. Table 2 shows the interference regarding direct translation.

The above three types of interference due to the direct translation from L1 happen frequently in participants' language output. For the lexical interference, we can see expressions like, "dear", "baby", "honey" "my dear", which seem inappropriate to say to a friend at least based on English culture. Actually, these pragmatic-discourse markers did not contribute to the content of communication but had essential functions in the way to manage the conversations. They were translated directly from Chinese "qin ai de" (honey or dear) and "bao bei" (baby). The two expressions were commonly used by people to refer to each other, especially among young girls and women in China, just a

**Table 2.** Direct Lexical, Phrasal and Sentential Translation from L1

| Types of L1 interference from direct translation | Examples extracted from the answers of the participants   |
|--|---|
| Lexical Interference                             | Thank you <b>dear</b> .<br>Thanks, <b>baby</b> .<br>Sorry, <b>baby</b> .<br>Sorry, <b>honey</b> .<br>Sorry, <b>my dear</b> .  |
| Phrasal Interference                             | Thank you. <b>Long time no see</b> . You've become very beautiful.<br>It turns out that only <b>good people eyes</b> can always see good things.<br>Thanks, you have <b>good taste and vision</b> .<br>Thank you, but I have <b>many shortcoming</b> . <b>These days more things</b> .<br>Sorry, I will hang out with you. <b>Must, next week</b> . |
| Sentential Interference                          | Thank you! <b>You look great on the road</b> .<br><b>I very thank you!</b><br><b>We can tell ourselves skills</b> .<br>Thank you. <b>We are each other each other</b> .<br><b>I can't play out with you this time</b> , because I got work to do.<br><b>I cannot play with you</b> since I am busy.   |

more friendly way to say “hi”. These “intimate words” may be appropriate in a Chinese context, which could cause confusion or misunderstanding in the target language. This kind of errors could result from the overextension of L1 pragmatic rules.

With respect to phrasal interference, “Long time no see” is directly from “hen” (long) “jiu” (time) “bu” (no) “jian” (see) in Chinese. As increased people use it, “long time no see” seems to be acceptable also in the English world. “Good people eyes” would be from “mei hao” (good) “ren men” (people) “yan jing” (eyes), which has a metaphorical meaning “Good people can always see the good sides of things”. “Good taste and vision” is from “hao de” (good) “pin wei” (taste) “he” (and) “yan guang” (vision), which is an inappropriate expression in the target context, because vision in English does not mean that people have a good view and understanding of something. “Many shortcoming” and “these days more things” were also directly translated by participants from their Chinese repertoires. “Must, next week” was translated from “Yi ding” (for sure), xia zhou” (next week), which means I will hang out with you for sure next week, which could potentially cause misunderstanding in an English context. To conclude, from an IL perspective, borrowed patterns from L1 seem not appropriate and successful in the target language.

Regarding sentential interference, the examples in the table were all translated directly from Chinese, the meanings of which were distorted and caused confusion in context. For example, the author tried to look back at the participant’s Chinese response

to figure out the meaning of “You look great on the road.” and the participant actually intended to say you look great when you wear the clothes and walk outside. “I very thank you” is a demonstration of direct Chinese translation from “wo” (I) “fei chang” (very) “gan xie” (thank) “ni” (you), which is considered an incorrect expression in English and could be caused by the overgeneralisation of pragmatic rules from L1. However, based on CR, this could be considered positive interference from L1 since it showed the politeness originating from the cultural background of the student. “We can tell ourselves skills” directly from “wo men” (We) “ke yi” (can) “jiao liu” (talk) “wo men de” (ourselves) “ji neng” (skills) actually means “We can discuss and share our skills to each other.” “We are each other each other” is translated directly from “wo men” (we) “bi ci” (each other) “bi ci” (each other), which implied that we both performed well. The last two sentences “I can’t play out with you this time.” and “I cannot play with you.” are pragmatically inappropriate in context.

Overall, participants attempted to translate Chinese to English without considering the meanings of words, phrases and sentences in the L2 contexts. The interference of direct translation from L1 is related to the aspects of CA. Lacking the ability to distinguish the semantic meanings between two language systems could lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication in the target language [4]. Also, the transfer of pragmatic rules directly from L1 could also cause mistakes in the target language.

### 3.2 L1 Interference at Syntactic Level Regarding Grammar

Table 3 shows different types of syntactic errors from L1 interference, which result from the wrong understanding of grammatical knowledge in the target language.

The most common errors that occurred are in tense, which reflects the different language systems between Chinese and English. There are examples, like “I think your dress is also suit for the theme”, having double verbs in a sentence. This is because in Chinese multiple verbs and verbal phrases can be arranged simply one after another without conjunctions and prepositions to connect [18]. Thus, the grammatical system in L1 has put a heavy influence on the language output in L2. Another interesting phenomenon is the omission of the verb “be” in participants’ output, such as “You ^ more beautiful”. This phenomenon is caused by their native language system where a predicate in Chinese could be a verb or an adjective [19]. In addition, participants sometimes did not change the verb forms to corresponding tenses, such as “Sorry, I shake my hands just now.” In Chinese, instead of changing the inflected forms of verbs for expressing past, present or future time, adverbs are inserted in sentences to do the function [4]. In summary, students’ failure in CA regarding grammar between the two language systems has led to their inability in using tenses correctly in the L2.

Wrong word forms happened frequently second to tense. The results showed that students were confused with the word classes in English. For example, “appreciate” in the sentence “Thank you for your appreciate.” should have the noun form appreciation. Nouns and verbs were used interchangeably by students, which resulted in the wrong grammatical structures in the target language. Due to their L1 system, the parts of speech of Chinese words are not morphologically marked [20], which means that the same form of a Chinese word could be a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb depending on the context. The inappropriate translation from Chinese to English probably due to their

**Table 3.** Syntactic Interference from L1 Regarding Grammar

| Types of Syntactic Errors                                     | Examples from the participants   |
|---|--|
| Tense<br>(Including omission of the verb “be”, double verbs). | Thanks. You ^ more beautiful.<br>They <b>are</b> all <b>match</b> according to the theme.<br>I think your dress <b>is</b> also <b>suit</b> for the theme.<br>It <b>is</b> still <b>pales</b> in comparison.<br>Your clothes ^ very nice too.<br>Thanks, I will <b>be</b> more hard <b>work</b> .<br>Thanks. Your speech ^ very good too.<br>Sorry, I <b>forget</b> to return the book I <b>borrow</b> from you.<br>Sorry, it <b>is</b> never <b>have</b> one more time.<br>Sorry, I <b>am forget</b> to return you book.<br>Sorry, I <b>shake</b> my hands just now. |
| Word forms  | Thank you for your <b>appreciate</b> .<br>Thank you for <b>communicate</b> with us.<br>I am very glad because of your <b>admire</b> .<br>Thank you for your <b>appreciate</b> about me.<br>Thanks for <b>say</b> that to me.<br>I am sorry about me <b>forget</b> to return the book.<br>I am sorry for you about <b>forget</b> to return your book.<br>I am sorry that I am busy <b>learn</b> things.   |
| Agreement between Subjects and Verbs                          | Beautiful people <b>has</b> the same thoughts.<br>Thanks, your clothes <b>looks</b> good.<br>This achievement <b>are</b> attributed to my efforts.<br>Something <b>come</b> up to me, sorry.<br>I would like to go out, but something <b>need</b> to be done.<br>Sorry, there <b>are</b> some paper to wipe the juice.<br>Sorry, there <b>is</b> some tips.  |
| Omission and Insertion of Prepositions and Determiners        | I forgot to return ^ book to you.<br>I have something to deal ^ suddenly.<br>I can’t go because ^ my work.<br>Sorry, please allow me to deal ^ other things.<br>I have other things so can we go out <b>at</b> next time?<br>Sorry I will compensate ^ your clothes.<br>If you need <b>a</b> advice, I would give you.   |
| Comparatives  | You look <b>more pretty</b> than before.<br>Your speech <b>more good</b> than mine.<br>You have become <b>more better</b> than before.   |

**Table 4.** Examples of Comma Splice

|  |
|--|
| Your book is fantastic, I did research based on it.                  |
| Sorry professor, I had many other things, forgot to return the book. |
| I am so sorry, please forgive me.                                    |
| There is something, I can't hang out with you, sorry.                |
| I have to finish my work, I cannot hang out with you.                |
| I'm sorry, I have work to do, I am not finished.                     |
| I am so sorry, because of my fault, the juice spilled on you.        |
| Your skirt is so pretty, I love it.                                  |

limited vocabulary bank and less exposure to CA during the SLA process. Without enough analysis and practice, learners would not be able to compare and understand lexical aspects clearly between Chinese and English vocabulary.

The frequency of errors regarding subject-verb agreement comes after wrong word forms. For simple present tense in English, the form of a verb must align with its subject in number. According to CA, not like in English, there are not any features related to inflectional morphology to indicate the singularity and plurality of subjects and verbs in Chinese. Brown [21] pointed out that the level of difficulty for acquiring L2 largely depends on the differences between the two language systems. Therefore, it is not easy for Chinese ESL learners to acquire this grammar point in the target language.

The last two kinds of syntactic errors, inappropriate use of prepositions and determiners and wrong forms of comparatives, are common mistakes in participants' output. Based on EA, omission and insertion of prepositions and determiners were probably due to simplification, which means that learners try to simplify the linguistic rules based on their limited linguistic knowledge in L2. Consequently, their expressions in the target language are distorted either by omission or addition of certain linguistic features at the level of spelling and grammar [22]. The wrong forms of comparatives could potentially result from overgeneralisation that learners apply language rules of L2 to an inappropriate context [12]. For example, "more + adjective" can be used to form comparatives in English. However, for some irregular adjectives, e.g. good and bad, there are different rules to form comparatives. Failure in EA during the process of SLA could lead to the wrong formation of comparatives in the target language.

### 3.3 L1 Interference at Syntactic Level Regarding Punctuation

Table 4 demonstrates the errors involving the comma splice sentences where commas are used to separate complete sentences instead of linking words used to connect them.

CA revealed that the structural errors were caused by the different ways to organise sentences between Chinese and English. The function of a comma in Chinese and English is different. A Chinese comma can be used to separate two independent sentences. In contrast, there is not such a function for an English comma, which can only be used for the separation of words, phrases or dependent clauses within a sentence [23]. In this



case, run-on sentences occurred when Chinese learners overextended L1 rules into L2 without any deep thinking.

## 4 Suggestions for Addressing the Issues Related to L1 Interference

Based on the findings above, participants lacking semantic, pragmatic and syntactic knowledge in L2 could lead to errors and communication failure in the target language. There are some possible solutions for these issues. Initially, learning vocabulary, phrases and expressions in context, like through reading or listening. Many Chinese students have got used to the rote learning style and prefer cramming. Thus, learning new linguistic patterns within the target context could help them understand the semantic meanings more easily.

Also, most Chinese students acquire English without opportunities to use it in real life or communicate with native speakers, so they lack the chance to know the pragmatic function of the target language. Therefore, exposure to sitcoms could be a beneficial way for students to improve their pragmatic awareness in L2. According to Washburn [24], for students learning L2, the pragmatic functions of the target language are limited to traditional textbooks and teaching materials in the classroom. He argued that sitcoms stand out from “all of the genres” available online or on TV due to their contribution to the best and varied situations for language usage in pragmatics.

Last, students’ failure in CA and EA could potentially result in L1 syntactic interference regarding grammar and punctuation. It would be helpful for students to practise grammar through designed classes targeting the differences in terms of grammar and the usage of punctuation between L1 and L2. Then, exercises and tasks followed could be supportive for L2 learners to consolidate the knowledge just acquired. In addition, while acquiring the L2, it would be efficient for learners to acquire the target language if they have facilitators to point out their errors and give valuable advice for the correction of these mistakes timely since they could become “chronic issues” that are not easy to be corrected at the later stage of learning the L2.

## 5 Conclusion

In this study, the analysis of how L1 interfered with SLA among Chinese ESL learners focusing on apology and compliment response was based on four methods CA, EA, IL and CR. L1 interfered with L2 regarding direct translation mainly at lexical, semantic and pragmatic levels. At the syntactic level, L1 influenced the accurate usage of grammar and punctuation in the target language. The interference may cause misunderstanding and awkwardness in the target language, especially for direct translation, because the meanings expressed in L2 sometimes were not what participants intended to convey. Although this study focused on L1 interference, the transfer is not necessarily negative. Yu and Ren [25] pointed out that L1 also plays a positive role during L2 learning because there are some common features or patterns among all languages. In addition, the way of thinking formed in L1 may help the process of L2 output [25]. Through CA, some linguistic patterns transferred directly from L1 could, to some degree, be considered as a positive transfer from a pragmatic perspective, which contributed to the

politeness built up in the target language. Compared with previous research, this paper has given a more comprehensive view of how L1 interfered with L2 in terms of language usage and pragmatic function. In addition, based on the findings learners were provided with some practical suggestions for the improvement of communicative competence in the target language. Educators could also potentially benefit from these suggestions. In the past, studies considering the pragmatic and cultural transfer from L1 to L2 is insufficient. Yoosefvand and Rasekh [26] mentioned that L2 learners should know the target vocabulary, grammar and culture to be successful in L2. Research focusing on more comprehensive aspects of SLA needs to be done.

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