A Discussion on Dealing With Chinese Transfer in English Teaching*

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Native language transfer is a common phenomenon in foreign language learning and is all the time influencing the learners’ language. As to us English teachers in China, how to use or avoid the Chinese transfer in students’ English learning is an issue we need to further explore. The paper, based on the theory of SLA (second language acquisition) and language transfer, discusses this phenomenon, analyzes the factors that cause the transfer, and puts forward some suggestions to deal with the influence of transfer in teaching English as a foreign language. Contrastive analysis, with examples, is employed to find the similarities and difficulties in students’ learning. Some of the difficulties can be predicted and positive transfer indeed plays a positive role in language acquisition.

Keywords: language transfer, positive transfer, negative transfer, error

Introduction

It is a popular belief that L1 (first language) interferes with a SLA (second language acquisition). In SLA, how important is the L1? Should its influence be totally rejected or completely responsible for the SLA? How to deal with the L1 transfer? As it is known that during the course of SLA, every learner will transfer his/her native language knowledge or techniques into the learning and application of his/her target language more or less. This transfer can be either positive or negative. College English teachers, while teaching, need to think about how to make full use of positive transfer to let students master the language more quickly and accurately, and how to help students avoid the influence of negative transfer to make errors as little as possible and use the language more freely.

Relevant Conceptions

Acquisition and Learning

According to Krashen’s monitor model, acquisition is the subconscious internalization of L2 (second language) knowledge that occurs through using the L2 naturally and spontaneously. Learning is the conscious study of an L2 that results in knowledge about the rules of the language. The key to distinguishing the two is not whether the environment is natural where one lives in or it is in a classroom. It lies in that which process is

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conscious and which is subconscious, for which Krashen was criticized since the judgment of the consciousness or unconsciousness cannot be accurately made. Today, Krashen’s conceptions of acquisition and learning are still widely used in theories of SLA, while they are not deliberately distinguished.

**SLA and Foreign Language Acquisition**

SLA is not intended to contrast with foreign language acquisition. The acquisition process embraces both natural acquisition and tutored classroom acquisition or learning (Ellis, 1985). Moreover, foreign language acquisition and foreign language learning are used interchangeably in the paper.

**Language Transfer**

Different linguists define “transfer” differently. Odlin points out “a fully adequate definition of transfer seems unattainable without adequate definitions of many other terms, such as strategy, process, and simplification” (Odlin, 1989, p. 28). A well-accepted conception of language transfer nowadays is that it is a process where there are differences between the L1 and L2, the learner’s L1 knowledge would interfere with the L2 (Ellis, 1985, pp. 6-7).

Language transfer can be positive or negative. When there are similarities between L1 and L2, the transfer functions positively and the learner feels it is easy to acquire L2, which will assist the learner in mastering L2; while there are differences between the two languages, the L1 transfer functions negatively, making it difficult for the learner to learn L2 and the learner will make errors.

**Transfer Phenomena in Learning English as a Foreign Language**

**Positive Transfer**

Positive transfer contributes to L2 learning, for it will be much easier for the learner to take in the knowledge of L2 when he/she finds that there are similarities between his/her native language and the target language. So in the process of teaching English, a teacher needs to help students find the similarities between Chinese and English, thus letting students understand the language better.

A very typical similarity between Chinese and English is sentence order, in which the two languages both observe the “Subject + Verb + Object” order. Actually, in declarative sentences, students barely make mistakes.

Another example of positive transfer is the structure of composition. If the teacher appropriately takes advantage of it, students will write compositions in a much easier way. Through contrastive analysis, we get the conclusions as follows: First, a composition requires the writer to highlight the theme either in Chinese or English. Second, an integral structure is needed which contains introduction, main body, and conclusion to make the whole composition logical, reasonable, and fluent. Third, both Chinese and English compositions require unitarity in paragraph organization in which the sentences must be logically linked together and serve a certain theme. In composition writing, almost all the students can achieve these three requirements out of language universality without any further training. While writing an English composition, students often borrow the Chinese composition writing skills in choosing and structuring the materials and examples. So, in English writing, the positive transfer of Chinese should not be overlooked. This interference should be fully realized and made the best use of to improve the students’ writing.

Besides writing, the two languages have similarities in other aspects emphasizing the logic, structure, and organization of sentences and paragraphs. Such classroom activities as oral presentation, discussion, debate, and summery, etc., can be developed on this basis.
Negative Transfer

The negative influence of transfer usually comes out in the form of errors. Trying to make fewest errors is the aim of every foreign language learner. Many English teachers have thought or are thinking of the effective countermeasures to minimize the occurrence of errors. Evidence of negative Chinese transfer mainly comes from students’ phonetic, lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic interferences.

Phonetic interference. Although Odlin (1989) said, “… A foreign accent will not always provoke distrust or hostility… it would be mistaken to assume that a foreign accent will necessarily cause misunderstandings” (pp. 158, 159), it is still very important for Chinese students to pronounce clearly and correctly to make themselves understood more easily and comfortably, especially for those who come from remote areas, for they receive little oral and listening training. Broken sentences, aside from accents, are likely to hinder the understanding.

According to Ur (1996), phonetic teaching includes the teaching of pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation. Ur also points out the following reasons for the learner’s errors: (1) Some pronunciations do not exist in the learner’s native language, which will produce the result that the learner finds similar pronunciations in his/her native language to replace the ones in the target language; (2) Some pronunciations exist in the learner’s native language, but not as independent phonemes. The learner is not aware that these pronunciations play an important role in understanding in another language; and (3) The learner can correctly pronounce a certain pronunciation, but he/she does not realize its stress or sense-group, so he/she borrows the intonation in his/her native language which is not appropriate in the target language. The consequence may be accent or misunderstanding.

In situation (1), the examples we often encounter are such pronunciations that do not exist in Chinese as /ð/, /θ/, and /v/. Chinese students usually borrow Chinese pronunciations /s/ and /w/ to replace them. In situation (2), we can find the examples of /i/ and /iː/. Though they exist in Chinese, the length of the pronunciation matters a lot in meaning in English, for instance ship and sheep. In situation (3), the mistake Chinese students are likely to make is that they often put the stress on the articles, because there are no articles in Chinese, which makes the students unconsciously emphasize them. On the contrary, in English, articles are rarely stressed. Besides, Chinese students often use falling tone to end a sentence, while in English rising tone is more often used. All these errors come from Chinese negative transfer.

Lexical interference. Students usually think there is always a word in English corresponding to a Chinese one, however, actually it is not the case. For example, “仆” in Chinese corresponds to “dirty” in English, but “dirty” has many other meanings in English, such as “a dirty night (仆仆仆仆)”, “dirty tricks (仆仆仆仆)”, “dirty wounds (仆仆仆仆)”, “dirty work (仆仆仆仆)”, etc. “仆” in “仆仆”, “仆仆”, “仆仆”, respectively corresponds “see”, “read”, and “look at”. Students often make such mistakes as: “Time (My study/work) is nervous/busy.”; “I’ll remember them and save the books and pictures forever.”; “I can’t think the problem creatively.”; “Their work hasn’t mistakes.”; “a hole on the wall”; “birds on the tree”; etc.

Grammatical interference. Grammar is a set of rules with which words are correctly put together to form right sentences. Its manifestation mode is structure. Each language has its unique structures. Compared with Chinese, English has more grammatical morphemes. For example, nouns in English have plural forms while in Chinese they do not. The same situation can be found in tenses of verbs and many other phases as well. Such
structures are likely to cause difficulties in English learning. Students’ errors are in number, article, tense, part of speech, clause, subject-verb concord, repetition, and word order, etc. (see Examples 1-9).

Example (1) Education has many role to play. (number)
Example (2) I’m going to buy book. (article)
Example (3) She said the police will help us. (tense)
Example (4) Convenient is the biggest character of internet. (part of speech)
Example (5) Nowadays, there are more and more people use computers. (clause)
Example (6) Go for walk is the thing he every day do. (part of speech, clause)
Example (7) If everyone in the society do this… (subject-verb concord)
Example (8) Because… so…, Although… but…. (repetition)
Example (9) Why this happen? (word order)

**Pragmatic interference.** Negative transfer in pragmatics is due to the different cultural backgrounds, ways of thinking, and social lives under the two language systems. Compare the sentences (1) and (2) below:

1. Where are you going?
2. (Chinese)

From the surface, the two sentences bear the same meaning. But in the social communication, they play totally different roles. The second sentence in Chinese is a very common greeting; no one cares if the answer is positive or negative. The first sentence in English does not have the greeting function. People mean to know the direction you are going and either a positive or negative answer is needed. This pragmatic failure, a kind of negative transfer, comes from differences in culture. If teachers do not pay attention to this negative transfer, the failures will occur repeatedly, leading to embarrassment and misunderstanding.

Other examples are as follows (see Examples 10-14).

Example (10) E (English): Your dress is beautiful.
C (Chinese): Oh, where where.

Example (11) C: Please come to my house if you are free.
E: OK. When?
C: Er… (I’ve never meant that!)

Example (12) E: Do you mind lending me your bicycle?
C: Yes, I don’t.

Example (13) E: Thank you for helping me.
C: It is my duty to do so. (Chinese)

Example (14) E: Good bye.
C: Walk slowly.

Chinese students like asking foreigners such questions as “Are you married?”, “How many children do you have?”, and “How much do you make every month?” Chinese people ask these questions to show their concern to each other, but in the eyes of Westerners, they intrude each other’s privacy. Nowadays, more and more Chinese people have realized this intrusion, however, errors like these still occur occasionally.
Conclusions and Suggestions

In the process of acquiring a foreign language, native language transfer does exist. The paper summarizes the Chinese transfer phenomena and its causes, and tries to assist students to make use of positive transfer influence and minimize the negative transfer influence and the errors caused by it. English teachers need to be fully aware the similarities and differences between the two languages to correctly guide students. We may as well encourage students to think in an English way, thus creating sound linguistic environment for them. However, the native language cannot be completely abandoned, since in students’ mind the translation between English and Chinese is all the time happening. It is much easier to explain some abstract words in Chinese than in English in the classroom.

Teaching of grammar undoubtedly plays an important role in English teaching whose ultimate purpose is to get learners to communicate in English and make themselves understood. Since grammar is a set of rules, the job of the teachers is to be the source of the information and provide students with needed rules, because these rules cannot be deduced.

Before entering the university, students have learned English grammar systematically, so we suggest a method which may work. In our classes, explanations of certain grammatical phenomena are seldom. We let students find and correct grammatical errors in their assignment for themselves or for each other. Emphases are put on the marked grammatical phenomena in English while unmarked in Chinese. Students are greatly encouraged to read more after class, develop the thinking way in English, and avoid literally translation.

In pragmatics, in order to minimize the negative transfer of Chinese, English teachers could provide students with more materials introducing the customs and cultural background to outline the ways of thinking, living and values of English-speaking countries. Meanwhile, they could create environment as often as possible in which Chinese students could communicate with English-speaking people, listen to or see English programs on TV or radio, and catch up with the latest development of the linguistic knowledge.

Although behaviorism was severely criticized in the 1950s because of the lack of explanation of human creativity in language, the writers think it is effective and persuasive in phonetic teaching. Behaviorism regards the learning process as a stimulus-response process. Children strengthen their language learning through a series of stimuli and responses, so do adults. The process of language learning is also a process of habit forming. In Watson’s classic behaviorism, stimuli “elicit” responses. Skinner’s new behaviorism, in which the role of stimuli is decreased, highlights that the behavior treads on the heels of response which strengthens the behavior or social intercourse. Humans are faced with various stimuli. When their response to a stimulus achieves a good effect, it will be strengthened, repeatedly practiced and developed into a habit. On the contrary, if the response is not a desirable one, people will abandon it and turn to a correct one. In language learning, a specific social setting requires a specific response. If a learner’s response is accepted by others, it will be reinforced until a correct language habit is formed (Ellis, 1985).

Meanwhile, the contrastive analysis works a lot in predicting phonetic difficulties. According to contrastive analysis, difficulties will happen when there are differences between L1 and L2. In the teaching of phonetics, teachers can predict the difficulty or even mistake in pronouncing /v/ through contrasting the pronunciations /v/ in English and /w/ in Chinese.
Given the roles of the above two theories, the writers put forward the following steps in phonetic teaching:
(1) Find the similarities and differences in pronunciations between the two languages; (2) Give students correct pronunciations to form the “stimuli”; (3) Let students “respond”; and (4) Ask students to practice the correct ones repeatedly to “strengthen” the responses.

On the other hand, encouraging students to speak English is very important as well, since there are still lots of students reluctant to speak out. If they have strong motives to speak English, the “stimulus-response” process will be more easily and quicker to attain.

Language teaching is lively and charming, which attracts many English teachers in China to explore the new and effective teaching methods so eagerly and enthusiastically. To deal with Chinese transfer phenomena appropriately may give them new inspirations.

References