

# On L1 Negative Transfer in Second Language Acquisition Based on Chinese Students' Writing Composition

ZHU Jie-xin

School of Foreign Language, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China, 430070

There is negative transfer of first language (L1) in second language acquisition, which generally introduces language errors, hindering learners' second language acquisition. Taking EFL learners' English composition as an example, this thesis analyzes the language errors caused by the negative transfer of L1. This thesis is conducted as the following four stages: The first part is an analysis of the relationship between language and thinking patterns, drawing forth the concept of language transfer; the second part is the literature review on second language acquisition and language transfer; the third part is the statistical analysis of the collected 110 samples; and the fourth part is the practical and innovative suggestion. This thesis aims to assist English acquirers in understanding the negative transfer of L1 and provide effective and practical measures in the future English teaching.

*Keywords:* negative transfer, second language acquisition, writing composition

## 1. Introduction

In a multicultural context, learning a foreign language becomes specifically significant, especially for most high school students. After all, English serves as not only a required subject in the “gaokao” (college entrance examination), but also offers more possibilities for their future development. However, the fact is that the majority of senior high school students are EFL learners, who merely learn English in certain circumstances, in need of the appropriate learning materials and communication opportunities. English composition encompassing lexical, syntactic and discourse levels is a suitable approach to test students' learning capacity. Therefore, this thesis takes high school students' English writings as an example.

This study has found that there exists various language mistakes in writing samples. As a matter of fact, the essence of this problem lies in different thinking patterns, for thought is reflected in a certain way, to be more precise, in a certain form of language (Liu, 2019). The relationship between language and thought has been studied for a long time. Generally, there are four common views on language-thought relationship. Spair-Whorf Hypothesis which refers to the linguistic determinism is the centralized embodiment of Whorf's language-thought relationship. Swiss psychologist Piaget claimed Cognitive Hypothesis, which believes that sense is prior to language. Independent language-thought theory advocates that language is nothing but a useful tool for thinking patterns. The last one illustrates that language and thought correspond to each other. Undoubtedly, there are great differences between Chinese and Western thinking patterns, thus the diverse

languages encompassing their own characteristics. Given these linguistic differences, language transfer will occur in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). This thesis takes the English writings of senior 1-3 students in Hebei as an example to study the negative transfer on L2 writing, so as to provide the theoretical and practical implications for their future cultivation.

## **Literature Review**

### **Previous Studies on Second Language Acquisition**

As a branch of linguistics, SLA has evolved into an independent field in the final third of the 20th century (Saito-Abbott et al., 2003). Of so many perspectives on the SLA theory, the most general and well recognized are as followings. Selinker put forward the Interlanguage theory, which has widely applied in studies of SLA. While in all L2 settings, there are at least three linguistic varieties: a native language (NL), a target language (TL), and the learner's developing second language (interlanguage). Interlanguage is independent with these two languages and stands for a language variety (Odlin, 1993). Krashen placed great emphasis on the distinction between language learning and acquisition. His Input Hypothesis which stresses that the meaningful input beyond acquirers current level of competence will assist them in evolving from stage  $i$  to stage  $i+1$  (Faltis, 1984), represents the paradigm of SLA studies in the 80s of the 20th century. On account of the research on the immersion learners, Merrill Swain argued that learners in immersion classes actually engage in little language production and comprehensible input is not sufficient for L2 learners. Therefore, the comprehensible output is required for L2 acquirers who prefer to be fluent and proficient in the target language (Izumi et al., 1999). Michael H. Long concluded that comprehensive input is beneficial in the process of SLA, while for SL acquirers, especially for EFL learners who lack the communication environment, group work can vastly increase practice opportunities, thus improving their language competence (Long et al., 1985). Sociocultural theory pointed out by the Russian psychologist and psycholinguist Lev S. Vygotsky and his colleagues meant that learners taking advantage of conscious and collaborative mental activities would assist them in adjusting planning, thinking and attending patterns, thus socially mediated mental processing evolving into self-mediated processing (Lantolf, 1994). The framework of Dynamic System Theory described and illustrated that due to the interaction between acquirers' learning environment and principles of self-organization, the complex systems make progress. Precisely speaking, owing to many interacting variables (an individual's interaction with the physical and social environment), the cognitive system develops (Verspoor et al., 2008).

In the long-term development, many influential SLA theoretical schools with interdisciplinary perspectives have indeed came into being, which can be roughly divided into the following two categories, cognitive school and sociocultural school (Yang et al., 2020). Chomsky pointed out the Universal Grammar (UM) which is perceived as the underlying theory of cognitive school, of which Michael Long, Kevin R. Gregg, and Stephen Krashen are the representatives. Kevin R. Gregg concluded the connection between variability and SLA theory and believed that the variable competence must invite an explanation of the acquisition of competence (Gregg, 1990). Based on the UM theory, they considered that the objectives of SLA research are learners' internalized language ability, so as to provide explicit explanation for the essence of SLA system. As for the sociocultural school, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is perceived as the theoretical cornerstone. Sociocultural school pays attention to these two concepts, mediation and internalization (Lantolf, 2006). They studied how SL

communicators successfully express their intentions in the actual language utterance. In order to reconcile the disputes and contradictions between the two above-mentioned schools, sociocognitive theory that organically compromises their core concepts. Atkinson pointed out that language and language acquisition are social phenomena that occur simultaneously and are constructed interactively (Atkinson, 2002).

### **Studies on Language Transfer**

In foreign language teaching activities, the relationship between SLA theory and language transfer is of vital significance. Language transfer involving a wide range of phenomena (Jarvis et al., 2000) is mainly about the influence of L1 on SLA. In the process of SLA, learners' habit of applying L1 will directly exert an influence on it, either positive promotion or negative interference. Robert Lado explained and clarified the Contrastive analysis which assumed that the majority of language errors are caused by the differences between the native and target language (Spolsky, 1979). When the L1 is similar to or consistent with the target language, positive transfer will appear. Nevertheless, when the L1 differs with the L2, negative transfer is prone to occur.

Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language, while English pertains to the Indo-European language family. Therefore, these two languages present different linguistic features. Chinese, the paratactic language, lays great importance to the function and meaning of sentences, while English is hypotactic language, exerting much attention on the application of inflexion, such as prepositions, conjunctions and so on. In light of these language variance, Chinese learners will encounter negative transfer in SLA. Negative transfer mainly manifested in phonology, lexis, grammar, discourse and cultural levels (Zhao, 2011). Phonology transfer refers to the intonation and tone differences, mainly caused by the pronunciation rules, while the last four aspects mainly embodied in writing language. By exploring SL acquirers' writing composition, this thesis is designed to find out the negative transfer of L1 in SLA and offer constructive suggestions for future foreign language teaching.

## **Case Study of Negative Transfer in Chinese Students' Writing Composition**

### **Research Samples**

The research object of this thesis is the students from grade one to grade three in an ordinary senior high school in Hebei Province. There are a total of 110 samples after eliminating unsubmitted writings or those failing to meet the writing requirements. Their English composition is taken as a sample with the purpose of analyzing the negative transfer of L1 from such three levels as lexis, syntax and discourse.

### **Research Content**

This writing task is selected from the three-volume composition of the college entrance examination in 2016. In accordance with the current college entrance examination's composition scoring criteria and vocabulary requirements in Hebei, the vocabulary requirement is reduced from 100 words to 80 words. In order to present the actual level of students' English writings, researchers try to create an examination-like environment, in which students can't communicate with each other, neither use mobile phones nor computers.

#### **Writing Task Description:**

Assume that you are Li Hua, and you have an appointment that you will go to the bookstore with the international student Bob, while you can't keep your words for some reasons. Please write him an email that includes:

1. Express your apology;
2. Explain the reason;

3. Make another appointment;

Notice:

1. Approximately 80 words;

2. Details could be appropriately added to make the text coherent.

### Statistics Analysis and Interpretation

Based on the students' writing output, the researcher classifies their language errors from these three levels, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Language Errors*

Lexical Level	article error; personal pronoun error, preposition error, spelling error, misuse of words
Grammatical Level	verb voice and tense inconsistency, subject-predicate disagreement, misuse of modal verbs, incomplete sentence components
Discourse Level	cohesion, coherent

#### Lexical errors

Statistics have shown that under the influence of negative transfer of L1, students mainly make such lexical errors, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2  
*Lexical Errors*

Lexical errors/category	number	proportion
article	10	7.9%
personal pronouns	24	19%
preposition	24	19%
spelling	51	40%
misuse of words	17	13%

Through statistical analysis, it's obvious that in the EFL environment, there are 126 lexical errors in the 110 Chinese high school students' SL writings, including 10 article errors, accounting for 7.9 %, 24 personal pronoun errors, accounting for 19 %, 24 preposition errors, accounting for 19 %, 51 spelling errors, accounting for 40 %, and 17 language misuse, accounting for 13 %. As is revealed in the table 2, affected by the negative transfer of L1, spelling error is the largest contributor in lexical mistakes. It can be concluded that students have insufficient vocabulary and lack the environment to use English frequently.

#### Grammatical errors

Statistics have shown that under the influence of negative transfer of L1, students mainly make such syntactic errors as verb voice and tense inconsistency, subject-predicate disagreement, and incomplete sentence components, which are shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
*Grammatical errors*

Grammatical errors/category	number	proportion
verb voice and tense inconsistency	32	24%
subject-predicate disagreement	35	26%
misuse of modal verbs	14	11%
incomplete sentence components	52	39%

The verb tense consistency in English is a major feature different from Chinese verbs. While using verbs, students is required to pay attention to the temporal context when the action or state is taken place. Nevertheless, students normally make such mistakes in their writings, for example, “We go to the bookstore tomorrow.” Tomorrow is the overt sign for future tense. Therefore, this sentence should be modified as “We will go to the bookstore tomorrow.”

Subject-predicate agreement means that the predicate verbs in English change with the subject, while there is no such grammatical rule in Chinese. Hence, students will ignore the subject-predicate agreement in writings. Such as, “I think you is my best friend.” As long as the subject is plural or second person pronouns, the predicate verb should be “are”.

English sentences are composed according to certain grammatical rules and basically originated from five basic sentence patterns. S+V (Subject + Verb), S+V+O (Subject + Verb + Object), S+V+P (Subject + Verb + Predicative), S+V+IO+DO (Subject + Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object), and S+V+DO+OC (Subject +Verb + Direct Object + Object Complement). However, owing to the influence of Chinese thinking patterns, students' compositions commonly lack parts of sentence elements. Based on the above shown data, of all missing sentence elements, subject, predicate and object stand above all. For instance, “I have much homework that must do it”, “we anytime after school next week” and “I decide on Saturday this week.”

#### Discourse errors

According to the statistics, affected by the negative transfer of L1, students mainly make such discourse errors as cohesion and coherent, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4  
*Discourse Errors*

Discourse errors/category	number	proportion
cohesion	29	53%
coherent	26	47%

The discourse level includes two categories cohesion and coherent, and cohesion refers to the association of meanings in discourse. The relationship between sentences can be divided into coordination and subordination. Coordination is a common syntactic relationship in English, which is usually combined with such conjunctions as “and”, “but”, and “or”. Subordination refers that one language unit is subject to the other, or rather, one sentence can be divided into main clause and subordinate clause. Under this circumstance, corresponding connectives are needed between main clause and subordinate clause. “I’m sorry can’t go to the bookstore with you today” is a typical sentence which lacks of appropriate conjunction words. In addition, English sentences avoid repetition, so such methods as reference, substitution, ellipsis should be taken to avoid repeated words. For instance, concerning these two sentences “I missed my grandmother and grandfather, so my parents plan to go to visit my grandmother and grandfather.” It should be revised as “I missed my grandmother and grandfather, so my parents plan to go to visit them.”

Coherence refers to the correlation of different information in a text, which is based on the cognitive nature, precisely speaking, the reader’s understanding of the text. Although there is no distinct connection between two sentences, the reader is still able to infer the specific situation of the second sentence from the description of the

first sentence. However, some samples could not present a coherent relationship between two sentences. Such as “You are my good friend. We can’t go to the library next Saturday.”

## **Implications**

### **Contrastive study of English and Chinese**

What is without doubt is that the great difference between L1 and L2 stands for a major obstacle for SLA acquirers. Therefore, to clarify the similarities and differences between English and Chinese are of vital significance. At lexical level, vocabulary is the crystallization of one nation’s culture. The most difficult thing for learning a foreign language is that the meaning of some target words can’t completely overlap to L1. At syntactic structure, as an inflectional language, English is rich in grammatical deformation, and the components of the sentence are linked together through various grammatical structures. Hence, students will not be able to fully grasp such grammatical rules as subject-predicate agreement, verb tense consistency and so on. At discourse level, there are a great number of run-on sentences in Chinese, while English sentences are bamboo-shaped. English tends to use more appropriate conjunctions to connect the main sentence with the subordinate sentence. Moreover, Chinese belongs to high-context culture, and a great deal of information has illocutionary meaning, while English belongs to low-context culture, and the encoded information can be clearly decoded. All in all, the differences between English and Chinese are attributed to the differences between thinking patterns and cultures. Therefore, it is essential to grasp the variances between these two languages, thinking patterns and cultures as well as their development history.

### **Input-output Environment Construction**

As a matter of fact, while decoding the L2, SL acquirers are unconsciously under the influence of L1 in most cases, such as in the process of receiving English information, EFL learners will simultaneously think in Chinese. Therefore, the friendly environment construction is indispensable. While creating an English learning environment, it is important for instructors do their utmost to do the following two things: The first thing is the input of language materials. In the process of language input, teachers should pay attention to the language and cultural differences between English and Chinese, letting students enjoy the charm of language and cultivating their English thinking abilities. What’s more, the comprehensible input is also of crucial importance. Teachers should pay attention to individual differences and impart learners according to their learning abilities and aptitude, so as to meet their own learning requirements. The second thing is the language output. As learners are living in a EFL environment, students’ insightful and innovative language output should be vigorously encouraged. Learning motivation also represents an important factor in L1 negative transfer. In a classroom setting, the immersion model can be used to attract students’ interest. Instructors should also adopt appropriate teaching methods, such as peer-peer interactions, group discussions, and dynamic reflections to attract learners’ attention. It is only through practice can students turn what they have learned into acquired knowledge. Therefore, in the teaching environment, it is important to focus on the combination of input and output, the only approach to be truly effective.

## References

- Atkinson, D. (2002). Toward a sociocognitive approach to second language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86, 525-545.
- Faltis, C. (1984). A commentary on Krashen's input hypothesis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 18, 352-357.
- Gregg, K. R. (1990). The variable competence model of second language acquisition, and why it isn't. *Applied Linguistics*, 11(4): 364-383.
- Izumi, S., et al. (1999). Testing the output hypothesis: Effects of output on noticing and second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 21, 421-452.
- Jarvis, S., & Odlin, T. (2000). Morphological type, spatial reference, and language transfer. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 22, 535-556.
- Lantolf, J. P. (1994). Sociocultural theory and second language learning: Introduction to the special issue. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78, 418-420.
- Lantolf, J. P. (2006). Sociocultural theory and L2: State of the art. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 28(1), 67-109.
- Long, M. H., & Patricia A. P. (1985). Group work, interlanguage talk, and second language acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 207-228.
- Odlin, T. (1993). Rediscovering interlanguage by Larry Selinker. *Language*, 69, 379-383.
- Saito-Abbott, Y. (2003). Reviewed work: Issues in applied linguistics by Michael McCarthy. *The Modern Language Journal*, 87, 621-622.
- Spolsky, B. (1979). Contrastive analysis, error analysis, interlanguage, and other useful fads. *The Modern Language Journal*, 63, 250-257.
- Verspoor, M., et al. (2008). Variability in second language development from a dynamic systems perspective. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92, 214-231.
- 刘志成. (2019). 论中西文化差异的语言学理据. *云南民族大学学报 (哲学社会科学版)*, 36(02), 59-65.
- 杨连瑞, 陈雨杉, 陈士法. (2020). 二语习得理论构建的认识论思考. *外语学刊*, (03), 113-119.
- 赵启君. (2011). 二语习得中母语负迁移现象及教学启示. *西南大学学报 (社会科学版)*, 37(S1), 274-275.