

## On the Promotion of Positivetransfer in Second Language Acquisition

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**Abstract:** In the process of second language acquisition, the mother tongue can produce both positive and negative transfer. From the perspective of educational psychology and linguistic commonality, this paper conducts an empirical study with different compare groups (primary, intermediary, and advanced) so as to analyze and compare the positive and negative transfer of mother tongue in second language acquisition, taking pronouns and reflexive pronouns for example. Then, it further compares the similarities and differences between Chinese and English language in phonetics, vocabulary, syntax and pragmatics. The positive transfer of mother tongue is important to second language acquisition, while negative transfer is inevitable. It is proposed that bilingual contrastive teaching between mother tongue and foreign language be carried out actively. A teacher can combine language contrast and analysis to reduce negative transfer errors consciously in order to exert the greatest positive transfer of mother tongue and realize a kind of foreign language thinking.

### 1. Introduction

The origins of second language acquisition research can be traced back to the end of the 1960s, going through different historical stages. However, in all stages, the phenomenon of mother tongue transfer has been an important factor in the analysis of linguists and psychologists <sup>[1]</sup>. The first language system of human thinking is what we call mother tongue. In general, the mother tongue is the first language that children contact and acquire first after birth. For second language learners, the mother tongue has an important influence on the acquisition of the target language <sup>[2]</sup>. The process of producing these effects is called linguistic transfer phenomenon by linguists. When the structural features of the target language are similar to those of the mother tongue, positive transfer will occur, which is easier to learn and promotes second language acquisition. When there are differences between the structural features of the target language and the mother tongue, negative transfer will occur, which makes learning more difficult and hinders second language acquisition. While mother tongue is established without any other language system <sup>[3]</sup>, second language is the second language system of learners, which is established after the formation of the mother tongue system.

Transfer is the influence of experience acquired in one kind of learning on other kinds of learning. The phenomenon of transfer widely exists in the learning process, which can be divided into positive and negative transfer. "Migration" was originally a term in educational psychology that refers to the impact of knowledge, skills, methods, or attitudes acquired in one context on the acquisition of knowledge, skills, or attitudes in another context <sup>[4]</sup>. The process by which the mother tongue affects second language acquisition is migration or transfer. Positive transfer (positive migration) contributes to the understanding and mastery of another kind of learning; on the contrary, negative transfer (negative migration) has a negative impact on the other kind of learning, leading to errors and difficulties. As a second language system, the process of second language acquisition refers to the process of learning a second language in a social environment which separates from the target language under the premise of mastering a certain native language system. It can be said the process and result of second language acquisition is not only influenced by the learner's age, psychological and social factors such as politics, economy, culture, but also the mother tongue. Learners in learning the target language will consciously or unconsciously use thinking, analysis

and comparison which are made on the original informatio, and use the original native language learning experience to guide. Language is the coding system of objective reality. Language has the function of expressing the world and understanding the world. Humans share a common natural world, which makes languages share something in common. It is this existence of “commonality” that provides the possibility of the positive transfer of mother tongue in second language acquisition, and provides feasibility for the cultural exchange between different nationalities. Although second language acquisition is always based on the mother tongue, the mother tongue is not a burden of learning but a resource for any language learning <sup>[5]</sup>. Language skills learned from the mother tongue can also be transferred to a second language.

## **2. Empirical Study**

For many years, when linguists studied the relationship between mother tongue and second language acquisition, they are more concerned with the interference effect of native language thinking on second language acquisition, that is, the “negative migration” of language. It is precisely because the linguistic community pays too much attention to the negative migration of language and ignores the commonality of language, so it does not focus on the positive migration of language. According to cognitive linguistics, the error caused by the so-called “interference” of the mother tongue is not due to the “negative transfer” of the mother tongue but to the borrowing of the mother tongue. The so-called “interference” is nothing more than the incorrect borrowing of the mother tongue. One should make full use of the positive role of mother tongue transfer to create a language environment which is helpful to second language learning; at the same time, by analyzing and explaining the mistakes caused by negative transfer, students are guided to pay more attention to the differences between the two languages, and are encouraged to compare and summarize the negative transfer of their mother tongue, so as to strengthen the internalization process of second language learning.

This study draws on the understanding of mother tongue and output of the transfer function in second language acquisition, adopts picture selection and picture description respectively, and tests the English comprehension and output ability of the subjects.

### **2.1 Subjects**

The subjects are students of grade two in a primary school, grade two in a junior high school and grade three in a senior high school. The average learning time of the subjects is 2 years, 7 years and 11 years respectively. The subjects are defined as primary stage learners, intermediate stage learners and advanced stage learners. There are 70 people in the primary group, aged from 8 to 9. There are 60 people in the intermediate group, aged from 13 to 14. The senior group consists of 65 people, aged from 17 to 18. Each group consists of two sets of parallel subjects, which are used for comprehension experiments and output experiments. The parallel test consists of two classes in the same grade. It is known from the paired test that there is no significant difference in the scores of the two recent English tests (interim and final exams) in the two paralld classes, which can be regarded as parallel subjects.

### **2.2 Experiment**

Understanding experiment and output experiment are carried out by using picture selection task and picture description task respectively. Each participant has to complete 12 questions. In this case, our study is based on the application of pronouns and reflexive pronouns. In order to avoid the influence of gender factors on the results of the experiment, two persons in each pair are of the same sex. Each question gives a pair of words and 3 corresponding pictures. The three pictures include a picture that fits the sentence description, a picture that does not match the object of the antecedent, and a picture that is used as an interference. The subjects have to choose the right word and the picture that matches the description from the three pictures (A, B or C). We interpret important English words or phrases to prevent learners from influencing judgments due to difficulties in vocabulary comprehension.

### 2.3 Process

All subjects will complete the test within 30 minutes.

### 2.4 Score

The correct answer is scored, and the wrong answer is not scored.

### 2.5 Experimental Results

This paper mainly studies the understanding and output of pronouns and reflexive pronouns. Chinese students have learned the output of personal pronouns in the primary stage, not the reflexive pronouns, in other words, they can't make English reflexive pronouns correct in the jurisdiction of the domain constraints. There is a significant difference between the intermediate group and the primary group, but no significant difference between the intermediate group and the advanced group. It shows Chinese students do not master the output of reflexive pronouns until the intermediate stage. In the primary stage, they think reflexive pronouns are free in the jurisdiction of the domain constraints and will use reflexive pronouns casually. By comparing the results of the experiment with those of the students before and after the test, it is proved that the strategy of summing up the similarities of English and Chinese grammar and then using the positive transfer of mother tongue to promote English grammar learning is feasible, which can effectively improve students' comprehensive English level.

People often regard the process of second language learning as a process of gradually replacing the features of the first language with the features of the second language. For second language learners, the more similarities exist between the mother tongue and the target language, the easier it is for them to master the target language. The common features of languages are closely related to second language acquisition, as shown in Figure 1. Anyone in the world who learns and masters the mother tongue, whether or not he realizes, has a certain understanding of the commonality of languages, that is, through the personality of things to understand the commonality of things. When he begins to learn a second language, he will use his native language to gain a common understanding of language commonality, consciously or unconsciously, in the second language acquisition, thus deepening the understanding of the second language he learns and improving it.

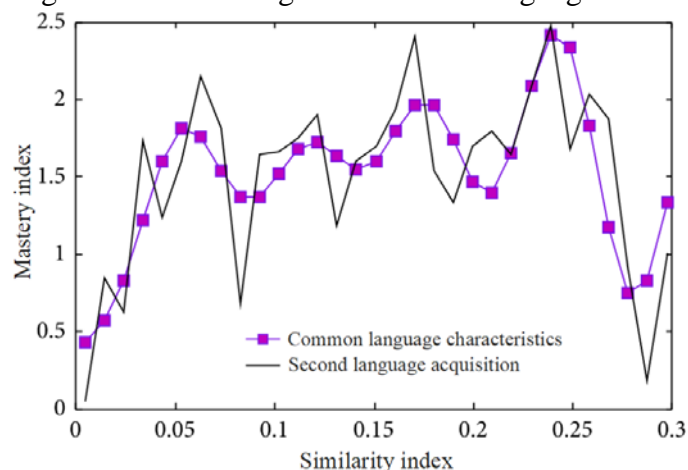


Fig.1 Performance Chart

### 3. Classification and Manifestation of Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue

The grammatical structure of Chinese is very different from that of English. For example, in Chinese, the noun has no change in the number, and the verb has no change in tense. This difference is easy to cause negative migration. So beginners are prone to make low-level mistakes. In the process of using English, Chinese students naturally transfer the grammatical concepts of Chinese into English, thus causing some mistakes. The negative impact of negative language transfer on second language acquisition is obvious. Some Chinese language educators and learners are afraid of

the negative transfer of language. Teachers can first explain the differences between the two languages. By comparing and emphasizing the similarities between Chinese and English, teachers can create more conditions for positive language transfer, so that students can learn English from passive to active, and improve the efficiency of English learning. The positive transfer of mother tongue has a positive effect on foreign language acquisition. Therefore, in the process of teaching, it is an effective way to help students find out and compare the similarities and difficulties between English and Chinese so as to promote the formation of positive transfer.

### 3.1 Negative Phonetic Transfer

Phonetics is the basic material shell and means of expression of a language, and it is also the first step for language learners to learn a language. In second language phonetic learning, the interference of mother tongue is very obvious. Chinese is a tonal language, which can be divided into yinping, yangping, shangsheng and qusheng tones. Tone is an important part of Chinese pronunciation and has the function of distinguishing meaning. And English is intonation language, there are three intonation types: falling tone, rising tone, and fall-rise tone. The same sequence of words in different intonations will have different meanings, such as “that's not the book he wants”. When put different emphasis on “not” or “he” or “wants”, the sentence meaning differs.

In the process of foreign language learning, learners will find that no matter how standard and fluent Chinese people speak English, they will bring a little Chinese accent more or less, thus making them impossible to speak as authentically as native speakers. Firstly, English has both open syllables ending with vowels and closed syllables ending with consonants, while Chinese characters end with vowels. Therefore, beginners often add a vowel after English consonants unconsciously, so “dig” is pronounced as “digger” and “start” is pronounced as “starter”. Secondly, the pronunciation pattern of Chinese is usually “consonant + vowel”, so when students read English, they add a vowel between the consonants, such as “price”, which is often pronounced as / pəraɪs /. Thirdly, there are many phonemes in English that are not found in Chinese. For example, students often confuse /θ/ with /s/ and /ð/ with /z/. Fourthly, the unit sounds in English are divided into long vowels and short vowels, such as /i:/ and /i/, while the single vowels in Chinese Pinyin are not. Last but not least, the loss of blasting, consonant turbidity and accent in English often make Chinese students guilty and easily lead to the transfer of voice.

### 3.2 Negative Vocabulary Transfer

Generally speaking, every language has its unique way of word formation, collocation and expression. However, foreign language learners, especially those at the primary level, tend to translate words from their native language into the target language from the perspective of meaning. As the basic unit of language communication, vocabulary contains rich cultural meanings. Words have different connotations, associative meanings and emotional colors. For example, “raining chicken” in Chinese can arouse people's sympathy, but in English it can't be associated in this way; it can only be expressed by a verb phrase “soaked through”. Moreover, the word “chicken” alone has far different associative meanings in Chinese and English. In English, “chicken” means a coward, while in Chinese, “chicken” means a woman engaged in pornography industry.

### 3.3 Negative Syntactic Transfer

Although the basic structure of English and Chinese sentences is subject (S) + predicate (V) + object (O), the internal structural differences between the two languages often lead to negative migration. The performance is as follows:

First, Chinese is an unmarked language with no morphological change. Instead, English is much richer and more complicated than Chinese in terms of order and form. Therefore, Chinese students are prone to negative migration when they learn English grammar in this area. Try the following example:

- (1) False: They are my friend. Correct: They are my friends.
- (2) False: She go to school every day. Correct: She goes to school every day.
- (3) False: Tom buy a book yesterday. Correct: Tom bought a book yesterday.

The mistake is to neglect the plural form of the noun in (1). The principle that subject-predicate must be consistent with person and number is ignored in (2). No attention is paid to the change of tense in example (3).

Second, characteristics of Chinese are significant because of negative transfer. The basic structure of a sentence is mainly reflected in the relationship between the subject and the topic, not the relationship between the subject and the predicate. Therefore, in the process of English learning, there are often such Chinglish sentences: there are many foreigners visit there. Here students are influenced by Chinese, taking “there are many foreigners” as the theme, and “visit there” as a topic, which is a syntactic error.

Third, Chinese sentences are heavy and confusing, and the context depends on the meaning. As long as the meaning can be expressed clearly, it does not pay attention to the formal integrity. The omission of subject and related words is not uncommon in Chinese. For example, “需要查询资料 (Need to consult materials.)”. Here, subject is omitted. However, in English, you must add the subject “we” or “you”, because English pays attention to the integrity of the subject-object logic and grammar. Another example is “你不说,我也不说 (you don't say, I won't say either)”. Because there is implied conditional relationship in Chinese, you can omit related words like “如果”. In English, you must say, “If you don't say, I won't say either”.

### 3.4 Pragmatic Negative Transfer

As the cornerstone of culture, language and culture are closely linked. In learning a second language, we not only need to learn its pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and syntax, but also need to learn enough about the culture of the language. Any language contains rich culture, and all cultures are unique. In the process of second language acquisition, learners tend to use their own cultural standards to measure the words, deeds and thoughts of others, and always use their own native language habits to express their own thoughts, but ignore the cultural connotation of the second language. So communicative errors often occur.

In Chinese culture, people often use speech acts such as “where are you going?”, “where have you been?” as greetings. These greetings do not constitute greetings for English speakers. Similar examples include saying “good-bye” and “see you later”, which sounds strange and ridiculous if expressed as “walk well, please”. In addition, when faced with compliments from foreigners, Chinese people usually say “no, not at all” or “where, where” to express self-deprecation. In English culture, people tend to respond to compliments simply by saying “thank you”. Language is the carrier and container of culture, and it is also affected and restricted by culture. As a result of cultural differences, negative transfer of pragmatics is likely to cause some unnecessary misunderstandings on both sides of communication, which should be prevented.

The interference of the mother tongue into the second language exists from the beginning of the second language acquisition. Teachers and students must correctly understand the negative transfer of the mother tongue and adopt corresponding strategies in the teaching process to eliminate the impact of negative migration. For a foreign language learner, the use of and dependence on the mother tongue is inevitable and always exists. Foreign language thinking cannot be learned overnight. A mode of thinking, when faced with obstacles in foreign language, will spontaneously take native language thinking. Therefore, in the process of teaching, it is impossible to insist that all students think in foreign languages. Instead, in teaching, we should gradually cultivate students' target language thinking consciousness, excavate and grasp the characteristics of the two kinds of thinking, so as to cultivate thinking in target language.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper makes an empirical study on whether there is a “transfer effect” in the process of English learning for Chinese students, and finds that Chinese students can make use of the positive transfer effect of mother tongue in the process of learning English, but the negative transfer effect of mother tongue is still large. The English learning process of Chinese students is a process of

constant adjustment, construction and restructuring with English as the target language. In this process, the influence of mother tongue constantly exist. Through conscious analysis of the English and Chinese language systems, students' sensitivity to the differences between English and Chinese can be trained. In daily language teaching, teachers should analyze the causes of errors to minimize the negative transfer from mother tongue, and make effective use of positive transfer to help learners improve the learning effect. If teachers can effectively combine language contrast, error analysis, language input and output, and even the mechanism of comparative culture and language acquisition in teaching, they can help students gradually reduce the negative transfer of mother tongue and realize the transition to English thinking.

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