Analysis of the Phenomenon and Strategies of Reverse Transfer Between Chinese and English

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Abstract: The reverse side of transfer that is second language effect on first language has not been paid too much attention to since the concept of language transfer has been brought up in 1972. And according to Cook's multi-competence theory, it indeed exists and studying it would have a significant meaning to the personal development of bilinguals and multilinguals. Based on Cook's multi-competence theory, this paper discusses the positive and negative transfer of English to Chinese, mainly focusing on students' multi-competence in English classrooms in China and giving some guiding advice to English teachers in China. It finds out that the good things of Chinese-English transfer are the improvement of semantic awareness, expressions and logic. Besides, there are some negative impacts on the aspects of sentence order and culture. According to the findings, four main suggestions to Chinese English teachers are proposed. They are regarding L1 and L2 as each other's resources ,attaching importance to logical words, building confidence of bilinguals and paying more attention to communication than accuracy.

Keywords: reverse transfer, compound ability, teaching English as a foreign language, teaching strategies, phenomenological study

1. Introduction

Since the bidirectional nature of speech transfer has been confirmed, the research on bi-directional transfer has been increasingly concerned [1]. The question of second language acquisition research has shifted, no longer focusing on why second language learners never reach the level of native speakers, but how bilinguals are formed [2]. What is usually discussed in the Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' field is the forward transfer, which means, learners' mother tongue has an effect on the target language [3]. However, examples of positive and negative reverse transfer abound [2]. Based on observation, they can be found in either grammar learning processes or everyday dialogues in Chinese classrooms. This study applies the method of phenomenology to summarize the aspects of both positive and negative sides and also add examples to the very field of reverse transfer. To be more specific, this phenomenological study mainly focuses on how   the second language has an effect on the first language. After analyzing the examples listed in the paper, useful advice can be given to Chinese English teachers regarding the negative transfer phenomena to guide their teaching work.

2.   Relative Theories on Multi-competence

Cook clearly pointed out that the influence of a second language on the mother tongue was due to the existence of compound ability. Compound ability is the unique language ability of bilinguals [4]. The composition and leading results of compound ability are analyzed in detail below.

Chomsky's theory of stimulus poverty holded that native speakers are born with a corresponding knowledge of grammar, which was called competence [2]. However, he believed that the acquisition of first language (L1) and second language (L2) was up for debate. Cook argued that only a minority of people really knew only one language, and most people knew more than two languages. Pure monolinguals were the exception, bilinguals or multilinguals were the norm. To this end, he extended the theory of stimulus poverty to large numbers of people who knew more than one language and had a variety of grammatical knowledge in their heads, namely, had multiple linguistic abilities [5].

However, multilingualism was not a simple addition of multiple language abilities, but a very complex system. In Cook's system, the moment monolinguals came into contact with a second foreign language, the knowledge of the second foreign language began to aggregate and interact with the knowledge of the mother tongue in the brain, forming a continuum of language knowledge [6].

Cook believed that compared with single language ability, multilingual ability is more holistic and systematic [7]. In other words, the grammar of the mother tongue and the grammar of the second language are not completely separate parts, nor are they fully integrated into a whole, but an organic system that influences and connects each other. As could be seen from the power of complex synthesis, multiple language abilities interact in the brain and are not distinct. Therefore, second language learners unconsciously mix their mother tongue and second language knowledge, which can provide a theoretical basis for studying bi-directional language transfer or reverse transfer.

What's more, in the primary stage of language learning, learners relied on their mother tongue to assist their second language learning, and the transfer from their mother tongue to the second language is the main form. With the mastery of the second language, learners would become less and less dependent on their mother tongue. As the second language system becomes more and more complete, an association between the two language systems occurs. At this time, there would be both the mother language's influence on the second language and the second language's influence on the mother language, so there would be a reverse transfer [2].

3.   Phenomenon Analysis of Reverse Transfer

3.1. Positive Transfer Phenomena

3.1.1. The Improvement of Semantic Awareness

When it comes to reverse transfer, the first thing that comes to mind is semantic awareness. Semantic awareness refers to the ability to understand and apply the meaning of words and phrases in a language. Semantic awareness includes lexical semantics, lexical association, contextual understanding, logical reasoning and so on.   In other words, it is a function of turning grammar and vocabulary into meaning. For example, a university professor in China assigns tasks at the beginning of a course. A student may ask "Teacher, must I do this?". Faced with such a challenge, a teacher who has not studied English grammar at all may just explain the reason for the assignment from the perspective of defending his homework and try to convince the student, or even ignore the student's questions and treat the student as a troublemaker. But if you have a deeper understanding of the function of modal verbs in English, the teacher can realize that the "must" in the student's

utterance is actually an emotional need, implying "I know that the teacher's task is pre-prepared, I seem to be supposed to follow it, but I seem to have a different idea, what if my idea is better?" Having thought of this, the teacher may possibly seize this chance to educate his student to dare to doubt and doubt the authority in a polite and verbal way,   which vividly shows how reverse transfer can benefit semantic awareness and communication. Similarly, the English present perfect continuous tense is used as "always" for the expression of emotions, the corresponding semantic is "I have been doing this thing without stopping, you have to understand that I had a really hard time". What's more, "Have eaten" in the present perfect tense corresponds to the implicit semantic of "don't eat anymore". Last but not least, the passive voice emphasizes "the recipient of the action" which means "I'm saying you were chosen, not someone else." and "I'm saying the car was sold, not something else." Don't focus on "the other thing didn't sell" or "why other people wasn't chosen", your response should focus on the point the other person is trying to emphasize. With this understanding, reactions can be more humanized and communication can be smoother.

3.1.2. The Improvement of Expressions

There are vocabularies that are used in English but not in Chinese, such as culturally specific foods, customs, and idioms, which can expand the Chinese perspective and understanding of L1 and L2 culture. What's more, English has grammatical marks that do not exist in Chinese, which can make the expression more accurate. For example, Chinese nouns do not have the plural form. But sometimes proficiency in English nouns is reflected in a sort of plural mark when speaking Chinese. A Chinese teacher who has taught English for a long time might say a sentence like this automatically in Chinese, "I don't like Binguan them". As you may know, "Binguan" is the Chinese of "hotel". However, in Chinese, the morpheme "them" isn't usually matched with inanimate nouns, but the word "them" here can in fact make the meaning accurate by emphasizing the category of hotels. Otherwise, it would mean a certain hotel or the facility in a hotel in Chinese. Admittedly, some people may argue that matching "them" and "hotel" is not accurate in pragmatics, which may lead to the slide in standards of Chinese. However, focusing too much on standards is not beneficial to the diversity and flexibility of language, which would lead to a result against the nature of language, which is serving for communication convenience rather than accuracy. By transferring the grammatical and lexical rules of a second language to the first language, a new expression can be formed, which helps to improve the diversity of expression of the first language.

3.1.3. The Improvement of Logic

The positive effects of English on Chinese can also promote the logic of Chinese and improve oral and presentation skills. The requirements for coherence and cohesion between sentences are higher in English output than in Chinese, which is easy to understand. For example, the phrase "he resented being excluded from the discussion which directly involves his future" doesn't follow a linear logic in Chinese. Instead, following the principle of "form dispersing and spirit gathering" in Chinese writing, it is expressed in many small sentences that are not coherent. Translated as "The discussion directly involves his future.   But he was excluded from it. He resented it". This is also a big problem for Chinese English as a Foreign Language(EFL)learners in using English. There are no logical relations under the guidance of emotional thinking. "The consciousness and behavior that can actively use connective words to realize the logical semantic connection between adjacent sentences, sentence groups or paragraphs (referred to as sentence/group/paragraph) and small sentences in sentence complex in English text" is called explicit logical connection consciousness. Bai has found the potential relationship between explicit logical connection consciousness and English writing level through research [8]. Specifically, Chinese EFL learners who master the

consciousness of explicit logical connection can improve the coherence and cohesion of their English writing. In view of the existence of metalinguistic consciousness, students' transfer of English output consciousness to Chinese can significantly improve the logic of Chinese.

3.2. Negative Transfer Phenomena

3.2.1. Sentence Order Confusion

Negative effects of a second language on native language learners are rarely among EFL learners with low proficiency in second language, but mostly among EFL learners with high proficiency in the second language. English culture has been internalized among those EFL learners [9]. The formed English thinking will have a negative impact on the accuracy of the native language. For example, if you speak Chinese according to the English word order, saying the result first and then the process: "He finally won through his own effort, his teacher's help and his parents' encouragement". But in Chinese, it would be "Because of his own effort, his teacher's help and his parents' encouragement, he finally won". Generally speaking, Chinese has the habit of their own word order, such as cause first, and consequence behind. However, in daily life, speaking Chinese in the English order of effect-before-cause will not lead to misunderstanding, so this kind of misuse is normally acceptable.

3.2.2. Cultural Misunderstanding

Once English thinking is generated, it will affect the understanding of Chinese. For example, a foreigner praises a Chinese girl's beauty, the Chinese girl would say modestly to the foreigner: "Thank you but I can see no where I'm beautiful. " They use unawareness of their own beauty to express the modesty, understanding and concession of Chinese people to others. The simple answer in Chinese is "Where? Where?". A foreigner who does not understand such modesty may explain further: "Your eyes, your nose, your ears, all of them are beautiful!". This is an example of foreigners not understanding humility in Chinese culture. Similarly, if a Chinese EFL learner exposes to English culture for a long time which tells you that "Be confident and show yourself bravely", it would be hard for him to understand why some people are so reluctant to accept praise as a sign of kindness to others, which leads to some obstacles and misunderstandings in his dealings with his native people.

4. Strategies in the Classroom Considering Reverse Rransfer

4.1. Regarding L1 and L2 as Each Other's Resources

Bilinguals' acquisition of L2 grammar knowledge can actually activate the inner knowledge of L1 which cause better realization of L1 context. When teaching grammar, teachers should teach the correlation between L1 and L2 and the meaning of utterances (pragmatic knowledge) to help students gain semantic awareness and better understand the L1 and L2 culture [10]. What's more, communication competence should be paid more attention to in the teaching of L2 and an effective way to do this is to encourage students to take L1 and L2 as each other's pragmatic resources.

4.2. Attaching Importance to Logical Words

When teaching logical thinking in English writing, teachers can reflect on the importance of metalinguistic awareness, and encourage students to pay attention to the differences between Chinese and English logical forms in daily communication and consciously use logical words to reflect coherence and cohesion. The example sentences of students who have used logical words

should be properly displayed in the writing class in the composition correction, so as to promote the students to use logical words properly.

4.3. Building Confidence of Bilinguals

Similarly, students with English grammar characteristics in Chinese communication should be correctly guided to affirm their mastery of English grammar knowledge and build up their pride in the unique expression of bilingualism. Instead of learning from native speakers, they should set successful bilinguals as role modals. The transfer of the mother tongue to the second language indicates that bilinguals are different from native L2 speakers. The transfer of the second language to the mother tongue proves that bilinguals are different from native L1 speakers, they are an independent group and have equal status with native speakers. Therefore, Cook believed that the level of native speakers cannot be used to measure second speakers, which lacks objectivity and science, with a strong monolingual bias [4].

4.4. Focusing More on Communication Than Accuracy

One point worth emphasizing here is that some of the problems caused by thinking patterns and vocabulary use brought by the second language are amplified. For example, in the previous example of the hotel, you can criticize that it is not in line with Chinese expression habits, but it has no problem in the effectiveness of expression. What's more, it is more lively and friendly, and it also makes Chinese expressions rigorous. However, if completely ignoring these habits and blindly emphasizing the curing of Chinese, and even requiring everyone to adopt exactly the same way of expression, the most "correct" way of expression, as a result, students would regard speaking as an anxious or even humiliating thing, dare not speak and thus lose the essential function of language communication.

5. Conclusion

Based on Cook's multi-competence theory , the existence of reverse transfer is confirmed. There are three positive aspects of reverse transfer of English to Chinese, which are improvement of semantic awareness, expressions and logic. And negative transfer between English and Chinese has two aspects, which are confusion of sentence order and cultural misunderstanding. They show the importance of teaching pragmatics , building up logical thinking and the confidence of bilinguals.

There are limitations in this paper, too. For example, the phenomenons all come from everyday experiences. They may not represent the norm. And the example of negative transfer focus on proficient English learners rather than second language learners in the foreign language classroom environment , which obviously needs to be completed.

This paper only focus on the English-Chinese transfer, in order to benefit more on the reverse transfer in English learning field, studies on other first language can be conducted in the future. For example, French researchers can further investigate the effect of French to English.

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