

# ***Analysis of The Negative Transfer in Chinese Middle School Students' Acquisition of English in Lexical Aspect***

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**Abstract:** This paper mainly analyzes the negative transfer issues that Chinese middle school students generally have in their acquisition of English regarding lexical aspect. Data of the research is collected from the designed exercise completed by three middle school students with different English proficiency levels. Concerning all the lexical transfer errors that the students make, collocation and derivation are the two most common types. Regarding collocation, this paper argues that an English word with multiple Chinese equivalents leads to the use of wrong collocations in English. Regarding derivation, this paper finds that the changeable word form of different parts of speech in English causes the wrong use of the word form. In addition, several suggestions are offered to improve the negative transfer in the acquisition of English, which are using English-English dictionary, focusing on the language input, and making contrastive analysis.

**Keywords:** Negative transfer, Second language acquisition, Chinese students, Lexical level.

## **1. Introduction**

When learning a second language, the learners would be affected by their mother tongue. One would inevitably use the rules of native language to learn a new language. The situation goes the same for Chinese ESL (English as Second Language) students. The fact that students often emphasize the established patterns that exist in their memory may hinder them from learning a second language smoothly. Using the theory of language transfer, particularly negative transfer, this essay intends to discuss how negative transfer has brought difficulty for Chinese learners during their study of English as a second language.

Negative transfer refers to cross-linguistic influences resulting in errors, overproduction, underproduction, miscomprehension, and other effects [1]. It is a psychological expression of using learned knowledge to study new knowledge. When applied to the field of second language acquisition (SLA), the negative transfer describes how the learners' native language would affect their acquisition of the second language due to their inclination to employ the established language patterns or rules while using the second language. Chinese learners would sometimes perceive the similarity between Chinese and English, for example, both English and Chinese have many words that could express the same semantic meaning in different context. However, on most occasions, Chinese differs from English. Under such a context, it would be unadaptable for Chinese students to apply the same rules

of the Chinese language in English study. In other words, negative transfer at lexical level has been a serious issue for Chinese students in language acquisition. Therefore, this paper will focus on analyzing the negative transfer that Chinese students meet at lexical level when they study English as a second language.

## 2. Literature Review

The impact of first language on the acquisition of second language has always been frequently discussed. In academic field, this impact is called native language interference. This transfer of native language can be classified into two types: positive transfer and negative transfer. The former improves one's foreign language study, while the latter cramps the study [2].

Regarding negative transfer study, it has experienced three periods in predicting possible interference:

The first period is the period of Behavioral Linguistics. At this stage, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis proposed by Lado [3] was the mainstream of the language transfer study. It argues that in the process of language acquisition, learners tend to transfer the form, meaning and culture related to their native language into the SLA. Therefore, this interference caused by the native language affects the acquisition, which results in language errors. Consequently, in general, similarities between one's first language and second language bring the positive transfer during acquisition, while differences between first language and second language bring the negative transfer during acquisition.

The second period is the period of Universal Grammar. At this stage, language transfer study entered the period of Interlanguage Hypothesis. The theory refuted Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and argued that the errors made by the learners were not only because of native language, but also the approaches and motives taken by the learners [4].

The third stage is the period of Cognitive Linguistics. At this stage, language transfer study has changed to the interpretation of its generation, which argues that language transfer is produced by the cognitive process of language acquisition. However, in processability theory, Pienemann revealed the limited function of language processing ability to language transfer and predict the developmental path of interlanguage. Based on what the theory argues, learners can only produce and understand the language forms that can be processed by language processing mechanism in the current state [5].

Regarding linguistics, Chinese (Sino-Tibetan) is written in characters while English (Indo-European) is written in alphabetic letters. Generally, this difference lowers the tendency of Chinese learners to make lexical transfer errors because of the lack of cognate language. However, research indicates that transference of word meaning, and word forms is possible when learners' first and second language share vocabulary cognates, which is why Chinese students transfer the meaning of words frequently and commit lexical error [6].

## 3. Research Design

### 3.1. Population and Sample

The population of the research is the Grade 9 students at Shenzhen Overseas Chinese Town Middle School (OCTMS). Chinese is the native language of the population, who have all studied English as a second language for at least 8 years. With respect to sampling, stratified random sampling is used to select 3 students from a random class. The participants are selected according to their English proficiency, which is examined by the IELTS English examination (Mock Exam), and the scores of the three selected students are band 4.0, band 5.0, and band 6.0 respectively.

### 3.2. Data Collection

As the present study focuses on analyzing the negative transfer in Chinese students' acquisition of English regarding lexical aspect, the approach to collect data is a designed practice in test form, involving phrase translation (Chinese to English), and a 120-word short essay of any topics.

During the test (data collection), the students are asked to complete the practice in a quiet room, where students are not allowed to cooperate and use any addition materials. The time limit is 40 minutes.

Practice questions are given in Appendix.

## 4. Results and Discussions

Based on the answer sheets given by the three students, lexical transfer errors in can be classified into two kinds: collocation and derivation.

### 4.1. Results

Here are some examples that show the errors in lexical collocation and derivation:

#### 4.1.1. Collocation

- (1) Look TV (Watch TV)
- (2) Say a story (Tell a story)
- (3) Nowadays, competition has become bigger and bigger. (Nowadays, competition has become more intense).
- (4) I'm satisfied to my life. (I'm satisfied with my life)
- (5) I go to school to study knowledge. (I go to school to acquire knowledge)
- (6) 4.1.2. Derivation
- (7) Personally, I am passion (passionate) about math.
- (8) The best cooker (cook) I know is my mother.
- (9) Fortunate (Fortunately), I have a lot of friends.
- (10) I found the beautiful (beauty) of math when I was small.
- (11) There is something wrong with the WIFI connect (connection) of my computer.
- (12) Succeed (success) does not have an exact definition.

### 4.2. Discussions

#### 4.1.2. Collocation

Regarding collocation, it refers to the occurrence of a word when it associates with another word. In English, the combination of words is not random. While writing in English, students always organize words and sentences in Chinese first, and then try to find the equivalent of English words without distinguishing their semantic difference in a linguistic context. Consequently, when a word is used, an ESL learner should recognize its suitable collocation, which is also known as "the strong patterning in the co-occurrence of words" [7].

In example (1), student used the word 'look' instead of 'watch' to collocate with 'TV'. The cause of such wrong collocation is the word-to-word translation of Chinese. Both 'look' and 'watch' are equivalent to the word '看' in Chinese semantically. '看' can collocate with many words in different

context in Chinese. However, in English, the collocation of ‘look’ and ‘watch’ are not as random as its equivalent in Chinese.

Same as the previous one, student picked the wrong collocation of ‘story’ due to the word-to-word translation in example (2). In English semantics, both ‘say’ and ‘tell’ are equivalent to the word ‘说’ in Chinese, which can also collocate with lots of words. However, when collocating with ‘story’, ‘tell’ is the correct one, not ‘say’.

In example (3), if people translate the sentence into Chinese, it means “现如今，竞争越来越大”. The direct translation of “大” is “big” or “large” in English, which drove the student to collocate “competition” by “big”. However, in English, “big” cannot collocate with “competition”, and its correct collocation should be “intense”, “fierce” etc.

‘To’ is one of the most common words (prepositions) that students use when they are not certain of the correct collocation. But in example (4), the collocation of “satisfy” should be “with”, which is a fixed combination.

In example(5), if people translate the sentence into Chinese, it means “我去学校学知识”. Lots of words in English, such as “study” and “learn”, can express the meaning of “学”. However, “study” cannot collocate with “knowledge”, and its correct collocation should be “obtained”, “acquire”, etc. Although “study” and “acquire” are related semantically, they cannot be interchangeably used in this context.

#### 4.1.3. Derivation

Regarding negative transfer, error in derivation is another problem that all the three students show in their samples. Derivation is the most common way to form a new word in English. Finding an existing word, making it the root and adding suffix or prefix to it, then a new word is created. For example, “-ful” is a suffix, by adding it to the root “care”, and a new word “careful” is formed. In addition, suffix or prefix, such as “-ful”, “pre”, does not simply create a new word, it also changes the meaning and the part of speech of the initial root (word) in English. However, Chinese does not have this kind of word formation. In fact, one Chinese word could have several parts of speech under different contexts without changing the form. Therefore, many Chinese words can be functioned as different parts of speech while their forms remain the same.

Unlike Chinese, the forms of many English words are needed to change because of the parts of speech in different linguistic contexts. This difference between the two languages causes Chinese students always adopt only one word to function as different parts of speech, which is why derivation always causes lexical errors among Chinese students when writing in English.

As the example (6) to (11) show, these sentences are problematic because of the part of speech in English. However, in Chinese, the mistaken words that students choose in these sentences are all acceptable because one form of Chinese word can have different parts of speech in different contexts.

In fact, these derivational errors made by the three students illustrate a widespread problem among Chinese students. Chinese students always simply remember the Chinese definition of the corresponding English words without paying attention to the parts of speech. For this reason, students fail to consider the constraint of using words while writing in English. As a result, Chinese students tend to make many derivation errors, which is also a type of the negative transfer of first language.

## 5. Conclusion

Negative transfer is a universal problem for Chinese students while learning English as a second language. Researchers from all over the world have done many research to explain the impact of first language in language transfer from different aspects.

This paper mainly focuses on analyzing the negative transfer of native language in Chinese middle school students at lexical level. According to the data from the sample students, errors in collocation and derivation are the two kinds of mistakes that the students frequently make because of negative transfer.

## 5.1. Pedagogical Suggestions

Finally, for improving these transfer errors, several pedagogical suggestions are provided to students.

### 5.1.1. Using Original English Dictionary

For most Chinese students, when they do not know the Chinese of an English word, their first reaction is to look for its Chinese translation. However, as the sample students show, checking the Chinese translations directly when meeting unknown words would derive some issues, for instance, using wrong parts of speech when writing in English. Therefore, students are encouraged to use English-English dictionary. Over time, students will eliminate the impact of native language interference, and have a greater interpretation on the meaning and the use of English vocabulary.

### 5.1.2. Paying Attention to The Language Input

The importance of input has been mentioned in many languages acquisition studies. It has been acknowledged that a large quantity of second language input helps learners cultivate the habits of developing natural and correct expression of the language, which could effectively reduce the negative transfer of first language.

### 5.1.3. Applying the Method of Contrastive Analysis

According to the research of Odlin, Contrastive Analysis is one of the most effective approaches to check native language interference [2]. Thus, if students can be aware of the interference by using contrastive analysis, the lexical errors are likely to be avoided. But as students, they may find difficult to understand and apply the theory. Therefore, teachers are suggested to help the students find the interference of negative transfer through the contrastive analysis.

## Appendix

Question 1: Please translate the following Chinese phrases into English.

E.g. 看书 Read books (a book)

I. 看...

看电视 \_\_\_\_\_

看小说 \_\_\_\_\_

看电影 \_\_\_\_\_

看新闻 \_\_\_\_\_

II. 听...

听音乐 \_\_\_\_\_

听声音 \_\_\_\_\_

听讲座 \_\_\_\_\_

听录音 \_\_\_\_\_

### III. 打...

打游戏 \_\_\_\_\_

打针 \_\_\_\_\_

打的士 \_\_\_\_\_

打篮球 \_\_\_\_\_

### IV. 说...

说中文 \_\_\_\_\_

说故事 \_\_\_\_\_

说大话 \_\_\_\_\_

说祷告 \_\_\_\_\_

Question 2: Write a 120-word minimum essay of any topics. Different writing styles are acceptable.  
(e.g. letter writing, argumentative essay, etc.)

## Authors' Contributions

Zhiqian Li designed research, performed research, analyzed data, and wrote the paper.

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