

The Influence of Native Language Transfer on College Students' English Learning

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Abstract: Second language acquisition is a process of reconstruction of the language system. Native language plays an important role in it. This paper further combines the domestic and foreign language transfer theory clearly. Meanwhile through the empirical study on the influence of native language on English learning of the students, a new perspective for College English teaching reform is provided which has the positive enlightening significance to research and practice of teaching.

Keywords: Chinese, positive transfer, negative transfer, English learning

1. BACKGROUND

Since the beginning of the new century, the Ministry of education has started the reform of College English teaching and learning. In 2007, the Ministry of Education awarded new formulation of College English Curriculum Requirements. It put forward a new college English teaching goal of cultivating students' English comprehensive application ability, especially the ability of listening and speaking.

However, Chinese students have experienced a long and arduous process of learning English. It is generally believed that Chinese students began to learn English after they had mastered Chinese to a certain degree. They were affected by Chinese in the process of learning a foreign language. A large number of Chinglish errors still exist in students' English learning mainly because of the influence of native language transfer on English learning. During college English teaching practice, teachers have found that many students are still not fluent in oral communication and writing after many years of English learning. There still exist a large number of errors of Chinglish in their writing and translation. This has become a fatal problem for students to learn English.

Wang Chuming (2001), one of foreign language teaching researchers, pointed out that the native language is one of the two major factors influencing foreign language learning. If we can understand the role of native language in foreign language learning and teaching, it is increasingly important for the study of language transfer.

2. RESEARCH SUMMARY OF LANGUAGE TRANSFER THEORY

2.1 Definition

In the study of second language learning, the effect of the first language (L1) on the second language acquisition (SLA) is known as native language transfer. In fact the transfer is a concept of psychology which refers to the effects of learners' existing knowledge, skills and methods on new knowledge and new skills in the process of learning. The term of transfer comes from the theory of educational psychology. It refers to the transformation of the learned behaviour from one situation to another situation. Transfer can be divided into two parts, positive transfer and negative transfer.

There are mainly two different effects of native language transfer on students' English learning. In western countries, there is homology between learners' second language and their native language. Accordingly, the two languages have similar cultural background and similar linguistic features so that positive transfer surpasses negative transfer in the process of learners' second language learning. Nevertheless, it is fundamentally different that foreign language (mainly English) learned by Chinese students and Chinese belong to different families. In linguistics, we all know that English belongs to the Indo European language, while Chinese belongs to Sino Tibetan language; English is an agglutinating language, while Chinese is an isolating language. Both of them have big differences in many aspects, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, thinking and culture etc.. These differences called negative transfer in linguistics. Therefore, if we want to learn about the influence of native language on second language acquisition, we should regard it from two aspects: positive transfer and negative transfer.

2.2 Theoretical research

In general, linguistic study on the influence of native language in the process of foreign language learning has probably experienced stages from CA (contrastive analysis) to EA (error analysis) and to IL (interlanguage) (Shu Dingfang, Zhuang Zhixiang, 1996). In China a lot of researchers studied positive and negative influence of native language transfer. Researchers of contrastive analysis believed that the knowledge of native language is the only factor of interference in foreign language acquisition, which is so-called negative transfer. Thus they excluded native language. But later EA found that learners' errors are only partly due to the interference of native language. For example, the errors made by Chinese students during learning English are 51% from native language interference (Shu Dingfang, Zhuang Zhixiang, 1996). Native language learning can also promote foreign language learning, which has a positive transfer. Interlanguage studied the positive effects of native language on the foreign language learning (second language acquisition) theoretically: (1) languages have common

features; (2) the cognition of native language is the foundation of foreign language learning; (3) the native language can facilitate input; (4) native language can promote learner's positive emotions (Lu Xiaoyong, 2002). These theories make a positive role in our study of native language in foreign language learning. From the actual situation of foreign language learning, learners are generally difficult to get rid of the influence of native language's habit. In the Chinese environment, it is not feasible and probable to exclude Chinese completely. For learners to learn a foreign language is not like learning a new skill or knowledge. They have gone through the learning experience of native language. Native language has been ingrained in their brain, which is neither possible nor necessary to destroy. So for the college students, especially non-English majors, foreign language teaching and learning cannot be separated from native language. What's more, foreign language teaching can use native language, especially through the rule of positive transfer to achieve the best effects.

A lot of domestic studies have shown that native language plays a complicated role in the process of foreign language acquisition. For instance, the research made by Sun Xiaoqing (2003) focused on the positive role of native language thinking. He believed that there are many influences of native language thinking on second language learning. It is not only limited to the target language output. Its influence also includes the effect of target language output. Native language thinking is not only an effective way to help understand, digest and absorb foreign language information, but also a common strategy to organize content and form. In second language acquisition we'd better exploitate and utilize native language thinking that is indispensable background resources. Let the native language and the target language as friends, and to maximize the efficiency of second language acquisition in order to achieve the success of both language learning. The empirical study made by Wang Wenyu and Wen Qiufang (2002) also expressed the same idea. Their study adopted many methods, such as sound thinking, retrospective interview and so on to record the English writing process of 16 English major students. Later they calculated the amount of native language thinking in the process of writing and analyzed related native language thinking and the scores of English writing. The result is that in the text output process, there is no negative correlation between native language thinking of contents and structure design and the scores of writing contents and structure. They believe that the results have certain significance to the comprehensive understanding of the role of native language in the second language acquisition. Shu Dingfang and Zhuang Zhixiang (1996) believed that students with strong reading ability for foreign language will also have strong reading ability for native language in general.

To sum up, domestic scholars generally think that the increase of native language level has a positive influence on foreign language learners' ability of reading, writing and translation. More and more people understand native language gradually. Some researchers and foreign language teachers believe that if one's native language is not good, one could not learn a foreign language well. It shows that native language transfer has a positive effect on students' language learning.

3. EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE INFLUENCE OF NATIVE LANGUAGE ON COLLEGE STUDENTS' ENGLISH LEARNING

In this study, we randomly selected 50 students from our sophomore English class for English writing test. Then SPSS statistical software is used to analyze the students' composition, especially the frequency.

Table 1 An investigation and analysis of the errors in College Students' English Writing

Error category	Frequency
Article	71
Grid	17
Number	20
Tense	25
(Adjective / Adverb) comparison	9
Derivative	30
Collocation and selection of words	80
Omission of subject	15
Omission of object	7
The omission of be and particle	10
Subject-Verb Concord	31
The consistency of noun / pronoun and antecedent	40
Interrogative word order	6
Position of adverbial	14
Repeat	10
Passive sentence	5
Run-on Sentences	17
Language structure	18
Independent "because" sentence	11
Interference from other types of sentences	48
Total	484
Non interfering error	179

Through above analysis, we can see that there are 663 errors altogether among 50 compositions. 484 errors are caused by the interference of native language and 179 errors are caused by non interference. As EFL learners, Chinese students still make some mistakes which cannot be explained by native language interference, but there are more than 70% errors which can be explained by using native language interference factors.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Foreign language teachers and students should pay attention to the influence of native language transfer in foreign language learning. It is important for them to take the right attitude and actively take measures to make the positive transfer of native language play a positive role in promoting teachers' teaching and students' English learning. Hence, the reform of College English teaching and learning will be advanced and college students' overall language proficiency will be improved.

4.1 To Understand the Phenomenon of Native Language Transfer Correctly

It is known that languages have common features in the process of its development. All human languages are composed of its unique pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and other systems. Any kind of language is the common property of one nation or community and is the communicational tool of this group. Under certain conditions, this tool can be mastered by people. It is famous for Chomsky's theory on Language Acquisition Device (LAD) and the common theory of language proposed by Greenberg. These theories proved firmly that Chinese has a positive effect in English learning. We just take several examples. Chinese and English have the same number of lexical category roughly; It is very similar of these two languages in terms of function and usage; They have many similarities in the structure of grammar. In particular word order of the two languages is basically linear. Because word order is one of the important features in the grammatical structure of a language, the same order lays the foundation of the smooth transfer between the two languages. For example, if native Chinese speakers learn English, it is easy for them to grasp the sentence order: He comes from China. This is because they have the same word order that expresses the same meaning between Chinese and English: He is from China.

In 1969, Selinker used the term of the Interlanguage first in the thesis *Language Transfer* in order to describe the psychological process of language acquisition for second language learners accurately. In 1972, Selinker published the article of *the Interlanguage* in which the concept of the Interlanguage was expounded comprehensively. The Interlanguage refers to the language system that exists in the process of the second language learning and was created by the learners. It is independent and legitimate between native language and target language. Meanwhile, it is a kind of universal and abstract interlanguage system. It reflects all foreign language learners' cognitive characteristics of its occurrence and development in the process of second language acquisition. Based on the interlanguage theory, all the learners' language systems belong to the interlanguage before the foreign language learners fully grasp the target language. At that time, it is intermediate between native language and target language. Due to the target language was learned after mastering the native language, it will be influenced by native language at all levels.

4.2 To Improve Foreign Language Teachers' Ability of English and Their Teaching Methods

We have to admit that in foreign language teaching, most Chinese teachers are also the second language learners at the same time. In the classroom Chinese teachers will also be affected by native language. This is the reality of the objective existence, we should not avoid but treat it properly. There is a certain gap between the language that most Chinese teachers use in the classroom and the target language. What the Chinese teachers used in the classroom is also called the interlanguage. It is an objective phenomenon that Chinese teachers use Chinglish. What should we do to overcome Chinglish in the classroom.

Firstly, Chinese teachers should pay attention to the basic skill of language by themselves. They should continue to improve their second language capabilities. After graduating from universities, most of the Chinese teachers got Master's Degree before they taught English for college students. For years of teaching experiences can help them to arrange and organize the overall teaching contents. Yet few of them have the experience of going abroad to live and study English just like a local people. Gradually in the pure Chinese environment, English teachers seldom have the chance to speak target language. It easily leads to the Chinglish in their teaching. The leaders of universities must lay stress on the training of foreign language teachers. They need English environment to further study. The universities could consider arranging teachers to study abroad temporarily. Teachers can enhance their second language ability quickly in the environment of native language. It is the fastest way for Chinese teachers to study language well. Besides, teachers themselves should grasp every chance of learning English. They can learn from English books, dictionaries, newspapers, radios or TV programs and so on. Nowadays we are in the age of international information. We can get the information that we need easily. It's very constructive for us to learn English although we are in the pure Chinese environment. If teachers have the sense of learning English continuously, they will overcome Chinglish and reduce the negative influence to the students gradually.

Secondly, in the teaching methods, teachers should use appropriate native language in their teaching. After all their students are non-English majors. The ultimate aim of learning English for students is to help them to improve their comprehensive application ability and to enhance their professional level. They are not English major students, so it's not necessary to just use English in the whole English class. Teachers should realize the importance of learning native language and make full use of the similarities and differences between native language and target language in their teaching practice. They could strengthen the importance of cultural knowledge and introduce cultural background in teaching. Teachers would establish a good relationship with students. Teachers should understand and care for students in their study. Teachers do not have to guard for the students' mistakes. On the contrary, teachers should take a tolerant attitude. In this way, students' enthusiasm for learning foreign language can be greatly raised. According to the characteristics of language learning, teachers can also strengthen the influence of language environment. In order to correct the shortage of college

English teaching, teachers may design the teaching contents carefully. With the help of modern media means, such as computers and internet, teachers can lead students into the fields that they like. By this way students' interest of learning English will be cultivated. Teachers can also extend the knowledge of books and add communication of life to the classroom teaching. With the help of communication, students will show deep interests in English thinking. In the end, it will improve the students' enthusiasm and confidence in learning English.

4.3 To Raise Students' Ability of Using English and Learning Methods

Corder (1967) pointed out that in the process of second language acquisition, learners' errors are inevitable. It is one of the learning strategy employed by the learners when they learn a new language. That is to say, learners apply the system of native language to understand and express the new phenomenon of target language. Chinglish occurred when Chinese learners use the strategies of native language transfer in the process of learning. It can not be avoided in the process of language development. Therefore, teachers should help students to understand that Chinglish is not the failure of learning, but the inevitable process of learning. It reflects the stage of the learner's language development. Interlanguage is the only route which must be passed by any one of foreign language learners. Although there are a variety of errors, students can improve and correct these errors step by step and approach the target language.

It is important for students to realize the theory of interlanguage and have the right attitude towards it. In view of this situation, what students can do is to practise English. According to the different stages of interlanguage, they will adjust their learning methods and conduct targeted learning. Only in this way can students overcome impatience and anxiety in their study and gradually learn to use English appropriately.

5. CONCLUSION

Through the above analysis of the phenomenon of language transfer, we can see that language transfer is a complex and important factors in English learning which should attach great importance to the majority of teachers and students. It is necessary to effectively improve the teachers' English language ability and teaching methods and to enhance students' learning methods and their ability of using English. Meanwhile, we will try our best to make the negative transfer of native language decline to a minimum level and to promote the positive transfer of native language.

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