

Analysis of Negative Transfer in Junior High Students' English Writing Errors

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Abstract

It has become a very significant topic that how to help students overcome the Chinese negative transfer in English writing. This research attempts to investigate the main types of errors made by junior middle school students in their English writing, then to explore the causes of the identified errors, in order to avoid these types of errors. The research subjects are 107 students from two classes in grade eight of No.10 Middle School of Nanchong. Questionnaire and composition writing are used as instruments in this research. It hopes that, this paper can help teachers and students to overcome the influence of Chinese negative transfer, improve students' English writing.

Key words: negative transfer; error analysis; junior high students; English writing

1. Introduction

As second language learner, Chinese students are faced with many difficulties and obstacles in the process of learning English as other SLA learners, because English and Chinese belong to two different language families, English belongs to Indo-european family while Chinese belongs to Sino-tibetan family, they have totally different system and distinctive cultural background. So, in the process of SLA, the negative transfer phenomenon of mother language is inevitable.

Many of us have acknowledged that the art of writing is beyond their reach and that writing is their Achilles' heel in their academic or professional career. In the four basic skills of English, writing takes an important part in reflecting one's comprehensive abilities, and it is also the reflection of their integrating skills and it is also the process of rewriting based on gaining English knowledge.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research questions and subjects

The research aims to answer these following questions: 1.How many common types of errors are likely existed in junior middle school students' English compositions? 2.What are the causes of negative transfer in students' English writing?

The subjects in the research are 51 junior students from class 1, and 56 students from class 2, they are

all in grade eight in No.10 Middle School in Nanchong. And, there must be noted that class 1 and 2 all joined in questionnaire stage, but only class 1 took part in composition writing stage because of the limit time of class 2. In order to ensure the data's objectivity and accuracy, the students chosen in the research possess average level of English, and it can set the foundation of validity and reliability of the research.

2.2 Research Procedures

2.2.1 Questionnaires

The 107 students were invited to complete the questionnaire in 3 minutes. However, it should be noted that 2 questionnaires there are invalid because the two students didn't answer all the questions in the list. Therefore, I just analyzed the other 105 questionnaires to conduct the research. There were 10 questions designed in Chinese so as to avoid subjects' misunderstanding. There were 3 questions which focused on negative transfer of mother tongue, another 5 questions centered on students' learning and the rest 2 questions were about teachers' teaching.

2.2.2 Compositions

Writing is an efficient way for researchers to collect the sample and data, meanwhile, in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the research, argumentation was chosen as the composition task which is often seen in our English writing tasks.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Result of Questionnaires Analysis

There are 107 questionnaires handed out to the selected students by the author, but 2 questionnaires were not completed, so these two questionnaires would be regarded as invalid data. The data analysis from the questionnaires were as follows:

Table 4.1 The degree of students' understanding on Chinese negative transfer

| | Not at all | A little | General | Very much | Total |
|------------|------------|----------|---------|-----------|-------|
| Number | 17 | 53 | 28 | 7 | 105 |
| Percentage | 16.2% | 50.4% | 26.7% | 6.7% | 100% |

From this data we can see that 53 students had a little understanding of Chinese negative transfer, moreover, there were 17 students almost knew nothing about the mother tongue language transfer, and just 7 students had a better understanding about the Chinese negative transfer. Students who had a better understanding of Chinese negative transfer took a very small proportion. Although most middle school students had a least knowledge on mother tongue negative transfer, they just stop at understanding level, and they did not notice the effect of the Chinese negative transfer.

Table 4.2 Students' thinking mode of writing

| | Use Chinese to write first and then translate it into English | Write compositions in English thinking mode | Recite writing samples | Total |
|------------|---|---|------------------------|-------|
| Number | 58 | 13 | 34 | 105 |
| Percentage | 55.2% | 12.4% | 32.4% | 100% |

When writing the English compositions, this data presented us that nearly 58 students will first organize the composition in Chinese, and then translate these sentences into English. There were 34 students chose to recite the English compositions. However, There were only 13 students use the English thinking mode to write the compositions. Another reason that the Chinese negative transfer affected students' English writing was that students usually brainstorm in Chinese thinking mode when they are writing. They would write the compositions in Chinese and then translated it into English. From the result, we can know that students are hard to learn how to write an excellent English composition with English thinking model.

Table 4.3 Method of overcoming the Chinese negative transfer

| | Contrastive analysis of Chinese and English | Use English to think | Master English vocabulary and grammar | Find out the reasons of making mistakes and correct it | Total |
|------------|---|----------------------|---------------------------------------|--|-------|
| Number | 9 | 16 | 34 | 46 | 105 |
| Percentage | 8.6% | 15.2% | 32.4% | 43.9% | 100% |

We could get the data from the form that almost 46 students realized the mother tongue negative transfer and tried to reduce and overcome it. 34 students planned to reduce the Chinese negative effect through mastering a large number of vocabulary and grammar rules. And 16 students intended to think in English native ways. And 9 students were going to make a comparison between English and Chinese to overcome the Chinese negative transfer. From the later data analysis we could see that there are several ways could reduce the mother tongue negative transfer, such as thinking in English native ways, making a comparison between English and Chinese, realizing the effect of the Chinese negative transfer and trying to reduce it.

3.2 Result of Compositions Analysis

After analyzing these 105 compositions, errors made by the students from these two classes were classified into different types, and I listed the number of errors in each type. The total number of errors is 14 kinds, they are: Noun; Verb; Article; Preposition; Conjunction; Clause; Misspelling; Punctuation;

Capitalization; Over-generalization; Subject-predicate agreement; Chinglish expression; Run-on sentences; Tense. The specific descriptive analysis, the error classifications and the frequency distribution would be presented in the following table.

| Types | Specifications of Types | Illustration | Error Analysis |
|------------------|-------------------------|--|--|
| Morphology level | Article | They don't want take bus. | Lack of article "the" |
| | | Require the government to get a public transportation. | Misuse of article "the" and "a" |
| | Number of nouns | There are few bus. | The noun "bus" should be changed into plural forms |
| | | Now our live is good. | Misuse of plural forms |
| Lexical level | Part of speech | It will also influent our health. | Misuse of parts of speech, "Influent" and "influence" |
| | | Because of the develop of technology. | Misuse of parts of speech, verb "Develop" and noun "development" |
| | | The street is not very widely. | Misuse of parts of speech, adjective "wide" and adverb "widely" |
| | | They never without thinking about our cities. | Misuse of preposition "without" |
| | Meaning | The street was very small. | Misunderstanding of the meanings; collocation errors |
| | | The traffic problems become larger and larger. | |
| | | The road is too thin. | |
| | | The number of the own cars is increasing. | |
| | | And the bus are very little. | |
| | | The traffic problems are very important. | |
| | | And spend many people's time. | Failure in distinguishing "spend" and "waste" |
| | | The number of the buses is too small. | Misunderstanding of the meanings; collocation errors |
| | | Traffic problems are more and more hard. | |

| | | | |
|--------|-------------|--|---|
| | Collocation | There are less cars. | Countable nouns should be modified by “fewer” |
| | | The public bus was less. | “Less” should be matched with “than” generally |
| | | The number of the own cars is increasing. | “Own” should be used together with adjectival possessive pronoun |
| | | We can ride bike or on foot. | “Ride” can’t be used together with “on foot” |
| | | The traffic is being more and more crowded. | “traffic” should be modified by “busy” or “congested” |
| Syntax | Predicate | It think that most important result is that. | Predicate verb should use the from of third person singular |
| | | Many reasons make the traffic problems. | Predicate verb should use “result in” or “lead to” |
| | | So traffic jam often happen. | Predicate verb should use the from of third person singular |
| | | It make traffic jam. | |
| | | Everyone have a car. | |
| | | More and more traffic problems in our city. | Lack of the predicate verb |
| | | There is some problems with traffic jam. | “is” should be changed into “are” |
| | | Some streets don’t wide enough. | Failure in distinguishing how to use “be verb” and “auxiliary verb” |
| | Word order | I think we should by bike to go to school. | “By bike” should be put at the end of the sentence |
| | | So cause the traffic problem very serious. | “Serious” should be put before the noun as the attribute |
| | | We can by bus go everywhere. | “By bus” should be put at the end of the |

| | | | |
|-----------|------------------|--|--|
| | | | sentence |
| | | I think we should by bike to go to school. | “By bike” should be put at the end of the sentence |
| | Sentence pattern | I want tell you it. | Misuse of the phrase “Want to do sth” |
| | | There have more and more own cars. | Mixuse of the sentence pattern “There be” and “have” |
| | | There have many things. | |
| Discourse | Tense and voice | Many cars will made the traffic jam. | “Will” should be followed by verb stem |
| | Mix | It can stand two cars going together. | Mixuse of sentence pattern; ambiguity of the meaning |
| | | I think courses these problems have a lot of reason. | |
| | | I think have three reasons. | |
| | | It’s crowded with every people. | |
| | Thinking model | I think we shouldn’t drive cars too much. | Chinese thinking habit; negative transfer of mother tongue |
| | | We should few to drive. | |
| | | The private car’s numbers becoming more. | |
| | | The traffic jam is normal to see now. | |

3.3 Discussion of Errors Classification and Negative Transfer Causes

According to the errors made by the students, and borrowing the standard of classification, the errors would be classified into 4 basic levels: morphology level; lexical level; syntax; and discourse level.

3.3.1 Morphology level

At this level, errors lie in article and the number of nouns. For example, “They don’t want take bus” should be added the article “the” then changed into “They don’t want to take the bus”. “There are few bus” should be changed into “There are few buses” by changing the single form of “bus” to the plural form “buses”.

3.3.2 Lexical level

At this level, errors exist in part of speech, meaning and collocation these three aspects. In the part of speech level, for example, in the sentence “because of the develop of technology”, the student fails to distinguish the verb “develop” with its noun form “development”. In the meaning level, “The road is too thin” should be changed into “The road is too narrow”, because “thin” is to describe a person not the road; and in the sentence “The traffic problems are very important”, the students actually want to express “The

traffic problems are very serious”, however, he misunderstood the meaning of “important”. In the collocation level, wrong combination exists in the sentence “They can ride bike or on foot”, it should be changed into “They can ride bike or walk”, because “ride bike” and “walk” are both verbs.

3.3.3 Syntax level

At this level, errors exist in these aspects: predicate verb, word order, sentence pattern, tense and voice. In the predicate verb aspect, errors are common to see, for example, “Everyone have a car”, “It make traffic jam”, this type of error are often seen in students’ writing; and in the sentence “More and more traffic problems in our city”, the predicate verb just disappears! Students should know that a big difference between English and Chinese is the importance of predicate verb in a sentence, and it is impossible to make a sentence without the predicate verb in English. In word order aspect, the student who wrote “I think we should by bike to go to school” misuse the order of predicate part and adverbial part. In the sentence pattern part, the students who wrote “I want tell you it” haven’t mastered the sentence pattern “sb want to do sth” (“sb” refers to somebody, “sth” refers to something). In the tense and voice aspect, “Many cars will made the traffic jam” should be changed into “Many cars will make the traffic jam”.

3.3.4 Discourse level

At this level, mix and negative transfer of mother language like thinking model will lead to errors. Mix of two sentence, for example, “I think have three reasons” is not a right sentence. About the negative transfer of mother language, there are so many funny but frequently happened examples, just like “We should few to drive” and “I think we shouldn’t drive cars too much time”.

4. Conclusions

By analyzing the questionnaires and writing compositions collected from the research subjects, the errors can be classified into four types: morphology level, lexical level, syntax level and discourse level.

It is obvious from the questionnaires that students’ Chinese thinking habit can cause the negative transfer of mother tongue in their English writing compositions, and lacking of English language circumstance makes it very hard for them to get rid of the influence of Chinese thinking habit. Therefore the English teachers should figure out some effective teaching strategies to help the students to overcome the mother tongue negative transfer, and apply these teaching approaches into the daily teaching activities.

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Appendix A

关于初中生英语写作的调查问卷

这是一份关于英语写作学习状况的调查问卷。在此我们需要您的热情帮助真诚的回答。此问卷采取不记名的形式，我们将会对您的答案进行保密。对于您的支持和帮助，在此我表示诚挚的感谢。下面有 10 道选择题，请仔细阅读题目和选项，请根据您的实际情况来作答。

1. 在英语学习中，您对英语学习中的母语负迁移了解多少？
A. 一点也不了解 B. 一般 C. 了解一点 D. 非常了解
2. 在英语学习中，您觉得下面哪个方面受母语负迁移影响最深？（可多选）
A. 词汇 B. 词形 C. 句法 D. 篇章
3. 您使用的英语词典有？（可多选）
A. 英汉词典 B. 英汉双解词典 C. 英英词典
4. 您觉得哪种英语词典对你的英语学习帮助更大？
A. 英汉词典 B. 英汉双解词典 C. 英英词典
5. 您写英语作文的一般思路是？
A. 用中文进行思考，然后再翻译成英文
B. 用英语思维进行写作
C. 背作文范文
6. 您的英语老师在英语课堂教学中对汉语的使用频率高吗？
A. 非常高 B. 比较高 C. 比较低

- 7.您觉得汉语思维习惯影响英语写作深吗?
A 一点也不影响 B 影响很少 C 一般 D 非常影响
- 8.您的英语老师一般使用什么方法讲授在英语作文中出现的错误?
A 不讲
B 指出错误, 给出正确答案
C 在课堂上跟大家一起寻找错误, 然后分析产生错误的原因
- 9.出现过的错误, 老师讲解后您还会再出现吗?
A.经常会 B 偶尔会 C 几乎不会
- 10.您觉得哪种方式能够使母语负迁移现象变得弱化?
A 英汉对比分析 B 用英语思维思考
C 掌握英语词汇语法 D 意识到并找出原因加以改正

Appendix B

某英语学习网站开辟了一个让网友针对某个问题发表个人看法的专栏: Have Your Say.本期话题是 Traffic Problems.请你根据下面的要点提示, 就此话题写一篇短文发表你自己的看法。

要点提示: 1.简单分析目前城市交通拥堵的主要原因(如私家车增多, 公交车少, 街道不宽阔等);
2.谈谈自己的建议。

参考词汇: 交通阻塞 traffic jam;
公共交通运输系统 public transportation

要求: 80—100 词
