

The Impact of Positive Transfer of Chinese Mother Tongue on English Writing in Primary Schools

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Abstract

The transfer of Chinese mother tongue is a common phenomenon among primary school students when learning English. Primary school students will use Chinese thinking modes to learn English. This clears up their learning obstacles to a certain extent, because English and Chinese have many similarities in sentence structure. This positive impact is called positive transfer. This study used a qualitative method by conducting questionnaire surveys of 524 students in six provinces across China, and interviewing six students in two classes of the sixth grade of the primary school affiliated to Shaanxi University of Science and Technology in Shaanxi province to analyze whether they were affected by Chinese transfer during the learning process and the specific aspects of this transfer on their performance. Research has found that the influence of mother tongue on students' English writing exists objectively, and the positive transfer of Chinese mother tongue can promote students to master sentences with the same word order and structure in English and Chinese. The positive effects of this transfer can enhance primary school students' confidence in learning English. Based on the research results, the researcher puts forward some suggestions for teachers to use the positive transfer of Chinese mother tongue to teach English writing in primary schools. Moreover, further researches are suggested to focus on the practical application of the findings of this research.

Keywords: English Writing, Sentence Structure, Chinese Mother Tongue, Positive Transfer, Confidence

Introduction

The "Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards" (2017) of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China stipulates that before graduating from junior high school, the requirements for students' English writing ability are as follows. First, be able to prepare, collect and organize materials according to writing requirements; second, be able to

write short essays and short letters, and revise them under the guidance of the teacher; third, be able to use common connectives to express order and logical relationships; fourth, be able to briefly describe characters or events; fifth, be able to write simple paragraphs or instructions based on diagrams or tables. These requirements require students to have basic writing skills before entering junior high school, especially starting from the fifth or sixth grade of primary school to write basic English sentences.

However, due to the influence of test-taking requirements and the mentality of eager for quick success, Chinese parents generally do not start paying attention to their children's English writing until junior high school. Teachers in junior high schools also mainly deduct points for grammatical errors when grading English writing. Teachers mainly explain common grammatical errors to students, but ignore the causes of these grammatical errors and the positive Chinese transfer behind the correct sentences written by students. Teachers rarely use the positive transfer influence of Chinese to guide students to write correct sentences. Therefore, this aspect is the focus of this research.

This research used a questionnaire survey conducted on 524 subjects from six provinces across the country and twelve students from two sixth-grade classes of the primary school affiliated to Shaanxi University of Science and Technology as interview subjects to explore the positive impact of Chinese mother tongue in primary school English writing and guide students when they cannot get rid of Chinese impact. In the context of mother tongue, we should make reasonable use of the positive transfer of Chinese and make full use of the positive influence of Chinese from a cognitive perspective to enhance students' confidence in English learning and improve their English writing skills.

Literature Review

The transfer of mother tongue is essentially a psychological transfer process. The thinking modes, expression and pronunciation habits of a mother tongue will be transferred to the learning process of the target language.

Researches on the transfer of mother tongue began in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. Linguists at that time generally believed that mother tongue had a great influence on second language learning. Lado (1957) formally proposed the theory of contrastive analysis in his *Cross-Cultural Linguistics*. He pointed out that the mother tongue has an impact on the learning of the target language. This is the so-called transfer. The basis of the contrastive analysis comes from transfer theory and behaviorist linguistic theory. These two theories are interconnected and influenced by each other. Subsequently, research on comparative analysis continued to develop. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that empirical research began to emerge, challenging comparative analysis and language transfer research theories. Linguists believe that the theory of contrastive analysis simply explains the phenomena of language acquisition and language transfer. In the late 1960s, Coder (1967) proposed the error analysis theory, proposed the error phenomena that easily occur during the language transfer process, and summarized five steps for error analysis. In the 1970s, the theory of interlanguage was put forward, the representative figure being Selinker (1972). Interlanguage theory holds that there is a language that acts as an intermediary between the mother tongue and the target language. This kind of interlanguage is not the final target language, but a mental language during the cognitive transformation process between the mother tongue and the target language.

From the late 1970s to the 1980s and 1990s, research on language transfer was no longer a process in a single direction. Many factors such as pragmatic environment, cognitive

psychology, social culture, and individual differences among learners all affect language learning, especially second language acquisition. Pienemann (1998) proposed the theory of language processability, explored the brain's language processing program, used cognitive science to reveal the rules of human cognition, and used a new perspective to study language transfer.

Writing, as a means of language output, can reflect learners' language learning level. Chinese language scholars attach great importance to the impact of the transfer of Chinese mother tongue on writing and make studies on it from different angles to promote foreign language learning and teaching.

Wang and Wen (2004) conducted an empirical study on the shared characteristics of the two languages, and they proved that since Chinese and English writing processes are basically the same, Chinese writing can be transferred to English writing. They also put forward a hypothesis that the abilities on using Chinese characters and laying out the discourse can affect English writing. The stronger the using ability of Chinese characters, the stronger the English word usage. Similarly, the stronger the discourse ability in Chinese, the stronger the ability to plan the layout of English writing, and the better the logic and coherence of the article. Wang (2006), a Ph.D. from East China Normal University, pointed out that characters, as the basic unit of Chinese, are the intersection of phonetics, semantics, vocabulary, syntax and other aspects of Chinese. Bian (2006) concluded through comparative research that there are five sentence patterns that are basically the same in Chinese and English. For language learners whose native language is Chinese and whose target language is English, the basic sentence patterns of Chinese can be transferred to English. There will be no noticeable expression errors in the basic sentence patterns of English. In addition, the Chinese composition structure of "start, coherence, turn, and conclusion" and the English one of "introduction of the topic - analysis of points of view - conclusion" also have similar requirements for the structure of the entire writing. Yang (2009) found that concepts of English writing are basically the same as Chinese ones. When students write in English, they usually first use their native Chinese to conceive. For example, when describing an event, they describe the time, place, characters, and the cause, process, and results of the event. Lin (2020) used the verb *have* as an example to study the issue of Chinese mother tongue in English writing. He pointed out that as a substantive verb, *have* can be translated as "有" (own), and its part of speech, meaning and usage are similar to Chinese. Therefore, learners usually use *have* when they use "有" in Chinese. Using the meaning of *have* is the result of positive transfer of Chinese mother tongue.

This paper refers to past researches about the transfer of mother tongue from Chinese to English writing, but the researcher found that most of the research subjects are concentrated in universities and high schools, and there are fewer studies on junior high schools and elementary schools. This article mainly focuses on the impact of Chinese mother tongue on the English writing of students in primary schools. It proposes some effective teaching strategies for teachers to deal with the transfer of Chinese mother tongue, and some learning strategies for students to make reasonable use of the positive influence of Chinese mother tongue.

Methodology

This study has two research objectives. On the one hand, it aims to find out whether primary school students use the relevant knowledge of their Chinese mother tongue to transfer to English writing in the process of English writing through questionnaire survey. On the other

hand, this study will study the transfer process of their Chinese mother tongue to English sentence writing through interviews.

This study first collected the questionnaires of 524 students from six provinces in China through online survey. The main questions are as follows. Do you think the English sentence structure and the Chinese sentence structure are the same? Do you think the word order of Chinese sentence is helpful for the correct expression of English sentences? Do you think being good at Chinese is helpful for learning English? In addition, this study interviewed six students from grade six of the primary school affiliated to Shaanxi University of Science and Technology in Xianyang city, Shaanxi province. The six students came from two classes, with three males and three females. Through interview questions, the research can find out how students transfer Chinese to English writing, get some examples of positive transfer and what are the specific aspects of these transfers.

Findings and Results

A. Analysis of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire of this research contains four questions: (1) What grade are you in? (2) Do you think the English sentence structure and the Chinese sentence structure are the same? (3) Do you think the word order of Chinese sentence is helpful for the correct expression of English sentences? (4) Do you think being good at Chinese is helpful for learning English? The response to the first question showed that there were 96 students in grade three, 75 students in grade four, 281 students in grade six and 72 students in grade six, among which students in grade 5 and grade 6 accounted for 67.36%. The statistical results of the second to the fourth question are as follows

Question Two	Totally agree	Partly agree	Not agree
Do you think the English sentence structure and the Chinese sentence structure are the same?	4.39%(23)	65.46%(343)	30.15%(158)
Question Three	Very helpful	Partly helpful	Not helpful
Do you think the word order of Chinese sentence is helpful for the correct expression of English sentences?	40.27%(211)	52.48%(275)	7.25%(38)
Question Four	Very helpful	Partly agree	Not agree
Do you think being good at Chinese is helpful for learning English?	74.43%(390)	19.27%(101)	6.3%(33)

According to the questionnaire survey, 4.39% and 65.46% of the students believed that the sentence structure of English and Chinese was exactly the same or partially the same, a total of nearly 70%. More than 90% of the students assume that Chinese word order was helpful for expressing English correctly. Moreover, more than 90% of students believe that learning Chinese will help them learn English. This shows that Chinese primary school students rely heavily on their Chinese mother tongue when writing in English, and first use their native language to plan the layout of the text, and then translate it into English, indicating that the students have not yet formed a complete English thinking. Relying on the mother tongue is the main way for most students to learn English, and it is also an inevitable

process in the process of learning English. Therefore, facing up to the influence of Chinese mother tongue on English learning is a topic that cannot be avoided in the process of learning English. In addition, it is particularly important to cultivate their interest in English writing, establish their self-confidence and pride, and give them more successful experiences to get rid of frustration when they first come into developing English writing ability, because primary school students are young and have not yet formed their own cognitive system and strong psychological quality, and language learning is a long and arduous process.

B. Analysis of the Interviews

The researchers interviewed six students to gain insight into the effect of positive transfer of their Chinese mother tongue on English writing. The six students came from two classes in grade 6, consisting of three boys and three girls. Two main questions were asked in the interview. The first question is, does using the Chinese way of writing help you express yourself more accurately and clearly in English writing? If students answer in the affirmative, they will be asked what specific ways of thinking would be helpful. The second question is, do you find it helpful to transfer Chinese writing skills or sentence structure into English writing? Similarly, if students answer in the affirmative, they will be asked about which Chinese writing skills and structures are helpful for English writing.

Regarding the first question, five out of six students answered yes. These five students believe that the way of thinking in Chinese writing can make English expression more accurate and clear. In the course of further interviews, the researchers learned that the basic writing styles of Chinese, such as the article structure of introducing the topic-giving details-arriving at a conclusion, are the same as most of the composition requirements in English. In addition, in Chinese a problem is often illustrated by examples, which is similar to the English writing style. Moreover, when these five students wrote English essays, they first thought about the content of Chinese and then conceived English writing. One of the six students did not go through the conversion of Chinese thinking when writing English composition, but directly used English thinking and sentence structure. Further interviews revealed that the interviewee's father is an English teacher in a university, and he has been influenced by the English environment since he was a child, and he has a very good command of English.

For the second question, except for the student whose father is an English teacher, the other five students often use Chinese sentence structure to write English sentences. When asked which sentence structures they were, all five students answered that the most common is the subject-verb-object one, which is the same in both English and Chinese. Three students mentioned that when adjectives in Chinese and English modify nouns, adjectives are usually placed in front of nouns. What is unexpected is that two students mentioned that in Chinese, they like to put modifiers, such as time adverbials and place adverbials, in the front of a sentence, while in English, it is the usual case to put this component at the end of a sentence. If a learner notice these differences, he or she will be able to write better English essays and improve in a fast manner. In the course of further interviews, three students expressed their concerns and worries about English writing, stating that writing is not included in the English test for grade one to grade five, so they often get full marks in English test. Now, after writing is included in English test from grade six, points are often deducted for small mistakes in tenses or spelling of words, and it is becoming more and more difficult to get full marks. This suggests that students' confidence in language learning gradually decreases as they age.

Conclusion

In the process of learning English, primary school students are unconsciously affected by the transfer of their mother tongue. Chinese mother tongue has a positive effect on students' learning of English, especially when students are exposed to a new English module, such as writing. The transfer of Chinese mother tongue helps students master the basic sentence patterns of English, because the word order of the basic sentence patterns of simple sentences in English are the same as that in Chinese, and these similarities help students to establish the English framework. The relationship between English and Chinese should be used reasonably, and the positive transfer of mother tongue can effectively help students improve their learning efficiency and make foreign language learning simple and easy. The commonality of English and Chinese is conducive to students to quickly grasp the structure of English sentences and use them appropriately in a reasonable context, which is of great help to students' English writing.

When students in grade six of primary school in China are first introduced to English writing, teachers need to explain the similarities between English and Chinese to students, so as to make full use of the positive impact of their mother tongue. According to the interviews, if the difference between thinking ways and expressions in English and Chinese sentences can be clearly explained, the teaching effect will be better. The difference seems to be negative transfers, but they can actually have a positive effect if they are used wisely, because any second foreign language exists on the basis of the mother tongue and is also used in the context of the mother tongue. It is impractical to ignore the influence of the mother tongue and talk about the use of a second language. Of course, it is also essential to note that the use of mother tongue in English classrooms is a means rather than a purpose, and using mother tongue appropriately can strengthen the positive transfer of mother tongue and achieve effective English teaching.

There are still some shortcomings in this study. First of all, the students in the questionnaire survey involved six provinces in China, but most of the samples were from Shaanxi Province, and the sample was slightly underrepresentative. Second, the interviewees were 6th grade students from a city, who were better at English compared with students in remote areas and could not objectively reflect the large regional disparities in China. In addition, the impact of mother tongue transfer on students' English writing is long-term and dynamic, and a short-term study can not reflect the whole picture thoroughly and comprehensively. Therefore more detailed and comprehensive research is expected in terms of time period and regional scope.

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