Types of Chinese Negative Transfer to English Learning and the Countermeasures

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Abstract—Based on the knowledge of language transfer and previous research achievements, the paper attempts to analyze the types of Chinese negative transfer and the countermeasures. By introducing the knowledge of Chinese negative transfer reflected at the levels of English pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, grammar, pragmatics and culture, the paper presents a relatively comprehensive study of the types of Chinese negative transfer. Meanwhile, the paper is organized in a logical way: identifying the problem, analyzing the problem and putting forward methods to solve the problem. This paper may serve to enrich language learners' knowledge of Chinese negative transfer to English learning. Meanwhile it provides learners with some practical measures to mitigate the effects of negative transfer. Knowing the differences between English and Chinese would help learners get rid of the interference of mother tongue. Consequently, learners' English proficiency and intercultural competence will be improved.

Index Terms—negative transfer of Chinese, English learning, types, countermeasures

I. INTRODUCTION

A. General Introduction to Language Transfer

It is commonly acknowledged that language transfer plays an increasingly important role in SLA. Rod Ellis (1999) pointed out that where there are differences between the L1 and L2, the learner's L1 knowledge would interfere with the L2; and where the L1 and L2 are similar, the L1 could actively aid L2 learning. The process which is responsible for this phenomenon is called language transfer. Accordingly, there are two types of language transfer: positive transfer and negative transfer, depending on the similarities and differences of language features. When L1 knowledge facilitates L2 learning, positive transfer occurs. For instance, Chinese learners of English have no difficulty in learning the English "S+V+O" sentence structure, because it corresponds to the Chinese structure "主+谓+宾" (subject + verb + object; zhu+wei+bin). So, it's easy for Chinese learners of English to express "我爱你" (I love you; wo ai ni) in English as "I love you". The other type of language transfer is negative transfer. It occurs when previous L1 knowledge impedes L2 learning. It's common to hear Chinese learners of English articulate /sæŋks/ when they pronounce the word "thanks". Actually the word is pronounced incorrectly. The correct pronunciation should be /θæŋks/. It is because there is only /s/ and no /θ/ in Chinese that Chinese learners pronounce the word in the wrong way. This is an example of negative transfer. Researches show that Chinese negative transfer is one of the majors causes of poor performance in English learning. Consequently, in order to become more successful in second language acquisition, learners are bound to know more about Chinese negative transfer to English learning.

B. Aims and Significance of This Paper

With China's increasingly active participation in globalization, English has been playing a more and more important role in our daily life. Not only can we use it in various bilateral and multilateral activities, but also we can use it in every day life: public signs, instructions, abbreviations, advertising, etc. Even though English is very popular, its use is not without problem. One of the problems is the negative influence of Chinese which is known as negative transfer. It is acknowledged that listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation are five fundamental skills to grasp in learning English. When English is used, it is inevitably influenced by Chinese. The influence can be found during the processes of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. This type of English which is influenced by Chinese is called Chinglish. Chinglish is very common in English learning. Here are several examples from translation:

人山人海 (huge crowds of people; ren shan ren hai") people mountain, people sea

我认为他不对。 (I don't think he is right; wo ren wei ta bu dui) I think he is not right.

我有时间。 (I'm free; wo you shi jian") I have a free time.

It's easy for Chinese learners of English to understand these English versions, because they are produced according to the Chinese expressions. However, for native English speakers, these versions are weird. Actually, the correct English versions should be:

人山人海 huge crowds of people

我认为他不对。 I don't think he is right.

我有时间。 I'm free.

Many translation errors are caused by negative transfer of L1. Some of them are so serious that they affect the relationship between countries. Therefore, it's of great significance to study the negative transfer of Chinese so as to enhance English learning and avoid unnecessary troubles. For this reason, a lot of researches have been done about the negative transfer of mother tongue. Even though the types of L1 negative transfer have been covered, they are not discussed comprehensively. L1 negative transfer can be found in almost every aspect of L2 learning: pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, grammar, pragmatics, culture, etc. L1 plays such an important role in L2 learning that many scholars take great interest in it. As the saying puts it, "Knowledge is infinite." So there is still much room left in the area of L1 negative transfer. Based on the study of Ellis (1999), Gass and Selinker (2008), Chen Huijun. (2006) and Wang Xuan (2010), this paper analyzes the types of L1 negative transfer to L2 learning from a relatively comprehensive perspective.

II. TYPES OF CHINESE NEGATIVE TRANSFER TO ENGLISH LEARNING

The phenomenon of L1 negative transfer is inevitable in the field of second language acquisition. The process of second language learning is so complex that language learners can not avoid making errors. Of the many factors which may lead to language errors, L1 negative transfer runs top on the list. Therefore, studying L1 negative transfer is of great importance. Inspired by the article of Lu Lihong(2011), the author explores the types of Chinese negative transfer at the levels of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, grammar, pragmatics and culture.

A. Chinese Negative Transfer to English Pronunciation

Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication (Liu Runqing, & Wen Xu, 2006). Since language is vocal symbols, poor pronunciation often cause breakdowns in communication. Also as they say one needs to learn almost 100% of its pronunciation, 50-90% of its grammar, and only 1% vocabulary in order to speak a new language. So pronunciation is of fundamental value in learning a second language. Where the influence of L1 negative transfer is the most obvious is at the level of pronunciation.

As is known, English belongs to Indo-European language family while Chinese belongs to Sino-Tibetan language family; English is intonation language while Chinese is tone language. Phonemes in these two languages are organized in different ways. Some phonemes appear only in English and they are totally strange to Chinese students. Since Chinese learners have never met these phonemes before, when they pronounce these sounds for the first time, they tend to find a similar sound in Chinese to replace the sound in English. For instance, most Chinese pronounce the word "thanks" incorrectly as /sæŋks/ instead of /θæŋks /, because there is no dental sound /θ/ in Chinese. In this way Chinese negative transfer occurs in pronunciation. Other forms of negative transfer to pronunciation are included in the following content (Wu Ying, 2010; Yu Xuelei, & Bao Chengli, 2009; Yu Lixia, 2008).

(1) There is no consonant clusters in Chinese, because consonants are always separated by vowels. Consequently, when Chinese learners pronounce consonant clusters in English, they tend to add a vowel between the consonants. For example, the word "blue" is pronounced as /bəlu:/ instead of /blu:/.

(2) In Chinese language, the pronunciation of a word usually ends up with vowels, /n/ or /ng/, e.g. 拉 /la/, 看 /kan/, 胖/pang/. As a result, when they articulate an English word, Chinese students tend to add a vowel at the end. So they pronounce the word "like" as /laikə/ with /ə/ added to the end.

(3) In English language, the sound /l/ is often placed before a consonant while there is no such a phenomenon in Chinese language. Therefore, Chinese learners always put a vowel between /l/ and the consonant or pronounce /l/ as a consonant. For instance, the word "milk" is often pronounced as /mɪlək/ or /miju:k/.

(4) Chinese learners tend to add vowels between the nasal plosive such as /tn/ and /dn/. The word "written" /rɪtn/ is pronounced incorrectly as /rɪtən/.

(5) The two sounds /θ/ and /ð/ appear only in English, so Chinese learners pronounce them as/s/ and /z/. For example "three" /θri: / is replaced by/sri:/.

B. Chinese Negative Transfer to English Vocabulary

Vocabulary is often considered as the central part in language learning. Some beginners believe that if they learn the vocabulary well they are sure to learn the language well. So they take great efforts to learn the vocabulary. Even though they work very hard, they can't avoid making lexical errors. Many of these lexical errors are caused by L1 negative transfer. These lexical errors include the following types (Zhai Haixia, 2009; Wu Mingjun, 2004).

1. Negative Transfer of Word Meaning

It is taken for granted that every Chinese word has its corresponding form in English and the words which refer to the same thing in two languages exist in pairs. However, the truth is that Chinese words and English words are not symmetric. One Chinese word can have several corresponding forms in English in different situations. For instance, Chinese people often collocate the word "看" with different objects and say "看黑板" (look at the blackboard; kan hei ban), "看电视" (watch TV; kan dian shi), "看报纸" (read newspaper; kan bao zhi), "看朋友" (visit friends; kan peng you). In most situations, "看" is translated into "look". After they know "看黑板"is expressed as "look at the blackboard", they translate "看电视", "看报纸", "看朋友"as "look at TV", "look at newspaper" and "look at friends".

Actually, the correct forms should be "watch TV", "read newspaper" and "visit friends". The phrases "look at TV", "look at newspaper" and "look at friends" are the products of Chinese negative transfer at the vocabulary level.

2. Lexical Redundancy

Lexical redundancy occurs when learners don't understand the meaning of the word in English and when learners are influenced by the equivalent Chinese phrase. For instance the Chinese word phrase "进入" (enter; jin ru) is often translated into "enter into". In fact, "enter" alone can express the meaning. "Into" is added because of the Chinese word "入" (into; ru).

3. Misuse of Word Categories

Many Chinese learners try to remember English words by memorizing the meaning, pronunciation and spelling without paying attention to their categories. For example, the word "家" (home; jia) in Chinese is a noun, while its counterpart "home" in English can be used either as a noun or as an adverb. Beginners often translate the Chinese phrase "回家" (go home; hui jia) into "go to home", because they think "home" and "家" belong to the same category. Actually, the word "家" here is used as a noun, while "home" is used as an adverb.

4. Inappropriate Collocations of Words

Many words which can be used together in Chinese may not be collocated in English. Chinese learners often ignore this phenomenon, thinking these words are used in the same way as in Chinese language. The influence of L1 negative transfer is quite obvious in word collocations. Here is an example:

Since Chinese people say "吃药" (take medicine; chi yao), they often express the same meaning in English by putting together "吃" (eat; chi) and "药" (medicine; yao), thus producing the phrase "eat medicine". The correct form should be "take medicine" (Wu Mingjun, 2004).

5. Literal Translation of Words from Chinese to English

Polysemy is very common in many languages. A word may have different meanings in different situations. Language learners often think in his or her native language mode and translate the word literally, thus producing inappropriate target language. For example, "休息室" (sitting room; xiu xi shi) is literally translated into "rest room". In fact, "rest room" is used as a synonym for washroom. The correct translation should be "sitting room".

6. Misuse of Countable Nouns and Uncountable Nouns

Some words are countable in one language but not in the other. For instance, in Chinese language we say "一只羊" (one sheep; yi zhi yang), "两只羊" (two sheep; liang zhi yang), "三只羊" (three sheep; san zhi yang). The word "羊" (sheep; yang) is countable in Chinese. Consequently, learners would say "one sheep", "two sheeps", "three sheeps" in English. These are wrong English expressions influenced by Chinese features, because the word "sheep" is uncountable in English. When people want to express the concept of more than one sheep, they have to use the word "sheep" in its original form.

C. Chinese Negative Transfer to Syntax and Grammar

Syntactic negative transfer is another important type of L1 negative transfer. Since Chinese and English have huge differences in syntax, Chinese learners of English are very likely to make syntactic errors and these errors are the types of Chinese negative transfer at syntactic level. In addition, language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication (Liu Runqing, & Wen Xu, 2006). We say language is a system because elements in it are combined according to certain rules and principles. These rules and principles are called grammar. To some extent, syntax is part of grammar, so negative transfer at the two levels is introduced together. According to the studies of Fa Xiaoying (2011) and Lin Lin (2013), Chinese negative transfer to English learning at the level of syntax and grammar include the following types:

1. Word Order

Compared with Chinese, English word order is more flexible. The flexibility does create troubles for Chinese learners. In Chinese, the declarative sentence and interrogative sentence have almost the same word order. People can get an interrogative sentence by putting only one interrogative at the end of the sentence. For instance we can change the declarative sentence "你喜欢读书。" (You like reading books; ni xi huan du shu.) into an interrogative one by adding "吗" (a word used to form a question; ma) at the end of the sentence and get "你喜欢读书吗?" (Do you like reading books; ni xi huan du shu ma). However, things are quite different in English, because when people want to get an interrogative from a declarative they have to change the word order. For instance, the declarative "You like reading books." is turned into an interrogative by changing the word order into "Do you like reading books?". Adverbs are often placed before the verb in Chinese while in English they can be placed after the verb. For instance, the Chinese adverb "很" (to a high degree; hen) comes before the verb "想" (miss; xiang) in the sentence "我很想你。" (I miss you very much; wo hen xiang ni.). Influenced by this structure, Chinese learners express the same meaning in English as "I very much miss you." This is obviously wrong. The correct form should be "I miss you very much." Besides the above-mentioned types, there are other forms of negative transfer to word order, such as the incorrect placement of the attributive word and negative word.

2. Loss of Subject

Chinese is characterized by parataxis and its syntax is connected by invisible logical relations, not by those visible words. On the contrary, English is characterized by hypotaxis and its syntax is closely bound up with punctuation as well as other typographical devices. Chinese often omit the subject when the subject is clear in the situation, thus producing many sentences without subjects, which obviously violates the rules of English syntax. For instance, we Chinese often say "有空就来吧！" (when have time, come to visit me; you kong jiu lai ba") to the interlocutors and they know what we mean is "如果有空你就来吧!" (When you have time, please come to visit me; ru guo you kong ni jiu lai ba！). Under the influence of Chinese habits, when learners want to express the same meaning, they produce "when have time, come to visit me." This sentence is wrong, because it has no subject and it violates the rules of English syntax. The correct form should be "When you have time, please come to visit me."

3. Misuse of Conjunctions in Complex Sentence

Since Chinese is a parataxis language, it relies strongly on logical conjunctions to express meanings. It is often the case that conjunctions in Chinese appear in pairs, such as "因为……所以" (because…so; yin wei…suo yi"), "虽然……但是" (even though…but; sui ran…dan shi). But in English complex sentences, one conjunction is enough. We Chinese say "因为在下雨，所以你不能出去。" (It's raining, so you can't go out; yin wei zai xia yu, suo yi ni bu neng chu qu.). When learners want to express the same meaning in English, they produce the sentence "Because it's raining, so you can't go out." It's Chinglish. The correct way to express this is "Because it's raining, you can't go out." or "It's raining, so you can't go out."

4. Theme-structured vs. Subject-predicate-structured

The basic structure mode of Chinese sentence is "topic + comment" while the basic structure mode of English is "subject + predicate" (Lv Juncui, 2009). Different structure modes lead to negative transfer. Affected by the Chinese structure mode, learners produce many Chinese-like English sentences.

When learners want to express "孩子们很难理解它。" (It's difficult for kids to understand it; hai zi men hen nan li jie ta.) in English, they say "Kids are difficult to understand it.". Actually the correct way to say this is "It's difficult for kids to understand it."

5. More than One Verbs in a Sentence

Different from English verbs, Chinese verbs don't have inflectional forms and they remain unchanged. As a result, Chinese learners tend to say "有许多人支持他。" (Many people support him; you xu duo ren zhi chi ta.) in English as "There are many people support him." Chinese language allows the co-occurrence of more than one verbs in a sentence, while English does not. One English sentence has only one verb and other verbs in the sentence should be used in their inflectional forms or used in a sentence submitted to the main sentence. So the correct version of the above Chinese sentence should be "Many people support him." or "There are many people supporting him."

6. Misuse of Verbs' Tense and Number

As is known, English is a language with inflectional changes while Chinese is not. In Chinese, verbs don't change in tense or person no matter when or whom the sentence refers to. For example:

我讲英语。 (I speak English; wo jiang ying yu.) I speak English

你讲英语。 (You speak English; ni jiang ying yu.) You speak English

他讲英语。 (He speaks English; ta jiang ying yu.) He speak English

In the above sentences, the verb "讲" (speak; jiang) remains unchanged in Chinese which gives birth to the unchanged form of "speak" in English. This violates the English rule, because in the third sentence "speak" should be used in its third person singular form "speaks". As for negative transfer to tense, the next example will illustrate the phenomenon well.

我看电视。 (I watch TV; wo kan dian shi.) I watch TV.

我昨天看电视了。 (I watched TV yesterday; wo zuo tian kan dian shi le.) I watch TV yesterday.

我明天看电视。 (I'll watch TV tomorrow; wo ming tian kan dian shi.) I watch TV tomorrow.

The three sentences indicate different time tenses. But as a result of Chinese negative transfer, the verb didn't show any change in tense. This is absolutely incorrect. In the English language, time tense in the above sentences should be as follows:

我看电视。 I watch TV.

我昨天看电视了。 I watched TV yesterday.

我明天看电视。 I will watch TV tomorrow.

7. Misuse of Voice

Since Chinese is a parataxis language, its passive voices are often expressed without using any passive marks. On the contrary, English uses passive structures a lot. Due to the negative transfer of Chinese, learners tend to omit the passive marks when they express a passive voice in English. Here is an example:

房间需要打扫。 (The room needs to be cleaned; fang jian xu yao da sao.) The room needs to clean.

There is nothing wrong with the Chinese sentence, however the English one which is produced according to Chinese language feature is wrong. There should be passive voice marks in it. So the correct form should be:

房间需要打扫。 The room needs to be cleaned.

8. Omission or Misuse of Functional Words

One of the difficulties for Chinese to learn English is the use of functional words. Two types of functional words are worth mentioning: prepositions and articles. Since there is no article in Chinese, when Chinese learners produce English sentence they tend to omit the articles.

地球围着太阳转。(The earth goes around the sun; di qiu wei zhe tai yang zhuan.) Earth goes around sun.

The English sentence is incorrect. According to English grammar, definite articles should be placed before unique things in the world, like the sun, the moon, the earth, the United States, etc. So the correct English version is:

地球围着太阳转。 The earth goes around the sun.

As for the misuse of prepositions, it's very common. Here is one example:

太阳从东方升起。 (The sun rises in the east; tai yang cong dong fang sheng qi.) The sun rises from the east.

We know that the word "从" (cong) means "from" in English. So the preposition used here is "from". Actually, this is ungrammatical. According to English grammar, it should be expressed in this way:

太阳从东方升起。 The sun rises in the east.

Besides the types mentioned above, there are other aspects of L1 negative transfer at the levels of syntax and grammar. Those aspects are left to be explored.

D. Chinese Negative Transfer to Pragmatics and Culture

Pragmatics is defined as the study of language in use. Due to different cultural backgrounds and life experiences, Chinese and English tend to use language in different ways. Consequently, it's easy for learners to suffer from pragmatic failure. Pragmatic failure refers to the inappropriate utterances that are caused by the ignorance of the target language norms and cultural background. To some extent, negative transfer at the levels of pragmatics and culture can be called pragmatic failure. Based on the studies of Jia Zhiyong (2005), Lin Lin (2013) and Liu Jinbao & Zhou Guiying (2007), the paper analyzes Chinese negative transfer to pragmatics and culture in the following way.

When they are praised, Chinese and English behave in different ways. Chinese often respond modestly by saying "I don't deserve it." or "You praise me too much.", while English just accept the good comment by saying "Thank you". The following example illustrates this very well:

A: 你英文真好。 (in ying wen zhen hao.) Your English is very good.

B: 哪里哪里。 (na li na li.) You praise me too much.

This conversation sounds weird to native speakers, because they normally don't respond in this way. The native-like conversation is as follows:

A: Your English is very good.

B: Thank you.

Language is used for human communication. So for the sake of satisfactory communicating results, attentions should be paid to negative transfer. That is to say, not only should we know the types of negative transfer, but also we should find out methods to handle negative transfer. So, the rest part of the paper shall provide the readers with some fundamental countermeasures.

III. THE COUNTERMEASURES TO DEAL WITH CHINESE NEGATIVE TRANSFER TO ENGLISH LEARNING

Part one dealt with the introduction to negative transfer and part two analyzed the types of Chinese negative transfer to English learning. Part three will introduce some possible solutions.

A. Making Contrastive Analysis about the Major Differences between Chinese and English

Wang Li, an expert in education, once said, "The most efficient teaching method is teaching by the comparison of the two languages." Second language learning and teaching can become more effective by comparing and contrasting the L1 and the L2. According to the works of Chen Huijun (2006), Tan Jiashan (2006) and Wang Xuan (2010) the paper concludes that contrastive analysis can be made between the two languages at the levels of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, grammar, pragmatics and culture. Through contrastive analysis, learners can realize the differences and difficulties in learning a second language, thus paying more attention to what they need to learn. In this way, they can learn a second language with high efficiency. For instance, with the help of contrastive analysis, learners will be aware that articles is widely used in English but rarely used in Chinese. So whenever articles are needed, learners would concentrate on their usages, thus avoid making errors.

B. Enhancing Language Learning by Laying Solid Foundations of Basic Knowledge

As the saying puts it, "A thousand-li journey starts with the first step." If one wants to climb a ladder he has to start from the bottom. It's the same with second language learning. If we want to learn it well, we should start from its basic knowledge (Liu Jinbao & Zhou Guiying, 2007). Listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation are five fundamental skills to grasp in learning English. No one skill should be ignored. They are of equal importance. For instance, listening ability can be strengthened by listening to native speakers' tapes, native news, watching TV programs broadcasted in native English language. The same listening material can be used over and over again, which is a very efficient way to improve listening ability. Only with enough input can learners produce output. Knowledge of

the five skills can be learned in class teaching and personal experience. Besides language knowledge, knowledge of other types is also important. If we are careful enough we can find that knowledge is everywhere.

C. Knowing English Culture

Language is the reflection of culture. This sentence perfectly illustrates the importance of culture in language learning. Many linguistic forms have their cultural origins. So it's necessary for language learners to know target language culture. Knowing English culture would help Chinese learners reduce the chances of making mistakes in learning English. Knowing English culture means knowing the following aspects of English speaking countries: geographical conditions, historical backgrounds, political policies, literary works, legends, religious beliefs, social customs, values and thinking modes, etc. All these cultural factors have undoubtedly exerted great influence on the English language.

D. Making English Learning More Interesting and Providing Learners with Certain Strategies

Many language learners agree that learning language is a tough job. Without proper guidance, learners would be fed up with English. Teachers should be clear about students' feelings and attitudes and make proper adjustments according to students' performance. As the saying puts it, "Give a man a fish, he eats for a day; teach him how to fish, he eats for a lifetime." So teachers should tell students how to learn instead of what to learn. This idea is of great importance in language learning.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through the above analysis, it is concluded that Chinese negative transfer to English learning exists at the levels of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, grammar, pragmatics and culture. Since negative transfer would impede second language learning, countermeasures should be taken to minimize it. As learners, we should put ourselves in native speakers' shoes and try to think in their way, increasing authentic input, taking opportunities to put what we have learned into practice, and combining learning with application. In addition, language teachers should provide students with strategies to learn the target language, inspiring students' potential, telling them how to learn instead of what to learn. This conforms to the policy of "quality-oriented education" and "education for all-round development". Only in this way can we realize sustainable development of education.

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