

A Review of Chinese Transfer on English Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract: There are various specific areas of research under the topic of second language acquisition. Among all of them, vocabulary is supposed to be the most basic and important one because people are not able to speak a language without acquiring a large amount of vocabulary. In addition, it is inevitable for second language learners to learn new vocabulary with the help of their mother tongue. In other words, learners tend to apply language transfer consciously or unconsciously. So, this paper will take Chinese as the first language and English as the second language to review and analyze the Chinese transfer on English vocabulary learning. The aim and meaning of this paper are to help Chinese learners to effectually acquire plenty of English vocabulary. According to the research results, the positive transfer mainly happens in the perspective of word formation, while the negative one takes place in word meanings, misuse of countable and uncountable nouns, literal translation of words and collocations. Suggestions will be given to teachers in order to better instruct students to overcome the negative transfer. For example, they can conduct the comparative analysis, emphasize the language input and choose the appropriate teaching language.

Keywords: mother tongue, second language, English vocabulary learning, language transfer

1. Introduction

The famous English linguist David Arthur Wilkins once wrote in his book, saying that, ‘Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed [1].’ This quote stresses the significance of vocabulary in second language acquisition. In other words, it is impossible to master a language without knowing lots of words. Therefore, it can be said that to learn vocabulary well is the basis and foundation of mastering another language, which should never be ignored or dismissed.

For Chinese learners who hope to have a good command of English, they have to prioritize vocabulary learning. Because from listening and reading skills to writing and speaking abilities, learners cannot avoid recognizing and using words according to their vocabulary reserve. However, it is of great difficulty to learn vocabulary by rote. This is why language transfer is introduced to vocabulary learning. It is expected to be a shortcut for Chinese learners to remember as many English vocabulary as they can.

According to the reasons above, this paper will review how the language of Chinese is able to transfer on English vocabulary, mainly exploring the negative transfer. The aim is to inform of advantages that Chinese learners can take from their mother tongue and misconceptions that they need to avoid. Finally, some suggestions for teachers' teaching will be given to make full use of language transfer on vocabulary learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Language Transfer

A number of linguists have tried to define 'language transfer' from their perspectives.

Fries, who introduced 'language transfer' into the study field of second language acquisition, thought that learners tended to unconsciously apply the rules, features and cultures of their mother tongue to the targeted language [2].

Sharwood Smith and Eric Kellerman argued that the definition should be narrowed down to 'those that lead to the incorporation of elements from one language into another [3]'.

Faerch and Kasper held the opinion that language transfer is the course of second language learners using interlanguage to either enhance or hinder their learning [4].

Among all the definitions given by many linguists, the most commonly accepted one is given by Odlin : Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired [5]. Obviously, this definition is more specific than others mentioned above. As it points out that transfer happens because there are similarities and differences between languages, it is natural to classify language transfer into the following two types.

2.2. Classifications of Language Transfer

2.2.1. Positive Transfer

According to Odlin's definition, the positive transfer may happen when the first language and the target language have similar characteristics. Generally speaking, the more features two languages have in common, the more possible and effective positive transfer will occur. For instance, since English and Spanish both belong to the Indo-European family, they share many similarities, such as the almost same letters, many of the same words and similar syntax. So, it is easier for a native English speaker to learn Spanish, especially the vocabulary.

2.2.2. Negative Transfer

On the contrary to positive transfer, the negative one is likely to occur when the first language differs greatly from the second language. It is claimed by many linguists that because of the influence of the negative transfer, second language learners can make mistakes at all levels. A typical example is that when Korean learners try to say English words with 'f', they may pronounce as 'p' or 'b' because there is not an 'f' sound in their own language. This is how negative transfer works in the area of phonetics. In addition, learners may also have trouble in syntax, semantics, pragmatics and so on. Therefore, negative transfer can be an obstacle in the course of second language acquisition.

3. Positive Transfer on Vocabulary Learning

There are many similarities in word formation between Chinese and English even though they do not belong to the same language family and do not share cognate knowledge, which is supposed to

be an advantage in second language vocabulary acquisition [6]. Among all the ways of word formation, the most common features of Chinese and English words take place in derivation and compounding.

From the perspective of derivation, words in both Chinese and English consist of root and affix. To take the word ‘disagree（不同意）’ as an instance. The prefix ‘dis-’ suggests a negation and the stem ‘agree’ means being in accord. So does ‘不同意’ in Chinese, which can be separated into ‘不’ and ‘同意’. Similarly, the word ‘Japanese（日本人）’ is the combination of root ‘Japan’ and suffix ‘-ese’. This is also how ‘日本人’ in Chinese is formed. Other examples can be ‘unnecessary（非必要）’, ‘reset（重启）’, ‘patriotism（爱国主义）’, ‘adulthood（成人期）’ and so on.

In terms of compounding, words are composed of the same part of speech or two different parts of speech in both languages. This means that compound words are formed in ways such as subject-predicate, verb-object, adjective-noun and so on. For example, ‘sunset（日落）’ is in the form of subject-predicate in English and Chinese; ‘weekend（周末）’ is constituted by two nouns in both languages; ‘hardware（硬件）’ is formed as adjective-noun in two languages.

In addition to the first two common ways of word formations, Chinese loan words in English are also easy for Chinese learners to remember. For instance, the words like ‘Beijing（北京）’, ‘Shanghai（上海）’, ‘pingpong（乒乓）’, ‘kongfu（功夫）’. The spelling of these English words are all borrowed from Chinese Pinyin, so Chinese learners can learn loan words without difficulties through the similar pronunciation.

In brief, as long as Chinese learners are aware of the similarities in word formation between Chinese and English, the process of vocabulary acquisition can be easier and faster. Chinese learners would not find it difficult to realize the rules if they expose themselves to a large number of words constructed from the same formations. So, it is of great significance for Chinese learners to actively analyze and summarize the similarity between their mother tongue and target language so that they are able to acquire vocabulary efficiently [7]. In this process, they take advantage of the positive transfer of native language.

4. Negative Transfer on Vocabulary Learning

4.1. Negative Transfer on Word Meaning

Negative vocabulary transfer is common in second language acquisition. Beginners of English generally think that Chinese vocabulary can find the corresponding word English. However, Chinese and English words cannot correspond one-to-one, and they usually differ greatly in meanings. According to Marina Dodigovic, Chengchen Ma and Song Jing’s experiment, the errors caused by polysemy accounted for 50% of the identified lexical transfer errors. There may be a potential reason that in Chinese, many frequently used words are applied in different contexts to express similar meanings and meanings without changing the form of words. Second language learners tend to assume that it shows the same situation in English. However, this thought may lead to overgeneralization, thus leading to lexical errors [8].

One Chinese word can have multiple corresponding forms in English, depending on different contexts. For instance, Chinese people often use different words to match the word ‘看’, like watching a game (看比赛), visiting friends (看朋友), reading a book (看书) and so on. The Chinese word ‘看’ is translated into ‘watch’ and ‘see’ in most situations. After they know ‘看比赛’ is translated as ‘watch a game’, they express ‘看朋友’, ‘看书’ as ‘watch friends’ and ‘watch a book’. But in fact, the correct forms should be ‘visit friends’ and ‘read a book’. So, the phrases of ‘watch friends’ and ‘watch a book’ are caused by Chinese negative transfer at the vocabulary level [9].

Another classic mistake regarding word meaning that many Chinese people usually make is about the verb ‘eat (吃)’. In Chinese, ‘吃’ is the only verb to describe the process of putting food into mouth, biting it and swallowing it. For instance, ‘吃饭’ and ‘吃药’ are likely to be translated as ‘eat meals’ and ‘eat medicine’, while the natural expression in English is ‘have meals’ and ‘take medicine’.

In brief, it is not always the case that Chinese words correspond with English words. So Chinese learners should avoid learning English in Chinese minds, instead they need to figure out and remember the real expressions in English.

4.2. Incorrect Use of Countable and Uncountable Nouns

There are no countability and uncountability of nouns in Chinese, but they are certain in English. Learners occasionally ignore the singular and plural of familiar nouns and are confused by the singular and plural of unfamiliar nouns. Learners often make mistakes because they base on their own Chinese thinking to judge whether English nouns are countable or not. For example, the word ‘bread’ is an uncountable noun, so it is wrong to directly indicate the specific number of quantities in front of it. However, when many Chinese learners want to express more than a piece of bread, they tend to be affected by their mother tongue and mistakenly add ‘two’ in front of the uncountable noun ‘bread’. As a result, they write down the wrong sentence as ‘I ate two breads’. But the correct way to express is ‘I ate two loaves/pieces of bread’.

In addition, ‘advice’ is an uncountable noun and ‘suggestion’ is a countable noun. As both words have the same meaning ‘建议’ in Chinese, a lot of Chinese learners can easily get confused by them. When people hope to receive some ideas or opinions from others, it is correct to say, ‘Please give me some pieces of advice.’ or ‘Could you please give me some suggestions?’. But it occurs to many Chinese that they neglect or feel confused about the countability and uncountability of the noun ‘建议’. So they tend to say ‘Please give me some advices.’, which is a totally wrong expression.

In a nutshell, forgetting, misusing or being confused about the countability and uncountability of nouns is also a bad result of vocabulary transfer from Chinese to English.

4.3. Straightforward Translation of English Words

Language learners often translate word by word in their native language. For example, the English word for ‘加油’ is ‘fighting’. But if translating it word by word with Chinese minds, ‘加’ is translated literally into ‘add’ and ‘油’ is translated into ‘oil’. Therefore, some Chinese learners will write ‘加油’ as ‘add oil’ because they think about it in a Chinglish way.

In addition, a classic wrong expression of Chinglish is ‘Long time no see (好久不见)’. Although even many native speakers of English use this expression now, it is literally translated by Chinese mindset and is against the rule of English.

In a short word, literal translation of English with Chinese thinking leads to a series of ‘Chinglish’ expressions, which is also the negative transfer of Chinese as the mother tongue to English learning in terms of vocabulary.

4.4. Negative Transfer on Collocation

According to Marina Dodigovic, Chengchen Ma and Song Jing’s experiment, Chinese collocations caused 22% instances of lexical transfer [8]. Different languages have their own unique ways and habits in the collocation and use of words. Therefore, it is inevitable that learners misuse some collocations due to the impact of their mother tongue thinking mode in the learning of collocation and use of words [10]. For example, due to the habit of Chinese grammar, learners will mainly

make collocation errors between content words and content words or between content words and prepositions. The collocation between notional words and notional words is mainly manifested in the collocation of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs [11]. For example, ‘heavy’ should be used to describe the rain, and ‘expensive’ should be used to describe the price. However, many English learners, influenced by their mother tongue, are accustomed to using the Chinese way of speaking and collocation, instead of using the adjective ‘big (wrong)’ to match rain and “high (wrong)” to describe price. The collocation of content words and prepositions is shown in the grammatical structure of nouns, verbs or adjectives plus a preposition, verb and infinitive. For example, the collocation of ‘arrive at the airport’ is correct. However, many people are affected by Chinese mother tongue and pay attention to the main meaning of this expression, such as ‘arrive’, ignoring the choice of prepositions in collocation.

Different languages have their own ways and habits in the collocation of words. However, at the level of vocabulary collocation learning, learners will use the wrong collocation under the impact of their mother tongue. Therefore, the negative transfer of native language thinking to second-language vocabulary learning is inevitable. It directly affects the mastery of the meaning of second-language vocabulary, the use of collocation and the application of learning strategies. In order to reduce the negative transfer of mother tongues to second-language vocabulary, teachers can guide students through a large number of reading and consulting dictionaries to widely contact the target language. In the meantime, they should also let students systematically learn the various meanings and collocations of vocabulary from the authentic target language and find the most suitable vocabulary learning method for themselves [12].

5. Suggestions for Teachers

5.1. Conduct the Comparative Analysis

As is well known to all, English and Chinese come from two different language systems. Professional teachers can use comparative analysis to summarize similarities and differences between them, so as to better play the positive role of mother tongue and minimize the negative impact of it. By comparing the similarities between Chinese and English, for example, recognizing the similarity of their words in terms of derivation and composition can better play the positive transfer role of mother tongue. In addition, comparing the differences between Chinese and English is beneficial for students to be aware of mother tongue interference, thereby reducing the negative transfer impact of mother tongue to a certain extent [13]. At the same time, by analyzing and explaining the errors caused by negative transfer, students are guided to learn and realize the differences between Chinese and English. In addition, students are encouraged to compare the two languages and summarize the negative transfer of their mother tongue, thereby strengthening the internalization process of second language learning [14].

5.2. Emphasize the Language Input

Second language acquisition expert Stephen Krashen believes that the most fundamental way to completely solve the phenomenon of mother tongue transfer is to input a large amount of understandable materials. Teachers should pay attention to avoiding the interference of students’ thinking patterns in Chinese while reasonably and appropriately using Chinese to explain. Teachers should encourage students to be exposed to a large number of original English newspapers, magazines, literary works, English radio broadcasts, and soundtrack movies [13]. Students can accumulate vocabulary from a large amount of English input and master English thinking patterns. In addition, there are numerous fixed collocations in English, which are difficult to directly understand and remember through Chinese thinking. On the contrary, in order to remember these

fixed collocations, we need to learn by combining the meaning of the word, the conditions of use, and the context in which it is used, in order to better understand and apply these collocations [15]. Teachers should create chances and encourage students to talk with people from English-speaking countries in English and apply authentic and vivid language materials to gradually form English thinking. Therefore, the occurrence of the phenomenon of ‘straightforward translation of English words’ mentioned earlier in this article may be reduced, as well as reducing the negative transfer impact of Chinese as a mother tongue on English.

5.3. Choose the Appropriate Teaching Language

Some teachers believe that a mother tongue should not appear in a real foreign language classroom, or that a mother tongue should not be used as much as possible, which is actually a misconception. Many studies have shown that teachers who teach foreign languages regardless of students’ level of understanding and language mastery are not very effective [16]. In the selection of teaching language, it is not necessary to deliberately pursue full English teaching. It is possible to appropriately use both languages according to students’ different learning stages, levels, and class types. Chinese can be appropriately applied to English teaching, helping students to reasonably, scientifically, correctly, and effectively use the concept system of their mother tongue at the appropriate time [17]. When necessary, the transfer function of mother tongue should be appropriately utilized to help students learn the information they have received. For example, words such as ‘watch’ ‘see’ ‘look’ have the same meaning in Chinese, but they cannot be confused in the use of English. It is necessary to use the bilingual teaching in Chinese and English method at this time. While teaching in English, using Chinese as the mother tongue to explain the differences between these words and explain confusion and difficulties can better avoid the “Negative Transfer on Word Meaning” mentioned earlier in this article.

6. Conclusion

The mother-tongue transfer is inevitable in the course of second language acquisition. Native language transfer in all aspects of second language vocabulary acquisition, whether positive or negative, is a necessary developmental stage in second language vocabulary learning. The results of this paper indicate that positive transfer is mainly in the perspective of word formation, while the negative transfer is in word meanings, incorrect use of countable and uncountable nouns, straightforward translation of English words and collocations. Therefore, learners should give full play to the influence of positive native language transfer. As for the influence of negative native language transfer, learners should be exposed to the target language accurately through reading extensively and consulting dictionaries. They need to clearly distinguish the word meanings and countability and uncountability of words. In addition, they also have to systematically learn the various meanings and collocations of words in order to understand and use them appropriately. As a result, it is likely that the influence of negative language transfer on second language vocabulary learning will be reduced.

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