Study of Influence of Negative Transfer of L1 Thinking on Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Language transfer is always the hot topic in the history of Linguistic researches. The influence of L1 thinking absolutely exists in the process of second language acquisition and varies with second language learners' personal language acquisition ability. According to Piaget, junior high school students are in the transitional stage from the Concrete Operation to the Formal Operation, and some of them may belong to the later. Also, the learning years in junior high school is the initial time to study English grammar and write compositions, so this research takes junior high school students of Grade-one as research participant, and mainly focuses on the errors occur in their English compositions. Through the analysis of the reason why they made such errors, the author aims at revealing the influence of L1 thinking on Chinese students' second language acquisition, also, the author intends to help educators to have clearer thoughts when sorting out educational plans and strategies, and enable both teachers and students to realize the importance of cultivating students' second language thinking in junior high school.

Keywords: L1 Thinking; Second Language Acquisition; Negative Transfer; Second Language Writing

1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

Language transfer is an important course in Linguistics. Rod. Ellis had ever defined L1 transfer and mentioned its influence was apparent in ways like listening, speaking, reading and writing in *Second Language Acquisition* in 1997. In English syllabus, students with more than three or four years' English learning experience should have ability of writing simple letters by using the given information or samples. Base on this document, practical test questions with situational context and subjective test questions take higher and higher proportion in recent years. So, attach more importance to students' writing skill is an urgent work for educators.

However, most researchers are valuing undergraduates' writing skills, but neglecting students in Junior and Senior high schools. This paper will focus on students who are in Junior high schools and try to make researches on their writings.

1.2 Research aim and significance

The aims of this paper can be classified into two levels. One is the theoretical level, and another is the practical level. The former means the author aims to verify the influence of negative transfer of L1 do exist in the process of second language acquisition; and the latter means that the author wish to help teachers and students to realize the importance of cultivating students' second language thinking in junior high school and give them more inspirations on making second language acquisition plans or strategies.

Zhou Baoguo (1996) emphasized the importance of English writing: "There were two functions of English writing, one was it is one of important communicating methods, and another was writing is one of the language skills coexisting with listening, speaking reading and translating in language learning process."

1.3 The structure of this paper

This paper is divided in to five parts. Chapter one is an introduction. In this part, the author explains the background, aim and significance of this research, and the structure of this paper. Chapter two is research methodology. It includes research questions, participants, methods and procedures. Chapter three describes the errors in samples and analysis the reasons. Chapter four is the conclusion. The author puts forward some suggestions for teachers and language learners, and reflects the deficiencies of this research.

2. Research methodology

2.1 Research questions

The research questions are:

(1) which kind of error exists in Junior high school students' English compositions more frequently;

(2) what's the reason of such an error, is there any relationship with their mother tongue thinking;

(3) what strategies could help them learn second language with less influence of their mother tongue.

2.2 Research participants

The participant who take part in this research are a class of Grade-one students in Henan Luoyang Huayang International School. In this class, there are forty-three students. Through interviewing with their English teacher, all of them have been leaning English for about four years. And they are learning some simple knowledge in grammar now, such as present simple tense, common sentence patterns like assertive sentence, negative sentence, etc.

2.3 Research method

Interview is the major research method in this research. Through interview, the author could get the truest and latest information about the participants. Here, the author made a short interview with their English teacher and got a general understanding about her teaching progress this year. All of these make a great effort in analyzing the students' minds and habits in writing English compositions.

2.4 Research procedures

There are four steps in this research. Firstly, the author collected the English compositions of the Grade-one students from their homework as research samples. Secondly, the author analyzed these samples and discovered the most obvious error they made–the use of subject in describing the weather–through quantitative method and qualitative method. Thirdly, according to the information collected from the interview with their teacher and the samples, the author analyzed the possible reasons of their errors. Finally, the author sorted these samples out and calculated the frequency of their errors, then compared with the data collected from foreign language corpus so that readers could notice this kind of error more easily.

3. Data analysis

3.1 Data analysis and error description

3.1.1 Errors in collected samples

Error is a key factor in studying language acquisition. Investigating errors is effective for more groups of language learners to avoid similar errors and make progresses.

The research samples were a homework of that class of students. The reason of choosing it is because homework is made in relatively relax environment without teachers, and the contents finished in such circumstance could reveal students' English writing levels to the utmost extent. The main content of this composition is to describe the season and members in family to a friend. Among them, there are three samples are out of use. After checking the forty samples, the author realized the most typical sentences in those compositions was the description of weather. In such sentences, there were five major types of errors were selected. The author counted the number and calculated the percentages of each error in samples, and represented in the following table:

The types of error	Numbers of error	Percentages of error
the improper use of subject	26	65□
the incorrect use of verb	6	15□
the incorrect descriptions of words	2	5□
the collocational errors	2	5□
the incomplete description	5	12.5□

Table 1. The proportion of different errors

According to the table, the most obvious error is the improper use of subject. In this group of students, there are four subgroups of students with different kinds of errors. For example, students wrote the sentences with half accuracy, ten chose the inappropriate subjects absolutely. What's more, two of them wrote the sentences without subjects. However, the other fourteen students wrote the sentences with totally correct subjects.

3.1.2 Error analysis

Error analysis is a method for investigating learner's language. Corder suggested five steps of Error analysis research: collection of samples of learner's language, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors and evaluation of errors (Rod. Ellis, 1999). Though many studies processed without following them precisely, the five steps are still used as principles by now.

(1) The identification of errors

The common way of identifying errors is to decide whether it is exactly an error or a mistake. Corder ever pointed that there are two ways to distinguish errors and mistakes: one is to check whether the learner make it in several continuous sentences frequently, another way is to check whether the learner could realize it and correct in the second time (Rod. Ellis, 1999).

The description about weather in compositions includes two seasons: summer and winter. In this sentences, the biggest question is the use of subjects, which was represented in the **Table 1**. For example, one of the group of students who uses subjects with half accuracy wrote that:

Our weather here is hot and rainy in summer and it's windy and cold in winter.

The difference between the two subjects about summer and winter is clear. The student chose "It" as the subject in describing winter but used "Our weather" in describing summer. The grammar of using "it" as subject to refer to weather had been taught in the fourth grade' English textbook. To verify whether it is correct that using weather as a subject directly, the author consulted two known corpora of native speakers: the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC). The data collected is shown below:

Using weather as subject	Spoken	Magazine	Newspaper
COCA	1%	0.5%	1.5%
BNC	2.5%	3%	2.5%

Table 2. The proportion of using weather as subject in corpora

Each number was calculated from two hundred of samples in corpora. No matter in conversations or written forms, few of native speakers would choose weather as subject directly in describing the weather simply. For example, native speakers would use it in sentences like:

I never experienced anything like that. "Weather was bright and beautiful for the first day of the fest, but on Sunday...

Only two British speakers would use it in the same way with the group of student, like:

November weather is cold, ...

But as for the total number of two hundreds, two is exactly a small number, which cannot verify the correctness of using weather as a subject directly in sentences.

The errors made by students who used two different subjects can be viewed as mistakes for they didn't show the consistency. In this way, the errors made by students who used the inappropriate subjects should be regarded as errors exactly. The example of error is:

Summer's weather is hot and rainy. Winter's weather is cold and cloudy.

(2) The description of errors

Describing errors can be named classifying errors. Errors always be classified into two types: grammatical categories and other common ways like omission, misinformation.

Among all types of the errors in these samples, the type of collocational errors is grammatical errors. Students who made collocational error wrote "At there", "In there". Two students wrote sentences leaving out subjects. Six of them used verbs in placing of adjectives, for example:

The winter here is cold and wind. In summer. It's hot and always rains.

Classifying errors can help researchers to diagnose the problems occurred by students in their language learning process, which is an effective method in making teaching programs.

3.2 Data analysis and explanation of errors

Explanation of errors aims at finding the reasons why errors were made. Taylor (1986) pointed out the possibility of existence of psychological, sociological and epistemic reasons.

3.2.1 Interlanguage

Interlanguage refers to a mental system fulling of learner's individual mental grammar. So, though the group of students was taught by one teacher, they made various sentences and different errors when describing the same content. Serial processing is one type of apparatus in Computational model. Rod (1997) said the idea of "serial processing" means information is processed in a series of sequential steps, whose representations can be learned as some kind of rules or strategies.

In this research, the input information is the given materials about weather, and the output information is the sentences wrote by the forty students in their compositions. Now compare a good sample with a bad sample:

Good sample: It's hot and rainy in summer, and it's windy and cold in winter.

Bad sample: We are very hot and rainy here in Summer, and cold and windy in Winter.

The difference is obvious between the two sentences. When reading the bad sample, the problem is sensed directly. For Chinese readers, it is easier to translate this sentence into Chinese. Psycholinguists ever pointed out that people are used to process and produce words or sentences in a sequence from left to right. Compared to English, the bad sample is more similar with Chinese sentence like "我们这里夏天很热而且多雨，冬天很冷还多风" etc, which displayed by the subject "we" vividly. It is obvious that this sentence was made with the impact of Chinese language thinking. Interlanguage, as language learners' personal internal system, is the central processing instrument in translating sentences between different languages. Based on the analysis of the bad sample, the hypothesis that the blanks in the student's internal grammar of English language were filled by L1 thinking was verified to a certain degree.

3.2.2 Negative transfer

Error is the most typical manifestation of negative transfer. Except for the improper use of subject, the other types of errors also deserve to be analyzed.

There are six students used a verb incorrectly. For example, when describing the weather in summer, they connected "rain" and "hot" by a conjunction. Some students added prepositions before "there", and some students translated "多风" into "a lot of wind". These errors are all strong evidences of negative transfer of Chinese language. For example, in Chinese language, the combination of words is more flexible. "在这儿" is a common word in conversations, but the combination of "in" and "there" is prohibited.

Neglecting the differences between English and Chinese is the major cause of making errors in second language learning process.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Major findings and suggestions

Through the analysis of these samples, the author summarized the main reason of their errors is the influence of L1 thinking, which works on the language learners' "black box" and plays a major role in Junior high school students' second language acquisition.

Paying attention to the factor of L1 transfer in making teaching programme is an important work for teachers. The most effective way of reducing L1 transfer is to provide students more chances of communicating with native speakers, which could help them to learn how to use English in a foreign mode of thinking. Cultivating students' foreign mode of thinking should be considered in the earlier language learning period, which could construct a solid foundation for second language acquisition. Teachers also need to focus on students' errors in language learning process, and adjust the teaching plans or methodologies timely. Language learners also need to reflect on own errors frequently and try to modify native speakers' mode of thinking.

4.2 Limitations and proposals

For some uncontrollable reasons, there are some important procedures didn't carry out, for example, collecting students' samples for the second time, making questionnaires with students, getting more information from the teacher, and so on. That's a huge limitation for this research and this paper.

So, the study would be better if the research was completed. Another deficiency of this study is the author only concreted on the negative transfer of native language, but neglected its positive transfer.

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