

# Negative Language Transfer in Chinese Learner's English Learning

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## Abstract:

In China, learning English has grown in popularity as a second language, and it now plays a significant role in the country's language education. In such a context, a noteworthy phenomenon exists that many Chinese English learners are easily influenced by their native language, which causes them to always make mistakes when they output English. This is a popular area for second language acquisition research. Based on the theories of negative language transfer and error analysis, this paper focuses on the effects of negative language transfer on Chinese second language learners. By summarising existing research and literature theories and analyzing specific examples, this paper attempts to summarise the various outcomes of negative language transfer on Chinese L2 learners and the reasons for it. This paper focuses on the review of domestic research, especially on the errors caused by negative language transfer, and tries to make suggestions for Chinese learners to avoid negative transfer when learning English.

**Keywords:** Negative language transfer; second language acquisition; errors; English learning.

## 1. Introduction

English has gained prominence as an international common language due to the growth of globalization and the rapid development of digital technology. In China, English language learning has become an integral part of the education system, and learners typically encounter a range of challenges in language transfer. Many scholars worldwide and in China have conducted detailed studies on negative language transfer. Negative language transfer has always been a hot research topic in second language acquisition [1]. Research is already being done to solve the problems caused by negative migration, and this area is still being researched. The verb "transfer" means transmitting, printing, imprinting, or reproducing anything from one surface to another. It derives from the Latin word *transfere*. According to Odlin's definition, transfer refers to the impact of previous language acquisition on learning a target language based on similarities and differences between the two [1].

Language transfer is a part that cannot be ignored when learners are learning a second language. Language transfer refers to the process by which learners apply their knowledge of their native language to aid in learning a target language. English learners whose mother tongue is a non-English language are susceptible to the influence of mother-tongue thinking when learning English. The

effect of negative language transfer on learning a second language is more pronounced when the two languages are more different [1]. The study findings released today provide strong evidence that English learning clearly shows the detrimental transfer from the mother tongue. Especially in the case of Chinese, a language that is so different from English, every Chinese learner of English has to deal with negative language transfer caused by their mother tongue almost all the time. Negative language transfer in Chinese has led Chinese learners of English to make mistakes in various aspects of learning English.

This paper aims to explore the effects of negative language transfer on Chinese learners of English. This paper will review the literature and research on negative language transfer affecting Chinese second language (L2) learners from three perspectives: speech, grammar, and morphology learning. Thereby, this study will try to answer the question of what types of errors Chinese learners of English nowadays make due to negative language transfer and how to solve the related problems.

## 2. Negative Language Transfer of Phonology

Negative language transfer is evident in the speech of Chinese learners of English. For human communication, language is a system of arbitrary voice symbols [2]. Learning phonics is very important when learning a sec-

ond language. Chinese English students inevitably suffer from the negative transfer of speech from their mother tongue when learning English. English is a member of the Indo-European language family, while Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. Zheng argues that for Chinese people, the interference of the mother tongue in English pronunciation is inevitable [3].

The reason may relate to the fact that there are many dialects of Chinese. When Chinese learners of English learn English, their speech is affected by the Chinese dialects of different regions, resulting in phonetic errors. Zheng categorizes Chinese English learners as subject to negative dialectal language transfer into several regions: north-west China, central China, north-east China, and south China [3]. Chinese learners of English make phonological errors that occur differently because they are in different regions. English learners in southern China are a good example of those who misuse the oral cavity as a substitute for nasal pronunciation, to the extent that they make the mistake of saying /n/ as /l/. In addition, since the phoneme /l/ does not exist in China, Chinese learners of English are prone to mistakenly replace it with other phonemes with similar pronunciations in Chinese. From a Chinese learner's point of view, the word "world" is easily pronounced as "word" or "world."

Chinese learners of English often make mistakes when it comes to English stress. Bian contends that many of the articulatory issues in English stress directly reflect Chinese metrical migration [4]. Word stress occurs when one or more syllables of a word are more prominent than the other syllables [5]. Above is the formation of English stress. Because Chinese has tones that obscure tension, stress is less obvious in the language than in English [6]. This leads to negative language transfer in the Chinese language, affecting Chinese learners of English in their pronunciation of English accents. Through experimentation, Bian concluded that this knowledge transfer is mainly unconscious since Chinese stress patterns are ingrained in Chinese pupils [4]. English words and sentences in Chinese may seem erratic or confusing to native speakers, and this specific rhythm may negatively impact native speakers' ability to understand English.

### 3. Negative Language Transfer of Syntax

Chinese English students' grammar is also affected by the negative transfer of their mother tongue. Lennon points out that people's learning is more susceptible to negative transfer when there are large differences between the two

languages [6]. The differences between Chinese, as a branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, and English, one of the Germanic languages, are large. According to Zhao, there are significant disparities between Chinese and English vocabulary regarding conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, and collocational ability [2]. English language learners should be fully aware of these discrepancies. According to Cai, subject-verb disagreement is one of the most frequent errors Chinese students make when they first begin learning English [7]. The most basic English syntactic rule is subject-predicate agreement. The subject-predicate agreement requires the parties to agree on 'person' and 'number,' but there is no equivalent requirement in Chinese [8]. Hu, Lu, Wang, and Zhang counted the reasons for high school students' writing errors and found that subject-verb agreement had the third highest error rate [9]. In Chinese, each verb character already includes all its tenses, but this is not true in English. Chinese learners of English tend to forget this when predicates need to be deformed in English grammar because of subject-verb agreement.

In addition, Chinese thinking is another reason that influences Chinese learners of English to learn grammar, leading to such grammatical errors. An important aspect of learning English grammar is using nouns correctly. The idea of "number" is present in all human languages, yet nouns are employed differently in each language [10]. Because there are no grammatical rules in Chinese for the deformation of plural nouns, Cai noted that native Chinese speakers learning English frequently overlook the plural form of nouns [7]. In Chinese, people do not need to change the form of the unit of quantity when they want to express quantity. It is difficult for Chinese learners of English to understand the role of "s" in English singular and plural changes at the initial stage of learning. Negative language transfer in Chinese has somewhat hindered Chinese learners of English from learning the grammar related to subject-verb agreement and number change.

Liu and Wu discovered that learners tend to misuse prepositions and articles because of the significant differences between these word categories in English and their home tongue and the intricate and complicated rules that govern them [11]. According to the data they collected, prepositional errors account for 9.0% of the total number of errors in Darus and Ching's corpus [12]. According to Robertson, certain Chinese learners habitually leave out articles that English native speakers would find useful [13]. Lei found that the article accuracy statistics show that the indefinite articles "an" and "a" are difficult for Chinese

ESL learners [14]. In the words of Cai, because Chinese is not their first language and does not require them to make clear distinctions between these prepositions, Chinese students find it difficult to understand the usage of comparable prepositions when they start learning English grammar for prepositions [7]. Chinese learners of English have been influenced by the negative transfer of their mother tongue, which leads to errors in the expression of prepositions and articles.

#### 4. Negative Language Transfer of Morphology

Morphology is also known as word formation, and it is necessary to master it when learning English. Chinese, as explained by the author of *The Morphology of Chinese: A Linguistic and Cognitive Approach*, published in 2000, does, in fact, contain “morphology,” and what little it does have is fascinating and illuminating [15]. However, Chinese morphology can cause negative language transfer to Chinese learners of English. Given that compound words in Chinese and English share a similar structure, the researcher discovered that cross-linguistic transfer between the two languages mostly shows up in the breakdown and composition of compound words [16, 17]. Xu suggests that Chinese is an isolated language due to the lack of affixes compared to English [18]. Suffixes are more common in Mandarin than prefixes or infixes [19]. In Chinese, suffixes reflect more of words’ meaning, emotion, and linguistic changes, while other affix functions are less obvious. Affixes in English are more complex and have fixed rules compared to Chinese affixes. Compound words in English are also significantly different from those in Chinese. Here is an example given by Xu: English compound words have different semantic relations, such as parallelism, subordination, modification, verb-object, etc., while Chinese compound words are mainly composed of modifying relations [18]. Chinese word formation has been ingrained in the brains of L2 learners, which has negatively transferred to the learning of English.

#### 5. Conclusion

This paper compares the differences between the two languages from the point of view of English and the point of view of Chinese. It summarises negative language transfer and the errors caused by negative language transfer. Teachers can use positive teaching strategies to address the issue of negative language transfer to help students overcome negative language transfer and increase the effectiveness of English learning. These strategies include

giving targeted language input, encouraging students to think critically and participate in communication, developing appropriate language habits, and eventually helping students improve their phonological, grammatical, and morphological learning.

In terms of past studies on this topic, few studies talk about the effects of negative transfer on second language learners. However, the author found few studies in the literature focusing on the view that Chinese learners of English are subject to negative transfer. English learners, as the subjects, decide how to cope with negative language transfer and how to solve the specific methods of negative language transfer, which should be studied more deeply in the future. In China, research on negative language transfer is developing. Everyone should pay attention to the impact of negative language transfer on people’s second language learning. A review based on previous studies can add new solutions and inspirations to this field and help the development of English education in China.

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