

THE INFLUENCE OF MOTHER TONGUE ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ENGLISH WRITING PERFORMANCE - A CASE STUDY OF NINGXIA MEDICAL UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Due to the differences between English and Chinese, students often make errors in English writing. One of the reasons that students faced in writing is that their mother tongue language knowledge system is already established. Coupled with the constraints of the language environment, the students' way of thinking and writing is prone to be influenced by their mother tongue. This paper highlights the current situation of the negative effects of the mother tongue on English writing among undergraduates in China, analyzes the main type of writing errors caused by their mother tongue, and provides targeted guidance to teaching them writing. The samples for the study are 57 learners of English as a second language (L2) students from Ningxia Medical University. They were asked to complete a writing task before their compositions were analyzed. Using Test Analysis Method, an analysis of writing compositions by this grade one university students found that the most common errors are caused by the negative effects of their mother tongue on English writing mainly on the use of articles, word order, and expressions of negation. Finally, to improve the quality of English teaching, this paper offers some suggestions on how to overcome the negative effects of the mother tongue on these students.

Keywords: Effects of mother tongue; English writing performance; expressions of negation; use of articles; word order

Abstrak

Disebabkan perbezaan antara bahasa Inggeris dan Cina, sering kali pelajar membuat kesilapan semasa menulis dalam bahasa Inggeris. Salah satu cabaran utama yang dihadapi oleh pelajar dalam penulisan ialah pengaruh sistem pengetahuan bahasa ibunda mereka yang telah terbentuk. Dengan ditambah kekangan persekitaran bahasa, cara berfikir dan menulis pelajar cenderung terpengaruh oleh bahasa ibunda mereka. Kertas kerja ini menyoroti keadaan terkini yang menunjukkan kesan negatif bahasa ibunda terhadap kemahiran penulisan bahasa Inggeris di kalangan mahasiswa di China. Ia menganalisis jenis kesilapan penulisan utama yang disebabkan oleh bahasa ibunda mereka, serta menyediakan panduan yang difokuskan untuk pengajaran kemahiran menulis kepada mereka. Sampel bagi kajian ini terdiri daripada 57 pelajar bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua (L2) dari Universiti Perubatan Ningxia. Mereka diminta untuk menyelesaikan tugas penulisan sebelum komposisi mereka dianalisis. Dengan menggunakan Kaedah Analisis Ujian, analisis komposisi penulisan oleh pelajar universiti tahun pertama ini mendapati kesilapan yang paling umum berkaitan dengan pengaruh negatif bahasa ibunda mereka ke atas penulisan bahasa Inggeris, khususnya berkaitan dengan penggunaan artikel, susunan perkataan, dan ungkapan penolakan. Akhirnya, untuk meningkatkan kualiti pengajaran bahasa Inggeris, kertas kerja ini mengemukakan beberapa cadangan mengenai cara mengatasi kesan negatif bahasa ibunda terhadap pelajar-pelajar ini.

Kata kunci: Pengaruh bahasa ibunda; prestasi penulisan bahasa Inggeris; ungkapan penolakan; penggunaan artikel; susunan perkataan

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Writing as a basic skill, is one of the most important sources of a second language output and the main curriculum outcome that students are required to master. In China, most English examinations consist of a writing part that causes teachers to pay much attention to cultivate students' ability to write in English during the daily teaching process. However, under the current English learning circumstances, Chinese students lack a genuine English learning environment and face a number of challenges in English writing, which inevitably impose a burden on their English learning (Amano et al. 2023). Although students have accumulated a certain amount of vocabulary and relevant grammar rules, they are still unable to use English accurately, or create complete and idiomatic English sentences and paragraphs. Due to the interference of the students' mother tongue, their English expressions are often interfered by some inherent language habits in Chinese. As a result, Chinese thinking is detected in their writing and they are prone to some obvious grammatical mistakes despite having learned the grammar rules. Therefore, the negative effects of the mother tongue can indeed be regarded as an important reason for hindering the cultivation and development of university students' English writing ability.

Great importance has been attached to the effects of the native language (L1) on second language (L2) learners, especially in their writing performance. In the past decades, research has shown that evidence for such effects is so abundant that both positive and negative effects can be found in phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The learner's native language, on the one hand, can facilitate L2 learning. Ellis (1999) found that when learners with different native languages are studying the same second language, the facilitative effects can be observed. For example, when Chinese learners and English learners are studying Japanese, Chinese learners will have an enormous advantage over English learners because of the similarity of the mandarin and japanese writing systems.

On the other hand, according to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), "all L2 errors could be predicted by identifying the differences between the learners' L1 and the target

language” (Ellis, 1999). The great difference between the Chinese and English languages is thus the prime cause of difficulties and errors in English learning among Chinese students. In order to improve students’ writing performance and reduce the influence of the mother tongue, this paper aims to find out the main types of English writing mistakes through an analysis of compositions written by Grade 1 students of Ningxia Medical University. Subsequently, this paper puts forward some specific teaching strategies for English writing courses, to help English teachers reduce the negative effect of consciousness of the mother tongue.

2.0 NATIVE LANGUAGE (L1) EFFECTS ON SECOND LANGUAGE (L2) LEARNERS’ WRITING

In recent years, large numbers of scholars and researchers have done quite a lot with L1 effects on L2 learners. Many of them in China have put a great focus on the influence of Chinese on students’ writing performance. Dai (2002) pointed out that it is difficult for second language learners to eradicate of the habit of thinking in their native language, even people who have studied or used a foreign language for many years. The more difficult the foreign language task is, the more dependent the learner will be on the mother tongue (Gong, 2015). Native languages have both positive and negative effects on second language learning.

2.1 Positive Effects

Most research investigated the negative effects of native language on second language writing, but it is improper to attribute most, or all the mistakes made in writing a composition to the interference of the native language (Almuhaysh, 2020). In fact, the role the positive effect plays on the learning and writing English cannot be ignored. For example, learners will subconsciously use the language rule and expression habits of their mother tongue to help them to learn English. As this will make it easier for them to master the target language, their mother tongue is seen to give a positive influence on language learning. Therefore, it will be of great significance for second language teaching and learning if we can make good use of the native language.

Odlin (1989) pointed out that when learners with different native languages are

compared, positive effects can be observed. First, good language awareness will promote students' second language learning. Students who are aware of the differences between their mother tongue and target language can better acquire a second foreign language. Secondly, when learners perceive the similarities between their mother tongue and the target language, the positive effect of their mother tongue will be promoted. Lu (2021) believes that the mother tongue plays a very important role in foreign language teaching, and it is unnecessary and impractical to completely avoid mother tongue teaching. Teachers can help students master language knowledge and skills as soon as possible and improve teaching quality by properly using mother tongue teaching in class. Yuan (2020) also affirmed the role of the mother tongue in second language learning, paid attention to the special structures that cause difficulties for students in teaching, and made a comparative analysis with the mother tongue. Since students have a high degree of mastery of their mother tongue, there will be a phenomenon of positive transfer in English learning.

In the initial stage of writing an English composition, it is very common that students attempt to express their thought through native meaning, sentence structures, or the culture of their mother tongue. So, the mother tongue has a positive effect on learning and writing English and is consistent with the target language. Furthermore, although the Chinese sentence structure and English sentence structure are very different, the declarative sentence structure is similar. The declarative sentence structure both in Chinese and English is "subject + predicate + object". For example:

前天，爸爸给我买了一个玩具。(The day before yesterday dad bought me a toy).

这件事让他非常高兴。(This matter made him very happy).

So, if a declarative sentence is directly translated from Chinese into English, the word order is generally correct. By making full use of the positive effect, students can increase their efficiency in learning and writing. The positive effect of native language helps the learner to promote the second language learning.

2.2 Negative Effects

Students study the English language in a purely Chinese environment. Hence, they think and write in a Chinese way. They have become accustomed to the Chinese way of thinking and writing expression for many years and they unconsciously copy the Chinese language habits blindly, ignoring the specific English expression requirements, and resulting in writing errors (Chen, 2021). As a result, their writing becomes irregular and does not meet the convention of writing in English. Although it is acknowledged that the influence of the mother tongue can bring positive effects, there are more negative effects on students' English learning and writing. The negative effect of the mother tongue can be manifested by various mistakes and inappropriate usage (Shi, 2020).

Firstly, students' mother tongue affects their English language vocabulary and subsequently leads to the negative effect on the translation of the word meaning. For example, the word “红牛” in Chinese is a drink, but some Chinese students directly translate it according to its literal meaning, 红 is red, 牛 is cow, so they translate it to a red cow. Hence, in student's composition, it is written as follows:

“Before I run 400 meters in a sports meeting, I drank one red cow”.

This sentence will cause some misunderstandings to readers. So, as seen here, when the students encounter some words they do not know how to translate, they will directly translate it word by word and it will cause misunderstandings.

Secondly, English and Chinese have different grammatical systems. For example, in Chinese, there is a sentence pattern “虽然.....但是.....”, it can be directly translated into “Although.....but.....”, but in English, “Although.....but.....” is a wrong sentence pattern where “but” should be omitted. Chinese students often forget that predicate verbs should be changed accordingly when the subject is in the singular third person in the general tense. Many Chinese students make this error since the Chinese do not have such a change. For example, in the sentence “他已离家半年了”, Chinese students will translate it into “He has left

home for half a year” because Chinese students are confused about “moment verb” and “renewal” of the verb in English, and hence, may make a mistake (Xie, 2020).

Thirdly, the influence of mother tongue relates to the cultural aspect in which language is the tool of culture, and culture is the carrier of the language. When we learn the target language, we should know their culture. At present, university students only have one comprehensive English Class. The contents in the books mostly are about Chinese society. So, in the process of writing, they will unconsciously apply their own cultural patterns, which will trigger negative effects. Once, a Chinese student wrote a letter to an English native speaker, depicting his hometown like this, “in order to keep warm and strong in winter, people in my hometown kill and eat dog”. Obviously, in some places in china it is common for them to eat dogs, as the dogs are not pet dogs. But in western culture, people thought dogs are men’s best friends. So, they are very confused about eating dogs because they know little about Chinese culture. This error was usually made by Chinese students in their English writing mainly because of the misunderstanding of different cultural backgrounds.

Based on the above example, we can see that if mother tongue is consistent with the target language, then the learning process of the target language will be easy; on the contrary, if there are lots of differences between the mother tongue and the target language, the learner’s previous learning experience will impede the learner’s learning. Then the mother tongue will hinder the learning process of the target language. The negative effect can be demonstrated by various mistakes and improper usage in English writing. Therefore, we should study and analyze the similarities and differences between the two languages in order to minimize the negative effects of the mother tongue (Chen, 2021).

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to investigate the negative effects of the mother tongue in English writing of Grade one students at Ningxia Medical University, this paper analyzes their final exam writing composition, so as to provide some pedagogical strategies for English writing teaching and learning.

3.1 Research Questions

This research involves the following questions:

- 1) What are the main types of English writing errors made by university students majoring in Clinical Medicine?
- 2) How can teachers effectively promote the teaching of second language writing?

3.2 Research Participants

57 freshmen majoring in clinical medicine were selected from Ningxia Medical University. These students finished their three years of high school study and entered the university. By this stage, they had already accumulated a certain amount of vocabulary, grammar knowledge, and sentence structures and were able to write clear and coherent English compositions. So, the types and number of errors caused by the negative effect of the mother tongue in English writing are more representative and valuable for analysis.

3.3 Topic of the Composition

The topic of the composition is A Place You Would Like to Travel. Three influencing elements including transportation, cost of living, and food are required to be mentioned in the composition.

3.4 The Procedure of the Research

The first step in the research process was to collect students' compositions. Due to the limited conditions, all the compositions came from one homework of the English writing class. The compositions were written on Iwrite online website (<http://iwrite.unipus.cn/>). Use Iwrite is

Received: 15 June 2023, Accepted: 24 November 2023, Published: 26 December 2023
<https://doi.org/10.17576/ajtlhe.1502.2023.11>

easier to collect the compositions and mark errors. Secondly, 57 compositions were collected, and analyzed fairly and reasonably. Thirdly, the errors in the paper were marked and the frequency of language errors were analyzed.

3.5 Data Analysis

Through the analysis of all the students' composition, the most common errors made by students are mainly from two aspects, namely lexical aspects and syntactic aspects (Wu, 2021). Table 1 shows the numbers and percentage of the errors in students' composition which are collected from students.

Table 1. Most common errors in students' composition

Types of Errors		N	%
	Article	71	18.98%
Lexical Aspects	Case	36	9.63%
	Singular and Plural	57	15.24%
	Word order	68	18.18%
Syntactic Aspects	Subject-verb Concord	35	9.4%
	Expression of Negation	42	11.23%
	Passive Sentence	26	6.95%
	Tenses and Voices	39	10.43%
Total errors		374	100.00%

The following is an analysis of the language categories with the most common errors frequency in terms use of articles, word order, and expressions of negation.

3.5.1 Use of Articles

In English, there are three articles: “a”, “an”, and “the”. In grammar, an article refers to a word used before a noun to show whether the noun is a particular example of something (so called definite article “the”) or a general example (called the indefinite article “a” or “an”).

There are three types of article errors, namely confusion of indefinite article, confusion of definite and indefinite article, and redundant and lack of article (Zhang, 2020). Concrete examples are as follows:

3.5.1.1 Confusion of Indefinite Article

Example:

- (1) China is a enormous country with beautiful landscapes.
- (2) Travelling is an useful way to gain knowledge and enlarge the horizon.

Correction:

- (1) China is an enormous country with beautiful landscapes.
- (2) Travelling is a useful way to gain knowledge and enlarge the horizon.

In the above examples, the first phonetic symbols of enormous is vowel, so “an” should be used in front of it, the first phonetic symbol of useful is a consonant, so “a” should be used in front of it.

3.5.1.2 Confusion of Definite and Indefinite Article

Example:

- (1) Great Wall is a largest engineering and building project carried out by humans.
- (2) We will gain the good result during travelling.

Correction:

- (1) Great Wall is the largest engineering and building project carried out by humans.
- (2) We will gain a good result during travelling.

In the above examples, “the” should be added in front of the superlative of an adjective. When people or things are mentioned for the first time or generally, it is necessary to use the indefinite article.

3.5.1.3 Redundant Article

Example:

(1) The Paris is a place I dreamed to go.

(2) On the weekends we need to go out for travel and to breath the fresh air and relieve the eye strain.

Correction:

(1) Paris is a place I dreamed to go.

(2) On weekends we need to go out for travel to breath the fresh air and relieve eye strain.

Some students add unnecessary articles because they don't know when to add. Article is not needed before the nouns indicating time and country name. In addition, do not add an article before general plural nouns and some idiomatic expressions.

3.5.1.4 Lack of Article

Example:

(1) The Great Wall is must-see in China.

(2) Besides, we can go for walk after long time study.

Correction:

(1) The Great Wall is a must-see in China.

(2) Besides, we can go for a walk after a long time study.

In a sentence, an article should be added before a singular countable noun, however, Chinese students always make errors here. In the above examples, students forget to use the article because in their minds there is no concept of article and there are no rules to follow, resulting in a typical negative effect error in the mother tongue.

3.5.2 Word Order

The basic word order for most languages is SVO (Subject-Verb-Object), and SOV (Subject - Object - Verb). In English the basic word order is SVO, while in Chinese is determined by pragmatic and semantic factors, which can be SOV and SVO. Additionally, the Chinese structures are diverse and changeable. Usually, the English sentences produced by Chinese

students are formed according to the Chinese word order, but this order is not correct in English. Therefore, it is more difficult for Chinese students to master the usage of English word order.

Generally speaking, an adverbial in English appears after the predicate it modifies. When the adverbial precedes the predicate, it places more emphasis on the modifier. However, modifiers in Chinese generally appear before the modified word. Therefore, influenced by their mother tongue, Chinese students tend to habitually place adverbials before predicates like Chinese, although they may not intend to emphasize anything. For example:

(1) I very like travel. (I like to travel very much.)

(2) We can through traveling to improve ourselves. (We can improve ourselves through traveling.)

In English questions, the auxiliary verb comes before the subject. In Chinese, the word order in statements and questions is the same. Therefore, Chinese students often make word order mistakes in certain English problems.

(1) E.g. Why I choose to go to England? (Why do I choose to go to England?)

(2) E.g. How we make good use of the knowledge we learned from traveling? (How can we make good use of the knowledge we learned from traveling?)

3.5.3 Expressions of Negation

English and Chinese express negation in different ways. When expressing negation in Chinese, a negative word is added before the negated verb even though the verbs are in the clause. While in English, the negative word and the predicate verb of the main clause are used together, that is, to move the negative word forward. Chinese students are not used to this kind of structure and often make errors. For example, "I think cost is not worth caring". When we answer affirmative negative interrogative sentences, it should be noted that if the statement part is negative and the negative interrogative sentence is affirmative, the answer

should be based on facts (Xie, 2010). Therefore, the correct expression is “I do not think the cost is worth caring”.

In addition, about a sentence that expresses negation in Chinese, it should be noted that if directly translated into English, it will become a partial negation, which leads to misunderstanding. For example, Chinese students often use the sentence “all the answers are not correct” to express the meaning of “none of the answer is correct”. However, “all the answers are not right” in English means some of the answers are correct and some are not correct, but the negative pronouns such as “nobody”, “no one”, “nothing”, and “none” are used to express the absolutely negative meaning. So, if a sentence is a complete negative sentence, the meaning expressed is different.

To sum up, this paper studies the influence of mother tongue on university students’ English writing by using corpus analysis, and finds that in terms of vocabulary, the negative effect of mother tongue on writing is mainly concentrated in Article, Word order, Singular and Plural, etc. In terms of syntax, the negative effect of native language on writing is mainly focused on expression of Negation, Tenses and Voices, etc. To a large extent, the above errors are due to students’ lack of language learning environment, lack of awareness of the differences between English and Chinese languages, and insufficient input and output. Therefore, the negative effect of mother tongue on university students’ English writing is already an undeniable fact. Based on this, what kind of teaching methods should English teachers adopt to improve students’ English writing level and avoid the native effects of mother tongue are worth further thinking and exploring (Fan, 2021).

4.0 PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Mother tongue has been proven to interfere with students’ English writing in many aspects. Therefore, this paper aims to put forward some pedagogical implications for English composition teaching and writing.

4.1 Strengthen the Input of English

According to the language input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) in second language acquisition theory, learners can only promote language acquisition if they obtain enough intelligible language input. It is found that an important reason for the negative effect of students' mother tongue is the lack of sufficient English input. In order to minimize the mistakes caused by the negative effect of the mother tongue on writing, a large amount of language input should be added before an "output" is produced.

An important method of input for English learning is reading. Through reading, students not only accumulate more vocabulary and grammar but also learn more authentic English expressions. In the process of teaching, teachers can select many English materials suitable for university students to read, and guide them to read intensively and extensively, to enhance their sense of English and enable them to acquire correct English expressions. Sufficient reading training can help students accumulate language knowledge, cultivate English language sense, to help students effectively reduce the interference of mother tongue during writing (Lu, 2021).

4.2 Strengthen the Output of English

The process of language learning is from input to internalization and then to output. Newly acquired language knowledge needs to be consolidated through output activities. Teachers can increase students' language output opportunities and effectively promote students' mastery of new knowledge through many practice activities.

Through the investigation, it was found that medical major students lacked English writing practice due to heavy professional study tasks, and they do not have special English writing classes. Writing and practicing more can help students reduce and overcome the negative effects of mother tongues. Teachers should make use of the time in class and guide students to carefully complete the composition exercises in the textbook within the limited time. After class, teachers can encourage students to write English diaries, let students start with simple sentences and gradually increase the difficulty of sentences and the length of

diaries, record daily life, normalize English writing, and reduce students' anxiety and fear of writing (Shi, 2020). Teachers can also regularly assign English report homework. The report content should not be limited to a specific theme to allow the students to share a story, discuss current hot topics, or popularize foreign cultures. Additionally, other students can ask questions in English according to the report content, to enhance classroom participation and interactivity. Such mandatory reporting activities ensure that every student has the opportunity to express themselves in English.

In addition, a common problem faced by Chinese students in learning English is the lack of a real English language environment. Due to the limitations of various environmental conditions, the focus of learning is basically on the level of vocabulary and grammar, and the communication function of language is often ignored, which results in many Chinese expressions in the composition. Therefore, creating an authentic English language environment is important to reduce the negative effect of mother tongue. Teachers can use a variety of multimedia teaching methods to try to create a more realistic language environment for most students, increase English language input, and at the same time encourage students to actively imitate and practice some more authentic English expressions (Fan, 2021). For example, teachers may play some classic English songs in English class, or share some lines from interesting English movies, and let students practice listening, and then imitate and speak out. These teaching measures can enable students to learn the authentic English expressions and understand Western culture in a relatively pleasant and relaxed atmosphere, so that students can naturally have the authentic language output.

4.3 Strengthen the Comparative Analysis of Chinese and English

English and Chinese belong to two different language families, and the differences between the two languages exist objectively. The data analyzed above concluded that the negative effect of students' mother tongue in English writing mainly exists in the differences between English and Chinese, which shows that the comparison of English-Chinese differences is undoubtedly an effective way to avoid negative effect of mother tongue. Therefore, the errors

caused by the interference of the mother tongue can be solved by comparative analysis, mainly including the comparison of English and Chinese languages, the contrast of Chinese and Western thinking modes, and the comparison of Chinese and Western cultures.

First, in the process of carrying out English classroom teaching, teachers should pay special attention to actively strengthening the comparative learning of English and Chinese languages by motivating and guiding students, including articulation, coherence, and other aspects. By organizing teachers and students to jointly summarize and analyze common “Chinese English” errors in students’ essays, students’ sensitivity to language differences will be enhanced. In this way, students can flexibly use collocations and structures that conform to English usage habits when writing English and avoid and reduce the mistake of negative effects of the of mother tongue (Liu, 2020). However, teachers cannot lead students into the misunderstanding of excessive comparison, do not pay too much attention to differences, and ignore the commonality between languages, in fact, students should also realize that sometimes mother tongue also has a certain positive effect on language output.

Second, teachers should let students understand the differences between English and Chinese thinking modes, in the process of teaching, teachers can analyze the original English passages from the perspective of thinking mode, help students to be familiar with Western thinking habits and writing methods, then try to practice writing through imitation.

Finally, a comparative analysis of cultures is also important. Language is an important carrier of culture, and many mistakes made by learners are basically closely related to the cultural differences between China and the West (Wang, 2020). Guiding students to learn something about cultural differences between China and the West can help students further deepen their knowledge and understanding of language.

5.0 CONCLUSION

By analyzing the English writing compositions of medical major students, this study found that students are most likely to make mistakes in articles, word order, and expressions of negation, resulting in the phenomenon of negative transfer of mother tongue. According to Krashen (1982), “the influence of the mother tongue on students is a phenomenon in which learners turn to their own mother tongue knowledge and make use of the existing rules of their mother tongue due to lack of knowledge during communication”. Since the mother tongue and the second language are mixed, the negative effect of the mother tongue is an important factor restricting the English writing level of university students. Based on the findings of data analysis, it is suggested that in daily teaching, teachers should actively explore effective teaching strategies, enrich teaching methods, pay attention to providing students with authoritative English materials, and provide timely guidance for students’ homework. Students should, based on sufficient intelligible English input, memorize more language blocks, sentence patterns, and sample essays, compare and analyze the differences between Chinese and English writing, subtly cultivate their English thinking, and minimize the impact of the negative transfer of their mother tongue on writing in English (Yuan, 2020).

The learning of English writing is not achieved overnight, it is a long-term continuous improvement process. With the joint efforts of teachers and students, the negative impact of mother tongue on university students’ English writing can be minimized as much as possible, and the English writing level of university students can also be fundamentally improved. It is hoped that the above findings can provide research ideas for the subsequent research on the influence of mother tongue on second language writing.

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