

# Reviewing the Impact of Mother Tongue Transfer on the English Writing Performance of Chinese University Students

**Xinrui Huang\***

School of Foreign Studies, Chang'an University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710064, China

\*Corresponding author:  
2023903735@chd.edu.cn

## Abstract:

This review paper reviews the impact of mother tongue negative transfer on the English writing performance of Chinese university students, with a focus on the negative transfer phenomena in vocabulary, grammar, and discourse, as well as the language and cultural differences that contribute to this phenomenon. The article is based on the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and the Markedness Differential Hypothesis, emphasizing how structural differences between Chinese and English lead to errors in learners' writing. In addition, it emphasizes teaching strategies to reduce negative transfer, advocates comparative language teaching, strengthens vocabulary and grammar training, and cultivates cross-cultural awareness. At the same time, technical assistance tools and cross-cultural collaborative writing projects were proposed to provide real-time feedback and immersive exercises. In the end, the article points out that although current research mainly focuses on negative transfer, the potential of positive transfer and the long-term efficacy of intervention measures have not been fully explored.

**Keywords:** mother tongue transfer; English writing; comparative analysis; teaching strategies; intercultural awareness.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

Mother tongue transfer, especially negative transfer, is a key issue in the field of second language acquisition. As a cross-linguistic influence phenomenon,

it is particularly prominent in the process of learning English as a foreign language. For Chinese university students, Chinese as their mother language often interferes with their English writing. When differences between the mother tongue and the target language exist, learners are easily influenced by negative transfer of the mother tongue, resulting in various errors

in English writing. In recent years, with the acceleration of globalization, the importance of English as an important tool for international communication has become increasingly prominent. Chinese university students face many challenges in their English learning process, among which negative transfer of the mother tongue is a factor that cannot be ignored [1]. In English writing, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse are all influenced by negative transfer from the mother tongue, which not only affects the fluency and accuracy of writing, but it also hinders the improvement of students' English writing ability.

## 1.2 Research Significance

This review mainly reviews and summarizes the impact of mother tongue negative transfer on the English writing performance of Chinese university students and the improvement of related teaching strategies, helping to reveal the specific manifestations and root causes of errors caused by the influence of the mother tongue in English writing, providing targeted teaching strategies for teachers, assisting students in overcoming obstacles caused by negative transfer of their mother tongue. Analyzing the phenomenon of negative transfer of mother tongue can help better understand the cognitive and thinking characteristics of Chinese students in the process of English writing and promote innovation and improvement of English teaching methods. It can also provide useful references for cross-cultural communication research, helping cultivate students' cross-cultural awareness and international perspective [2].

## 2. Mother Tongue Transfer

### 2.1 Definition

Mother tongue usually refers to the standard language of one's native language that one first learns. Mother tongue transfer refers to the impact of the mother tongue on the learners in the process of learning a second language. Researches on the transfer of mother tongue can be traced back to the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. Linguists at that time generally believed that the mother tongue had a great influence on second language learning. Linguist Lado, R. states that "native language transfer" refers to learners consciously or unconsciously utilizing the knowledge of the first language to help themselves learn a second language [3]. He held the belief that "Students usually apply the meaning and form of their mother tongue and its culture to second language learning." In his work 'Cross-Cultural Linguistics', he argued that in foreign language learning environments, learners heavily

rely on their native language, tending to transfer linguistic forms, meanings, and culturally associated elements of their native language to the learning process of the foreign language. American Linguist Odlin, T defined language transfer as "Language transfer refers to the effects caused by both the similarities and differences between the target language that learners are acquiring and the languages they already know or are currently learning [4]."

### 2.2 Classification

Based on the positive or negative effects of impact, mother tongue transfer is divided into native positive transfer and native negative transfer. Ellis summarized the transfer of native language into second language acquisition into the following four aspects: positive transfer, negative transfer, avoidance and overuse [5]. Positive transfer and negative transfer are discussed here. Chomsky, N believed that all human languages have similarities [6]. When the rules of the native language are similar to or the same as the rules of a foreign language, learners could transfer the native language rules to the foreign language, which could help to reduce the mistakes in foreign language learning. This is called positive transfer. In contrast, transferring items and structures that are not the same in both languages will disturb the foreign language learning and cause errors. This is negative transfer.

### 2.3 Relative Hypothesis

Lado, R firstly put forward the theory of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis [3]. He said that the level of difficulty experienced by the learners will be directly related to the degree of linguistic differences between L1 and L2. Eckman, F.R. pointed out through the theory of Markedness Differential Hypothesis that the difficulties faced by second language learners can be predicted based on the comparison between their native language and the target language [7]. Areas in the target language that are different from their mother language and relatively more obvious than their native language will be difficult. In addition, the theory of error analysis is also an important theoretical foundation, which was proposed in the late 1960s. It emphasizes systematic analysis of learners' mistakes to explore the source of their mistakes, provide a basis for avoiding these errors, help us adjust our teaching strategies, and implement more effective writing instruction.

## 3. Researches on Mother Tongue Transfer and Chinese University Students' English Writing

From the 1940s to the 1960s, most foreign language ed-

ucation researchers mainly focused on negative transfer and the erroneous impact of the mother tongue on second language writing. By the late 1980s, some researchers had proposed that native language writing could promote second language writing [8].

Domestic research started late, but developed rapidly. An increasing number of studies are focusing on writing errors caused by the native language. In recent years, domestic scholars have conducted extensive research on the phenomenon of mother tongue transfer. Wen & Guo found a negative correlation between the participation of native language thinking and writing performance, which indicated that native language interference is an important reason for losing points in composition [9]. Wang, Y. Y. found in the study of the influence of language transfer on English learning that language transfer is mainly manifested in four aspects: vocabulary, syntax, phonetics and discourse, among which vocabulary and grammar errors are more prominent [10]. At the same time, there are abundant studies on the influence of native language migration on the writing of specific groups, especially college students, including research on both English and non-English majors. Here, past empirical research and reviews are briefly reviewed, summarizing the impact of mother tongue negative transfer on Chinese university students' English writing performance.

### 3.1 Related Research Methods

There are many research methods on the influence of native language migration on Chinese college students' writing, and the most commonly used ones are the questionnaire survey method, text analysis method and interview method. Zhang, W. B. conducted a questionnaire survey on students at Xi'an International Studies University [11]. Gu, & Xiang conducted a study using 60 essays from sophomore English majors at Jilin University as an example [12]. Chu & Lou conducted interviews with students who filled out questionnaires to gain a deeper understanding of their views and feelings towards negative transfer of their mother tongue [13].

### 3.2 The Specific Manifestation of the Impact

#### 3.2.1 Negative transfer

Compared to positive transfer, the negative impact of mother tongue on Chinese university students' English writing is more pronounced, mainly reflected in three aspects: vocabulary, grammar, and discourse.

At the vocabulary level, this negative transfer first manifests as misuse of parts of speech, such as using nouns as verbs or adjectives as nouns. For example, such sentences often appear in students' compositions: "Honest is so im-

portant for every person." In this sentence, "honest" is an adjective and cannot be used as a subject. This sentence should be in the noun form of "honest", i.e. honesty [14]. In addition, there are semantic negative transfer, such as confusion of praise and criticism words, misuse of synonyms and other errors. For example, students may misuse "slender" (slim, positive) and "skinny" (bony, negative), ignoring the semantic differences and affecting the accuracy of expression [15]. In addition, there are also errors in word collocation, such as wrong habitual collocation and fixed collocation. For example, students will misuse "In contrast of" as "in contrast to" in writing, which is not in line with English expression habits [2].

At the grammatical level, there are more diverse types of problems, including run-on sentence problems, tense consistency problems, sentence structure errors, singular and plural noun problems, article usage errors, subject verb inconsistency, subordinate clause errors, passive voice errors, etc. Here, the author will select several for example discussion. Due to the influence of Chinese expression habits, many students use commas to connect simple sentences in their English writing, resulting in grammatical errors known as run-on sentences. For example, "You can come across someone, you can communicate with them, you can keep in touch with them, you connect with people around you inevitably [1]." In terms of tense, Chinese reflects the concept of time through time nouns or phrases, while English reflects tense through verb inflection. Students tend to ignore the change of verb form, resulting in tense errors. For example, "He go to school yesterday.", where "go" should be "went" [16]. Errors in sentence structure include incomplete or redundant sentence components, such as missing subjects or objects, or inserting redundant components into the sentence. For example, "This semester want to get a better grade." should be "I want to get a better grade this semester [2]." In the use of singular and plural nouns, nouns in English are divided into countable nouns and uncountable nouns, but there is no such distinction in Chinese. Students may have difficulty distinguishing countable nouns from uncountable nouns or neglect distinguishing countability, which can lead to errors caused by negative transfer from their mother tongue. The wrong example sentence is "Cooperation is a good quality for modern society which we should learn from ant." "ant" should be "ants" [2]. There are also many errors in the use of clauses, such as "No sooner people had gotten what they need than they felt self examined." The correct sentence should be "No sooner people had gotten what they need than they felt self examined [1]." At the discourse level, negative transfer is mainly manifested as problems of text structure, cohesion and coherence. Influenced by mother tongue's thinking, Chinese

students tend to have loose structure and unhighlighted theme in English writing [2]. In addition, English emphasizes the use of obvious means of connection to make the text coherent, but Chinese students may lack of connection awareness, resulting in improper connection of the text, affecting the reader's understanding. For example, Chinese students significantly use fewer pronouns (such as "this" and "it") and logical connectors (such as "however" and "therefore"), and rely more on lexical repetition or implicit logical connections. For example, students repeatedly use "students need to study hard" instead of "they need to work hard" when discussing educational issues, resulting in redundant text and poor coherence [17].

### 3.2.2 Positive transfer

At present, there is relatively little research exploring positive transfer, and it is difficult to define the evaluation criteria for positive transfer. However, some scholars still have proposed that the mother tongue has a positive impact on college English writing. For instance, some scholars think that when the grammar rules of English and Chinese are similar (both English and Chinese follow the basic sentence structure of SVO), the positive transfer of mother tongue helps students to master and use sentence patterns more quickly.

### 3.3 Causes of Problems

The main reason for the error is the language difference. English and Chinese belong to different language families, and there are significant differences in vocabulary, grammar, discourse and so on. For example, at the vocabulary level, Chinese lacks the obvious part-of-speech change marks that English has. Students are not sensitive to the part of speech when writing, which can easily cause misjudgment and misuse of the part of speech. What's more, students tend to make simple word-by-word correspondence between Chinese meaning and English vocabulary, ignoring the deep meaning of English vocabulary, resulting in confusion of positive and negative words, misuse of synonyms and other errors. Chinese and English have their own vocabulary collocation habits. Influenced by their mother tongue, students will have problems of improper collocation in English writing. The differences in grammar rules between English and Chinese are even more pronounced. According to the Comparative Analysis Hypothesis and the Markedness differential Hypothesis mentioned earlier, the significant differences in grammar usage between Chinese and English can lead to difficulties for students in learning, understanding English grammar, resulting in various grammar errors in writing. At the discourse level, Chinese writing usually focuses on the gradual deepening of background, and subliming the theme

at the end of the article, while university English writing emphasizes being straightforward and having a clear central idea. Differences in expression between English and Chinese language writing can lead to related problems for university students in English writing.

In addition, differences in cultural background and learning environment and strategies are also important causes of errors. Kramsch, C. elaborated on the close relationship between language and culture, and the differences in language communication behaviors in different cultural backgrounds may lead to learners expressing themselves in a second language writing that does not conform to the cultural habits of the target language [18]. In daily communication behaviors such as greeting and thanking, Chinese and English have their own fixed expression patterns and cultural connotations. If students do not know these differences, they are likely to use expressions that do not conform to English cultural habits in writing. At the same time, Zhang, Y. mentioned that in the process of Chinese university students' English learning, due to living mainly in a Chinese language environment and lacking enough English language input and practice opportunities, mother tongue thinking habits dominate in English writing, resulting in negative transfer [19]. Alternatively, students may not be fully aware of the existence and harm of mother tongue negative transfer in the learning process, and thus lack effective learning strategies to overcome the interference of mother tongue [16].

## 4. Suggestions for Adjusting Teaching Strategies

In view of the negative transfer effect of mother tongue on Chinese university students' writing, existing research has put forward a variety of teaching strategies to improve and help university students avoid the negative transfer effect as far as possible and improve their writing ability and level.

Firstly, teachers should strengthen the teaching of comparative analysis between Chinese and English in terms of vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and other aspects. Through comparative analysis, students can understand the similarities and differences between the two languages, then identify and avoid errors caused by negative transfer from their mother language [14]. Teachers can provide students with a variety of English input materials, such as original English works, English movies, English news, etc., allowing students to experience authentic English expressions and ways of thinking through a large amount of comprehensible input. In addition, attention should be paid to the teaching of vocabulary semantics, collocation

and usage, so that students can master the deep meaning and collocation relationship of vocabulary, and avoid the misuse and improper collocation of vocabulary caused by negative transfer from mother tongue [12]. Strengthen English grammar teaching, especially the teaching of grammar items such as tense, voice, and subordinate clauses. Teachers should help students master English grammar rules and improve their ability to use grammar by means of systematic explanation and a lot of practice [20]. Meanwhile, in English teaching, teachers should focus on cultivating students' cross-cultural awareness, allowing them to understand the cultural background, social customs, values, and other aspects of English-speaking countries. By introducing cultural knowledge and discussing cultural topics, students can be helped to broaden their cultural horizons and reduce the negative transfer of their mother language caused by cultural differences [13].

In addition to the above suggestions, the author thinks that technical tools can be used to assist teaching, such as intelligent writing software or online learning platforms. These tools can analyze students' writing content in real time, quickly identify errors that may be caused by mother tongue transfer, and provide targeted suggestions for modification and explanation. Schools can try to launch cross-cultural writing collaboration projects, organizing online or offline writing exchange activities between students and students from English-speaking countries. By completing writing tasks together, reviewing and revising articles with each other, students can experience the differences of the English language and culture, so as to have a deeper understanding of the influence of native language transfer, and learn to actively use positive transfer and avoid negative transfer.

## 5. Conclusion

The negative transfer of native language has a significant impact on the English writing of Chinese college students, which is mainly reflected in the misuse of vocabulary, grammatical errors and loose discourse structure. The differences in language and cultural thinking between Chinese and English are the main causes, leading students to overly rely on their mother tongue cognitive patterns in writing. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and the Markedness Differential Hypothesis provide theoretical support for explaining such phenomena, emphasizing the predictive role of language structure differences in second language acquisition difficulty. The existing teaching strategies suggest emphasizing the reduction of negative transfer effects through strengthening Chinese English comparative teaching, deepening vocabulary and grammar training, and integrating cultural awareness cultivation. At

the same time, the author suggests using intelligent technology to assist in real-time error correction or conducting cross-cultural collaborative writing projects to enhance practical experience. However, most of the current research focuses on negative transfer, and the potential of positive transfer in the mother tongue and the long-term effects of intervention measures still need to be further explored. Future research can further explore the potential of mother tongue positive transfer, clarify the specific performance and mechanism of positive transfer in English writing, and provide more comprehensive theoretical support for teaching practice. Finally, the author suggests strengthening the evaluation of the long-term effects of intervention measures, paying attention to university students' performance and progress at different stages of learning, optimizing teaching strategies, and achieving sustained improvement in students' English writing abilities.

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