

A Study on Positive Transfer of Chinese in Middle School Student's English Learning

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Abstract

Language transfer refers to the influence of the learning of the former language on the learning of the latter language in the acquisition of language. This effect is divided into positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer refers to the former to promote the latter's learning. In recent years, the phenomenon of positive transfer has been paid more attention by foreign language teaching workers in China, especially in middle school English teaching. Students can get twice the result with half the effort by using the similarities between Chinese and English in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. This paper will analyze the positive transfer of Chinese in middle school English learning from multi-level angles.

Keywords

Language Transfer; Positive Transfer; Chinese; Middle School English Learning.

1. Introduction

The study of language transfer in the field of linguistics started in the 1950s. Language transfer is a phenomenon in the process of foreign language acquisition (Ringbom, 1987). For a long time, it has been a very considerable topic for Second Language Acquisition(SLA). Language transfer has experienced the great development of contrastive analysis theory, error analysis theory, interlanguage theory. Native language transfer has already attracted many scholars' attention in the study of SLA. The influence of native language on SLA can be divided into two kinds: positive effects and negative effects. The positive effects, namely, positive transfer, promote second language acquisition, while the negative effects, namely, negative transfer, refer to the interference of native language to SLA (Selinker, 1972; Cook, 2003). However, for a long time in the study of SLA, people usually focus on the negative transfer of native language, while the positive transfer of native language has not received sufficient attention. According to the theory of SLA, native language is not only an indispensable background and basis for second language learning, but also a resource that can be developed and utilized (Ringbom,1987; Cenoz & Gorter, 2015). It should be pointed out that the similarities between the native language and the second language in vocabulary, grammar and culture will promote second language acquisition to great extent. Taking previous studies and the current situation of middle school English teaching in China together, this research analyzes the effects of positive transfer of Chinese on middle school English teaching, and then explores the teaching strategies suitable for middle school English teaching.

2. The Present Situation of English Teaching and Learning in Middle School

Education in China has developed rapidly in the 21st century. China attaches great importance to middle school education, and it constantly carries out curriculum reform, hoping to make middle school education enter a higher stage. As one of the three major subjects, English has its own characteristics.

2.1. The Present Situation of English Teaching in Middle School

In China, middle school English teaching is currently in the stage of basic education. Middle school students mainly learn English vocabulary and grammar and foster language pragmatic ability, then lay a solid foundation for further English learning. In current English teaching, students' English proficiency is uneven and many students still lack basic English literacy. Students' foreign language autonomous learning habits have not been well cultivated. Many schools dogmatically teach English vocabulary, grammar and do not pay attention to the cultivation of students' cross-cultural communication ability. Learning basic English words and grammar does not require students to have high language proficiency or store a lot of cultural background. Therefore, many teachers just require students to memorize these fixed English words and learn to use the corresponding English grammar. Dogmatism and mechanical teaching have become a common phenomenon. In the long run, it is not conducive to the cultivation of students' English quality.

2.2. The Present Situation of English Learning in Middle School

When it comes to many negative problems of English teaching, many people will attribute the culprit to "*examination-oriented education*". After advocating the implementation of *quality education* in China, the access to English is in all directions, from classroom textbooks to extracurricular reading materials, all of them are ways to expand our English learning. Nevertheless, many students learn English for the sake of examination-oriented needs. The real aim of learning English is not to master English to improve their cross-cultural communication. Students are still conditioned to the English learning method based on indoctrination, which does not well feedback the students' autonomous learning. This situation has contributed to some drawbacks in English teaching. English teachers usually teach English on the platform, while students just blindly listen to the teacher. It is difficult for students to have their own independent thinking in the whole process of learning.

3. The Effects of Positive Transfer on Middle School English Teaching

In the initial research, researchers thought that language transfer is only negative transfer, and that Chinese only hinders English learning. Therefore, people usually focus on the negative transfer of native language, while the positive transfer of native language has not received sufficient attention. The experience shows that we should treat the native language transfer roundly and pay attention to the positive effects. The effects of positive transfer of Chinese on English teaching involves various levels. This research mainly introduces the following three aspects: pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

3.1. The Effect of Positive Transfer on English Pronunciation

Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, while English belongs to the Indo-European family. Chinese and English belong to different language systems, but human vocal organs are the same. The production of any voice is inseparable from the lung, pharynx, mouth, nose and other speech organs. In China, The first thing students come into contact with in primary school is Pinyin. Learning Chinese is based on *Pinyin*. After students master *Pinyin*, they can easily master English pronunciation in the process of learning English speech sounds, because there are many similarities between Chinese and English pronunciation. Some English words are similar to Chinese in pronunciation, for example, *Tai ji* (*Tai Chi*), *dou fu* (*tofu*), *tai feng* (*typhoon*) etc. Many English words are transliterated directly in Chinese: *tan te* (*Tanta*), *pu ke* (*poker*), *New York* (*New York*), *wei ta ming* (*Vitamin*) etc. Words with similar pronunciation in Chinese and English are more conducive to learners' learning and memory. These words can be memorized by students with the help of *Pinyin*. After mastering the rules of transliteration of loanwords, students can draw inferences from one instance. For example, the vocabulary of

national place names basically does not need extra time to memorize. This is the effect of positive phonetic transfer.

3.2. The Effect of Positive Transfer on English Vocabulary

Chinese and English have similarities in word meaning, part of speech and lexical semantics. Chinese students can make use of the similarities between Chinese and English to produce positive transfer in English learning.

3.2.1. Positive Transfer of Word Meaning

Chinese and English have a large vocabulary size, and there are many abstract words. When students learn some simple English words, they can easily understand and master these words with the help of picture. For example, when explaining the word *elephant*, the teacher can show the students pictures of elephants, repeat the pronunciation of *elephant*, and then the students can know the meaning of this word. But for some abstract words like *memory*, *thought*, *culture*, teachers can not show students their objects or pictures, but can help students better understand and master them through supplementary explanation in Chinese.

3.2.2. Positive Transfer of Parts of Speech

Chinese and English also have great similarities in parts of speech. The notional words such as nouns and verbs in Chinese correspond to English, and the function words such as conjunctions and prepositions also correspond to English (Cai jinting & Xu huazhen, 2018). This similarity can help Chinese students use their native language knowledge to quickly master English vocabulary. For example, the *hei ban* in Chinese is represented in English by *blackboard*, and the corresponding English expression of *whiteboard* is *bai ban*. In Chinese, nouns usually act as subjects and objects, verbs act as predicates, and so does the usage of English. Part of speech similarity is conducive to improving English learning efficiency. Chinese and English expressions are very close in some ways, which can be directly verified by the lexical equivalence in functional equivalence theory proposed by American linguist Eugene Nida. Equivalent translation emphasizes we can find semantic equivalent expression in target language in the process of translation. For example, *brainwash*, *pull the door*, *red tea* etc. They are the same in expression form and connotation extension. Once students learn these expressions, it is difficult to forget them, which greatly reduces the difficulty of English learning. This is the decisive role of positive transfer of mother tongue.

3.2.3. Positive Transfer of Lexical Semantics

There are a large number of synonyms in both Chinese and English. In the process of expression, the choice of synonyms should be determined according to the context. Take *statesman* and *politician* as an example, *statesman* is the use of positive meaning, corresponding to the meaning of Chinese politicians; *politician* is the use of derogatory meaning in Chinese. *Statesmen* refer to the leaders who have a certain political foresight and ability. They can control the state power emerged in the long-term political practice. *Politicians* refer to those who engage in political speculation for the sake of their own political needs. The rules of English and Chinese are consistent here. At this level, learners can use their Chinese knowledge to learn the corresponding words in English literally and deeply.

3.3. The Effect of Positive Transfer on English Grammar

Both Chinese and English are analytical languages. In the process of foreign language teaching, English teachers can make a comparative analysis of Chinese and English. By this way, teachers can find the common grammatical features of the two languages, and promote the occurrence of positive transfer of native language.

3.3.1. Positive Transfer of Sentence Structure

The grammar of Chinese and English is reflected by sentences. English clauses correspond to single sentences in Chinese and sentences correspond to Chinese complex sentences. English and Chinese have the same components in clauses, including subject, predicate, object, adverbial, attributive, complement etc. Both English and Chinese sentences include seven sentence types: SVC, SVA, SV, SVO, SVOC, SVOA, SVOO. Table 1 in the following clearly reflects the similarities between English and Chinese in sentence structures.

Table 1. Similarities between English and Chinese in sentence structures

Basic sentence structures	Sample sentences (English)	Sample sentences (Chinese)
S+V+C	<i>I am a teacher</i>	我是一个老师
S+V+A	<i>Tom is in the house</i>	汤姆在房子里
S+V+O	<i>Mary kisses Tom</i>	玛丽亲吻汤姆
S+V+O _i +O _d	<i>Mary gave me an apple</i>	玛丽给我一个苹果
S+V+O+C	<i>We have proved her a fool</i>	我们证实她是一个傻子

Chinese and English are similar in composition and syntactic types. The same grammar help students to learn English. Teachers can make good use of this similarity to help students learn some simple English syntax. The word order of simple declarative sentences in English and Chinese is almost the same. So we can translate some Chinese sentences into corresponding English without considering the word order. For example , “这个消息令我感到难过” corresponds to "*The news made me sad*" in English. This translation is roughly the same as the SVOC of Chinese. Students have been living in the Chinese environment since they were born, and they know their mother tongue very well. With the knowledge of Chinese grammar, as long as students master the basic English vocabulary, they can translate the corresponding English sentences accurately and easily.

3.3.2. Positive Transfer of Connectives

Both Chinese and English pay attention to the cohesion and coherence of texts. In order to achieve textual cohesion and coherence, both languages use many ways of cohesion, among which connectives are the most common. There are a large number of conjunctions in both Chinese and English. Among the conjunctions in English, some of them play a similar role in logical cohesion to Chinese, such as *so, but, then, however, finally* etc. The semantic and syntactic similarity of these connectives can promote the improvement of Chinese students' English writing ability. Relying on these logical connectives in Chinese, students can easily express their ideas in English composition.

3.3.3. Positive Transfer of Object and Adverbial Clauses

The word order of English object clauses is similar to that of Chinese. *I think / believe / promise / know* in English corresponds to that of Chinese. For example, the English sentence of *I know that what she said is right*, which is similar to Chinese in expression habits, most Chinese students can easily translate it. Therefore, Chinese students need to spend less effort in learning English sentence patterns similar to Chinese.

Adverbial clauses in English are similar to Chinese in semantics and syntax. In English writing, Chinese students often use adverbial clauses guided by conjunctions such as *because, if, though, while* etc. Because they can find corresponding words in Chinese, they rarely make mistakes in the process of writing.

4. Effective Teaching Strategies to Promote Positive Transfer

It can be seen that the effects of positive transfer of Chinese on middle school students' English learning is mainly reflected in English pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Middle school English teachers should adopt different teaching strategies to increase positive transfer and improve students' English learning.

4.1. Balancing the Commonality and Differences between Chinese and English

In the process of second language acquisition, language commonality promotes the learning of second language, and language difference hinders the learning of second language. Therefore, in the process of teaching, foreign language teachers should pay attention to balancing the commonality and differences between languages. Because no matter how different the mother tongue and the target language are, there will be a certain degree of commonality between the two languages and can be widely used in the process of foreign language teaching. If teachers can strengthen the analysis of language commonality, they can enhance learners' learning confidence and motivation, and attract students' interest in English learning. If the teacher only emphasizes the negative transfer of Chinese and only requires the learner to guard against the negative transfer of Chinese, then learners will form a wrong view of language. Therefore, as an English teacher, we should pay attention to balance the commonality and difference between English and Chinese, and help students learn English more easily.

4.2. Providing Authentic Environment for English learning

In English teaching, teachers should not only let students master the basic knowledge of English, but also guide them with the knowledge of foreign cultural background, so as to create effective English learning environment for students. In this way, the foreign language and real life can be combined for teaching. Students can better understand the culture difference and form English learning thinking.

Teachers can use the following methods to create English learning environment. First, when teaching English, teachers should make full use of multimedia and other modern teaching equipment to provide students with sufficient English input. It can reduce the negative effects of Chinese. Second, English corner is a good place for students to learn English and communicate with each other. In English corner, when other students make continuous progress, it will also drive you to study hard. Teachers can prepare different topics carefully every time, but they are not simple. English corner allows students to learn more new words when they practice oral English. Third, let students watch English movies and dub them. The original audio movies have standard English pronunciation and authentic English expression. It also has some words that are not seen in textbooks but commonly used in daily life. This can create an authentic English learning environment for students. Fourth, listen to some English songs. English teachers can collect some English songs with high comprehension and put them to students. These English songs are helpful for students to learn pronunciation and improve their English listening ability.

4.3. Conducting adequate Input and Output Training

No small step, no thousands of miles; no stream, no river. A large amount of language accumulation is the premise of learning language well. Through a lot of reading and listening practice, Students can improve their written English proficiency. Students should have a wide range of reading, and intensive reading and extensive reading should be combined. Reading materials can choose British and American news, English novels and other corpus, which can make students' English expression more authentic (Su Liuhua, 2000). In the process of English teaching, teachers should make full use of various available English materials to input English into students. On the one hand, students should make the most of reading and listening

materials in the textbooks for practice. On the other hand, teachers should select some teaching materials from outside the textbooks, such as 21st century English newspaper, BBC, VOA, which have a wide range of topics and are suitable for students of different levels of difficulty. Listening, speaking, reading, writing and viewing are a complete system of language learning, and they interact with each other. There is an old Chinese saying that practice makes perfect. Constant practice and imitation training are the fastest ways to improve speaking and writing. English teachers should also pay attention to output training. At present, Chinese students' English reading and writing proficiency is higher than that of oral English, which is the result of only paying attention to input and ignoring output. Therefore, adequate input and output should be combined to promote the cultivation of all aspects of English proficiency.

5. Conclusion

This research mainly discusses the effects of positive transfer of Chinese on the learning of English pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar in middle school English teaching, and then puts forward some effective teaching strategies under the background of positive transfer. In a word, language transfer is inevitable in the process of second language acquisition. It is very important for teachers and students to have a correct understanding of positive transfer of Chinese. As the basic stage of English learning, it is more necessary to correctly understand the positive transfer. Only when we have a distinct understanding of positive transfer of Chinese, can students correctly finish off the mistakes caused by negative transfer of Chinese. Only by clearly recognizing the transfer of Chinese, can students make the most of Chinese to improve their English learning proficiency. Teachers should have a clear understanding of the effects of positive transfer of Chinese on students' English learning. In the process of teaching, English teachers should adopt different teaching strategies for different language transfer, increase the positive transfer of Chinese, reduce the negative transfer, and create the authentic English environment for students.

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