Chinese to English negative transfer: A guide to English teachers in China

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Abstract

This article sheds light on Chinese to English negative transfer. It defines negative transfer and provides examples of each negative transfer type (pronunciation, grammar, pragmatics, and culture). The examples are drawn from previous researches and from personal experience in teaching English language to Chinese students. In the end, the article culminates with countermeasures to deal with negative transfer.

Keywords: Chinese, China, English, English teachers, negative transfer

1. Introduction

English has become the language of globalization. This fact made Chinese people avid to learning it so as to integrate and increase their opportunities. However, learning English by Chinese students has always been described as difficult and filled with errors that would result in miscommunication. Transfer is "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (Odlin, 1989, p.75). Negative transfer is when elements from Chinese language impede the learning process of English language and thus result in inappropriate language. Negative transfer is so rife that is takes place at different levels: pronunciation, grammar, pragmatics and culture. Evidence lends support to the idea that L1 negative transfer takes places in every aspect of language, specifically in phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Both Odlin (1989) and Lee (1999) agree with the claim that negative transfer can happen within all the linguistic subsystems. This article will present the types of negative transfer and the countermeasures to deal with it to facilitate learning.

2. Negative transfer

Transfer is a crucial concept in second language acquisition. It is also an important notion in psychology where it refers to "the phenomenon of previous knowledge being extended to the area of new knowledge, i.e. the influence which the learning or remembering of one thing has on the learning and remembering of another thing." (Sajavaara, 1986, p.123). It was Sajavaara (1989) who initially brought the notion of transfer into the domain of linguistics where he utilized it to denote cross-linguistic influence. Nevertheless, it wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that term 'transfer' gained popularity among linguists; and educational psychologists and educators have started to utilize it to describe the application of past knowledge or experience in new situations.

The significance of 'language transfer' lessened due to the influence of Chomsky's universal grammar in the late 1960s when learners' errors were considered as evidence of creative constriction process and not as a result of language transfer (Chomsky, 1969). Starting from the 1970s, a more balanced viewpoint has come into existence and the role of transfer is recognized. Odlin (2001) contended that transfer is not merely a result of habit formation. This line of discussion diverges significantly from the behaviorists' perspective that suggests that

language acquisition is nothing more than a "habit - formation" process. "Transfer" initially emerged as one of the fundamental terms in the field of psychology. In a psychological context, it describes a scenario where pre - existing knowledge is extended and broadened during the process of obtaining new knowledge. In other words, it refers to the impacts that the act of acquiring and remembering one thing has on the acquisition and memorization of other things (Sajavaara, 1986). It is precisely this concept that constitutes the psychological foundation for "language transfer."

As Yu (2004) pointed out, in the process of second language acquisition, the knowledge acquired from the first language is certain to have an impact on learning a second language. This influence stems from the conscious or unconscious judgments made by the learners. Consequently, the similarities and differences between languages can lead to either positive transfer, negative transfer or no transfer at all. Positive transfer means that learners draw on their prior knowledge to prevent errors during language learning. This transfer is beneficial in that it aids language learning in different circumstances, and it might happen when the native language and the target language share the same linguistic features. Conversely, negative transfer occurs when learners rely on their previous knowledge and make mistakes while learning the target language (Gass & Selinker, 2001). This process involves the application of native - language patterns or rules that result in an incorrect or inappropriate form in the target language. Zero transfer describes situations where there is no transfer taking place.

3. Types of Negative Transfer
3.1. Chinese negative transfer to English pronunciation

English and Chinese are two totally different languages; with English being from Indo-European family and Chinese being from Sino-Tibetan family. This familial distance brings along with it differences in the phonetic systems of the two languages (in terms of phonemes). Difference in phonetic systems can influence EFL learners' English pronunciation. Zhang and Yin (2009) stated that "there are many dialects in China, and different local accents will cause trouble in learning English" (p.141). A common example is the difference between /æ/ and /e/ in words such as "*bad*" and "*bed*", which poses a challenge for students from Yunnan Province (Zhang & Yin, 2009).

A phoneme (the smallest unit of speech) that exists in English language may not exist in Chinese language. For example, many Chinese students pronounce "*thanks*" as [saŋks] instead of [θaŋks] or "*mouth*" as [maʊs] instead of [maʊθ] (Boussaid, 2025). The voiceless dental fricative sound [θ] does not exist in Chinese. Instead, Chinese students replace dental sounds with a voiceless alveolar fricative sound [s]. Chinese students also tend to insert a schwa [ə] between consonant clusters in English words. For example. "*sky*" would be pronounced [səkʌɪ] instead of [skʌɪ]. The same goes for other English consonant clusters (*bl/ spl/ scr/ sq..*). Chinese tend to insert the schwa [ə] to split any consonant clusters because their language is syllabic and has no consonant clusters like English.

Elaborating more on the schwa [ə], Chinese students are inclined to pronounce "*red*" as [rɛdə] instead of [rɛd] and "*orange*" as [ˈɒrɪn(d)ʒə] instead of [ˈɒrɪn(d)ʒ]. The reason behind this is that most Chinese words tend to end with vowels, and thus the negative transfer of the schwa insertion at the end of English words (Boussaid, 2025). A last example is the /v/ vs /w/ case; Chinese students pronounce "*van*" as [wan] instead of [van]. The underlying reason behind this is that the phoneme [v] is not existent in Chinese language. There is an endless list of Chinese negative transfers to English pronunciation. Teachers need be aware of them and of the reasons behind them.

Why do some students have difficulty learning certain linguistic elements in the target language but not in others? Markedness Differential Hypothesis (Eckman, 1977) propounds that languages exhibit a continuum from the most common (unmarked) to the rarest linguistic possibilities (marked) that occur in a language. Ortega (2008)

states that "the general implication is that marked forms tend to be more difficult to learn and therefore cause more interlanguage solutions" (p. 38).

3.2. Chinese negative transfer to English grammar

Grammar is a very important aspect of English language that Chinese students pay attention to (sometimes detrimental to pronunciation). Nonetheless, there are many common examples of negative transfer to English grammar that hinder the English learning process. Odlin (1989) as well as Lee (1999) uphold the view that negative transfer occurs in all aspects of language including grammar. Larsen-Freeman (1986) states that the similarities can assist in the acquisition of the target language, while the differences could work against it and result in errors. Chen (2006) also supports the view that L2 deficiencies are mainly caused by negative transfer from L1. For instance, Chinese language makes use of one verb "*kan*" to mean "look, watch, read, and visit" in different situations (*kan hei ban: look at the blackboard*), (*kan dian shi: watch TV), and (kan bao zhi: read newspaper*). However, the Chinese verb "*kan*" is translated in most cases as "look". Thus, the incorrect sentences (*look* at newspaper/ look* at TV*, instead of *read* and *watch*, respectively) (Shi, 2015).

Chinese students most of the time say "*go to home*" instead of "*go home*". This error is due to word category difference that exists between Chinese and English. The word "*home*" (jia) in Chinese functions as a noun only, but it functions both as a noun and as an adverb in English. Because of this, Chinese students write and say "*go to home*" (noun), instead of "*go home*" (adverb). In addition to this, Chinese students also tend to make errors when it comes to English collocations. Chinese students usually say "*chi yao 吃药*" which is literally translated as "*eat medicine*", consequently transferring such phrase into English (Shi, 2015).

Regarding plurals, Chinese students forget to add the plural marker "s" to countable nouns because Mandarin is non-inflectional when it comes to forming plurals. This is true when talking about tenses as well; *I watched TV* would be (*wo kan guo dian shi le 我看过电视了*). As you can see, there is no inflection such as "*ed*" attached to the verb "*kan*" (看). Instead, entirely separate characters acting as particles (过，了) are inserted in the sentence structure to indicate the past tense.

Another Chinese negative transfer to English grammar is word order. As a teacher in China, you would encounter a student who would say "*I very much like it*" instead of "*I like it very much*". This occurs because adverbs (e.g. *very*) come before verbs in Chinese language (*wo hen xihuan 我很喜欢 – I very like*), unlike English in which they can be placed before or after the verb according to the specificities of the sentence in use and the type of adverb.

The reader can also notice that pronouns are usually skipped in Chinese sentences; For example: "*when have time come and visit*" instead of "*when you have time, come and visit me*" (*you kong jiu lai ba 有空就来吧*) (Shi, 2015). The pronoun skipping negative transfer happens mainly because the context in which the Chinese conversation takes place sees no need for adding pronouns when it is totally clear to or with whom the interlocutor is conversing. While it is true that this may happen in English, it is a lot more common in Mandarin, which is a very contextual language in nature.

A very rife negative transfer to English grammar is the omission of articles (*a*, *an*, and *the*) in English. Since Chinese is contextual, it is the context that determines whether the interlocutors are speaking about a book or the book. Therefore, Chinese students may sometimes use indefinite article "*a*" or "*an*" when definite one "*the*" is needed or may use none since Chinese makes use of none.

A linguistic fact about Chinese language that English teachers in China should also pay attention to is that Chinese conjunctions come in pairs in a single sentence. Consider the example of "*because it is raining, so you*

cannot go out" (*yinwei xiayu suoyi chu bu qu* 因为下雨所以出不去). Chinese students would produce sentences like that instead of the correct ones: "*because it is raining, you cannot go out*" or "*it is raining, so you cannot go out*". The sentence "*because it is raining, so you cannot go out" (yin wei za ixia yu, suo yi ni bu reng chu qu)* is not correct in English because only one conjunction (either *because* or *so*) would suffice, unlike Chinese that may necessitate two conjunctions in one sentence. In other cases, Chinese students would say or write sentences in English without conjunctions. This error happens because Chinese, apart from being contextual, is also a paratactic language (using clauses without coordinating nor subordinating words), while English is a hypotactic language (using coordinating and subordinating words) (Zhou, 2003).

Anyone listening to Chinese students would observe that they sometimes misuse the pronoun *he* for *she* and *she* for *he*. However, if looked at with discernment, anyone would notice that the negative transfer takes place most of the time at the level of speaking, but not writing. This is because the pronouns *he* and *she* are the same at the level of pronunciation, but not in writing. The pronouns *he* and *she* are both pronounced as [ta], but are written as 他 and 她, respectively.

3.3. Chinese negative transfer to pragmatics and culture:

Pragmatics is the study of language in context. Language does not exist in a vacuum. Utterances have meanings that change according to the context in which it is said. A single situational utterance from culture A (English) may have different meanings in culture B (Chinese). A situational utterance imported from culture B and used inappropriately in culture A would result in a pragmatic failure (communication breakdown), and vice versa. Sociolinguistic negative transfer is one cause of cross-cultural misunderstanding (Kim, 2003). Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) categorized sociolinguistic transfer into three types and regarded pragmatic transfer as the second type, which involves the transfer of L1 discourse or sociocultural competence. Negative pragmatic transfer is the process by which the pragmatic application in the first language (L1) is carried over to the second language (L2), resulting in negative consequences for communication (Spencer-Oatey & Dong, 2000). For example, when Westerners are praised, they would just say "*thank you*". However, when Chinese are praised, they would just say (in most cases): "*you praise me too much/ I don't deserve it/ not really...*"). This difference is rooted in culture. It is considered normal to accept the praise in western countries, while it is considered immodest in Chinese culture to accept the praise all at once whenever it is given.

Other situational utterances that are rooted in culture are conversation starters. English people usually start a conversation by asking about how you are doing or talking about the weather (if it starts to get awkward). On the other hand, Chinese people would ask whether or not you had lunch/ dinner and what kind of food you had. In some other cultures, like Indonesian, people start a conversation by asking whether you had a shower. A prudent observer must never say that a culture is strange, but rather unique in itself.

The factor that generates the most miscommunication issues between Chinese people and westerners is the way they make, respond, and react to requests. Westerners would respond negatively to a request and say "*no*" directly. This way is considered to be rude by Chinese people, who would not say "*no*" directly, but rather smile and beat around the bush. The Chinese smile in this context, on the other hand, would be considered to mean a "*yes*" by a westerner, which isn't the case. Silence is also treated in different ways. For westerners, silence is a sign of dissent, while for Chinese people, silence "represents consent willing" (Du, 2014).

Another Chinese negative transfer to English culture that sometimes makes westerners uncomfortable is the spatial behavior of Chinese people. Chinese people tend to leave only a very short physical distance among them. A fact that can be seen when queuing in public places. On the other hand, westerners enjoy more space. Sometimes, Chinese students (4-10 years old) tend also to touch their teachers. The teacher should know that there are proxemic differences between China and western countries. This difference is due to the cultural and environmental differences that exist between these countries. A proxemic behavior that is considered normal in

China, may be unusual in another country, and vice versa. A teacher should know this fact and should not get vexed and offended whenever his personal space is invaded.

Other negative transfers to pragmatics and culture is counting with fingers. Westerners use fingers of both hands to count from one to ten, while Chinese people use only one hand. Sometimes, Chinese students do not understand that you mean when you show them seven fingers to mean number seven. The same misunderstanding occurs when a Chinese student shows number seven to his English teacher (Chinese people have specific hand gestures to communicate numbers 6 to 10 and are different in many regions of the country).
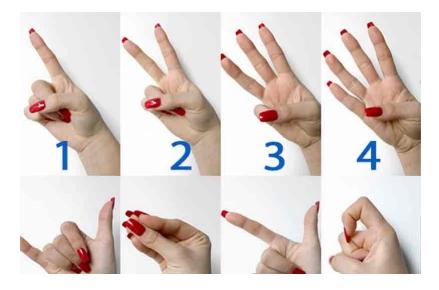

Figure 1. How Chinese numbers can be shown by hands/ Picture Recovered from
https://studyinchinas.com/numbers-in-china/

Teachers in China should also pay heed to their kinesic language (body language) so as not to result in miscommunication. When westerners want to refer to themselves as "*I*", they would do so by touching their heart or chest. However, Chinese students touch their noses when referring to themselves as "*I*". Sometimes, when a Chinese student touches his nose to mean "*I*" or "*me*", the teacher would interpret it as if the student is pausing to think. Teachers should also pay attention to their body language to what comes to pointing. In china, it is considered very rude to point at someone with the index finger. The same is true of snapping fingers and pointing at someone or something using feet. Yet, it is very polite to handle and give things using both hands. It is very vital that the teachers know these pragmatic and cultural differences to facilitate learning and to avoid any miscommunications.

3.4. Countermeasures to deal with negative transfer:
There are many ways that a teacher would address and deal with negative transfer. The first of these, of course, is knowing deeply about negative transfer and the reasons underlying them. Secondly, a teacher would opt for a contrastive analysis by which he compares and contrasts the two languages, English and Chinese, in terms of similarities and differences. To avoid reoccurring errors and make learning more productive, the teacher should focus more on the differences that usually impede the learning of English language. Communicative activities should not only focus on fluency alone, but also on overt grammar activities supported by teacher feedback (Ellis, 2000). Thirdly, the teacher should introduce pragmatic knowledge into the classroom by providing real-life examples and content. To avoid pragmatic failure, it is handy to explain when a certain expression needs to be used, how, and in which context. Last but not least, introducing cultural activities (e.g. drama, stories...) into the classroom would be a very good tool to maximize pragmatic competence of students.

4. Conclusion

This article highlighted some of the most common Chinese negative transfer to English. It also explained the causes behind those negative transfers and the countermeasures to deal with them. Teachers should bear in mind that errors which are the result of the negative transfer are part of the natural process of English learning. It is a process that needs time and practice. There is an endless list of negative transfer examples. Teachers need only know the underlying causes behind them and use this knowledge to assist students and facilitate their English language learning process.

Among the limitations facing this research is that the data collected is not universal and cannot be said to be representative of all Chinese learners of English in mainland China. Even though a qualitative approach is effective in gaining a profound understanding of the issues at hand, this approach may not provide a precise representation of an entire population. This renders the analysis of the data somehow subjective and incomplete. Further research is needed to replicate this study with both qualitative and quantitative approaches as well as with an extensive data collection from many different populations in China.

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