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## The Impact of the Negative Transfer in Syntax Learning and Its Coping Strategies: A Research Based on the Writing of High School Students

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**Abstract:** *Negative transfer, as a universal phenomenon in Second Language, has a negative effect on learning target language. How to decrease errors due to negative L1 transfer is taken seriously by linguists. Considering high school students as objects, the author collects 105 compositions (3 being useless, due to copying contents of reading comprehensions) of senior high school grade 1 from a school in Sichuan Province, and find out common syntactic errors in writing by analyzing statistics concretely. The research indicates that having a good understanding on Negative Transfer Theory can not only help student's correct syntactic errors, but enhance their writing skills. Thus, the author provides quite a few effective strategies to help overcome negative language transfer.*

**Key words:** negative transfer; high school students; composition; syntax; strategy.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Research background

With the further study of English teaching in Middle School, English teaching in writing has obtained attention of linguists gradually. Negative transfer, as one classification of language transfer, gains attentions as well. Larry Selinker, an American

linguist, proposed the terminology of language transfer, and believed that it should be researched by the prescriptive of Cognitive Science. Scholar Odlin made a clear and concrete definition of “Transfer”. In addition, Corder, an advocate of Error Analysis, considered that errors are inevitable and necessary in learning. Consequently, the study in negative transfer and English teaching becomes ubiquitous and popular. Now, linguists, scholars, and postgraduates are concerned about these topics, expecting to make new breakthroughs.

## **1.2 Research significance**

Theoretically speaking, writing, as one of the most essential skills for English learners, is prone to help them understand how much they have mastered directly and quickly. However, due to the negative transfer of mother tongue, Chinese learners, especially the middle school students, tend to output ungrammatically, leading to considerable errors. Therefore, English learners should learn continuously to have an effective contrast between Chinese and English in all-round aspects, especially in syntax, to decrease its negative impacts and output professionally, just like native speakers.

Practically speaking, the instances manifested in the paper could be of vital helps for learners to realize what errors they might make in writing, and be a fundamental reference to check whether they have made such errors. What’s more, it can help avoid some inappropriate codes of thinking, helping write grammatical and appropriate sentences and compositions and improve their comprehensive capabilities in English.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1.1 Language transfer**

Language transfer, also called cross-linguistic influence, was clearly defined by Odlin in his book *Language Transfer: cross-linguistic Influence in Language Learning*. He explained, “Transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired (and perhaps imperfectly acquired.)” (Odlin T, 1989:27). Furthermore, it has been briefly defined as “The influence of a person’s knowledge of one language on that person’s knowledge or use of another language.” (Jarvis S & Pavlenko A, 2008:1). American linguist Lado, publishing his book *Linguistics Across Cultures* in 1957, believed that when learning foreign languages, learners are willing to depend on their mother tongue that they have mastered greatly, tending to closely connect language form, meaning and culture of L1 with foreign languages (Lado, 1957). That is to say, once the components

are similar between mother tongue and target language, learners can master those fast and clearly, or not.

It is quite acknowledged that according to results of transfer, it can be divided into three types: positive transfer, negative transfer and zero transfer. Here, the negative transfer is more emphasized. Negative transfer has been defined as “The interference of previous learning in the process of learning something new, such as switching from an old manual typewriter to a computer keyboard”(The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: forth edition.2000). Therefore, this kind of transfer would affect learners negatively, contributing to the difference between native language and target language. In other words, foreign language learners would set back in their L2 acquisition due to the existence of negative L1 transfer.

## **2.2 Error analysis**

“The fact that not all error are explicable by contrastive analysis resulted in a disillusionment with contrastive analysis. Gradually contrastive analysis was replaced by the Error Analysis movement(Ellis,1994), a major claim of which is that many errors made by L2 learners were caused by factors other than L1 interference” (Hu,2011:272). The advocate of error analysis, Corder, considered that errors should not be regarded as uselessness, but something useful and natural in his book *The Significance of Learners' error* (Corder,1967). “Different from contrastive analysis, error analysis gives less consideration to learners' native language. ”(Dai &He, 2013:158 ). As an alternative of contrastive analysis, error analysis possesses profound effects for both learners and teachers. Learners who have input and digested considerable information, can renew messages, learn what they have never mastered, and master it well. According to the research of errors students made in their learning progress, teachers can gain useful information, find out their deficiencies in teaching, and ameliorate teaching methods. Under this circumstance , students can boast another improvements due to teachers' amelioration.

## **3. Analysis of the Research**

### **3.1 Research instrument**

This paper contains 105 compositions (3 being useless, due to copying contents of reading comprehension) of senior high school grade 1 from a school in Sichuan Province. This test is quite ordinary as usual, requiring students to write a letter to their English

teacher Miss Chen. The concrete requirement would list in the following steps.

假如你是李华，被英语老师 Miss Chen 发现在英语课堂上写数学作业。她收走了你的数学书。请根据以下要求给 Miss Chen 书写一封英文书信。

要点：1. 针对自己的行为向 Miss Chen 道歉；

2. 向 Miss Chen 提出希望她能归还数学书的想法。

注意：1. 字数为 100 字左右；

2. 书信的开头与结尾已为你写好（不计入你所写词数），但不得抄入答题卡。

Dear Miss Chen,
Yours Sincerely,
Li Hua

Having analyzed the compositions, the author found various errors, such as spelling, tense, run-on sentence, and etc, including errors in syntax appeared in the research. According to concrete analysis of every composition, four syntactic errors are obvious—run-on sentence, Chinglish, misuse in part of speech, sentence fragment. There's a detailed result of errors in syntax.

Error	Run-on sentence	Chinglish	Misuse in part of speech	Sentence fragment
quantity	73	49	33	16
percentage	42.7%	28.6	19.3%	9.4%

From the sheet, the fact that the number of run-on sentence is the most serious problem in syntactical errors due to negative transfer of native language is undoubted. The percentage of run-on sentence reach to 42.7%. That is to say, nearly half of the students can't avoid this error. When writing compositions, they are accustomed to writing run-on sentences, namely ungrammatical sentences. In addition, Chinglish is another error that most students would make and because of the neglect of part of speech, many students can not differentiate it very clearly. For example, they are puzzled about the words "hard" and "hardly" and cannot distinguish them, thus, they always use them in wrong context and conditions. What's worse, sometimes they write sentence fragment.

### 3.2 Errors in the study

This section would list six typical examples of run-on sentence, sentence fragment, misuse in part of speech and Chinglish. Then, some detailed reasons to explain why those errors are made by students would be presented. Lastly, several methods would be proposed.

#### 3.2.1 Errors in the syntactic structure

##### 3.2.1.1 Run-on sentence

Run-on sentence can be considered as a long sentence with a number of short sentences, some commas and just one period, without an appropriate correlative. In fact, some Chinese sentences are so long that their meanings are quite complicated. Therefore, to translate them perfectly, students should split one long sentence into two or more sentences. While students, especially Grade 1 students in high school, often neglect it and just use one sentence to translate, resulting in errors: run-on sentence. Sentence structure of English sentences is quite different with the Chinese one. In English, every sentence, complex or simple, should just contain one subject, one or more predicates and other components (except subordinate clause and several sentences connected by correctives).

Here is a form about run-on sentences typically found in the research.

Instances of run-on sentences	At first, I did the math work, that's because I had 2 papers to do that day.
	And then, I went to bed, I forgot the homework completely.
	I really need the math book, I can't finish my math homework without it.
	I am your student Li Ha, I'm sorry for that I did math homework at your English class, I think I made a stupid mistake, I apologize to you for this.
	Today, I went to school, I hadn't finished my homework.
	I really made a mistake, Miss Chen, I am so sorry, I hope you can give me math book.

From the examples, many students can't have a correct sense about the relationship between two or more short sentences. In addition, they often translate sentences according to their habits and codes of thinking. In other words, they are used to writing

and translating like Chinese sentences, including a large number of short sentences. The third sentence from the sheet is used to analyze. In reality, those two short sentences: “I really need the math book”(我真的很需要那本数学书), “I can’t finish my math homework without it”(没有它, 我无法完成数学作业), exist a casual relationship. The second short sentence is the reason of the first, Thus, the two sentences can be combined into one compound sentence. For example, “I really need the math book, as I can’t finish my math homework without it”.

To avoid run-sentence, students should do as the following steps: Firstly, confirm a correct subject for every sentence. Secondly, appropriately deal with the relationship of two short sentences or the relationship of main clause and subordinate clause. Thirdly, check whether it’s right or not.

For instance, “他有个女儿, 在北京工作, 快要回来了”. If confirming “他” as a subject, students should deal with the relationship of main clause and subordinate clause. “他有个女儿, 而女儿在北京上班, 而且快要回来了”. Using attributive clause, this sentence can be translated as “He has a daughter, who works in Beijing and is going to return soon ”. If confirming both “他” and “女儿” as subjects, sentence should deal with the relationship of two short sentences. “他有个女儿, 而且他的女儿在北京上班, 快要回来了”. Using a connective, this sentence can be translated as “He has a daughter, and his daughter works in Beijing, being going to return soon.”

### **3.2.1.2 Sentence fragment**

A sentence fragment refers to a phrase or clause used as a sentence, but in fact, it cannot become a grammatical sentence in that it can’t express a complete thought or an idea. That is to say, linguistically, English sentences should contain complete meanings, components and grammar units, while in sentence fragment, owing to the absence of some necessary components, such as a subject, predicate and even preposition, sentences become incomplete, leading to ambiguous or fragmentary meaning. Therefore, having done a translation, students should recheck it carefully. Certainly, students may find it difficult to identify sentence fragments, for they occur frequently in daily conversations, such as “hope you happy”, “tell me why” and “for me? ”. In spoken English, people can understand meaning of each other due to the same context. However, without context, fragmentary sentences are unacceptable and others cannot understand meanings well in writing or translation. Thus, students should spare no pains to overcome errors in sentence fragment.

Here is a form about sentence fragment typically found in the research.

Instances of sentence fragment	Now I will tell you why.
	So I apologize to you for the thing, which writing homework in class.
	I couldn't finish my housework unless do it on English class.
	I feel very sad that did homework in English class.
	Because in last night and stayed up late to play computer games.
	I do it until 12:00, but not be finished.

From the sheet, many students can write sentences according to their meanings, but owing to lacking clear understanding on grammatical rules, they can't write sentences correctly both in meaning and grammar. Listing the second sentence as an example, the meaning can be guessed, but it is inconsistent with grammar rules. "Writing", as a gerund, can be used as a noun, but "writing homework in class" is just a phrase, which cannot be a complete sentence. Once "writing" is considered as a subject of an attributive clause guided by which, there is no existence of predicate verb. Thus, to translate this sentence correctly, it needs changing to "I apologize to you for the thing that I did in class.", or "I apologize to you for the thing that I did homework in class." The amended one uses an attributive clause to modify "the thing", and the second one uses an appositive clause to explain "the thing".

To overcome sentence fragment, students should do as follows: To begin with, make sure whether there is a subject in your sentence. Then, make sure if a predicate verb exists in the sentence, and the verb, which appears in V-ed and should be more noticed. Later, make sure whether conjunctions exist in subordinate clauses. Finally, after your writing or translation, you should read it loudly to reconfirm.

For example, "我很高兴能与朋友们一起玩游戏", once translated as "I am very glad that can play games with friends", the sentence is inaccurate. Obviously, the word "that" can be considered as a signal word of predicative clause, but there is no subject in the clause. Therefore, to amend it, a subject "I" should be added. The right sentence should translate as "I am very glad that I can play games with friends". In addition, changing its syntactical structure, it can be translated as "I can play games with my friends, which makes me happy".

### 3.2.1.3 Misuse in part of speech

Every word has its own meaning, function and specific position, but sometimes students

cannot distinguish part of speech of those words. Chinese vocabulary, “成功” can be regarded as a noun, verb, as well as an adjective, such as “他的成功”, “他成功了”, and “他很成功”. However, there are three words to express these meanings in English vocabulary. “成功”, a noun, is consistent with “success”. “成功”, a verb, equals to “succeed”, while “成功”, as an adjective, is in accord with “successful”. To memorize words quickly, many Chinese students only have a good memory on spelling, without paying attention to its part of speech. In addition to this neglect, considerable English words exist two or more parts of speech, which confuses students who may remember one and forget others.

Here is a form about typical instances of misuse in part of speech in the research.

Instances of misuse in part of speech	I'll listen to you more careful.
	I will study English hardly.
	So the math homework is very difficulty for me.
	I really couldn't do that to make you sadly.
	Miss Chen, I know you must be anger.
	I will more and more interest in English.

From the table, students can't distinguish many word's part of speech, especially the open words, namely, noun, verb and adjective, adverb as well. Taking the third sentence as an example, “difficulty” is a noun, cannot be written with a verb. As a result, “difficulty” should be changed as an adjective, namely “difficult”. In other words, this example should be altered as “So the math homework is very difficult for me”. Furthermore, students know the rule that “be +adjective” is equal to “be +of noun (related to the adjective who has same root and meaning)”. At this time, the use of “very”, which is inappropriate for its part of speech, should be changed as an adjective. Therefore, this sentence can be also translated as “So the math homework is of great difficulty for me”.

To decrease errors in part of speech, students should spend time on memorizing its meaning, spelling, and part of speech of every word in their daily study. Simultaneously, a good understanding on its use and typical sentence plays an important role in students learning. And they need to think twice about which kind of part of speech should be chosen in that position. For example, students are asked to translate this sentence: “他们笑得很开心”. Firstly, make sure “smile” can be a verb, as well as a noun. Then, once using it as a noun, this sentence needs adding a verb to complete. If using it as a verb, “很



开心”should be used as “happily” in that only adverbs can modify adjectives and verbs. Finally, using “smile” as a noun, this sentence can be translated as “Their smiles showed their happiness”. Grammatically, the sentence is true, but there is a fault according to meaning. Therefore, it’s better not to use it. Considering “smile” as a verb, this sentence can be translated as “They smiled happily”. Both according to its meaning and syntactical rules, this sentence is completely right.

### 3.2.2 Errors in the mode of thinking

Li deems that in China, majorities of English learners prefer translating sentences one by one, according to their Chinese meanings, when asked to write compositions. Lacking translation theories and considerable practice, learners often translate sentences literally, which may lead to incomplete compositions and misunderstandings on several information(Li,2005). In other words, many students are accustomed to outputting sentences that are not consistent with language habits of native speakers, due to the code of thinking in Chinese, which is called Chinglish. Chinglish, with a feature of Chinese, often appears in their learning, which can be considered as an inevitable language phenomenon. The source of English reading is so little that many students do not have opportunity to read intensively and extensively, leading to their little understanding of English feature. In other words, they are unacquainted with English, therefore once needing to translate sentences or write compositions, they prefer to continue using Chinese collocation and structure.

Here is a form about the examples of Chinglish in the research.

Instances of Chinglish	I’m little wise but I can’t hide from your bright eyes.
	In fact, if I can ,I will not or don’t want to do the math homework in your class. But I can’t, because our homework is so much that.....
	I know it’s not a good student should do.
	Yesterday, we have many homework, so I for finish the homework that do the math’s homework in English class. but when you find me is finishing homework ,and tell me is not right.
	I promise with you. After that this thing is never happen.
	Today my math teacher call me you must write math homework. If you don’t do homework you will go out class stand widow listening me teaching every class.

From the tabulation, many students are willing to translate sentences according to

their experience in Chinese, resulting in Chinglish. Taking the third sentence as an example, it could be translated in Chinese as“我知道这不是一个好學生應該做的”. Obviously, this kind of translation is in accordance with its Chinese order. No one can deny that this sentence is completely improper. This sentence uses two predicate words “is” and “should”. Meanwhile, the word “it”, referring to a thing or animal, should not be connected with “a good student”. Thus, this sentence should be changed as “I know it’s not a good thing that a good student should do”, or“ I know it shouldn’t be done by a good student”.

In order to translate sentences naturally, students should change their habits of translating according to Chinese experience, or it would lead to inaccuracy of information. Furthermore, students need to enhance their language capabilities. Most students possess large vocabulary and are aware of relatively comprehensive grammar rules, but they cannot judge the whole from one sample, and they can’t employ what they have mastered flexibly. In Chinese-English translation, they may understand the meaning of Chinese, but they couldn’t find the most appropriate word for their translation. As a result, they’d translate it literally, leading to the existence of Chinglish in their compositions. All in all, Chinese learners should improve their abilities profoundly, both in English and Chinese, which is a great help for them to correctly understand the text and use English and Chinese adroitly.

## **4. Coping Strategies**

### **4.1 Correct understanding on negative transfer**

Negative transfer of L1, is a phenomenon that most Chinese learners would face, therefore, there is no need to feel embarrassed for it when wrong. Thus, the first significant thing you should do is to calm down and treat it objectively. Then you should understand that the existence of negative transfer brings English learning more challenges, necessities and pleasure. In other words, the fact that this impact may bring several problems in learning cannot be avoidable, but everyone need to learn something. And the progress you make during learning enriches your knowledge and broadens your horizons, leaving you a numerous amount of pleasure. Finally, you need to conquer it by your self-conscious actions. The enhancement of language is the most essential and effective way to master English listening, speaking, reading and writing, reaching to the standard of native speakers.

## **4.2 Concrete strategies on overcoming negative transfer**

Not only students should take actions immediately, teachers should also take steps to help them master a more native and natural English. Thus, concrete methods would be proposed by two angles.

### **4.2.1 The action of teachers**

Firstly, teachers should attach great importance to vocabulary in teaching. Not only teachers should emphasize its meaning and spelling, but teachers should tell them to remember quite a few more fundamental and vital matters, such as its part of speech, detailed use and typical sentence. Meanwhile, teachers should often begin spot examination from those five aspects in class. Secondly, teachers can make comparative analysis between Chinese and English syntax to strengthen their sense in syntax and let them understand the difference and similarity between English and Chinese in syntactical structure, which helps them to make full use of positive transfer of L1, and try their best to overcome the influence of mother tongue. In addition, they should help students to increase English input and enlarge the quantity of output, letting them be familiar with English structure lastingly. Besides, teachers need to explore more effective teaching modes and strategies in writing. Paying attention to students' reaction and enough preparation to guide them, teachers should encourage them to have more practice and ask them to have higher requirement for themselves.

### **4.2.2 The action of students**

Students should increase their amount in vocabulary, and try to remember the meaning of every word by interpreting it in English. Therefore, keeping an English dictionary is of great necessity. Memorizing words through its English explanation can help them to have a better understanding on its use and tend to differentiate it with other similar words in meaning, which can cultivate their English thinking consciousness gradually. In addition, they can use English-English dictionary to master information directly, and this is another excellent opportunity to input continually and learn more native English. Apparently, the most fundamental and essential step is the constant practice. As the proverb says, "Practice makes perfect!" Even if knowing numerous theories, many things cannot be done without practical actions.

## **5. Conclusion**

From the perspective of negative transfer of mother tongue, according to the rules of English grammar, the author draw a conclusion that in English learning there are four types of errors that tend to be made by students: run-on sentence, sentence fragment,

misuse in part of speech and Chinglish. In addition, the author has analyzed the reason why this kind of error would appear, made detailed analysis of some instances, and proposed some suggestions to help avoid those errors. To avoid it, students should read more English books to learn and develop English mode of thinking. Lastly, coping strategies on negative transfer of L1 are also presented. The paper indicates that having a good understanding on Negative Transfer Theory and correct ways to learn English can not only help students to avoid syntactic errors, but also enhance their writing skills.

This paper can guide students to avoid errors that are not complicated but are easily made. Particularly, coping strategies proposed at last can give references for both teachers and students. However, the source of research just comes from a composition of 102 students, and no specific questionnaire exist; therefore, the paper may not be completely objective and universal.

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