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NEGATIVE TRANSFER AND ENGLISH WRITING PROFICIENCY AMONG JUNIOR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN CHINA

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Abstract:

English and Chinese exhibit notable differences across various linguistic aspects. Hypotaxis is a significant feature emphasized in English, whereas parataxis holds prominence in Chinese. Proficiency in writing is a crucial skill to acquire in English language learning, involving the mastery of vocabulary, syntax, and grammar. Chinese students often encounter challenges in comprehending these concepts, resulting in inevitable errors in their written compositions. Such errors can be attributed to the negative transfer effect stemming from their mother tongue (i.e. Chinese). Negative transfer from Chinese may impede or disrupt the acquisition of a second language. Furthermore, the stark sociocultural disparities between Chinese and Western cultures lead to the inadvertent application of Chinese language rules in English expression, consequently compromising accurate usage. This paper utilizes language negative transfer theory, alongside comparative and error analysis theories, to analyze how mother tongue negative transfer affects the English writing proficiency of junior middle school students. Specifically, the study examines the influence of negative transfer on grammar, vocabulary, and discourse. Data for this investigation is collected through the analysis of composition materials. Additionally, the paper concludes by offering recommendations to mitigate the adverse effects of mother tongue negative transfer on English writing proficiency, with the goal of improving English language instruction for Chinese students.

Introduction

In the realm of English teaching and learning as a foreign language, listening, speaking, reading, and writing are regarded as four primary skills, among which writing posed as the most intricate and challenging. Writing requires more than just students' knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, sentence patterns. It is a means of conveying information and exchanging opinions through various modes of expression and communication, which enables learners to share their ideas, emotions, and perspectives in diverse ways. Hyland (2003, p.3) defines writing as "marks on page or a screen, coherent arrangement of words, clauses, and sentences structured according to a system of rules". Crystal (2006) also demonstrates that writing is a way of communicating that uses a system of visual marks made on some kind of surface. It is a form of graphic expression. Based on these definitions, it can be concluded that writing contains a set of graphic symbols that are related and arranged according to certain linguistic rules to combine words, phrases, and sentences. In the Chinese context, the teaching and learning of English writing inevitably encounter influences and challenges stemming from differences between Chinese and English in vocabulary, sentence patterns, grammar, and discourse structure.

In the typical English practice of Chinese junior middle school students, many students leave their English writing tasks blank. Moreover, during the teaching process, students consistently display resistance and reluctance towards assigned composition writing tasks .In English tests, students often achieve low average scores in writing. These trends highlight Chinese students' weakness in English writing, prompting our curiosity to delve into the underlying causes of this phenomenon.It is important to note that English teaching in China is primarily categorized as foreign language teaching, rather than second language teaching, as pointed out by Sha (2007). This distinction implies that learners lack a contextual framework for learning English, and there is a substantial linguistic and cultural gap between Chinese and English. This gap encompasses various aspects, including pronunciation, word formation, word order, and discourse style. Additionally, due to students' limited understanding of the cultural background and language conventions prevalent in English-speaking countries, many students fail to pay attention to the differences in expression between English and Chinese when writing. These factors, combined with their weak grasp of grammar knowledge, contribute to the recurring phenomenon of negative transfer from their mother tongue in their writing.

Furthermore, in teaching English writing at the junior middle school level, teachers frequently disregard the cultural disparities between English and Chinese. They often prioritize grammar and vocabulary training over addressing issues related to English writing habits and thinking. Similarly, at the junior high school level, teachers tend to overlook these issues and instead prioritize the teaching of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and other knowledge during instruction (Gu, 2016). In some instances, teachers solely concentrate on teaching English writing to prepare students for the high school entrance examination.

Objectives of Research
The objectives of this study are as follows:

(1)To investigate the types of negative transfer that occur in English writing among junior middle school students.
(2)To identify the reasons behind the negative transfer from the mother tongue in English writing among junior middle school students in China.
(3)To provide suggestions on how to mitigate the negative impact of the mother tongue and improve the writing ability of Chinese junior middle school students.

Research Questions
The research questions of this study are as follows:

(1) What types of negative transfer occur in English writing?
(2) What are the reasons for the negative transfer of the mother tongue?
(3) How can the adverse effects of the mother tongue be mitigated, and what strategies can be implemented to enhance the writing proficiency of Chinese junior middle school students?

Literature Review

Language Transfer Theory
In the realm of second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, the role and influence of language transfer have always held a prominent position. However, there is no consensus on the definitive definition of language transfer. One influential explanation, put forth by Odlin (1989), defines transfer as "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (p.27). Odlin (1989) further notes the similarities and differences between languages play a significant role in language acquisition, and this impact is substantiated by research in the field of language acquisition. Odlin (1989) emphasizes that language transfer is a form of "cross-language influence, wherein the mother tongue language is likely to interact with other factors.

Learners are influenced by language transfer, which allows them to articulate their thoughts and engage in language and cultural communication by drawing upon the pronunciation, word meanings, structural rules, or habits of their mother tongue during the process of language acquisition. In the case of Chinese students learning a foreign language such as English, they are inevitably affected by the transfer from their mother tongue as well as various other factors, including cultural influences. Aligned with the theory of language transfer, this study aims to elaborate and analyze the manifestations of language transfer before delving into the impact of culture on English learning. According to Selinker (1972), transfer results can be divided into two types: positive transfer and negative transfer. For the purpose of this research, the focus will be on negative transfer.

Negative Transfer
Negative transfer, also known as interference, refers to the use of native language patterns and rules that lead to errors or inaccurate forms in the target language (Richard, 2002). During the process of learning English, the mother tongue not only facilitates language acquisition but

also has a certain hindering effect on acquiring the target language, thereby impeding or modifying the development of interlanguage.

Negative transfer occurs when the learning tasks in both languages exhibit similarities and differences. This phenomenon can manifest in various ways, encompassing phonological negative transfer, negative transfer of vocabulary, negative transfer of grammar and syntax, and even negative cultural transfer. For example, learners may avoid certain structures in the target language due to a lack of understanding, leading to language divergence and an excessive reliance on familiar and simplistic structures. Bai and Qin (2018) posited that Chinese English learners inevitably transfer their native traditions, values, and thinking patterns into their English learning process. Consequently, Chinese students are adept at composing English essays in English words but in a Chinese cognitive style.

Another example is the tendency of Chinese students to overly rely on simple sentences, avoiding the complexities of clause relations, which ultimately violates the rules of English style. Furthermore, erroneous substitution and borrowing between the foreign mother tongue and the target language, coupled with misunderstandings regarding cultural background, habitual expressions, and word order in both languages, can lead to negative transfer among learners. Feng (2023) demonstrated that the process of second language acquisition, commonly referred to as language transfer, is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by a multitude of factors, including the individual characteristics of the learner, cognitive psychology, and the linguistic environment. Overall, these instances illustrate how negative transfer manifests during the learning process, highlighting the influence of the mother tongue on acquiring the target language.

Contrastive Analysis Theory
Contrastive analysis theory suggests that negative transfer from the mother tongue in applied linguistics is achieved through comparing the mother tongue with the target language. This theory, dating back to 1957, asserts that positive transfer happens when there are similarities in the learning content of the two languages, while negative transfer arises from their differences (Lado,1957). By conducting a comparative analysis of the target language and the source language, it becomes feasible to anticipate students' learning difficulties and identify error- prone areas.

With further advancements in research, the theory of contrastive analysis has sparked controversy. Studies have revealed that many of the predicted errors did not actually occur, highlighting the limitations of the contrastive analysis method in making accurate predictions. James (1980, p.163) stated that "[c]ontrastive analysis is not only problematic but also fraught with controversy. Ellis (1994, p.308) mentioned that "only some errors were traceable to transfer, and contrastive analysis could be used only a posteriori to explain rather than predict". In other words, contrastive analysis needed to be used hand in hand with error analysis. Despite the mixed reviews from researchers, it is important to acknowledge the valuable contribution of the contrastive analysis method to the study of negative transfer from the mother tongue.

Error Analysis Theory
Based on the limitations of the contrastive analysis theory, scholars have turned their attention towards the study of errors themselves. Instead of solely predicting errors, the theory of error

analysis aims to identify the underlying causes of error formation by analyzing the errors observed in students' learning processes. This theory holds significant implications for teaching. Corder (1971) argues that analyzing learners' errors enables teachers to comprehend the language stage that students have reached, as well as the learning strategies and steps employed during the second language acquisition process. In accordance with the theory of error analysis, teachers can analyze the causes of students' errors in their compositions as part of the English writing learning process in junior middle school. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the specific challenges students face, allowing for targeted instructional interventions. A significant number of Chinese scholars employ error analysis theory to investigate the nature of errors in English writing. For instance, Hu (2020) employed error analysis theory to examine the definite clause in high school English writing instruction. The study demonstrated that error analysis can reduce within-sentence and chapter errors of definite clauses in high school English writing instruction and enhance students' utilization of definite clauses in English writing, thereby enhancing their writing abilities.

In this study, the error analysis theory serves as the theoretical foundation. Composition papers from students are collected and analyzed to identify and summarize the reasons for errors. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes behind students' errors.

Methodology

Due to the existing deficiencies in English writing teaching in Chinese junior middle school, this study seeks to investigate the categories, causes, and potential improvement strategies for negative transfer in English writing among junior middle school students. Drawing upon Lado's (1957) comparative analysis theory and Corder's (1971) error analysis theory, the study adopts a quantitative research method. Firstly, composition papers were collected and analyzed to identify errors. Subsequently, interviews were conducted to investigate students' perspectives on English writing. Data from both the composition materials and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to categorize students' errors and perspectives. Brown and Clarke's (2012) six steps of reflexive thematic analysis guided the process of identifying patterns and categories within the qualitative data. Through this approach, the study aims to provide insights into the nature and origins of negative transfer from the mother tongue. Additionally, it aims to propose effective measures for mitigating negative transfer and improving students' English writing skills.

Research Subject

The research object of this study comprise 84 students from a Middle School in China. To ensure the effectiveness of the study, the subjects were selected based on strict criteria. Junior three students were chosen because they have already acquired a certain level of English writing knowledge, enabling their compositions to clearly demonstrate the negative impact of the Chinese language.

Research Instrument

To identify mistakes made by students in their writing due to negative transfer from their mother tongue, papers from the final exam of Grade Three junior students were collected. The composition requirements for the exam were as follows:

Write about your plans for the summer holidays under the title 'My Summer Vacation Plans' with no content restriction.
write an essay of approximately 80 words.
The given beginning of the essay does not count towards the total number of words.

It was a formal examination, and the collected papers accurately reflected the students' true abilities. In this study, a total of 84 papers were distributed and collected. However, four (4) of them were blank and considered invalid essay samples. Consequently, the examination consisted of 80 valid essay samples. The following provides an overview of the paper collection status.

Table 1 Collection of Composition Papers

Total Composition Papers	84
Valid Composition Papers	80
Valid Rate	95.23%

Results and Discussion

The statistics showed that a total of 165 errors resulting from mother tongue negative transfer were identified in all the valid composition samples. These errors can be categorized into three aspects: (i) grammar; (ii) vocabulary; and (iii) discourse. There were 97 errors in grammar, constituting 58.79% of the total number of negative transfer errors. Additionally, there were 56 errors in vocabulary, accounting for 33.94% of the total number, and 12 errors in discourse, accounting for 7.27% of the total number. These data were collated and analyzed as follows.

Table 2 Errors in Composition Materials

Types of errors	Quantity	Rates
Grammar	97	58.79%
Vocabulary	56	33.94%
Discourse	12	7.27%
Total	165	100%

Grammar

Due to the disparities in thinking patterns and cultural backgrounds between Chinese and English, as well as the substantial differences in syntactic structures, Chinese being an analytical language and English being a synthetic language, distinct syntactic systems for sentence formation exist (Xu, 2020). Consequently, students frequently employ Chinese syntactic rules in their English writing, leading to instances of negative syntactic transfer. Based on the analysis of students' composition materials, the types of errors are classified into the following categories:

Word Order Confusion

Error example 1: *I should on foot in trip get close to nature.*

Taherinasab (2023, p.16) stated that " it is crucial to know the grammatical order of words in every language since it helps build and understand the simplest and the most complex sentences in the language", indicating that word order is a significant factor to understand sentences. Error example 1 exemplifies a sentence with typical Chinese word order, conveying the

meaning "I can get close to nature and take a trip on foot". In English, adverbials are commonly positioned at the beginning or end of a sentence, with frequency adverbs being the exception, placed between the subject and the predicate. In contrast, Chinese typically places adverbials between the subject and the predicate.

Tense Error

Error example 2: *I will started to make some food.*

The above example illustrates the confusion between the general future tense and the general past tense. Chinese, as an analytic language, does not require changes in verb forms to indicate grammatical functions, including tense. In contrast, English, as a synthetic language, exhibits diverse and distinctive morphological changes in verb forms to convey different grammatical usage and meaning (Peng, 2012). In Chinese, the differences in sentence tenses are typically expressed using different time adverbials, while the predicate verbs remain unchanged. In English, however, the distinction between sentence tenses is primarily reflected in the changes of predicate verbs. Due to difficulties in grasping the changes in verb forms for different tenses, students often make writing errors related to tense.

Sentence Pattern Error

Error example 3: *I will spend half an hour to do that.*
Error example 4: *There are very important for us to keep healthy.*

Chinese students find specific fixed sentence patterns in English challenging to learn. For example, in error example 3, the use of "spend" requires the following gerund form ("doing"), instead of the infinitive form ("to do"). Similarly, in Example 4, there is confusion between the "there be" sentence pattern and the "it is adj. (for sb.) to do sth" pattern. These sentence patterns do not exist in Chinese, making them difficult for Chinese students to grasp.

Vocabulary

There are numerous distinctions between English and Chinese vocabulary. From a sociolinguistics perspective, each language possesses its own unique linguistic system and construction, influenced by the respective cultural traditions, values, thinking patterns, and daily habits of the respective nations. Achieving semantic and cultural equivalence between two languages is a rare occurrence. Leech (1976) argues that connotative meaning is not an inherent part of word meaning, but rather a social and cultural value that the word carries in the perception of language users. Chinese is characterized by a paratactic structure, whereas English is characterized by a hypotactic structure. English and Chinese belong to distinct language families; English belongs to the Indo-European language family, while Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. These differences and disparities make it challenging for Chinese students to learn English vocabulary and often lead to negative transfer of vocabulary. This phenomenon is manifested in the following aspects:

Pronouns

Error example 5: *You should get close to nature with you friends and teachers.*
Error example 6: *Eating enough fruits and vegetables can make my keep healthy.*
Error example 7: *It᾽s me hobby.*

In error example 5, "you" should be replaced by "your". In error example 6, "my" should be replaced by "me", and in error example 7, "my" should be used instead of "me". Personal pronouns in English refer to pronouns that represent people or things, while possessive pronouns refer to the various relationships associated with personal pronouns. Chinese language does not emphasize the distinction between the usage of personal pronouns and possessive pronouns. In English, the correct forms of adjective possessive pronouns and nominal possessive pronouns must be used in accordance with their respective semantic roles. Otherwise, personal pronouns and possessive pronouns can be misused. Chinese morphology does not make a distinction in the usage of these two pronouns. In English, there is a difference between the subjective and objective cases of personal pronouns, whereas in Chinese, the form of subject and object remains the same. It is due to these differences that students make the aforementioned mistakes.

Articles
Error example 8: *Playing sports for half a hour everyday can keep us fit.*

In the above example, "a" should be changed to "an". In Chinese, there are no articles, and the corresponding meanings are expressed flexibly by selecting appropriate quantifiers and numerals based on the context. However, in English, there are definite and indefinite articles, as well as a distinction between "a" and "an". The usage of "a" and "an" can be challenging and prone to errors for Chinese students. Due to the absence of relevant concepts in Chinese, students often overlook or misuse articles.

Conjunctions
Error example 9: *We can either jump and run everyday.*

In the example above, "and" should be changed to "or" because "either... or..." is a fixed collocation. English places special emphasis on the use of formal conjunctions, while Chinese focuses more on semantic conjunctions. Due to the influence of Chinese hypotaxis, Chinese students often omit conjunctions or make collocation mistakes when using conjunctions in their writing.

Prepositions
Error example 10: *I should do more exercises at half an hour.*
Error example 11: *I will learn how to cook with my mother.*

Khatter (2019, p.371) stated that "using the appropriate preposition is one of the special difficulties for EFL learners due to the literal translation from Arabic (L1) into English (L2)". Chinese EFL learners face the same problem as well. In example 10, the correct preposition is "for", and in example 11, "with" should be replaced with "from". The number of prepositions in Chinese is significantly fewer than that in English. According to the statistics of Curme (1931), a renowned American linguist, there are 286 prepositions in English. English prepositions primarily introduce nouns, pronouns, or equivalent words or phrases to other words in the sentence. They express various relationships such as place, time, object, manner, reason, purpose, exclusion, apposition, and can even function as adverbs. On the other hand, Chinese prepositions mainly introduce nouns or pronouns to verbs or adjectives, and in many cases, it is challenging to find the corresponding preposition in Chinese.

Misuse of Part of Speech

Error example 12: *It＇s bad for my healthy.*

Example 12 shows that "healthy" should be changed to "health" in the example above. In Chinese, the forms of nouns, verbs, and adjectives in most words are the same, and their meanings are distinguished only in specific sentences. This is completely different from English. Consequently, students often overlook the selection of appropriate parts of speech when using English words.

Incorrect Use of Lexical Connotation

Error example 13: *We should eat too much fruits.*

In this example, the use of "too much" is inappropriate because it is typically associated with derogatory words. The incorrect use of vocabulary connotation is primarily attributed to cultural differences. China and Western countries belong to two distinct cultures, and vocabulary carries not only conceptual meanings but also different connotative meanings. Leech (1976) categorized semantics into seven types based on language function, with connotation referring to connotative meaning. Leech argues that connotative meaning is not the fundamental part of word meaning but rather a social and cultural value perceived by language users. If students fail to grasp the connotative meaning of words, they are prone to making mistakes in their use of connotation in writing.

Discourse

Error example 14: *The summer vocation is coming. I will eat fruit and vegetables everyday, they can keep me healthy. I can do exercise after dinner. In my summer vocation, I want to get close to nature with my parents and friends, we will take a walk, go swimming or have a picnic. In my free time, I will learn how to cook, such as noodles, chicken soup and fried rice. This is the plan for my summer holiday.*

According to Wei (2004), regardless of the form and length of a text, sentences are logically organized in a coherent manner through specific means of connectivity, establishing semantic relationships between them. The semantic connection between sentences plays a vital role in discourse coherence, and this connection is often achieved through cohesive devices. English and Chinese, influenced by distinct modes of thinking, exhibit noticeable disparities in discourse patterns. English discourse follows a "linear" structure, with writing characterized by clarity and directness. On the other hand, Chinese writing adopts a "spiral" approach, whereby the subject is not directly addressed but introduced through other angles. In English discourse, sentences are interconnected by grammatical rules, emphasizing grammatical logic, and employing conjunctions or pronouns. In Chinese, an article typically revolves around a central topic, and each sentence in the article relates to this topic, emphasizing semantic logic. These differences in English and Chinese discourse also impact students' English writing to some extent.

In this example, there is not conjunctions between sentences "I will eat fruit and vegetables everyday, they can keep me healthy" and "I can do exercise after dinner", this is typical in a Chinese way of thinking due to that Chinese is logically cohesion. However, this kind of connection between sentences is not very native in English. Thus, it's better to add "And" or "In addition" between the two sentences. Furthermore, the last sentence "This is the plan for

my summer holiday" is another typical Chinese way of writing. In normal circumstances, The topic and main ideas are summarized at the end of an article. However in English, the topic usually lays in the beginning sentences. Thus, it's more native to place "I will eat fruit and vegetables everyday" before "To spend a meaningful holiday, I have some plans for it".

Causes of Errors

Causes of the aforementioned writing errors of junior middle school students were summarized in this section. The data from the interview revealed that the reasons for these errors fell into three categories: differences between Chinese and English languages , student-related factors, and teacher- related factors.

Negative language transfer from Chinese to English is the direct cause of these errors. According to Ellis (1994), language transfer, particularly negative transfer, is more prevalent in the initial stages of acquiring a second language, when learners face challenges in comprehending and articulating the target language. They frequently rely on their native language as the primary learning strategy, resulting in frequent language transfer. The variation in grammar, vocabulary and discourse between English and Chinese poses a challenge to students when writing in English, particularly for junior high school students who struggle to grasp these nuances. This often leads to them relying heavily on the linguistic rules of their mother tongue, Chinese, which do not transfer well to English and results in language errors.

The primary factor contributing to these errors is the students' lack of English proficiency. Krashen (1983) posited that in the process of language learning, learners fall back to the native language and apply its rules when conveying ideas in a second language due to a lack of mastering of the target language. Thus, students often apply Chinese grammatical structures to English writing, leading to errors due to negative transfer from Chinese.

To address the grammar errors, students should regularly practice English grammar and sentence patterns during their writing exercises to mitigate the impact of negative transfer from their mother tongue. The study data revealed that grammar had the highest error rate among students, emphasizing the importance for teachers to thoroughly analyze the grammatical differences between English and Chinese in writing instruction. Regarding vocabulary errors, students should concentrate on understanding the disparities and variations between Chinese and English vocabulary and engage in more practice. Additionally, apart from explaining grammar and vocabulary, emphasis should be placed on the proper use of conjunctions and other discourse markers to ensure that compositions adhere to the conventions of English discourse.

Another significant factor in these errors is inadequate teacher writing instruction. Most educators still adhere to the traditional teaching approach of regarding vocabulary and grammar as the foundation of English learning. They devote most of the class time to these areas, even breaking down writing instruction into the combination of vocabulary and grammar. As a result, the majority of class time is allocated to these activities, with writing often detracted into the sum of vocabulary and grammar. Inadequate instruction on discourse knowledge may result in macro-logical confusion and inappropriate articulation errors in students' writing. Absence of instruction on writing methods and strategies may lead students to exclusively employ simple, unvaried sentences in their writing, lacking awareness of varied, advanced

vocabulary and complex sentence structures that add depth to their writing. Such instruction fails to foster high-level comprehension of the essence of writing and its learning.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study indicated that writing errors were primarily distributed across three areas: grammar, vocabulary and discourse. The most common grammar errors identified in this study are related to divergence in word order, tense, and sentence structure between English and Chinese. Vocabulary errors primarily occur in pronouns, articles, prepositions, conjunctions, and other word categories. These errors stem from the absence of these words in Chinese or their distinct usage in English. For instance, since articles are nonexistent in Chinese, students often overlook their inclusion in their writing. In terms of discourse, English prioritizes morphology, while Chinese focuses on meaning. Unfortunately, students often overlook the disparities between English and Chinese in discourse.

In the process of learning English writing, the influence of mother tongue negative transfer is inevitable. Therefore, students should adopt a comparative learning approach that focuses on the disparities between Chinese and English. By doing so, they can overcome the impact of negative transfer. Specifically, students should pay attention to the use of pronouns, prepositions, articles, and conjunctions in vocabulary. They should also prioritize understanding the connotation and meaning of vocabulary,mastering sentence patterns, tense, voice, and word order structures. In terms of discourse, students should strive to express their thoughts directly and connect the structure of their compositions using appropriate conjunctions.

Teachers can take steps to reduce writing errors by implementing targeted training in grammar, vocabulary, and discourse to minimize negative transfer from Chinese to English. They should also carefully review students' work for mistakes, categorize and summarize errors, and promptly correct them. Implementing error correction strategies can leave a lasting impression on students, leading to improvements in their writing skills. Consolidating students' basic knowledge is crucial. For example, vocabulary, in particular, plays an important role in language learning. A larger vocabulary allows the students to express their thoughts effectively in writing, while a limited one can hinder their abilities. Improving vocabulary is an essential part of language acquisition. Thirdly, teachers should revise their traditional approach to writing instruction by utilizing cooperative and group learning strategies that engage students in classroom activities, enhance students' interest in writing, and promote learning motivation.

Acknowledgment

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