

MOTHER TONGUE INFLUENCE IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF CHINESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

This article is on the influence of mother tongue on Chinese learners of English. Some of the mother tongue influences that happen in the process of learning the English language in China are: phonological transfer, syntactic transfer as well as grammar and tense. The data obtained in this research was gotten using the case study and interview method. The researcher was able to make some findings that early exposure to the English language, exposure to the English culture and having a native English teacher play a huge role in reducing the mother tongue interference in the learning of the English language. The researcher made these suggestions based on the findings: organizing seminars for Chinese English teachers, creating more time for teaching oral English, reward-punishment system should be introduced to encourage the use of Standard English language in schools, students should be discouraged from communicating in mother tongue in classroom environments, teachers should introduce drilling especially in the English phonetic classes.

Keywords: second language learning, mother tongue interference, phonological interference

Introduction

English learners irrespective of their different backgrounds, face difficulties in learning English as a second language and such difficulties can be linked to mother tongue interference. Mother tongue is a language which is unconsciously acquired from birth. The Chinese English learners are not left out in this as it is a global phenomenon, it is discovered that the Chinese language just like any other language have some adverse effect on Chinese learners of English, most especially in the phonological aspect. Chinese students face different phonological problems in the process of learning the English language. Learning to pronounce the expressions of a second language means acquiring new pronunciation habits and overcoming the biases of the first language (Cook, 1996). This article is designed to point out the mother tongue interference which are commonly faced by Chinese English learners. This article may not exhaust all the transfer errors but definitely will elicit the implications or effects of Chinese Mother tongue on Chinese English learners.

Methodology

The case-study approach was adopted by the researcher in carrying out the research considering the need for a thorough and in depth information on the research topic. According to Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster (2000), case study refers to research that investigates a few cases in considerable depth. The case study approach provides a deeper and more detailed understanding of the case compared to studying many people in a more superficial way. Mitchell (1983) defined a case study as a “detailed examination of an event (or series of related events) which the analyst believes exhibits (or exhibit) the operation of some identified general theoretical principles” (p. 192). A case study is intensive research in which interpretations are given “based on observable concrete interconnections between actual properties and people within an actual concrete setting” (Stoecker, 1991, p. 95). Stoecker believes a “case study is the best way by which we can refine general theory and apply effective interventions in complex situations” (p. 109). The target population of this study consist

of Chinese learners of English aged 3 to 10.

Theoretical Review

A second language (L2) can be said to be any language a person acquires or learns after the native language (L1). According to Wikipedia, 'A person's second language, or L2, is a language that is not the native language of the speaker, but is learned later. A speaker's dominant language, which is the language a speaker uses most or is most comfortable with, is not necessarily the speaker's first language. The second language can also be the dominant one'.

Second language acquisition is the process of learning another language other than one's native language. There are other second language acquisition theories but for the purpose of this study we will be discussing Stephen Krashen's theory monitor model theory. Krashen's Monitor Model evolved in the late 1970s in a series of articles (Krashen 1977, 1978) and was elaborated and expanded in a number of books (Krashen 1981, 1982, 1985; Krashen and Terrell 1983). According to Stephen Krashen, language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill, but meaningful interaction in the target language in which speakers are not concerned with the form of the words but with how well their utterance are conveyed and understood. Competence in the language is acquired from receiving comprehensible input without having to undergo any formal instruction on grammar of the language. Krashen's theory of second language acquisition consists of five main hypotheses:

1. Acquisition Learning Hypothesis
2. Monitor Hypothesis
3. Natural Order Hypothesis
4. Input Hypothesis
5. Affective-filter Hypothesis

Acquisition Learning Hypothesis

The Acquisition-Learning distinction is most widely known among linguists and language teachers and the most fundamental of the five hypotheses in Krashen's theory. According to Krashen, Acquisition learning hypothesis consist of two independent system of foreign language performance which are 'the acquisition system a' and 'the learned system'. **The acquired system (acquisition)** is the subconscious acquisition of a language, it can be likened to what happens when a child unconsciously starts to reproduce correct grammatical structure after having been exposed to a language in a natural environment. In such situation, the child concentrates in communicating his or her message which flows naturally from his mental lexicon. **The learned system (learning)** is the conscious acquisition of a language, where an individual learns a language through formal instruction with the rule of grammar being the focus. Krashen went on to say that acquisition is more important than learning one's grammatical knowledge which does not guarantee correct usage of the grammar learned but fluency in a language requires the person to efficiently communicate the message so therefore language should be acquired and not learned.

Monitor Hypothesis

According to Krashen, The monitor hypothesis explains the relationship between acquisition and learning and defines the influence of learning on acquisition. He believes that every second language learner has a monitor that he uses to refine his language. He is of the conviction that the acquisition system initiates utterance, while the learning system performs the role of the 'monitor' or the 'editor'.

Natural order Hypothesis

This hypothesis is based on research findings (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Fathman, 1975; Makino, 1980 cited in

Krashen, 1987) which points that the acquisition of grammatical structures of a language follows a 'natural order' which is said to be predictable. This means that certain grammatical structures are likely to be acquired before others, the acquiring patterns for a second language remains the same for both children and adults but are different for the first and the second language.

Input hypothesis

The Input hypothesis explains how a learner acquires a second language and the processes involved. Krashen is of the belief that learning progresses and takes place in a natural order and that not all individuals will have the same level of competence. He goes ahead to advocate that natural communicative input should be used to meet individual needs and that the input should not consist on intentional use of grammar structures but natural use.

Affective-Filter hypothesis

According to Krashen, a number of 'affective variables' play a facilitative, but non-causal role in second language acquisition and these variables are said to include, self-confidence, motivation, personal traits and anxiety. He is of the believe that a learner with a high level of motivation and a low level of anxiety has higher chance of success in the acquisition of a second language than a learner with a low level of motivation and a high level of anxiety. Lower levels of motivation and confidence tends to hinder the process of subconscious language acquisition.

Literature Review

Before we discuss or do some literature review on mother tongue interference, it is best we first understand the concept of mother tongue. According to Wikipedia, a first language, native tongue, native language, or mother/father/parent tongue, is a language that a person has been exposed to from birth or within the critical period. In some countries, the term native language or mother tongue refers to the language of one's ethnic group rather than one's first language. Mother tongue could be defined as the language which a group of people considered being inhabitants of an area acquired in the early years and which eventually becomes their natural instrument of thoughts and communication. Mother tongue is the first language that a person learned. In terms of that view, the person is defined as a native speaker of the first language, although one may also be a native speaker of more than one language if all of the languages were learned without formal education, such as through cultural immersion before puberty (Oluwole, 2008). Children tend to acquire their mother tongues in social situation such as homes and schools. Social, cultural and family values are passed on to a child through the mother tongue and this can be seen in Piyade's words "Language mediates the learning of social rules and cultural values" (Piyade 1990, p. 11). Mother-tongue (L1) interference refers to the influence of the native language of the learner on his or her acquisition of the target language. Target language is the language the learner is aiming to learn, it can also be called L2.

Mother tongue interference is a common problem which often arises when teaching English and in order to understand and solve this particular problem, contrastive analysis is employed because it entails the study of both languages. Contrastive Analysis is a method used in the 1960s and early 1970s to explain why some features of a target language were more difficult to learn than others. (Mozlan, 2015)

Lado's Linguistics across Cultures (1957) is of the view that those items of a target language similar to the learners first language will be easily learned while those different from the target language will be difficult for the learner to acquire and this is what the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis suggests (Mozlan, 2015). Kolawole (2002) is of the belief that Nigerian students' performance in English language was poor due to a number

reasons such as the use of mother tongue; he goes on to say that some students do not understand the grammar of the English language because their teachers themselves do not have an in depth knowledge of the English grammar which in most cases make the teachers resort to transfer of the grammatical structure of the mother tongue into the English language. Some teachers are seen code switching which enables them use mother tongue in explanation of concepts, and this in turn have some adverse effects in the acquisition of English standard grammar.

Ashari and Munir, in Joseph (2015) advocated that the interference occurred in sixteen terms of grammatical errors which involved word order, number, personal pronouns, genitive and possessive pronouns. They however claimed that the interference occurred due to the fact that the students did not receive input that facilitated them to write and also can be attributed to lack of students' knowledge in second language acquisition.

On the phonological level, Luo (2014) discovered that some Chinese students have difficulty distinguishing the English pronunciation between the alveolar nasal sound [n] and the alveolar liquid lateral sound [l]. Akinwamide and Tergujeff (2012) explain this as mother tongue interference, which frequently happens in second language teaching and learning.

Odiye and Okafor (2020), stated that in the process of second or foreign language acquisition, the learner's mother tongue or dominant language directly or indirectly affects the acquisition of the target language, and plays a positive or negative role in promoting or interfering respectively. Their paper adopts an analytic and a descriptive approaches in analyzing the positive and negative language transfers of Nigerian students' Chinese language essay writing in the Department of Chinese Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, from four aspects: grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and mechanical accuracy.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data was analyzed based on 40 case studies obtained

Phonological influence

Category	Numerals	Percentage
Chinese students taught by a foreigner native teacher	12	30%
Chinese students taught by a local teacher	28	70%

The table above summarizes the phonological influence based on the case studies gathered. Altogether there were 40 students of different age bracket, among the 40 students, 12 were taught by foreign teachers and 28 were taught by the local teachers. After checking the percentage, it was discovered that the number of those students taught by the local teachers are higher than those taught by the foreign native speaker.

Morphological influence

Category	Numeral	Percentage
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Chinese students exposed to English from the age of 3 to 5	15	37.5%
Chinese students exposed to English from the age of 10 to 13	25	62.5%

The table above shows that the data collected was divided into two groups. The first group was exposed to English from the early age while the second group were exposed to English from the age of 10 to 13. The first group with the 37.5% had more understanding of the English morphology than the second group (62.5%) because of their early exposure to the English language.

Semantic Influence

Category	Numeral	Percentage
Chinese students exposed to the English culture	19	47.5%
Chinese students not exposed to the English culture	21	52.5%

Exposure to the English culture through movies, books and music helps in having a more understanding of the English semantic. Students who are exposed to the English culture understand the English semantic there by reducing the mother tongue interference in the learning of the English language. From the above table, the statistics shows that the students with no exposure to the English culture (52.5%) experience the mother tongue interference more those that have been exposed to the English culture.

Findings

Some findings were made in the process of carrying out this study, and this cuts across, phonology, grammar, morphology e.t.c. The researcher having extensively studied a contrastive analysis of the English and Chinese sound systems made some findings on some of the mother tongue transfers and reasons for such.

The researcher discovered that Chinese and English both have aspirated stops and affricates but the Chinese aspirated stops are strongly aspirated while the English aspirated stops can be said to be so only on a word initial position. English stops found in the middle and final positions are weakly aspirated with the exception of /t/ and /k/ which are strongly aspirated before a stressed syllable. Voiceless stops are unaspirated when they come after /s/ E.g. 'spill' and stop are unreleased when they appear before other consonants, but the Chinese English learners tend to unconsciously pronounce the voiceless stops as strongly aspirated in every situation they find such stops, except in a situation where it has been drilled and corrected.

Final consonants are difficult for the Chinese learners to produce reason being that Chinese has only two final consonants which are the /n/ and /ŋ/ sounds. Two things happen when a Chinese learner tries to produce these final consonants, it is either the final consonant is lost in the process or a vowel is added at the end of the word making the word a syllable longer. Example, in an attempt to produce the word 'tap', many Chinese English learners produce words like 'ta' instead of 'tap'. After the first attempt which resulted in the production of 'ta', when corrected, they tend to produce word like 'tapu'. You can see the omission or dropping of the final consonant in the first attempt and the addition of a vowel in the second attempt. This is one of the difficulties Chinese English learners encounter but with proper drilling and practices, the correct pronunciation will be achieved.

Consonant clusters (text, accent) Chinese words only have up to 2 consonants and just one at the end of a word which are basically m, n, ng but in English, you can have up to 3 to 4 consonant clusters. Therefore when a native Chinese pronounces some English words, they tend to drop some consonants in order to fit the Chinese structure. Another way the Chinese learner of English handle such challenges is by adding a vowel at the end of the word and further breaking the monosyllabic word into two syllables.

In American English there are two types of L, these are the light /l/ as in listen when the tip of the tongue touches the upper pallet and the dark /l/ which appears after a vowel and at the end of a word. This is when the tongue pulls back or the tip of the tongue maybe not touch the upper pallet. In Mandarin either exists the l sound but it never appears at the end of a word which shares the same feature with the light l. in an English word with a dark l, the Mandarin English learner ends up replacing the sound with an /u/ sound.

Nouns in Chinese are not inflected for plurality unlike in the English language so in most cases, this pose as a problem to Chinese English learners. For example, the sentence ‘ I see birds’, A Chinese will normally discard the plurality in the bird and say something like ‘我看见鸟’, and this is a mother tongue transfer .

The English word classes do not coincide with the Chinese, the adjective in Chinese can be said to syntactically perform the function of verbs and this has caused many Chinese grammarian to treat adjectives as a subclass of verbs. For example the sentences ‘she sings on the stage’

/ð /and /θ/:When learning the English language, acquisition of those sounds shared with English are easy for the Chinese English learners compared to sounds like /ð/, /θ/ and /v which do not exist in Chinese Language. These sounds are extremely difficult for the Chinese to produce due to the fact that there is no sound in Mandarin Chinese which its production takes place in the same place of articulation just as the English counterpart. In an attempt to produce these sounds, Chinese English learners may end up producing sounds like /z/, /s/ or /ʃ/, it is quite common to hear Chinese English learners to say “I sink” when the intended sentence is “I think” and “my mouse” instead of “my mouth”. The /v/ sound is not found in the Chinese Language which leaves the Chinese English learners substituting it with the /w/ sound. For example you tend to hear words like ‘woice’ when the intended word is ‘voice’ and ‘wet’ for the word ‘vet’.

Long vowels: unlike the Chinese Language, the English language has a short and long vowel. The long vowel /I:/ is pronounced differently from the short vowel /i/, for example in words like ‘sheep’ and ‘ship’. These vowels provoke a difference in meaning in English words which they appear in respectively. The Chinese English learners find it difficult adapting to the long vowel because it does not appear in the Chinese Language and the Chinese learners of English are likely to mix up their pronunciations when they confront such pairs as /ɪ/ and /i/, /ɑ/ and /ɔ/, /ʌ/ and /a /, and /ʊ/ and /u/

Example:

ship, sheep

pot, port

dip, deep

Conclusion

This article is intended to identify the influence of mother tongue in Chinese English learners with the hopes of shedding light on the Chinese negative transfer while acquiring the English Language. Chinese English

learners usually substitute the Chinese phonemes for English instead of creating a new set of English sounds, they tend to replace them with similar Chinese sounds. Having this in mind, it is however important for English teachers in China to have an in depth knowledge of both English and Chinese phonological systems so as to achieve a standard pronunciation in the target language.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings, in order to improve performance of English language learning of students:

1. Schools should organize seminars for Chinese English teachers.
2. Schools should create more time for teaching oral English.
3. Reward-punishment system should be introduced to encourage the use of Standard English language in schools.
4. Teachers should introduce drilling especially in the English phonetic classes.

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