

A Study on the Role of Language Transfer Theory in Junior High School English Grammar Teaching

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Abstract

English and Chinese, as two languages, have some similarities and many differences. Students will be influenced by Chinese unescapably when learning English grammar. These influences caused by Chinese, of which have a positive effect, namely, positive transfer, promoting students' learning initiative and effectiveness. And on the contrary, a negative influence, namely, the negative transfer, hindering students' learning initiative and effectiveness. It is found that if positive transfer is promoted and negative transfer is reduced, Chinese will play a more positive role in junior high students' English grammar learning and improve their initiative and effectiveness in English grammar learning. Based on this, this research puts forward corresponding measures, including applying language transfer to English grammar teaching, enhancing initiative of English grammar learning and applying contrastive analysis and error analysis to English grammar teaching.

Keywords— language transfer theory; junior high school students; English grammar teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, language is made up of sentences, which consists of words and some special symbols. If we put some words and some symbols together randomly, that will not make a sentence. There must be some rules to organize these words, this is grammar. There is no doubt that in today's rapidly developing world, English remains a powerful tool for communication, and at the same time, Chinese people are attaching more and more importance to English learning. Grammar is a part of English teaching. In foreign language teaching, it is necessary, but not self-sufficient. We should be clear about its role in junior high school.

Throughout the history of foreign language teaching, second language educators have alternated

between teaching methods that encourage students to analyze language in order to learn it, and teaching methods that encourage students to use language in order to acquire it. Ultimately, to this question, should we teach grammar? Ellis (1997) gives a positive answer: Yes. Grammar teaching cannot be separated from the classroom. It should not only tell students how to speak and write, but also explain to them why they speak and write the way they do.

Grammar teaching has been neglected in China since the rise of communicative approach in the 1980s. In communicative language teaching, many teachers seem to think that students can obtain new structures through active practice and use. During this period, a great deal of research and writing has been done on communicative teaching. However, second language

acquisition is usually achieved in an acquisition-rich environment. In an environment with few learning opportunities such as China, there are few opportunities for natural exposure to the target language. We cannot expect students to acquire grammatical ability only through interaction and communication. Since the 1990s, more and more attention has been paid to grammar teaching. The newly issued "High School English Curriculum Standards" requires teachers to clarify the purpose of grammar teaching and adapt to grammar teaching methods.

Recently, many Chinese teachers attach great importance to grammar teaching. However, there is a common phenomenon in grammar class, that is, teachers teach grammar mechanically. They just list grammar one after another on the board without adding the following explanation. They ask learners to memorize the items mechanically. Judging from the history of English grammar teaching at home and abroad, the focus of the debate on grammar has shifted from "whether to teach" to "how to teach". Therefore, it is the most urgent task for English educators and teachers to study the "time-saving and efficient" English grammar teaching mode.

In fact, for second language learners, they can't help but be unconsciously affected by the negative transfer of their mother tongue in English grammar learning. Therefore, in this context, it is particularly important for English teachers to cultivate students' awareness of positive transfer of Chinese and improve their initiative and effectiveness in learning English grammar.

Language transfer research has many inspirations for our foreign language teaching and research. Language transfer research not only focuses on the objective similarity of language but also emphasizes learners' subjective cognition and contextual factors (Cai, 2024), providing important inspirations for second language teaching. Both the contextual factors of second language acquisition and the learners themselves have undergone significant changes (Yan,

2025). Comparative analysis is an indispensable auxiliary means in foreign language teaching, and transfer research is inseparable from error analysis (Guo, 2001). If language transfer theory is better used with contrastive analysis and error analysis, junior high school students' English grammar learning initiative and effectiveness will be improved to some extent.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1 Language Transfer Theory

Language transfer has been an important research topic in the fields of applied linguistics, second language acquisition and language teaching for at least a hundred years (Dai & Wang, 2002). Language transfer refers to the psychological process whereby prior learning is carried over into a new learning situation, or the influence as a result of similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired (Odlin, 1989). According to the influence of the first language on the second language learning, there are two kinds of language transfer: when the first language plays a positive role, it will help the second language learning. This effect is positive, which is the so-called positive language transfer. Negative transfer refers to the impeding of current learning and thinking owing to the application of non-adaptive or unsuitable information or behavior. So, negative transfer is a kind of interference effect of prior knowledge causing a slow-down in learning or solving of a new assignment when compared to the performance of a hypothetical control group without any respective previous experience.

It is essential to know that the positive and negative transfer are not mutually incompatible and therefore, in fact, real-life transfer effects are likely to be a mixture of both. Even though negative transfer may not help learners in the second language learning, from another perspective, we may reduce the negative transfer or just take a right attitude to it.

2.2 Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis

Contrastive analysis is a method of comparing languages in order to identify potential errors, with the

ultimate aim of distinguishing between what needs to be learned and what does not, as well as judging which areas are easy to learn and which are difficult to learn in the context of second language learning (Gass & Selinker, 2001:72). Early contrastive analysis was associated with behaviorism and structuralism (Hu, 2015:268). Its disadvantages are that, first of all, the difference between mother tongue and target language can be defined linguistically, but sometimes it can be difficult psychologically. An item that is linguistically difficult may not be psychologically difficult. Second, contrastive analysis cannot predict all errors, and there are some errors that contrastive analysis cannot predict. Thirdly, the difficulties predicted by contrastive analysis are not accurate. Some of the difficulties predicted are actually not difficult for learners.

By using contrastive analysis, it is difficult to explain all errors, because some errors made by the second language learners result from other factors except for L1 inference (Ellis, 1994). There are some distinctions between error and mistake: if the learner is short of knowledge, errors will be made, because he or she does not know the right form or is unable to use language correctly (Hu, 2015: 269). And also, if the learner fails to perform their competence, mistakes will be made. It means that the learner has already learned the knowledge or skill but simply fails to function it correctly due to lack of attention or other factors (Hu, 2015: 269).

There are different types of errors. In terms of source of errors, it includes inter-lingual errors (or transfer errors) and intra-lingual errors (or developmental) errors (Hu, 2015: 269). In terms of the nature of errors, it includes omissions, additions, double markings, misformations and misorderings (Hu, 2015: 269).

III. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After looking up relevant information, this research adopts the method of interview and questionnaire. This study interviewed 8 English teachers from grade two in Beisu middle school in

Jining, Shandong Province and took 325 students in grade two of Beisu middle school. In order to ensure the authenticity and validity of the data, the questionnaire was anonymous.

3.1 Interview Results and Discussion

This research interviewed all the 8 English teachers in Grade two of Beisu Middle School. According to the interview, the advantages and disadvantages of English grammar of junior high school students are as follows (see table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Results and Discussion of the Interview

Advantages	Disadvantages
Part of speech	Modal verb
The five basic sentence patterns	Attributive clause
Adverbial clause	Tense
Passive voice	Inversion, emphasis

As can be seen from the above table, students' advantages in English grammar learning were parts of speech, sentence patterns, adverbial clauses and passive voice. And modal verbs, attributive clauses, tenses, inversion sentences and emphatic sentences were their disadvantages. According to the interview results, this research designed relevant questions (Questions 9~18) in the questionnaire to find out the relationship between English grammar learning and language transfer.

3.2 Questionnaires Results and Discussion

In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, this research distributed questionnaires in a small range to test the reliability and validity. After the test, this research distributed a total of 325 questionnaires in eight classes, and collected 319 questionnaires, with a recovery rate of about 98%. Among them, 12 were invalid, 207 were valid, and the effective rate was about 94%.

The questionnaire consists of 20 items and is divided into 5 dimensions. Based on these five dimensions, this research discussed and analyzed the results of the questionnaire.

1. The Importance and Difficulty of English Grammar Learning

In this section, students are asked to answer

questions based on their own actual situations through questionnaires. The first four questions are mainly related to the key and difficult points in English classes. By identifying the key and difficult points in English

learning among the four teaching parts of Vocabulary, Writing, Listening and Speaking, and Grammar, the importance of grammar learning can be judged (Questions 1 to 4, see table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Students' Learning Situation of English Grammar

Questions	Choices	Proportion
1. Which of the following parts does your English teacher teach for the longest time?	a. Vocabulary.	0%
	b. Writing.	0%
	c. Listening and Speaking.	0%
	d. Grammar.	88%
	e. Reading.	12%
2. Which of the following parts do you think is the most difficult in learning English?	a. Vocabulary.	0%
	b. Writing.	20%
	c. Listening and Speaking.	25%
	d. Grammar.	28%
	e. Reading.	27%
3. Which aspect of the following English knowledge do you most want to master better?	a. Vocabulary.	11%
	b. Writing.	17%
	c. Listening and Speaking.	23%
	d. Grammar.	37%
	e. Reading.	12%
4. What do you think of the differences between English and Chinese?	a. There are significant differences.	48%
	b. There are some differences.	47%
	c. There is not much difference.	3%
	d. I don't know.	2%

According to the data in the above table, English teachers spent the most time in teaching grammar, and English grammar learning was the focus and difficulty of junior high school students' English learning. As important and difficult point, the difficulty of English grammar learning is partly due to the differences between English and Chinese. At the same time, most of these students want to learn grammar well, as well as other English skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. This is more necessary for them to learn

English grammar.
2. The Influence of Chinese on English Grammar Learning, Practice and Use
To explore the influence of Chinese on English, this study sets up four questions covering three aspects: English learning, English practice and English use, and also investigates the specific extent of this influence. From the perspective of students, it is the most genuine way to explore the influence of Chinese on English grammar teaching (Questions 5~8, see table 3.3).

Table 3.3 The Influence of Chinese on English Grammar

Questions	Choices	Proportion
5. How much do you think the classroom model taught in Chinese has helped you learn English grammar?	a. None.	0%
	b. Some.	12%
	c. Many.	88%

	d. I don't know.	0%
6. Do you often use Chinese grammar knowledge when you are learning English grammar?	a. Yes.	100%
	b. No.	0%
7. When expressing English sentences, how often do you organize your language in your native language in advance in your mind?	a. Usually.	94%
	b. Sometimes.	6%
	c. Never.	0%
8. How much Chinese thinking mode have you been influenced by when doing exercises after class?	a. Many.	23%
	b. Some.	48%
	c. Few.	25%
	d. None.	4%

These students are influenced by Chinese when learning, practicing and using English grammar. According to the data, firstly, when learning English grammar, students all thought that the class taught in Chinese was of a certain degree of help. And they all used Chinese grammar to understand English grammar. Secondly, their Chinese thinking pattern affected them when they practiced grammar. Thirdly, Chinese often played an important role in the use of grammar to form sentences. This is reflected in the fact that most students often organized the language in Chinese in advance in their minds and expressed English sentences by means of translation. These effects, good and bad, do not mean that the bad effects are really bad,

they can be reduced. The discussion on this aspect will be carried out in the fourth part.

3. Positive Transfer and Negative Transfer of Chinese to English Grammar

This study sets questions to explore the specific influence of Chinese on students' English grammar learning, mainly in terms of students' self-confidence, which can affect students' subjective initiative in English learning. Furthermore, regarding the influence of Chinese on specific English grammar knowledge, this study also sets up some questions to explore the positive and negative transfer situations of key and difficult points in English grammar learning (Questions 9 to 18, see table 3.4, table 3.5 and table 3.6)

Table 3.4 The Impact on Students' Confidence in English Grammar Learning

Questions	Choices	Proportion
9. Will learning English grammar that is the same as or similar to Chinese increase your confidence in learning English grammar?	a. Yes.	98%
	b. No.	2%
10. How does learning English grammar, which is different from Chinese, affect your confidence in learning English grammar?	a. Negative.	56%
	b. No impact.	25%
	c. Positive.	11%
	d. I don't know.	8%

There are some similarities between Chinese grammar and English grammar, but there are more differences. These differences had an impact on students' grammar learning. In terms of psychology, through questions 9 and 10 (see table 3.4), we can

conclude that the similarities between Chinese and English grammar increased students' learning confidence, while the differences negatively affected more than half of students' learning confidence.

Table 3.5 Positive Transfer of Chinese to English Grammar Learning

Questions	Choices	Proportion
11. When learning the classification of parts of speech in English, do you rely on Chinese?	a. Totally.	75%
	b. Usually.	24%
	c. Never.	1%
	d. I don't know.	0%
12. When learning the five basic sentence patterns of English, do you rely on Chinese?	a. Totally.	63%
	b. Usually.	31%
	c. Never.	6%
	d. I don't know.	0%
13. When you were learning English adverbial clauses, how did the knowledge you mastered about Chinese adverbial clauses affect you?	a. Negative.	39%
	b. No impact.	58%
	c. Positive.	1%
	d. I don't know.	2%
14. When learning the passive voice, have you realized that English uses passive structures more than Chinese?	a. Yes.	56%
	b. No.	44%

As can be seen from the table 3.5, more than half of the students relied on Chinese to consciously compare English and Chinese when learning parts of speech, sentence patterns, adverbial clauses and passive voice,

to better grasp grammar knowledge. Therefore, these knowledge points are students' strengths as observed by the teachers in daily teaching, according to the interview.

Table 3.6 Negative Transfer of Chinese to English Grammar Learning

Questions	Choices	Proportion
15. When you are learning modal verbs in English (such as can, may, must, should, etc.), do you rely on Chinese?	a. Totally.	68%
	b. Usually.	30%
	c. Never.	2%
	d. I don't know.	0%
16. When learning English attributive clauses, how does Chinese affect you?	a. Significant.	33%
	b. Some.	45%
	c. Not much.	21%
	d. I don't know.	1%
17. Do you find it difficult to master English tenses in your learning process?	a. Yes.	92%
	b. No.	8%
18. How has the sentence structure of Chinese influenced you in the learning of inverted and emphasized sentences in English?	a. Negative.	44%
	b. No impact.	31%
	c. Positive.	20%
	d. I don't know.	5%

However, as the teacher has also observed, the

students were not good enough in learning modal verbs,

attributive clauses, tenses, inversion sentences and emphatic sentences in spite of the use of Chinese, and these points have become their weakness. And, as we can see from the table 3.6, especially when students were learning inverted sentences and emphatic sentences, Chinese had a negative effect on 44 percent of them.

Through the discussion and analysis of the results of these questions, we can understand that language transfer theories, such as contrastive analysis, are

related to students' initiative and effectiveness in learning English grammar.

4. Ways to Improve their Grammar Used by Students.

After understanding that the theory of language transfer has a certain relationship with students' initiative and effectiveness in learning grammar, this research analyzes the results of the following questions to find ways to promote the positive transfer of Chinese to English grammar learning and reduce the negative transfer (Question 19, see table 3.7).

Table 3.7 Students' Methods of Improving Grammar

Questions	Choices	Proportion
19. Have you ever had the experience of improving your English grammar through the following ways? (At least choose one)	a. Review grammar knowledge.	90%
	b. Do grammar error correction exercises.	56%
	c. Review the grammar mistakes.	95%
	d. Listen to the recording and imitate the grammatical expressions.	6%
	e. Read the article and analyze the long and difficult sentences.	93%
	f. Practice English writing.	87%
	g. Never improved grammar proficiency.	5%

Through investigation and analysis of the ways students have used to improve their grammar, it can be concluded that reviewing grammar knowledge, practicing grammar knowledge, including mistakes correction of grammar, analyzing long and difficult sentences in articles, reviewing wrong grammar practices and practicing English writing were effective ways for most students to improve their grammar. Notably, 95 percent of students improved their grammar by reviewing mistakes. Reviewing grammar mistakes means that students analyze their own mistakes, which was very effective for their grammar learning.

5. The Mutual Promotion Relationship between Students' Attitude towards Grammar Learning and the Improvement of Grammar Level.

Students' subjective initiative plays a significant role in English learning, and English grammar learning is a key and difficult point in English learning. This means that there is a certain relationship between English grammar learning and students' subjective initiative in learning English, which may promote, inhibit or complement each other. To explore the relationship between the two, this study set up the following questions for students to answer based on their own actual situations (Question 20, see table 3.8).

Table 3.8 The Relationship between Learning Attitude and Grammar Learning

Questions	Choices	Proportion
20. If you have a better grasp of English grammar, which or which of the following situations will happen to you? (At least choose one)	a. I think English grammar is very important.	86%
	b. I think English grammar is very simple.	74%
	c. I have great confidence in English grammar.	98%
	d. I'm reviewing and learning English grammar.	81%
	e. I prefer doing grammar exercises.	95%
	f. None of the above.	2%

Generally speaking, we often notice that the increase of learning confidence and correct attitude towards English grammar will promote students' learning of English grammar. In fact, as can be seen from the table 3.8, after students improved their English grammar level, they would be more aware of the importance of grammar, more confident in learning, and would pay corresponding practical actions, such as reviewing grammar and doing grammar questions. That is to say, if students' grammar has been improved, then their learning attitude will be more correct, learning confidence will be stronger. In this way, the cycle repeats, learning confidence and attitude and learning performance have a mutually reinforcing relationship.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through the discussion and analysis of the interview and questionnaire, this research has made some findings on the application of language transfer theory in junior middle school English grammar teaching.

First, it is feasible to apply the language transfer theory to junior high school English grammar teaching. Because of the similarities and differences between Chinese and English, students unconsciously transfer Chinese to English when learning English grammar. Positive transfer is beneficial to their English grammar learning, while negative transfer is not. For junior high school students in the stage of constructing English grammar framework, it is necessary and helpful to give

full play to the positive transfer and reduce the negative transfer of Chinese. This requires every junior high school English teacher to actively guide and cultivate students' language transfer awareness and ability in class.

Second, it is high time that teachers should enhance students' initiative of English grammar learning. The initiative of junior high school students in learning English grammar is reflected in their learning confidence and attitude. Chinese and English have similarities and differences, language transfer theory can help them better learn and understand their similarities and differences, so as to increase their confidence in learning English grammar, cultivate their good learning attitude, making them learn grammar in a better state. In this way, difficult as the English grammar is, students have more confidence in English learning and have more courage to challenge themselves. According to the interlanguage theory, too simple knowledge will make students feel bored, too difficult knowledge will make students lose confidence. However, the knowledge with a certain degree of difficulty is more suitable for students to learn, this is also called "i+1" principle. Teachers should choose grammar of appropriate difficulty to stimulate students' interest in learning by choosing real language materials, enriching classroom content and adopting correct error correction methods, so as to change the long-standing dull, time-consuming and inefficient phenomenon of grammar teaching (Cheng, 2004). Students will have a better grasp of English grammar,

and then, their initiative will increase. This cycle will reinforce each other.

Finally, it is an effective way to increase positive language transfer and reduce the negative transfer. The application of contrastive analysis theory and error analysis theory can promote the application of language transfer theory in junior middle school English grammar teaching, especially the positive transfer of Chinese.

On the one hand, the use of contrastive analysis theory can promote the positive transfer of Chinese, reduce negative transfer or transform it into positive transfer. In junior middle school English grammar teaching, teachers should cultivate students' awareness and ability of language transfer in daily teaching. In teaching, when encountering English grammar that is the same as Chinese grammar, contrastive analysis between English and Chinese can be properly conducted to guide students to realize the similarities between English grammar and Chinese grammar, and encourage them to consciously carry out language transfer when they encounter similar situations next time.

On the other hand, the use of error analysis theory can reduce the negative transfer of Chinese. Contrastive analysis theory can promote positive transfer of Chinese, reduce negative transfer. For students' difficulties in grammar learning, a teacher should do the following three things. First, guide the students to figure out whether this is an error or a mistake. Secondly, teachers need to guide students to categorize errors. Finally, teachers need to encourage, supervise, and lead students to review grammar errors. With constant practice and review of grammatical errors, the negative transfer of Chinese to English grammar will be reduced.

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