

# **A Study of Negative transfer of Mother Tongue in Senior High students' Chinese to English translation ----A case study of QiuMing senior high School**

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**Abstract:**

Mother tongue transfer is an exceptionally essential factor during the process of English learning. Therefore, this study picks QiuMing senior high school to make a case study. The purpose of this study is to evaluate whether the mother tongue interferes with students' Chinese to English translation and in what way it interferes with students' Chinese to English translation. The research data shows that most of the errors in students' test papers are caused by Chinese negative transfer. According to the research, lexical errors are the most frequent errors. Since English and Chinese belong to a different language family, there are many differences. Therefore, it is unavoidable that the Chinese will interfere with students' English learnings. Hence, teachers should pay more attention to these frequent errors and provide students with some cultural background of the western country. Besides, the students should also increase their awareness of these errors and try to avoid them.

**Keywords:** Negative transfer, Error analysis, Second Language Acquisition, Senior high school teaching

**1. Introduction****1.1 Research background**

Since the 1960s, the error analysis theory has developed rapidly as an essential branch of applied linguistics research. In the Chinese students' translation practice in China, the phenomenon of negative transfer of the mother tongue is incredibly obvious, which seriously interferes with the accuracy of the translation. (Zhu, 2020). Therefore, this study decides to analyze the negative transfer of the mother tongue in high students' Chinese to English translation based on error analysis.

**1.2 Research purpose**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate whether the mother tongue interferes with students' Chinese to English translation and in what way it interferes with students' Chinese to English translation. By doing this, this study wants to find the negative transfer of the subjects and provide some useful suggestions for senior high school English teaching study.

**1.3 The structure of the paper**

This study consists of five parts. The first part is the introduction, which includes the background, purpose, and structure of this paper. The second part is the literature review. In this part, the definitions of error analysis and translation studies are explained in details; the third part is about methodology, it mainly discusses the research questions, research subject, research instrument, research procedure, the fourth part is the result. In this part, this study mainly analysis students' errors from three perspectives, lexical, syntactic, and discourse. The last part is the conclusion of this study. This part explains the significant findings and implications for senior high

school English teaching.

## **2.Literature review**

### **2.1 Negative transfer**

Negative transfer, which is also regarded as interference, is the use of native patterns of rules, which “lead to an error or inaccurate form in the target language(Richard, 2002). It is well known that Chinese and English belong to different language systems. Therefore, their grammar, discourse pattern, and thinking way are quite different. When Chinese learners are learning English, they will be influenced by their Chinese usage. Odlin (2001) suggests that the language transfer is that “transfer is the impact resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other languages that have been previously acquired” Language transfer can be divided into negative transfer and positive transfer. Eills (1985) proposed that negative transfer occurs when past performance disrupts previous performance on a second task. It can also be referred to as “interference.” In this situation, learners often make errors because of the negative transfer of the mother tongue.

### **2.2 Error analysis**

From the 1960s to the early 1970s, linguistic began to analyze errors.Corder(1967) is a representative scholar. He puts forward that “Errors can not be avoided; this is an integral part of language learning(Corder, 1981). The purpose of error analysis is to find out the reason that people make these errors. Besides, he also suggests that errors provide the teacher with information about how much the learner had learned, and provided the researcher with evidence of how language was learned. Based on the definition, there are mainly two kinds of errors, intralingual error, and interlingual error. According to their elements, they can be further classified into lexical errors, including the misuse of articles, pronouns, collocations; syntactic errors, including word order and tense problems; discourse errors, caused by Chinglish and cohesion problems.

### **2.3 Research on Negative transfer and Translation studies**

Many scholars have also studied negative transfer. Guo Chunjie(1998) finds out that Chinese students often conduct their English writings based on Chinese thinking patterns. What’s worse, some students tend to write Chinese first and translate into the English word by word. These kinds of writings were thought to make their articles fully reflect the trajectory of Chinese thinking. Besides, Some researchers focus on negative transfer in Chinese students’ translation. For example, Xv Jing (2019) discussed the negative transfer of the difference between Chinese and English grammar is not enough for the basis of language. Yang Jing(2012) argues that at the lexical level, senior high school students tend to apply verbs instead of using function words. From the perspective of the syntactical level, senior high school students usually use simple sentences, but not good use of subordinates, and simple sentences dominated by the subject, not good at using the score structure. Wu Shaohuai& Wang Lihong (2006) explored the influence of three

psycholinguistic constraints on metaphor transfer, which are markedness, prototypically, and psychophysiology. Besides, LinYun (2002) explained that the differences between the native language and target language in linguistic markers might result in the occurrence of negative transfer. Some researchers focus on language transfer at different language levels in translation by application of contrastive analysis and error analysis. Foreign scholars are mainly focused on other research fields. At the syntactic level, Odlin(2001) lists examples of language learners of different mother tongues learning English and describes the phenomenon of negative language transfer from the perspective of syntax.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research questions

The research questions of this study are:

1. Does the mother tongue interfere in students' Chinese to English translation?
2. If the mother tongue does interfere, in what way does the mother tongue interfere with students' Chinese to English translation?

#### 3.2 Research subject

Altogether this study plans to select 60 grade two students from QiuMing high school, according to the survey, all of them began English studying when they were Grade three students in primary school, so all of them learn English for about nine years. Their mother tongues are Chinese. Besides, None of them has the experience of studying or living abroad in an English speaking country, and they have never been systematically taught the differences between English and Chinese, so they made many errors caused by Chinese negative transfer. All of them had taken this translation test, and the length of the test time was 45 minutes. The information on the research subjects can be seen in Table 3-1 Information of Subjects.

**Table 3-1 Information of Subjects**

Grade	Number	Year of learning English	Mother language	Experience of Studying/living Abroad in an English-speaking Country	The length of test time
Grade two (senior high school)	60	About nine years	Chinese	No one has this kind of experience	45 min

#### 3.3 Research instrument

The research instrument of this report is the test paper. Based on the English level of the students and their textbook, this study makes a test paper which is composed of 15 sentences. Each sentence has its function. Some of them are used to test their grammar, some of them are used to

test their vocabulary, and some of them are used to test their cohesion. After the test, the test papers are collected and recorrected immediately. The errors in the test paper are gathered and categorized based on error analysis theory.

### **3.4 Research procedure**

Based on the previous study, this report aims to focus on errors of the Chinese to English translation caused by the negative transfer. This study makes a qualitative analysis of high school students' errors based on negative transfer theory and error analysis theory. Altogether This study plans to select 60 grades two students from QiuMing high school, and these students are required to translate 15 sentences in 45 minutes. Then the author will categorize the errors in students' translation based on error analysis theory and try to figure out the reasons that cause these errors.

## **4. Result & Discussion.**

### **4.1 An Overall Statistic of the Errors in Students' Works**

After collecting students' test papers, this paper makes an error analysis of students' test papers. There altogether 60 test papers and 198 errors are collected. Among all the errors, 175 errors are caused by negative transfer, which can be classified into three types: lexical errors, syntactic errors, and discourse errors. The detailed data can be seen in Table 4-1

From Table 4-1, it is easier to find out that there are more lexical errors in students' test papers, which takes up 52.00%, and there are 62 syntactic errors, accounting for 35.42%. The number of discourse errors is least compared with the other two kinds of errors, and it only takes up 12.58%. Then this paper makes further analysis of each error and the specific errors of lexical, syntactic, and discourse errors can be seen in the table 4-2, 4-3, and 4-4.

Form Table 4-2, it is clear to see that there are six kinds of error in the lexical level, which are article, plural nouns, case of pronouns, incorrect choice of verbs, collocations, part of speech. Among them, incorrect choice of verbs and misuse of collocations are the most severe problems, which take place respectively 43.96% and 35.16%. From this situation, we can see that these subjects(senior high school) students do not have a systematical understanding of the usage of words, especially verbs. This also indicates that they just automatically memorize the meaning of each word, but still feel confused about their collocation. Besides, the misuse of part of speech and article takes up 9.98% and 5.49%, respectively, which is caused by their knowledge of Chinese. Since there is not part of speech in Chinese, students ignore the part of speech unconsciously.

From Table 4-3, there are four kinds of errors in syntactic level, which are word order, tense, disagreement between subject and predicate, and omission of that. Among all these errors, the disagreement between the subject and predicate is the biggest problem. It takes up 79.03%, which is also caused by their habits. In Chinese, the verb will not change with the change of subject, but in English is quite different. This kind of situation is caused since English and Chinese belong to a different language family.

Form Table 4-4, there are two kinds of error in discourse level, which are cohesion errors and Chinglish. From the data, the errors in cohesion take up 90.9%, which shows that students feel challenging to organize simple sentences into complicated sentences.

**Table 4-1 Errors Caused by Chinese Negative Transfer**

Errors types	Number	Percentage
Lexical errors	91	52.00%
Syntactic errors	62	35.42%
Discourse errors	22	12.58%
Total account	175	100%

**Table 4-2 The Distribution of Lexical Errors**

Errors types	Number	Percentage
Article	5	5.49%
Plural nouns	4	4.40%
Case of pronouns	1	1.01%
Incorrect choice of verbs	40	43.96%
Collocations	32	35.16%
Part of speech	9	9.98%
Total account	91	100%

**Table 4-3 The Distribution of Syntactic Errors**

Errors types	Number	Percentage
Word order	5	8.06%
Tense	5	8.06%
Disagreement between subject and predicate	49	79.03%
Omission of that	3	4.85%
Total account	62	100%

**Table 4-4 The Distribution of Discourse Errors**

Errors types	Number	Percentage
Cohesion	20	90.9%
Chinglish	2	9.1%
Total account	22	100%

## **4.2 Analysis of Errors in the testing paper**

### **4.2.1 Lexical errors**

#### **4.2.1.1 Article**

Articles consist of an indefinite article and definite article, which are added in front of nouns to specify grammatical definiteness of the noun. In English, it is entirely reasonable to use articles, but there are no such rules about articles. Besides, there are individual usages of articles in English. Therefore, it is common for students to make errors in articles. After counting the errors, there are five errors in articles accounting for 5.9% of all the lexical errors.

For example:

- (1) I have to bring an umbrella.
- (2) Helen used to be the rude and negative girl

The first example shows that the students do not know the differences between the word “a” and “an,” and example 2 should be added “a” before the word rude. From this we can see, the students still have some misunderstanding about the usage of the article, and they should pay more attention to it.

#### **4.2.1.2 Plural nouns**

In English, the noun can be divided into two categories, countable nouns, and uncountable nouns. Therefore, when there are more than one countable nouns, the plural marks “s” should be added after the noun. Nevertheless, there is no such rule in Chinese. Chinese people will add the word “yi(one), er(two)” in front of the word that needs to be modified. Besides, there is no countable nouns and uncountable nouns in Chinese. Due to these differences, it is relatively more natural for Chinese students to make errors on the usage of plural marks. However, from the research data, there are only four errors in it.

Here are the examples:

- (1) Can I take my sunglass?
- (2) Best wish.

For example, one and example 2, -es should be added behind “sunglass” and “wish.” The words “sunglass” and “wish” the countable words, so the plural mark “es” should be added. From the data, the frequency of this error is lower than other errors, only takes up 4.40%. From this situation, although there are no plural marks in Chinese, students still know how to use it. The reason causes this situation is that they have been told by their teachers so many times, and they gradually overcome this error.

#### **4.2.1.3 Case of pronouns**

The next error is the case of pronoun, which is also a significant difference between English and Chinese. In English, there are three kinds of the case of pronouns, the first case of pronoun, the second case of pronouns, and the third case of pronouns. The usages of the word will be changed based on the case of pronoun. However, there is no such usage in Chinese; thus, students will be

confused about it.

For example:

- (1) I need you help.
- (2) I am waiting for you help.
- (3) If you can recive my these questions, I will be happy.

As for the example 1 and 2, the correct expression of these sentences should be “I need your help” and “I am waiting for your help.” Most of the students are confused about the usage of “you” and “your” because the Chinese translations of these two words are the same. In example 3, the correct version should be “If you can reply to me.” Different usages of English and Chinese also cause this situation. In Chinese, the expressions of the subject and object are the same, but in English, the situation is quite different.

#### 4.2.1.4 Incorrect Choice of Verbs

According to research, this study finds out that Chinese students tend to translate the Chinese meaning of the verb into English directly. During this process, a few of them will consider whether the usages of verbs are correct. Sometimes Chinese verbs are not equivalent to the English one.

The data also shows that the incorrect choice of verbs causes 43.96% of lexical errors.

For example:

- (1) What kinds of clothes we need.
- (2) I will extremely happy
- (3) Because she is too sad at first to ask for help.
- (4) Please reply to me fast
- (5) What kind of clothes should we need?
- (6) Please reply quickly to me.
- (7) If you can recive my those questions, I will be happy.

As for the example 1 and 2, it is clear to see that students omit the verb “do” and “be,” which is caused since there is no auxiliary in Chinese; as for the example 4, it is mainly because those students are not familiar with the usage of “reply”; as for the example five to seven, it is quite evident that the inference of Chinese causes these errors. These students translate the Chinese words directly into English without considering the contexts. Therefore they make many mistakes. Verb plays an essential role in the sentence, so the students should choose the verb correctly.

#### 4.2.1.5 Collocations

The definition of collocation means a series of terms and words always occur at the same time, and the rules are fixed. Different word has different collocation, and there is no specific rules, so it is quite dull and challenging for students to remember all the collocations. It is usual for them to misuse the collocation. The errors caused by the collocation takes up 35.16%.



Here are the examples:

- (1) As a senior high student, I need to study well.
- (2) I need your help.
- (3) I need help.
- (4) Please reply me quickly.
- (5) Finally he has become a famous writer, and a lot of people have moved.
- (6) Although he was disabled, but he didn't give up.

In the first sentence, the "study well" should be changed into "study hard." In Chinese, the word *Hao* (same meaning with "well") is often used with the word "study," but in English, people usually use the word "hard" to modify the word study; in the second and third sentences, the collocation "need to" and "need for" should be changed into "need," in the last example, the adjective "quickly" is not collocated with the word "verb," and the right collocation should be "reply soon." As for the example 6, the word "but" should be omitted. Due to the complexity and variety of English collocation, senior high school students should pay more attention to the rules of it.

#### 4.2.1.6 Part of Speech

As for the English words, it usually adds some inflectional affixes in front of the word to change the part of speech of the word, but in Chinese, there is no inflectional change. Hence, many Chinese students make errors on the part of speech of the words.

Here are the examples:

- (1) First of all, she was so sad that she couldn't ask for help.
- (2) Good luck for you.
- (3) Helen was a rude girl.

In example 1, the students misuse the word "sad" and "sadness." These two words all mean "sad" in Chinese, and in Chinese, there is a character called "de" to present the adjective form. Therefore, it is easy for students to make errors when they write sentences. In example 2, the word "lucky" should be changed into "luck." In example 3, the word "rudeness" should be changed into the word "rude."

### 4.2.2 Syntactic Errors

#### 4.2.2.1 Word Order

The word orders of Chinese are opposite to the English. In English, the attributive is usually put at the end of the word that needs modifying. However, in Chinese, it is usually put in front of the word that needs modifying. Besides, there are two differences in the position of adverbials between English and Chinese. In general, people in Anglo-American countries tend to put adverbials at the end of sentences, while Chinese people prefer to put adverbials at the beginning of the end of a sentence. Due to these differences, students must make some changes to the original word order. Otherwise, they might make some errors.

Here are the examples:

- (1) This was my looked the best movie, it was very moved.
- (2) First of all, because she is very sadness that she didn't want to be helped.

In example one, it is typical Chinese word order. In Chinese, it is reasonable to put the modifying words or phrases in front of the word that needs modifying. However, it is precisely the opposite in English. As for example 2, in Chinese, it is acceptable to put adjuncts like "because" in the first place of the sentence, but it is inappropriate in English. Therefore, the word "because" should be deleted.

#### 4.2.2.2 Tense

It is known to us that the verb plays an essential role in sentences, so the usage of the tense is also significant. Tense represents the time when the action happened, which is divided into six kinds, and each kind of tense has its rules. Besides, the form of the verb will change based on different tenses. However, there is no such change in Chinese. Chinese people usually add some words in front of the verb to show the difference of the tense like "xianzai" (present tense), "guo le" (past tense,) and "ma shang" (future tense). Therefore, Chinese students tend to ignore the change of tense.

For example:

- (1) I would taked your umbrella.

In example I, the word "taked" should be changed into "take."

#### 4.2.2.3 Disagreement between subject and predicate

In English, the form of the subject should in coherence with the predicate. If the subject is the third person, the predicate should add "-s" and "-es," if not, the predicate should use the base form. If the subject is in the past tense, the predicate should also in the past tense. However, there is no inflectional change in Chinese, so students often make errors of it. The disagreement between subject and predicate errors takes up for 79.23%, which shows that students are easy to make this kind of errors.

Here are the examples from students' test paper:

- (1) Finally she becomes a famous writer and moved many people.
- (2) This movie talked a girl name is Any's life.
- (3) Finally she become a famous writer and move many people.
- (4) Although he was disabled, he doesn't give up.
- (5) Finally she becoming a famous writer and moved a lot of people.

According to the table, the errors caused by disagreement between subject and predicate is the most frequent error, which also shows the significant interference of Chinese.

#### 4.2.2.4 Omission of that

There is no clause in Chinese grammar. Therefore the usage of the clause is a significant obstacle to Chinese students. Many students feel difficult to handle the clause and they often forget to add the word “that.” The interference of the Chinese also causes this kind of error.

Here are the examples:

- (1) This is the best movie I have ever seen.
- (2) This movie told a life a girl is called Anne

As for the first example, it should be corrected into “This is the best movie that I have ever seen,” and as for the second example, the correct version should be “this movie told a life of a girl that is called Anne.”

#### 4.2.3 Discourse Errors

##### 4.2.3.1 Cohesion

The traditional way of English teaching pays more attention to correcting grammar mistakes and neglect the teaching of cohesion both in sentences and paragraphs. While it is found that although students have learned a large number of vocabulary and grammatical rules, it is difficult for them to write a perfect composition.

Here are the examples from students’ test paper:

- (1) This is the best movie I have ever seen. It is very touching.
- (2) If you can answer me these questions, I will be very happy.
- (3) Maybe my mom disagrees me to go there, I need your help.

From the example 1, 2, and 3, it is clear that there need some cohesive devices like “and, so, but.” However, due to the using habits of Chinese, many students usually forget to add these cohesive devices. Therefore, the constancy of the sentences will be destroyed.

##### 4.2.3.2 Chinglish

Chinese and English belong to different language families, and they have a different cultural and social background. Influenced by these factors, the expressions of these two languages also are different. As for senior high school students, they do not have a systemic study on the English, so they are likely to express their idea in the Chinese way and make so-called Chinglish sentences.

Here are the examples from students’ test paper:

- (1) As a high middle school students, I need study better and better.
- (2) If you can answer me these, I will much happy.
- (3) Please early reply for me.

In example 1, “study better and better” is a typical Chinglish expression. The right expression should be “study well,”; and in example 2, the right expression should be “If you can answer me these questions, I will be very happy,”; and for example three, the right expression should be “please reply soon.” If students do not consider the specific contexts and English grammar, it would be unavoidable for students to make Chinglish sentences.

## 5. Conclusion

The research data shows that most of the errors in students' test papers are caused by Chinese negative transfer. According to the research, lexical errors is the most frequent errors, and the incorrect choice of verbs and wrong usage of collocations are the main lexical errors, syntactic errors takes the second place, and the disagreement of subject and predicates is the main syntactic errors; the discourse errors take the third place, and the wrong usage of the cohesive device is the main discourse errors. As for the reasons causes these errors, it is mainly caused by the inference of Chines. English and Chinese belong to a different language family, and there are many differences in their culture, society, and thinking patterns. Therefore, it is unavoidable that the Chinese will interfere with students' English learnings. In order to improve this situation, teachers should pay more attention to these frequent errors and provide students with some cultural background of the western country. In the meantime, the students should also increase their awareness of these errors and try to avoid them.

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**Appendix : Test paper**

汉译英练习 (45min)

姓名: \_\_\_\_\_ 性别: \_\_\_\_\_ 班级: \_\_\_\_\_

亲爱的同学: 本练习仅做研究使用, 答案不会影响你们的英语成绩。请同学们认真回答下列各题, 不要漏答任何一题, 也不要与别人商量。谢谢您的配合!

1. 海伦曾经是一个粗鲁消极的女孩。

\_\_\_\_\_

2. 我可以拿走我的太阳镜吗?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. 如果你可以回答我的这些问题, 我将非常高兴。

\_\_\_\_\_

4. 起初她因为过于悲伤不愿意寻求帮助。

\_\_\_\_\_

5. 我们需要什么样的衣服?

\_\_\_\_\_

6. 作为一个高中生, 我需要好好学习。

\_\_\_\_\_

7 最终她成为了一名有名的作家并且感动了很多。

\_\_\_\_\_

8. 尽管他残疾了, 但是他并没有放弃。

\_\_\_\_\_

9. 这是我看过最棒的电影, 非常感人。

\_\_\_\_\_

10. 请尽快回复我。

\_\_\_\_\_

11. 这部电影讲述了一个叫安妮的女孩的一生。

\_\_\_\_\_

12. 我需要你的帮助。

\_\_\_\_\_

13. 我要带把伞。

\_\_\_\_\_

14. 也许我妈不同意我去, 我需要你的帮助。

\_\_\_\_\_

15. 祝你好运。

\_\_\_\_\_

感谢同学们的认真填写, 祝学习进步!