

## The Positive Role of L1 in the Acquisition of a Second Language

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### Abstract

L1 not only plays a negative role in SLA, but also a positive role, it will be helpful if we make use of the positive effect, for the reason that there are some common characteristic among all languages, and L1 and L2 may have similar syntax, vocabulary, and phonetics. Besides, the thinking model developed in L1 is also helpful in learn a foreign language.

**Key words:** L1; SLA

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### INTRODUCTION

People's language ability is combined with thinking ability, it develops as thinking develops. L1 is the first language reaction system in people's thinking system, it is formed in the condition that no other language system was set up before. Anyone who begins learning new knowledge or skills tends to make use of their original cognitive structure, include of the L1 knowledge and abstract thinking ability learned through the L1, which constitute the original cognitive structure of SLA; this is the source of information processing. Therefore, when learners learning the L2, they will consciously or unconsciously make use of their former information to think, analysis, comparison and comprehend, so they will use the experience gained in the process of learning their L1 to direct them to master a new language. Therefore,

a correct understanding of the the role of L1 in the acquisition of a second language is of great significances.

Almost everyone who learns English could have experienced the effect of SLA from L1. The most common phenomenon is the affect of pronunciation of foreign language from their native language. In other words, when a German speaks English, he may somehow speak with a German accent. In addition to the accent, in actual situations, L1 could also affect a student's method to express a second language, which gives rise to the "one country English". Take a Chinese student as an example, when he using English, "run car" and "family computer" would appear, instead of "sports car" and "personal computer". The Chinese way to express English is called "Chinese English". It is apparent out of the ordinary exercise of English and accurately the result from the affect of thinking patten in native language.

For the above stated, traditional linguists said that L1 only have negative influence on second language acquisition (SLA). Does L1 interfere second language learning? Actually, the "Theory of L1 interference" is somewhat single-faceted. It neither mirrors the nature of foreign language learning nor discloses the inner relationships of L1 and L2. In the long process of foreign language learning, especially at the early stages, the learner will certainly make use of the knowledge or abilities of L1 to satisfy the learning needs or to reach the communication goal because of the existence of a great inconformity between the level of native language and second language. It is tactics of the learner and a approach in the procedure of SLA. So the influence of L1 in SLA is not only "interfering", but also "helpful" to a large extent. Since a lot of work has been done about the study of the negative role of L1 to SLA, this thesis will mainly focus the positive role that L1 plays in SLA. And for we are Chinese English learners, most of the examples are between Chinese and English. It can be explained in the following aspects:

## 1. THE COMMON CHARACTERISTICS AMONG ALL LANGUAGES

Language is a symbol system for human beings. The relationship among the inner rules of this system is not arbitrary, but abide by some objective laws. Although there may be some differences, but in nature, language is the conjunct speciality of all human beings: it frequently related with the thinking patten of human beings, it is the most effective way for human beings to express themself. Human beings' thinking patten has some similarities, so do languages, which are used to express thinking may also have some similarities. Fromkin and Rodman (1998, p.28) suggested: "the more investigations on different kinds of languages and more descriptions about their differences, the more discoveries about the limited differences. But linguistic universals involves all grammar and the relationships among them, besides, it involves the form of expression of grammar rules. All these principles formed the universal grammar, and the universal grammar is the foundation of specially designated grammar for each language."

Hockett stated briefly 16 kinds of common points among all languages. In psycholinguistics, the cause of these common characteristics varies. The L1 thinking plays an important role in common characteristics of language. Take one kind of migrant bird as an example, which was named by its chirping, in England it is called 'cuckoo', in France, it is 'coacou', 'kuckuck' in Germany, 'kokuk' in Greece and 'buguniao" in China. This is the phenomenon of perceptual categories. Another phenomenon is called psycholinguistic categories; Greenburg (1963) split language into two categories: object situated behind verb (35% of the total number of language) and object situated in front of verb (44% of the total number of language).

Generally speaking, there are some relevant issue between language similarities and SLA:

All languages use limited scattered speech sounds, and they formed meaningful words or component parts; all these words and component parts can form unlimited sentences.

b) All the grammar includes the rules of words making and sentences making.

c) Each language has a certain number of vowels and consonants

d) Each language has similar classified grammar.

e) Linguistic universal exists in all languages.

f) Each language has its own way in expressing some concepts. such as passive, tense, negative, order.

g) Everyone can create and understand unlimited sentences no matter what kind of language he speaks.

h) Every child can master the language he touches wherever he is born, whatever his nationality is, and however the economic condition is.

What has been said above mirrors the so-called

linguistic universal, which has close relations with SLA. In the learning process, anyone can master the language consciously or unconsciously, should take advantage of these common places of its L1 and L2. So, learner's L1 lays a foundation for learning L2. That is, linguistic universal has a positive influence in SLA.

## 2. POSITIVE TRANSFER

During the development of studies on language transfer, negative transfer has been the popular issue while positive transfer received less concern though its obverse effect is universally acknowledged. However, it is not appropriate to emphasize the obvious negative transfer and overlook the positive part, since cross-linguistic similarity which may generate positive transfer is an integral part of the whole cross-linguistic influence set (Yu, 2004). A learner's L1 always has great impact on his or her L2. Today, linguists are paying more and more attention to L1 transfer. One theory is universal grammar raised by Chomsky. Another one is linguistic universals raised by Greenberg. L1 and L2 share much in common, the learners can at least stay in communication and manage to make him or herself understood not to mention the language rules, which is called positive transfer. But L1 and L2 have a lot of differences. L1 slows down and interferes with the process of SLA, which is called negative transfer. "The students who come into contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his L1 will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult."

In practice, attention is almost exclusively directed to the differences of L1 and L2 today because negative transfer is more noticeable than positive transfer. The positive transfer is ignored by many linguists. But the truth is there are many similarities between the two languages. Here I will take the positive transfer from Chinese (L1) to English (L2) as an example; it is easy to find that a person who can speak English fluently must speak Chinese well. The similarities can stimulate the positive transfer from L1 to L2. It can be seen from three aspects - syntax, vocabulary and phonetics.

### 2.1 syntax

There are five basic syntaxes, which are the base of all complicated sentences, are the same in two languages.

1) S+ V 1+ Predicate e.g. He is a teacher

他是一名教师

2) S+ V 1+ (adverbial) e.g. They work hard.

他们工作努力

3) S+ V t+O e.g. I like dogs.

我喜欢狗

4) S+ V t+ indirect O+direct O e.g. He passes me a ball.

他传给我一个球

5 )S+Vt+ O +C e.g. She taught us to study Chinese.  
 他教我学习汉语

The examples above are the similar sentence structures between L1 and L2, they can accelerate the learning curve.

## 2.2 Vocabulary

Both English and Chinese have five similar ways to form words; they are compound, conversion, affixation, sound-changing and abbreviation. Here are some examples in compounding and conversion.

Compound, it is the combination of two or more words to form a new word and the new words are called compound words. For example, 网站(website), 后院(backyard), 长途(long-distance) they were constitute in this similar way:

Compound words	网站website	后院backyard	长途long-distance
Chinese	网 站	后 院	长 途
English	web site	back yard	long distance

From above examples, we can see that both English and Chinese compounds are composed of two separate words.

(2). Conversion, no change of the word form, changes the word class to from a new word. For example, in Chinese, the word“准”can be converted from verb to adjective and adverb:

- a.不准大声喧哗。(verb, permit)
- b.他箭射的很准。(adjective, accurate)
- c.他准能写完作业。(adverb, must)

Likewise, the word “home” in English, can also be conversed form noun into adverb, adjective and verb.

- a. The African plains is the home of the lion king and his wives. (noun, home)
- b. Is Tom home yet? (adverb, at home)
- c. I've watched most of the home games. (adjective, about home field)
- d. The warship homed to the naval port. (verb, go back)

These similarities between the word form formation can help Chinese English learners remember and understand the new English words well.

## 2.3 Phonetics

Chinese Pinyin system and English phonetic symbols has many similar or same places, e.g. They all have the sound like [w], [ei], [ai], [l], [m], [n], [f]. These similarities mean that Chinese students can easily grasp this pronunciation.

To be brief, the similarities between L1 and L2 can be transferred from L1 to the SLA, and thus be helpful.

## 3. L1 THINKING

Psycho-linguists suggested that the relationship between language and the way of thinking is a complicated issue. Most questions have no clear answer, but most psycho-

linguists and cognitive linguists believe that thinking is a psychological phenomenon; it is a reflection of the objective world. Language is not only the main tool for people to communicate, to express and to store the ideas, but also the main material of thinking. Thinking starts before language, thinking creates language, but thinking has to rely on language. Language can express thinking and assist the action of thinking. Both language and thinking have their own rules for developing, but also their regular rules of interaction. Neither of them can exist independently. The modes of thought of different nations have both common characteristics and peculiar characteristics. And these common characteristics can facilities SLA. For example, Lay analysed the English writing texts and precess of 4 Chinese students. Then he found that the students who relay more on L1 thinking performs better in the content, construction and detail in their composition then students who lack of L1 thinking. Latter, Lay pointed out the eight functions of L1 thinking in L2 writings: a. Raising questions; b. Evaluating the organization; c. Enhancing their self- expression; d. Displaying cultural sensitivity; e. Brainstorming; f. Forking through complicated ideas; g. Increasing lexical variety; h. Recalling past experience.

Take English as an example, English is becoming an international language, and it no longer a exclusive language of a country or a nation, but a common information media. Because of the effect of the way of L1 thinking, when a Chinese uses English, he will of course shows the particular patten of Chinese thinking. Especially recent years, with more and more communication with different countries around the word, many English words expressions for Chinese special things appear in many fields. Those special words, phrases and sentences have already become popular expressions in English. Even in “China Daily” and “Beijing Review”, there are thousands of words and expressions which reflect the characteristics of China, such as “one country, two systems” and “long time no see”. None can neglect the fact that such Chinese thinking can help Chinese English learners to express in English.

## 4. L1 AS A TOOL FOR SLA

Broadly speaking, most of people use L1 as an assistant tool; they should know what is the meaning of a word or a sentence of L2 in his L1, especially for early stage learners. But the question is how to deal with L1, foreign language and the referring things. The aim of learning and using a foreign language is to coordinate the relations of two languages and tries to equally exchange language code. For example, when teacher want explain some abstract L2 words, L1 is the best choice, for students will be confused with the L2 explanation.

Enlightened by Lay's study, Friedlandere mainly focus on the function of L1 in the conceiving period. He made

28 Chinese students write an article about Chinese festivals in English and Chinese separately, and found that they can catch up with more details in Chinese than in English, it shows that L1 thinking can help students meditate topics about their native culture. Kobavashi and Rinnert compared two methods of the Japanese students' English compositions writing. One is translation method, firstly written in Japanese and then translate it into English. The other one is directly written in English. The results show that the translation method has great advantages over the direct method.

We can see that, L1 as a tool to express thinking, to explain new words is necessary for SLA.

### The Possible Suggestions

According to the above academic research and empirical discussion, it could be deduced that foreign language teachers should take advantage of positive transfer, similarities between languages and L1 thinking, overcome differences between L1 and L2 and the negative transfer as much as possible in teaching practice. In order to help Chinese English learners to learn more effectively with regard to cross-linguistic distinction, as Lado (1957) noticed that English teachers could achieve better teaching results in the classroom if they can pay more attention to the comparison between the L1 and L2 and accurately identify students' problem, it seems that proper number of the comparison of the Chinese and English are very beneficial for Chinese English teachers and learners to get a better understanding of the language differences and thus, pay more attention to the language knowledge which are unique for English, such as the principle of contiguity and different kinds of composite sentences. For example, teachers would make summarize the features of English syntax and simplify them with doggerels for Chinese students to remember. Classifying errors following by abundant exercises meticulously designed is a good method for students to realize and have a deep impression of some difficult features of English composite sentences. It is thought that according to the method of language character comparison, differences realizing, more vividly explanation, abundant exercise would make language learning more easily. Difficult English language rules which disaccord Chinese and difficult to Chinese English students. What's more, it is requisite for teachers to realize not only the language differences but also similarities, and pay attention to both sides. Although English is different from Chinese, there are many sides that they have in common. It is advisable for teachers to guide student to find more similarities between Chinese and English, which are the bases for positive transfer, and apply the Chinese

rules into English acquisition. Hence, Chinese learners would feel it easier to understand and digest those hits of English. It could also be helpful for Chinese students to decrease their anxiety created by language differences and increase learning driving force and enthusiasm on English learning, which could contribute to improving the learning results.

## CONCLUSION

For language learners, the skills of using L1 knowledge have not only neither negative effect nor interference, but also a very important promoting effect. The point of considering most mistakes in English expressing as 'negative transfer' of L1 in the past is not totally with the actual situation of L2 learning, and it is also not totally with the theory of SLA. L1 is the learner's linguistic knowledge that exists in the brain, which can help L2 learners to input language, and lead the learner to the highest level of L2 use. Of course, SLA is a complex psycho-process. What way and when to bring the effect into L1 is decided by the characteristics of the L1 and L2, and is also up to the type of L2 use and the stage of L2 learning. However, L1 can not be overlooked as an obstacle in the process of SLA. If it is used properly, it will have the same effect as the L2.

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