Influence of Chinese Language and Culture on English Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Many factors exert an influence on second language acquisition, among which the learner's first language and native culture are crucial because they heavily influence the version of the second language acquired and learned. Concerning English as a second language, the course of it being learned is also the course of it being changed. Under the influence of Chinese language and culture, including Chinese word formation, sentence structure, traditional idiom, narrating pattern and thinking mode, the emerging of a new version - Chinese English - appears to be unavoidable. Chinese learners should place emphasis both on the fundamental rules of English language and on the traditions of Chinese language and culture when learning and teaching English, and develop a Chinese way of English language acquisition. We lose more than we gain if we abandon Chinese cultural traditions and thinking modes to acquire British or American English.

1. Introduction

Learning a second language has been assumed to be influenced significantly by linguistic, psychological, social and cultural factors. They tend to bring about differences in the level of second language proficiency. Researchers have addressed these interfering factors, but the influence of the learner's mother language and native culture needs to be further explored because these two factors seem to be unavoidable and decisive in the version of a second language that might be acquired and learned. For Chinese learners of English, the two factors are also particularly crucial. On the one hand, Chinese learners find it very difficult to avoid the influence of Chinese language and culture when they learn English and find it hard to express themselves in idiomatic English as native speakers do; on the other, more and more people question the necessity for Chinese people to use English as Britons do; after all, Americans, Australians, even Indians and Nigerians speak English in their own ways.

With the growing theoretical interest in this area and the need to meet practical needs, this research paper attempts to achieve three goals. Firstly, it aims to highlight the influence of learners' mother language and native culture on second language acquisition (SLA), because researchers currently
appear more interested in studying this issue in the linguistic and psychological areas, such as how to input, output and intake a second language, and the influence of motivation, attitude and mood on SLA. Though a few scholars have revealed the influence of mother language and social and cultural factors, their analyses could also be expanded further. Secondly, it tries to prove the inevitability and necessity of localization and then sinicization of the English language, which might direct people to use English in their local way. Chinese learners are often confronted with the situation that they are criticized or corrected when they speak English not in a native way, and over a long period of time, they might feel ashamed and even guilty because of speaking English with Chinese traits. In actual fact, all kinds of varieties of English languages could be accepted on the condition that basic vocabulary is not challenged, grammatical rules are obeyed, and fundamental syntax principles are followed. And lastly, it is supposed to help Chinese learners establish a correct attitude toward Chinese linguistic and cultural influence on English language acquisition, and give them some useful suggestions of how to solve the problems they meet in learning English.

2. Literature Review

This research paper has been informed by four sources within the relevant literature. Some of the viewpoints found therein have been adopted or expanded, and some new ideas have been explored as well on the basis of analyzing or modifying the present findings.

2.1 Influencing Factors on SLA

Chinese learn English as a second language, so how second language is acquired should be discussed foremost. There are several factors, including inner linguistic factors, outer social factors and personal psychological factors, which all have an influence on SLA. Krashen (1985) proposes the input theory, according to which, we acquire language only when we understand messages fully in the target language, that is, when the input is meaningful and effective for listeners or readers. Swain (1995) puts forward output hypothesis based on her French immersion programs in Canada and claims that speaking or writing itself is actually part of the process of second language learning given the right situation. Ellis (1994) analyzes the law and process of SLA from seven aspects systematically, the third part of which focuses on how the outer social factors bring influence to bear on SLA, and gives proper attention to the influence of mother language and native culture.

Meanwhile, Krashen (1985) reveals the role of the first language in SLA and he argues, “First language influence appears to be the strongest in complex word order and in word-for-word translations of phrases” (p.65), “First language influence seems to be strongest in acquisition-poor environments” (p.66).
On the cultural side, Jin and Cortazzi (1998, p.98) discuss whether the culture the learner brings is a bridge or a barrier, and take into consideration the situation in which the teachers and students come from different cultural backgrounds.

Learning a foreign language implies a degree of intercultural learning; students may be led to become more aware of their own culture in the process of learning about another and hence may be in a better position to develop intercultural skills.

On the basis of what they state, a further point needs addressing, namely that though there are many factors which will influence second language learning, the influence of mother language and native culture are fundamental, in that national language and traditional culture demonstrate the effect from the nature of the language, deciding which version of a second language will be acquired. Other factors such as motivation and linguistic mechanisms just bring about differences in the level of proficiency, reflected in whether quickly or slowly, whether more or less, whether deeply or shallowly a second language will be acquired.

### 2.2 English Language Acquisition and Localization

English is the most popular second language which is being learned by one third of the population of the world. However, the non-native English speakers are also shaping English instead of just passively absorbing it because of different social and cultural backgrounds, which gives rise to various versions of English, even a mixture of English and the local language. Power (2005, p.46) claims that a growing concern is about learners not emulating Brighton or Boston English, but embracing the local version of English, and she predicts

In the future, there could be a tri-English world, one in which you could speak a local English-based dialect at home, a national variety at work or school, and international Standard English to talk to foreigners.

Johnson has also conducted a study on English globalization and localization. She concludes that English language should separate from its culture of origin and facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and that through globalization people are likely to make English localized and *incorporate a considerable range of local features* to fit with local culture (2009, p.140).

Alfehaid gives a study of the positive and negative effects of globalization on English language teaching and learning. He points out that some English language teaching course books which are published in the west are inappropriate for Muslim teachers and students, and suggests cultural appropriateness should be given attention to while teaching the English language (2014, p.103-109).
This literature has proved that the course of English being acquired is just the course of English being changed, for it is unavoidable that the national language and traditional culture of non-native learners will exert an influence on English learning, and the so-called viewpoint that one should go into the cultural environment of the second language if one wants to master the second language is only wishful thinking and unrealistic, and Chinese English will emerge once Chinese learn English in their own way under the influence of Chinese language and culture.

2.3 Influence of Chinese Language and Culture

As to how Chinese language and culture influence English learning, Chinese researchers have been concerned with this and have written articles on this topic. Influence of Chinese Language Context on English Language Acquisition (Ji, 2010), Negative Impact of Chinese Thinking on English Language Acquisition (Qian, 2012), Interference of Chinese Language Context on English Learning (Tang, 2009), An Analysis of the Influence and Role of Chinese Language and Culture on English (Long, 2010), Negative Transfer Effects of Chinese Culture on English Learning (Kong, 2013) are some examples. The writers of these articles know about Chinese language and culture, and English language and culture as well, and are hence capable of expounding how Chinese language and culture exert positive or negative effects on English learning, and specifying the influencing factors, such as Chinese word formation, sentences structure, traditional idioms, narrating patterns and thinking mode.

Some western scholars express a similar interest in the topic. Jin and Cortazzi discuss the influence of Chinese traditional culture on students learning the English language. They emphasize that the thinking of modern Chinese people is significantly structured by Chinese traditional cultural belief represented mainly by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism (1998, p.107). Another article, though, focuses on the habit and the Chinese way of acquiring knowledge, and really informs the current research a great deal, because it has summarized five Chinese Characteristics of learning, such as emphasis on perception of the concrete, non-development of abstract thought, emphasis on particulars not universals, practicality as central focus, and concern for reconciliation (Chan, 1999, p.299).

Through induction and analysis, we find that Chinese language, conventions of Chinese culture and Chinese mode of thinking all apparently have an influence on Chinese people learning the English language. Considering the extreme importance of these influences, a further discussion should be carried out by means of analyses of questionnaires and interviews, and the features of the influence could be explored in detail.
2.4 Teaching English as a Second Language

One of the purposes of undertaking this research is to direct English language teaching and learning. Some experts have probed into this field. Brown (2007) proposes some useful viewpoints, such as “A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language” (p.133), “English is not frequently as a tool for understanding British cultural values, but for international communication” (p.136) and “one of those concerns is the issue of grammaticalness and correctness” (p.136). Alfehaid (2014, p.106) also suggests that teaching materials should fit with “different cultures and habits from various societies worldwide”.

The viewpoints above are enlightening, from which a conclusion might be drawn concerning Chinese students learning English: place emphasis on both the fundamental rules of English language and the tradition of Chinese language and culture, and develop a Chinese way of English language acquisition, that is, communicating in English while thinking in Chinese (for instance, at first describe how beautiful the flower is in one's mind in Chinese and then put what you imagine into English), preferring Chinese cultural expression to British or American idioms (for example, use “one loves radish while the other cabbage” instead of “one man’s meat is another man's poison”), putting more emphasis on using English correctly than authentically (taking into consideration whether what you express is right or wrong grammatically but not whether it is standard British or American English or other versions). And I believe that we lose more than we gain if we abandon Chinese cultural traditions and thinking modes to acquire British or American English.

3. Interview analysis

I have taken Jianghan University where I work as an example to undertake research on the influence of Chinese language and culture on English learning and teaching.

3.1 Questions

Questions are put forward to find out how the students react to English learning. The questions are about the purposes of learning English (such as taking exams, going abroad, working in a foreign company, travelling abroad), cultural confusion or even shock in learning English (including which kinds of cultural phenomena lead to confusion, reaction in the course of the confusion, frequency of occurrence, results of cultural confusion or shock), the aspects of the influence of the Chinese language (word formation, sentence structure, syntax, text organization and etc.), the aspects of the influence of Chinese culture (special words, national idioms and expressions, thinking mode), and suggestions about English teaching materials (giving an assessment of the present teaching materials).
3.2 Interviewees

Interview respondents include 3 teachers and 15 students. They answer all the questions seriously: the students answer all the questions directly in combination with their own circumstances, and the teachers answer these questions by means of collecting and analyzing the mistakes students make in the examinations and exercises.

3.3 Findings

After all the questions and answers were classified and analyzed, some findings emerge as follows.

Firstly, Chinese learners are likely to coin new English words on the basis of Chinese word formation or literal meaning. On the one hand, learners follow the rule of the Chinese compound word to make a new word or phrase, for instance, combine "electric (电)" "brain (脑)" into "electric brain (电脑)", though there is a word "computer" in English vocabulary. "Four side shape" (quadrilateral, 四边形), "universal principle" (axiom, 公理), "ladder figure" (trapezoid, 梯形), "walk street" (pedestrian, 人行道) are alike in this. On the other, learners create a new word or a phrase by Chinese word’s literal meaning, and "color wolf" (色狼), "king eight eggs" (王八蛋), "chicken without sexual life" (童子鸡), "man and wife lung slices" (夫妻肺片) are hence produced. Because every English word of the phrase has no connection with the others, it is impossible for foreigners to guess the meaning of these phrases.

Secondly, Chinese learners tend to choose an inappropriate word under the influence of the Chinese language. On the one hand, learners fail to compare the words which have similar meanings and choose the wrong one. Because the Chinese word "看" usually takes "see" as its equivalent in English, so "see" is abused or misused in many cases, "see a match", "see newspaper" are just examples. Some Chinese learners using "big rain" instead of "heavy rain" is also because Chinese people often think "大" and "big" are equivalent. On the other hand, learners copy Chinese word’s usage into English words, and bring about the expressions like "happy happy" (高兴高兴), "walk walk" (走走), "look a look" (看一看).

Thirdly, Chinese learners are prone to make grammatical mistakes because of the significant grammatical differences of the English and Chinese languages. The first is mistakes in tenses, "I buy a new house last year", "she doesn’t finish the homework now", "he is reading newspaper when I visited him yesterday" which can be easily found in the students’ homework. The second is misuse of singular or plural nouns, "he go to work on foot everyday", "there is 40 student in the classroom" are examples. The third is confusion in choice of voice. Many students confuse passive voice with
active voice, and make a sentence like "the new road is constructing". The fourth is mistakes in sentence structure. "I only can so do" is arranged according to Chinese word order "我只能这样做", "good good study, day day up" is a word to word translation of the Chinese sentence (好好学习，天天向上). "You see this bag is big or small", "she is still alive is her luck" are incorrect because two notional verbs can’t be used in a sentence, though we can use more than two verbs in a Chinese sentence, and the former sentence also makes a grammatical mistake. The fifth is mistakes in arrangement of the order of clauses. Chinese learners might put an adverbial clause before the main clause "when he was told the good news he was joyful" as the Chinese like to express ideas in chronological order. However, British people put emphasis on the result and like to make a sentence like "He was joyful when he was told the good news".

Fourthly, Chinese are accustomed to comprehending and expressing the meaning according to Chinese culture and thereby bring about some new expressions into the English language. On the one hand, Chinese learners comprehend the meaning in a Chinese way and produce Chinese English phases. In Chinese “yellow” has the meaning of “erotic”, so Chinese learners like to use "yellow movie" but not “blue movie” when they want to express the meaning of “erotic movie”, and gradually, “yellow movie” becomes a Chinese English phase. For another example, Chinese use "dragon" to display a royal pride and have no idea that "dragon" is a fierce animal breathing out fire in English stories and legends, and introduce “descendants of the dragon” into English. On the other, Chinese learners bring about some new expressions into the English language under the influence of Chinese cultural character and thinking mode. Chinese use "have you had breakfast" (你吃了吗), "where do you go" (您上哪儿啊), "how old are you now" (你今年多大), "how much is you salary" to show close relation, but British people think it is a kind of invasion of privacy. Furthermore, Chinese also like using "I don’t cook well" (我饭做的不行), "where where" (哪里哪里), "what I do is just so so" (我做的只是一般般), "You’re highly praising me, my handwriting is no good at all" to display modesty, but British people might think it disrespectful or dishonest.

4. Conclusion

Many factors have influence on SLA, such as first language, native culture, learning aptitude, motivations, psychological factors, linguistic mechanisms, media and social environment. They all tend to bring about differences in the level of second language proficiency while the first two factors are decisive in the version of a second language that might be acquired and learned, in that it is unlikely to avoid the influence of the first language and traditional culture and the course of English being acquired is just the course of English being changed. Thus the emerging of a new version - Chinese English - appears to be unavoidable once Chinese learners learn English in their own way.
under the influence of Chinese language and culture. Generally speaking, the influencing factors vary from Chinese word formation, sentence structure to traditional idiom, narrating pattern and thinking mode. Chinese learners should place emphasis both on the fundamental rules of English language and on the traditions of Chinese language and culture when learning and teaching English, and develop a Chinese way of English language acquisition, that is, communicating in English while thinking in Chinese, preferring Chinese cultural expressions to British or American idioms, stressing more on using English correctly than authentically. We lose more than we gain if we abandon Chinese cultural tradition and thinking mode to acquire British or American English.

References


