

The Influence of Differences in Chinese and Western Thinking Modes on EFL Writing

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Abstract

The way of thinking is the bridge between culture and language. Thinking is closely related to language, which is first expressed and recorded in people's language. Different ethnic groups have different language cultures and ways of thinking. Meanwhile, thinking dominates language and has an important influence on human language forms. Writing is not only a language activity but also a thinking activity. The process of English as a foreign language (EFL) writing is not only the transformation of language form, but also the transformation of thinking mode. English learners in China often encounter difficulties caused by differences in thinking modes between English and Chinese when writing in English. This paper discusses the language form of the differences between English and Chinese thinking modes, and puts forward suggestions on how to strengthen Chinese students' awareness of the differences in English and Chinese language, culture and thinking modes, and take effective countermeasures to overcome the influence of Chinese in English composition and improve English writing.

Keywords

Thinking Mode, Difference, EFL Writing, Countermeasures

1. Introduction

Thinking and language are closely related, and language is the main carrier of thinking and the main manifestation of thinking. Language is an important tool for thinking and a constituent element of the way of thinking. Differences in ways of thinking are an important reason for language differences. The use of language reflects the choice and creation of thinking. Language is dominated by thinking, and thinking plays a decisive role in language. The process of second

language writing is not only the transformation of language forms, but also the transformation of thinking (Lian, 2010). The thinking mode affects the rhetorical method and the basic laws of the layout of the text. The mistakes in English writing of Chinese students are mainly caused by the dominance of Chinese thinking over English. Therefore, to write English articles well, on the one hand, one should understand British and American culture and improve the ability to control the language. On the other hand, one should also be familiar with the rules of English writing, learn to organize materials with English thinking mode, and write in a proper way. Eastern and western nations have their own specific thinking methods and rhetorical modes. English and Chinese are different in terms of word formation, sentence construction, and text structure, and language forms have their own characteristics. After making an effective comparison of English and Chinese in terms of morphology, syntax, and text, this paper aims to propose some strategies to overcome the negative influence of Chinese thinking modes on English writing.

2. Research Background

Bilingual thinking is a unique phenomenon in second language writing. When EFL students write in English, they often encounter some problems that cannot be explained by grammatical rules, that is, language barriers caused by the difference of two kinds of thinking modes. Regarding the role of mother tongue thinking in the process of second language writing, most researchers focus on the interference and negative effects of mother tongue on second language writing (Friedlander, 1990; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992). The research results of Lay (1982) and Krapels (1990) both show that when the topic of second language writing is culturally related to the mother tongue, learners will think in their mother tongue more significantly. The research conducted by Guo Chunjie and Liu Fang (1997) pointed out that the mother tongue has three major mediating roles in the second language output process: understanding mediation, retrieval mediation and judgment mediation, and they believe that these three functions cannot be satisfactorily explained by the existing language transfer theory. They suggest that the term “native language participation” be used instead of language transfer.

Some researchers have studied the influence of mother tongue on second language writing through teaching experiments. The research of Wang Wenyu and Wen Qiufang (2002) shows that students' foreign language writing process has bilingual characteristics. However, the participation of mother tongue in different thinking activities varies. The research results of Wang Wenyu and Wen Qiufang (2002) show that the amount of thinking in the mother tongue of Chinese college students in the process of English writing decreases with the improvement of the second language level, but the decrease amount of participation in the mother tongue in different thinking activities varies. By calculating the correlation coefficient between students' mother tongue thinking and composition

performance, they found that the more Chinese way of thinking involved in English writing, the lower quality of the composition is. Similarly, Woodall (2002) examined the second language writing process of 15 learners whose native language and second language were different languages (Japanese and English). Their study finds that the longer the code-switching time in the thinking-aloud process is, the lower the writing quality is, and the shorter the essay length is. Knutson (2006) believes that the influence of native language thinking on the quality of second language writing is not always negative. In her experiment, a subject who frequently uses native language thinking can still create high-level second language writing. Van Weijen, Van den Bergh, Rijlaarsdam and Sanders (2009) find that in English argumentative writing, the more Dutch college students think in their native language, the lower their composition scores are, and this negative correlation was obvious in the performance of the meta-evaluation link of writing (reflecting on the writing process and evaluating the writing task).

The above related research has enriched our understanding of mother tongue thinking in the process of second language writing, and deserves researchers' attention. One thing to note is that in the process of understanding, learning and using foreign languages, thinking in one's native language will inevitably lead to the intervention of the strong native-language contextual knowledge in the brain to fill in the gaps, which activating native-language expressions that match the native-language contextual knowledge (Wang, 2003a). Learners tend to translate the activated native language into a foreign language for use, resulting in a Chinese-style foreign language. If it cannot be translated, a dumb foreign language will appear (Wang, 2003b). The association effect between thinking modes and language has been supported by empirical research. Wang and Wang (2015) asked 48 Chinese college students to complete two English writing tasks: one task is to ask the subjects to describe the plot of an English movie in English, and the other is to ask them to describe a impressive scene that occurred in their own home in English. English movies are related to English experience, which can easily stimulate English thinking; while past events of their family are related to Chinese experience, which can easily stimulate Chinese thinking. The results show that when the subjects describe English movies, Chinglish was significantly reduced; when describing family past events, Chinglish was significantly increased.

Therefore, EFL writing is inevitably influenced by the thinking modes of learners' mother tongue. One of the important reasons is that most students learn foreign languages in the environment of their mother tongue. For most EFL learners, two points need to be considered: firstly, the environment for language learning is the cultural environment of the mother tongue, and various cognitive activities such as understanding things and acquiring knowledge are carried out in the mother tongue; secondly, EFL students generally begin to learn a foreign language when they have mastered their native language. Their thinking mode has been basically fixed, and all kinds of knowledge, including world knowledge and language knowledge, are deeply influenced by their mother-tongue thinking

patterns and stored in their long-term memory. When EFL students write in English, no matter how high their English level is, if they don't pay attention, their writing will inevitably have traces of their mother tongue. Vocabulary is the central factor of a language. Various types of words form word chunks through aggregation and collocation. After organic combination, word chunks can form sentences and complete texts (Jiang, 2020). Therefore, this study analyzes the three aspects of vocabulary, sentence and text to explore the influence of Chinese thinking on English writing.

3. Reflection of Differences in Thinking between English and Chinese in EFL Writing

3.1. Differences between English and Chinese Diction

3.1.1. Differences in the Frequency of Verbs, Nouns, and Prepositions

Concrete thinking in Chinese and abstract thinking in English lead to different use frequencies of verbs, nouns and prepositions in the language. Chinese is dynamic, and verbs are often used in the language, while English is static. Compared with Chinese, there is a tendency to use less verbs in English. Abstract expressions in English are characterized by extensive use of abstract nouns and prepositions or phrases or structures. For example,

1a) Chinese: Ta neng chi neng shui.

1b) Chinglish: He is able to eat and sleep. (Correct: He is a good eater and sleeper.) (Lian, 2010)

3.1.2. Differences in Word Collocations

English word collocation is one of the aspects that Chinese students find difficult to learn English, because some words in Chinese have different expressions in different English contexts, and these expressions are commonly used, if EFL students don't pay attention to the difference between the two languages, a collocation error occurs. For example,

2a) Chinese: Xuexi zhishi hen zhongyao.

2b) Chinglish: It is important to learn knowledge. (Correct: It is important to acquire knowledge.)

In Chinese, *xuexi zhishi* can't be written as *learn knowledge*, because "learn" and "knowledge" don't often collocate in English, while most of the verbs go with learn are usually "gain, acquire, obtain, absorb, etc." (Huo, Jiao, & Wang, 2021).

3.1.3. Differences between English and Chinese Word Forms

As a kind of Indo-European language, English is deeply influenced by Greek and Aristotelian logic. It has a strict number category. For example, nouns can be countable and uncountable, and singular countable nouns must be preceded by the article *a/an/the*, and add *-s* or *-es* to plural countable nouns. Due to the lack of morphological changes in Chinese, there is no need to have an article before a noun, and no need to add a plural mark at the end. For example,

3a) Chinese: Wo xiang yao shu.

3b) Chinglish: I want book. (Correct: I want a book. Or I want books.)

3.2. Differences in Sentence Structure

It is helpful to understand the differences in sentence structure between English and Chinese for EFL students. Many Chinese students are influenced deeply by Chinese thinking modes which is the root for their chinglish expressions. Compared with Chinese sentences, English sentences have the following main characteristics.

3.2.1. Different Locations of the Focus

Westerners are straightforward and habitually put the main message at the beginning, and then fill in the rest. The sentence pattern is linear, that is, most sentences are straight to the point, with subject-predicate-object as the core. In English sentences, the main contents appear first and then with the help of conjunctions, phrases and subordinate clauses, the other elements are orderly combined. In Chinese, short sentences or simple sentences are often used, and the focus of the sentence pattern is at the back. The sentence pattern is spiral, that is, most Chinese sentences first explain the side details, such as time, place, reason, conditions, etc., spread out layer by layer, and then point to the topic. For example,

4a) Jingguo duonian de nuli, women zhongyu jiejie le zhege nanti.

4b) After many years' hard work, we have solved the problem. (Improved: We have solved the problem after many years' hard work.)

5a) Wo yuan dasuan jinnian jiuyuefen qu yingguo lvyou, houlai budeibu tui-chi, zhe rang wo hen shiwang.

5b) I planned to travel England this September, then I had to postpone it, which made me disappointed. (Improved: It was disappointing when I had to postpone the tour to Britain which I had arranged in September.)

3.2.2. Differences of Tense and Aspect between English and Chinese Sentences

The tense and aspect changes of English verbs are extremely rich, including person, number, tense, voice, and modality of verbs, all of which are limited by time and space, requiring strict subject-verb agreement, while Chinese language forms are not as strict as English. For example,

6a) Wo xue yingyu xuele shinian le.

6b) I studied English for ten years. (Improved: I have been studying English for ten years.)

3.2.3. Differences in Associative Anaphora

English is an analytical rational language. It pays attention to form consistency between sentences and emphasizes explicit cohesion and structural integrity; Chinese is a comprehensive intuitive language. In most cases, formal connection means are rarely or not used, and invisible coherence is emphasized.

7a) Ta bu lai, wo bu qu.

7b) He won't come here, I will not go there. (Improved: If he doesn't come here, I will not go there.)

3.3. Differences between English and Chinese Text

Due to the deep-rooted thinking habits of EFL students in their mother tongue, in addition to the problems of word collocation and syntactic structure, paragraphs with no focus and lack of cohesion are two major defects in EFL students' writing.

3.3.1. Use of Topic Sentences

Since Western thinking is influenced by Aristotle's formal logic and pays attention to deductive method, which has not only become a means for Western scholars to construct theoretical systems, but also a way of thinking that Westerners are more accustomed to (Lian, 2010). In contrast, the traditional Chinese way of thinking pays attention to the induction of experience and intuition, the formal logic is not developed, and the scientific theoretical system is rarely produced, but it is good at quotation style, commentary style, and casual style. For example, in a writing exercise class on *our campus*, Student A's composition is as follows:

When you come into our campus, you will see a stone tablet, it said our school motto. And the most important building in a school must be the library. It looks grand and magnificent. To protect the environment, many kinds of trees are planted on both sides of the road. On the way to our department of building, there is a red gallery, it is classic and grand. Beside the gallery, we can see an artificial lake, in the lake, there are many geese and fountains. Every time when we pass by the lake, we will feel good and relax.

Judging from the arrangement of the paragraph structure, there is no topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph, and the writer's point of view is vague.

3.3.2. Differences in Cohesion between English and Chinese

Cohesion is the connection of different inter-sentence relationships in a text, and it is a discourse construction method that enables the writer and the speaker to establish a relationship that crosses the border, and connects the sentences in the text together. The cohesion of English text includes denotative cohesion, omission and substitution, connection cohesion and lexical cohesion. There are certain differences in the means of discourse cohesion between English and Chinese. English is hypotactic and Chinese is paratactic. English is rich in relative words, using various tangible cohesion means to achieve the integrity of grammatical form. Its expression is dominated by logical form, the concept is clearly defined, the sentence is well organized, the layers are well-organized, and the syntactic function is mostly explicit. The expression form in Chinese is the cohesion of ideas. Although the relative words are omitted to achieve the concen-

trated and prominent effect of characters, the syntactic function is invisible, and it seems that the concept, reasoning, and judgment are not very strict. For example, in Student A's composition mentioned above, there is a sentence: "When you come into our campus, you will see a stone tablet, it said our school motto". Except for some wording mistakes in this sentence, there is a lack of conjunctions between sentences. The sentences are not tightly connected, showing the characteristics of EFL learners' jumping thinking. If you use the relevant connectives, it should be "When you come into our campus, you will see a stone tablet on which there is our school motto".

4. Countermeasures to Overcome Thinking Mode Differences

The way of thinking, the characteristics of thinking and the style of thinking are the philosophical mechanisms of language generation. It is necessary to conduct a comparative study of thinking in the mutual conversion of the two languages. Each language embodies the characteristics of the people who use that language. Thinking dominates language. It is certainly not easy for Chinese people to learn to write with English thinking, but it must be done. To get out of the frame of Chinese thinking, the following measures can be taken: 1) EFL learners should develop the habit of reading and reciting English. Reading helps to develop the sense of language and acquire the strategies of English discourse. In the process of reading, learners should combine their understanding of the language and related cultural factors to form a habit of English thinking and acquire a natural sense of language. 2) In the process of foreign language teaching, EFL teachers should strengthen the introduction of English ways of thinking and cultural content, and increase the input of materials that reflect the characteristics of English thinking habits, especially the input of argumentative essays based on special thinking patterns. Teachers should set up some exercises which will enable students to have a clear understanding of the influence of English and Chinese thinking on language, and summarize the differences to eliminate the interference of Chinese thinking in English writing. 3) Guide EFL learners to do some comparative research between English and Chinese, so that students can understand and explore the internal cultural meaning of English and Chinese words in the comparison, and distinguish the semantic differences, rhetorical characteristics, syntactic rules and text structure patterns of English and Chinese. 4) In the process of writing teaching, teachers can arrange some translation training appropriately. Through the mutual translation of Chinese and English, writing teachers carry out a comparative study of English and Chinese to make students deepen the understanding of the characteristics of the two languages.

5. Conclusion

The way of thinking, the characteristics of thinking and the style of thinking are the philosophical mechanisms of language generation. It is necessary to conduct

a comparative study of thinking in the mutual conversion of the two languages. Each language embodies the characteristics of the people who use that language. Many mistakes made by Chinese EFL learners in English writing are caused by the interference of Chinese thinking on English thinking. Eastern and western nations have their own specific thinking methods and rhetorical patterns, so there are many differences between English and Chinese in terms of word formation, sentence formation and text structure, and the forms of language also have their own characteristics. Therefore, for EFL students, in order to write English articles well, on the one hand, they should understand the western culture and improve their ability to control the language; on the other hand, they should also get familiar with the rules of English writing, and learn to apply the rules during the writing process.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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