

Examining the Impact of Transfer of Mother Tongue on Oral English Learning: A Case Study of Cantonese Dialect High School Students

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Abstract: When Chinese senior high school students learn English as a second language, they are influenced by dialects. In Guangdong, especially senior high students who speak Cantonese dialects are impacted by mother tongue transfer in both positive and negative ways. Existing research has studied the impact of mother tongue transfer on pronunciation, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. However, most studies focus on the negative aspects of mother tongue transfer. There is limited research on the transfer of mother tongue among high school students who speak Cantonese dialect. This study employs questionnaires, interviews, participatory observation and literature review to investigate the impact and forms of mother tongue transfer on English oral learning among high school students. In this study, a theoretical framework for promoting the acquisition of second languages is constructed by applying the bias analysis theory derived from the contrastive analysis hypothesis of language transfer. Furthermore, it examines how mother tongue transfer affects the oral acquisition of English by Cantonese senior high school students. The similarity in pronunciation between Cantonese and English assists students in mastering English pronunciation; however, due to the absence of certain phonemes, the accuracy of English pronunciation may be compromised. In terms of grammar, Cantonese and English share similarities in aspects such as the use of adverbials and attribute post positions, which will facilitate the learning of English grammar. However, due to the differences in thinking between English and Chinese, negative transfer effects are generated in psychological vocabulary, subjunctive mood, and other aspects.

Keywords: Cantonese, oral English learning, language transfer, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Error Analysis theory

1. Introduction

English serves as the official linguistic medium in 47 nations, with another 22 countries using it as their mother tongue. It is estimated that over 604.8 million individuals globally utilize English as their mother tongue (Eglitis-media, 2023) ^[1]. Given its pivotal role in international diplomacy and discourse, the English language is indispensable for global interaction. At present, the difference between Chinese senior high school students' oral English and authentic English is still significant. There is still much room for improvement when it comes to Chinese students' ability to speak English. First of all, many educators still continue to employ pedagogical approaches that prioritize reading and writing over oral communication. This is because they have been affected by the traditional "knowledge-centered" teaching methodology (Zhang, 2023) ^[2]. It is common for teachers, especially in secondary schools, to use a test-focused curriculum that emphasizes the teaching of reading and writing rather than improving students' communication and listening skills. Second, the ability of students to improve their oral competency is affected by the transfer of mother tongue. Students' pronunciation may be affected by the dialects and phonetic similarities between the two languages, and these transfers could be positive or negative.

A certain percentage of the English examination of the college entrance examination in Guangdong province is based on oral English. The total score for the English college entrance examination consists of 150 points, of which 20 points are attributable to the scores obtained in the *Computer-based English Listening and Speaking Test*. Due to long-term influence from the college entrance examination system and various other factors, many students are unable to effectively express themselves in English communication. This often leads to a decline in their interest in mastering oral English skills. What's more, Cantonese and Mandarin are widely recognized as distinct linguistic entities (Ma, et al., 2020) ^[3].

Therefore, it is necessary to explore the impact of Cantonese transfer on the oral learning of high school students, so as to improve the effect of oral teaching in high school and enhance the efficiency of students' oral learning. What's more, language transfer also affects the pronunciation, intonation, grammar and vocabulary aspects of language learning for students.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to contribute to the existing studies on language transfer from three aspects. To begin with, existing studies have examined the transfer from mother tongue to language learning (Giang, 2022) ^[4]. Considering the significant differences between the mother tongue and the target language, most studies focus on negative transfer of the mother tongue, emphasizing the importance of avoiding negative transfer during second language acquisition (Liu, 2008^[5]). Nevertheless, few studies have examined positive transfer, and less is known about its specific manifestations. Second, research has focused mainly on the development of writing (Daukšaitė, 2019) ^[6], phonetics (Giang, 2022) ^[4] and grammar (Abdulqrem, 2021^[7]; Thordardottir, 2021^[8]), emphasizing the negative transfer effect of the mother tongue on the target language. Oral learning has been examined relatively little, primarily at the level of phonetics. Third, most studies examine the impact of mother tongue transfer on English learning of college students as a target group (Giang, 2022^[4]). It should be noted, however, that most college students have already distanced themselves from their native language environment and pursued studies far from their homes. In this paper, the research focus is on high school students from Guangdong who speak a Cantonese dialect. The students have at least five years' experience learning English and are at a good stage of their English learning. In Guangdong, most high school students are surrounded by their mother tongue and are influenced extensively by it. This study aims to explore the transfer of Cantonese in the process of English oral learning, based on language transfer, contrastive analysis hypothesis, and error analysis theory. By taking into account the impact of positive and negative transfer, this paper examines the manifestations of positive and negative transfer during the learning process. It offers some insights for senior high school students learning English and teachers teaching the language.

2. Literature review and analytical framework

2.1 Conceptualization and typology of language transfer

It was widely posited that since the postwar era until the 1960s that the majority of learning difficulties experienced by second language learners are caused by their mother tongue (Ellis, 2018) ^[9]. In other words, there will be some interference with learning from the mother tongue during the process of learning. The term "transfer" was originated from psychology studies, which describe an important aspect of the acquisition of a second language. Transfer is the interaction of commonalities and differences between the target language and any other learned or incompletely acquired language. Transfer theory also suggests that the degree of differences between specific two or more languages influences the difficulty of acquiring a second language (Odlin, 1989) ^[10]. If there are similarities between two languages, then existing knowledge of the mother tongue will be helpful in learning and mastering. Conversely, if there are significant differences between two languages, it will hinder the learning of a second language.

In general, existing studies have indicated that mother tongue transfer occurs mainly in positive and negative modalities of transfer (Odlin, 1989^[10]; Ellis, 2018^[9]). There is a recognized phenomenon in the learning process. Positive transfer occurs when one form of learning promotes and facilitates another type of learning. In contrast, negative transfer occurs when one type of learning interferes with or hinders another type of learning. In language studies, positive transfer refers to the similarity between the mother tongue and the target language that promotes the learning of the second language. Moreover, it may accelerate through certain developmental sequences in the mediator. For language learners, Ellis (2018) ^[9] suggests that mother tongue can assist in the early stages of learning a second language. During the early stages of language learning, the promoting effect of the mother tongue is more pronounced than the hindering effect. As for negative transfer, it is caused by interference by the mother tongue. Often, this occurs when there are differences between the laws and forms of the mother tongue and the target language, making it difficult for learners to distinguish between the two and to confuse their characteristics. In this process, the interference of the mother tongue can cause learners to make mistakes for a longer period of time.

2.2 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework (Figure 1) developed in this paper is based on the theoretical foundation of

language transfer. Language transfer theory can identify various phenomena that occur during the process of second language learning, for instance, the transfer of the mother tongue. Inspired by behavioral psychology and structural linguistics, a contrastive analysis hypothesis is formed by comparing the mother tongue with the target language when acquiring a second language. In language transfer research, the contrastive analysis hypothesis is often used to study the positive and negative transfer of the mother tongue. In particular, error analysis is used in order to identify the factors responsible for the negative transfer effect.

The contrastive analysis hypothesis and error analysis theory are widely used in language research. Employing contrastive analysis enables the formulation of scientifically predictions regarding the learning and teaching of second languages. Scholars believe that by analyzing the differences between the mother tongue and the target language, it may be possible to predict what errors will occur in the learning process. Contrastive analysis can also be used to analyze and explain errors after they have occurred. The error analysis focuses on the actual language errors made by learners, so it does not have to contend with issues of correspondence and comparison standards across all languages as contrastive analysis does. Clearly, contrastive and error analysis cannot be substituted for one another, but rather can complement one another. The two play different roles.

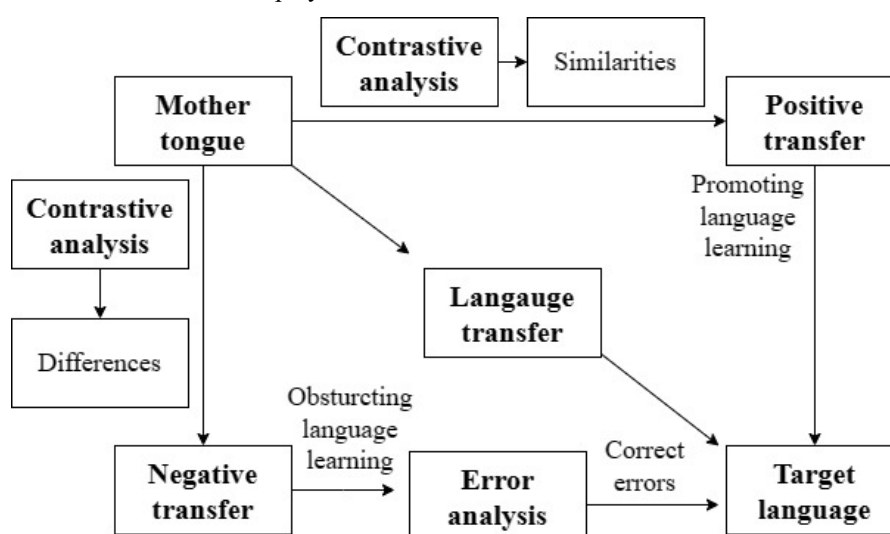


Figure 1: Analytical Framework

In the early 1940s and 1950s, the contrastive analysis became important when it was commonly believed that statements of similarities and differences between different languages were sufficient to address teaching issues (Ghadessy, 1980) ^[11]. When learning a new language, learners focus on similarities and differences between their mother tongue and the target language. Consequently, the acquisition of a foreign language is more challenging when one's mother tongue differs from the foreign language. When learning a new language, it is inevitable that the mother tongue will transfer at the level of phonetics, grammar, and thinking. According to the contrastive analysis of mother tongue and target language, there is a possibility of positive transfer, thereby promoting the acquisition of the target language. In contrast, the differences between the two can result in a negative transfer, which makes learning a language more difficult.

Contrastive analysis has gained significant importance in the study of learner errors within the field of second language acquisition (Khansir, 2012) ^[12]. By comparing languages, it enables the anticipation of potential errors and challenges that may arise during the language learning process. Consequently, learners should focus on learning the distinctions identified through comparative analysis. Employing the contrastive analysis hypothesis, language teachers are able to provide students with more precise instruction. In recent years, contrastive analysis has been applied by language teachers around the world in language teaching environments, curriculum design, and language classrooms. In language teaching, contrastive analysis is viewed as a teaching command and as a functional method (Khansir, 2019) ^[13]. Currently, the contrastive analysis hypothesis has also been applied to the study of mother tongue transfer in minority languages, and is used in many regions around the world.

Error analysis is the inheritance and development of contrastive analysis hypotheses. An error analysis is a systematic analysis of the errors that learners encounter during the acquisition of a second language. Errors are categorized into interlingual errors and intralingual errors, as well as lexical errors

and grammatical errors (Richard, 1971^[14]). Errors may be caused by a variety of factors, including negative transfer of the mother tongue, excessive generalization of the target language, cultural differences between the mother tongue and the target language, and differences in the environment in which the students learn the language. For instance, Tsai (2023)^[15] examined the errors made by students when translating between Chinese and English, focusing on tenses.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the positive and negative effects of the Cantonese dialect on the English learning of high school students. Utilizing the analytical framework, the specific effects of positive and negative transfer can be identified in the study of language transfer. This research employs the contrastive analysis hypothesis to discover the similarities and differences between Cantonese and English across various aspects. In light of the theory of error analysis, analyze which aspects of student learning are impacted by the transfer of mother tongue during the learning process, and how those impacts are manifested in real-life situations. Two research questions are proposed:

- 1) What aspects does the transfer of mother tongue involve in the oral English learning of high school students with Cantonese dialects?
- 2) In what ways does mother tongue transfer affect the learning of oral English?

3. Methodology

This study aims to analyze the effects of Cantonese dialect on senior high school students' English speaking proficiency. This research was conducted from September 2022 to December 2023. Data were collected using a combination of various methods including participatory observation, questionnaire survey, and in-depth interviews. To begin with, a participatory observation approach has been adopted by the first author through the educational internship in the teacher training program. The internship took place from September 2022 through June 2023. Engaging in teaching tasks, a teacher is more likely to generate trust among students.

Additionally, questionnaires were distributed to high school students who speak Cantonese in Guangdong Province. Questionnaires were primarily distributed in the Pearl River Delta region, which includes Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Jiangmen, Zhuhai, Zhongshan, Foshan, and other locations. Specifically, the questionnaires focus on the effects of mother tongue transfer, and the questionnaire is designed in accordance with the analytical framework. This questionnaire is designed to determine whether students are aware of Cantonese pronunciation traits and their effects on English speakers. A preliminary survey was conducted prior to the distribution of questionnaires on a large scale, and the survey questions were subsequently modified. The questionnaire enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of the spoken English learning environment, habits, and subjectivity of high school students in various parts of Guangdong. In total, 460 questionnaires were issued via SurveyMonkey. In order to analyze the data from the questionnaire, we first gather the questionnaires and check the quantity, response time, and response circumstances. Surveys with missing or duplicate information were excluded and the valid response rate is 93.26%.

Interviews were conducted with both English teachers and students to gain a deeper understanding of their respective perspectives towards mother tongue transfer. In total, we interviewed three English teachers with two years or more of teaching experience and ten Cantonese high school students from Jiangmen No.1 Middle School in Guangdong Province. During the interview process, students were asked about their experiences and learning opportunities related to mother tongue transfer, beginning with their English language education. In interviews with students, more detailed information was obtained regarding Cantonese's influence on English learning. Each interview lasts approximately fifteen minutes, depending on the number of questions and the extent of responses.

4. Results and discussions

This section presents two parts, each based on research findings related to the respective research questions. Section 4.1 will discuss several aspects of the mother tongue transfer of Cantonese dialects to English. In Section 4.2 will examine how and why the mother tongue transfer of Cantonese dialect occurs.

4.1 The influence of Cantonese dialect on English oral learning

As a first step, we surveyed high school students to gauge their awareness of the impact of Cantonese

on oral English learning. The questionnaire includes three related questions designed to assess:

A. Do you think there is a similarity between English pronunciation and Cantonese pronunciation?

52.39% of high school students believe there are similarities. 25.43% of high school students believe there are no similarities. The data show that more than half of high school students have a conscious awareness of comparing and analyzing two languages in their daily lives and in their learning.

B. What do you think of your English pronunciation and intonation foundation?

81.74% of high school students believe that their pronunciation and intonation are above average. This question seeks to understand how high school students perceive themselves to be affected by mother tongue transfer. Clearly, most students do not feel significantly impacted by the transfer of their mother tongue, and their oral English is quite good.

C. In the study of oral English, what do you think is the influence of Cantonese?

Among the respondents, 38.91% perceived the negatives are greater than positives, while 25.22 % believe that positives are greater than negatives. Over half of the students are aware of both positive and negative transfer of their mother tongue, and believe that such transfer occurs in all aspects of oral learning. Only 16.09% of high school students believe that it has no impact. This group of students does not appear to be aware of the concept of language transfer.

According to questionnaire results, senior high school students are already able to distinguish between their mother tongue and the target language when it comes to learning oral English. Since the two languages belong to separate language families, there is a clear difference between them. However, there are some commonalities between the two languages. In fact, students who are fluent in English are also fluent in Mandarin and Cantonese. This indicates that the methods and abilities acquired from the mother tongue significantly influence the learning of English.

Following this, we seek to understand how oral English is influenced by Cantonese. According to the results, Cantonese high school students' oral English acquisition is greatly influenced by pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, and grammar. The two questions we asked are listed below.

D. What do you think are the aspects where Cantonese has the greatest impact on English oral learning?

E. What do you think are the weaker parts in English oral learning?

Intonation: Based on the results of the questionnaire, 64.57% of high school students believe that intonation is the most influential aspect of Cantonese, and 58.91% think that intonation is their weakest area of English speaking. The difference in data may be due to the fact that some high school students do not fully understand the concept of intonation. There are some students in high school who may believe that intonation is not important and may not know whether to increase or decrease their intonation while studying.

Pronunciation: Approximately 55.87% of high school students believe that pronunciation is the most influential aspect of Cantonese on English. 81.09% of students believe that pronunciation is their weakest area of oral learning. The data show a significant difference between the two, indicating that Cantonese-speaking high school students are still heavily influenced by their mother tongue. Pronunciation is an important aspect of learning spoken languages. Cantonese does not contain many English phonemes, indicating that high school students at present are still subject to negative transfer effects.

Grammar: The questionnaire results show that 51.96% of high school students believe that grammar is the most influential aspect of Cantonese on English speaking. Grammar is considered to be a weakness by 69.35% of high school students. The data are different between the two, and grammar knowledge is often difficult for high school students to master. In their opinion, this is a relatively difficult aspect of learning English. It should be noted, however, that complex grammar is rarely used in spoken language.

Vocabulary: Results from the questionnaire indicated that 44.78% of high school students believed that vocabulary was the most influential aspect of Cantonese on their English learning. A majority of students in high school believe that vocabulary is a weakness. The two sets of data are quite similar. Students in Guangdong high schools use similar textbooks for learning vocabulary. In this regard, the level of mastery in vocabulary is equivalent. Vocabulary used in daily oral communication and oral mock tests is not difficult.

4.2 The ways of mother tongue transfer play a role in oral English learning

The findings revealed that the distinct expressions of mother tongue transfer affect all aspects of learners' learning. The following section will detail the manifestations of mother tongue transfer appears from four perspectives: pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, and grammar.

4.2.1 Transfer on pronunciation

According to the survey, 52.39% of students believe that there is a similarity in pronunciation between Cantonese and English, while 22.17% have not considered this aspect. Consistent with previous observations, these students are unaware of the similarities and differences between their mother tongue and the target language. There is some similarity in pronunciation between Chinese Pinyin and the International Phonetic Alphabet, but they differ in terms of intonation and strength of the pronunciation. Positive transfer methods can reduce learning resistance and help students recognize the International Phonetic Alphabet.

Only 32.17% of respondents in participated in surveys reported that their English teachers had systematically taught them the International Phonetic Alphabet. According to the survey results, 44.57% of students answered that their English teacher had mentioned the International Phonetic Alphabet during class. Nonetheless, 15.22% of students stated that the instructor had never taught them before. This implies that many students were unable to acquire the International Phonetic Alphabet in a systematic manner. As a result, students' ability to acquire English pronunciation is affected.

Among China's major dialects, the phonetic distinctions are most evident. Several of the English phonetics are not precisely translated into Chinese phonology, and some do not even exist in Chinese at all. For example, many native Cantonese dialect learners do not distinguish between long and short vowel sounds in their pronouncement of vowels. The questionnaire results indicates that 81.74% of high school students reported that the school's oral language curriculum is taught through classroom practice. In other words, students do not have a very favorable environment in which they can learn spoken English. Long and short sounds are frequently confused.

4.2.2 Transfer on intonation

English tones can also appear in several places in a sentence to convey distinct meanings, making it challenging for learners to understand. Different tones of English can convey distinct meanings and interpretations when the same words and sentences are uttered. Students should be able to distinguish between the two. In English, sentences can be either ascending or descending. In oral English, rising and falling tones are frequently used to identify the emotional hue. A rising tone in oral English typically indicates a speaker who is more emotional. There is a fair amount of passion and intense emotion present during the speaking process. Nonetheless, a dropping tone frequently indicates a disinterest in the speaker's feelings.

Readers often focus on intonation accuracy of words and sentences when reading aloud in Cantonese. Since it is difficult for students to understand recordings of native speakers or recordings of actual scenarios, English teachers typically use listening materials that have clear, fluent, and standardized pronunciation. (Deng, interviewee 12)

Cantonese and English have different rising and falling tones. For instance, falling tones are typically used when reading declarative sentences, special interrogative questions, and exclamatory sentences in English. In Cantonese, however, sentences that end with periods and exclamation points have decreasing tones. A question mark typically indicates a rising tone in a sentence.

High school students rarely interact with one another during learning. Although phonics teachers emphasize intonation, reading and writing education still dominate high school curricula. Students are asked to read the text aloud during high school reading class. Yet, this requirement does not emphasize the intonation of the voice.

4.2.3 Transfer on vocabulary

As for positive transfer, this is related to the evolution of Cantonese in the process of development. Due to historical reasons, Guangdong has had relatively early exchanges with foreign countries, especially the United Kingdom. It is a common observation among Cantonese students in Guangdong to note that many Cantonese words are pronounced similarly to English words. Cantonese-speaking high school students learn English fast due to their ability to recall terms from their Cantonese pronunciation. Students benefit from the way these words are spoken and how similar their meanings are.

Many Cantonese terms have phonological similarities. This phenomenon can support learning and memory during the English language learning process. Typically, this type of vocabulary is used and understood in a similar manner to English. To some extent, it is beneficial for vocabulary usage. (Gu, Interviewee 3)

The following examples illustrate negative transfer. The Cantonese term “红茶” is a combination of “red” and “tea”, pronounced as “红茶 (hung4 caa4)”. The English equivalent of “红茶” is “black tea”, which is a combination of “black” and “tea”. There is a big difference in meaning, and the colors represented by the two are completely different. As a result, Cantonese learners who are susceptible to negative transfer of their mother tongue can easily understand the term “black tea” as “tea with black color”. For high school students learning English, there are relatively few frequently used collocations, which makes them more prone to incorrect collocation usage, biased translation, and poor transfer from their native language. It does not sound natural to speak English in that manner.

The causal compound sentence is the most evident. When expressing cause and effect in Chinese, learners often utilize the expression “because... so...”. “Because” and “so” cannot both be used in the same sentence in English. The phrase “though... but...” is equivalent. Furthermore, as a result of the mother tongue’s negative transfer, senior high school students frequently begin oral practice with “and”. It is common to hear students utilize “and” to begin sentences multiple times because it is easy to understand. (Feng, Interviewee 13)

4.2.4 Transfer on grammar

There are some similarities between Cantonese and English in terms of tense and words. Therefore, language transfer has positive effects. Furthermore, the order of words in Cantonese and English grammar is quite distinct. There is a weak structural link between the subject and the predicate in Cantonese. There is no change in the consistency of subjects and verbs when speaking Cantonese. In addition to verb predicates, Cantonese employs a variety of predicates, adjective predicates, and non-verb predicates. There is such a large difference between Cantonese and English in this area that learners frequently make mistakes such as misunderstanding word order and subject-verb inconsistency. These mistakes may affect a learner’s ability to speak English correctly.

In spoken English, even when grammar and vocabulary are impeccable, the meaning of phrases may be misconstrued due to word order issues. The formation of such errors is largely due to the influence of Chinese thinking patterns.

Verbs in English are categorized as either transitive or intransitive. In Cantonese, it is difficult to distinguish between the two, but in English, there is a significant variation in how they are used. An intransitive verb cannot become passive since a direct object cannot come after it. Because of the influence of their mother tongue, learners frequently make the error of using intransitive verbs in oral English (the passive voice). (Li, interviewee 11)

Cantonese and English exhibit significant differences in thought processes. Cantonese speakers tend to think in images and rely more on experience and intuition. However, while English speakers are more inclined towards abstract thinking, which is also related to logical reasoning. Therefore, they pay more attention to related concepts and reasoning in the process of thinking. At the same time, Cantonese speakers pay more attention to roundabout ways, and rarely choose a straightforward way when thinking and solving problems. Therefore, learners are influenced by the thinking of their mother tongue and often form a general context in oral English prior to interacting with others. The survey results also support this argument. It was reported that 58.04% of students used English thinking in their oral English output, while 33.04% employed Mandarin thinking. Cantonese thinking is still relatively rare among students.

5. Conclusion

This paper found that pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, and grammar are the pivotal areas of English learning where the positive and negative effects of mother tongue transfer are most evident. The findings of this study reveal that Cantonese senior high school students’ English language learning process is highly influenced by mother tongue transfer. Due to the similar pronunciation and usage characteristics of Cantonese dialect and English, the mother tongue has a positive effect on students’ oral English skills in senior high school. The two languages, however, belong to different language families, so negative transfer is also present in all areas. For instance, unclear words, disordered word order, and other grammatical errors are also common when learning oral English. Errors often occur unconsciously among senior high school students.

English pronunciation is significantly influenced by Cantonese dialects. Negative transfer could occur as a result of the differences between Cantonese and English phonetic transcriptions. Learners are more significantly affected negative transfer could occur as a result of the differences between Cantonese and English phonetic transcriptions. In terms of liaison and pause when there is a negative transfer of mother language intonation. Nonetheless, learning Cantonese has a beneficial transfer effect since some of the words are pronounced similarly to English. However, when it comes to vocabulary learning, learners frequently have diverging conceptual understandings of the mental vocabulary of a second language. As a result, improper speech will occur. Among the most blatant examples of the negative transfer of mother tongue is the improper use of the passive voice, which is relatively rare in Chinese. Mother tongue transfer may also be negatively affected by inertial thinking differences between Chinese and English speakers.

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