

# Empirical Study of Cultural Transfer in the Process of Second Language Acquisition

Mingzhe Sun<sup>\*</sup>, Yi Liu<sup>a</sup>

*School of International Studies, University of Science and Technology Liaoning, Anshan 114000, China*

*\*Corresponding author e-mail: 1395648487@qq.com, <sup>a</sup>liuyi79112@163.com*

**ABSTRACT.** *Language can be regarded as a carrier of culture. In the process of second language acquisition, cultural differences are the main factors causing learning disabilities. The cultures of various nationalities have both similarities and differences. In the process of intercultural communication or foreign language teaching and acquisition, the phenomenon of cultural transfer is widespread. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to draw a general conclusion through a questionnaire survey of nearly 100 college students, and on this basis, exploring the different forms and various elements of cultural migration in the process of second language acquisition and the cultural transfer to inspire the teachers and students in the second language teaching and acquisition process.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Second language acquisition, cultural transfer, cultural differences*

## 1. Introduction

The word “transfer” belongs to the category of psychology, which means the influence of the knowledge or abilities that learners have mastered on the new ability or knowledge they want to master or learn. The second language refers to another language that learners acquire based on mastering their mother tongue or native language. The second language is defined according to the order of time in which the language is acquired. Transfer in the process of second language mainly includes mother tongue transfer, target language transfer, and cultural transfer. Culture, as an indispensable and important factor in the process of second language teaching and acquisition, generally has a very significant influence on teachers’ teaching activities and students’ language acquisition.

## **2. Cultural Transfer Theory**

### ***2.1 The Connotation of Cultural Transfer***

According to the different ways in which children and adults master a particular language, Krashen, an American applied linguist put forward the “Krashen Input Hypothesis”. Krashen believes that children acquire the first language through unorganized and unconscious language acquisition; on the contrary, adults learn the second language through purposeful, organized, planned and conscious language learning. In this process of second language acquisition, linguists usually define the influence of native language knowledge and the specific culture of their own nation on second language acquisition, that is, the promotion or hindrance of the original knowledge to the new knowledge being mastered or to be learned which is called “language transfer”. The effect of mother tongue structure and pragmatic knowledge is called “mother tongue transfer”, while the influence of mother tongue or target language culture is called “cultural transfer”.

### ***2.2 Relations among Cultural Transfer, Language Acquisition and Cross-cultural Communication***

Cultural transfer inevitably happens in the process of language teaching and acquisition. Cultural transfer and language acquisition complement each other, and they are essential. To put it simply, in the process of learning non-native languages, native culture has an impact on the language learners are going to acquire. In this process, the native culture and the different cultures crash with each other, exchange with each other, and blend with each other. The process of continuous export of native culture, continuous input of different cultures and exposure of cultural differences is also the process of cross-cultural communication. Intercultural communication refers to the process of communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. In the questionnaire, 85 percent of college students believe that they do not know much about the Chinese and western cultural differences but have learned or been exposed to them, and they believe that the cultural gap between Chinese and western cultures is huge. 15 percent of college students said they were not clear about or able to explain the cultural differences between China and the west.

## **3. Cultural Transfer in Second Language Acquisition**

### ***3.1 The Relation between Culture and Language***

Different people have different thoughts about what culture is. Brown believes that culture is the sum of beliefs, habits, and patterns of life and behavior, all of which are roughly shared by people occupying a given geographic area. According

to Ji Xianlin, a Chinese linguist, culture refers to the spiritual, material, and useful things created by human beings in history.

Language is a very vital part of culture, a unique cultural phenomenon, a significant means of spreading culture, and shows strong vitality and national cohesion. Human language is mysterious. Although many linguists in ancient, modern, Chinese, and foreign countries are committed to the study of language, human language has not been fully understood. Language is a testimony to the historical development of a country and nation. Language is regarded as the carrier of culture and an important carrier of cultural communication and dissemination. Culture includes customs, ways of thinking, beliefs about religion, and some other forms of cultural expression. Language is an important heritage of a country and nation. It is elementary for a nation. Culture needs language as a communication tool, and language has a huge impact on the development of culture during the process of communication.

### ***3.2 The Influence of Cultural Transfer on Language Acquisition***

The influence of cultural transfer on second language acquisition is comprehensive and profound. In the process of learning the target language, the teaching and acquisition activities will be carried out according to the bottom-up model. The knowledge of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, construction, semantics, and pragmatics all have cultural transfer.

Similarly, there is a question in the questionnaire: "Which aspect of English that cultural transfer has the greatest impact on?" Not surprisingly, the results were mixed. 5 percent of the students think that the most influential aspect is the conceptual meaning of vocabulary, while 25 percent think that the most influential aspect is the connotation meaning of vocabulary, because the connotation meaning is hidden behind the vocabulary containing cultural factors, which is difficult to understand. Similarly, 25 percent say that grammatical understanding and collocation are most affected by cultural transfer. And the majority of the students choose the language communication, that is, pragmatics. As shown in Fig. 1.

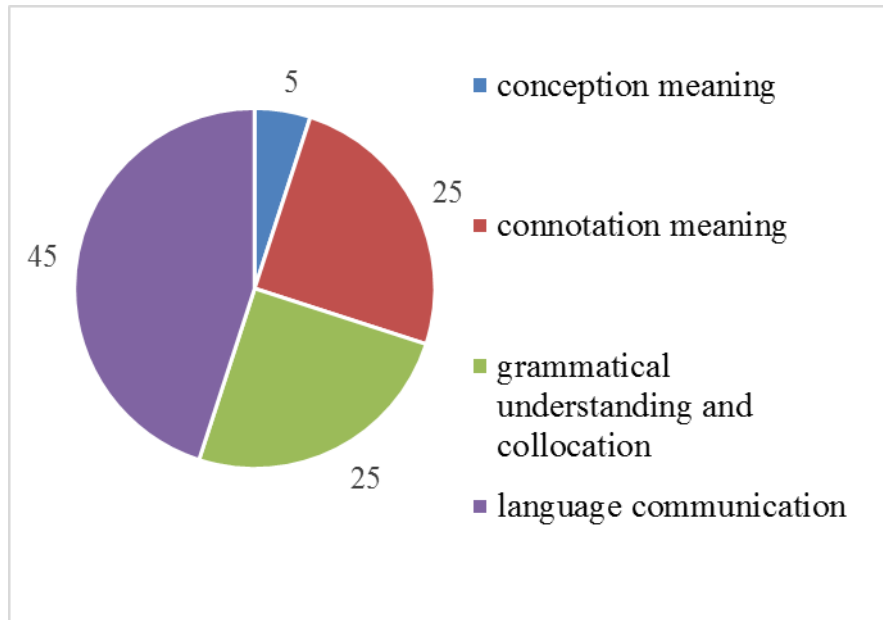


Figure. 1 Which aspect of English that cultural transfer has the greatest impact on?

### 3.2.1 Linguistic Structure

#### a. Lexical Aspect

Vocabulary is a general term for all words in a language, including special names for condensed phrases, idioms, and idiomatic phrases. A nation's vocabulary system includes its traditional customs, ideological values, thinking methods, religious beliefs, geographic location, artistic orientation, and behavior patterns.

In the English vocabulary system, there is the word "blue". The Chinese meaning is "blue color or pigment; resembling the color of the clear sky in the daytime", while there are many kinds of the English meaning of it. First, it refers to colors, such as "a blue flower." Second, it refers to a gloomy mood or state of mind, such as "in a blue mood". Third, it can refer to bruises, such as "beat sb. black and blue". Fourth, it also means something related to pornography or sex, such as "a blue film" or "blue software". In Chinese, words related to pornography or sex are "yellow". This is because of the differences between Chinese and foreign cultures caused by the word distinction.

#### b. Grammatical Aspect

The cultural transfer in the grammatical level during the second language acquisition process is generally reflected in the changes of person and number, singular and plural nouns, tense, subject-verb agreement, negation, and other sentence patterns. Since Chinese does not have morphological changes that express

grammatical meanings strictly, there are many in English. For example, the following example sentences are mistakes in grammatical structure for beginners of English (wrong sentences are marked with \*).

\*—He love his mom the most among all family members.

\*—There is countless books in the library.

\*—In the days of 2019, I complete all the plans I make at the end of 2018.

\*—Won't you go out with us? —No, I will.

The first and second sentences are both because, in Chinese culture, there is no structural principle that the third person singular and subject-verb agreement. In Chinese grammar culture, there is no distinction between singular and plural. In the third sentence, there are three structural auxiliary words in Chinese, “了、着、过”, which are used to express the tense of action, and it is different from the way of changing word patterns in English. Because the requirements of verb tenses in English culture have not been well mastered, the transfer has occurred. The fourth sentence is wrong because the learner does not understand the answer about the negative-interrogative question. The correct answer should be “No, I won't.” or “Yes, I will.”

### 3.2.2 Pragmatics

#### a. Communicative Language

In Chinese English classes, the teacher's sentence “Class begins.” comes with the bell of the class. At this time, all the students will stand up and say hello to the teacher: “Good morning, teacher.” Or in another case, a student meets a teacher who just came out of the office. If the student says hello to the teacher, he may say “Hello, teacher.” Both situations are wrong. The reason is that the differences between Chinese and English culture have resulted in cultural transfer. In Chinese culture, people are deeply influenced by the Confucian culture, and believe that teaching is a highly respected profession. Students should respect their teachers and say “老师好” when they say hello to them. Therefore, when they say hello to the teacher in English, they will substitute the mother tongue culture into the target language culture. The difference is that in English culture, the word “teacher” is not an honorific title or a salutation, and it is rarely used in communication. In most cases, it only represents the profession or industry of teachers.

#### b. Taboo Language

Chinese and western taboos are reflected in many different aspects. For example, the topics that are discussed when the two meet each other, numbers, colors, appellations, etc. all have taboo phenomena within the scope of pragmatics. In the West, “white” is a symbol of purity. People will choose white wedding dresses, white bouquets, and white decorations in weddings. Even well-meaning lies are said to be “white lies”. On the contrary, in Chinese culture, white often corresponds to death. People don't choose to use white as a gift, because it will be considered a curse. The Chinese call death “white things.” So “white” is also a taboo word in

Chinese culture. Then, in the process of second language acquisition, because of the lack of understanding of the differences in western culture, cultural transfer may occur. There was a story: When a Chinese and an American communicated, the two discussed a wedding celebration. The American thought that this was a particularly pure, beautiful, and happy thing, and he said the word “white”, but the Chinese understood it as the meaning in Chinese culture. In the end, the two broke up, and this communication failed. Therefore, only by understanding each other’s cultural differences behind each other’s language can cultural and linguistic communication complete without errors.

### ***3.3 Factors Leading to Cultural Transfer***

#### ***3.3.1 Mode of Thinking***

China’s way of thinking can be summarized as “inductive”. The so-called inductive type refers to first enumerating specific examples, and finally looking for common traits in different examples to seek the final truth, that is, to say the cause first and then the result. The Chinese often use the “because ... so ...” sentence pattern, because the Chinese way of thinking is used to use subtle expressions, that is, some backdrops are used in the front to make the following reasons or the demands are less obtrusive. This is considered to be polite and quality performance in Chinese culture, and it will be more popular than straightforward language styles. While western ways of thinking can be called “deductive”. The so-called deductive form is to first talk about the truth or experience that has been summarized, and then gradually use practice to prove this truthful experience. So westerners speak straightforwardly, and never express their opinions or ideas euphemistically. Their style of speaking never turns around. Westerners often use the sentence “... because ...” because they focus on the results, so they talk about the matter first and then explain the reason. This not only saves time for both parties to talk, but also allows the other party to better understand the content of the discourse and avoid guessing.

#### ***3.3.2 Cultural Stereotype***

Hu Wenzhong defined “stereotype” as a set of beliefs for certain individuals or groups which may be positive or negative, and now the term is generally used with a derogatory meaning. Once the set is formed, it is difficult to change in a short time, and it is likely to infect people around the perception of the same thing. For example, in China, when talks about the southerner is savvy and the northerner is bold, or this person is bitter and harsh and the other is kind and enthusiastic, unconsciously, it has been imprinted with the stereotype. Or it is generally believed that the Chinese are shy and humble, the Americans are frank and optimistic, the Germans are stubborn, the French are romantic, and the English are solitary and arrogant. These are concrete manifestations of cultural stereotypes. Therefore, when the learner learns the target language, he or she will actively apply the cultural stereotype in his or her mind to the target language culture. As a result, learners may find that the facts are different, which causes stagnation of language acquisition or failure of communication.

### **3.3.3 Ethnocentrism**

Ethnocentrism is the sense of national superiority that people often talk about. When a nation or community considers itself to be the center of the world, national centralism follows. William Graham Summer has published a detailed definition and explanation of ethnocentrism. He believes that ethnocentrism means that a nation regards its group as the center of the world. They will use their own culture as a reference when dealing with different cultures, which also means that they will use their own cultural standards to judge the culture and behavior of other nations, to separate the native culture from other cultures, and to show the difference and superiority of the native culture.

## **4. The Enlightenment of Cultural Transfer**

### **4.1 For Students**

#### **4.1.1 Cultural Awareness**

In the process of second language acquisition, learners must maintain an awareness of learning culture, be culturally conscious, and deeply realize that language is the product of the concentrated reflection and inheritance of culture. Every ethnic group and every language has its own culture. In the process of second language acquisition, learners cannot separate the complementary relationship between language and culture. Efforts should be made to cultivate awareness of cultural acquisition, so that the acquisition of culture and the acquisition of language can proceed simultaneously. Learners should regard language knowledge and cultural knowledge as a whole, and keep themselves in the context of the second language and culture in order to cultivate a sense of sensitivity to the differences and conflicts between different cultures, and try to drop the transfer of their own culture to the lowest. Read as many books as possible to improve the learner's own cultural literacy. The learner should communicate more with people in the target language culture, or acquire culture through various channels.

#### **4.1.2 Practice and Progress**

Due to the differences in Chinese and western thinking modes, learners should improve the sensitivity of differences in thinking styles as a whole, conduct multiple training of thinking patterns, and should be adapted to the target language as much as possible in both language structure and language use. Interlanguage will gradually transform into the target language as the learner's knowledge and ability increase, and overcome the interference caused by the mother tongue. Learners should train their own interlanguage system within and outside the scope of the syllabus and lesson plan, and use the native culture and target language culture as the background for second language acquisition. Learners should also practice the practical use of vocabulary, sentence patterns, and grammar. At the same time, learners should face up to the language mistakes made in the learning process, and should not be detracted from their interest in learning.

## **4.2 For Teachers**

### **4.2.1 Comprehensible Input**

According to the “Krashen input hypothesis” proposed by American linguist Krashen, Krashen believes that in teaching activities, the range of knowledge imparted by teachers should be greater than students’ cognitive ability. This is Krashen’s “i+1” theory. “i” here refers to “input”, which is a large amount of language materials. And “+1” refers to a greater degree of students’ comprehensive ability. According to the Krashen hypothesis, the most important first step for teachers is to provide students with a large amount of comprehensible language input materials. Students should be given more opportunities to contact with target language materials and target language culture both inside and outside the classroom, such as situational plays, group discussions, audio and video broadcasts, practical cases, vivid dialogues, extracurricular extensions, and story sharing.

### **4.2.2 Cultural Literacy**

The improvement of students’ language ability is closely related to the improvement of teachers’ own quality. Teachers are intermediaries and transmitters between different cultures. If the teacher does not understand the culture of the target language, it will directly or indirectly affect the students’ grasp of cultural knowledge. This requires teachers to pay attention to the improvement of their own language ability and cultural ability, and put language ability and pragmatic ability into an equally important position. Through a lot of reading, expanding contacts, more exposure to the culture of English-speaking countries, and more understanding of the folk customs, political history, and traditional values of English-speaking countries, so as to cultivate teachers’ cultural literacy and improve their pragmatic ability. As the guide of English teaching activities and the disseminator of English language and culture, teachers should also participate in relevant training, exchanges, and seminars.

## **5. Conclusion**

China’s international status has been significantly improved. China’s experience and methods are worthy of learning and reference, and Chinese culture has gradually spread to the world. Learners and professors gradually pay more and more attention to the cultural transfer in the process of second language acquisition. However, since learners do not understand the language and cultural differences between the mother tongue and the target language, this will lead to cultural transfer, thereby hindering the acquisition of second languages. Culture is the soul of a country or a nation. Without culture, a nation will have no cohesion and creativity. Language is the first manifestation of culture, and it has no chance to carry culture, but also inherit culture. Culture communicates and spreads through language, and language expresses and merges through culture. Therefore, this thesis adopts empirical research methods to reveal the current teaching problems and factors through the investigation of learners, and then draw general conclusions and suggestions, so that the teaching and acquisition of both teachers and students complement each other



and develop together. Teachers and students are indispensable in teaching activities, so only with the joint efforts of the two can cultural transfer be avoided.

### **References**

- [1] Paula Carneiro, Ana Lapa, Júlia Reis, Tânia Ramos, Testing pragmatic inferences: The impact of language and culture, Spanish, 2020.
- [2] Crystal David, Language and Linguistics: an introduction to the study of language, 1969.
- [3] Jiang Xiaofeng, Negative Cultural Transfer in English Teaching and Its Alleviating Principles, Hefei, Anhui, 2012.
- [4] Ling Wang, King Kui Sin, Legal Translation and Cultural Transfer: A Framework for Translating the Common Law into Chinese in Hong Kong, German, 2013.