

The Application of Mother Tongue Transfer Theory to English Syntactic Teaching in Primary School

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Abstract: This paper reports an empirical study on the sixth-grade students' mastery of English syntax in primary schools, and the influence of mother tongue transfer theory to English syntactic teaching in primary schools. The subjects are 98 sixth-grade students in S Experimental Primary School and the instruments adopted included a questionnaire survey and sentence pattern tests. Detailed analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data has yielded the finding as follow: 1) Grade 6 students have mastered five basic English sentence patterns and some complex sentence structures; 2) The majority of students learn English by acquiring their mother tongue; 3) Mother tongue transfer theory can help students to complete the dialogue accurately with corresponding syntax in class, thus improving the efficiency of English syntax teaching in primary schools.

Keywords: Primary school; English syntactic teaching; Mother tongue transfer theory.

1. Introduction

Chen C believed that the transfer of native language thinking plays an important role in promoting students' second language acquisition [1]. Based on the behaviorism theory in 1950s, Pham G put forward the learning group with high L1 proficiency improved in L2 English indicates a degree of spontaneous cross-language transfer among children with high L1-L2 proficiency [8]. However, Erdocia K thought that when L1 and L2 differ, their cues compete, resulting in a negative transfer from L1 [2]. Therefore, how to leverage the positive transfer of Chinese and strive to prevent the negative transfer effect of Chinese interference to promote English teaching, has attracted widespread attention.

In recent years, Western scholars have conducted considerable research in the field of second language acquisition. Labakova, Popoola and others elaborated on the impact of positive transfer of mother tongue on second language acquisition [9]; Erdocia, Singh, and Raffaele investigated the impact of mother tongue negative transfer on second language acquisition [3][10]. Compared with foreign researches on mother tongue transfer theory, China starts relatively late in the study of mother tongue transfer theory in foreign language teaching. However, it is gratifying that some scholars in China are gradually conducting empirical research. For example, Guo Qian pointed out that if the writing systems of the two languages are the same, it will promote the transfer, so that children can transfer the strategies and knowledge accumulated in one language to another [4]. Long Guizhen expounded that in the process of English teaching in primary schools, don't completely exclude the use of mother tongue, nor rely too much on mother tongue, but use mother tongue moderately [7]. However, most scholars at home have conducted extensive research on mother tongue transfer, rather than specifically focusing on a particular aspect of language teaching.

Therefore, based on previous research, the paper accepts 87 sixth grade students from Experimental Primary School in S City as the survey subjects, and adopts tools such as questionnaires and tests to explore the mastery of English syntax by sixth grade students in primary school, summarize

the common syntactic errors made by sixth grade students, and analyze the degree of influence of mother tongue transfer on students in elementary school English syntax teaching.

2. Research Method

2.1. Questions that need to be solved

This paper aims to answer the following questions: 1) How well do sixth grade students master English syntax in primary school? 2) What are the common errors that sixth grade students make in syntactic learning? 3) How does mother tongue transfer affect students in primary school English syntax teaching?

2.2. Respondents

87 sixth grade students (43 in Class 1 and 44 in Class 2) from S Experimental Primary School participated in this survey. The reason for choosing them as survey and subjects of comparison is that sixth grade students have already studied English courses for three years, and have gained a certain understanding and mastery of English sentence patterns and syntax; The second reason is that sixth grade students are still in the early stage of English learning, and most students still acquire English ability through their mother tongue transfer, which best reflects the impact of mother tongue transfer on English syntax teaching.

2.3. Survey instrument

A questionnaire survey on the mastery of English syntax among sixth grade students. The survey is about students' mastery of essential English syntax in primary school, which includes tenses (simple present tense, present continuous tense, simple past tense, future tense), five basic sentence patterns, affirmative sentences, interrogative sentences, imperative sentences, and There be sentence patterns. Table 1 provides an analysis of sixth grade students' mastery of syntax. The options in this section are based on a 4-point scale (1-4), such as: 1=not at all; 2=basically not at all; 3=most people will; 4=master everything.

The test paper. Class 1 of Grade 6 is the experimental class, and Class 2 of Grade 6 is the control class. Both classes will

undergo two separate tests before and after class. There are three types of tests (using the following words to make sentences, sentence structure conversion, and sentence translation). Conduct the first test before class and analyze the reasons for students' syntactic errors. Afterwards, targeted treatment will be given, and students in the experimental class will receive sentence pattern training using mother tongue transfer in the class, while the control class adopts traditional teaching methods. Finally, conduct a second test to compare

the average grades of the two classes and analyze whether mother language transfer is helpful for English syntax teaching.

2.4. Data analysis

Apply the collected data for statistical analysis: 1) Calculate the average score of students in two tests simply; 2) Analyze the reasons for errors in student testing.

Table 1. Is the survey of sixth grade students' mastery of syntax.

		frequency	percentage	effective percentage			frequency	percentage	effective percentage
tenses	1	5	5.7	5.7	interrogative sentences	1	4	4.6	4.6
	2	26	29.9	29.9		2	20	23.0	23.0
	3	42	48.3	48.3		3	39	44.8	44.8
	4	14	16.1	16.1		4	24	27.6	27.6
	Total	87	100.0	100.0		Total	87	100.0	100.0
five basic sentence patterns	1	5	5.7	5.7	imperative sentences	1	9	10.3	10.3
	2	39	44.8	44.8		2	33	37.9	37.9
	3	36	41.4	41.4		3	33	37.9	37.9
	4	7	8.0	8.0		4	12	13.8	13.8
	Total	87	100.0	100.0		Total	87	100.0	100.0
affirmative sentences	1	2	2.3	2.3	There be sentence patterns	1	12	13.8	13.8
	2	9	10.3	10.3		2	31	35.6	35.6
	3	46	52.9	52.9		3	29	33.3	33.3
	4	30	34.5	34.5		4	15	17.2	17.2
	Total	87	100.0	100.0		Total	87	100.0	100.0

Table 2. Is two test scores of sixth grade students.

	class	number of students	class average		class	number of students	class average
Test 1	class 1	43	68	Test 2	class 1	43	78
Test 1	class 3	44	67	Test 2	class 3	44	70

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Sixth grade students' mastery of English syntax in primary school

Table 1 shows the statistical results of a questionnaire survey on the mastery of syntax among students in two classes, reflecting the overall tendency of sixth grade students to understand and apply syntax in primary school (Table 1).

From the data in Table 1, it can be seen that most students are in a level which is concentrated between basic understanding of syntax and proficient mastery of it, indicating that most students generally understand syntax in primary school, but are not very proficient in using it. Li Yuwei emphasized that the syntactic awareness, cognitive flexibility and sentence comprehension ability of primary school students improve with the increase of grade [6]. Therefore, in the class, attention should be paid to training and improving students' cognitive flexibility and mother tongue acquisition level.

By observing the above data, students have the best mastery of affirmative sentences, and most of them are in the point-3 or point-4. Students also have a good grasp of tenses

and interrogative sentences, and most of them are in the point-3. But from the perspective of imperative sentences and There be sentence structures, students are in a polarized situation, either point-2 or point-3, indicating that their mastery of these syntactic key points is not yet proficient enough, and they lack certain theoretical knowledge and application abilities. At the same time, the mastery of the five basic sentence patterns by students is not ideal, and the proportion of students in the point-4 is the lowest among other syntax types, indicating that this sentence pattern is very difficult for elementary school students to understand and apply. Therefore, in the subsequent teaching, emphasis should be placed on training and improving interrogative sentences, imperative sentences, There be sentence patterns, and the five basic sentence patterns.

3.2. Syntactic and sentence structure errors that most students often make in syntactic learning

The author conducts the first pre-class test on Class 1 of Grade 6 (43 students) and Class 3 of Grade 6 (44 students), and analyzes the common errors that most students make in syntactic learning. The results are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Is the common errors that most students make in syntactic learning.

types	syntactic items	number of students
making sentences with following words	tense error	10
	voice error	25
	sentence elements are repeated or missing	31
	incorrect relations in sentences	36
sentence pattern conversion	grammatical component order	31
	wrong use of interrogative sentences	23
	mistaken use of inverted sentence	17
	improper use of clauses	27
sentence translation	grammatical errors	32
	sentence component missing	21
	improper translation of complex sentences	29
	failure to understand the relationship between sentences leads to conjunctions errors	34

Table 3 shows that most of the errors made by sixth grade students in this test are due to their weak grasp of syntax and sentence structure knowledge. The reason for students' weak mastery of knowledge is due to the contradiction and conflict between their already mastered knowledge of mother tongue syntax and their newly acquired knowledge of English syntax.

Tense and grammar errors. Both English and Chinese generally have three tenses, namely past tense, present tense, and future tense. This is the commonality between English and Chinese tenses. However, English and Chinese use different grammatical means to express sentence tenses. In Chinese, verbs themselves have no formal changes, but only use adverbs of time to express time changes. But English uses the tense of verbs to express time changes. In Chinese, tense is usually expressed with the help of other words, such as adding adverbs such as “正”、“正在” (similar to be doing) before verbs to indicate the present tense, adding adverbs such as “将”、“将要”(similar to will do) to indicate the future tense, and adding adverbs such as “已”、“已经” (similar to have been) to indicate the past tense.

Improper translation of complex sentences and failure to understand the relationship between sentences leads to conjunctions errors. Due to the different logical thinking between English and Chinese, the order in which key information appears in sentences is also different. The thinking mode of English is linear, and it goes straight to the topic in language. Syntactically, in English sentences, the most important information often appears at the beginning of the sentence, and then the secondary information appears. On the contrary, Chinese people's thinking mode is spiral, and their language is tactful and tortuous. Syntactically, secondary information appears first, and then primary information appears in Chinese sentences.

Incorrect relations in sentences. Syntactically, Chinese tends to use people as subjects, while English mostly refers to objects as subjects. As far as sentence voice is concerned, Chinese usually uses active sentences, while English mostly uses passive sentences. (It is admitted that the earth is round. 我们承认地球是圆的。) Therefore, excessive use of subjective expressions such as "we think", "I think" and "someone said" in English sentences will not conform to English language habits.

3.3. The impact of mother tongue transfer on English syntax teaching

In order to explore the impact of mother tongue transfer on

primary school students' learning of English syntax, the author compared the average scores of the experimental class and the control class after classroom training through two tests and a period of classroom training, and analyzed the positive and negative effects of mother tongue transfer on English syntax teaching. (Table 2)

Table 2 shows that after implementing relevant teaching in the experimental class, the average score of the second test for sixth grade students in Class 1 has significantly improved compared to the first test. Most students have significantly improved their accuracy in tense, grammar, and five basic sentence structures by emphasizing the differences and similarities between English and Chinese syntax in the classroom and conducting multiple corresponding classroom exercises. However, for translation questions, their level has not improved much, only improving some grammar and vocabulary collocation errors, language organization and sentence structure still remain in Chinglish. Then, compared to the grades in the control class, it is the experimental class where students improve their scores more.

Overall, mother tongue transfer has two effects: positive transfer that promotes teaching and negative transfer that interferes with learning. When certain characteristics and patterns of the mother tongue are similar or consistent with English, learners applying the mother tongue model to English learning will have a positive promoting effect. However, when certain characteristics and rules of the mother tongue are inconsistent with English, Chinese thinking patterns can interfere with English learning, causing negative transfer of the mother tongue. Therefore, when applying the theory of mother tongue transfer to syntactic teaching, it is necessary to pay attention to its negative transfer. Mastering syntactic rules and overcoming mother tongue negative transfer is a long-term process that requires continuous practice.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Research results

Through this survey, the following conclusions can be drawn: 1) Sixth grade students have mastered affirmative and interrogative sentence patterns, but they still cannot fully understand the object complement and indirect object in the five basic sentence patterns, and do not yet apply the imperative sentences. 2) Most students often make errors such as tense, grammar, and missing sentence components in syntactic learning, but after a period of practice based on

mother tongue transfer analysis, students have made significant improvements in these errors. 3) The theory of mother tongue transfer can help students accurately complete dialogues using corresponding syntax in the class, thereby improving the efficiency of English syntax teaching. But the use of Chinese is only a means, not an end. Excessive use of mother tongue is not perfect in English class, as mother tongue also has its negative effect on teaching and learning efficiency.

4.2. Research enlightenment

For teachers, the sixth-grade students are in the initial stage of English learning, and their knowledge of English vocabulary, syntax and grammar is limited. In addition, factors such as learning habits, learning interest and learning ability are not enough to make them master and internalize English knowledge very slowly, and they are easily influenced by their mother tongue thinking. In this case, it is very effective to use the mother tongue to explain some difficult syntactic structures in class. With the help and guidance of teachers, we will gradually become familiar with and establish English thinking mode, so as to get rid of the interference of mother tongue in English learning. In a word, how teachers can improve classroom efficiency in the limited classroom time, how students can internalize their knowledge structure in time, and how to learn how to fully input the target language is one of the issues that need to be constantly considered and explored in future teaching.

4.3. Research limitations

Firstly, subjects are only in Grade 6, and all are Chinese-speaking subjects. The scope of the subjects is small and concentrated in the same grade, so the sample size is too small to represent the English syntax teaching in the whole country. Secondly, the experimental class receives a series of contrastive training between English and Chinese during the teaching experiment, while the control class does not. Relatively speaking, the experimental class has the advantage of resource tilt, which makes the experiment biased. Finally, the method used to investigate and analyze the data in this study is too simple, and the exploration of teaching strategies

is limited to empirical talk, lacking theoretical support. The overall research of this paper is superficial and not deep enough.

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