

THE INFLUENCES OF MOTHER TONGUE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING:  
THE CASE OF CHINESE MIAO

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Abstract

THE INFLUENCE OF MOTHER TONGUE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING:

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Under the Supervision of Yuanyuan Hu, Ph.D.

This paper aims to explore ways to improve Chinese Miao-speaking students' English proficiency. On the basis of a review of related literature on crosslinguistic influences, features of the Miao language, and the similarities and differences between the Miao language and English, the paper explores positive and negative influences of the Miao language on Miao-speaking students' English acquisition. The paper concludes with suggestions for improving Miao-speaking students' learning of English.

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## **Chapter I Introduction**

Mother tongue is the first language a child acquires without conscious learning, and it is usually impressed upon his mind. A person's mother tongue influences how a person learns a second or third language. According to Ellis (1999), the psychological process a learner goes through to understand a second language (L2) is influenced by his or her mother tongue.

Learners unconsciously apply knowledge from their mother tongue to the new language they are learning.

As English is popular in China, Miao-speaking students are required to learn English when they attend universities. English may be new to Miao-speaking students who grew up in areas where the Miao language is the first language. The Miao language and English have both differences and similarities. The Miao language is characterized by classifier constructions, while English is a West Germanic language spoken originally in England (Martha, 1991). They differ in linguistic features such as phonology, vocabulary, syntax and so on. In order to improve their English learning, students should consider how their first language influences how they learn English. This paper aims to show Miao-speaking students the similarities and differences between the Miao language and English, explore positive and negative influences of their mother tongue on their English acquisition, and provide them with suggestions for improve their English learning.

### **Statement of the Problems**

The problems to be addressed are: 1) What are the similarities and differences between the Miao language and English? 2) How the similarities and differences between the Miao language and English help or hinder Miao-speaking students as they work towards learning English?

## **Definition of Terms**

Miao Language. Miao language is a Southeast Asian language characterized by classifier constructions (Martha, 1991).

Language Transfer. This term is defined as the extent to which the mother tongue influences how well someone acquires a foreign language. Both positive and negative influences exist, depending on how similar or different the two languages are.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study focuses on determining to what extent Miao-speaking students' mother tongue influences their English acquisition. Both positive and negative transfers will be discussed, and effective ways to improve Miao-speaking students' English learning will be explored.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study specifically examines the influences of Chinese Miao-speaking students' mother tongue on their English acquisition. The findings will be meaningful to the Chinese Miao group and will be especially beneficial for those hoping to improve their own English proficiency.

## **Methodology**

This library research was conducted through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. A brief review of literature that describes basic features of the Miao language was conducted. A second review of literature on the similarities and differences between the Miao language and English was conducted. Additional research was conducted to determine how speaking the Miao language as a first language influences the ability to learn English. The paper concludes with suggestions for improving Miao-speaking students' English learning.

## Chapter II Review of Related Literature

This chapter reviews the literature on crosslinguistic influences, features of the Miao language, and the similarities and differences between the Miao language and English. This chapter also reviews Miao language's influences on Miao-speaking students' English acquisition.

### Crosslinguistic Influences

Crosslinguistic influences usually occur while someone is learning another language (Johanne & Samuel, 2003). Ellis (1997) points out that influence is "transfer", the influence that a learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2. Brittney, Josh and Chantal (2010) agree that crosslinguistic influence is closely related to language transfer. They found that speakers use their L1 knowledge to assist their interpretation of an L2 and uses of the L2.

Crosslinguistic influences consist of two main types, positive influences and negative influences, which are attributed to the similarities and differences between L1 and L2. Lourdes (2009) argues that the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 influence L2 acquisition subtly and selectively, resulting in positive as well as negative influences on L2 learning. With regard to positive influences, for example, English speakers trying to learn French would apply English principles to their learning of French. An English speaker would see that *night* (English) and *nuit* (French) appear to be similar. Since English and French share linguistic roots, it is relatively easier for English speakers to learn French. As for negative influences, for instance, where phrases are placed in a sentence can be confusing to a new language learner. Languages like French tend to place adjectives after nouns that they modify, while languages like Mandarin

place all modifiers before nouns. Languages like English, however, tend to place adjectives before nouns but adjectival phrases (i.e., ‘that’ or ‘which’ phrases) after nouns (Huang, 2010).

Lourdes (2009) raises a key question on researching crosslinguistic influences: “If knowledge and capabilities for competent language use are already available to L2 learners through the mother tongue, how do they affect the development of the new language” (p. 31)? Muriel (2012) identifies six affected aspects: vocabulary (lexicon), morphology (word structure), phonology (sound system), syntax (grammar), nonverbal structures and discourse (ways to organize sentences and information). The following analysis will focus on three of them.

### **A Comparison between the Miao Language and English**

The Miao language was initially a spoken language mainly used in Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Chongqing, Guangxi and other regions where Miao people live in groups; however, after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the government helped Miao people to create Miao characters to turn it into a language with a written form (Wang, 1985). This section focuses on three significant aspects of the Miao language – phonology, vocabulary and syntax in addition to the similarities and differences between the Miao language and English in these three aspects.

#### **Phonology**

Phonology is the study of how sounds are organized and used in natural languages (Habash, 2010). Because the Miao language is deeply influenced by Chinese, the Miao language also uses initials and finals whereas English uses consonants and vowels. In a Chinese syllable, an initial is the initial consonant of the syllable, and a final is everything after that in the syllable (Yu, Hu, Zhang & Xu, 2003). Initials in the Miao language correspond with English consonants; finals in the Miao language correspond with English vowels. Tian (2003) points out that the

Miao language has 6 phonological characteristics, which are listed as follows.

1. No retroflex, for example [r].
2. Though the Miao language has the phonetic symbol [n], Miao-speaking students may easily confuse [n] with [l].
3. The Miao language does not have labiodentals like [f] or [v].
4. The Miao language does not have friction sounds like [θ], [ð], [ʃ], [ʒ], [tʃ], [dʒ],[tr],[dr],[ts] or [dz].
5. [n] or [ŋ] sounds are not often used in the Miao language.
6. The Miao language has guttural consonants like “[hv]”, “[hg]”, “[kh]”, or “[gn]”.

According to Wu (2010), there are 32 initials and 26 finals in the Miao language.

Different from the Miao language, English has 24 consonants and 20 vowels. In fact, because initials in the Miao language correspond with English consonants, and finals in the Miao language correspond with English vowels, both languages share some common sounds. The same or similar sounds are shown in Table 1, which is adapted from a table in Wu (2010)’s paper.

Despite the similar sounds in the Miao language and English, there are definitely different sounds (Tian, 2003). The Miao language has glottal sounds like [hv], [hg], [kh] and [gn], which do not exist in the English phonetic system. English has the following consonants: [θ], [ð], [ʃ], [ʒ], [tʃ], [dʒ], [j], [w], [r], and [v] and the following vowels: [i:], [æ], [ʌ], [a:], [ɔ], [ɔ:], [u:], [ə], [ə:], [ai], [ɔi], [eə], and [uə], which do not exist in the Miao language.

*Table 1*

*A Comparison between the Miao Language and English Pronunciations*

Same or Similar Pronunciations			
Initials or Consonants		Finals or Vowels	
Miao Language	English	Miao Language	English
[b]	[b]	[i]	[i]
[p]	[p]	[e]	[əu]
[m]	[m]	[u]	[u]
[f]	[f]	[ao]	[au]
[d]	[d]	[ei]	[ei]
[t]	[t]	[ie]	[iə]
[n]	[n]	[ee]	[e]
[l]	[l]		
[s]	[s]		
[g]	[g]		
[k]	[k]		
[h]	[h]		
[ng]	[ŋ]		

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**Vocabulary**

Saville-Troike (2012) points out that “vocabulary is the most important level of L2 knowledge for all learners to develop – whether they are aiming primarily for academic or interpersonal competence” (p. 146). According to Luo and Yang (2004), the Miao language has several vocabulary features as follows.

1. Uses one word to express different meanings. For example, in the Miao language “dlex” can mean “water” or “river”, so “houk dlex” means “drink water”, and “ib dol dlex” means “a river”.
2. Uses one-morpheme words. For example, “yangt” means “fly”, “nzhel” means “fish”, “ndraox” means “grass”, and “ndox” means “sky”.
3. Uses null morphemes. A null morpheme is an empty string of phonological segments. For example, in the Miao language, “gus” does not have its own meaning and is a null morpheme to be used for people’s relationships. “gus jual” means “the in-laws”, “gus nbeuf” means “cousin”, “gus laot” means “partner”, and “gus luas” means “friend”.
4. Four-syllable word formation is a special form in the Miao language. Four-syllable words are also called four-character words. It is a traditional linguistic form of Chinese (Li, 2006). Because of the profound influence of the Chinese language and culture, the Miao language has also adopted the four-character feature into its vocabulary. There are three forms of four-character words in the Miao language. The first form is ABAC. For example, “bul chongb bul gol” means “propose a marriage”, and “lol bangx lol juat” means “gossip”. The second form is ABCD. For example, “ghangb deb ghuat qeut” means “hometown”. The third form is the most rhythmic one, AABB. For example, “loul loul hluak hluak” means “the old and the young”.

Both languages use alphabet letters, so the biggest similarity of them is that their words

look alike, and some words even have same meanings (Teng, 2005). Table 2, adapted from a table in Teng's (2005) paper, lists some of the words.

*Table 2*

*Words with Same Meanings and Similar Spellings*

English	Miao Language
Night	hmangt
Head	hfud
just	jus
desk	dax
die	das
door	diux
heard	hnangd
dog	dlod
lon	lax
cen	cait
young	yil

Table 3, adapted from another table in Teng's (2005) paper, shows that with some other words, even if they have same spellings, their meanings are totally different.

*Table 3*

*Words with Same Spellings but Different Meanings*

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<i>Word</i>	<i>Meaning in English</i>	<i>Meaning in Miao</i>
<i>bad</i>	<i>not good</i>	<i>father</i>
<i>bat</i>	<i>a kind of flying animal</i>	<i>pig</i>
<i>bus</i>	<i>a kind of public transportation</i>	<i>diamond</i>
<i>mail</i>	<i>about postal matters</i>	<i>trade</i>
<i>was</i>	<i>the past tense of "is"</i>	<i>spin</i>
<i>nail</i>	<i>a part on finger</i>	<i>fish</i>
<i>not</i>	<i>negate</i>	<i>a lot</i>
<i>lax</i>	<i>slacken</i>	<i>long time</i>
<i>laid</i>	<i>the past tense of lay</i>	<i>short</i>
<i>cat</i>	<i>a kind of animal</i>	<i>high speed</i>
<i>sat</i>	<i>the past tense of sit</i>	<i>hacking knife</i>
<i>hot</i>	<i>heat</i>	<i>speak</i>
<i>ax</i>	<i>a kind of tool; hatchet</i>	<i>no</i>
<i>ad</i>	<i>advertisement</i>	<i>sister</i>
<i>seed</i>	<i>germ</i>	<i>society</i>

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Saville-Troike (2012) also points out that “every language has specific limits and requirements on the possible orders and arrangements of elements” (p.153). Luo and Yang (2004) found that there are four basic sentence patterns in the Miao language: SV, SVO, SOV and SVC.

1. Subject + Verb (SV). For example, “God mol.” corresponds with “I go.” in English.
2. Subject + Verb + Object (SVO). For example, “God nzuad ndif.” corresponds with “I wash the dishes.” in English.
3. Subject + Object + Verb (SOV). For example, “Nil cuat zhangd nof doub uat.” means “He does all kinds of things.” A literal translation of the Miao sentence into English corresponds with “He all kinds of things does.”
4. Subject + Verb + Complement (SVC). For example, “Nil nbaox mol dleb leuf.” means “They went far away.” in English. But if the sentence is translated literally into English, it is “They far away went.”

Among the four basic sentence patterns, both the Miao language and English have two basic sentence patterns, SV and SVO. However, SOV and SVC are unique to the Miao language. Luo and Yang (2004) illustrate SOV and SVC as follows.

1. Subject + Object + Verb (SOV). For example,

Miao language:	Nil	lol	<u>zhit</u>	<u>haik.</u>
Literal translation in English:	He	words	<u>doesn't</u>	<u>speaks.</u>
SOV:	Subject	Object	Verb	
English:	He	doesn't	speaks	words.

The sentence “Nil lol zhit haik.” means “He doesn’t speak words.” in English. However, a literal translation of the sentence into English corresponds with “He words doesn’t speak.”

2. Subject + Verb + Complement (SVC). For example,

Miao language:	God	dreuf	hend.
Literal translation in English:	I	<u>am busy</u>	very.
SVC:	Subject	Verb	Complement
English:	I	am	very busy.

In English people say “I am very busy”, but Miao people say “God dreuf hend”, which means “I am busy very” according to literal translation.

### **The Influences of the Miao Language on Miao-speaking Students’ English Acquisition**

The comparison of the Miao language and English shows the similarities and differences between the two languages. This section focuses on the influences of the Miao language on Miao-speaking students’ English acquisition, including positive and negative influences in terms of phonology, vocabulary and syntax.

#### **Phonology**

Wu and Tang (1999) found that Miao students tend to have problems with English vowels, especially diphthongs that do not exist in their mother tongue. They are likely to divide diphthongs into two single vowels. For example, they may divide [ai] into [a] and [i] and pronounce them with the same length and strength. It is the same with other diphthongs, such as [au], [au], [əu] and [eə]. In addition, when Yang and Liu (2010) surveyed 61 university Miao-speaking students about their pronunciation of the Miao language and English, the researchers found that Miao-speaking students cannot pronounce some sounds correctly, because the sounds do not exist in the Miao language. Therefore, when the students have difficulty pronouncing a certain sound in English, they may find a similar sound in their mother tongue to substitute the English sound. As a result, mispronunciation may occur. If their mispronunciations are not found or corrected immediately, they may gradually form a bad habit, which may be

difficult for them to get rid of. Findings from Yang and Liu (2010)'s study are summarized in Table 4.

*Table 4*

*Weaknesses in Miao-speaking Students' English Pronunciation*

Weaknesses	Number of People	Percentage
Cannot distinguish [m],[n], and [ŋ]	41	67.2%
Cannot correctly pronounce [θ], [ð], [ʃ], [ʒ], [tʃ], [dʒ], [j], [w], and [r]	40	65.6%
No friction when pronounce [v]	38	62.3%
Cannot distinguish [i:] and [i], [e] and [æ], [ʌ] and [a], [ə:] and [ə], [u:] and [u], [ɔ:] and [ɔ]	35	57.3%

**Vocabulary**

Another influence is reflected in vocabulary. First, as Dong (2001) points out, some of words in the Miao language have more meanings than their corresponding words in English. For example, in the Miao language, “yongx” is used to refer to all kinds of sheep, but in English there are different words for different kinds of sheep. English has “sheep” and “goat”. The animals belong to one class, but they have their special names. So it is quite possible for Miao students just to remember one with no idea of the other word. Second, for words that look alike but have similar meanings in the two languages, students may get familiar with these words rapidly, but they may have a tendency to mix them together. When they are not sure about English words, they may use spellings in the Miao language to replace them. In addition, for

words with same spellings but different meanings in the two languages, they are also likely to get confused.

### **Syntax**

The influence of Miao-speaking students' mother tongue in terms of syntax can be mainly attributed to the two unique sentence structures in the Miao language. Miao-speaking students may use SOV and SVC structures that do not exist in English. For example, in English, people say "Mary cooks food." but when Miao-speaking students say the sentence in English, they may say "Mary food cooks." because of the SOV pattern in their mother tongue. Similarly, Miao-speaking students may say "I am happy very" in English because of the influence of the SVC pattern in their mother tongue.

### **Summary**

The above analyses from the perspective of crosslinguistic influences shows that there are both similarities and differences between the Miao language and English. To Miao-speaking students, in most cases the similarities may facilitate their English learning. But in other cases, some similarities and differences may negatively influence Miao-speaking students' English acquisition. Certain strategies are needed to help Miao-speaking students make use of positive influences and avoid negative influences.

## **Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations**

The previous chapter compares the Miao language with English and discusses the influences of the Miao language on Miao-speaking students' English acquisition from three perspectives: phonology, vocabulary and syntax. There are both similarities and differences between the Miao language and English. In most cases the similarities may facilitate their English learning, for example, help them memorize English words. Nevertheless, some similarities and differences may cause problems and hinder their English learning. Therefore, it is vital for Miao-speaking students to be aware of the similarities and differences, which will be very useful in the process of learning English. Students should make efforts to make good use of positive aspects to help their learning and understand difficult aspects to avoid negative transfers. Useful strategies below are recommended for Miao-speaking students.

The challenges of Miao-speaking students have with some English sounds can be mainly attributed to the lack of equivalent sounds in their mother tongue. One of effective ways is imitation. Students can find resources for imitation and practice. Nowadays, there are many resources on the Internet. For example, students can find a short video, listen first and then read after it, and repeat after it again and again until they can read it fluently and correctly. This is a useful strategy to improve pronunciation. In this way, students can not only listen to the pronunciation of a speaker, but also watch the shape of his or her mouth when they are pronouncing a certain sound. Take the phonetic symbol [v] as an example. The Miao language does not have it. Therefore, many Miao-speaking students mistake it for [w], which exists in the Miao language (Wu, 2010). Students may also find a partner to practice with. The students may read to each other and correct each other's mistakes.

Association is another useful way to help Miao-speaking students memorize English sounds.

Even when Miao-speaking students meet with sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue, they can try to associate the sounds with similar sounds in the Miao language. For example, the phonetic symbol [ŋ] is difficult to pronounce for Miao-speaking students because it does not exist in the Miao language. Therefore, Miao-speaking students have to find a way to practice the unfamiliar sound. The Miao word “bangx” can be a good example. “bangx” means “flower” in the Miao language, and the part “ang” of the word is pronounced very similarly to [ŋ] (Teng, 2005). Associating the difficult phonetic symbol with the sound that exists in the Miao language may be a good strategy for them to learn the difficult sound.

As for vocabulary learning, the problem of vocabulary learning for Miao-speaking students mainly lies in their confusion by different meanings in English and in the Miao language. Some words look the same, but their meanings are different. To solve this problem, students can draw on their imagination. For example, “nail” is a part on the finger in English, but it means “fish” in the Miao language. To Miao-speaking students, in order to memorize this word, they can draw a picture in their mind. For Miao-speaking students who understand that “nail” means fish in their language, they can use their imagination to learn the English cognate. They would have to adjust their thinking to realize that “nail” in English can refer to the cartilage found on the dorsal side of one’s fingers. They may also use their knowledge of Miao words to create sayings to help them remember English meanings, a saying like “A nail (Miao) does not have nails (English).”

In addition, as to the words with the same meanings and similar spellings, comparative strategies can be used (Kan & Kohnert, 2005). For example, a Miao-speaking student may write down the English word “just” and its form in the Miao language “jus”. By comparing these two words, students can become aware that adding a “t” to the end of “jus” turns it into “just”. For the English word “head” and Miao word “hfud”, students can also write down them and do a

comparison, which may help them recognize that changing the two letters “fu” in the middle into “ea” results in “head”.

As to syntax features, comparison and contrast can also be an effective strategy. The most difficult part of Miao-speaking students’ English acquisition lies in the different sentence structures. Miao-speaking students can collect English sentences, make comparisons and contrast them with sentences in the Miao language, and identify differences (Teng, 2005). Students may read sentences out aloud and eventually create their own sentences. All of these strategies may help students gain a better understanding of English sentence patterns.

In summary, figuring out the positive influences and negative influences of their mother tongue will be helpful for Miao-speaking students learning English. By understanding the similarities and differences between the Miao language and English, students can use strategies to improve their learning of the English language.

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