

THEORETICAL EVOLUTION AND PRACTICAL LIMITATIONS OF L1 TRANSFER IN
CHINESE EFL CONTEXTS: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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Peili Wu

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Abstract

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Peili Wu

Under the Supervision of Dr. Madelon Köhler-Busch

This study explores the theories of language transfer and its application in Chinese EFL context. By comprehensively reviewing the development of L1 transfer theories from the early viewpoints of behaviorist psychology to the contemporary comprehensive framework, the research reveals the complexity of the transfer phenomenon. The study analyzes existing theories and practical application in the context of EFL in China and points out notable limitations in theoretical frameworks, research methods and practical application. Based on this, it proposes the necessity of constructing a localized Transfer Model and formulating targeted teaching strategies to reduce negative transfer and enhance positive transfer effects. Meanwhile, the study also suggests that research methods and teaching strategies should be optimized to provide more targeted and evidence-based support for Chinese EFL learners.

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Chapter I Introduction

As an important branch of modern linguistics, language transfer has long been a key area of second language acquisition research. It aims to explain cross-linguistic influence of mother tongue on target language acquisition.

With the rise of behaviorist psychology in mid-20 century, language transfer begun to receive attention in linguistic field. Burrhus Frederic Skinner was a representative figure of behaviorism at that time. Skinner (1957) believed that language learning was a process of habit formation and reinforcement, where learners acquired new behaviors through imitation, practice, and consolidation. Based on this view, Robert Rado (1957) proposed the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). He suggested that the difficulties encountered by learners in the process of second language acquisition could be predicted and explained by comparing the first language and the second language systematically. This was the early stage of language transfer research and laid the foundation for the developments in transfer theories.

The transfer theories evolve through decades and becomes more integrated today. But it still lacks something when it is applied to Chinese context. Given significant differences between English and Chinese, Chinese EFL learners face unique challenges of L1 transfer during English language acquisition in the area of phonology, grammar, pragmatics, etc. This seminar paper aims to review the theoretical evolution of transfer and analyze its limitations when applies to the Chinese EFL context. It will also offer recommendations of future directions for learning, teaching and research in transfer area.

Statement of the Problem

Theoretically, the dominant models of language transfer mainly derive from Indo-European language comparisons (Odlin, 1989). Chinese is an analytic language that lacks tense markers and articles, thus activates unique error patterns in English acquisition rarely seen in Indo-European contexts (Yuan, 2010). This framework of transfer theories cannot thoroughly explain the typological differences between Chinese and English. Methodologically, there is a lack of longitudinal tracking of Chinese learners' language transfer across different learning stages to support dynamic transfer models. Practically, the disconnection between teaching strategies and transfer theories makes it difficult for Chinese EFL learners to internalize transfer knowledge.

Therefore, primary problems will be addressed in this study as follows:

1. How has the transfer theories evolved? How can we explain the impact of L1 transfer on Chinese EFL learners' given the unique linguistic differences between the two languages?
2. Are there any limitations in the existing transfer theories concerning English language acquisition of Chinese EFL learners?
3. How can we develop more effective teaching strategies and research methods to address the challenges posed by L1 transfer in the Chinese EFL context?

Definition of Terms

L1 Transfer: The definition of language transfer given by Odlin (1989) is "the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (p. 27). It can be positive transfer when the influence come to facilitate learning and negative transfer when influence causes errors.

EFL Learners: EFL stands for English as a Foreign Language. EFL learners means students who study English as a foreign language. It refers to Chinese learners studying English in this seminar paper (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive review of sources of language transfer theories and to identify the limitations of existing transfer theories when applied to the Chinese EFL context. It tries to construct a dynamic modeling of L1 transfer on the English language acquisition of Chinese EFL learners. Specifically, this study tends to contribute to a better understanding of language transfer in English language acquisition and provide practical recommendations for EFL Chinese learners and educators.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is to provide a comprehensive review of L1 transfer theories and its application to Chinese EFL context. It will make a contribution to the existing knowledge body of transfer. For educators and researchers who are interested in the challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners, it can provide them with some valuable insights in transfer. Findings such as the limitations of current transfer theories and proposals of context-specific pedagogical strategies can help learners and educators improve the effectiveness of

English learning and teaching in China. Additionally, it may also benefit other non-native English-speaking contexts by providing insights into the role of L1 transfer in language acquisition.

Methodology

To answer these questions, library research will be conducted. Key words such as “L1 transfer”, “Chinese EFL”, “language acquisition”, “cross-linguistic influence”, and “contrastive analysis” etc. are used to search for relevant sources in academic databases including Karmann Library, Baidu Academic Network, and China Journal Full-text Database. Library research will focus on the evolution of transfer theories, analyzing its effects and applications on Chinese EFL learners’ and its limitations. Based on the analysis and findings, conclusions and future recommendations will be made for future research, teaching and learning.

Chapter II Literature Review

Language transfer is a significant area of research in second language acquisition and has been long studied since 1950s. Transfer theory has shifted from behaviorist and deterministic approaches to more refined and integrated frameworks. This evolution recognizes the complexity of transfer as a phenomenon influenced by cognitive, social, and cultural factors and highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of transfer to inform effective language teaching and learning practice. With the remarkable linguistic differences between Chinese and English, Chinese EFL students experience salient impact of L1 transfer during their language acquisition. This chapter reviews theoretical evolution of L1 transfer, L1 transfer theories in China, and studies on L1 transfer in Chinese EFL contexts.

Theoretical Evolution of L1 Transfer

In early 20th century, transfer theory first appeared and was reckoned as behavioral approaches in the context of behaviorist psychology. Skinner (1957) with some other behaviorists believed that language learning was a straightforward process of habit formation and reinforcement, where learners acquired new behaviors through imitation, practice, and reinforcement. Then Robert Lado (1957) proposed the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). He pointed out that the difficulties learners would encounter in L2 acquisition were predictable and explainable by educators through systematical comparison of the L1 and L2. This marked a significant development in transfer theories and applied linguistics during 1950s-1960s. But the CAH overemphasized on structural differences and was also criticized for its lack of flexibility. Error Analysis emerged in response to the limitations of the CAH. A more nuanced approach

was provided to understand transfer by analyzing the errors learners made. This approach agreed that some errors occurred because of L1 transfer while some could be due to other factors such as developmental processes, strategies, or interlanguage development (Corder, 1967). With the cognitive revolution in psychology, the explanations of transfer shifted its perspective from behaviorist to cognitive. Grass and Selinker (1992) viewed transfer as a cognitive process where learners used their existing L1 knowledge to interpret and produce L2. The concept of “cross-linguistic influence” (Odlin, 1989) was also included in the cognitive theories of transfer, suggesting that transfer was complicated interactions between L1 and L2 knowledge. Sociocultural approaches were seen in the late 20th century. Influenced by the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978), these sociocultural theories of language acquisition highlighted the role of social interactions, cultural context and the zone of proximal development (APD). In this framework, transfer was interpreted as a dynamic, context-based phenomenon influenced by learners’ social and cultural experiences. But sociocultural approaches received criticisms for not offering a precise and detailed explanation of the mental process that drove language transfer.

Now transfer is believed to be the interaction result of both internal factor of cognition and external factors of society and culture (Meng & Mohd Sharif, 2024; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). It can manifest at different linguistic levels (phonological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic) and individual differences play an important role in how it manifests (Ellis, 2015; Bi, 2023). This integrated approach combines comprehensive insights from the above-mentioned theoretical frameworks, which can inform effective language teaching and learning practices.

The Development of L1 Transfer Theory in China

According to Lv (2018) in “The current Situation, Shortcomings, and Development Trends of L1 transfer Research in China-- A Review of L1 Transfer in Second Language

Writing”, research on L1 transfer in second language acquisition begins late in the 1990s in China compared with international studies and still lags behind international standards. The author notes that most of the research relies too much on literature reviews and not enough on empirical data with limited use of diverse research methods and statistical analyses. The author also calls for a broader range of linguistic aspects of language transfer, more sophisticated research methods, and investigation the application of transfer research to language teaching.

After reviewing and comparing 168 Chinese studies and 79 foreign studies published in core foreign language journals from 2000 to 2023, Liu (2025) points out that most research on language transfer at home and abroad is empirical (with quantitative research being predominant), and the theory employed is largely the same in terms of research methods. However, empirical research abroad has gradually become more rigorous and standardized, which only a few researchers in China have been able to achieve triangulation and collect multiple types of data from the same research subject. However, as the theoretical framework in China has gradually enriched, scholars have formed their own research systems. The author also points out that lexical transfer and syntactic transfer are the most common in terms of research dimensions. In China, lexical transfer is given more attention, especially spelling and word meaning, followed by syntax and phonology; abroad, syntactic transfer is the focus, followed by phonology, with a lack of research on other language levels.

By using CiteSpace software, Wang & Pan (2023) conducted a visual analysis of 162 publications on language transfer in China taken from Peking University core periodical Catalogue and CSSCI Periodical Catalogue from 2000 to 2022 from the perspectives of publication volume, author distribution, key word co-occurrence, keyword clustering, and keyword emergence. Based on the analysis of these researches in China, they make several

recommendations. The scope of study subject should be expanded by including younger age groups such as middle and primary school students instead of focusing on university students. Conceptual transfer studies could be broadened by incorporating cognitive systems, language experience, and contextual factors. A multidisciplinary approach should be adopted by integrating insights from various fields such as psycholinguistics. And collaboration within the academic community and interdisciplinary exchange in the field of Chinese language transfer research should be strengthened.

Transfer Theories Applied to Chinese EFL Contexts

The existing transfer theories have provided valuable insights into the processes of language learning. However, when applied to Chinese EFL students, the theories reveal several limitations that stem from linguistic, cultural, and educational factors unique to the Chinese context.

One of the limitations is they consider insufficiently the significant linguistic differences between Chinese and English. Chinese belongs to Sino-Tibetan language family while English belong to Indo-European. The differences between are multifaceted and manifest cross various linguistic dimensions including phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. For example, Chinese is a tonal language, and the pitch contour of a words can change its meaning. English is a non-tonal language, and its intonation and stress patterns are used for emphasis and rhythm rather than lexical meaning. So Chinese EFL learners always find English phonology difficult because of the different sound systems. Mandarin's tonal system contrasts sharply with English's stress-timed prosody. Tang (2014) reports that EFL students often apply Chinese phonetic knowledge to English, leading to mispronunciation. For example, Chinese students may use Chinese character or Pinyin to remember English words. She also mentions that Chinese

diverse regional dialects affect English pronunciation. Huang (2017) finds that “the nasal consonants are difficult for native speakers of Wenzhounese because of the confusion between the alveolar and the velar nasals” (p. 13). These phonological difficulties that Chinese EFL students encountered may not be fully addressed, resulting in overgeneralizations in term of transfer effects (Ellis, 2015).

Meanwhile, Chinese is an analytic language, and it lacks inflectional morphology, articles, and tense markers. But English uses inflections to indicate grammatical relationships. EFL learners fails to consistently produce inflectional morphology in their English speech due to the properties of L1 prosodic phonology being transferred into the interlanguage grammar rather than a lack of understanding of the morphosyntactic features (Goad, White, & Steele, 2003). A Chinese L1 speaker was found to use mostly bare verbs in English when tense marking was a must even after living in the United States for 18 years (Lardiere 1998). This indicates that some properties of Chinese make the acquisition of tense marking difficult. The distance between the two languages makes the direct application of transfer theories more complicated because these theories often make assumptions about the natural of transfer based on languages that are more closely related with each other (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

The existing transfer theories do not fully address the socio-cultural factors. Influenced by Confucian educational traditions, Chinese EFL learners tend to rely on memorization and rote learning and respect teachers’ authority when they start language learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). What’s more, the education system in China is heavily exam-oriented, making educators and students focus more on grammar and vocabulary rather than communicative competence (Hu, 2002). In order to achieve mastery, they would practice repeatedly language elements such as vocabulary and grammatical structures and be reluctant to engage in communicative activities.

In contrast, Western educational approaches advocate communicative language teaching (CLT) and emphasize interactive and communicative methods. Transfer theories often neglect the fact that communicative approaches are not universally applicable, which can lead to misunderstand the nature of transfer in Chinese EFL contexts (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

Meanwhile, traditional transfer theories often overemphasize on negative transfer while positive transfer from Chinese to English is barely studied. However, Chen (2020) challenged the perspective by exploring the similarities between English and Chinese in the areas of language thinking, vocabulary, and grammar, suggesting that Chinese EFL learners should make full use of positive transfer. Transfer theories need to better incorporate these positive aspects (Odlin, 1989). Furthermore, Su (2010) conducted a study on the bi-directional transfer of pragmatic competences by focusing on the speech act of requesting among Chinese EFL learners at intermediate and advanced levels. The study supports the idea that language transfer is not unidirectional and both forward and backward transfer in language learning should be considered.

As advocated by Treffers-Daller & Sakel (2012), transfer should be studied as a key mechanism in language processing rather than being seen as a deviation from monolingual norms. Language transfer plays a significant role in second language acquisition.

The theoretical evolution of L1 transfer experiences behaviorist, deterministic approaches and more integrated frameworks. Previous theories provide foundational insights in understanding the nature of transfer. Contemporary approaches offer more comprehensive perspective by recognizing transfer as an active phenomenon of individual and social interactions.

When applied to Chinese EFL contexts, the theories reveal limitations because English

and Chinese have sharp contrasts in linguistics, culture, and educational systems. These contrasts as manifested in phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics bring challenges for Chinese EFL learners. While positive transfer from Chinese to English is possible in the areas where the two languages share similarities such as vocabulary and grammatical structures. Meanwhile, it is necessary to notice that we should have more refined and subtler understanding of transfer processes because directionality of transfer complicates language processing.

So, the above insights suggest that future research on L1 transfer should focus on exploring context-specific transfer phenomena and developing context-specific pedagogical strategies. Chinese EFL learners can be better supported and prepared to overcome linguistic difficulties and achieve proficiency in English by addressing the complexities of L1 transfer through targeted, evidence-based strategies.

Chapter III Conclusion and Recommendations

As a core issue of second language acquisition research, language transfer theories aim to explain cross linguistic influence of mother tongue on target language acquisition. However, existing theories and practical application reveal notable limitations when applied to Chinese EFL context, mainly in theoretical frameworks, research methods and practical application.

Theoretically, the Indo-European-centric frameworks of mainstream transfer theories cannot thoroughly explain the typological differences between Chinese and English. Mainstream transfer theories, including the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and cross-linguistic influence models, primarily compare Indo-European languages (e.g., Spanish to English). The fundamental typological differences between Chinese and English have not fully been taken into consideration. These differences, such as Chinese's tonal nature and analytic structure versus English's inflectional morphology and subject-prominent syntax, lead to systematic errors in Chinese learners' English production, which have not been adequately captured by current transfer theories. Meanwhile, most of the research focus on negative transfer in grammar and

phonology with insufficient attention to positive transfer and pragmatic aspects like high-context cultural strategies.

Methodologically, most studies on language transfer adopt cross-sectional designs, collecting data from different learners at a single point in time. There is a lack of longitudinal tracking of Chinese learners' language transfer across different learning stages to support dynamic transfer models. Longitudinal studies will provide a complete and clearer picture of language transfer development during the acquisition process of Chinese EFL learners. Without longitudinal tracking, it would be difficult to understand the dynamic nature of transfer effects and how they evolve over time. For instance, phonological negative transfer might be more prominent at beginner levels, while pragmatic transfer could become more significant at advanced stages. Additionally, empirical research on the psychological and social factors influencing Chinese learners' language transfer is relatively insufficient. One of the key factors is the examination-driven education system, which significantly affects learners' motivation and language use perception. Learners might take language learning as an examination tool instead of communication media.

Practically, the disconnection between teaching strategies and transfer theories makes it difficult for learners to internalize transfer knowledge. Chinese English learners are often trapped in a difficult situation of exam-oriented teaching and real-world language application. Teaching strategies often do not incorporate transfer theories but contrast Chinese and English mechanically. Learners are not provided with enough opportunities to use language in real-life contexts so they might be able to repeat grammar rules or vocabulary lists but struggle to use them correctly in conversations or writing. As a result, other important aspects of language skills like speaking and listening are not sufficiently combined and effective language internalization is

hindered.

So English educators and learners should understand these factors more deeply. More context-specific and explanatory model that incorporates Chinese linguistic features and educational realities is needed to assist Chinese EFL learners in overcoming the challenges associated with L1 transfer and achieving proficiency in English. Based on the above analysis, this study proposes the following recommendations.

To develop a Localized Transfer Model

Integrate Chinese-English typological features like tones and topic structures into transfer theories. Educators can better understand the specific difficulties encountered by Chinese EFL learners by systematically addressing typological differences in transfer theories. And then they can design targeted teaching strategies to relieve negative transfer and enhance positive transfer.

Create a “Chinese-English Contrastive Analysis Database” to identify and analyze common occurrence of negative transfer and positive transfer. Collect language samples of writing, speaking and testing papers etc. from Chinese EFL learners. Categorize transfer-related errors and facilitators into different groups such as phonology, morphology etc. Then incorporate pragmatic and social dimensions into this database and so on. With this Database, educators and learners can address the specific challenges they encounter triggered by L1 transfer.

To Optimize Research Methods

Adopt longitudinal research to study same group of learners across different proficiency stages. For example, design a multi-year study following Chinese EFL learners from middle school to university and collect data on their language use. With the development of learners’ language skills, different transfer effects at continuous learning stages could be observed. Meanwhile, both qualitative and quantitative research methods matter because they help

researchers catch comprehensive and deep understanding of language transfer. Quantitative methods like statistical analysis can quantify the frequency and intensity of language transfer. While qualitative research methods like in-depth interviews or classroom observations can uncover the cognitive, cultural and situational factors underlying the transfer process. Combine both can comprehensively analyze the multi-dimensional aspects of language transfer.

To Enhance Teaching Strategies

Design different instruction to address transfer effects in stages. For the beginner stage, activate positive transfer like similar structures between Chinese and English to quickly build learners' confidence. At the same time, set up early warnings of negative transfer by using common error bank data. For example, for beginners, phonological contrastive training such as animated demonstrations of / ð / vs. / z / and / θ / vs. / s / pronunciation should be strengthened. For intermediate and advanced stages, pragmatic and critical thinking courses should be added to guide students to express complex views in English, reducing interference from their native language and optimizing logical expression. Integrate cross-cultural communication training and context-based language practice into daily English learning to enhance learners' engagement and avoid cultural bias in language transfer. Additionally, curriculum material should be designed and modified accordingly to maximize effects of positive transfer and restrain negative transfer interference.

To Conduct Teachers Training

Help educators establish a comprehensive understanding system of how transfer works and what teaching practice should be applied during English teaching process through theoretical knowledge training. Regular training classes where educators can learn basic theories and workshops where they can do case studies and contrast analysis should be provided to better

equip them with the expertise of language transfer. Train educators to design specific teaching activities to address language transfer issues and raise their awareness of the impact of cultural difference on language transfer.

To Foster Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Organize regular interdisciplinary seminars and set up a platform for experts from different fields including linguists, psychologists, sociologists, educators and educational technology experts to share their research findings and insights about transfer. For example, inviting psychologists to introduce the latest cognitive psychology theories, linguistics to share cases of language transfer, and educators to discuss challenges in teaching practice. Form a research team consists of researchers with diverse disciplinary backgrounds to jointly carry out a language transfer project. Establish a cross-disciplinary research library to share data, tools and research outcomes. With these strategies, it is possible to foster interdisciplinary cooperation in the field of language transfer.

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