

Thinking for Writing: Evidence of Language Transfer in Chinese ESL Learners' Written Narratives

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Abstract : English as a second language (ESL) learners are often observed to have transferred traits of their first languages (L1) and habits of using their L1s to their use of English (second language, L2), and this phenomenon is coined as language transfer. In addition to the transfer of linguistic features (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, etc.), which are relatively easy to observe and quantify, many cross-cultural theorists emphasized on a much subtle and fundamental transfer existing on a higher conceptual level that is referred to as conceptual transfer. Although a growing body of literature in linguistics has demonstrated evidence of L1 transfer in various discourse genres, very limited studies address the underlying conceptual transfer that is happening along with the language transfer, especially with the extended form of spontaneous discourses such as personal narrative. To address this issue, this study situates itself in the context of Chinese ESL learners' written narratives, examines evidence of L1 conceptual transfer in comparison with native English speakers' narratives, and provides discussion from the perspective of the conceptual transfer. It is hypothesized that Chinese ESL learners' English narrative strategies are heavily influenced by the strategies that they use in Chinese as a result of the conceptual transfer. Understanding language transfer cognitively is of great significance in the realm of SLA, as it helps address challenges that ESL learners around the world are facing; allow native English speakers to develop a better understanding about how and why learners' English is different; and also shed light in ESL pedagogy by providing linguistic and cultural expectations in native English-speaking countries. To achieve the goals, 40 college students were recruited (20 Chinese ESL learners and 20 native English speakers) in the United States, and their written narratives on the prompt 'The most frightening experience' were collected for quantitative discourse analysis. 40 written narratives (20 in Chinese and 20 in English) were collected from Chinese ESL learners, and 20 written narratives were collected from native English speakers. All written narratives were coded according to the coding scheme developed by the authors prior to data collection. Statistical descriptive analyses were conducted, and the preliminary results revealed that native English speakers included more narrative elements such as events and explicit evaluation comparing to Chinese ESL students' both English and Chinese writings; the English group also utilized more evaluation device (i.e., physical state expressions, indirectly reported speeches, delineation) than Chinese ESL students' both English and Chinese writings. It was also observed that Chinese ESL students included more orientation elements (i.e., the introduction of time/place, the introduction of character) in their Chinese and English writings than the native English-speaking participants. The findings suggest that a similar narrative strategy was observed in Chinese ESL learners' Chinese narratives and English narratives, which is considered as the evidence of conceptual transfer from Chinese (L1) to English (L2). The results also indicate that distinct narrative strategies were used by Chinese ESL learners and native English speakers as a result of cross-cultural differences.

Keywords : Chinese ESL learners, language transfer, thinking-for-speaking, written narratives

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