

Addressing Negative First Language Transfer by Raising Students' Awareness

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Abstract: It is commonly believed that few second language learners are able to use the target language without any interference from their native language. Many learners of English in China are relying on Chinese to organise their ideas when they write in English. This is problematic because these two languages have several different features. For example, Chinese is topic prominent whereas English is subject prominent; Chinese does not have tense inflections of verbs while that is a common feature of English. In addition, what can be easily expressed in one simple sentence in Chinese might need a compound or complex English sentence, or even a group of English sentences to convey a clear meaning, vice versa. To address the problem, this paper comparatively analyzed the linguistic features of a well written argument in Chinese and its English translation (See Appendix) using functional discourse grammar approach, and proposed some feasible solutions, which could give English language learners and teachers a new perspective of approaching the target language.

Keywords: Second language; Organizational thought; Generation gap

Some abbreviations derived from the work of Li and Thompson (1981, p. xix) and Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks and Yallop (2003, p. 34) are used in presenting the examples from the Chinese text:

Adv G: adverbial group	NOM: nominalizer (de)	NG: nominal group
PFV: perfective aspect (-le)	RVC: resultative verb compound	VG: verbal group

Some notations by Halliday (1994, p. 65) are employed to analyse the English text:

clause boundary	[] downranked phrase	[[]] downranked clause
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1. Analysis and Discussion

1.1 The Clause

1.1.1 Marked and unmarked themes

Theme, which functions as the starting point of a message, comes first in both Chinese and English. However, in declarative clauses in English, writers tend to use unmarked theme, theme that conflated with subject, unless there is good reason for choosing something else (Halliday 2004, p. 73), whereas in Chinese, almost any constituent can easily be moved to the front to form the theme without the sentence becoming particularly marked (Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo, 2001, p. 204).

Take the first sentence in each text for analysis:

对于	年轻人	和	老年人	之间	无法避免	的
dui-yu	nian-qing-ren	he	lao-nian-ren	zhi-jian	wu-fa-bi-mian	de
regarding to	youngster(s)	and	elder(s)	between... and	inevitable	NOM
Textual theme	Topical theme					
Complement						
代沟,	现代人	并	不	陌生。		
dai-gou,	xian-dai-ren	bing	bu	mo-sheng		
generation gap(s),	people of these days	but	not	unfamiliar		
Rheme						
Subject		Structural adjunct	Mood adjunct	Complement		

Fig. 1-1

'Generation gap	[[which is inevitable between youngsters and elders]]	is	not
Topical theme		Rheme	
Subject		Finite	Mood adjunct
unfamiliar	to people [of these days].'		
Complement	Circumstantial adjunct		

Fig. 1-2

In Figure 1-1, 年轻人和老年人之间无法避免的代沟 (nian-qing-ren he lao-nian-ren zhi-jian wu-fa-bi-mian de dai-gou, 'the inevitable generation gap between youngsters and elders'), which is the complement of the subject 现代人 (xian-dai-ren, 'people of these days'), is the topical theme, but the sentence sounds quite ordinary and unmarked in Chinese.

In English, by contrast, it is less likely to have complement thematic (Halliday, 2004, p. 73). If the English equivalence has a complement standing at the front as the theme of the sentence, it would be distinctively odd and thus quite heavily marked (Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo, 2001, p. 205) as in the sentence 'The inevitable generation gap between youngsters and elders, people of these days are not unfamiliar with.'

However, the English translation in Figure 1-2 kept 'the inevitable generation gap between youngsters and elders' as the topical theme without being marked by converting it into the subject and tactfully put all the modifiers 'inevitable' and 'between youngsters and elders' in a clause post-modifying the head 'the generation gap' in the nominal group, whereas the original subject 'people of these days' been turned into part of the adjunct: 'The generation gap which is inevitable between youngsters and elders is not unfamiliar to people of these days.'

Therefore, it is important to point it out to the students that, when writing in English, it is safer to put the subject, which has the direct relation to the finite verb operator, first as an unmarked theme in an English declarative clause, unless they need to emphasise the adjunct or complement. Furthermore, students should be taught that there are a couple of words like 关于 (guan-yu, about) and 对于 (dui-yu, regarding to) that can be used to facilitate the fronting of the theme in Chinese, but the use of the equivalent 'about/regarding to' in English would sound awkward and does not really make sense (Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo, 2001, p. 205). This could be exemplified by the direct translation: 'Regarding to the inevitable generation gap between youngsters and elders, people these days are not unfamiliar with'.

1.1.2 Subject

English is a subject-prominent language, which is also evident in Figure 1-2. Nearly all English sentences have a subject, and the subject is easy to identify in an English sentence, since it typically occurs right before the verb and the verb agrees with it in number. Furthermore, subject is the 'resting point' of an argument (Halliday, 1994, p. 77).

In Chinese, on the other hand, the concept of subject seems to be less significant. The subject is not marked by position, by agreement, or by any case marker, and in fact, the subject in a sentence may be missing altogether if it is predictable from the context (Li and Thompson, 1981, pp. 15-16).

1.2 Verbal tense and aspect

In English, verbs have primary tense by reference to the time of speaking -- present, past and future relative to 'now' (Halliday 1994: 75). However, Chinese has no markers of tense. The language does not use verb affixes to signal the relation between the time of the occurrence of the situation and the time that situation is brought up in speech. In another word, Chinese does not have temporal verbal operators in its mood system, so the form of a verb expressing a past event may be of no difference from the same verb expressing a current event.

This feature is not very obvious in this text as it is an argument, in which mainly present tense are used. If students were assigned to write a personal recount, tense problems would come to surface. Students tended to use present tense instead of past tense when they were writing something that had already happened.

Teachers therefore should use more activities to raise students' consciousness of the different forms of tense inflections in English and explicitly teach which verb forms should be used in what situations. In a traditional English grammar class in China, students do lots of practice of choosing the right tense form of a provided verb in a de-contextualised sentence. Even if they could do these exercises correctly, they keep using the incorrect tense forms when it comes to the real-life application. Thus, it would be more meaningful if the functional teaching approach and more contextualised teaching materials could be employed in teaching the English primary tense. For example, teachers could give students some good models of narrative English texts, and let them focus on the verbs and find the verb features by themselves. Teachers could then highlight that past tense of verbs are generally used in a narrative text, let students write a narrative in groups in class followed by an individual writing task.

What is worth noting is that Chinese does have some verbal aspect markers. Teachers may teach the simple, continuous and perfective aspect of English by matching them with those verbal aspect markers of Chinese. The learners' first language can sometimes be used as a bridge to teach. Li and Thompson (1981, p. 185) listed the verbal aspects of Mandarin Chinese as following:

1. Perfective: – le and perfectivizing expressions
2. Imperfective (durative): – zai, - zhe
3. Experiential: -guo
4. Delimitative: reduplication of verb

The text in appendix includes some examples of ‘–le’ as an aspect suffix, signaling that perfective aspect should be used in English (See Figures 1-3 and 1-4).

人们	采用	了	很多	方法
ren-men	cai-yong	– le	hen-duo	fang-fa
people	adopt	- PFV	various	method(s)
various methods have been adopted				

Fig. 1-3

父母	付出	了	多少	高昂	的	代价
fu-mu	fu-chu	– le	duo-shao	gao-ang	de	dai-jia
parent(s)	give	- PFV	how much	expensive	NOM	sacrifice
the enormous sacrifice that their parents have made ...						

Fig. 1-4

1.3 Subject-verb agreement

The agreement between subject and the verb is also known as concord. In English, all present tense verbal operators (except modals) take an ‘–s’ suffix if the subject is third person singular (Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo, 2001, p. 41). However, in Chinese, there is no subject-verb concord.

Firstly, verbs in Chinese do not have tense. Secondly, nouns (except human nouns and pronouns) in Chinese all appear in singular regardless of whether they are countable or un-countable. Not like having suffixes ‘-s’ or ‘-es’ to form regular plural forms of countable nouns in English, there are no plural suffixes for countable nouns in Chinese only except the plural suffix - 们(–men) added to human nouns and pronouns. As a result, from the form of a noun in Chinese, it is impossible to tell whether it conveys a singular or a plural meaning without referring to the context. Take nouns from the text for example (See Figure 1-5), nouns in Group A and B are all countable ones. While Group A nouns mean plurality in the context, all of them have to appear in their plural forms in the equivalent English text.

Group A	Group B	Group C
方法 fang-fa method(s)	代沟 dai-gou generation gap(s)	对抗 dui-kang animosity
学校 xue-xiao school(s)	问题 wen-ti problem(s)	了解 liao-jie understanding
课程 ke-cheng course(s)	事情 shi-qing thing(s)	代价 dai-jia sacrifice
冲突 chong-tu conflict(s)	关系 guan-xi relationship(s)	教育 jiao-yu education
学习 xue-xi study(ies)	目标 mu-biao effect(s)	生活 sheng-huo life
资料 zi-liao material(s)		

Fig. 1-5

When students in China write in English, it is quite common for them to miss out the subjects or to have no agreement between subject and verb. Therefore, teachers should highlight the importance of the subject and the subject-verb agreement in English to the students, and do explicit teaching of the rules accordingly as well as guide them to form the habit of self-monitoring.

2. Above and Below the Clause

2.1 Premodification and postmodification

Chinese is characterised by premodification while English more often has postmodifications. In another word, Chinese is a head-last language, as in a phrase, the head generally comes at the end (Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo, 2001, p. 205). For example, in the nominal group (see Figure 2-1), the head is 代沟 (dai-gou, ‘generation gap’). The English equivalence has the head ‘generation gap’ at the start of the nominal group as English is a head-first language.

年轻人	和	老年人	之间	无法避免	的	代沟
nian-qing-ren	he	lao-nian-ren	zhi-jian	wu-fa-bi-mian	de	dai-gou
youngster(s)	and	elder(s)	between...and	inevitable	NOM	generation gap(s)
the generation gap [[which is inevitable between youngsters and elders]]						

Fig. 2-1

Another example from the text:

一些	孩子们	容易	懂得	的	资料
yi-xie	hai-zi-men	rong-yi	dong-de	de	zi-liao
some	children	easily	understand	NOM	material(s)
some materials [[that can be easily understood by children]]					

Fig. 2-2

In English, rank shifted clauses or phrases are often used as postmodifiers in nominal groups especially when encountering long modifiers (See Figures 2-1 and 2-2).

Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo (2001, p. 205) have indicated that the tendency for premodification in Chinese extends beyond nominal groups. Nearly all modifiers, including adverbials of time and place, usually come before the verbs they modify. Unfortunately, this text does not provide us with such examples. In fact, the head-last nature of Chinese does apply not only in simple sentences, but also in complex sentences that the subordinate clauses occur before main clauses as in Figure 2-3:

他们	就	会	意识到	父母	在	养育	孩子		
ta-men	jiu	hui	yi-shi-dao	fu-mu	zai	yang-yu	hai-zi		
they	then	will	realise	parent(s)	dur-	bring...up	child(ren)		
的	过程	中,	付出		了	多少	高昂	的	代价。
de	guo -cheng	zhong	fu-chu	-le	duo-shao	gang-ang	de	dai-jia	
NOM	process	-ing	make	-PFV	how much	expensive	NOM	sacrifice	
...they will realise the enormous sacrifice [[that their parents have made]] to bring them up.									

Fig. 2-3

Teachers could help to raise the awareness of the students by guiding them to compare the different word orders in Chinese and English texts. It would be especially effective when adult learners are taught in such an analytic way.

2.2 Clause complex

In English complex sentences, non-finite clauses stand together with finite clauses and modify them. They could be used to de-emphasise certain actions.

Instead, a Chinese sentence may contain two or more verb groups or clauses juxtaposed without any marker indicating the relationship between them, but such serial verbal constructions: '(NG) +VG+ (NG) +VG+ (NG)...' may convey different types of messages because of the meanings of the verbs involved and the relationships that are understood from the context to hold between them (Li and Thompson, 1981, p. 594).

Take the second sentence in the first paragraph for example (See Figure 2-4). It is a complex sentence consisting of two clauses, each containing two and four verbal groups. These separate events are related in some ways by reference to the context. Most of the events in this example are related as the first action is done for the purpose of achieving the second. Since there are six events involved, the English sentence is constructed by six clauses. To highlight the premiere event in English, all the other events are described using non-finite clauses (see underlined).

人们	采用了	很多 方法	来	解决	这个 问题,
ren-men	cai-yong le	hen-duo fang-fa	lai	jie-jue	zhe-ge wen-ti
people	have adopted	various methods	come	solve	this problem
NG	VG	NG	RVC	VG	NG
various methods have adopted			<u>to solve this problem</u>		
其中	就	包括	学校	引入	相关 课程
qi-zhong	jiu	bao-kuo	xue-xiao	yin-ru	xiang-guan ke-cheng
among them	then	include	school(s)	introduce	relevant courses
Adv G		VG	NG	VG	NG
<u>including</u>			<u>introducing relevant courses in schools</u>		

教育	学生们	如何	成为	合格 的 父母。
jiao-yu	xue-sheng-men	ru-he	cheng-wei	he-ge de fu-mu
educate	students	how	become	good parents
VG	NG	Adv G	VG	NG
<u>to educate students</u>		<u>to be good parents</u>		
To solve this problem, various methods have been adopted, including [[introducing relevant courses [in schools]]] to educate students to be good parents.				

Fig. 2-4

Another mistake that Chinese students often make is that they tend to use more than one finite verb in one English sentence. To address this problem, teachers may expose them to argumentative English texts that contain a lot of complex sentences, and guide them to find the clause features and compare with that of a good Chinese translation, followed by joint construction of an argumentative text and individual writing.

3. Conclusion

The interference from learners' first language should not be considered intuitively as something just negative, but rather as a natural stage and it may be used as a valuable strategy in the process of second language teaching. Consciousness raising activities which sensitise learners to the difference between the first language and the second language systems and their own interlanguage would be effective to prevent the negative transfers as well as to encourage more positive transfers. Many Chinese students might have not noticed such kind of differences and connections between Chinese and English in the above-mentioned areas. Teachers may get students to compare some well-written Chinese/English texts and good English/Chinese translations of the same texts containing these language features. Letting them identify the different features as well as the similarities followed by explicit rule teaching would be more meaningful and beneficial to them than decontextualised grammar teaching and error correction.

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