Alleviation of Interlanguage Among Chinese College Students—A Change of Perspectives*

QU Ying

Harbin Engineering University, Harbin, China

Interlanguage, as a pervasive and imminent phenomenon, is the headache for almost every second language learner. Its origin can be traced back to the tremendous difference on the level of thought. Among numerous attempts to tackle the problem, a change of perspectives from culture aspects is an approach to alleviating the interference of mother tongue and to improving interlanguage. Several perspective conversion patterns are dealt with, including subjective and objective thinking pattern conversion, narrative sequence conversion, negation conversion, parataxis and hypotaxis thinking pattern conversion, and topic subject and thematic structure conversion. The feedbacks from the drills in the college English classes of Harbin Engineering University in 2015 prove the validity of the cultivation approach.

Keywords: change of perspective, English interlanguage, college English

Introduction

It is commonly known that different language system will inevitably shape different thinking patterns in different language users. The gigantic variations between Chinese and English are reflected in multiple aspects in language, which renders English learning more difficult for Chinese students. The interference from the mother tongue is so deep-rooted and pervasive that the formation of interlanguage is so doomed unless English learners try to seek changes from the level of thoughts. The so called perspective here refers to the starting point or angle we use to observe the world. Perspectives from the different cultures are marked with distinct tendencies and features, and the characteristics are also passed on to respective languages. Changing perspective originally refers to the regrouping of the semantic level of target language, thus redelivering the same message in a different or opposite syntax angle (HU, 1999). For the same reason, the second language learners also need to change perspective while generating the target language sentences, i.e., the reprocessing sentences of mother tongue towards the target language (JIA, 1998). The process may produce more genuine language sentence patterns, which are closer to the language habits of the target language users, so as to achieve effective communication. This paper attempts to analyze the alleviating effects of changing perspectives on interlanguage of non-English major college students in Harbin Engineering University.

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QU Ying, lecturer, master, Foreign Department, Harbin Engineering University.

The Perspectives Conversion

The differences in the perspectives between English and Chinese can be caused by different history, regions, culture, customs, thinking patterns, and so on, which is projected in the language more as the differences in starting points. Thus, during the English teaching and learning, the roots of the difference need to be found; based on that, the cultivation of the thinking patterns' conversion can be carried on, and the shackle of language transformation can be shattered from source, rendering the generated language form much closer to the target language. The thinking patterns' conversion contains five aspects as follows.

Subjective and Objective Thinking Pattern Conversion

The subjective thinking pattern is observed in Chinese culture, which places human beings at the center of the universe. It is reflected in the language as the human being theme, and the narration following, which leads to dominating number of sentences in active voice, uses personal subjects, while English speaking countries comply with the objective thinking pattern, which treats the natural world as the objective existence, and allows the world to be exhibited in its objective form. So impersonal subjects are widely applied in English sentences, which means the perspective unfolds from the aspect of recipient as well as the consequence of the action, which is used as the subject. As a result, an overwhelming number of passive sentences are used in English. Thereby, teachers should give students the timely guidance to flexibly shift perspective, and arrange proper subjects in accordance with the need of the communication content. For example, while a student tries to give an account of his winter vacation experience in oral class, he simply bores everybody to sleep. The reason is not the scarcity of fun in the winter activities; on the contrary, they are rich and varied. The problem lies in his choices of sentence patterns, which is almost singular—most of his sentences begin with “I”: “I went to travel and I saw...I got an idea...” (WANG, personal communication, May 15, 2015). The overuse of first person narration not only sounds monotonous, but also creates a preoccupation on people that he is self-centered. Consequently, even no grammatical mistakes committed, he cannot effectively deliver his ideas and thereby achieve the goal of communication. It is necessary for the English teachers to shed light on the different ways in perceiving things between Chinese and Western culture, so that students may understand the expressing habit of English users in a general way, and try to narrate in impersonal subjects, adding the variety to their expressions. For example, “The most exciting thing during the vacation is my journey to...”, “I was amazed by...”, “An idea occurs to me...” (WANG, personal communication, May 15, 2015). These modified sentences apparently sound more vivid and genuine.

Narrative Sequence Conversion

The expression of a language is more than the mere choice of words and symbols; it carries the transmission function of the culture and ideas (Gadamer, 1994). Vast differences exist between the expressing habits between Chinese and English time and space sequence, which is closely related with collective thinking mode in Chinese culture and the individual idea in English. Chinese sentence starts from the macro things. For example, the expression of time goes from year, month, to day; the address lists from nation, province, city, to district, street, and number; while the narration unfolds with the natural time sequence, pushing forwards from the beginning. However, English habits are mostly the opposite of Chinese: day to year, small to big, near to distant. From above, an important difference can be seen: Chinese sentences tend to arrange everything in their natural happening order, steady, and slow, while English is used to come to the point directly, the important things first, the rest evolving around them. To give an example, a student tries to illustrate how the violence in

the movies influences the youth in his class presentation. He starts by talking about the facts that teenagers can only thrive under healthy and clean environment, then follows by introducing the impacts of movie culture on them, and winds up by connecting the violence in the movies with the teenagers. Such a layout appears to be redundant and pointless, and cannot ring any resonance among English native users. His teacher told him to rearrange his narrating order and priority, and place the important argument in the very beginning. Then the starting parts are modified as: “It is not exaggerating to say that Hollywood setting is the most violent place in the world, because it is...”, “The influence of violence in movie on youngsters can be seen in following aspects” (DAI, personal communication, May 19, 2015). With the altering of the semantic ordering, the audience may have clearer anticipation about what will go next in the speech.

Negation Conversion

The negation forms differ a lot between the two cultures owing to the differences in language systems and thinking patterns. For example, Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language, in which every character can stand independently. Negative words, for the most part, are used in expression of negation; while English belongs to the Indo-European languages, which has inflection changes; therefore, negation in English can be seen from the changes of the affixes, such as a(an)-, anti-, counter-, de-, dis-, in-, un-, -less, -proof, -free, and so on. In practice, because of the tremendous differences in grammar and culture, it is hard to compare all the negation forms side by side, not to mention to find the equivalent classification in both languages. But what needs to be seen is that English negative words are not always followed by what are going to be negated. For example, when a student is talking about “both of the vases are not broken” (YU, personal communication, June 10, 2015), what he means actually is “not both of the vases are broken”. And a better way to put it is “neither of the vases is broken”. Besides, transferred negation is commonly used English, i.e., the negation symbols exist in the part of predicate verbs, while what is negated is the predicative or adverbial modifier. That is the accustomed thinking mode in English, also the content that students need to learn adapting and applying. One more simple example, “I believe he cannot make it”, may have a better way of expressing it in “I do not believe he can make it”.

Parataxis and Hypotaxis Thinking Pattern Conversion

Hypotaxis, also called overt cohesion, means that the meanings of the language are represented by words arranged through a series of syntax rules. Parataxis, also called covert coherence, refers to the fact that words are used where the meanings are fit, while the sentence structure resides in the second place (KE, 1991). Chinese is a typical parataxis language, which can be seen in its fabulous classic poetry as well as in the modern daily conversations. Take classic poems for example: It seems that the random words are piled there mindlessly and orderlessly, while the words are actually closely interrelated and when reading picturesque feelings can be felt and music can be heard. Similarly, modern Chinese discourse does not emphasize fixed subject-predicate structure; sentences come into shape in a loose fashion, without the shifts of tense, voice, class, and singular and plural forms. What is more, Chinese sentences are composed in a certain logical order, which is mostly achieved by semantic coherence rather than by the transitional words. For this reason, numerous short sentences and sentence fragments are used in modern Chinese discourse.

English focuses on the hypotaxis, which has strict structure frame and is abundant with the changes of tenses, voices, etc. In the composition of English sentences, the subject and the predicate build up the major frame, where the other components such as attribute, objective, complement grow, and some other parts like

adverbial clauses will be introduced by transitional words. Therefore, English sentences are long and complex with the main clause and the subordinate clauses intertwining. We can see that in an example from ZHU Zi-qing's famous essay *Silhouette*. The original Chinese sentence goes as follows: “我们过了江,进了车站. 我买票, 他忙着照看行李”(JIN, 2002, p. 56).

Translation one: We crossed the river and entered the station. I bought the ticket while he was busy looking after the luggage (LIU, class work, June 17, 2015).

Translation two: We crossed the Yangtze and arrived at the station, where I bought a ticket while he saw to my luggage (by YANG Xian-yi & DAI Nai-die) (Jin, 2002, p. 56).

The student tried to apply the Chinese parataxis thinking pattern by translating according to the target language's sentence structure—two separate sentences. Generally speaking, it is fine from the grammatical aspect, but the expression is stiff and boring. Instead, YANG and DAI's version links two parts together with “where”, rendering the whole sentence going smoothly and continually in meaning and feeling, which accords with the English expressing habit more. This student's work is so common and not even the worst in his peers, that is to say, the parataxis thinking pattern of Chinese students is responsible for the abundant seemingly ok Chinglish, creating an obstacle between them and a higher English level. To solve that problem, the English teachers should guide students to learn to embrace the hypotaxis thinking pattern through constructing the virtual context for students to practice spoken English. For example, put in the transitional words which are not so frequently used in Chinese between sentences and use more clauses rather than short and simple sentences.

Topic Subject and Thematic Structure Conversion

Besides, Chinese do not have fixed thematic structure and the topic subjects are often used instead of considering the need of logic and utility. On the contrary, English has clear thematic structure, in which the subjects are either people or objects, or substituted by pronouns. The difference always causes interference to Chinese students, whose failure to adapt leads to unnatural English. For example, a translation exercise is like this: “唱错了词不要管, 不用道歉, 观众不一定会注意到” (LU, 2012, p. 16) In accordance with the Chinese habit of placing topic subjects in front, one student directly translated it as “sing wrong words doesn't matter, don't say sorry, because audience may not see it” (YAN, class work, June 19, 2015). Thus, it is quite necessary to help students to tackle similar sentences by firstly picking out the potential subject in Chinese, then adding the transitional words to clarify logic. In this way, the problem is neatly solved. The same student then modified his translation as: “If you sing wrong words, don't apologize...” (YAN, class work, June 19, 2015). Meanwhile, it is important to let students know that the transitional words are the “joints” of English sentences, and one of the significant symbols of good English is the master and use of those words.

Conclusion

Above all, perspective conversion thinking patterns are not only effective but also the essential link in the college English teaching and learning. If they are absent in cross cultural communication, interlanguage will emerge and misunderstanding will happen, for example, the overuse of “I”, projecting an exploding ego to others; the misuse of negative relations, delivering an opposite message, etc. All those will create serious damage to communication. It is not uncommon to see the phenomenon when a group of Chinese are practicing English together, regardless of their fluency, most of the time, they can understand each other quite well, even when the messages are delivered in problematic structure. However, when they are expressing the same ideas to

a person whose mother tongue is English, they find that the simplest idea may be misunderstood, and the words out of the native speaker's mouth sound clueless. Putting aside the difference of diction habits, these differences in perspectives may be the major reasons. That is exactly why the cultivation of perspectives conversion shall be emphasized in college English education.

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