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A Specific Current Issue in Teaching English as a Foreign Language—Learners Use Their Mother Tongue in Learning English as a Foreign Language

Yiyao Xu

Jiangsu Changshu Middle School, Changshu, Jiangsu, China.

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Corresponding author: Yiyao Xu, Jiangsu Changshu Middle School, Changshu, Jiangsu, China.

Abstract

In the English as a Foreign Language classroom, it is very common for students to learn a foreign language through the use of their mother tongue. In view of this phenomenon, the author analyzes and discusses the adverse effects of excessive use of the mother tongue on the development of oral English skills. This analysis is based on her own experience of teaching English in a high school in eastern China. This article will discuss the influence on English speaking skills from the perspective of incorrect pronunciation and confused grammar caused by long-term heavy use of one's mother tongue. At the end of the article, the author will also provide some pedagogical suggestions for these two aspects: In English teaching, teachers should study the grammatical similarities and differences between the mother tongue and the target language. They should make reasonable use of the mother tongue as an auxiliary tool to enhance students' oral ability.

Keywords

Mother tongue, learning English as a foreign language, speaking skills

1. Introduction

The use of the mother tongue plays an important role in the learning process of a new language. As stated by Butzkamm and Nishanthi, each person has only one opportunity to learn his or her mother tongue from birth, and then all new languages need to be acquired with the help of the native language (Butzkamm, 2003; Nishanthi, 2020). However, in the classroom of learning English as a foreign language, excessive use of the mother tongue will have an adverse effect on the development of speaking skills. Denizer also claims in his paper that compared with the impact of mother tongue use on other skills such as listening and reading, the impact of mother tongue interference on speaking ability is greater, which requires special attention (Denizer, 2017). In addition, take the author's own teaching experience as an example. In the process of teaching English to second-year high school students in eastern China, it was found that although the students performed well in reading English articles, they would habitually use Chinese when asked to answer questions. At the same time, when asked to try to answer in English, students will suddenly become speechless, or just say a few words or phrases with difficulty. One point to be highlighted here is that the general language level of this group of learners is pre-intermediate to intermediate, which is the A2-B1 level in the Common European Framework of References for Languages. Normally, they can simply answer questions or express their ideas in English, but the actual situation shows that long-

term use of their mother tongue hinders the development of their oral skills. This article will explore and analyze the negative effects on the development of spoken English skills from the two perspectives of incorrect pronunciation and confused grammar caused by a large number of mother tongue interference. After the analysis, corresponding teaching suggestions will be put forward for improvement.

2. Cause analysis

2.1 Incorrect pronunciation

In the classroom, excessive use of the mother tongue interferes with the pronunciation of English learners, resulting in pronunciation errors and affecting oral expression. In Subandowo's article, he conducted a survey on the pronunciation of spoken English among students from different regions in a university in Java and found that because of long-term exposure to the local language environment, students have different dialects and accents, which leads to the problem of inaccurate pronunciation (Subandowo, 2017). In particular, when students pronounce some consonants in English, the pronunciation errors are obvious. For example, students will pronounce /dʒ/ into /d/ or /k/. This kind of native pronunciation which is different from English brings a lot of trouble to English learners. Moreover, due to the frequent use of their mother tongue in and out of class every day, learners will unconsciously bring their accents that can only be found in their native dialects into oral English. According to some scholars, the great influence of a large number of mother tongues on oral English learning is the phenomenon of mother tongue interference (Bhela, 1999; Irene et al., 2023). Some experts pointed out that the pronunciation habits or rules of the mother tongue not only interfere with English learning but may also have a positive side. (Patrick et al., 2013; Anindya, Inayati, & Ulani, 2022). Learners can remember the correct pronunciation through the similarity in the pronunciation of their native language and English. However, it should be noted that the phonetic systems of English and native language are very different. It can be seen from Luo's research on pronunciation problems in college English teaching in China (Luo, 2014). He found that students would learn English in their hometown before entering university, and in this language environment, the teacher would use the home dialect to teach English pronunciation in the classroom, which caused the learners to be exposed to the problematic pronunciation environment from childhood. It should be emphasized that in view of the different phonetic systems of Chinese and English, the sound interference of the mother tongue is inevitable. Specifically, English has 20 vowels and 28 consonants in the phonetic system, while Chinese has 10 vowels and 22 consonants, and four tones are involved (Wei, 2003; Liu, 2017). Also, these two different phonetic systems have different pronunciation rules. Therefore, when learners frequently use their mother tongue in English learning, it is common for them to show inaccurate pronunciation, which is bound to be detrimental to the development of oral ability.

2.2 Confused grammar

In the process of speaking in English, excessive reliance on the grammatical content of the mother tongue for translation and conversion, while ignoring the grammatical rules of English itself, will lead to grammatical errors and affect the accuracy and fluency of speaking (Manrique, 2013; Şener & Korkut, 2017; Kasap & Emamvirdi, 2022). In 2013, Manrique conducted research on the role of mother tongue in foreign language learning at a university in Colombia. He found that teachers like to use their mother tongue to explain grammatical knowledge to students, and this is convenient for students to understand, but in the long run, students will develop a way of thinking in their mother tongue, and they may subconsciously use their native language to literally translate the target language, which leads to various grammatical errors in sentences, such as the wrong use of prepositions, the mixed-use of tenses, and the reversal of word order. From the daily English learning class, it is not difficult to find that because of the complexity of grammatical concepts, the teaching of grammar in English has always been a difficult part for teachers. The use of the grammar-translation method can not only help teachers explain grammatical concepts smoothly but also give students a clear understanding (Şener & Korkut, 2017). However, the use of the grammar-translation method can cause the problem of excessive use of the mother tongue in grammar teaching and also cause learners to involuntarily use their first language to translate and understand the target language. Even when speaking, learners will tend to use the grammatical rules of the native language directly in the translation of the target language, which ultimately leads to inaccurate oral expression. Trendak also stated from the perspective of universal grammar that all languages have certain similar grammatical features (Trendak, 2015). From this point of view, it is also feasible to learn part of the target language through the grammatical structure of the mother tongue. However, it should be noted that since the mother tongue and the target language are basically two different language systems (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013), their grammatical composition is very different, so when students use the grammatical content of their mother tongue to help learn the target language, it is necessary to presuppose

an appropriate amount and pay attention to grammatical accuracy. As a result, excessive use of the mother tongue will cause learners to have grammatical confusion in the process of speaking, which will adversely affect language expression.

3. Pedagogical suggestions

3.1 Suggestion for incorrect pronunciation

Teachers should expose students to pure English pronunciation and give daily pronunciation corrections in English as a foreign language class (Patrick et al., 2013; Kabellow, Omulando, & Barasa, 2020). Keshavarz and Abubakar emphasized that good pronunciation is a particularly important part of English-speaking skills, occupying the first place (Keshavarz & Abubakar, 2017). When people's pronunciation is incorrect, even if the grammar, vocabulary, and sentence composition used in what they say are correct, the listener may still be unable to understand it. From the perspective of the interactive theory of English teaching, learners should be exposed to the English language to the maximum in the classroom instead of frequently using their mother tongue (Dailey-O'Cain & Liebscher, 2015). In other words, teachers should avoid using native pronunciation as much as possible, and try to provide students with pure English pronunciation in the process of teaching English pronunciation. For example, when explaining the pronunciation of words or reading texts to students, teachers should use tapes with pure English pronunciation. In addition, Scrivener's 'present-practice' cycle chart, also shows that exposure plays an important role in language input. (Scrivener, 2011) After obtaining sufficient exposure to the language, learners can further digest and absorb, which is beneficial to improve their speaking skills. Besides, in the study of English pronunciation of college students by Luo, he finally suggested that teachers should teach some phonetics knowledge to the students and if necessary, the teacher should explain the distinctions of some related dialects. (Luo, 2014) Furthermore, the most important point is to give students timely pronunciation correction. Obviously, the improvement of students' oral skills is inseparable from the necessary repeated pronunciation practice and pronunciation correction under the guidance of teachers.

3.2 Suggestion for confused grammar

In English teaching, teachers should use their mother tongue as a tool for learning English to find the similarities and differences in the grammatical content between their mother tongue and English, and then use these differences to promote English learning (He, 2012). The sociocultural view believes that the mother tongue can be used as a resource for target language learning, and it can help students understand complex grammatical knowledge or difficult language knowledge (Şener & Korkut, 2017). However, this does not mean that the mother tongue can be used as a supplement in any case. Cook supports the use of the mother tongue as a learning strategy in English classrooms, and he emphasizes that the active use of the mother tongue is based on specific circumstances (Cook, 2001). Some other experts also agree with Cook's point of view that the auxiliary use of the mother tongue should be determined according to the specific activities in the classroom (Paker & Karaağaç, 2015; Timuçin & Baytar, 2015). For example, the mother tongue can be used as a tool when explaining difficult grammatical points, issuing complicated classroom instructions, and checking students' reflections or feedback. In addition, in 2012, Voicu conducted a study on English learners in China to explore the similarities and differences in the syntactic structure of Chinese and English language systems (Voicu, 2012). He found that when there are similarities in the syntactic structure between the Chinese and English systems, the auxiliary use of Chinese as the mother tongue helps learners acquire grammar knowledge in English. On the contrary, when there are obvious differences in Chinese and English grammar, learners will find it difficult to understand. For example, Chinese students may be confused about the usage of "there be" and "have" in English because in Chinese the meaning of "there be" and "have" is the same and there is no distinction between their usage. However, when the teacher compares the differences between the two language systems at the same time and gives students the opportunities to practice, they will overcome the differences and finally promote the learning of the target language. As a consequence, it can be seen that as long as teachers can correctly take advantage of the similarities and differences between the two languages and make appropriate explanations for the existing differences, the problem of grammatical confusion among English learners can be avoided, and this will be beneficial to the development of the learners' oral skills.

4. Conclusion

This article analyzes in detail the reasons why the overuse of the mother tongue has a negative impact on learners' oral ability in English as a foreign language classroom. The analysis of the issue is mainly carried out from two aspects of pronunciation and grammar, which are closely related to speaking skills. It also can be seen that the extensive use of the mother tongue will directly cause learners' pronunciation and grammar errors, which also leads to problems in the final

language output. Correspondingly, teachers should not only pay attention to language exposure and pronunciation correction in the English classroom but also pay attention to the correct use of the mother tongue and the differences between these two languages.

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