

Reverse Transfer in Chinese Adolescents: Implications for Language and Cultural Identity Preservation

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Abstract:

This literature review examines the phenomenon of reverse transfer (RT) among Chinese adolescents, focusing on its implications for the preservation of their mother tongue and cultural identity. Reverse transfer, a subtype of cross-linguistic influence (CLI), occurs when a later-acquired language affects an earlier one, challenging the traditional view of language learning as unidirectional. The study of RT is particularly pertinent for Chinese adolescents, who are often exposed to multiple languages due to globalization and educational policies, potentially impacting their linguistic and cultural heritage. This article employs the method of a formal literature review. The review synthesizes recent research on RT among Chinese adolescents, with a focus on how additional languages, particularly English, influence their Mandarin proficiency. Findings suggest English has had a significant impact on the mother tongue of Chinese adolescents. Moreover, RT's impact extends to cultural identity, with some adolescents navigating multicultural spaces effectively, while others experience cultural dissonance, suggesting RT's role in shaping cultural self-perception and connections to Chinese heritage. The paper underscores the complexity of RT's effects on language and cultural identity, highlighting the need for educational practices that support multilingual development without compromising the mother tongue. It concludes with a call for longitudinal studies to explore the long-term effects of RT on language and cultural identity among Chinese adolescents, aiming to inform language education and cultural preservation policies.

Keywords: Reverse Transfer, Chinese Adolescents, Mother Tongue Preservation, Cultural Identity.

1. Introduction

In 1995, the European Union highlighted the significance of multilingual education in language teaching. According to the European Union's 1995 directive, students are typically encouraged to acquire proficiency in two additional languages from the Union beyond their native tongues[1]. This policy has led to a surge in multilingualism within educational settings and language acquisition research, as Jessner noted on page 15[2]. Consequently, bilingual education has increased in educational settings, for instance, the integration of English as a second language in China. And similarly in Sweden, schools offer language courses like English and modern languages. Bilingual education is not uncommon in contemporary times[3].

1.1 Key Terms and Concepts

1.1.1 Cross-linguistic Influence

The concept of transfer, synonymously referred to as cross-linguistic influence (CLI), was initially presented in 1986 by Sharwood Smith and Kellerman. They characterized it as "the interaction between languages that are acquired at different times[4]." And cross-linguistic

influence is not just considered as a negative impact in language acquisition, but rather recognized as a naturally occurring characteristic in language learning. Cross-linguistic influence is commonly used to describe the impact of learners' existing language knowledge on the acquisition of a new language. This influence can be positive or negative, depending on various factors such as the similarity between languages, the proficiency of the learner in the languages, the age of the learner, and the learner's awareness. In the field of language acquisition, cross-linguistic influence is an important research topic, aiding our understanding of the dynamic relationships between different languages during the language learning process and how these relationships shape the communicative abilities of language learners.

1.1.2 Reverse Transfer

CLI is a multidimensional phenomenon that covers a wide range of interactions between different languages for language learners. It includes conceptual transfer, positive transfer, negative transfer, bidirectional transfer, lateral transfer, and reverse transfer, among others. This article mainly discusses reverse transfer, and the rest are

not discussed. Within the spectrum of CLI categories, three relatively recent distinctions that have come to light are reverse, bidirectional, and lateral transfer, as noted by Jarvis and Pavlenko in 2008[5]. The concepts of reverse, bidirectional, and lateral transfer intriguingly pertain to the impact on multilingual development. As Jarvis and Pavlenko highlighted, most research has concentrated on forward transfer, which involves linking a single source language (typically the first language, L1) to a single target language[5,2]. What has hardly been investigated, however, is the influence that foreign language has on the learner's first language[6]. Therefore, reverse transfer is particularly worthy of our study because the topic is novel and the research is concentrated. Reverse, where a newer language influences an already-known language[5-3]. For example, an English learner in China might unconsciously use English expressions or grammatical structures when speaking Chinese.

2. Methods

This article employs the method of a formal literature review, utilizing Google Scholar as the database, with search keywords including "reverse transfer," "Chinese adolescents," "mother tongue," "cultural identity," and so on. The study focuses on the language transfer among bilingual Chinese adolescents and discusses its implications for cultural identity, while studies that do not specifically address these populations or outcomes are excluded.

In the literature "Backward Pragmatic Transfer: An Empirical Study on Compliment Responses among Chinese EFL Learners[7]," the author Min Cao explores the phenomenon of backward transfer, especially in the pragmatic behavior of Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners when responding to compliments. This study provides empirical evidence that the learners' second language (English) affects their first language (Chinese) pragmatic behavior, which is an example of reserve transfer.

The research subjects were four different levels of English learners from a university in China, including freshman students from junior colleges, freshman students at the university's English Level A, sophomore students majoring in English, and university English teachers. Data was collected through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT), which required participants to write in Chinese about their responses to specific compliment situations. The DCT questionnaire asked participants to provide personal information, such as gender, age, major, and their English proficiency level along with relevant test scores. In the DCT, participants were asked to write down their responses to compliments in Chinese. Finally, Herbert's (1989) coding scheme was used to categorize compliment response strat-

egies, which included three main strategies: agreement, disagreement, and other interpretations, and further subdivided into sub-strategies. A One-Way ANOVA test was used to examine whether there were significant differences in compliment response strategies among the four groups. The first article demonstrated the occurrence of negative transfer in expressing praise. The second article demonstrated that as language learners improve in their second language proficiency, their patterns of transfer in sentence processing strategies indeed change. Chinese EFL learners and English CFL learners exhibit some different patterns in the developmental changes of sentence processing transfer. The title of this article is "Transfer of sentence processing strategies: A comparison of L2 learners of Chinese and English[8]," and the author is I-Ru Su. A total of 122 participants were involved in the test, divided into two groups: native Chinese speakers and native English speakers. Each group was further divided into a control group and three second language learner subgroups of different proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced). The test sentences were composed of two nouns and one verb, with these cues appearing in either competitive or convergent combinations within the sentences. Sentence types included different word orders (NVN, VNN, NNV) and noun animacy (AA, AI, IA). The test was divided into two sessions, one in Chinese and one in English. The control group only completed the session in their native language, while the second language learner groups were tested in both language sessions. There was a 5 to 7-day interval between the two language tests. Scoring was based on the percentage of participants who chose the first noun as the agent. This article, by comparing the patterns of transfer in sentence processing strategies among Chinese and English second language learners of different proficiency levels, provides an in-depth understanding of the transfer phenomena in the process of second language acquisition. In the literature "China and English: Globalisation and the dilemmas of identity[9]" Written by Joseph Lo Bianco, it analyzes the depth of British penetration in China and demonstrates how English has gone beyond traditional foreign language teaching to have a profound impact on Chinese education and society. This paper uses a first history analysis to explore the relationship between language curriculum and socio-political change by analyzing changes in first foreign language (FFL) selection in primary and secondary school curricula worldwide over the past 155 years. The second comparative study reveals global language learning trends by comparing the language education policies of different countries and regions, especially the choice of English as a first foreign language. Third, the case study, with a special focus on the situation in China, analyzes the compulsory and pervasive nature

of English in the Chinese education system and its potential impact on different ethnic groups. Policy analysis to assess the Chinese government's policies to promote English education, including at the primary, secondary and university levels. A sociolinguistic analysis that explores the relationship between language and national identity, social cohesion, and national identity. This proves that English, as the second language learned by Chinese people, has a profound impact on Chinese culture.

"The Effects of the English Language on the Cultural Identity of Chinese University Students[10]". Written by Milja Seppälä. The research method used in this literature is ethnography, which is a qualitative research approach focusing on understanding the daily life and cultural practices of specific cultural and social groups through field observation, interviews, and in-depth participation. Through questionnaires and interviews, the study results indicate that learning the English language has broadened students' understanding of China and the world, leading to adjustments in their perceptions of both cultures. The students have a deep emotional connection and sense of responsibility towards traditional Chinese culture, while also showing great interest in Western lifestyles and concepts of freedom and independence. In this paper, although the term "reverse transfer" is not directly mentioned, the research does address how globalization and English learning affect Chinese students' cultural identity. The article "Self-identity changes and English learning among Chinese undergraduates" was co-authored by Gao Yihong, Cheng Ying, Zhao Yuan, and Zhou Yan[11]. It utilized a quantitative research method to investigate the changes in self-identity among Chinese college students during the process of learning English. The study involved 2,278 undergraduates from 30 universities across 29 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities in mainland China, employing a stratified sampling technique. The research included a self-designed questionnaire consisting of 24 statements related to changes in self-identity, measured by a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Descriptive statistical analysis and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were conducted using SPSS 10.0 to examine the impact of demographic characteristics on changes in self-identity.

"A Study on the Pragmatic Backward Transfer of Chinese Learners of English," written by Ye Xiao[11]. The research method used in the article is a computer-assisted experimental test, which includes questionnaire surveys, pilot experiments, and formal experiments (syntax judgment time tests and syntax judgment result tests). The experimental content is mainly derived from ten variant sentences in newspapers and literature (including long attributives before nouns, the order of free clauses in com-

plex sentences, and various English-style migration structures). The core content of the study is to examine the impact of the second language (English) on the syntax of the mother tongue (Chinese) of Chinese learners of English, and to analyze and discuss the test results from a cognitive perspective. The article finds through experiments that the Chinese syntax judgment of advanced English learners is affected by English, indicating that long-term learning and use of English may lead to changes in Chinese language habits. This change may cause learners to unconsciously use English expressions in Chinese communication, thereby affecting their cognition and identification of Chinese culture.

3. Results

3.1 Reverse Transfer Phenomena of English Learning of Chinese Teenagers

The first study confirmed the existence of backward pragmatic transfer from English to Chinese among Chinese English learners, especially in response to compliments. The research found that the higher the English proficiency of the learners, the more likely they were to use English-like response strategies (such as accepting compliments) in Chinese, indicating that backward pragmatic transfer is enhanced by the learners' English proficiency levels. This provides theoretical support for the study of backward transfer in Chinese adolescents rather than young children. The second document, written by I-Ru Su, is not limited to the expression of praise. The results show that the patterns of transfer evolve as learners improve in proficiency, and there are differences in transfer patterns among learners from different linguistic backgrounds. It shows that reverse transfer is very common and closely related to language and age.

3.2 Reverse Transfer Has Impacted the Language and Cultural Identity of Chinese Adolescents

From the literature above, we can conclude that English, as a second language in China, has a profound impact on China. English is not only associated with the target language culture, but an imagined community of "Chinese elites"[12]. Hong Kongers who know and use English see themselves as having a higher status in Hong Kong society Firstly,[13] in the literature "Effects of EFL Learning on L1 Chinese Lexis[14]," it is demonstrated that learning English as a foreign language (EFL) affects Chinese learners' first language (L1), Chinese, particularly in the lexicon. The study focuses on the lexical level, especially the manifestation of reverse transfer in Chinese writing. This is particularly evident in language use and lexical

complexity. The impact is not only lexical but also significant in expression. In “The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition,” written by Fan Shen[15], a reflective method is used, combining personal experiences and observations to explore how cultural identity affects the process of learning English writing. The author discusses the logical structure required in English writing, such as the use of topic sentences, which differs from the logic the author is accustomed to in Chinese writing. The author adapts to this logical difference by creating a new “English self.” The impact of English as a second language on Chinese syntax also includes the order of clauses in complex sentences, the use of long attributive phrases before fixed phrases, and the use of auxiliary words in the perfect tense, etc.[16] In “Self-identity changes and English learning among Chinese undergraduates[13,2],” it is demonstrated that the impact of reverse transfer on culture is two-sided; reverse transfer in this study refers to the influence of learning English on Chinese students’ existing cultural identity. The study found that learning English not only improved the students’ awareness of their own English abilities but also enhanced their identification with and appreciation for the values of their native language and local culture, indicating the presence of productive bilingualism. The experience of learning English may lead to cultural conflicts, but such conflicts are not always negative. Some students may undergo a fragmented change in cultural identity, but as they engage in deeper learning and self-reflection about language and culture, they may move towards a more positive direction in cultural identity change. In the process of learning English, students may become more aware of the uniqueness and beauty of the Chinese language. For instance, they might compare the different ways in which English and Chinese express the same concept, thereby appreciating the Chinese expressions more, such as idioms, poetry, and the phonetic beauty of the language.

4. Discussion

This article found that many studies discuss the impact of reverse transfer mainly on the level of language expression. For example, the study explores how reverse transfer affects expressions such as apologies[17] and compliments. However, they overlook the fact that language is a carrier of culture, and there is a lack of research that combines reverse transfer with cultural identity.

In the context of contemporary globalization and rapid technological development, educators are faced with the challenge of how to utilize reverse transfer in teaching to promote students’ cultural identity. By implementing cross-cultural comparisons, organizing activities relat-

ed to the mother tongue culture, strengthening bilingual education, guiding reflective learning, and fostering cultural sensitivity, educators can help students deepen their understanding of their mother tongue and culture while mastering a second language. These strategies not only help students maintain their cultural characteristics in a multicultural environment but also enhance their cultural confidence and social cohesion. The cultural diversity brought about by globalization requires educators to cultivate students’ understanding and respect for different cultures, while also raising awareness of the protection of their mother tongue and cultural heritage. Through these methods, educators can promote the comprehensive development of students, enabling them to find their place in a multicultural society and contribute to building a harmonious coexistence.

The phenomenon of reverse transfer among Chinese adolescents, as revealed by our literature review, underscores the dynamic interplay between language learning and cultural identity. The influence of English on Mandarin not only manifests in linguistic shifts but also resonates with the adolescents’ cultural self-concept. While bilingualism offers cognitive and communicative advantages, it also poses challenges to the integrity of the mother tongue. Our analysis calls for a nuanced approach to language education that balances the benefits of multilingual exposure with the preservation of linguistic and cultural essence. Future research should delve into the long-term effects of RT, offering insights to educators and policymakers on fostering a harmonious multilingual environment that celebrates diversity while cherishing linguistic roots.

5. Conclusion

Reverse transfer (RT) is a common phenomenon, and research has confirmed that it is prevalent among Chinese adolescents in the process of learning English. This phenomenon manifests not only in language aspects such as vocabulary and syntactic structure but also in pragmatic behavior, indicating that the second language has a profound impact on the first language. Studies have found that RT affects the mother tongue proficiency of Chinese adolescents, particularly in terms of vocabulary selection and syntactic structure. This influence suggests that while bilingualism enhances cognitive flexibility, it may also lead to changes in the use of the mother tongue, potentially affecting the transmission of language heritage.

RT is also related to the formation of cultural identity. The research emphasizes that RT influences the formation of cultural identity by shaping adolescents’ self-perception and their connection to Chinese heritage. Learning English and interacting with different cultural elements can

lead to a re-evaluation of cultural identity, and in some cases, result in fragmentation. However, it also provides opportunities for the development of a more nuanced and positive cultural identity.

This study also has educational implications. It calls for educational practices that support multilingual development while preserving the mother tongue. Educators are advised to be aware of the potential of RT and to integrate strategies that foster a positive attitude towards both languages and cultures.

The study concludes with a call for longitudinal research to explore the long-term effects of RT on language and cultural identity. Such research would provide deeper insights into the sustainability of language and cultural heritage in the face of increasing bilingualism and globalization.

In summary, the study of reverse transfer among Chinese adolescents reveals a complex field where language learning is closely linked to the construction of cultural identity. It emphasizes the need for a balanced approach to language education that acknowledges the benefits of bilingualism while also protecting the integrity and richness of the mother tongue and cultural heritage.

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