

# Exploring the Impact of Language Transfer: Taking Chinese and Spanish Students' English Learning as Examples

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## Abstract:

This study examines the effects of language transfer on second language acquisition using the English language learning of Chinese and Spanish students as an example. Language transfer includes positive transfer (the aspects that help learning) and negative transfer (the aspects that hinder learning). In the process of learning a language, this is an important phenomenon. This study will investigate the phenomenon of language transfer among students studying English whose first language is Spanish or Chinese in order to compare the positive and negative transfer impacts of the two student groups in terms of phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar. Through empirical investigations on their English language acquisition in conjunction with the idea of language transfer, the particular difficulties and advantages that Chinese and Spanish students encounter when learning English are investigated. The study found that Chinese and Spanish-speaking students showed a variety of positive and negative transfer patterns in their English language learning. Spanish students exhibit substantial vocabulary and grammatical structure migration, whereas Chinese students mostly exhibit language transfer in pronunciation and grammatical structure.

**Keywords:** Language transfer; Chinese students; Spanish students; SLA

## 1. Introduction

Learning English has been significantly impacted by language transfer, a frequent occurrence in the process of acquiring a second language. This phenomenon implies that when learning a second language, students will inadvertently incorporate aspects of their mother tongue, such as linguistic

conventions, habits, and thought processes, into their new language acquisition. The effects of language transmission can be divided into two categories: positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when some language components or rules in the mother tongue are similar to or consistent with English, and it promotes learning. Negative transfer, on the other hand, happens when the linguistic char-

acteristics or rules of the mother tongue differ significantly from those of English, resulting in misinterpretations or errors during the learning process.

Although there are many facets to language transfer, this study primarily concentrates on phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar. Positive transfer will first take place when the learner's mother tongue and the second language have similar phonetics. In this instance, second language learners can readily comprehend and mimic the phonetics of the target language. However, learners may import phonetic habits from their mother tongue, such as wrong up-and-down patterns and inaccurate accretion, into the second language. Second, another important factor is the transmission of terminology. It makes reference to the fact that second language learners are impacted by their mother tongue in terms of word choice, matching, and usage due to the differences in vocabulary between the two languages. During this process, both positive and negative transfer are evident. Thirdly, learners may benefit from their mother tongue when learning these grammatical rules if the mother tongue and the second language share commonalities in tenses, modalities, and sentence structures. This beneficial transfer lowers learning barriers and speeds up learners' comprehension and application of second language grammar principles. Conversely, negative transfers will occur when the circumstances are reversed. Learning English will be influenced not only by the linguistic rules but also by the mother tongue's cultural background and thought process.

Studying the impacts of language transfer on Chinese and Spanish students learning English is important in many ways, and there are differences between the two types of learners. Spanish has greater beneficial effects on language transfer when studying English because it is a member of the same family as English. Cultural factors also affect language transfer from Chinese to English; many Chinese students learn English using "Chinglish," which can cause misunderstandings in a variety of contexts. On the other hand, there is less overlap between Chinese and English, which also means that there is less positive transfer. However, even slight similarities between two languages can have unfavorable consequences.

Learners must reinforce language contrast learning and have a thorough understanding of the distinctions between English and their mother tongue in order to counteract the detrimental effects of language transfer. Simultaneously, develop English-speaking habits and, with extensive reading and listening practice, progressively adjust to the language's conventions and expressions. Additionally, one of the best ways to raise one's English proficiency is to actively engage in practical activities in an English-speaking setting. In conclusion, language transfer has a complex

impact on learning English, with both possible positive and negative outcomes. Students should maximize the benefits of positive transfer and work to overcome the difficulties of negative transfer.

## **2. Positive Transfer**

### **2.1 Positive Transfer from Chinese to English**

When Chinese students are learning English, language transfer is unavoidable [1-3]. When students realize there are similarities between the two languages, they will unconsciously transfer them into the second language acquisition. Gu points out that some grammatical structures of Chinese are similar to English [1]. For example, some Chinese sentences also follow English syntax, consisting of "subject + predicate + object." Furthermore, from the standpoint of morphology, Chinese use adverbs to modify verbs and adjectives to describe nouns. English vocabulary is also enhanced by the growth of Chinese to English transfer. Cannon claims that English picks up a lot of Chinese vocabulary that spans a wide range of topics, including philosophy, art, cuisine, culture, and many more [2]. For instance, traditional Chinese bean products are the source of tofu, and Typhoon is Guangdong's seaside region is the source of the name.

### **2.2 Positive Transfer from Spanish to English**

Spanish to English language learners frequently experience language transfer, which is when they inadvertently apply the characteristics, conventions, and patterns of their native tongue to the new language they are learning [4-6]. The positive transfer is just as important for Spanish language learners. According to Sun-Alperin and Wang, phonological awareness has been identified as a crucial prerequisite for learning to read and write [4]. Spanish students may find that the intonation and rhythmic elements of Spanish assist them better understand and mimic English intonation when learning English. Additionally, there are several lexical constructional similarities between Spanish and English, including the usage of affixes and etymas. This resemblance is beneficial for acquiring and retaining English vocabulary through reasoning and analogy.

There are certain cultural similarities between Spain and English-speaking countries, such as exchanges in history, art, literature and other aspects. The similar cultural background enables Spanish students to accept the English culture more quickly, and to understand and explain linguistic phenomena through their existing cognitive mode.

### 3. Negative Transfer

#### 3.1 Negative Transfer from Chinese to English

Numerous studies have demonstrated that pronunciation is where detrimental transfer of the mother tongue to the foreign language initially manifests [7-13]. Because Chinese pinyin and English letters are somewhat similar in their writing systems, many Chinese language learners who wish to communicate in English are inclined to select a term that sounds similar to their home tongue and spell English words using pinyin. Chinese students who rely too much on this type of replacement, nevertheless, could find it difficult to pronounce English correctly. For instance, “i” can be pronounced as “liable” in English (/ai/), but as “ani” in Pinyin (/yi:/); similarly, “b” can be heard as “bi:” in English and as “bo” in Pinyin. Below is a research:

By reviewing 39 Chinese students’ speaking recordings, Ho (2003) found the results showed that most of them were influenced by pinyin and had difficulty in pronouncing /r/ and /l/, especially when these two letter appears together, many Chinese students tend to miss /l/. For instance, “world” will be pronounced as “word”. Another difficulty is pronouncing /θ/, due to the lack of this pronunciation in Chinese, people will replace it with /s/. As a result, Chinese students are prone to pronounce “sink” instead of “think”. This study demonstrates that the Chinese and English phonetic systems differ significantly. Chen claims that the tone system of Chinese and the intonation system of English are completely different [3]. This disparity may make it difficult for Chinese students to learn how to pronounce certain vowels or consonants in English, as well as make it difficult for them to understand the intonation patterns of the language. Gu asserts that there would unavoidably be notable differences in the way each language is spoken because English is an intonation language and Chinese is a tone language. Negative transfer will be evident if Chinese students heedlessly rely on pinyin when learning English..

Another negative transfer is “Chinglish”. Yang points out that “Chinglish” refers to English with Chinese grammar, vocabulary, expression habits or cultural characteristics [7]. When learning English for non-native speakers, this linguistic phenomenon is increasingly common. Research shows that language correctness is affected by “Chinglish,” which commonly uses direct Chinese idioms. ignoring the unique vocabulary, expressions, and phrases of English, which diminishes the precision and authenticity of the language. Readers or listeners’ comprehension and emotions will be impacted by this..

Moreover, “Chinglish” could also cause cultural misunderstanding. It may contain some words or expressions

with Chinese cultural characteristics, and these elements may cause misunderstandings or conflicts in cross-cultural communication. Below is an example well explains this phenomenon:

Example 1

*Chinese student: “I don’t want to eat supper today.”*

*English people: “You don’t need supper tonight?”*

*Chinese student: “Yes.”*

*English people: “So you need supper tonight? What do you mean?”*

This misunderstanding appears because Chinese says “Yes” to agree the question, but English people says “No” to mean that He do not need supper. The example proves that readers or listeners from different cultural backgrounds may not be able to accurately understand the cultural connotations contained in these elements.

#### 3.2 Negative Transfer from Spanish to English

Rosa claims that when pupils are unfamiliar with the rules of the second language, they often use the grammatical structure of their native language [5]. Despite being Indo-European languages, Spanish and English have somewhat different grammatical structures, which can lead to interlingual errors caused by the transmission of deviant forms. For example, Spanish uses prepositions more often than English, and the words “a” and “de” don’t match up exactly. Moreover, in compare with Spanish, in which the use of personal pronouns is much more complex, including different forms like subject, direct object and indirect object, it is relatively simple in English. This may lead Spanish students to fail to understand English contents in many aspects. Whatsmore, the two language are also different in adjective order. Adjectives are often positioned opposite nouns in English and after them in Spanish. When creating English sentences, this discrepancy could result in incorrect adjective placement.

Subordinate clause is another reason that might cause negative transfer from Spanish to English. There are many tone words, such as “que” and “cuando” in Spanish, which are used to guide subordinate clauses. In contrast to English, there are also richer types of modal expression. While the virtual is no longer a significant grammatical category in modern English, the subjuntivo is a somewhat complicated term in Spanish that is used to indicate possibility, doubt, desire, or an unfactual state. There may be misunderstandings and complexity if Spanish students only use language transfer to learn English. There are also more varied forms of modal expression than in English. The subjuntivo is a relatively complex term in Spanish that is used to signify possibility, doubt, desire, or an unfactual state, whereas the virtual is no longer an important gram-

matical category in modern English. There may be misunderstandings and complexity if Spanish students only use language transfer to learn English.

According to López and Greenfield, Spanish phonological awareness and English oral proficiency account for the most variance [6]. Spanish and English speakers pronounce words differently, even though they are members of the same language family. If Spanish students read English terms based on their own preferences, the pronunciation could be off. For example, the letter “H” is frequently pronounced in English, whereas Spanish people do not. Additionally, they could put “E” before a word that begins with “S,” like “sport” to “esport.” It is also common for vowels and consonants to be confused. Take “V” and “B” as an example, these two letters are pronounced similarly in Spanish, but totally different in English, making it difficult for Spanish students to distinguish.

Spanish and English do have some similarities in vocabulary, but their usage is very different. The following are some Spanish and English words that look similar but use differently:

#### Example 2

*English people: “I’m afraid I cannot support your decision.”*

*Spanish student: “Is my decision so outrageous that you can’t stand me?”*

This negative transfer happened because “support” in English means showing an attitude of agreement with somebody’s opinion, but in Spanish “soportar” has the meaning of endure and tolerate.

#### Example 3

*English people: “Excuse me, do you know where the exit is?”*

*Spanish student: “I think achievement is earned through hard works.”*

This phenomenon was caused by the same reason: “exit” is the way out of a place, whereas “éxito” means triumph in Spanish. The two example clearly shows the possible negative consequences if Spanish students are fully depended on language transfer. However, gender confusion, which is often the result of relying solely on the mother tongue, can also be a negative transfer in vocabulary. Spelling mistakes can sometimes be a part of negative vocabulary transfer. Spanish students’ spelling habits may have an impact on their writing of English words; rather than following proper spelling standards, they may write things based on how they are spoken in spoken language. Spanish students may be influenced by their spelling habits when writing English words, which means that they might write words according to the pronunciation of spoken language, rather than to the correct spelling rules.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper summarizes the transfer patterns of students in English learning in two language contexts and puts forward corresponding teaching suggestions to reduce negative transfer and enhance positive transfer. This research examines the dual effects of language transfer by analyzing the English learning processes of Chinese and Spanish students. Research indicates that students from diverse linguistic backgrounds have a range of transfer qualities when learning English. Chinese pupils are greatly impacted by the harmful transfer of native Chinese phonetics, vocabulary, and grammatical structure, especially the pinyin system’s interference with English pronunciation. Because both Spanish and English are members of the Indo-European language family, Spanish pupils exhibit greater positive transfer, particularly in vocabulary and pronunciation. However, there are also negative grammatical transfer issues.

Phonetic and grammar training should be enhanced to help Chinese students overcome the negative transfer of pronunciation and grammatical structure. We should focus on teaching grammatical differences to Spanish speakers in order to help students avoid unfavorable transfer in language structure. Future research can look more closely at how students from different linguistic backgrounds can improve their language learning outcomes by overcoming negative transfer through positive transfer. More empirical data is required in order to investigate the effects of different transfer modalities on learning outcomes in more detail.

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