

How Second Language English Learning Enhances Chinese Native Speakers' Linguistic Cognitive Skills

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Abstract:

The importance of English proficiency for native Chinese speakers is increasingly recognized, with its applications becoming more diverse. Observations from daily life clearly show that acquiring English as a second language significantly enhances the linguistic cognitive abilities of native Chinese speakers. However, many native Chinese speakers encounter challenges in learning English and often lack motivation. This paper explores how English learning enhances the cognitive linguistic abilities of native Chinese speakers. It examines the necessity, logic, and strategies of learning English, focusing on linguistic phenomena and logic. The study investigates English and learning methods among Chinese speakers, employing detailed tables for clear and visual representation. The paper concludes with practical suggestions for improving English learning among native Chinese speakers.

Keywords: Language Learning; Second Language Acquisition; English; Linguistic Cognitive Ability; Native Chinese Speakers; Learning Strategies.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the global trend towards learning a second language has grown markedly. According to Graddol, English is reshaping national and individual identities, transforming political dynamics, creating new global wealth and social exclusion patterns, and redefining human rights and citizenship responsibilities worldwide [1]. Learning a second language enhances daily communication during work or travel and also enables learners to deeply understand the underlying logic of a country's history, culture, and national character. English, as a universal language, enjoys widespread popularity. Recently, the emphasis on English learning within Chinese education has continually increased. Increasingly, individuals recognize that learning a second language, particularly English, significantly enhances their understanding of their mother tongue and other languages. Integrated into China's nine-year compulsory education system from primary through high school, English education is considered essential for establishing a solid foundation in English learning [2].

In China, the opportunity to learn a third language generally presents itself at the university level. Individuals with high English proficiency often find it easier to learn additional languages, including a deeper understanding of Chinese. However, many Chinese learners struggle with

grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure, challenging language mastery. It is widely acknowledged that the benefits of language learning increase exponentially with each additional language learned. During my study abroad in Sweden, I observed that my classmates' proficiency in English varied, though they consistently demonstrated a moderate level of proficiency in Swedish linguistics. This observation suggests that English language learning is universal in shaping language perception. This paper focuses on learners of English as a second language, specifically excluding those raised in bilingual environments from this discussion. Interestingly, these differences in language learning may be more pronounced among older adults, as young adults are already functioning at their cognitive peak [3]. Consequently, research targeting bilingual older adults could provide further insights into the cognitive benefits of bilingualism [4]. This raises the question: How does learning English enhance the cognitive linguistic abilities of native Chinese speakers? Typically, English education in China focuses on independent language study, with minimal emphasis on the interplay between English, the mother tongue, and cognitive linguistic abilities. This study aims to analyze how English learning positively influences the cognitive linguistic abilities of native Chinese speakers, enhancing the understanding and

effectiveness of English education in China and aiding those with language learning difficulties to grasp bilingual and multilingual structures more easily. This study aims to explore through phenomenon analysis and interview surveys. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, I will interview ten Chinese native speakers who are learning English, including English language majors, non-English language majors, and nonlanguage majors.

2. Literature Review

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a field that possesses both ancient origins and modern developments. Its ancient roots extend back over two thousand years to the Roman era, marking the early origins of foreign language teaching [5]. However, within Western academia, SLA only gained recognition as a formal academic discipline in the late 1960s to early 1970s. Scholars often cite S. P. Corder's "The Significance of Learners' Errors" and L. Selinker's "Interlanguage," both published in 1972, as foundational texts that established this discipline [6]. However, it was U. Weinreich, in his 2010 book „Languages in Contact,“ who began to focus on language interference, describing it as bilinguals deviating from language norms due to their familiarity with multiple languages [7]. This work laid the groundwork for core SLA concepts like language transfer, interlanguage, and fossilization [8].

SLA research seeks to understand how individuals learn a second language after their first. Doughty and Long argue that comprehensive SLA research encompasses not only the acquisition or loss of a second language by children and adults in various environments but also includes dialect acquisition or loss, broadening the scope of this field [9]. They also noted that language learning is a complex cognitive process unique to humans, suggesting that SLA research can elucidate the workings of the human brain and intellectual activities. Since its inception, the field has been characterized by its professional depth and accessibility to the general public. The field allows for diverse viewpoints, as individuals from various backgrounds may offer insight into second language acquisition. This accessibility is due to the practical nature of the topics discussed, such as effective foreign language learning, which contrasts with more esoteric fields like quantum mechanics that are less approachable for non-professionals. Despite its accessibility, SLA is a specialized discipline with distinct core issues and extensive research methodologies and requires rigorous academic training for researchers. The contradiction between its popularity and professionalism allows for easy initial engagement based on common sense and experience, yet advancing in this field requires

specialized academic training.

Recent research on language perception has predominantly focused on young children, with scant attention to Chinese native speakers. This article primarily explores how learning English as a subject affects the language perception abilities of second language learners and aims to enhance their English proficiency.

3. Methods

3.1 Enhancement of Language Cognition in Native Chinese Speakers through Second Language English Learning

Improving cognitive language abilities through English learning is a well-documented phenomenon. Enhancing cognitive language abilities is often a by-product of acquiring a second language. Traditionally, English learners in China enhance their skills by listening to English radio broadcasts, reading and reciting English articles, and memorizing vocabulary—activities that constitute the input phase of language learning [10]. Owing to inadequate oral communication training and learning environments, the speaking skills of many English learners in China lag behind their reading and writing abilities [11]. This disparity also contributes to enhancing cognitive language abilities. Through continuous reading, English learners gain a deeper understanding of English text expressions and acquire elements of language learning such as vocabulary, sentence structure, and cultural nuances, even in non-verbal communication settings. Furthermore, the relatively few learners with opportunities for language interaction can produce better output, thereby exchanging more information in English [12]. Examples include studying abroad or utilizing global language learning tools like mobile phone applications popular in many neighboring countries. Consequently, their cognitive language abilities surpass those of the ordinary English learners mentioned previously.

3.2 An Investigation and Analysis of the Language Cognitive Ability of Chinese English Learners

The author conducted interviews with five language majors from Beijing Foreign Studies University. These students are native Chinese speakers, use English as their second language, and major in a third foreign language. Currently, all five individuals are pursuing their studies in various European countries. Additionally, five Chinese intellectuals with limited English proficiency were also interviewed. This study quantifies and compares three variables, the frequency of English text input, the frequency of English text output, and reliance on English, to explore

the impact of English learning on cognitive language abilities.

The quantification chart is as follows:

Table 1. Results

	group1				group 2			
Sample Categories	Sweden	Sweden	Hungary	Hungary	doctor	doctor	teacher	teacher
Input	D	D	D	W	W	M	N	Y
Output	D	D	D	D	M	Y	N	N
Dependency	must use	must use	must use	must use	occasionally use	never use	never use	never use

The participants are divided into two groups: Group 1 is classified by the country of study abroad and the third foreign language spoken, and Group 2 is classified by occupational classification.

Frequency of use is categorized into five levels: D (every three days), W (once a week), M (once a month), Y (once a year), and N (never). Dependency on English is categorized into four levels: must use (as the sole or primary mode of communication), often, occasionally, and never use.

The data indicates that Group 1, which has a proficient command of English, shows higher levels of language text input, text output, and English dependency than Group 2. Additionally, the author collected and organized content from the interviews, which focused on three main areas: interest in English learning, experiences in learning English, and the personal necessity of learning English.

During the interviews, most international students reported that their interest in learning English stems from engaging in daily communication rather than traditional methods like memorizing vocabulary or solving linguistic exercises. Exchanging information with people from other countries through daily interactions, such as chatting and joint activities, significantly enhances language learning motivation and creates a positive feedback loop. Positive attitudes towards native language speakers can boost an L2 learner’s motivation, while negative attitudes can diminish it [13].

4. Discussion

4.1 Impact of Mother Tongue Comprehension through English Learning

Language cognitive abilities are not the sole cognitive skills in learning a target language. The inherent language cognitive abilities of native Chinese speakers frequently influence their English learning. Many scholars have predominantly observed negative impacts, noting conflicts between native speakers’ linguistic structures and cultural habits and the target language, such as English. This perspective has given rise to various linguistic error theories, including the L1 Transfer Theories [14] and the Interaction Hypothesis [15]. While these theories concentrate on linguistic errors, they often overlook the positive influence of the mother tongue on second language acquisition. In the context of English learning, native Chinese speakers may find that several Chinese phonemes resemble those in English. Consequently, many Chinese learners of English tend to use a harmonic marking method in the initial stages of learning. This method involves using familiar Chinese phonemes for pronouncing English words, which helps enhance their memory retention of these words. Although not always applicable, this method invariably improves phonological cognitive abilities in the early stages of English learning. In this study, the author explores Chinese students’ attitudes toward harmonic memorization in Chinese and English, assessing factors such as interest levels, usage frequency, and recommendations, resulting in the table below.

Table 2. Survey statistics

	VG	G	F	N
Interest Concentration,	43.5%	16.8%	20.3%	19.4%
Frequency	34.2%	21.8%	24.7%	19.3%
Recommend Attitude	16.1%	8.7%	52.6%	22.6%

In the table, VG stands for very positive, in terms of frequency, means that the method is often used, and in terms of attitude, means that it is highly recommended; G stands for positive, in terms of frequency, means that the method will be used, and in terms of attitude means that it can be recommended; F stands for No Attitude or Neutral, in terms of frequency it means that the method is not used much and in terms of attitude it means that it would not be recommended; N is negative, in terms of frequency it is strongly discouraged, and in terms of attitude it is strongly discouraged.

This shows that the method of utilizing the similarity of Chinese and English phonemes to enhance learning is widespread among Chinese students, and it is believed that using this method in the early stages of language learning will be facilitated. The author cautions that greater focus should be on the target language in later stages of language learning. Persisting on using bilingual similarities can lead to various errors, such as mediation errors and other second language acquisition issues, as extensively documented in the literature.

Additionally, many structural aspects of Chinese and English are similar. For instance, both languages typically use a subject-predicate-object order in declarative sentences. This similarity in basic sentence structure is beneficial in language learning. It does not lead to excessive comprehension bias in the early stages of communication in the target language. It enables native Chinese speakers to continue communicating in English without undermining their self-confidence in learning the language.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Synthetic Statement

As English language learning becomes increasingly integral to Chinese education and the influence and inclusiveness of the English language expand, an increasing number of Chinese learners find themselves confused during the English learning process. Although there are various methods to learn English, achieving a significant level of language proficiency remains challenging. At the same time, both English and Chinese influence each other. How does learning English enhance the cognitive language skills of native Chinese speakers? From the above research, the essay can conclude that the acquisition of English improves the mental ability of native Chinese speakers through cross-linguistic expressions, grammatical merging of similar terms, and cultural intermingling in the application of the language.

6. Suggestions

6.1 Analysing from the Systemic Functional Grammar Theory

6.1.1 Content of systemic-functional grammar

Systemic-functional grammar has two components: systemic and functional grammar [16]. Systemic grammar aims to explain the internal underlying relationship of language as a system, which is a systematic network of some subsystems associated with meanings that people can constantly choose, also known as „meaning potential“. Functional grammar aims to show that language is a means of social communication because the language system and its components are inevitably determined by the roles and functions they provide. Establishing a systemic functional grammar is based on two facts: language speakers choose among a set of systems and endeavour to achieve different semantic functions in social interactions; language and human social activities are closely linked and cannot be separated [16].

6.1.2 The impact of systemic functional grammar theory on English learning

Therefore, English language learning should be put in the context of the whole culture and society. As Chinese learners, we study English as a foreign language. Proficiency requires understanding the differences and connections between Eastern and Western cultures, enabling skillful use of English in various contexts. Besides acquiring basic linguistic skills, English learners should also focus on comprehending Chinese and Western cultures, particularly the meaning and application of vocabulary within specific cultural contexts.

6.2 . English Learning Advice

Listen more, read more, write more, and speak more: Listening, reading, writing, and speaking are the basic elements of learning any language. Improve learners' listening and speaking skills by listening to English audio or watching English films and TV dramas; expand learners' vocabulary and comprehension by reading English books, news, and magazines; and improve learner's written expression skills by keeping an English diary and writing essays.

Create an English language environment: It is difficult to use English in China. However, we can create some English environments, such as using English learning software, participating in English corners, joining English clubs, communicating with foreigners and so on. These activities bring learners closer to authentic English usage and enhance both listening and speaking abilities.

Communicate with native speakers and native English speakers: Communicating with native speakers is an effective way to improve speaking and listening skills. Organize and participate in English corners, speech contests, and discussion groups. Additionally, join online forums or platforms to interact with native English speakers. These interactions will improve learners' listening and speaking skills but also enhance learners' overall linguistic intuition.

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