

## Original Paper

# Research on the Influence of Native Language Transfer on the Use of Conjunctions in English Writing by Chinese College Students

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### Abstract

*Among the four basic skills in English learning, writing has always been regarded as the most difficult one for Chinese college students to master. Errors often occur in the process of college students' English writing, and negative transfer from the mother tongue is an important cause of these errors. Due to the interference of negative transfer, many Chinese college students are unable to apply the English knowledge they have learned to write authentic English articles. The use of conjunctions is one of the important means of cohesion in English discourse. This paper analyzes the use of conjunctions in English writing by Chinese college students from the perspective of mother tongue transfer, attempts to analyze the reasons for the misuse and omission of conjunctions by Chinese students. The problem of the use of conjunctions has become an important bottleneck restricting the improvement of the quality of English writing by Chinese students. Based on the perspective of language transfer theory, this paper systematically examines the deep influence mechanism of the Chinese thinking mode on the use of English conjunctions, revealing the typical phenomenon of the misuse of conjunctions due to excessive reliance on the Chinese feature of parataxis. The research further proposes targeted teaching intervention strategies from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, including increasing English reading volume, emphasizing contrastive teaching between English and Chinese, setting appropriate conjunction exercises, and developing a corpus-based intelligent error correction system, aiming to fundamentally improve the English writing ability of Chinese learners.*

### Keywords

*English Writing, Application of Conjunctions, Native Language Transfer*

## 1. Introduction

In the English teaching system, the cultivation of writing skills holds a central position. This is not only a comprehensive manifestation of language output ability, but also a comprehensive test of vocabulary application, grammar mastery, paragraph construction, and thinking expression ability. Through observation of teaching practice, it has been found that even college students with considerable vocabulary reserves and grammatical foundation still have problems such as awkward expression and insufficient naturalness in their English writing. The root cause lies mainly in the significant differences in discourse cohesion methods between English and Chinese: Chinese tends to achieve coherence through associative means, while English relies more on formal cohesion. When learners unconsciously apply the thinking mode and connection methods of their native language, a typical "native language negative transfer" phenomenon occurs. Native language transfer is essentially a deep psychological language processing mechanism. When second language learners construct the intermediate language system, they will unconsciously activate their native language cognitive framework. This psychological process does not occur at the level of real-time communication, but is pre-internalized in the language representation system of the learner. This language transfer mainly stems from the systematic similarities and differences between the target language and the native language in aspects such as pronunciation, syntax, and semantics. When there are significant similarities between the two languages in a specific language category, positive transfer often occurs; while when there are structural differences, negative transfer phenomena may arise. The phenomenon of native language negative transfer has a huge impact on learners' English writing, potentially resulting in the lack of natural cohesion and coherence in the written English. This language transfer issue not only affects the quality of writing but also reflects the key difficulty in deep language thinking transformation.

During the process of language acquisition, the four core abilities of listening, speaking, reading and writing constitute a complete language ability system. And writing ability is often regarded as the gold standard for measuring language proficiency. Compared with the other three skills, written expression requires learners to simultaneously utilize multiple dimensions of abilities such as grammatical structure, vocabulary reserves, logical thinking and cultural cognition. This comprehensive characteristic makes writing the most challenging language skill, especially for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Due to the lack of exposure to the target language's culture, non-native writers not only need to overcome the conversion barriers of the language system, but also face deep cultural differences in thinking patterns, rhetorical habits and paragraph organization. Chinese English learners often exhibit negative transfer from their native language in the writing process, and the misuse of discourse cohesion devices, such as improper use of conjunctions, is particularly prominent. This interlanguage feature significantly restricts the quality of writing, making most of the produced texts difficult to reach the naturalness of native speakers. Therefore, systematically studying the formation mechanism and solution paths of English writing difficulties has important teaching value and social significance for improving the English output ability at the higher education stage in China.

## 2. The Theories Related to Native Language Transfer

### 2.1 *The Comparative Analysis Theory*

The contrastive analysis theory, as an important research method that emerged in the field of linguistics in the mid-20th century, has its theoretical foundation rooted in the dual academic backgrounds of behaviorist psychology and structuralist psychology. This theoretical system systematically compares the heterogeneity characteristics of the native language and the target language in dimensions such as the phonetic system, vocabulary composition, and grammatical structure. It not only pioneered the academic concept of language transfer but also established an analytical framework for scientifically predicting the difficulty of second language acquisition.

The contrastive analysis research method has been controversial in the field of linguistics. Since its inception, it has faced questions about its practical value. From a theoretical perspective, the premise assumption of this method is that negative transfer from the native language constitutes the main obstacle to second language acquisition. However, modern research shows that learners' cognitive strategies, individual differences, and psychological factors often have a greater influence than language differences themselves. Mistakes should not be simply regarded as learning disabilities; rather, they are a necessary stage in the development of language ability. This cognitive paradigm shift directly weakens the theoretical foundation of traditional contrastive analysis. Although new theories such as error analysis emerged after the 1980s, the revival of contrastive analysis in the academic community proves its unique value: it is not only a tool for predicting language difficulties but also develops into a systematic framework for cross-language research, demonstrating methodological advantages in translation theory construction, language typology classification, and the description of specific language phenomena. This method, through systematic comparison of language structure differences, remains an effective way to enhance metalinguistic awareness and cultivate cross-cultural sensitivity. This dual educational function ensures its continuous importance in the language courses system of universities. The new generation of contrastive analysis methods, integrating cognitive linguistics and corpus technology, is breaking through traditional limitations and opening up new dimensions for language acquisition research.

### 2.2 *The Error Analysis Theory*

The Error Analysis Theory became popular in the 1970s. Due to the limitations of the Contrastive Analysis Theory, the Error Analysis Theory emerged. The Contrastive Analysis Theory mainly focuses on comparing the native language and the target language. It further confirmed the influence of the learners' native language patterns on the target language during the learning process and predicted the problems and easily occurring errors that learners would encounter in future learning. However, the interference of the native language can only predict and explain a part of the errors. Therefore, the application of the Contrastive Analysis Theory in practice has brought many difficulties and limitations and The Error Analysis Theory emerged accordingly.

Compared with the Contrastive Analysis Theory, the Error Analysis Theory has stronger predictive and explanatory power for the difficulties and errors encountered by foreign language learners in the process of learning the target language. For example, linguists gradually discover during the learners' language learning process that there are many differences in language structure between the native language and the target language. However, learners do not necessarily make mistakes regarding these differences; instead, similarities or similarities in language structure between the native language and the target language are more likely to cause errors. Moreover, many of the errors predicted by the Contrastive Analysis Theory did not occur in many experimental studies. Therefore, language researchers analyzed and studied the errors commonly made by learners. The Error Analysis Theory solved the limitations of the Contrastive Analysis Theory and provided more scientific and effective methods for learners to learn new languages. These errors can also be analyzed to determine their causes, not only due to the interference of the native language. Making mistakes is inevitable and an indispensable part of the learning process. The Error Analysis objectively describes the cross-linguistic phenomena between the learners' native language and their first language.

### *2.3 The Interlanguage Theory*

The 1970s marked a significant paradigm shift in the study of second language acquisition. As the limitations of the Contrastive Analysis Theory and the Error Analysis Theory in explaining the language learning mechanism became increasingly apparent, the academic community began to break away from the traditional binary opposition thinking framework. Researchers gradually realized that the process of second language acquisition is not simply the migration of the native language or the imitation of the target language, but rather a dynamic intermediate system constructed by the learner. This language system, known as "interlanguage", has remarkable uniqueness: it is neither similar to the learner's native language system nor the target language system, but rather a transitional language system with phased development characteristics. The proposal of this theory completely changed the paradigm of second language acquisition research, shifting the focus from static language comparison to the dynamic examination of the learner's internal cognitive mechanisms.

The interlanguage theory is a very promising theory, which has significant importance for the practice among communication linguistics, psychology, and comparative cultural theory, as well as for the development of language learning theories. Interlanguage has the characteristics of flexibility, initiative, and systematicness. Flexibility means that the learner's interlanguage system is not fixed and can change or improve in any environment. Initiative implies that the interlanguage system is usually in a state of continuous modification and development. In order to make the interlanguage system closer to the target language system in second language learning, learners accept new rules and start new hypotheses and then constantly revise them. Therefore, the interlanguage system is always in a process of continuous change. Systematicness means that although students make some mistakes in the process of second language learning and the rules they use differ from the target language, they still follow certain rules, rather than randomly. The language behavior of language learners is governed by the

interlanguage system, which is completely different from the language behavior they use when speaking their native language. In real second language communication situations, the errors produced by learners are controlled by the grammar system of the target language. If the learner's interlanguage system is regarded as the standard, then these errors will be reduced.

### **3. The Impact of Native Language Transfer on the Use of Conjunctions**

#### *3.1 The Importance of Conjunctions*

In professional writing and effective communication, conjunctions play a crucial bridging role. These seemingly simple words actually form the framework of the logical structure of the text. Not only can they clearly present the causal, transitional or progressive relationships between viewpoints, but also help readers smoothly follow the author's train of thought. Mastering the application of conjunctions is a key element in improving the fluency and logical rigor of writing. Articles lacking these transitional words often appear fragmented and logically confused. From academic papers to business reports, from legal documents to daily emails, the appropriate use of conjunctions is a basic prerequisite for ensuring the accurate transmission of information, which requires writers to have the ability to precisely select conjunctions.

The cross-linguistic influence of native language transfer on the application of conjunctions by second language learners is a linguistics phenomenon worthy of in-depth discussion. Learners in second language writing and oral expression often unconsciously transfer the logical connection methods of their native language to the use of the target language. This transfer may manifest as excessive or missing conjunctions, or as inappropriate selection of conjunctions. English learners with a native Chinese background often reduce the use of conjunctions required by English cohesion due to the influence of Chinese incoherent features; this negative transfer from the native language not only affects the accuracy of language expression but also interferes with the coherence of the text, and needs to be overcome in foreign language teaching through comparative analysis and targeted training.

#### *3.2 The Similarities and Differences between English and Chinese Conjunctions*

**Similarities in the Use of Connecting Words in English and Chinese:** The similarities in the functions of connecting words in English and Chinese lie in the fact that they serve the same purpose. When using appropriate connecting words to link sentences and sentences, or paragraphs and paragraphs, one can accurately convey the various semantic and logical connections and information between sentences or paragraphs. The positions where connecting words appear in English and Chinese are mostly the same. In both English and Chinese, in most cases, connective words in the text appear at the beginning of the sentence. They act like bonds, closely connecting sentences with sentences or paragraphs with paragraphs.

**Differences in the Use of Connecting Words in English and Chinese:** First, there is a difference between explicit and implicit. English emphasizes explicit connection, emphasizing the use of form to express meaning. The discourse uses more connecting words to link and express various semantic relationships,

and can clearly express various semantic and logical relationships. In contrast, Chinese emphasizes implicit connection. Therefore, connecting words are used less. Chinese emphasizes the logical sequence of events and emphasizes unity through meaning. Second, there is a significant difference in the sentence structure between English and Chinese. The structures of sentences in English and Chinese are obviously different. The structure of Chinese sentences is relatively loose. Sometimes there are many parallel clauses or parallel components in a sentence, and there are no connecting words to clearly express the logical relationship between them. While the structure of English sentences is relatively rigorous, the logical relationships between each clause or component are more obvious. Influenced by the mother tongue, Chinese students' English compositions often exhibit some negative transfer phenomena such as loose structure and few connecting words.

#### **4. The Empirical Study**

##### *4.1 The Study Design*

The main focus of this study is the phenomenon of native language negative transfer in the use of conjunctions by college students in their English writing. This study mainly investigates the negative transfer phenomenon of conjunction usage in college students' English writing through a survey of their graduation theses. By using error analysis and comparative analysis, the actual usage of conjunction errors by these students in their writing is summarized. The research subjects of this study are 8 initial drafts of graduation theses of undergraduate students majoring in English education from a certain university in 2020, which were randomly selected.

The reason for choosing the initial drafts of the theses is that they are the first drafts of the undergraduate students' graduation theses and have not been revised by teachers, which can ensure the authenticity and originality of the students' writing levels, and can effectively reflect the original errors in their writing. Firstly, the graduation theses of English majors require no less than 7,000 words, so choosing the graduation theses of English major students can ensure a certain number of words for the research and facilitate the start of the study. Moreover, these students have all undergone the same English education experience, which can ensure the validity of the research results. Finally, the graduation theses can ensure the authenticity and representativeness of the research. The research objective of this study is to, under the guidance of transfer theory, identify the common errors of students and analyze the errors caused by native language transfer from the aspects of vocabulary, grammar and conjunctions. The reasons for the errors are studied and feasible strategies are attempted to reduce the influence of native language negative transfer. The aim is to quickly improve the English writing ability of college students and ultimately effectively enhance their comprehensive English skills in practice.

##### *4.2 The Research Method*

This paper combines qualitative and quantitative research methods, and takes the initial draft of the graduation thesis of the 2020 undergraduate graduates majoring in English education as the research

object. Through comparative analysis and error analysis of the theory, a textual analysis of the errors in the initial draft of the thesis is conducted. The main errors in the research materials of this paper are analyzed from three levels: vocabulary, syntax, and conjunctions. Through this research, the author also discovers that the phenomenon of negative transfer of the mother tongue has a significant impact on the grammar and conjunctions in students' writing, and the proportion of errors is relatively large. The reason for this phenomenon is that students do not have a sufficient understanding of the differences in grammar between the two languages and the different cultural backgrounds. When encountering difficulties in writing, they rely more on their mother tongue. Based on this research, some suggestions are proposed for college students' English writing learning, in order to weaken the influence of mother tongue transfer on students and further improve their English learning ability and level.

#### 4.3 The Research Result

After randomly selecting 8 first drafts of graduation theses for English major students, the author promptly corrected these 8 papers and collected the errors. The main errors were language errors, including lexical errors, syntactic errors and errors in discourse expression. The author counted the number of errors in the first drafts of these 8 papers and there were a total of 238 errors. According to the error analysis theory, these errors were first classified into three types: lexical errors, grammatical errors and conjunction errors. These three types are the most common errors in college students' English writing.

**Table 1. Frequency and Proportion of Errors Occurrence**

Error Type	Error Number	Proportion
Sentence Grammar	57	23.95%
Vocabulary	97	40.76%
Conjunction	84	35.29%

As shown in Table 1, there were a total of 238 errors in the initial drafts of the 8 papers. Among these, there were 57 syntactic errors, accounting for 23.95% of the total; then there were 97 lexical errors, accounting for 40.76% of the total; and there were 84 errors in the use of conjunctions, accounting for 35.29% of the total. It can be seen that lexical errors and conjunction errors accounted for a relatively high proportion of all the errors.

Based on the types of error in the conjunctions, the errors in the sample can be further classified into the following three categories:

**Table 2. Frequency and Proportion of Conjunction Errors**

Error Type	Error Number	Proportion
Conjunction Omission	23	27.38%

Conjunction Misusing	41	48.81%
Inappropriate Conjunction	20	23.81%

From Table 2, it can be seen that the total number of conjunction misuse is 41, accounting for 48.81% of the total number of conjunction usage errors. The number of conjunction omission is 23, accounting for 17.38% of the total number of conjunction usage errors. The number of inappropriate conjunction usage is 20, accounting for 23.81% of the total number of conjunction usage errors.

During the writing process, many students tend to use fewer conjunctions due to the negative transfer from Chinese. For instance, "The manager was unable to attend, he sent his secretary as a substitute." should be changed to "The manager was unable to attend, so he sent his secretary as a substitute." The relationship between these two sentences is causal, so a conjunction expressing the result should be used, such as "so". Chinese conjunctions are relatively scarce, and Chinese students who are influenced by this tend to use conjunctions in a monotonous way. For example, in Chinese, the conjunctions for expressing contrast or comparison are usually only "但是" and "然而", while English has "but", "yet", "however", "nevertheless", "otherwise", "on the other hand", "on the contrary", and "whereas", etc. The most frequently used conjunction by Chinese students is "but", and the usage frequency of the word "however" will increase after their English proficiency improves.

After students realize the importance of English conjunctions, they will intentionally use them, but there are still many errors. The main ones are as follows: Firstly, many conjunctions in Chinese occur in pairs, such as "因为-所以" and "虽然-但是", while English conjunctions are usually used alone. For example: "Because he didn't want any ties, so he never married." In English, "because" and "so" cannot appear in the same sentence, and either one can be deleted; Secondly, the misuse caused by English-specific conjunctions. Example: "He not only doesn't know but also doesn't care what happened." When expressing a negative progressive relationship, there is no specific expression in Chinese, just adding words like "not" to indicate negation. However, in English, there is a specific phrase "neither... nor", and this sentence should be written as "He neither knows nor cares what happened".

The inappropriate use of conjunctions in English writing can cause unclear meaning in sentences and sometimes make it difficult for readers to understand the intended meaning. Example: "It means not influencing the child to become what we ourselves desire him to become, but also being influenced by the child's own impression." The two parallel infinitives in the sentence are obviously in a contrast relationship, so "not... but" should be used instead of "not only... but also".

## 5. Strategies for Solving Errors in Conjunction Usage

### 5.1 The Increasing of English reading

The core path to improving writing skills lies in establishing an autonomous reading habit system driven by interest. By systematically increasing the reading volume, learners can effectively develop



their text structure comprehension ability, thereby gradually correcting the interference effect caused by Chinese thinking in the use of English conjunctions. Educational practice shows that teachers should implement differentiated teaching strategies: on the one hand, they should precisely match reading materials according to students' language ability levels, ensuring that the texts meet the "i+1" comprehensible input standard in terms of vocabulary complexity, syntactic difficulty, and cultural connotation; on the other hand, they need to focus on cultivating students' ability to select materials independently, guiding them to come into contact with diverse topics, idiomatic language, and challenging cognitive texts. This immersive reading not only strengthens language intuition, but more importantly, enables second language learners to internalize three-dimensional knowledge systems: micro-level vocabulary and grammar rules, meso-level sentence connection techniques, and macro-level discourse organization logic. When learners convert this multi-dimensional language cognition into output practice, their written expression can significantly reduce the influence of native language negative transfer and achieve a qualitative leap from "Chinese English" to idiomatic expression.

### *5.2 The Emphasizing of the English-Chinese Teaching Contrast*

The root cause of the negative transfer phenomenon lies in the fact that learners fail to fully recognize the structural differences between the English and Chinese language systems. Teachers should systematically guide students to conduct comparative studies on the conjunction functions in both languages. From the perspective of teaching practice, first, students need to deeply understand the essential difference between the "syntactic combination" in English and the "semantic combination" in Chinese, which involves cultivating the ability to grasp the rigorous logical relationships of English sentence structures. Only by establishing this cognitive framework can students accurately choose the appropriate conjunctions that conform to the norms of English expression. Secondly, based on empirical teaching suggestions, teachers should collect typical error examples from students' writing samples and focus on analyzing the semantic field differences and syntactic restrictions of frequently used error conjunctions in English and Chinese. Through targeted comparative training, the tendency of students to simply transplant their native language expression habits can be eliminated. Finally, in the teaching process, efforts should be made to cultivate students' ability to organize their thoughts directly in English. This transformation of thinking mode is the fundamental way to avoid negative transfer.

### *5.3 The Setting of appropriate conjunction exercises*

In current teaching practice, there is a common phenomenon where teachers focus more on correcting grammar errors while neglecting the construction of the text when grading students' compositions. This bias directly leads to the systematic deficiency of students' ability to use conjunctions. From the perspective of teaching reform, it urgently needs to establish a multi-dimensional training system for conjunctions: it can design sentence combination tasks, requiring students to select appropriate connecting words while maintaining semantic coherence; it can also create text completion exercises to guide students to distinguish the logical functions of different conjunctions in specific contexts; and it

can carry out text diagnosis activities to deepen understanding by modifying cases of incorrect usage. All training must be embedded in real language contexts, enabling students to dynamically perceive the logical connections between sentences, thereby establishing an internalized cognitive understanding of the functions of conjunctions. This contextualized training not only enhances language accuracy but also cultivates students' logical thinking ability at the text level.

#### 5.4 The Development of an intelligent error-correction system

In terms of the influence of native language transfer on the misuse of conjunctions, an intelligent error correction system based on a corpus can be developed. This system, through in-depth analysis of the differences between learners' language outputs and the target corpus, and by applying NLP technologies and machine learning algorithms, can accurately identify and correct grammatical errors in the improper use of conjunctions. Compared with traditional error correction methods, this system not only can identify explicit errors but also can detect implicit misuse issues that conform to grammar but do not conform to usage through semantic analysis, providing an intelligent solution for conjunction learning in second language acquisition.

### 6. Strategies for Solving Errors in Conjunction Usage

In academic research conducted in written English, the accurate use of conjunction words has become one of the important indicators for evaluating the quality of a text. As an important grammatical means for text organization, connective words not only construct a logical network of connections between sentences, but also largely determine the rigor and readability of academic texts. From the perspective of second language acquisition, English learners exhibit obvious cross-linguistic interference when using connective words. This interference is specifically reflected in multiple dimensions such as redundant use of connective words, logical dislocation, and systematic deficiency. Through quantitative analysis of the writing corpus of English learners as a foreign language, it was found that these improper usages would cause structural breaks in the text, seriously affecting the rigor and persuasiveness of the argument. In view of this, this study proposes a set of targeted teaching intervention plans, aiming to effectively reduce the negative impact of the native language thinking mode on the use of English conjunction words through explicit grammar teaching and contrastive analysis methods.

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