

A Study on the Influence of French on English Learning from the Perspective of Transfer Theory

Li Qingya¹ and Zang Xiaojia²

¹School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, 1 Dongxiang Road, Chang'an District, Xi'an Shaanxi, 710129, P.R.China.

Email: 528996213@qq.com

² School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, 1 Dongxiang Road, Chang'an District, Xi'an Shaanxi, 710129, P.R.China

¹Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

French and English belong to the Indo-European language family. France and Britain also have far-reaching historical ties. Because of this, there are many similarities between French and English. However, as two different languages, there are also great differences between French and English. This article intends to compare the similarities and differences between the two languages in terms of phonetics and vocabulary, and analyze the transfer effect of French on English learning from the perspective of transfer theory, so as to help French majors senior students make full use of similarities in the English re-learning process to strengthen positive transfer and avoid negative transfer, thereby improving learning efficiency.

Keywords: transfer theory, French, English, phonetics, vocabulary

With the development of the “Belt and Road”, the exchanges between China and France have become more frequent, and more and more Chinese college students have chosen French as their major. Currently, there are 150 universities in China offering French majors. When students of French majors first came into contact with French, in order to be able to master French as quickly as possible, they would often temporarily give up the English they had learned before. When they learned French successfully, they would find that their English proficiency had dropped significantly, so they had to learn it again. However, on the way to learn English, the knowledge of French that has been acquired has always affected the learning of English.

French and English belong to the Indo-European language family, and both languages use Latin alphabet. Hundreds of years of historical collision between France and Britain has also allowed the two languages to truly absorb and blend with each other. According to statistics, French vocabulary accounts for about a quarter of modern English vocabulary and is a very large source of foreign words in English (Dong Xiaoye, Mao Xiaoting, 2018). It is the large number of similarities between French and English that make French-major senior Chinese students subconsciously transfer their acquired knowledge of French to English in the process of relearning English, which promotes or hinders their English learning. .

As a student, if you can consciously compare French and English, scientifically use the common rules between the two languages, properly handle the similarities and differences between them, and rationally use the theory of language transfer to strengthen positive transfer and avoid negative transfer. It can improve learning efficiency and learning effect, and achieve an ideal learning state. This article will focus on the influence of French on the transfer of English learning in terms of phonetics and vocabulary.

1. Language Transfer

Since the late 1960s, language transfer or crosslinguistic influence has been one of the important research topics in the field of second language acquisition. (Corder 1967; Selinker 1972; Brown 1985; Wang Chuming 1990, Yang Lianrui 2005, etc.) A large number of linguists have successively defined language transfer, among which the exposition of famous American linguist Terence Odlin is the most representative. His book *Language Transfer* is also the most frequently cited book in current language transfer research. Odlin (1989) pointed out in *Language Transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning* that transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired (and perhaps imperfectly acquired). According to Odlin's definition of transfer, language transfer not only occurs between the mother tongue and the second language, but also between other languages, such as the transfer of the second language to the third language. In the learning process, if the previously acquired language has a positive impact on the later target language learning, it is called "positive transfer", and if it has a negative impact, it is called "negative transfer".

2. The influence of French pronunciation rules on the negative transfer of English learning

Phonetics is an important part of language learning. Correct pronunciation can cultivate a good sense of language, improve listening skills, and enhance learning confidence. Although both French and English use 26 Latin letters, French has only 35 phonemes, while English has 48 phonemes. In French, the movements

of the lips, tongue, and mouth are more obvious and prominent, and the organs of pronunciation are more tense and powerful than when speaking in English. Therefore, due to oral muscle memory, after the senior students have mastered French, they usually have a clear French accent when they speak English.

In addition, French is a language with a very regular pronunciation, and most words and sentences can be read correctly by the spelling of the words. This is the biggest difference between French and English pronunciation, and it is also the most difficult problem encountered by many senior students of French majors. As senior students, they have already kept in mind the pronunciation rules of French, so when seeing a word, the first reaction is to use the pronunciation rules of French to read it. As a result, many students from French major will be incomprehensible when speaking English.

The most significant negative impact of French pronunciation rules on English learning is mainly reflected in:

a) Some letter combinations in French have fixed pronunciations, such as *ai, ei* /*ɛ*/; *au, eau* /*o*/; *an, am, en, em* /*ɑ̃*/; *in, im, ain, aim, ein* /*ɛ̃*/; *om, on* /*ɔ̃*/; *un, um* /*œ̃*/; *ien* /*jɛ̃*/, *oin* /*wɛ̃*/, *gn* /*ɲ*/, *ph* /*f* /, *qu* /*k*/; etc. The pronunciation rules of fixed pronunciation of specific letter combinations allow French majors to read English according to the pronunciation of the letter combination when they see English words. The result is that the English they speak is not understood well by others;

b) In French, except for the consonants *c, f, l, q,* and *r* which are pronounced at the end of the word, other consonants are generally not pronounced at the end of the word, and *-ent* is not pronounced in the conjugation of the verb. This case does not exist in English;

c) No matter how many syllables there are in French words, the accent is usually at the last syllable of the word, while the accent of English words is more variable. Therefore, students of French major tend to be unable to grasp the accent when speaking in English;

d) The *h* is never pronounced in French words except for the letter combination *ch*, producing [ʃ] (in most cases), or [k] (before the consonant *r*). As a consequence, senior French majors also habitually ignore *h* when reading English words;

e) The letter *r* is a uvula in French, and there is no corresponding sound in English. Because of the influence of muscle memory, senior French majors will involuntarily pronounce the uvula *r* in French when they pronounce *r* in English.

The more you understand the rules of French pronunciation, the easier it is to speak English according to French pronunciation rules. This is exactly where French causes negative transfer of English learning. Therefore, in the process of relearning English senior students of French majors should carefully study the similarities and differences in pronunciation between French and English, and master the pronunciation rules of English proficiently, so as to minimize the negative transfer of French pronunciation rules on English learning and speak fluent and accurate English.

3. The transfer influence of French in English vocabulary

Vocabulary is another important element in language learning. Abundant vocabulary can enhance the accuracy, depth and breadth of language expression. After Guillaume, Duke of Normandy became the King of England in 1066, French became the language of the upper class such as the royal family and nobles. The

phenomenon of French as the superior language of Britain continued for more than three hundred years. After more than three hundred years of penetration and influence, English has absorbed a large number of French words. Since the 17th century, the rapid development of the United Kingdom and the United States in the political and economic fields has brought a huge impact to the world, and English vocabulary has also entered the French-speaking society in large numbers. Therefore, in terms of vocabulary, English and French have formed an "intimate relationship" with me in you and you in me. This kind of "intimate relationship" provides convenient conditions for students of French major to read English. Students can infer the meaning of English words based on the French vocabulary they have mastered and the context, so as to successfully complete the reading. This is exactly the positive transfer of French in English vocabulary, which can also help learners expand their English vocabulary, increase reading speed, and improve learning efficiency. However, the positive transfer is limited to homomorphic synonyms or near-form synonyms in French and English words, such as "machine (EN)" and "machine (FR)" "photo (EN)" and "photo (FR))" "member (EN)" and "membre (FR)" "television (EN)" and *télévision* (FR)" "insist (EN)" and *insister* (FR)" etc.

It should be pointed out that although French and English near-form synonyms can improve students' reading efficiency, they also bring trouble to students' writing. For example, when writing English words, students of French major often worry about whether there is an *e* at the end of the word. In addition, some homographs or similar words with different meanings in French and English words are very easy to mislead students. For example, *main* (EN) means *hand* in French, *car* (EN) means *because* in French, and *pain* (EN) means *bread* in French. These are exactly the points that cause the negative transfer of French to English learning. Facing these words, as a student, we need to memorize more, and accumulate more, so as to achieve the purpose of weakening transfer influence.

4. Conclusion

Transfer is the effect of previously learned knowledge on later learned knowledge, and the phenomena of positive and negative transfer will inevitably occur in language learning. Only by carefully comparing all aspects of the two languages and mastering their essential characteristics can we effectively use positive transfer, restrain negative transfer, and get out of the influence of negative transfer.

With the continuous development of economic globalization and the "Belt and Road", the exchanges and cooperation among countries in the world in the fields of politics, economy, culture, and diplomacy are constantly deepening. Single foreign language talents can no longer fully meet the needs of the situation. If you can master one more language, you will have one more chance of success in your life. Therefore, college students in the new era should master multiple languages through comparative learning methods, so as to better adapt to the requirements of the development of the times, and to realize their value of life as soon as possible.

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