English Interferences in German Sentences

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Abstract German is taught and studied as a second foreign language after English in Taiwan. Since there are more commonalities and similarities between German and English than between German and Chinese, Taiwanese learners of German would rather refer to English than to their native language Chinese. This study analyzes the English interferences which occurred in the sentences written by the subjects, who were sophomores from Division of Continuing Education at Wenzao University of Languages and majored in German. The analyses are based on the scripts submitted by the subjects for their midterm and final exams. The results reveal that English interferences occurred in the German sentences written by the subjects. Moreover, suggestions for teaching a second foreign language are offered.

Keywords German as a Second Foreign Language, English Interferences in German Sentences, Suggestions for Second Foreign Language Teaching, Taiwanese Learners of German

1. Introduction

I was a grade three student of the Division of Junior College at Wenzao College of Languages. Our midterm exam was just over. The midterm exam of the course German Reading II appeared to be easy, so we were all confident that we would receive high scores.

A week later, we had the teacher's first class after the midterm exam and all students were excited to see their high scores. The bell rang, the teacher walked into the classroom, and started to distribute the test papers. Students who received their test papers were disappointed as they saw the scores. I was one of them. We sat on our own seats, looking at the errors in our answers corrected by the teacher and asking each other the reasons why the sentences were grammatically incorrect.

The teacher heard our discussions and explained to us why some of our sentences were grammatically incorrect. After his explanation, we realized that we transferred the grammatical rules in English to German. If the rules in the two languages are the same, our sentences are correct. If the rules are different, English interferences occur. While the teacher was explaining, I was a little upset with our previous teachers because they did not remind us of the contrasts and differences between English and German.

The teacher was the only one who discussed the differences between English and German in class. However, he did not talk about the contrasts between English and German until we wrote German sentences with English interferences. Due to this experience, I claim that German should be compared and contrasted with English as well as Chinese in German class. The contrasts and differences between English and German have been always neglected by our teachers. As a result, we made lots of errors which are caused by English interferences.

When I studied in Germany, I took the seminar *Teaching German as a Second Foreign Language*. We probed into the third language acquisition, instruction and didactics in the seminar. Since I started to teach German, I have also observed English interferences in German sentences produced by students. Therefore, my interest in German as third language instruction was inspired and I have decided to be devoted to research in this field. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the analyses of English interferences in the German sentences written by the subjects, who were Taiwanese German learners and studied German after English. Furthermore, overall suggestions for teaching German as a third language are provided with the hope to improve German teaching in Taiwan.

2. Literature Review

This chapter is divided into three sections: In the first section, I discuss the research about German as a third language education in the Chinese-speaking areas. In the second section, I probe into the hypotheses of second language acquisition which are related to the topic of this paper. The third section provides an overview of the third language acquisition.

German as a Third Language Education in Taiwan

In the context of foreign language education, a third language (L3) is identified as a language acquired through

instruction and teaching staff after the first foreign language (L2) (1). According to this definition, German is regarded as L3 in Taiwan because it has always been taught and studied after the L2 English. However, German as L3 is a relatively current research topic in Taiwan.

Numerous academic studies have examined Chinese interferences in German sentences. On the contrary, few scholars have given attention to the comparison and contrast between German and English (1). This topic has not been a focal issue in foreign language education research.

Research concerning a language constellation of Chinese as native language (L1), English as L2 and German as L3 was first conducted and published in the late 1980s. Welge (2) described his observations at a Chinese high school (1). Nevertheless, he was not able to analyze the Chinese interference in German learning due to his lack of Chinese ability (3).

Vogel (4) conducted a case study and observed the German language acquisition of Chinese learners. In his research, he emphasized the code-switching in L3-Output. English proficiency, learning motivation and other factors such as learning strategies, possibilities and language consciousness were analyzed in his study.

Chang H.C. (5) described in her dissertation the learning strategies that Taiwanese German learners adopt. The purpose of her study was the relation between the learning duration and the frequency of applying different learning strategies. What is more, she investigated with empiric research whether male and female learners apply different strategies in order to learn German (6).

Merkelbach (1, 7) investigated the influences of English teaching on German teaching in Taiwan in his papers. The negative influences of English teaching at high schools on L3 teaching were observed. As a result, his research called for the change of English teaching in Taiwan. The way English is taught in Taiwan should be reformed.

Lay (8) was devoted to the attitude toward languages and multilingualism in his research. His study addressed the role of individual multilingualism and the influences of the native language on foreign language learning. The influences of foreign language learning on the attitude toward languages were investigated as well. The language consciousness of the Taiwanese learners was proved in his study. The subjects regarded their native language Chinese as an interference in their foreign language learning. As a result, his study called for changes of foreign language teaching.

Chen (3) examined the influences of the available language abilities on German learning in her dissertation. The roles of the native language Chinese and the L2 English in German learning and teaching were addressed. Her empiric research investigated the transfer phenomena in L3 speaking and writing as well. However, Merkelbach (1) claims that Chen neglected the roles of Taiwanese language, which is also the native language of Taiwanese.

Lay and Merkelbach (9) addressed the influences of the L2 English acquisition on L3 German acquisition in their studies as well. They examined to what extent German is taught under the consideration of the L2 English in Taiwan and how Taiwanese students have benefited from their English abilities as well as learning experience while learning German. The results showed that the majority of the subjects regarded their English abilities as aids for German learning. The subjects claimed that explicit comparisons between English and German had been explored in their German classes and considered the comparisons very important. They wished that teachers could provide more exact explanations concerning comparisons and contrasts between English and German.

Merkelbach's study in 2011 also dealt with the learning strategies that learners use. This study noted the differences of learning strategies used in L2 and L3 learning. Moreover, he also examined the relations between learning strategies and culture.

To conclude, there are some published papers that deal with German as L3 education in Taiwan. Numerous studies investigated the learning strategies, learning motivation, multilingualism, language consciousness and influences of the available language proficiency. Some studies also provided the comparison between L2 learning and L3 learning. Nevertheless, L3 didactics has hardly been offered.

Hypotheses of Second Language Acquisition

Contrastive analysis hypothesis.

The contrasts of two languages were increasingly investigated by applied linguists in the middle of the twentieth century. The investigation resulted in the introduction of the "Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH)". It claims that the differences between the native language system and target language system lead to the principal barriers to second language acquisition and that learning difficulties as well as errors can be predicted according to the analysis of the contrasts between the two languages in question (10). On the other hand, errors occur owing to the contrasts between the native language and target language and thus errors could be avoided if the two languages are compared and contrasted in class (11).

Lado (12) argues that foreign language learners very often refer to their native language. The commonalities and similarities between the native language and target language bring about the correct production in the target language. On the contrary, the contrasts and differences result in errors in productions of the target language. As a result, learning difficulties and errors can be prognosticated through the analyses of the differences and contrasts between the native language and target language. The behaviorist and structuralistic theories argued that foreign language learning is controlled and the target language should be compared as well as contrasted with the native language.

The CAH, however, is criticized by some scholars such as Schachter, who claimed that the CAH neglects the individual and psycholinguistic behavior patterns of the learners (13). It is possible that learners of the same native language make different kinds of errors (11). The errors which result from

the target language system such as overgeneralization may occur as well (14). There are also some errors which deviate from both native language and target language (11). What is more, learners may confuse similar linguistic elements in the target and native language with one another (14). The CAH did not take these phenomena into consideration and could not explain the reasons for the phenomena. Therefore, the weak version of CAH was introduced, which argues that errors cannot be prognosticated but identified as native language interference (11).

Language transfer and interference

The studies showed that language transfer and interference occurred during second language learning and that they were the results of language contacts as well (15). The two terms were often considered synonymous (16). Nevertheless, Hufeisen (13) argued in her dissertation that transfer and interference are different phenomena. As Lado asserted, language learners tend to often refer to their native language during foreign language learning. Transfer comes about when the elements of the native language correspond to those of the target language. On the contrary, transfer of different elements from native language to target language causes interference, which is one of the error sources (13). Furthermore, learners will judge whether or not elements of their native language system can *be transferred to the target language system. (12).*

Overview of Third Language Acquisition

L3 learners have not only L1 but also L2 at command. In addition, they are experienced and competent foreign language learners. Thanks to their cognitive experiences, L3 learners know how a foreign language is acquired. Thus, they have already developed their own learning strategies. Moreover, they also know what learning difficulties they may need to deal with. These emotional experiences will influence their attitudes towards foreign language learning (17).

Contemporary studies reveal that there are three important factors which will influence third language learning: age, limited time for learning, and the chronological sequencing of language courses. L3 learners start to learn a new language at a higher age. They have more language learning experiences and thus they know their learning types. What is more, they have developed their subjective learning theories. Nevertheless, the time for third language learning and teaching is relatively limited owing to the higher age of learners (1).

L1 and L2, which L3 learners have at command, are often "utilized" as the "foundation" and "support" of the L3 learning. Owing to the lack of L3-proficiency, L3 learners often have difficulties in understanding and producing L3. In order to overcome these difficulties, learners tend to transfer the phonetic, lexical, syntactic and semantic elements of L1 as well as L2 directly to those of L3. In other words, L1- and L2-proficiency are utilized as the communication strategies. The relation between the different languages is identified as

the "transfer base" (18).

The transfer in terms of third language acquisition has two aspects. If the target language is similar to L1 or L2, learners tend to resort to the linguistic elements such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar of the L1 or L2. The strategic and cognitive transfer comes about if the target language and the L1 or L2 show no relatedness (16).

Learners resort to the L1 or L2 during L3 learning, which results in interlingual transfer. The interlingual transfer which takes place in L3 learning can come from both L1 and L2. Research has noted that the interlingual transfer can be positive and negative (1). Therefore, it is necessary for L3 instructors to teach the commonalities, similarities, and contrasts among different languages in class.

3. Methods

In this chapter I will explain what methods I use to analyze English interference in learners' productions in German. I will also describe my subjects in terms of their backgrounds as well as their language learning experiences and specify the sources.

I collected and observed the work of 25 students in order to analyze English interference in productions of German learners. The sophomore students whom I taught last year are my subjects. They are German majors from the Division of Continuing Education, starting to study German as they enrolled in Wenzao University of Languages. In addition to German, they had to study English, which they had studied for at least six years. The ages of the students were between 19 and 40 years old.

The students had to take the midterm and final exams in my class every semester. Since the course is named *German Conversation and Listening*, the midterm and final exams had both a written part for testing listening and an oral part for testing speaking. The written part consisted of True-or-False tasks and Multiple Choice tasks. This meant that the students did not produce any sentences. For the oral part, students were required to construct a conversation between two people regarding a certain topic assigned by me in advance. As they presented their conversations, they had to submit the scripts to me because I also evaluated the accuracy of their oral productions.

The scripts the students submitted were the sources of my analysis. I collected fifty scripts and observed the German sentences which they wrote. When I saw an error, I needed to determine whether or not it is an English interference at first. Subsequently, I started to analyze the English interferences which appeared in the scripts. I compared the incorrect German sentences with the English translations as well as the correct ones. Finally, I identified the categories of the errors through comparison.

I did not assign students to write certain German sentences. Students were allowed to create their own conversations. Therefore, they made various kinds of errors in their productions. In this study, I focused on the grammatical

errors which were caused by English interference and analyzed them. Nevertheless, I could not provide statistics to explore how strongly certain English grammatical elements influenced German learning, which was the limitation of this study.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, the errors which are due to English interferences are classified and analyzed. In the second section, general suggestions for German as a third language instruction are offered with the hope to avoid English interferences.

Error Analysis

The interferences which occur in the subjects' scripts can be classified into five types: word order, articles, perfect tenses, pronouns, adjectives, and verbs with prepositions.

Word Order

Most of the errors found in the scripts occurred because the differences of the word order in English and German were overlooked. In English, verbs are not fixed to a certain position of a sentence while German verbs must be at the second or the last position. On the other hand, the verb is located after the subject in a sentence in English. This rule for word order in English may cause errors once learners apply this rule to German. For example, instead of writing the correct sentence "Am Donnerstag haben wir Deutschunterricht" (We have German class on Thursday), one subject wrote "Am Donnerstag, wir haben Deutschunterrcht". In the incorrect sentence, the verb *haben* is not located at the second position but after the subject. This student neglected the contrast in the rules for word order in English and German and thus transferred the rule in English to German. The transfer of the different rules brought about this error.

The temporal and local adverbs are often placed at a wrong position as well. In English, the temporal and local adverbs should be either at the beginning or the end of a sentence. In German, on the contrary, they cannot be placed at the end of a sentence if there is an object in the sentence. This contrast between English and German is not sensed by most learners. The incorrect sentence "Wir haben eine Prüfung am Samstag" (We have a test on Saturday) is a typical example for this kind of error. The temporal adverb *am Samstag* cannot be placed at the end of the sentence because this sentence has the object *eine Prüfung*. However, the subject assumed that the temporal adverb is placed at the end of the sentence in both English and German.

Articles

In English, the indefinite article *a/an* is needed before the profession and the nationality. On the contrary, the indefinite article *ein/eine* before the profession and the nationality should be removed in German. Neglecting this contrast

between English and German lead to the incorrect sentences such as" Ich bin eine Lehrerin"(I'm a teacher) and " Ihr Mann ist ein Deutscher"(Her husband is a German).

Perfect Tenses

English has only one helping verb, which is *have*. On the contrary, there are two helping verbs in German, *haben (have)* and *sein (be)* when it comes to perfect tense. Which one should be used depends on the verb. This difference between English and German is overlooked by most learners. As a result, incorrect sentences such as "Er hat heute hier gekommen" (He has come today) and " Meine Eltern haben nach Taipeh gefahren" (My parents have gone to Taipei) are found in the scripts. According to German grammatical rules, the helping verb *haben* should be replaced with the German be verb *sein* because of the verbs *gekommen* and *gefahren*. In other words, correct sentences should be "Er ist heute hier gekommen" and "Meine Eltern sind nach Taipeh gefahren". Learners' English abilities result in their assumption that the helping verb *haben* is applicable all the time.

Pronouns

In English, the pronoun *it* is always used to refer to an item mentioned before. On the contrary, the gender of an item determines which one of the third singular pronouns should be used in German. *Er* (he) should be used to refer to a masculine item and *sie* (she) should be used to refer to a feminine item. However, five subjects did not know this contrast between German and English and used the pronoun *es* (it) to refer to a masculine or feminine item.

Adjectives

As in English, there are comparative and superlative adjectives in German as well. However, the rules to form comparative and superlative are different in English and German. In German, *er* is always added at the end of the adjective so that the comparative is formed, no matter how many syllables the adjective has. On the contrary, *more* must be added before an English adjective and the adjective remains unchanged if it has over three syllables. Three subjects transferred this rule to German and added the German equivalence *mehr* (more) before the adjective which has more than two syllables.

As for superlative, *st* or *est* is always added at the end of a German adjective so that superlative is formed, no matter how many syllables the adjective has. On the contrary, *the most* must be added before an English adjective and the adjective remains unchanged if it has over three syllables. Four subjects transferred this rule to German and added the German equivalence *am meist* (the most) before the adjective which has more than two syllables.

Verbs with Prepositions

There are many verbs and idiomatic verbs which use prepositions both in English and German. However, German verbs may use different prepositions from English. The differences in prepositions were neglected by my subjects

and resulted in the errors such as *warten für* (wait for) and *helfen mit* (help with) found in their scripts. The subjects assumed English and German verbs use the same prepositions and just translated the prepositions from English to German.

To conclude, the subjects referred to English grammatical rules and also transferred the rules in English to German. Owing to some commonalities and similarities between English and German, the subjects judged that the grammatical rules in English can always be transferred to German. However, there are definitely differences and contrasts between the two languages and they are mostly overlooked. The transfer of the different grammatical rules from English to German led to the English interferences found in the scripts. In order to avoid these errors, the differences and contrasts mentioned above between English and German cannot be neglected in German class any more. On the other hand, they must be discussed in details in class so that learners will be aware of them and pay attention. Overall suggestions for L3 instructions are going to be offered in the next section.

Suggestions for Instructions

Some errors caused by English interference are found in the fifty scripts which students submitted to me, which proves that German learners do resort to English in German learning. The resort to English sometimes helps learners with German learning, but it can sometimes result in interference and thus errors occur once learners transfer the linguistic elements which are different in English and German. Therefore, German class should include the comparison and contrast not only between Chinese and German but also between English and German (18).

Neuner (18) suggests that the similar and different elements in the L1, L2 and L3 should be explored in class through the comparison of texts written in the L1, L2 and L3 with certain elements that are to be discussed. It is suggested that learners first try to globally understand the German text with the assistance of the English as well as Chinese translations. Subsequently, the linguistic elements (the comparative form) in German should be analyzed and compared with those in English as well as Chinese. The commonalities, similarities and differences among the three languages should be explored in class (15).

L3 learners should not be considered "empty bottles" but "active doers". Inductive methods and autonomous tasks should be applied in L3 instruction. In other words, example sentences with the linguistic elements in question should be offered in both English and German to learners at first. Learners should be required to think, compare, discuss, and develop hypotheses on the basis of the example sentences offered in class. L3 instructors should try to apply various methods in order to inspire learners to learn the L3 successfully. The new didactic principles which are evolved from multilingualism yield the successful L3 learning (18).

5. Conclusions

In Taiwan, German is learned and taught as the third language after the second language, English. As a result, Taiwanese German learners have both Chinese and English proficiency at command and may resort to both languages while learning German. However, they resort to English more often than to Chinese and transfer the linguistic elements from English to German owing to the lack of relations between Chinese and German (9).

On the basis of the third language acquisition, Taiwanese German instructors should not only deal with the linguistic elements in German but also in English as well as in Chinese. In this way, German is compared with English and Chinese in order that learners discern the commonalities, similarities, and differences among the three languages. Furthermore, inductive tasks should be applied often in L3 instruction. Examples in German along with those in English and Chinese should be provided at first. Learners are required to think, compare, discuss, and develop hypotheses in class.

This study does not explore how strongly certain linguistic elements in English influence on learning those linguistic elements in German. Therefore, it is suggested that exact statistics be provided in the future study and instructors could take it as a reference for their German teaching. In order to offer statistics, all students should be required to speak or write certain sentences and then instructors count the frequency rate of English interference occurrence. The higher the rate is, the more emphases instructors should put on the contrast. However, low rates do not mean those involved contrasts between English and German can be neglected.

This paper focuses on English interference in the grammatical aspect and only provides instructors with general principles of the third language instruction. As a result, future studies should also examine English interference in the phonetic and lexical aspects. Concrete suggestions for teaching German as a third language should be offered to the instructors in Chinese-speaking areas as well. Besides, those suggestions should be applied in class as well as in teaching materials. The effects of the offered teaching methods on German learning need to be investigated.

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