

The Application of the English-Chinese Comparison to Discourse Structures Analysis

L'APPLICATION DE LA COMPARAISON ENTRE ANGLAIS-CHINOIS DANS L'ANALYSE DE STRUCTURE DU DISCOURS

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Abstract: This paper makes an attempt to employ the English-Chinese comparison to English discourse structures analysis to help students avoiding some errors of interference from their native language and developing students' linguistic skills to a high level of proficiency.

Key words: the English language, the Chinese language, comparison, Discourse structure

Résumé: L'article présente l'essai d'employer la comparaison anglais-chinois dans l'analyse de structure du discours anglais pour aider les étudiants à éviter des erreurs d'interférence venues de leur langue maternelle et à élever leur niveau linguistique.

Mots-Clés: langue anglaise, langue chinoise, comparaison, structure du discours

1. INTRODUCTION

How can we conquer the interference from the native language and culture and transform the negative transfer to a positive one? Linguists believe that a systematic comparison of the target language with the native language would help language learners by finding out their differences and similarities. "We assume that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult. The teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real problems are and can provide a help for teaching them" (Lado, 1957:2). "You could know your own language only if you compared it with other languages" (Engels, quoted in Chen Anding, 1998:IV). In China, the importance and indispensability of a systematic comparison of the target language with the native language in foreign language teaching have been long recognized. The famous linguist Lu Shuxiang suggests: "I believe, the most useful way for Chinese students to learn English is to identify the differences between English and Chinese, especially in specific items as morphology, grammar, sentence structure, ect" (quoted in Yang Zijian, Li Ruihua, 1990:1). Since 1970s, based on the comparative study of the homogeneity and

heterogeneity of English and Chinese, the method of the English-Chinese comparison is gradually employed in English teaching. There have been quite a few researches done on how the method to be best put into teaching. Many scholars have dealt with the principles and techniques to use the method in teaching more systematically, scientifically and professionally. The present author does a tentative endeavor to employ more scientifically the English-Chinese comparison to discourse structures analysis so as to help English learners overcome negative transfer from their native language and learn idiomatic English.

2. CAUSES

Because English and Chinese come from different language families, the differences determine the distinct discourse structure between them. The present teaching methods for non-English majors mainly concentrate on lecturing English discourse structures, grammatical items and lexical usage. As a result, teachers try all ways to practice students to have a good mastery of English; it is still difficult for them to use it properly. For most non-English majors their English learning is affected inevitably by their native language. The influence manifests itself not only on phonology, syntax, but also on thought pattern, discourse pattern. Most Chinese students organize discourses in ways that differ

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from native speakers of English. They consume writing in English is the same as writing in Chinese. So, they write their essays in Chinese and translate them into

English. The following example is an invitation card written by one student.

Mr. And Mrs. Green:

We have decided to have a humble dinner on Monday, May 4th, 7 p.m at Jin jiang restaurant. We invite you to come.

R.S.V.P

Mr. and Mrs. Wang

This invitation card is by no means culturally appropriate to foreigners. It is rather a note or message than an invitation card. The student tried to write a formal invitation card but failed to observe the form of the card. He transferred the Chinese way of writing it.

When writing an invitation card, certain conventional terms should be used, e.g. request the pleasure (or honor) of, and specific format should be complied with. So an invitation card in English native discourse should be:

MR. and Mrs. Wang

Request the pleasure of

Mr. And Mrs. Green's

Company at dinner

on Monday, May 4th

at 7 p.m

Jin jiang restaurant

R.S.V.P

*Telephone: 0714-*****

3. PRACTICAL NEED

L1 influence on L2 has been universally acknowledged by foreign language specialists and teachers. But, there is another issue which should also attract considerable attention—Whether English learners themselves are conscious of interference from their native language or not? In most cases, learners are observed to be unconsciously affected by their native language and don't know how to reduce the influence. The author conducts the following test to verify the issue in some degree.

The subjects for the test are 120 Chinese students majoring in international trade, law and administration in Wuhan University of Science and Technology. All the students are in their first year. The samples are selected through random sampling. There are nearly 450 students in Grade 2004. All the names of the students are inputted into computer and numbered, then 120 students are selected according to the random sampling table in statistics. Because of the probability

characteristics and the equal chance of being selected, subjects can be said to stand for the typical features of the whole. All the students are approximately similar in their learning background, though the data of their language proficiency is not given.

The test requires the subjects to read a material chosen from a composition (quoted in Zhao Yongqing, 1995) written by a second year student of English major and give their assessments on it within ten minutes.

After the results are collected, they are carefully estimated and analyzed in computer according to statistic procedure. It is expected that the eventual outcome of the statistics (by means of simple arithmetic) will provide a more or less reliable fact that most learners don't sense that their English learning is affected by their native language and assume writing in English is the same as writing in Chinese. The hypothesis is that they can't judge which is natural English expression and which is chinglish one and how they are interfered by Chinese. It will mirror some deficiencies that lie in present college English teaching and what needs to be improved. It will also take us into consideration that the more appropriate method should be applied to present English teaching. The following is

the reading material.

Should Students Do Business or Not

In recent years, doing business is very popular on the campus. More and more college students spend more and more time doing business. This phenomenon causes a lot of hot argument. Is it right or not? In my opinion, we can't say it is right or not directly because the reason is complete.

On the one hand, many students do business in order to reduce the burden of their family because their family has not enough money to support them. So they're doing business is reasonable. We can't say it's not right. As to those students whose families are not very poor, some of them doing business just want to practice in the society and gain some experience. Earning money is not their main purpose. We can't say it is not right either.

But on the other hand, doing business is wrong.

Students shouldn't do that because their tasks are learning knowledge. Doing business must take some time, and time is very precious in the college. So doing business is wasting time. The more business is wasting time. The more business students do, the less knowledge they learn. Which is more important, knowledge or money? Of course, the knowledge. Some students will ignore their study with the more and more money they earn. The money will control them; the money will twist their souls.

In a word, whether students should do business or not is decided by the purpose they hold. They have different reasons, so we should look at the question more objectively.

(quoted in Zhao Yongqing, 1995)

After subjects have finished their requirements, the results are counted up in table 1.

Table 1 Percentage statistics for composition evaluation

A. Argument	Very clear-cut 14% (17)	Clear-cut 52% (62)	Not clear-cut 34% (41)	Obscure 0	No argument 0
B. Position of argument	At the beginning 31% (37)	In the middle 4.2% (5)	At the end 59% (71)	No 6.2% (7)	Don't know 0.8% (1)
C. Assessment to the position of argument	I also do like this 14% (17)	I am likely to do like this 54% (65)	I don't oppose to do like this 23% (28)	Opposing 9% (10)	Don't know 0

According to the statistics in table 1, 66% subjects consider the argument set forth in the composition is clear-cut. 91% subjects admit the argument put forward at the end is appropriate and they themselves are likely to do like this. 83% subjects evaluate the composition is perfect. From the statistic result, we can find almost all students agree with the writing style, because it accords with Chinese writing approach of indirectness. For instance, a question is proposed at beginning, and then an ambiguous answer is responded to it—"I can't say right or wrong". In the end, a conclusion is drawn—"Whether students should do business or not is decided by the purpose they hold". Nevertheless, this approach doesn't conform to more natural English writing, which is more direct. It is unlikely for native speakers of English to spend much time in setting up a background for the main point. Thus, an American professor Mr. Edwin who teaches English writing and linguistics in our university evaluates the composition like this:

The composition doesn't directly address or answer the question set by the writing task and violates the principle that the thesis sentence should appear in the Introduction Part. The first sentence in the last paragraph—Whether students should do business or not is decided by the purpose they hold, should be more like a generalization of the ideas in the essay and therefore should be regarded as the thesis sentence.

Mr. Edwin evaluates the composition a "c" paper. Why are there notable differences between the evaluations from an English native speaker and Chinese students? It is due to Chinese students having no recognition about the different writing styles of English and Chinese, which are determined by different thought patterns. If English teachers can give an elaborate comparison on the differences to students in their class teaching, students will not evaluate English writing with Chinese writing style like the given example.

The results of the test show that students know less the similarities and dissimilarities of the target language and the native language. This has consequently caused an obstruction for them to use English appropriately and adequately. So, it is very imperative for English teachers to draw a detailed comparison on English and Chinese in their teaching, which will help learners to break away interference from their native language.

4. APPLICATION OF THE ENGLISH-CHINESE COMPARISON TO DISCOURSE STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

How to best put the English-Chinese Comparison into English discourse structure analysis is a center of this paper. In order to make the method more effective and accessible, the teacher should make full use of the textbook available to implement the method to their teaching. At least there are three reasons which show why teachers should do like that. The first is that "Teachers use the textbook as their syllabus guidelines in the day-to-day planning of lessons, most evidently with respect to which language to introduce but also by extension with respect to what information to give pupils" (Byram 1991:173). Thus, the textbook is seen as a map, a resource, a trainer, an authority and an ideology in language teaching. The second is that it is impossible and impractical to carry out the English-Chinese comparison as a separate course to non-English majors because their English class hours are limited, usually four or five class hours per week. The third is that at present, there are no professional textbooks for teachers to compare the target language and the native language in teaching for non-English majors. The main English discourse patterns in student's textbooks should be compared with corresponding Chinese ones.

At present, the main discourse patterns in textbooks involve narration, exposition, argumentation, drama, letter writing, etc. The comparison dominantly focuses on them. For example, Unit 5 in Book 3 of *College English (New)* is concerned with *Writing Three Thank-you Letters*. In order to make students know how to write thank-you letters, the teacher compares the different writing strategies of English and Chinese.

It is agreed that in a formal thank-you letter, thanks should be expressed in the first line such as the example in unit 5.

Dear Mr. Weidner,

I am writing to let you know how much I appreciate your helping my son Robert last Thursday when he sprained his ankle. It meant a great deal to him to have someone extend comfort and care at such a distressing time.

Robert's ankle is healing well, and he should be his normal, active self again in about a week. He joins the

rest of my family in thanking you for your kindness.

Very truly yours,

Philip Canoff

Even in an informal thank-you letter, it's fine to start more indirectly, but your thanks should be mentioned with the opening paragraph, as in another example in unit 5.

Dear Emily,

One of the most wonderful parts of my trip was returning home to find everything looking so shipshape. I just had to thank you again for watching over things so well while I was away. You did a great job! I only hope that my plants don't miss you now that I'm back.

Your grateful neighbor,

Lynn

In contrast, Chinese writing is different. The writer is likely to spend much time in setting up a background, and then proceed with the main point of the letter such as the following example.

Dear Teacher,

How are you?

Now I am a college student. College life is quite different from middle school. It is new for me. I am trying to adjust myself to the new life.

Dear teacher, when I was at middle school you not only taught me a lot of knowledge, but also influenced me in various ways. I am very grateful. You were very kind to me just as kind as a father might be. I still remember once you lent your umbrella to me whereas you were caught in the heavy rain as I learnt later. You were generous to me too. Once you invited me over for dinner. I'll never forget what you have done for me, and I will keep grateful for what you have done for me.

Best wishes to you.

Yours sincerely,

Li Dong

(quoted in Ma Baojing, Cheng Mingfa, 1999:7)

In the case given above, the writer begins talking generally of school, then of how his teacher had loaned him his umbrella and been kind to him, and then the student express his appreciation to his teacher, which is really the purpose of the letter.

By comparison, the different writing strategies of English and Chinese are clearly seen. Students will understand the most appropriate way to write thank-you letters in English.

Argumentation is another discourse pattern whose structure differs from Chinese one. The difference causes learner's difficulty in reading and writing. The teacher picks up Text A of Unit 8 (in Book 2 of *New College English*) and a student's essay to make a model analysis and comparison.

It has been well documented that English

argumentation is linear logic mode, while Chinese one is circular logic mode. Table 2 below can roughly show their differences (quoted in Yang Mei, 2002:41).

Table 2 Main differences of argumentation structures

Occidental	A. Oriental
Straight linear	Circular or spiral
Anti-climax	Climax
Process, reasons	Outcome, content
Problem-solving	Fact-enumerating
Deductive	Inductive

Text A of Unit 8 (seen in Appendix) is an essay concerning about environmental conservation. It can be divided into three parts. The first part (Paras.1-5) is opening remark: It is fairly simple but important to distinguish between environmental necessities and environmental luxuries, and we should apply the fundamental principle of sensible environmentalism. The second part (Paras.6-11) is main body: A sensible environmentalism does not sentimentalize the earth. The third part (Paras.12-14) is conclusion: We should protect nature for the sake of our own. The prominent features in its structure can be categorized as following:

1st. The essay develops dominantly in a linear way. It begins with a thesis statement: We should apply the fundamental principle of sensible environmentalism. Then, it develops by a series of subdivisions of that thesis statement each supported by evidence, details, and examples, proceeds to develop the central idea and relate the idea to the other idea in the whole essay. Thus, the flow of ideas occurs in a straight line from the opening sentence to the last sentence.

2nd. In the first paragraph, the writer poses a provocative question — how to choose, to stimulate readers' interest; and then in the second paragraph, come straight to the thesis statement. This direct way to put forward the thesis right at the beginning to attract the attention of listeners or readers, but ending the speech or text in a relatively flat style is regarded to display another feature of occidental argumentation structure “anticlimax”.

3rd. In the main body, the writer lays more emphasis on the demonstrative process and applies several techniques which include contrast, concession, examples, cause-effect analysis, etc. to demonstrate the reasons why the thesis is supported.

4th. The essay is reasoned in a deductive way.

Nevertheless, Chinese argumentation structure is

obviously different with English one. The sequence of qi cheng zhuan he is considered as its typical structure. The *Dictionary of Chinese Rhetoric* (Zhang Dihua, 1986:314) defines the qi cheng zhuan he as follows:

A common logical belles-lettres structure and sequence. Also the epitome of a common structural pattern for a variety of texts, ancient and modern. “Qi” is the opening or beginning. “Cheng” continues or joins the opening to the next stage. “Zhuan” is the transition or turning point. “He” is the summary or conclusion.

Influenced by Chinese discourse structure, most of Chinese students use the same way to write English essay. Here, we choose a student's essay with the title: *Should college students take up part-time job*, to give a more detailed illustration.

Should College Students Take up Part-time Job?

When I entered the college, I found that I had too much spare time to spend. For we had only four or six hours in class, and what should I do in the rest time of the day, is a problem for me. Like most college students, I choose to take up a part-time job.

We can hear many argument about should college students take up part-time jobs or not. Some people believe study is the students' responsibility; college students also have to study hard on the campus. They also think if college students take up part-time jobs, they can't deal with the relation between job and study.

Many others think that take up part-time jobs is good for college students. Take up part-time jobs can increase the experience and enlarge our knowledge. I agree this view.

The prominent features of the essay can also be categorized as follows:

1st. The essay develops completely in a circular way. It begins to set up a background for the main point. Then, it comes gradually close to the point until the thesis is finally addressed.

2nd. In the first paragraph, the writer only gives a background introduction, rather than comes straight to the thesis statement like English writing. Not until the last paragraph, the write addresses the main idea. This way displays another feature of Chinese argumentation structure “climax”.

3rd. In the second paragraph, the writer doesn't provide enough evidence, examples to support his thesis, but tells us, “I agree this view”. This writing is very personal and doesn't pay more attention to logic reasoning.

4th. The essay develops in an inductive way.

By comparing, the different discourse features of English and Chinese are clearly displayed and students have a deeper comprehension on them.

5. CONCLUSION

Due to the solid theoretical foundation and an urgent practical need, the English-Chinese comparison should be placed on an important position in English discourse analysis. Although the waters of innovative course seldom run smooth, and we will find ourselves facing with so many difficulties in practice, we still hold that

the application of this method to English teaching will be necessary as well as valuable. In this paper, the present writer has tried to explore the feasibility of applying the method in English teaching for non-English majors. The consideration and suggestions in this paper may not be all-round and completely reasonable. They need to be judged and replenished in the teaching practice.

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