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A Study on Interlanguage Transfer through L3 Acquisition

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Abstract

As the globalization process progresses more rapidly and widely, there has been a ever-growing demand for multilingual learning. Compared with the study of Second Language Acquisition, studies on the Third Language and even Multilingual Acquisition have attracted a relatively poor attention. At the same time, considering current educational environments for ethnic colleges and universities, the effects of college English teaching for minority students can be said to have been 'generally poor.' In this situation, when we try to find ways to improve college English studies for minority students most of whom already can speak two languages or even more, it would not be the best idea to keep following the experiences of traditional Second Language Acquisition. It is necessary first to find out whether there are positive or negative effects in acquiring multiple languages, and then to conduct a profound research on L3 (third language and even multilingual) Acquisition in order to employ more efficient teaching methods for multilingual learners. After conducting a Japanese-teaching experiment on two groups of learners with mono-lingual and bilingual backgrounds, it has been found that there is a positive transfer between different languages. In this paper, following the recent research findings on Language teaching for multilingual learners, I try to show with further supports that when it comes to language education for learners with multilingual backgrounds, we should focus on the advantages they may earn in order to conduct more effective language acquisition.

Keywords: *Minority students, Inter-language transfer, L3 acquisition, positive/negative transfer, multilingual acquisition.*

1. Introduction

'College English' is a compulsory course for all Chinese college students. Therefore, how to improve the learning effect of students has always been an important topic for discussion. However, many excellent experiences from previous studies can not completely replicated, because many universities and colleges show big difference in learning abilities and characteristics of students. Therefore, it is very necessary to conduct a careful research based on the characteristics of students, thereby to design a reasonable teaching method to improve students' learning effect.

One of the most striking features of ethnic colleges and universities is that most of the students are ethnic minorities, which indicates that the students have a bilingual or even trilingual background. They have great advantages to master more than one languages, mostly Chinese plus one of minority languages. China has a variety of dialects. But dialects cannot be equated with minority languages. Dialects are usually phonemic variants of Mandarin Chinese. But minority languages usually belong to the language families different from Mandarin Chinese.

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Another characteristics of students in ethnic colleges and universities in China is that college English teaching for minority students can't always lead to good results, even with teaching methods that have been proven effective enough. Of course, these teaching methods are all based on the research conducted for students with monolingual backgrounds.

Thus, in teaching college English, it is unreasonable to simply follow the experiences and methods of second language acquisition in English teaching or to just repeat traditional education methods for students with a monolingual background. Instead, we should conduct investigations based on specific circumstances of a school. After that, new and proper reflections and plans can be proposed based on specific characteristics of the students. In that way we may be able to teach them efficiently in accordance with their aptitudes and to maximize the teaching effect.

2. Background

Nowadays, many scholars have been paying much attention to the study of the third language and even multilingual ($L \geq 3$) acquisition. Lots of studies have shown that $L \geq 3$ (multilingual acquisition) is by no means equivalent to L2 (second language acquisition). Because in the process of language learning, each language will have mutual influence, and the influence is generally multi-directional. Therefore, different scholars have different understandings of - and insights into - the interaction among languages. Generally speaking, all opinions about the interaction between languages can be summarized into two categories. One posits there is a positive influence between languages; the other posits there is a negative influence between languages.

The following scholars have drawn the tendency of positive transfer between languages in multilingual acquisition. Ahukanna (1981) [1] and Ringbom (1987) [2] have found that people who are native speakers of non-Indo-European languages tend to transfer other acquired Indo-European languages when learning another Indo-European language. Cenoz (2001) [3] has revealed that when multilingual learners are acquiring a new language, the similarity between the new language and the previously learned language is more important than the proficiency of the previous language. Chandrasekhar (1978) [4] also believes that influence from L2 (second language) is favored if L2 is typologically close to L3 (a third and multilingual language), especially if L1 (a first language) is more distant.

At the same time, some scholars hold different opinions on the influence of multilingualism. Sharwood (1994) [5] has concluded that for language learners, not only the native language but also any other language they master will have a positive or negative impact on the target language. Mägiste (1984) [6] has suggested that multilingual users need to spend more time to master a new language, compared with bilingual users. Hufeisen (2000) [7], Hammarberg (2001) [8], and Singleton (2003) [9] have found that compared with the L1, L2 has more influence on the acquisition of L3.

As seen from the brief summaries of the various perspectives, many of them show that the positive transfer generally occurs in the same language family. But at the same time, the interaction between languages does not occur in the same language family only. It can also appear between different language families or adjacent learned languages. At this stage of discussion, one interesting issue can be raised as to whether there is a positive transfer or negative interference among languages in different language families.

With this question in mind, the first purpose of this paper will be whether the influence between different language families is positive transfer or negative conflict. And the second purpose of this paper will be to identify the factors and causes that contribute to these phenomena.

3. Methodology

In order to achieve the above objectives, the optimal solution is to collect and statistics data through actual experiments. Then draw final conclusions by comparing and analyzing data. Therefore, the research object should be determined at first, followed by the specific experimental operation method and experimental design.

3.1 Participants

According to the actual conditions of the School of Foreign Languages in Yunnan Minzu University¹, two groups of participating students can be set up. One group consists of 20² first year Japanese major undergraduate students, these students only master their native language³, Chinese. So learning Japanese can be seen as L2 learning; The other group consists of 20 third year undergraduate students from the English major, these students have been engaged in professional English study and training for two years, basically can use English as the second foreign language, therefore, Japanese learning can be seen as L3 acquisition.

The reason to chose Japanese and English as the target language of the study is because both languages and the native language of the students (Chinese) belong to three different language families⁴. So, it is more in line with the original intention of this paper to reveal the relationship between different languages in different language families.

3.2 Instruments

The best research for such problems is the experimental method and the parameter comparison method. Because the experimental method can reflect the real learning situation most directly and effectively. And the parameter comparison method can help us compare the experimental results intuitively, at the same time, the control of constants and parameters can effectively reflect various factors that affect the results.

3.3 Design

The first consideration of the experiment is the needs to fix some constants, then add some parameters for comparative study. The setting of the students' number and the personnel composition (20 students per group; 10 boys and 10 girls) can be seen as the first constant. Followed by the Japanese level of the students (all 0 basis). Then course type (both Japanese basic courses), number of courses (3 courses), class hours (6 hours per week), study time (36 weeks). In contrast, the variable is set to have a bilingual basis. After two semesters of study, two groups of students need to take the Japanese proficiency test. Test content includes language basic skills, language usage frequency and language usage accuracy. Through the statistics of the final results, it might possibly show which group of students has the best learning efficiency and the best learning results.

The specific operation process includes four main steps. The first step is the choice of the target student, which should be two groups of students with a zero-based Japanese level with monolingual (Chinese) and bilingual (Chinese + English) basis. The second step is the choice of the course, the most basic course, and the course which can strengthen certain aspects of ability should be chosen, therefore *the basic Japanese*, *Japanese phonetics* and *Japanese daily conversation* have been selected. The third step is the teaching process. The teachers who teach the same course for the two groups of students should be the same. The teaching time of each course should be consistent, and the teaching method should be as identical as possible. The final step is the evaluation of the effect. Since the purpose of the evaluation is to verify the student's knowledge reserve and the frequency and correct rate of language use, a combination of written and oral tests should be used. The written test can be used to verify the student's mastery of the basics; the oral test can evaluate students' ability to use the language specifically.

3.4 Procedure

¹ The reason for selecting these two groups of students is that the School of Foreign Languages in Yunnan Minzu University will conduct the second foreign language (Japanese) for the third-grade English major students, and the Japanese courses for them is the same as that for the first-year students majoring in Japanese.

² Since the total number of students in each grade of Japanese major in the School of Foreign Languages, Yunnan Minzu University is 30. According to this base, 20 of them were selected to participate in the experiment.

³ Although most Chinese students also need to learn English before entering the university, but compared to professional studies in the university, the previous English learning lacks systematic and professional. Therefore, only some basic knowledge of English can be learned, but hard to reach the level of the second foreign language.

⁴ Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family; English belongs to the Indo-European language family; Japanese belongs to the Altaic language family.

Because all participants are Japanese zero basis, therefore, the whole learning process is mainly taught by teachers and supplemented by students' review. All students were not told that they were under this study throughout the whole learning and testing process, the main reason is to avoid the impact on this research due to subjective psychological factors.

The teaching process is mainly to improve students' listening, speaking, reading and writing. Each class is reasonably assigned to each aspect. After completing a whole year of study in three courses, the evaluation test should be applied to measure students' learning effect. In order to test the ability of students in all four aspects, the test includes two parts: written test and oral test. The written test mainly examines the vocabulary mastery of students; the oral test mainly examines the pronunciation of students and the willingness to communicate in a newly learned language.

According to the above requirements, the written test paper is mainly based on objective questions, through the final results, the students' vocabulary mastery is visually reflected. The oral test mainly consists of three parts: reading words, read sentences and free conversations. All the content of the test is the knowledge learned in the classroom.

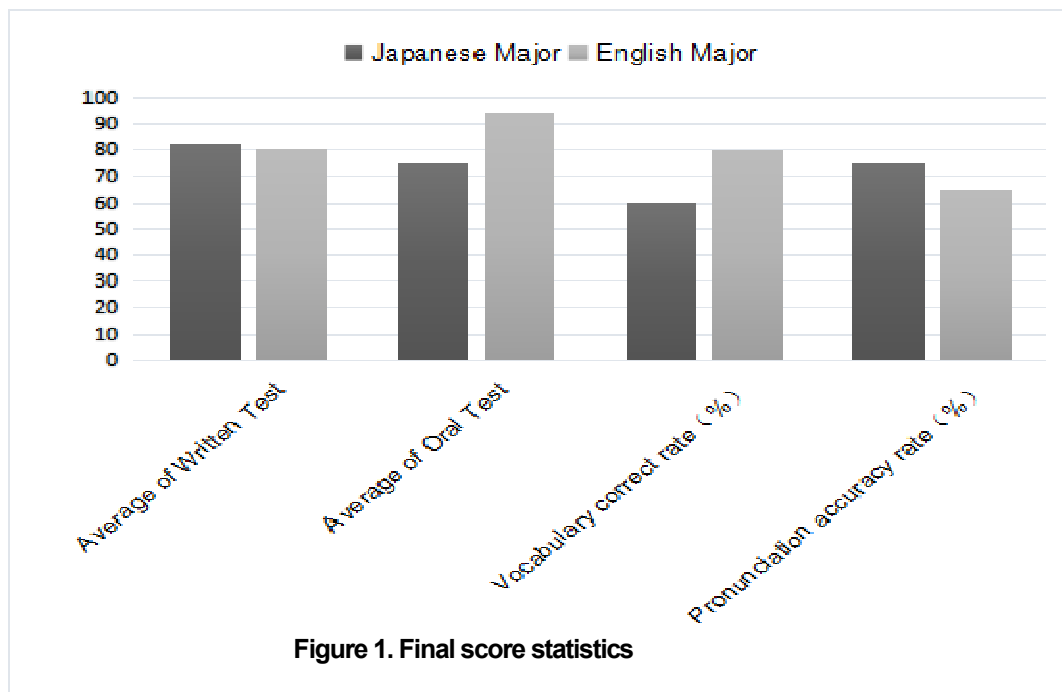
Statistical analysis of test results is required after the exam. The results analysis mainly includes the average scores of both written and oral tests, vocabulary correct rate and pronunciation accuracy rate. In addition to objective data results, some of the subjective performances in the oral exam also need to be analyzed, such as confidence in communication, willingness to speak and positive enthusiasm. At the same time, not only the analysis of the correct rate is required, but also the problem of common errors needs to be paid attention to.

4. Results and Discussion

Through the above experiments and evaluations, the following test consequences can be obtained, which include both objective results and subjective ones, as well as the common errors of both two groups of students. The following table is the objective accuracy data.

4.1 Objective Results and Discussion

Objective results mainly refer to specific visible scores, correct rates, and error frequencies. Therefore, under the results of the final exam, the average score of both written and oral test are counted out, as well as vocabulary and pronunciation correct rate.



According to above results in the figure 1, it can be seen that the average score of the written test between two groups is similar, but the average score of the oral test is quite different, English majors with second language foundation get significantly higher oral score than Japanese majors with monolingual basis. Secondly, the correct rate of vocabulary and pronunciation is compared, the English majors with second language foundation shows significantly better vocabulary accuracy than the Japanese majors without second language basis, but the opposite is true in terms of pronunciation correctness.

Based on the above experimental phenomena, it is necessary to analyze and explain the reasons for these results. First of all, the possible reasons of the similar written test results might be because of the written test type, it is mainly focus on vocabulary and grammar. Since both two groups of students are zero-based Japanese level, they basically reach a similar level of vocabulary and grammar after receiving the same training within the same duration. However, the oral test results showed a gap between two groups, the probable cause of this phenomenon might be that students with a second language foundation are more sensitive to language, and they have high enthusiasm in learning another new language, which directly lead the group to be more accustomed and more confident to use a foreign language to communicate. Considering of vocabulary accuracy, English majors perform better, which might be due to the characteristics of Japanese vocabulary. There are a large number of English borrowing words in Japanese vocabulary, so students with English vocabulary foundation are obviously more dominant. On the contrary the pronunciation correctness shows a different situation, that is because the pronunciation of English borrowing words in Japanese is quite different from the actual pronunciation of English, therefore the students with an English-based foundation are more susceptible to English pronunciation, resulting in a lower standard of pronunciation in Japanese.

4.2 Subjective Results and Discussion

Followed by the evaluation of subjective factors in oral test, especially the last part of the test, these factors are mainly analyzed through the following aspects: the willingness to hold the floor, the frequency to start a topic, the length of utterance and lexical richness. All these subjective factors do not consider linguistic correctness. Finally, the average rate⁵ of two groups of students participated in these four aspects

⁵ In order to facilitate statistical data, the evaluation method for the rate of this part is the proportion of students who meet the requirements among all students in each group. The specific demand is that in one aspect, the student needs to speak at least 4 sentences that satisfies the condition.

are counted out.

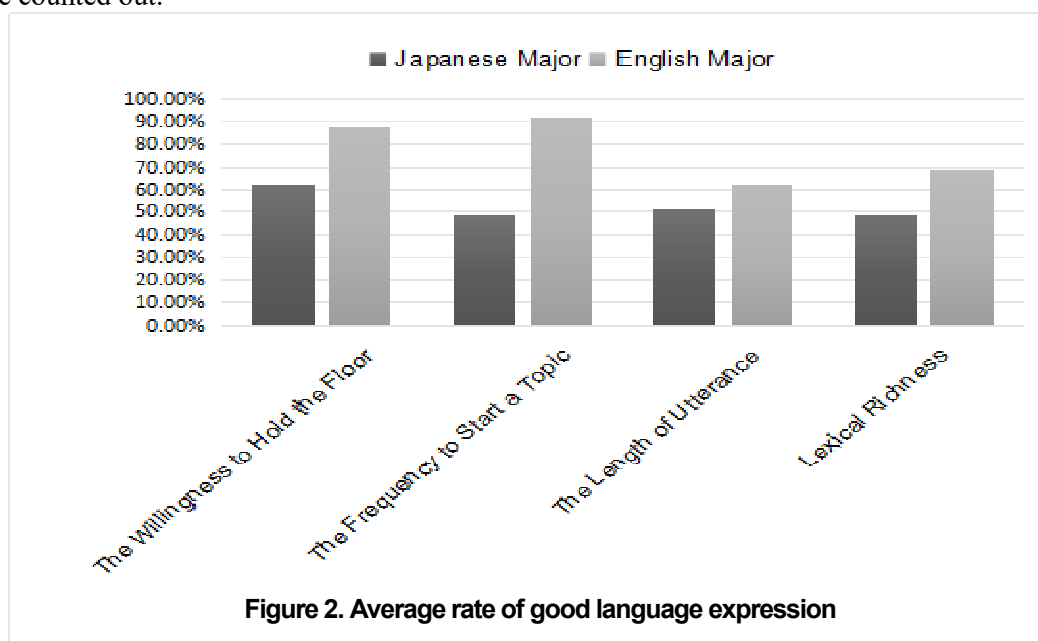


Figure 2. Average rate of good language expression

The Willingness to Hold the Floor

The investigation of this factor mainly wants to judge how much interest students have in this newly learned language. The great number of master the initiative reflects the strong interest in a new language. In the prescribed time, the two groups of students showed different willingness to hold the floor. The English major students comparatively showed high frequency of holding the floor in a conversation.

The Frequency to Start a Topic

This factor is a good indicator of students' confidence in the use of new languages. The trend of leading the topic according to one's own preference and wishes fully explains the confidence of the speaker. The high frequency to start a topic indicates high confidence and high leadership in a dialogue. In this aspect, English major students are more dominant than Japanese major students. English major students are more inclined to start many topic discussions to show their abilities and what they are good at.

The Length of Utterance

The length of utterance is mainly to show students' language skills and ability to make sentences. Being able to use long sentences to express one's own meaning can show that the student has a good grasp of grammar and syntax. Based on this point, English major students slightly occupy some advantages.

Lexical Richness

This standard is mainly to measure the mastery and the use of vocabulary in specific conversations. If one can use more diverse and more appropriate vocabularies in a specific conversation, it will prove that students have a good grasp of lexicon. English major students performed better in this respect.

Through the evaluation of subjective factors in oral test, English major students showed overwhelming advantages in all four aspects. The reason of this may be that after two years of professional English training for English majors students, they have more confidence to communicate in a newly learned language and have more methods in language learning. At the same time, the psychological suggestion with multilingual ability can also promote students to learn more effectively.

4.3 Results and Discussion of Common Errors

Some common errors can be found in the written and oral test results of the two groups of students. By analyzing these questions, it can help us more intuitively understand the difficulties of students. After sorting, common errors can be basically divided into three categories: omission of case-auxiliary words, wrong pronunciation of Kanji, misuse of honorific words.

Omission of Case-auxiliary Words

Because Japanese is a kind of synthetic language, it has a lot of bound morphemes, which aim to indicate the grammatical functions that attach to other morphemes. Therefore there are a lot of case-auxiliary words in Japanese with different functions. It shows that Students have great difficulty in using these words correctly and tend to omit such kind of words unconsciously.

Wrong Pronunciation of Kanji

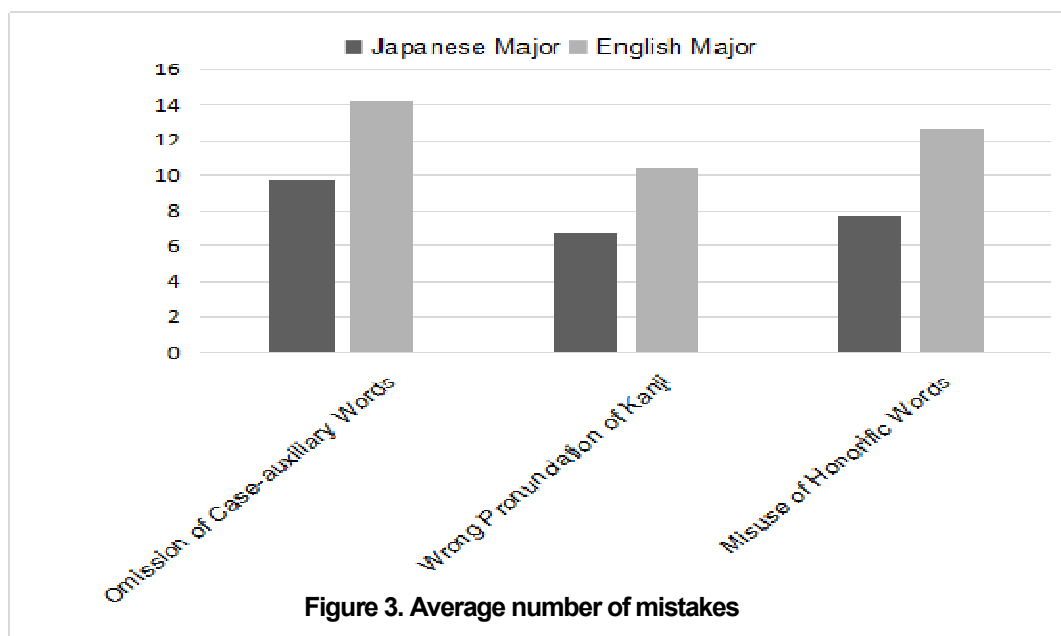
Another common error is the wrong pronunciation of Kanji. Kanji is a very distinctive aspect of Japanese, it looks very similar to the original complex form of Chinese characters. But in terms of semantics, especially in pronunciation, it is quite different from modern Chinese. Therefore, two groups of Chinese students are easy to pronounce the Kanji in a wrong way according to the Chinese characters.

Misuse of Honorific Words

Another mistake that is easy for students to make is the misuse of honorific words. Honorific words in Japanese are very complicated, different honorific words are required in different contexts and with different interlocutors. When students use such expressions, they cannot make reasonable and appropriate choices in terms of actual situation.

According to the above problems that students are easy to make, the root causes need to be understood before finding a solution. Because these mistakes are common to both groups of students, so obviously it has a relationship with both L1-Chinese and L2-English. Because Chinese is a kind of analytic language, so the language is made up of sequences of free morphemes, which means there is no case-auxiliary words in Chinese, as well as in English. The same happens in the honorific words situation, that is there is no complicated system of honorific words in both English and Chinese. Depending on the above characteristics of Chinese and English, it can be clearly seen that these error-prone points are concentrated in the language phenomenon unique to Japanese. Therefore a conclusion can be drawn that all previously mastered languages may have a positive impact on the new language.

However, although these errors are common, but the two groups of students show the difference in the number of mistakes.



It can be seen from the figure 3 that considering about the same error, English majors are significantly more likely to make mistakes than Japanese majors. So from this point of view, learners who master more languages are more likely to make mistakes when learning new languages. According to (Mägiste, 1984) [6] there are interference between multiple languages, so the more languages you master, the more obstacles you have when learning a new language. But for this phenomenon, I have the following two possible

explanations. First of all, the group of English major students have a higher frequency of language expression, therefore, they are more likely to make mistakes than another group of students. Secondly, the mistakes made by English major students are basically concentrated in the parts that have nothing in common with the two languages (Chinese and English) they've already mastered.

5. Conclusion

In summary, it can be concluded that in the process of language acquisition, learners with multilingual foundations have overall advantages when compared with those with monolingual basis. That is, the positive transfer among languages is more obvious than the conflict. Although in some specific language categories, negative transfer can possibly occur due to large linguistic differences between languages.

The first reason for the positive transfer phenomenon may be inferred by the fact that learners with multilingual backgrounds already have multilingual awareness, which means that they are more sensitive to the language(s) they are being exposed to. The second reason may be inferred by the fact that linguistic similarities between languages may help learners to master multiple languages more effectively. Finally, after having a successful experience of mastering a variety of languages, learners have more confidence in language acquisition, which leads them to invest more enthusiasm in learning another language.

The research results and the inferences from them can be effectively used for multilingual education for minority students. In doing so, there are some very useful tips we can employ which will help learners to go through more successful language learning process. First of all, it is necessary to have students informed the fact that learners with multilingual backgrounds have more advantages in learning new languages than learners with monolingual backgrounds, so that students can understand their own strengths and enhance their self-confidence. Secondly, students can be encouraged to find similarities between languages. Research shows that different languages have different degrees of similarities at different levels, so students can improve learning interest and efficiency by finding language similarities.

With all the meaningful findings listed above, we have to admit, to a certain extent, that there are still some points that need further attention in this research. First, due to the limitations of actual educational conditions, the age factor has not been maintained consistently: the average ages of the two groups of participants are not controlled the same. Second, there might be a question about the representativeness of the relatively small size of the samples. Lastly, the evaluation conditions are not comprehensive.

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