

A Review of the differences in Written Expressions between English and Chinese from the Perspective of Contrastive Analysis

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Abstract

Written expression plays an important role in students' English learning and has always been a weak part in English teaching. In daily learning, the differences between mother tongue and second language inevitably have an impact on students' writing. This paper aims to use contrastive analysis to explore the differences in lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels between English and Chinese writing, and proposes relevant teaching suggestions based on these, so as to improve students' English writing level and teachers' writing teaching level.

Keywords— English, Chinese, writing, contrastive analysis, differences, lexical, syntactic, discourse.

I. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, writing has been a key and difficult point in English teaching, as well as a weak part that restricts the improvement of many students' comprehensive language abilities. Writing, as a form of written expression, can comprehensively assess students' ability to choose words, make sentences, and plan their discourse layout. However, due to the influence of Eastern thinking patterns, cultural and historical backgrounds, and expression habits, students are inevitably subjected to negative transfer of their mother tongue, making it difficult for the texts they produce to meet the standards of English expression habits and norms, greatly reducing their readability, standardization, and logicity.

Fisiak (1981) held that contrastive analysis can deeply analyze and describe the similarities and differences between languages, detect the corresponding concepts between languages, and apply the theoretical results of contrastive research to practice. Lado (1957) also believed

that the key to alleviating or eliminating difficulties in foreign language learning lies in comparing native and foreign languages. Ellis (1999) also affirmed the role of the mother tongue in second language learning. He argued that the mother tongue is the source and carrier of all knowledge, and it can help learners screen the input of the second language, so as to make the best use of the second language. Therefore, contrastive analysis can be used to explore the relationship and differences between mother tongue and second language.

The contrastive analysis between English and Chinese starts from the language system, aiming to help English learners discover the commonalities between the two languages, clarify their differences, and take targeted measures to reduce the interference of their mother tongue and errors, and improve the purity of the output text. Therefore, this paper will start from the perspective of contrastive analysis and explore the differences in written expressions between English and Chinese from the lexical,

syntactic and discourse levels, in order to provide appropriate improvement ideas for English writing teaching and learning.

II. LEXICAL LEVEL

2.1 Differences in vocabulary types

Lian Shuneng (1993) proposed that English is a comprehensive language, which refers to the use of morphological changes to express grammatical relationships. Its morphological changes mainly refer to some inflectional changes that represent grammatical meanings, including gender, number, case, tense, aspect, voice, tone, etc.; Chinese is an analytical language, which uses word order and function words to express grammatical relationships without morphological changes. Its typical feature is that there is no inflection. The combination of Chinese words into sentences relies on word order and function words. Wang Meng (2015) held that at the lexical level, the relationship between words in English is expressed through morphological changes in the words themselves, while in Chinese it is expressed through word order or function words.

Zhu Xiaorong (2017) proposed that Chinese is an ideographic and isolated language that cannot undergo part of speech or semantic changes based on word roots, but rather expresses different meanings through the use of words with other word groups; English, on the other hand, is a phonetic script that belongs to the inflectional language and has rich affixes. Infinite new words can be derived through inflection and derivation, such as expressing different tenses, possessive cases, and other relationships through morphological changes in vocabulary. Wang Xiaojun and Wu Hui (2015) argued that English is a grammatical language with many modifying elements, complex structure and rigorous logic; Chinese, on the other hand, is a semantic language that emphasizes parataxis and has a relatively loose structure, often described in short sentences. The expansion of the English language relies on using important information as the main predicate of a sentence, while the rest serves as auxiliary components, forming a framework based structural pattern.

2.2 Dynamic vs. Static

After comparing and analyzing the samples, Shao Weiyan and Shao Zhihong (2015) found that English is a language

centered around verbs in theory, but in reality, nouns dominate its use; In theory, Chinese focuses on nouns, while in reality, verbs have an advantage in frequency of use. Since English commonly uses nouns, the narration is static; Verbs are commonly used in Chinese, so narration is dynamic. Liu Linghui (2010) proposed that due to the jumping and creative features of traditional Chinese thinking, which is flexible and natural, verbs are often used in Chinese expression, showing a dynamic feature; Western thinking emphasizes experimentation as the foundation and objective facts, so the objective nouns and passive voice are often used in English expressions, which shows a static feature.

III. SYNTACTIC LEVEL

3.1 Hypotaxis vs. Parataxis

Many scholars unanimously believe that hypotaxis and parataxis are the most fundamental differences in sentence structure between English and Chinese. Eugene Nida (1982) pointed out that "perhaps the most important difference in linguistics between Chinese and English is the contrast between hypotaxis and parataxis." Tytler (1962) held that English pays great attention to the form and structure in writing, with verbs as the center of each sentence; On the contrary, in Chinese, it is not limited by form and places more emphasis on the connection of meaning.

Yu Buli (2010) considered that hypotaxis and parataxis are important differences in written expression between English and Chinese. English emphasizes hypotaxis, structure, and form, with more use of connecting devices, making it a more rigorous language with explicit grammar. Chinese emphasizes parataxis, function, and meaning, with less use of linking devices, making it relatively concise and grammatically implicit. Zhang Bi (2009) found through contrastive analysis that in writing, Chinese emphasizes parataxis, and the obvious linking devices in Chinese sentences are significantly less than those in English. Sentences often rely on tone or intangible connections in meaning. English, on the other hand, emphasizes hypotaxis and relies on the rigorous organization of obvious surface symbols to express meaning. Chen Jiayu (2015) found that written English expression emphasizes hypotaxis, which usually refers to the use of conjunctions to reflect the primary and secondary relationships between sentences. It

uses the form of the language itself to connect words and organize language. Chinese writing emphasizes parataxis, which refers to the connection between words or sentences through the meaning or logical connections of them without the use of language forms.

3.2 Personal subject vs. Impersonal subject

The choice of the subject of sentences also reflects the different thinking patterns and the preference towards subjectivity and objectivity between the two languages. Guo Hao (2014) argued that another significant difference between English and Chinese sentences lies in the differences in personal and impersonal subjects. When expressing ideas in English, it often emphasizes objectivity and highlights the influence of objects on people's thinking and behavior, so its subject often appears in the form of "impersonal name". Chinese emphasizes the subjectivity of thinking in expression, often starting from the subject of behavior, so personal words are often used as the subjects in Chinese sentences. Li Ke (2005) found through contrastive analysis that Chinese with traditional oriental thinking habits believe that only humans can have conscious and willful behavior, and non-human and inanimate things generally can only have some unconscious and involuntary states or movements, so they tend to use "person" as the subject in expression. Jin Chuan (2009) believed that a more subjective Chinese expression style can have a negative impact on students' English writing, as students are often influenced by their mother tongue and choose "person" as the subject, which is not in line with the English expression habit of using "object" as the subject and may lead to the result of Chinglish.

3.3 Theme vs. Subject

Chinese pays more attention to the expression of the overall meaning of sentences, that is, focusing on the theme; English is more concerned with the standardization of sentence structure and the necessity of the subject. C. N. Li and SA. Thompson (1976) examined English and Chinese from the perspective of linguistic typology and believed that English is a language where the subject dominates, and sentence structure is generally dominated by a "subject-predicate" structure. Therefore, in most cases, the core of a sentence overlaps with the subject; Chinese, on the other hand, is a language where theme is prominent, and sentence construction is usually based on the "topic-explanation"

mode, where topic is basically the theme.

Li Xiaoguang (2014) believed that both English and Chinese have a particular emphasis on sentence structure. English sentences emphasize the subject, while Chinese sentences emphasize the theme. In English, the subject of a sentence is an indispensable center, and a rigorous subject-predicate structure becomes the core of the sentence, while other sentence components collaboratively serve the subject-predicate structure. Jin Jiling (1991) believes that most sentences in Chinese are not in subject-predicate structures, but thematic structures. The five basic sentence patterns in English follow the principle of subject priority, which cannot be omitted. Yuan Zaicheng (2017) found that there is a large amount of ellipsis and transformation of subjects in Chinese students' English writing, which does not conform to English writing style. The reason for this is that Chinese places more emphasis on the theme rather than the subject, while English emphasizes the proper use of subject, which means that the subject cannot be casually deleted or changed.

3.4 Specific sentence patterns (run-on sentences and minor sentences)

There are also differences in the frequency, order, and proportion of usage between English and Chinese in some specific sentence patterns, such as run-on sentences and minor sentences. Winter (1977) and Honey (1983) proposed that "the construction of clause relationships is a cognitive process of reaching consensus between authors and readers, and people need to use context or adjacent minor sentences to explain or generate clause relationships. Li Jian (2018) found through a contrastive analysis of the use of run-on sentences in English and Chinese that there are also significant differences in the use of run-on sentences between the two languages in writing. These differences are reflected in the rules of punctuation, cohesion, and expression structure. In terms of the use of punctuation, the punctuation of English short sentences should follow strict rules and cannot be omitted or overused; But in Chinese, the use of punctuation is always casual. In terms of cohesion, Chinese writing relies more on repetition of meaning, while English places more emphasis on the repetition of form. In terms of expression structure, Chinese writing often uses critical language to express itself, pursuing clarity in meaning; In English writing, there is a greater emphasis on

form standardization and strict logical order on expression.

Shang Yanhui and Luo Mingjiang (2016) analyzed the differences in the relationship between English and Chinese minor sentences, which has shown that in writing, the differences in thinking styles between China and the West can also be reflected through the relationship between English and Chinese minor sentences: Chinese people prefer concrete thinking, while Westerners prioritize logical thinking; English arranges from unknown information to known information, while Chinese arranges from known information to unknown information; In English sentences, the results are often placed first and the reasons are placed later. However, in Chinese sentences, there is a totally opposite phenomenon; English emphasizes "hypotaxis", while Chinese emphasizes "parataxis".

3.5 Forms of sentences

The specific forms of Chinese and English sentences are like the growth patterns of two plants, while the development of Chinese sentences is like the growth of bamboo knots; English is like a tree, which spreads its branches and leaves around its trunk. Wang Shujie and Yu Song (2018) believed that the characteristics of linear thinking make English sentence structures strictly follow the structural form. It is necessary to first establish a main stem, namely a subject-predicate structure or a main sentence, and then use various relational words, prepositions, participles, etc. to add other components and clauses onto this main stem, which is like the growing process of a large tree with branches and leaves. So, English sentences can be very long, and there are many subordinate components. Curved thinking pattern makes Chinese sentences more meaningful, with the common use of coordinate sentences. This process is like the growth of a bamboo pole, unfolding and extending section by section.

Luo Ping (2014) held that the tree-like structure is a subordinate structure, where various components are subordinate to the subject-predicate structure or main sentence, and this subordinate structure is one of the most important characteristics of modern English. Chinese sentence structures are mostly composed of coordinate sentences, like bamboo poles, which develop sequentially.

3.6 Passive vs. Active

The voice of English and Chinese sentences also reflects the thinking habits and expression preferences of both the East

and the West. Luo Ping (2014) found through contrastive analysis that passive voice is more commonly used in English. Chinese, on the other hand, prefers active voice. The reason for this is that passive voice is more objective, making the sentences more logical. The reason why passive voice is not widely used in Chinese is that it implies "unfortunate voice" in the cultural environment of China, which is often used to express the occurrence of unlucky events. Liu Zhe and Li Xuejie (2012) argued that the use of passive voice is a common grammatical phenomenon and expression habit in English, as passive voice can emphasize verb changes, highlight impersonal subjects, and be more objective. Due to the emphasis on human subjectivity in traditional Chinese thinking and expression habits, students are more inclined to use personal subjects and active sentences in English writing. Li Hanqiang (2003) found through sample analysis that students often apply Chinese expression style when writing English compositions. The sentence pattern which matches this style is active sentences, and passive sentences are less commonly used.

3.7 Connecting devices

The implicit connection in Chinese and the explicit connection in English also cause one of the syntactic differences between the two languages. Zhao Ai (2020) used a corpus to analyze the differences in cohesion between English and Chinese texts, and explored the reasons for the differences. Research has shown that explicit connecting devices such as conjunctions, clauses, and compound sentences are commonly used in English to achieve coherence and complete discourse structure. Chinese writing, on the other hand, tends to use implicit means to achieve meaning clarity and coherence in its layout, with relatively loose logical relationships and discrete feature, which often uses clauses and run-on sentences.

Lei Gang (2010) found through sample analysis that most of the conjunctions in English discourse are explicit, while the conjunctions in Chinese discourse are implicit, and the conjunctions in Chinese discourse is significantly less than that in English discourse. In addition, through the analysis of student writing samples, it was found that students are not proficient in the use of conjunctions, finding it difficult to achieve a true cohesive result, and the form of conjunctions used is relatively monotonous. Zhang

Lan (2012) analyzed the use of connecting devices in college English writing and found that due to the influence of implicit connection mode in Chinese writing habits, students often use less or mistakenly omit connecting elements, and their use of connecting words is too simplistic, which affects the readability and logicity of their discourse.

IV. DISCOURSE LEVEL

4.1 Thinking patterns

The thinking pattern determines the essential differences between Chinese and English bilingualism, and is reflected through vocabulary, sentences, paragraphs, and discourse. Kaplan (1966) found that there are linguistic and cultural particularities in the organization of discourse, as it is a reflection of human thinking patterns. Ye Qin (2010) found through contrastive research that the differences in sentence structure and paragraph structure at the writing level caused by the two thinking patterns of English and Chinese: in terms of sentence structure, the analytical thinking pattern drives English writers to pay more attention to the standardization and completeness of structure. The integrated thinking style in Chinese drives Chinese writers to place more emphasis on the overall expression and understanding of meaning rather than the clarity of language form. In terms of paragraph structure, English discourse always puts forward questions and viewpoints directly, then elaborates on them, and finally emphasizes the viewpoints, which is the general mode of English writing. Due to the influence of integrated thinking, the central argument in Chinese is always drawn after the discussions. The different thinking patterns radiate from sentences to paragraphs, and then from paragraphs to the entire discourse, ultimately resulting in completely different styles of English and Chinese texts. Zhang Juan (2020) also argued that differences in thinking patterns will inevitably be reflected in the carrier of thinking, namely language structure. She believed that thinking patterns can affect the selection of content words and function words, as well as the conversion of parts of speech; It can lead to differences in the pursuit of hypotaxis, parataxis and spatiotemporal view between English and Chinese sentences; Finally, it will create differences in the structural framework and presentation of the main idea in the discourse.

4.2 Different styles of writing

Directly or indirectly presenting arguments deeply affects readers' grasp of the main idea of the article, and Chinese and English show totally different presentation methods. Metalene (1985) pointed out that the excessive citation of classics in Chinese students' articles can deeply confuse Western readers, as they may feel that it is completely unrelated to the theme of the article, which can lead to a lack of logical connections throughout the entire article; He also found that Chinese students generally show a preference for citing classics, and their use of idioms and quotations serves to make the article lively and interesting. However, in the eyes of Western readers, these quotations actually distract their attention.

Cai Jigang (2001) pointed out that Chinese paragraph writing is in the style of "step by step", while English paragraph writing is in the style of "coming straight to the point". The former style is manifested as the beginning of a paragraph, which does not directly clarify the argument and enter the main topic of the article gradually. The "coming straight to the point" style starts by raising questions and viewpoints from the beginning, then discusses them in the main section, and summarizes them in the last paragraph. Ni Hui (2011) also verified this feature in students' writing samples. The result has shown that English writing tends to come straight to the point and get to the topic, while Chinese people usually prefer to lay the groundwork first and then touch on the topic, which leads to the rigidity and ambiguity of students' written English expression. Ye Qin (2010) found through contrastive analysis that Chinese expressions tend to place important information at the end, while English tends to present important information at the beginning.

4.3 Topic sentence

Topic sentences are the core of paragraphs and chapters, and they are the essence of effective information in a discourse. There are certain differences in the status and usage of topic sentences in these two languages. Kaplan (1996) held that the paragraph pattern in English is linear, which can be divided into deductive and inductive paragraphs. In deductive paragraphs, the topic sentence appears at the beginning of the paragraph; In inductive paragraphs, the topic sentence appears at the end of the paragraph. The development of Chinese paragraphs usually adopts a

roundabout approach. People tend to place the topic sentence in the middle, at the end, or not at all.

Wang Huikai (2004) conducted a contrastive study on the use of topic sentences in English and Chinese argumentative paragraphs, and found similarities and differences in the use of topic sentences between English and Chinese. Research has shown that in both English and Chinese, more than half of the topic sentences in argumentative paragraphs are located at the beginning of the paragraph, which is a deductive paragraph. However, in English and Chinese argumentative paragraphs, the situation where the topic sentence appears in the middle of the paragraph is the least. The difference between the two is that there are two main modes of paragraph development in English argumentative papers: deductive paragraphs and non-topic sentence paragraphs; while in Chinese argumentative papers, paragraph development is diverse: topic sentences can appear at the beginning, end, middle, and non-topic sentences. This research result also reflected the differences in thinking styles between English and Chinese. Liao Kaihong (1999) conducted an analysis of English and Chinese texts and found that 72% of English paragraphs contain topic sentences; In Chinese, it only accounts for 34%. Research has shown that English articles have more paragraphs with topic sentences than Chinese articles, indicating that the expression of the main idea in English discourse relies more on topic sentences.

4.4 Natural order vs. Highlight order

In discourse, the effectiveness of presenting important information is deeply affected by word order. However, under the influence of different thinking modes, the word order in Eastern and Western texts is also different. Liu Xuyan and Hu Xiaoqiong (2011) found after comparing a large amount of language materials that due to the influence of spiral thinking, the word order of Chinese is closer to the order in which humans understand things, and the listing of information reflects the basic thinking process, namely natural order. English, on the other hand, is influenced by linear thinking and tends to prioritize the information that needs to be emphasized, that is, highlight order. Li Ke (2005) found that the important information in Chinese comes later, and the previous information serves to draw the final conclusion, which conforms to the natural order of expression. He also emphasized the importance of

following a highlight order in English writing, that is, focusing on the main idea first, placing important information at the beginning of a sentence or paragraph, and expanding the paragraph according to actual needs.

4.5 Linear vs. Spiral

Different ways of expression lead to differences in the strictness and logic of writing between Chinese and English. After conducting extensive comparisons between English and Chinese expressions, Scollen (2000) found that although Chinese students with good English scores wrote seemingly excellent English articles without language errors and with smooth sentences, native English speakers still found it very difficult to understand. The reason for this phenomenon is the differences in the textual structure between English and Chinese. Kaplan (1996) believed that the organization and development of English discourse is "linear", that is, to state the theme directly and discuss it; The Chinese discourse adopts a "spiral" style, which means indirectly entering the theme, but rather "sidestepping" around the periphery of the theme and finally entering it.

Wang Meng (2015) explored the differences in thinking patterns between English and Chinese writing, and found that the thinking pattern in Chinese is "spiral" while that in English is "linear". This difference also leads to significant differences in discourse layout between English and Chinese writing. The "Cohesion Theory" proposed by Halliday (1976) points out that discourse in English writing emphasizes linear thinking of lexical and thematic coherence. According to scholars' statistics, about 90% of English argumentative articles explicitly state their arguments, and even more than 50% of articles state their main ideas in the first paragraph of the articles; However, Chinese students tend to apply Chinese spiral thinking, which leads to issues such as unclear argumentation and lack of coherence in the context. Chu Zhenli (2005) argued that English articles adopt the author-responsible pattern, that is, the author has the responsibility to clearly express the central idea of the article and directly inform the readers of the author's views; Chinese articles tend to be in reader-responsible pattern, indicating that the central idea of the article is implicit, and the comprehension of main idea of the article depends on the reader's self-understanding and perception.

V. CONCLUSION

In summary, the differences in writing between English and Chinese mainly involve three levels: vocabulary, sentences, and discourse. These differences are characteristic products formed by different thinking patterns and cultural backgrounds between English and Chinese. Educators can use contrastive analysis and propose corresponding measures based on these differences to help students overcome the negative transfer from their mother tongue, sharply grasp the accuracy of language forms, follow the appropriateness of language use, and output texts that are in line with English thinking patterns and contexts.

VI. PEDAGOGICAL ENLIGHTENMENTS

6.1 Combine reading training with writing training

Krashen's "input hypothesis" emphasizes that a large number of comprehensible language input contribute to second language acquisition. The reason why students' compositions are not standardized and authentic enough is that they read too few English texts. Therefore, this requires learners to input a lot of correct target language in the process of learning the second language. Through a large amount of contact with English texts, students can gradually accumulate language materials for expressing ideas in English and reshape their thinking patterns, so as to master the language application ability to express ideas and the organizational skills of the layout.

6.2 Strengthen the contrastive analysis of English and Chinese sentence structures

Under the guidance of teachers, students can start with daily writing samples, make in-depth contrastive analysis of English and Chinese sentences, and summarize specific differences from typical mistakes. In addition, teachers can constantly strengthen the memory and use of correct English sentence patterns in sufficient Chinese-English sentence translation training.

6.3 Improve the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching

When teaching vocabulary, teachers should make more use of authentic English example sentences, so that students can deeply understand the context in which these words are applicable, and supplement them with Chinese sentences with similar contexts to guide students to compare the differences. At the same time, vocabulary teaching should involve the meaning of words, parts of speech, collocation

and synonym discrimination, so as to help students choose accurate expressions according to context, meaning and English expressing habits.

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