

English-German Transfer Phenomena and Pedagogical Strategies in German as a Second Foreign Language: A Study of English Majors

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Abstract: When English major students learn German as a second foreign language, they already have a wealth of foreign language learning experience and English language proficiency. This background not only constitutes a significant advantage but also serves as a source of specific cross-language transfer errors. Based on the language transfer theory under the framework of third language acquisition and combined with classroom practice, this study systematically examined the specific manifestations of English-German transfer in four dimensions: phonology, vocabulary, grammar and discourse, and distinguished between positive transfer and negative transfer. The research further proposed an integrated teaching framework: activating positive transfer, predicting and intervening in negative transfer, and transforming cross-language interference into teaching resources. The research aims to provide practical guidance for German as a second foreign language teaching tailored to the characteristics of English major learners.

Keywords: English Major; German as a Second Foreign Language; English-German Transfer; Third Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

In the teaching context of German as a second language, a recurring phenomenon deserves special attention: When English major students attempt to express I have a question, they often produce English utterance instead of the corresponding expression Ich habe eine Frage in the target German language. This seemingly minor mistake cannot be attributed to a momentary oversight, but rather reflects the profound influence that the firmly established English language system has exerted on the emerging German language system. This

phenomenon is referred to in the literature as language transfer. For English major students, such transfers are not isolated events but defining features that run through the entire process of their German language acquisition.

English major students demonstrate a unique convergence of triple learner identities in the acquisition of German as a second language. First of all, as experienced foreign language learners, they have received systematic professional training in English, possess mature learning strategies and a strong sense of meta-language. Secondly, as high-level English speakers, their proficiency in English is significantly higher than that of non-English major learners. In addition, English and German both belong to the West Germanic branch and share extensive similarities in vocabulary and syntax. Thirdly, they are also beginners of German at the same time, facing a language with complex inflectional forms that needs to be learned from scratch. These three identities make the phenomenon of English-German transfer among English major students more complex than that among other learner groups.

However, the current teaching practice and research status present two significant contrasts. Firstly, the comparative analysis in German as a second language mainly takes the comparison between China and Germany as the core and uses Chinese as the reference framework to explain German grammatical phenomena. Although this contrast is indispensable, it neglects the more direct and systematic mediating role that English, the foreign language that students have recently consolidated and mastered most proficiently plays. Secondly, most of the transfer research in the field of third language acquisition remains at the level of theoretical exposition and experimental exploration. Theoretical insights into the transfer mechanism have not yet been fully translated into classroom practice. This constitutes a

continuous disconnection between theory and practice, which urgently needs attention.

English major students take Chinese as their mother tongue and English as their first foreign language to learn German, forming a typical dual-interlanguage configuration. Chinese offers a broad cognitive framework rooted in the mother tongue, while English, as an acquired second language, has formed a relatively fixed set of foreign language processing conventions in the minds of learners. More importantly, the kinship between English and German prompts learners to constantly establish cross-language associations. These associations can have a promoting effect in some cases - for instance, English and German cognates can accelerate vocabulary expansion, but in others, they can also lead to systematic errors. A typical case is the transfer of the English rigid SVO word order to the German verb postposition structure: learners produce ungrammatical statements such as *Ich kann lesen den Text* instead of the target form *Ich kann den Text lesen*.

Based on this, this study, relying on the language transfer theory under the trilingual acquisition framework, combined with first-hand classroom observations and teaching practices for English major students, systematically sorted out the specific models of English-German language transfer and distinguished between facilitating transfer and interfering transfer. Based on this, this paper proposes operational teaching strategies and constructs a two-way framework, aiming to utilize positive transfer and prevent negative transfer interference in advance to enhance the overall effect of German as a second language teaching.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Language Transfer Theory

Language transfer is one of the core constructs in second language acquisition research. In his landmark monograph *Language Transfer*, Odlin defines cross-linguistic influence as the effects-facilitative or interfering-resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any previously acquired (or partially acquired) language [1]. Ellis then proposed a systematic classification framework, distinguishing three types of transfer: positive transfer occurs when previous language knowledge promotes the learning of the target language; Negative transfer occurs when such

knowledge hinders acquisition or induces errors; When there is no correspondence between the languages involved - whether facilitating or interfering - it is zero transfer. Before the emergence of third language acquisition (TLA) as an independent field, transfer studies had been operating within a binary paradigm of L1→target language. However, with the development of TLA research, scholars have increasingly recognized that the role played by L2 in third language acquisition is far more complex and prominent than that of L1. The fundamental difference between second language acquisition and third language acquisition lies in that in the initial stage of second language acquisition, learners rely solely on a single grammatical system, namely their L1 grammar. The initial stage of trilingual acquisition involves a selection mechanism, and cross-language transfer occurs when learners make a choice between L1 and L2 [2]. In third language acquisition, transfer is not an automated process but is jointly regulated by cognitive factors and contextual factors. Cross-language transfer in a trilingual context not only includes unidirectional forward transfer (L1→L3, L2→L3) and combinatorial forward transfer (L1→L2→L3, L2→L1→L3), but also unidirectional reverse transfer and combinatorial reverse transfer (L3→L1, L3→L2, L3→L2→L1). This makes the phenomenon much more complex than L1 transfer in second language acquisition [3].

An early model of cross-language influence in third language acquisition, the core of which lies in determining which previously acquired language exerted a dominant influence. Recent empirical research results show that the main source of transfer is the language perceived as the closest to L3 typology [4]. For English major students, English is the first foreign language they have acquired through more than ten years of continuous teaching since the beginning of formal school education. This long-term exposure has formed a consolidated and deeply rooted foreign language system, covering the conventions of pronunciation production, syntactic organization principles, vocabulary coding strategies, and even classroom interaction patterns. When learners start German acquisition, this system originated from English will automatically map to the new target language context.

This discovery has profound implications for

understanding the German acquisition of English major students. As the first language, Chinese is manifested as an implicit acquired language in cognition. As the first foreign language, English, along with German, belongs to the category of explicit learning foreign languages in terms of ontological status. Therefore, when learners encounter difficulties in German production, they usually do not call their native language, Chinese, but subconsciously activate English - English is not only a learned foreign language like German, but also belongs to the Germanic language family.

2.2 English-German Linguistic Affinity and the Bidirectionality of Transfer

Typological languages that are similar exhibit higher lexical transfer rates [5]. Both English and German belong to the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. This genealogical relationship constitutes the linguistic basis for understanding the phenomenon of migration between Britain and Germany. The two languages present systematic correspondences on multiple levels. At the lexical level, the two share a large number of cognates: the English word *hand* corresponds to the German word *Hand*, and the English word *sing* corresponds to the German word *singen*. This regular phoneme correspondence gives English major students a natural advantage in vocabulary expansion. At the syntactic level, both languages employ modal verbs, copulative structures with predicatives and complements, and comparative forms of adjectives, providing English major students with an existing cognitive foundation to master these German grammatical categories.

However, the relationship between English and German is not merely a variation of dialects, but rather a language pattern that seems similar but is actually quite different. German retains a more conservative inflection system than English. These inflectional categories have either completely vanished in English or undergone significant simplification. More crucially, the word order rules of German - especially the verb-second constraint in the main clause and the verb-final positioning in the subordinate clause - lack direct correspondence in English. Therefore, when dealing with German syntax, English major students cannot rely on the existing structural knowledge in English.

In terms of vocabulary acquisition and basic

syntactic patterns, the superficial similarities between the two languages make positive transfer the dominant mechanism. On the contrary, in areas where English lacks or highly simplifies inflectional categories, especially the gender, number and case of nouns, as well as the position restrictions of verbs, negative transfer becomes the main factor restricting the development of the target language. This bidirectionality requires teachers neither to view students' English background merely as an obstacle to overcome, nor to uncritically assume that an English major background necessarily brings advantages to German language acquisition. On the contrary, teaching strategies must be based on a precise judgment of the direction of transfer: identifying when to utilize positive transfer in English and when to preset preventive measures for negative transfer.

3. Contrastive Analysis of the English-German Linguistic Systems and Transfer Phenomena in German L2 Acquisition by English Majors

3.1 Phonological Contrast and Phonological Transfer

English major students have extensive prior phonological training. Therefore, the influence of the English phonological system constitutes an inevitable factor in the acquisition of third language (L3) phonetics [6]. The vowel systems of English and German not only show systematic correspondence but also have significant differences. Except for the morphemes *ä*, *ö*, *ü* and *ß*, German and English share the same orthographic representation on all other letters, but there are substantial differences in their phonological realization. In monophthongs, the two languages share a set of vowel phonemes with comparable articulation positions and articulation patterns. For instance, English /i:/ and German /i:/ are basically the same in terms of tongue position height and front-back position, enabling English major students to pronounce the long vowels in German *Liebe* and *Bier* relatively accurately. Similarly, English /a:/ and German /a:/ occupy comparable articulation areas, so learners do not encounter significant difficulties with words such as *Vater* and *sagen*.

In contrast, German has two front-rounded vowels - /ø:/ and /y:/ - which do not exist in the English phoneme system. The pronunciation of these two vowels requires the tongue to move

forward and the lips to be rounded simultaneously. Because English is completely lacking in these phonemes, learners encounter difficulties at both the perception and output levels. In classroom practice, English major students often use /ɜ:/ instead of /ø:/ to pronounce *schön* as a vowel similar to that in English *shorn*. Similarly, they use /u:/ instead of /y:/ to make *Tür* sound similar to the English word *tour*. These alternatives are not arbitrary but are systematically driven by the perception of phonetic similarity: /ɜ:/ are close to /ø:/ in terms of tongue height and front-back position, but differ only in lip shape configuration (non-round lips against round lips); /u:/ and /y:/ share the features of high tongue position and round lips, with only differences in the front and back positions. Guided by the subjective judgment of cross-language similarity, learners map their existing English vowels onto the German target sound and consistently tend to choose the phonemes that need to be modified along the least articulation dimension. The result is a perceptual illusion: learners believe they have achieved the target pronunciation, while the actual output represents an intermediate language phonetic system with an English tint.

An empirical observation of an 18-month German as a second language teaching program shows that by the second semester, only a few learners can achieve a mastery level of these two phonemes close to that of the target language. However, most learners continue to produce non-target language variants even after completing their entire studies.

Furthermore, German vowels do not weaken in unstressed syllables, a feature that contrasts sharply with the common vowel centralization pattern in English, where unstressed syllables are typically weakened to /ə/ or /ɪ/. In English, the orthogonal letter *e* at the end of words is usually not pronounced, such as *make* and *like*. However, in German, the suffix “-e” must be pronounced, as in *Liebe* and *Hase*. In the observed classroom practice, learners often omit this final vowel and produce /li:b/ instead of the target pronunciation /li:bə/. The underlying mechanism is that the deeply rooted morpheme-phoneme correspondence rules in English are automatically activated in the German context and preferentially override the spelling-pronunciation rules of German. This indicates that positive transfer of grapheme-phoneme conversion is suppressed at

the reading level.

In terms of consonants, English major students have a significant advantage: there is a great deal of overlap in the phoneme systems of stops, fricatives and nasal sounds between the two languages, providing a favorable starting point for pronunciation. /p/, /t/, /k/, /b/, /d/, /g/, /f/, /s/, /m/, /n/ phonemes in the two languages have basically the same pronunciation characteristics. This consistency enables English major students to skip the starting from scratch process of constructing pronunciation actions that beginners need. On the contrary, they can quickly transfer the already automated pronunciation programs from English to the corresponding German pronunciation. For instance, the pronunciation of /f/ in English *fish* and German *Fisch* is almost exactly the same, and there is no need to relearn it. This positive transfer not only reduces the initial pronunciation burden but also enables learners to allocate their limited attention resources to the acquisition of German-specific phonemes.

Although there is a great deal of overlap in phonological systems between English and German, it is precisely those phonemes where they diverge that constitute the high-risk areas for negative transfer - its impact is more concealed and difficult to eliminate than that of positive transfer. The most prominent case among them involves the /r/ phoneme. The typical realization of /r/ in English is the gingival near sound /ɹ/, when pronounced, the tip of the tongue approaches but does not touch the gum. In contrast, /r/ in standard German is usually realized as a voiced uvular fricative /ʁ/ or alveolar trill /r/. These two /r/ sounds have fundamental differences in both the position of pronunciation and the way they are pronounced. Constrained by deeply rooted English /r/ pronunciation habits, English major students constantly produce Anglicized /r/ in words such as “rot”, “Bruder” and “sprechen”, forming a persistent error that runs through their spoken German production. The deep cognitive mechanism is to assimilate the German /ʁ/ into the English /ɹ/ phoneme category - this perceptual equivalence classification explains why the error is resistant to correction. This kind of interference runs through the entire development trajectory; Even among intermediate and advanced learners, the residual English /r/ pronunciation can still be observed.

Another challenging set of sound segments

involves two voiceless fricatives represented by the letter combination <ch> : the palatal sound /ç/ and the uvular sound /x/. Due to the absence of /ç/ in the English phoneme system, when learners pronounce <ch> in *ich* and *nicht*, they usually replace it with the closest articulatory part /ʃ/, making “ich” sound similar to “ish” in English. As for the phoneme variant /x/ that appears after the post-vowels (/a/, /o/, /u/), learners usually replace it with /k/ or the English /h/, thus pronouncing *Bach* as [bak] or [bah].

Another notable feature of German consonants involves Auslautverhartung at the end of words, as shown in *Hund* /hʊnt/ and *Tag* /ta:k/. This phonological process does not exist in English. In English, the voiced blocking consonants at the end of words retain their voiced nature - for example, the consonant at the end of *dog* remains /g/ and is not voiceless to /k/. English major students often transfer the restriction that prohibits finalization in English to German, pronouncing the ending of *Hund* as /d/ instead of the target sound /t/. Such mistakes occur very frequently in reading aloud and impromptu speaking, but usually do not attract the learners' conscious attention: in English, the /d/ - /t/ oppositions at the end of words do not have phonemic distinction, so learners have hardly developed the ability to self-monitor their pronunciation for this opposition. In addition, both English and German mainly adopt the CVC syllable structure and allow for complex consonant clusters, which provides a perceptual basis for the syllable processing of English major students. However, German permits word-initial /ʃ/-onset clusters - /ʃp/ and /ʃt/, as in *Sport* and *stehen* - that are unattested in English word-initial position, where <sp> and <st> are realized as /sp/ and /st/ rather than /ʃp/ and /ʃt/. Under the influence of English orthographic conventions, learners may produce *Sport* with an English onset /sp/ rather than the German target /ʃpʁʊt/.

In terms of lexical stress, English word stress is constrained by both etymological and prosodic factors, and its stress position is relatively difficult to predict. In contrast, the stress of German words shows a higher regularity: in the native language vocabulary, the principal stress usually falls on the initial syllable of the stem (such as *Arbeit*, *fahren*, *antworten*). In verbs with unstressed prefixes, the stress falls on the stem rather than the prefix (such as *verstehen*, *bekommen*, *erzählen*). When English major

students encounter such German words, because they are accustomed to the stress pattern of English, they may mistakenly place the stress in the prefix and pronounce it as “VERstehen” instead of the target language form of “verSTEHen”. This error pattern reflects the transfer of processing conventions - which are insensitive to the distinction of stress between prefixes and stems; However, German precisely demands reliable stress contrast at this point.

Classroom observations reveal a dualistic feature. On the one hand, learners can quickly acquire German morphemes and most consonants with relatively high accuracy - this is clear evidence of positive transfer. On the other hand, there are still problems in mastering segments such as /r/ and /ç/, and the obvious retroflex sounds have led to a distinct English accent. Take the learner's oral output of the sentence *Mein Bruder ist drei Jahre alt* as an example. This sentence shows three features triggered by transfer: the /r/ in *Bruder* is implemented as an English roll-tongue near sound /ɹ/ instead of a German uvular fricative; The diphthong “ei” in “drei” is overly prolonged and diphthongized, approaching the tail glissando of the English word *day*. In *alt*, the vowel is pronounced as English /ɔ:/ instead of German /a/, and the lateral sound is pronounced with a audible retroflex sound rather than gingival contact. In this six-word sentence, traces of English transfer can be clearly seen everywhere, which is a typical example of the quasi-German interlanguage feature of English major students.

3.2 Lexical Contrast and Lexical Transfer

English and German share a large number of international vocabularies originated from the Greek-Latin language family, which provides a convenient basis for positive transfer in vocabulary acquisition. For instance, the English word *university* corresponds to the German word *Universität*, *communication* to *Kommunikation*, and *computer* to *Computer* (which can be distinguished merely based on the orthoptical convention of capitalizing the first letter of German nouns). With the help of their existing reserves of English vocabulary, English major students can quickly recognize such words in German reading, thereby significantly reducing the cognitive load of text decoding.

These cross-language corresponding words present a systematic orthographic correspondence at the character position level.

Therefore, the word formation knowledge that English major students have already acquired can be directly transferred to German vocabulary learning. The English derived suffixes such as -tion and -ich correspond regularly to the German words -tion and -isch respectively. Mastering these corresponding relationships enables learners to recognize and remember a large number of German written words in a relatively short period of time, thereby accelerating the development of reading comprehension ability.

In addition, English and German have a large number of Germanic cognates in the high-frequency semantic domain - basic actions, colors, body parts, natural phenomena and kinship terms - which constitute the richest vocabulary resources available to English major students. Such as the *hand* to *Hand* and *come-kommen*, *drink-trinken* and *mother-Mutter*. These cognates are not exactly the same form; On the contrary, they exhibit a systematic consonant correspondence dominated by traceable historical sound change patterns. For example, the English word /t/ corresponds to the German word /s/ or /ts/ in cognates such as *water-Wasser*, *better-besser* and *summer-Sommer*. When teachers explicitly emphasize such regular patterns in the classroom, learners' vocabulary acquisition efficiency is significantly enhanced. Even for pairs of cognates with relatively obscure corresponding relationships - *Tag-day*, *Buch - book*, *Schiff - ship* - once learners establish an awareness of the underlying diachronic relationship under the influence of the teacher's intermediary support, it can be quickly consolidated.

However, the false friends between the UK and Germany constitute the main source of negative lexical transfer. False friend words - that is, words with similar spellings but different meanings or false cognates - are abundant between English and German. Typical examples include: the German word *sensibel* (meaning sensitive) and the English word *sensible* (meaning sensible); *eventuell* (possible) and *eventually* (final); *der Chef* (boss, supervisor) and *chef* (chef) *die Rente* and *rent*; And *das Gift* (poison) and *gift* (present). Contrary to intuition, this risk is more prominent for English major students with a higher level of English proficiency: when they encounter German word forms with similar spellings, they extract English words more quickly, and English semantic

representations are automatically activated, making them particularly prone to semantic misjudgment.

A classroom example: *A learner translated Er hat das Gift genommen* as *He took the gift*, while the actual meaning was *He took poison*; Similarly, *Der Chef ist sensibel* is translated as *The chef is sensible*, while The actual meaning is *The boss is sensitive*. In each case, just one false friend word triggered an overall semantic distortion.

On the contrary, English and German show a systematic correspondence in derived morphology, which provides a convenient channel for semantic inference and word formation. Such as "un-" (negative: unhappy - unglücklich), "miss-" (incorrect: misunderstand - missverstehen), and über -/over-" (excessive:) Prefixes such as *overwork* and *überarbeiten* have functional and semantic equivalence in the two languages. Including -lich/-ly, -bar/- able, -los/ less and -ung/-ing, suffix also constitutes a systematic form of mapping. As English major students have received systematic training in English derived morphology, they are well-positioned to identify the corresponding German affixes and infer the lexical meanings of new words with significant efficiency.

These Shared derivational morpheme un-/un-, -tion/-tion, -ly/-lich - allowing learners to meet *unglücklich*, *möglich*, and *Freiheit* and some strange form, Be able to make use of the semantic cues of its English counterparts (unlucky, possible, freedom). Although this morphological inference strategy occasionally makes inaccurate predictions due to the incompleteness of functional equivalence between the two languages, it significantly improves the efficiency of vocabulary acquisition and reading fluency overall.

However, affix transfer itself also has its inherent drawbacks. The -ly in English has almost been completely grammatically transformed into an adverb suffix, while the -lich in German has the dual functions of an adjective suffix and an adverb suffix (for example, *freundlich* is an adjective). Based on their English experience, learners may regard all the German -lich forms as adverbs, thus causing misanalysis of structures like *ein freundlicher Mann*. In German, adjectives can function as adverbs without morphological changes, a typological feature that is significantly different from that in English.

In addition, orthographic habits in English may interfere with German spelling. Learners often angularize German word forms, for instance, by writing Adresse as Adresse or interessant as interessant. This phenomenon is very easy to observe in students' homework. The following excerpt is from the regular homework of a third-year English major student, as shown in Figure 1:

The image shows a handwritten note on lined paper. The first part 'tzt' is written in black ink. The second part 'leme' is written in blue ink. The third part 'English' is written in red ink.

Figure 1. Routine Assignment by a Third-year English Major

Observations show that even after eighteen months of German language teaching, learners still habitually spell *Englisch* as *English*. These spelling mistakes are not merely manifestations of failed memory retention, but rather an intrusion of the English orthographic pattern at the level of the writing movement - a form of negative transfer operating within the fine writing movement program.

The orthographic convention in German that all nouns must have their first letters capitalized also interferes with the spelling habits of English major students. German requires that every noun must be capitalized, while English only limits capitalization to proper nouns and content words in titles. Therefore, learners have internalized a cognitive schema, that is, capital letters are equivalent to proper noun identities or emphasis marks. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in the teaching stage of German as a second language (Level 1), as shown in Figure 2:

The image shows a handwritten text sample on lined paper. The first line is 'ist arbiterinnen und sein hobby ist.' with 'arbiterinnen' written in blue ink. The second line is 'Mutter ist 48, ist Geschä ftsfrau u' with 'Mutter' in red ink and 'Geschä' in blue ink. The third line is 'gem, mein vater und meine Mutter' with 'Mutter' in red ink.

Figure 2. Writing Sample: Elementary German L2 (Level I), English Majors

Students systematically failed to capitalize nouns in their writing. The fundamental reason lies in the fact that the rule of English capitalization has been automated as a default parameter in the procedural memory of writing movements. If it is to be reconfigured, a long training period will be required.

3.3 Grammatical Contrast and Grammatical Transfer

The grammatical level is the area where negative transfer is most concentrated and also the link where the demand for teaching intervention is

most urgent. For English major students, positive transfer at the grammatical level mainly functions through abstract conceptual frameworks, while negative transfer permeates specific lexical and syntactic operations.

Research shows that when the second language proficiency is high, three-sentence grammar nodes may merge with two-sentence grammar nodes to form shared syntactic representations [7]. Before the teaching of German grammar, English major students have already developed a meta-language awareness of grammar categories through English learning. The transfer of these conceptual frameworks provides a cognitive basis for the acquisition of German grammar. The conceptual framework of modal verbs (Modalverben) is also transferable: the English words *can*, *must*, and *should* are functionally parallel to the German words *können*, *müssen*, and *sollen*, enabling rapid semantic mapping. The comparative and superlative categories of adjectives are also shared by both languages. When encountering the German words *schneller* and *am schnellsten*, learners can quickly understand their functions and derived patterns through the existing schemas. Furthermore, the constructs of linking verbs with predicative complements (*She is intelligent and Sie ist intelligent.*) present the same component order and can directly achieve positive transfer.

At the grammatical level, positive transfer mainly functions through abstract conceptual knowledge - that is, learners have a declarative understanding of the content encoded by grammatical categories. However, when such conceptual knowledge needs to be realized in specific morphological operations - such as the inflection changes of verbs in tenses and the addition of suffixes of adjectives in comparative forms - the direction of transfer may reverse rapidly. This separation between conceptual understanding and morphological operation constitutes a notable feature of German grammar acquisition for English major students.

The difference in word order conventions is one of the main sources of grammatical negative transfer. English is an SVO language, and its typical word order template is relatively fixed. Although the position of adverbials is relatively flexible, the basic framework of subject-verb-object remains unchanged. In contrast, the German main clause embodies the V2 (second verb) constraint: it restricts the verb to occupy the second structural position defined

syntactically, rather than appearing in orthographic order after a starting component - which can be a subject, adverbial, or any other main phrase. Therefore, English allows *Yesterday I went to the cinema*, while German must say *Gestern ging ich ins Kino*, where the verb *ging* is in the second position and the subject *ich* is in the third position. Under the deeply rooted influence of the adverbial-subject-verb word order in English, English major students systematically produce non-target word orders such as *Gestern ich ging ins Kino*. These mistakes were neither accidental nor caused by negligence. They reflect the deep intrusion of English linearization rules into German syntactic planning.

The English clauses maintain the SVO word order and are consistent with the structure of the main clause (*I know that he has come*). However, German clauses follow the SOV (subject-object-predicate) word order: the limiting verb or verb complex is shifted to the end of the clause to form a box structure or verb last word order (*Ich weiß, dass er gekommen ist*). Therefore, processing German clauses requires learners to perform a syntactic operation that does not exist in English - moving the verb from its typical median position to the edge of the clause. This brings an additional cognitive burden. Under the pressure of real-time output, learners tend to default to using the median linearization strategy of English verbs. The result is a systematic imitation translation of the structure of English complement clauses, such as *Ich glaube, dass er hat das gemacht*, that is, a direct transplantation of the English that clause template (*I think that he has done it*).

In contrast, the negative usage of German modal verbs is relatively more complex because it involves changes in person, number, and tense. [8] Moreover, the modal verb structure in subordinate clauses also brings additional complexity. In German, restrictive modal verbs and lexical verbs are discontinuously distributed: *Ich glaube, dass er das machen kann* places the infinitive *machen* near the object, while the modal verb *kann* remains at the boundary at the end of the clause. In contrast, the corresponding verbs in English remain directly linearly adjacent: *I think that he can do it*. This non-continuous verb pattern has not been used in English syntax and poses a huge challenge in the initial learning stage.

In the field of nouns, the differences between

English and German are one of the most significant areas of comparison. English noun phrases hardly show inflection changes, retaining only the genitive - 's and the plural -s marks. In contrast, German noun phrases require triple designations of gender, number and case, and are achieved through consistent forms on articles, adjectives and determiners. Under the influence of the deeply rooted pattern that English noun phrases are unmarked, English major students systematically make two types of mistakes.

Firstly, the neglect of grammatical gender. The three gender systems in German are a completely unfamiliar grammatical category for Chinese learners, as neither their native language nor their first foreign language (English) possesses this feature. Natural gender in English is only manifested through pronoun oppositions (he/she/it) and some nouns with life, and does not cause consistent morphological changes in articles or modifiers. However, German requires that each noun must be assigned an arbitrary grammatical gender and be consistently marked throughout the noun phrase. English major students tend to transfer the unlabeled noun templates of English to German and fail to synchronously encode gender characteristics when acquiring new vocabulary. This leads to gender consistency errors in subsequent outputs, such as mistaking the target word *das Auto* for *der Auto*. When encountering *Buch*, learners accustomed to the English unmarked *book* tend to regard German nouns as gender-neutral entities and use articles (*der Buch, das Tisch*) unsystematically. When asked in class about the basis for choosing articles, learners often reply that it is based on intuition. This is not random guessing but implicit transfer: they subconsciously process German nouns through an English framework, in which nouns are self-sufficient and do not carry grammatical gender, and gender is regarded as marginal features rather than a necessary component of the entry. It is no surprise that learners almost unanimously regard gender as the biggest obstacle to the acquisition of German vocabulary.

Secondly, the personality of nouns constitutes another source of negative transfer. This error does not reflect the limitation of memory, but rather demonstrates the interference at the deep syntactic processing level, that is, the conflict between the mode of marking relationships

through word order in English and the morphological marking system in German. When processing German “Ich gebe dem Lehrer das Buch”, English majors must assign the appropriate case-inflected article to each noun phrase, whereas English expresses the same relations through prepositions or linear position alone. This proves relatively unfamiliar to learners habituated to signaling grammatical relations through word order; under real-time communicative pressure, they readily omit or misassign case marking. In the erroneous production *Ich gebe der Lehrer das Buch*, the indirect object requires the dative *dem Lehrer*. In English *I give the teacher the book*, by contrast, the indirect object bears no morphological case, its syntactic function being signaled exclusively by linear position. Subject to the inertial pull of the English double-object construction, learners are unaccustomed to the obligatory selection of a case-inflected article for the indirect object, resulting in dative omission or misassignment.

In the Beginner German (Level 1) class, the exercise on dative and accusative consists of ten questions (out of a total of 100 points). The pass rate of the class with 24 students was only 75%, and only one student got a full score. The mistakes were mainly concentrated in the questions that tested linear sorting with lattice and Bingge components. In German, when the dative and accusative objects coexist, their relative order is governed by clear rules. In English, the four sentences *I give my sister the book*, *I give her the book*, *I give my sister it* and *I give her it* all maintain the unchanged order of indirect object to direct object. However, in German. These sentences correspond respectively to *Ich gebe meiner Schwester das Buch*, *Ich gebe ihr das Buch*, *Ich gebe es meiner Schwester* and *Ich gebe es ihr*. As shown in these examples, the order of the genitive and inanimate cases varies depending on whether they involve complete nouns or pronouns, and this order is strictly fixed.

In terms of prepositional case dominance, English is completely lacking in this morphological syntactic mechanism, which presents learners with an entirely new acquisition task. German prepositions govern fixed cases: *mit* and *zu* require the dative case, *ohne* requires the accusative case, and *in* selects the dative case when indicating a static position and the accusative case when indicating directed motion. Because learners are accustomed to the

pattern in English where the noun form remains unchanged after a preposition, they frequently use the default nominative or accusative form in the context of German prepositions. English prepositions govern the accusative form of pronouns, but leave complete noun phrases morphologically unmarked. There is no alternation with case-Bingge. Therefore, learners transfer the default object case rule of English to German, resulting in *mit den Lehrer* instead of the target form *mit dem Lehrer*.

Interlanguage collocation is a conventional pairing in a specific language, and there are significant differences between the two languages in this regard. The English *wait for* corresponds to the German *warten auf* (dominating the fourth case); The English *depend on* corresponds to the German *abhängen von* (dominating the third case); The English word *think about* corresponds to the German words *nachdenken über* or *denken an*. In the process of language production, learners preferentially activate the prepositional framework of English, thereby generating systematic errors such as *warten für*, *denken über*, and *abhängen auf*. On the surface, these are incorrect choices of prepositions; From a cognitive perspective, they reflect the global migration of the English pricing model to German. These mistakes occur frequently in both written and spoken modalities and are consistent among different learners, indicating that their origin is not individualized memory errors but systematic valence transfer in English.

4. Pedagogical Strategies Grounded in Transfer Analysis

The design of teaching intervention follows a core principle: an English major background is neither an absolute advantage nor a pure burden, but a cognitive resource that can be strategically utilized and regulated by both teachers and learners. This section organizes suggestions around this principle in accordance with a triple framework: utilize positive transfer, prevent negative transfer, and transform interference into teaching capital.

4.1 Explicit Strategies for Leveraging Positive Transfer

Positive migration is not an automatic process. Although learners may unconsciously benefit from the similarities between English and German languages, such benefits remain

fragmented and unsystematic. The role of teachers lies in making unconscious positive transfer explicit and systematic, enabling learners to transform from passive beneficiaries to active agents of cross-language promotion.

English-German cognates and Greek-Latin international common words constitute the resources that have not been fully utilized in vocabulary teaching. During the early teaching stage (approximately the 7th to 8th week), when learners have completed their pronunciation training and transitioned to the vocabulary acquisition stage, teachers can set up a dedicated English-German Vocabulary Bridge module. This module organizes high-frequency A1-level terms by cross-language corresponding types: historical phonetic change patterns (such as English /t/ → German /ss/ or /ts/, for example: *water* - *Wasser*, *better* - *besser*; English /d/ → German /t/, for example: *day* - *Tag*, *door* - *Tür*, and the affixes correspond in parallel (for example: -tion → -tion, for example: *information* - *Information*). Unlike traditional thematic or semantic field vocabularies, this module is organized based on the principle of cross-language form parallelism, aiming to establish a systematic interword mapping between the learner's firmly established English vocabulary network and the emerging German vocabulary network. In the classroom, learners review their English counterparts, compare orthographic differences and identify recurring patterns. Under the influence of this cognitive framework, learners spontaneously conduct cross-language comparisons in subsequent vocabulary exposure, significantly reducing the memory burden of cognate word acquisition.

English and German share the basic principles of word formation, which provides a transferable basis for morphological consciousness. In the early stage of the course, the teacher can arrange a teaching session to compare the word formation logic of English and German compound words: the parallel structure of the English *sun* + *flower* = *sunflower* and the German *Sonne* + *Blume* = *Sonnenblume*; And although the English word *glove* is etymologically different from the literal meaning of *hand* + *shoe*, the German word *Hand* + *Schuh* = *Handschuh* embodies the same combinatorial logic. Such comparisons indicate that German compound words are not incomprehensible syllables but are composed of recognizable units in accordance with familiar rules. Early

activation of compound word awareness can significantly reduce the fear of long German compound words and lay a foundation for the subsequent development of autonomous morphological reasoning ability.

As mentioned earlier, English major learners have a large amount of transferable knowledge at the level of abstract grammar concepts, but due to the lack of explicit contrast, negative transfer frequently occurs in the morphological implementation stage. Teachers can systematically introduce parallel examples from English and German as the cognitive starting point for grammar explanations. For instance, when introducing the German trinity system, teachers do not have to directly define grammatical gender. Instead, they can guide learners to focus on the remaining gender markers in English: *Why do we turn the referents' pronouns into he/she/it? Why are ships sometimes called she?* This establishes the cognitive premise that language can classify nouns through formal marking, thereby building a bridge for systematic learning of the German gender system. By anchoring new information to existing cognitive structures, this method can reduce the perception of novelty in grammatical categories.

4.2 Explicit Strategies for Preempting Negative Transfer

When there are objective differences between the native language and the target language, negative transfer can only be avoided when the inhibitory mechanism successfully suppresses the interference. Otherwise, negative transfer will occur [9]. Forward-looking awareness arousal forms the cornerstone of negative transfer prevention: at the recorded high-frequency error points, teachers pre-deploy cognitive prompts before learners make mistakes, prompting them to identify key differences between English and German languages, thereby consciously suppressing the automatic activation of the default mode of English.

Grammar is one of the main areas where negative transfer occurs. At the beginning of each grammar unit's teaching, teachers can present a concise English-German comparison warning - that is, a half-page slide or handout, highlighting the core differences at the target grammar nodes in a visual way. The design purpose of this early warning form is not to completely eliminate all errors through a single

intervention, but to establish a cognitive alertness state towards cross-language differences before teaching touches upon the target grammar points and before learners produce relevant forms. When learners subsequently encounter the target structure in their practice, this pre-activated attention cue can increase the probability of them monitoring and suppressing the default mode of English.

As for the high-frequency occurrence points of negative transfer of the term English-German fake friends, teachers can embed short interactive clips (three to five minutes) at different nodes of the course, presenting three to five examples of fake friends each time. For example: *Gift* means poison, not a present; *Rat* means advice, not a mouse. *bekommen* means to obtain, not to become. Such contrasts can trigger cognitive dissonance, thereby reinforcing memory traces. Classroom evidence shows that such unexpected information can reliably stimulate directed responses; Compared with mechanical memory of neutral materials, coding with emotional load has more advantages in maintaining persistence. It is more effective to distribute the presentation throughout multiple teaching sessions than to concentrate it in a single course, as the interval arrangement can not only maintain attention engagement but also provide opportunities for interval extraction.

4.3 Harnessing Interference as an Instructional Resource

Not all negative transfer phenomena need to be eliminated. If properly utilized, transfer errors can become productive teaching resources: they make the cross-language associative network in the learner's mind visible, thereby providing the best starting point for targeted intervention.

When learners make typical transfer mistakes in the classroom, teachers do not need to correct and intervene immediately. On the contrary, this error can be reconstructed into a miniature teaching segment of comparative analysis. Take the non-target form *Ich bin lesen* as an example. Teachers can write the English word I am reading and the German word Ich lese side by side on the blackboard, and then raise the question: Why do we tend to produce *Ich bin lesen*? Because we are imitating the progressive structure of English. However, German lacks a specific continuous tense, and the simple present tense itself encodes the ongoing action. This reconstruction transforms error from a

stigmatized performance failure into a phenomenon with cognitive information value. It not only corrects specific biases but also guides learners to understand their roots, generating deeper teaching effects in the field of meta-language awareness. The ability of learners to proactively mark English templates as potential points of divergence when encountering similar structures in the future is precisely a hallmark of strategic learners.

The transfer of language structure can only occur smoothly when it is in harmony with the natural acquisition process. Therefore, it is necessary to provide learners with rich and context-embedded language usage scenarios to promote their immersion in the target language environment [10]. Classroom activities can incorporate interactive games, collaborative tasks and structured discussions to promote active participation and continuous communicative engagement, thereby consolidating German proficiency through meaningful practice.

4.4 Fine-Tuning Curricular Design

The effective implementation of the above-mentioned strategies requires support at the curriculum level. It is suggested that the three micro-level adjustments be incorporated into daily teaching.

First, introduce a dedicated English-German Comparison field in the vocabulary materials. Traditional German second language textbooks usually only provide paired vocabulary annotations in both German and Chinese. For English major students, it is recommended that teachers add a third column in self-compiled supplementary materials or classroom materials: English corresponding words and related comparative annotations. For example, next to the German word *die Eltern*, the English annotation can be written as: parents (only in the plural form; always used with the plural article *die*). This alignment method is closer to the learner's existing vocabulary storage structure and helps to achieve direct vocabulary mapping between English and German without the need for Chinese as an intermediary for conversion.

Secondly, systematically integrate the parallel examples of English and German into grammar teaching. Learners of a new foreign language are often subject to cross-language interference. Incorrect analyses of German expressions often stem from structurally similar but semantically different forms in English or Chinese [11].

When presenting German syntactic patterns, teachers should simultaneously show the corresponding English structures, thereby forming an intuitive bilingual parallel contrast.

Third, design dedicated English-German conversion exercises. In addition to the regular Sino-German translation exercises, teachers should also introduce English-German conversion tasks, using English source sentences as materials to train on the specific differences between the English and German languages. For example, given the English sentence I think that he is coming, the learner is asked to convert it into German Ich glaube, dass er kommt. The unique value of the English-German conversion practice lies in its clear positioning of English as a transfer source, compelling learners to identify and recalibrate the default mode of English during the conversion process. The resulting training is more targeted and precise than Sino-German translation.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the transfer phenomenon among English major students is not an isolated language performance bias, but rather presents a systematic and collective regular psycholinguistic process. The genealogical kinship between English and German at the lexical level provides ample space for positive transfer, while the morphological differences at the grammatical level, especially the fundamental differences in noun categories and word order conventions, constitute the deep-seated roots of continuous negative transfer.

For English major students, the acquisition of German as a second language is a learning trajectory that has both inherent advantages and hidden dangers. Its advantage lies in the fact that through systematic training in the English major, students have developed mature foreign language learning strategies, a strong sense of meta-language, and a cognitive foundation for cross-language comparison. The hidden danger stems from the fact that English, as a highly automated second language system, will continuously intrude into the real-time production process of German. This influence is more concealed due to the close genealogical relationship between the two languages. English is neither an unconditional aid nor a pure source of interference. The value of transfer entirely depends on how teachers guide learners to adapt

to it.

Therefore, teachers must identify where English promotes acquisition and where it creates traps, transforming knowledge that learners feel familiar yet decently similar into explicit meta-language understanding. The ultimate goal of teaching strategies is dual: to transform positive transfer from accidental benefits into conscious application of strategies, and to reconstruct negative transfer from mistakes that need to be prevented into materials available for teaching analysis. When teachers can clearly identify the source, mechanism and dynamic direction of transfer in the classroom, English will transform from an implicit source of interference into an explicit teaching resource. The system proposed in this study is the practical embodiment of this principle in the German second language classroom, providing an operational framework for German teaching in English majors, starting from the existing language resources of learners.

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