The Influences of Mother Tongue on Middle School Oral English Teaching

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Abstract：*In the process of second language acquisition, negative transfer of mother tongue is inevitable and occupies a very important position. Research shows that the major problems in spoken English performance of Chinese middle school students are caused by the negative transfer of Chinese. Therefore, it is very necessary to study how learner's prior linguistic knowledge influences the developmental sequence of the students' oral English. By comparing these two different language systems and analyzing the linguistic samples of negative transfer, especially the influences on phoneme, vocabulary, syntax and pragmatics, we can have a better understanding of the difficulties students are encountering when learning oral English. So some strategies are put forward to help the learners to overcome these difficulties and the teachers to improve the quality of oral English teaching.*

Key words: *negative transfer, mother tongue, middle school students, oral English teaching.*

I.   Introduction

English is widely used as a communicative tool in the world. Under this circumstance, it is particularly important to be able to speak and listen effectively in English, especially for people of this century. For the last decade, as China's international status has been rising, the requirement of spoken English for Chinese is becoming higher than before. As a result, more attention has been paid to oral English teaching which aims to enable students to use English skillfully for effective communication. However, in practical teaching of English, especially in oral English teaching, the result seems not as satisfactory as we expect, and the phenomenon of dumb English and Chinglish are very common. Oral English has always been regarded as the most difficult part in Chinese secondary school English teaching. And the time students spend in learning spoken English is not in direct proportion to their achievements, which has attracted more and more attention of English teachers and researchers.

Language transfer has been the research focus of applied linguistics for a long time, as well as pedagogical strategies and other issues in second language acquisition. Many scholars at home and abroad devote themselves to the research of how one's native language functions in the acquisition of his or her target language. In recent years, mother tongue transfer has been valued by foreign language teachers as it affects the target language learning to some extent, including both positive and negative transfer. In this study, we focus on the negative transfer. When people learn a new language, they subconsciously translate and produce the second language in

their native language logical thinking pattern, therefore, negative transfer occurs. The linguistic features and expressing habits of one's mother tongue have a strong negative impact on his or her oral expressions in English in the early stage. Learners are inevitably influenced by Chinese when they begin to learn English since they habitually use their Chinese way of thinking to accept new things and analyze new problems. So the phenomenon of Chinese-style English is very common in the oral English produced by middle school English learners.

In China, learning English systematically for students starts in middle school. Students at this stage already have a sound command of their mother tongue and the relevant knowledge, and these knowledge and experiences are bound to play a role in their English learning. Whether in phoneme, vocabulary, syntax, or pragmatics, students' prior linguistic knowledge has a more or less impact on English learning: positive transfer and negative transfer. If students can make good use of positive transfer according to the similarities between Chinese and English, their English learning will achieve twice the result with half the effort. But what is more important is that students should pay more attention to negative transfer of mother tongue to break the inherent way of thinking and try to set up a new thinking pattern in the course of learning the new language. Therefore, in order to help improve the quality of oral English teaching and the level of students' spoken English, it is worthwhile for us to have a further study on negative transfer of mother tongue in oral English teaching in middle school and explore the corresponding instructional strategies.

II.   Theoretical Framework

2.1. Language Transfer

Transfer is a concept in psychology, which refers to the influence of one kind of learning on another. When this transfer is applied to the process of language learning, that is to say, people will be affected by their mother tongue in the process of learning L2, the phenomenon of mother tongue transfer appears. Language transfer has always been a very important topic of second language acquisition and linguistics, and up to now, there are many linguists who have paid much attention on studying in this field. As to its definition, there are various expressions, and of which the definition of language transfer proposed by Odlin from a cognitive point of view is most often cited forward: Transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired [1]. There is so much to say about this proposal, not east the relatively precise definition of transfer in the field of second language acquisition research. Based on the influence of mother tongue on target language, language transfer can be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer refers to the similarity between mother tongue and target language in the process of second language acquisition promotes the learning of target language and accelerates the acquisition of second language while negative transfer means that the difference between the learner's mother tongue and the target language plays a negative role in the process of language acquisition and hinders the learning of the target language.

2.2. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

According to behaviourist theories, the main obstacle to second language acquisition was learners' prior knowledge, which means that proactive inhibition occurred when the original habits got in the way of learning new ones [2]. In this case, the learning of second language was interfered by one's prior linguistic knowledge. In the process of second language acquisition, behaviorist view of language emphasized the concept of "difficulty". It was believed that the degree of difficulty of learning a foreign language depended mainly in the extent to which the second language pattern was different from or similar to a native language pattern [2]. In other words, where the two were similar or identical, positive transfer occurred, but where they were different, difficulty

arose and errors as a result of negative transfer were likely to occur. As Lado said, the student who comes into contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult [3]. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are difficult will be difficult [3]. This view can be understood as the difference between the mother tongue and the target language is proportional to the difficulty of learning the target language and can be explained by the equation of 'difference = difficulty'. After that, Lado put forward the idea of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which advocates that: (1) The level of difficulty will be directly related to the degree of the differences between the L1 with L2 when learning a new language, and the greater the difficulty, the more frequent the errors; (2) The errors can be predicted by identifying the differences between the L1 and L2 [3].

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis was at the height of power in the 1960s, but gradually in the course of its application, many experts questioned it for the following reasons. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis holds that the main cause, even the only cause, of difficulties and errors in foreign language learning is the interference resulting from the learner's the mother tongue. It did not recognize the source of difficulties other than the mother tongue [2]. However, later studies have found that nor is transfer just a matter of interference of the learner's mother tongue, as other factors also had an effect. Meanwhile, the comparison does not fully predict when the transfer will interfere. On the other hand, another view was that the negative transfer is a normal phenomenon in the process of second language acquisition, and it has little sense to spend a lot of time studying this normal phenomenon. These views brought great challenges to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which made it fade out of the stage. In general, the Contrastive Analysis is too simplistic and absolute. In any case, as an important theory of language transfer, its contribution to foreign language teaching cannot be ignored. Therefore, teachers can use it as a tool to predict potential difficulties.

2.3. Error Analysis

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the limitation of Contrastive Analysis became more and more obvious, and Error Analysis gradually replaced Contrastive Analysis as it was widely accepted that only some of the errors the learner makes can attribute to his or her native language and the sources of these errors need to be analyzed carefully. Corder noted that errors can be significant in three ways: (1) they can provide the teacher with information about how much the learner had learned; (2) they can provide the researchers how the language was learned, and (3) they can serve as devices by which the learner discovered the rules of the target language[4]. Different from Contrastive Analysis, the focus of Error Analysis lies not in the differences between one's native language and the target language, but the errors that the learner makes. The main point is that the process of learning should be paid attention to and we should carefully study the errors occurred in the process of language learning and explore its source through scientific analysis. Error Analysis was one of the first methodologies used to investigate learners' language [2]. Compared with the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, it is more scientific and systematic as it does not simply focus on mistakes, but starts from its root and analyzes them. Although Error Analysis has made great progress compared with Contrastive Analysis, it has its own limitations, such as the lack of specificity and precision in the definition of error categories and the inappropriate use of simplistic classification to explain learner' errors.

III.   Influences of Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue on Oral English in Middle School

3. 1. Influences on Phoneme

During the process of learning English, the pronunciation of words is the first part for middle school

students to learn. While oral English can not only affect the level of students' expression, but also affect their listening comprehension. As the primary stage of learning English, middle school stage is a very important period during the course of English learning. However, phonemic errors can be clearly found when students speak in English. Since some of the students just start to learn English or have started learning English not for a long time, they could not learn English without the help of Chinese. But the deep-rooted habits and the way of thinking in Chinese will have a great negative impact on the learning of English pronunciation. The negative transfer of mother tongue is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

3.1.1.   Influences on Consonants

As Chinese and English belong to two different languages families, they have their own phoneme systems. Some English phonemes can be found in Chinese *pinyin*(拼音), but there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two languages, and many of the sounds in English do not exist in Chinese, which makes it difficult for the beginners to distinguish English phonemes from Chinese *pinyin* system. And then they habitually replace these new English phonemes with some similar sounds in Chinese *pinyin*. For example, the common consonants /θ/ and /ð/ in English have no corresponding sounds in Chinese, so some students replace them directly with /s/ and /z/ in Chinese, which results in the following phenomenon. In those words "path"[pɑːθ] and "bathroom"[ˈbɑːθruːm], students often utter such speech sounds like"path"[pɑːs] or "bathroom"[ˈbɑːsruːm]. At the same time, the phenomenon of holding the sound can be clearly seen in the process of learning consonants. Since some writing of phonetic transcriptions in Chinese pinyin is the same as consonants in English phonetic symbols, many students are confused and often make mistakes when they pronounce them. For example, students pronounce like this: /p/一/pu/, /b/一/bu/or /bə/, /t/一/tə/, /d/一/də/, /k/一kə/, /g/一/gə/, /1/-/lu/, /f/一/fu/, /m/-/mu/. Thus they can easily read a word like this: some/sʌmu/, blue/buluː/ or /bəlu/, which are absolutely wrong. In addition, China has a vast territory and there are many local dialects which also bring some negative effects on English pronunciation. Liu Dongliang, for instance, believes that this is because the pronunciation organs are used to the pronunciation patterns of native dialects, and then form the pronunciation memory of native dialects in the cerebral cortex [5]. For example, some people in Hubei (湖北) cannot distinguish /l/ with /n/, therefore, many students in Hubei easily utter the speech sounds like: know /ləʊ/ or nowadays /laʊədeɪz/. This kind of errors are caused by the negative transfer of Chinese pronunciation system and they are hard to be corrected because students are used to thinking in their native language and the patterns of movements in their pronunciation organs are somewhat fossilized.

3.1.2.   Influences on Vowels

There are vowels and consonants in English phonemes. As same as consonants, some vowels in English phonetic symbols do not exist in Chinese pinyin. This difference also brings negative transfer to English phonetic learning. On the other hand, vowels can be divided into long vowels and short vowels. Compared with short vowels, long vowels should be pronounced with relatively longer time. However, there is no such division in *pinyin*. When listening to middle school students who speak in English, we can easily find the following phenomenon. They often pronounce like this: book /buːk/ rather than /bʊk/, and good /guːd/ rather than /gʊd/. Besides, vowels can be divided into pure vowels and diphthongs, and diphthongs have the following :/aɪ/ /eɪ/ /aʊ/ /əʊ/ /ɔɪ/ /ɪə/ /eə/ /ʊə/. These diphthongs combined by different pure vowels make students confused and also bring great difficulties to them. For example, we can often hear students say mouth /mɔːθ/, apple /epl/, which absolutely do not achieve the request of English pronunciation.

As watching English movies or listening to local people who speak in English, we find that they are used to speak with a wide mouth and usually accompanied by some exaggerated expressions, which is largely

different from Chinese manner of speaking. This differences are caused partly because of different customs and habits, but more importantly, many vowels such as /æ/、/ɑ/、/aɪ/、/aʊ/ in English phonemes require learners to open their mouths wide so that these vowels can be produced correctly. And this is why some foreigners advise Chinese to open their mouths wide to speak English well.

3.1.3. Influences on Stress

Each Chinese character has four tones which are called yin, ping, yang, ze, while English belongs to this kind of language which emphasizes stress. That is to say, it generally uses stress to distinguish the part of speech and the meaning of words. For example, if the stress of the word "import" lies on the front part, it is a noun. While it is a verb if the stress lies on the back. When middle school students are learning polysyllabic words, there is an interesting problem that most of them tend to put the stress of one word in a later position because they think this manner can speak English more smoothly. And the typical words are "interesting" and "different".

In addition, the basic characteristic of the Chinese pronunciation system is that one word accompanies one sound. The boundary between adjacent words is obvious and there is non-interference when pronouncing. Also, the pause time on each syllable and each word is more uniform and there is no obvious stress, which is very different from English. Let's look at two sentences,"There is a 'book on the 'desk."and "My 'brother 'put up a 'picture on the 'wall." In English, different word occupies different pause time. English emphasizes syllable stress and pay attention to hierarchy and rhythm as well as cadence. However many Chinese students, under the influence of long-term Chinese pronunciation, speak English without considering stress, secondary stress and non-stress. Thus their spoken English are very strange. On the other hand, some words in English are composed of single syllables, but most of them have multiple syllables. There is also the phenomena of consonant affixes in English, sometimes, it need to leave out the sound of one letter. For example, "all" and "of", "of" and "you" will be pronounced together in the phrase of "all of you". And these differences may make students' pronunciation less pure.

3.2. Influences on Vocabulary

In terms of vocabulary, there are still great differences between English and Chinese. Although many Chinese characters correspond to some words with the same meaning in English, not all words correspond to each other. However, many students think that the words with the same meaning have identical usage, and they will use these words like Chinese without taking over in English manner. Therefore, it can be clearly seen there are many errors in collocations. For example, since "绿茶" is translated into "green tea", students naturally associate "红茶" with "red tea". However, the correct answer should be "black tea". Similarly, when students are translating "杀鸡取卵" without the guidance of teachers, they will directly translate it into "kill the chicken that lays the golden eggs" rather than "kill the goose that lays the golden eggs". There are many similar mistakes, for example, we can say "穿一件黑色衣服" in Chinese expression. However it is different in English. It is for sure that it cannot directly follow the name of clothing after "dress", and the right structure should be "dress in + 颜色/衣服名称". For instance, we can say "Mr. White likes to dress in white." rather than "Mr. White likes to dress white." These differences make students vulnerable to the influence of their mother tongue in oral expressions by English, resulting in mistakes.

The meaning of English has broad sense and narrow sense, but also involves denotative meaning and connotative meaning. And the meanings of a same word in different places and situations are also different. "Amaze" and "astound", for example, both have the meaning that "expressing surprise at something". However, the former has the meaning together with "at a loss" while the latter has the similar meaning together with

"beyond belief". In addition, there are a variety of rules for the classification and forms of words in English. Nouns can be divided into singular nouns and plural nouns, and verbs have transitive verbs and intransitive verbs. Also we need to pay attention to the changes of tense and voice as well as adjectives which involve three forms of primitive, comparative and superlative. On the other hand, the choice of article is also a difficult problem for middle school students. The words in Chinese are not so complicated, therefore, for middle school students who have just come into contact with English, they only memorize the meaning of words in isolation when learning new words without considering connotation and variability of these words in practical use. Thus Chinglish occurs resulting from negative transfer of native language.

3. 3. Influences on Syntax
3.3.1.   Influences on Sentence Structure

Chinese and English have two different syntactic systems, therefore, their requirements for syntactic rules are different. At the same time, it hinders the learning of idiomatic English. Linguists and translators generally believe that hypotaxis and parataxis are two important characteristics of language syntax. Chinese pays attention to parataxis, that is to say, the meaning can be conveyed by language without relying on the change of lexical form. While English pays attention to hypotaxis, it means that the logical relationship of sentences needs functional words such as conjunctions and articles. Influenced by the characteristics of Chinese sentences, middle school students often ignore the use of connectives in their oral English, which leads to logical confusion between sentences. Let's look at some examples:

A: English is very important. I need to learn English well. English will help me get a satisfying job. I want to work in a big tourism company. (Chinese)

B: I need to learn English well because it will help me get a satisfying job. And it is very important if I want to work in a big tourism company. (English)

A: I went back home after school and I had dinner with my parents and I went to bed at 9:00. (Chinese)

B: After going back home after school, I had dinner with my parents, then I went to bed at 9:00. (English)

These are the different manners that Chinese and native English speakers use to express the same meaning. Because of the differences in sentence structure between English and Chinese, the spoken English produced by the Chinese learners is loose in structure and logic, and often sounds very awkward to native speakers.

3. 3. 2.   Influences on Voice

Voice includes two parts: active voice and passive voice. Although both Chinese and English have the two kinds of voice, Chinese expressions seldom use passive voice in practice while passive voice often appears in the expressions in English. Under the influence of negative transfer of mother tongue, middle school students seldom consider passive voice when speaking in English. For example, the sentence "这本书是一位非常著名的作家写的" are usually translated into " A very famous writer wrote this book" but not "This book was written by a very famous writer". As well, students often say that "Edison invented the electric light" rather than "The electric light was invented by Edison". Since middle school students are just beginning to learn English or some of them have learned English for a short time, they tend to translate word for word when speaking. In order to learn pure spoken English, we must overcome these negative effects from our mother tongue.

3. 4. Influences on Pragmatics

As a communicative tool, the main function of language is to communicate with others. And pragmatics refers to the actual use of language. Pragmatic failure was first put forward by Jenny Thomas in 1983 which refers to the errors in our communication because of failing to achieve the aim of communication. As the words

don't fit the occasions, listeners can't arrive at the intended meaning of the speaker. In others words, although we use the language with correct grammars, it is hard to achieve a perfect communication.

In oral English expression, the negative transfer of mother tongue is also obvious in pragmatic aspects, resulting in the pragmatic failure. Due to different cultures and ways of thinking, people may adopt different expressions in the same or similar situations. And on account of the lack of relevant pragmatic knowledge, students can easily produce the expression in English using a manner which suitable for Chinese context, as a result, negative transfer of mother language occurs. In real life, it is easy to find these pragmatic errors, such as the following examples:

A: Would you want to buy something?

B：I want to buy some vegetables.

When shopping in a supermarket, such case often happens. This expression of A is obviously translated directly from Chinese to English, which makes people sound embarrassed and feel impolite. Actually, the native speaker would say "What can I do for you ?" or "Can I help you?"

A: Thank you very much.

B: Never mind.

This is another example of the pragmatic failure. As we all know, helping others is a traditional virtue of the Chinese nation for thousands of years, therefore, we tend to say "没关系" or "没事" when someone says "谢谢". This is a typical example of Chinglish and the correct answer should be "You are welcome" or "It's my pleasure". While "never mind" can be used when someone says "sorry" to you.

A: Oh, you really did a very good job.

B : No, I just tried my best to do it.

A: Your English is really good.

B: Not so good.

Chinese are taught to be modest from childhood, therefore when hearing others' praise, they are likely to refuse to admit it firstly. This answer often confused speakers in English because they would say "Thank you" but not "Not so good" or "where where".

IV.   Implications for Oral English Learning

From the above analysis, we can know that mother tongue has brought a lot of negative influences on English learning in the aspects of phoneme, vocabulary, syntax and pragmatics. Therefore, the importance of avoiding negative transfer sticks out. In this part, some implications will be provided for English teachers to help middle school students learn English better and speak English more correctly and smoothly.

4.1. Paying More Attention to the Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue

In traditional accounts of negative transfer, it was the major factor that hinders second language acquisition. Errors occurred as a result of the learners' existing linguistic knowledge of their mother tongue. So in order to reduce the errors caused by negative transfer and help students speak English like a native speaker, we should, first of all, pay more attention to negative transfer of mother tongue.

Teachers should introduce students the general knowledge of negative transfer and make them aware of the fact that some errors are not simply mistakes, sometimes, they are negative transfer resulting from their mother tongue. Based on this point, if transfer error occurs when students are speaking English, teachers should not

only point it out and correct it, but also make students be aware of the fact that it is negative transfer of their mother tongue and help them pay more attention to the sources of improper usage of English according to Errors Analysis.

However, it should be noted that language transfer includes the negative one and the positive one. We advocate that students should be informed that their existing language of Chinese can not only hinder the acquisition of English, but more importantly , there are similarities in vocabulary, grammar, syntax and other aspects in these two language, which have many positive effects on English learning. Only having an objective and fair attitudes towards negative transfer, can learners have a better understanding of it, and as a result, some errors will be avoided.

4.2. Adopting Contrastive Analysis in Teaching

Based on Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, the difficulties and errors in foreign language learning are interference coming from the learners' first language. While it has been shown to be clearly problematic and untenable to claim that the differences between the native language and the target language will lead to difficulty as it just might do, it does not mean that Contrastive Analysis is not instructive for English teachers, especially middle school teachers. Teachers can take full advantages of Contrastive Analysis but just regard it as a tool for predicting potential areas of difficulties.

Xu Yulong, for example, once defined contrastive linguistics as: contrastive linguistics is a branch of linguistics whose task is to make a synchronic study of two or more languages and describe their similarities and differences, especially their differences, and then apply such research to other related fields [6]. Thus, Contrastive Analysis can be applied to English teaching. When teaching English, it is necessary for teachers to guide students to compare the knowledge with that in Chinese and try to find out more differences between them. For instance, teachers can consciously introduce Chinese to deepen students' impression when the expression in English is very different from Chinese.

4.3. Creating a Positive English Learning Environment

In a successful English class, students talk a lot in the target language. There is no doubt that the more the students are exposed to the target language, the more linguistic knowledge and cultural information they will acquire, and the more differences between their native language and the target language they will find. This means that teachers need to create an environment in which the target language is commonly used so that students have adequate amount of exposure to the target language and opportunities to listen and to produce more utterances in English.

It is necessary for English teachers to make full use of modern teaching equipment, such as video, tape and multimedia technology, to provide students with a better language environment so that their understanding and recognition of language habits and customs in foreign language countries will be enhanced. Also, teachers need to spend more time and energy to actively improve their comprehensible input in the target language and arouse the students' enthusiasm for learning. Above all, the main purpose is to place students in a foreign language environment, and try to reduce the amount of the students' negative transfer of mother tongue, and finally help the learners to achieve proficiency of the natural and fluent communication in English.

However, what deserved our attention here is that creating an English environment does not mean that no Chinese should be used in class. If necessary, Chinese can be used as an auxiliary means. It is often found in teaching practice that sometimes it is difficult to explain a certain language phenomenon clearly in English, but it can solve the problem in very few words in Chinese. It can be seen that Chinese, as an effective learning strategy, can effectively assist English teaching. On the other hand, it is not wise to rely too much on Chinese.

4.4. Raising the Students' Cross-cultural Communication Awareness

Language is the carrier of culture, and learning a new language is also learning its culture. It is essential for teachers to cultivate their cross-cultural awareness as it does help to reduce the negative transfer of their mother tongue on the oral expression in pragmatic aspects. Cross-cultural communication refers to the communication between native speakers and non-native speakers, and also refers to the communication between someone who has differences in language and cultural background.

As discussed above, we find that sometimes students make transfer errors not for lacking knowledge of grammar or vocabulary, but because they have a misunderstanding of the cultural differences of the two languages. So, English teachers should guide learners to consciously compare Chinese and English cultures and raise their cross cultural awareness in communication, especially the use of different expressions in the same context. Only having a deeper understanding of cultural and linguistic differences, can students master the essence of cross cultural communication and communicate appropriately.

Besides, for this purpose, English teachers should also increase the input of English culture. The ways can be various, such as organizing students to watch programs broadcast in English in western countries, watching English movies and videos, reading modern literary works, and introducing the cultural customs of English speaking countries in the form of lectures, especially the different cultural customs from China.

V.   Conclusion

For more than half century, the negative transfer of mother tongue has been the focus of second language acquisition, since no theory of second language acquisition that ignores the learner's existing knowledge can be considered complete. The solution, as many linguists and scholars has come to recognize, is that negative transfer of mother tongue needs to be acknowledged and subjected to careful inquiry. Without a better understanding of negative transfer, we cannot realize that how the learner's prior linguistic knowledge influences the course of the target language learning, much less reduce errors resulting from the learner's native language. Based on the theory of negative transfer of mother tongue and previous studies on it, this paper aims to discuss the nature of negative transfer by analyzing some aspects influenced by Chinese in the process of learning English in middle school, as well as the strategies to cope with them.

After analyzing the aspects which are easily influenced by Chinese, the author found that the differences of linguistic knowledge and culture between the Chinese and English account for the errors made in English learning. In many cases, it is obvious when the English sentence pattern is different from the Chinese one, the negative transfer bring great difficulties to the English study of middle school students.

As most linguists said, the idea of when learning a foreign language, one should forget about one's native language is unrealistic. Therefore, it can be claimed that without much attention paid on negative transfer of the native language, the learning of English will not go far, not to speak of being successful. Thus we should firstly recognize the negative transfer of mother tongue is objective and definite, and have a relatively fair and objective attitude toward it. Also, in order to learn English more efficiently and effectively, English teachers should take some practical measures. Finally, it is essential to point out that there is a long way to go in regard to avoiding the negative transfer of mother tongue, therefore what we should do is to recognize the problems and find the suitable solutions to them.

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