

Analysis of the Errors in the Chinese Students' Composition

Haiyan Lu

School of Foreign Languages, Nanjing University of Engineering, Nanjing 211167, Jiangsu, China

Abstract: Writing is a complicated process and being able to write well is usually considered to be the last skill in language learning. Teachers firstly need to find out the errors the Chinese students made in their English writing process in order to improve students' writing ability. Errors are common characteristic of language acquisition and learning. Via studying the types of errors on the basis of error analysis theory, the author hopes to seek an effective approach to the teaching of English writing.

Keywords: Errors; Chinese students; Composition

Publication date: November, 2020

Publication online: 30 November, 2020

***Corresponding author:** Haiyan Lu, 453377730@qq.com

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Writing is usually considered to be the last acquired skill in language learning, because compared to the other language skills, listening, speaking and reading, writing is the most difficult (Sun, 1995). D. Nunan (1991) also confirmed this belief by saying that writing is a complicated process and being able to write well is usually considered to be the last skill in language learning. Considering the current situation of Chinese students' writing, the author believes that we firstly need to find out the causes for their learning problems, in other words, errors they made in their English writing process in order to improve students' writing ability.

Errors are common characteristic of language acquisition and learning. Larsen-freeman and Long claimed that the study of second language acquisition can be said to have passed through a series of phases

defined by the modes of inquiry researchers have utilized in their work: contrastive analysis, error analysis, performance analysis and discourse analysis. Error analysis is a tool used to determine the nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language. Via studying the types of errors on the basis of error analysis theory, author hopes to seek an effective approach to the teaching of English writing.

1.2 The significance of the study

For a long term, English composition is a weak link in English studying. Their writings are filled with all kinds of errors, which affect their performance in the examination to a great extent. The large number of language errors shows the problems in our present teaching of the basic language skills. If the major problems were found out and the corresponding remedial teaching methods were put forward, students would surely make less language errors in their writing and their writing proficiency would be greatly improved. Hence, detecting the language errors, analyzing them, finding out the causes and offering the effective solutions will be the most effective means to improve both our teaching and the students' writing proficiency. Thus, via conducting the study on this paper, author hopes to classify the frequent errors made by students, and analyze each type under the error analysis theory.

2 Literature review

2.1 Key concepts

Contrastive Analysis (CA) became popular in the 50s and 60s of the 20th century. But since the late 1960s, doubts of CA have increasingly been voiced. Many researchers thought it necessary to analyze and study learners' errors systematically. Therefore error

analysis became popular instead of CA. Researchers such as Corder, Richards, and Dulay and Burt made quite a few contributions in this field.

2.1.1 Definition of error

Different researchers view errors from different standpoints, each defining error from different level of the language. However, they all agree on one point that errors are deviations from a “selected norm” of language performance (Dulay et. al., P139). Besides, error study covers almost every aspect of the language, including phonology, morphology, syntax and pragmatics. For different purposes, researchers usually place different weight on the corresponding aspect. The present study just focuses on the common characteristic of linguistic errors shared by a group of non-English majors on the Chinese environment.

2.1.2 Definition of error analysis

Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics defines errors analysis as “the study and analysis of the errors made by second and foreign language learners” (p. 96). According to Corder (1981: 16), who made the first arguments for the significance of learners’ errors in 1967, error analysis is a type of bilingual comparison, a comparison between learners’ inter-language and the target language. It is a methodology of describing L2 learners’ language systems. Error analysis aims to 1) find out how well the learner knows the second language; 2) find out how the learner learns the second language; 3) obtain information on common difficulties in second language learning, as an aid in teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials; and 4) provide data from which inferences about the nature of the second language learning process can be made.

Error analysis is distinguished from contrastive analysis by its examination of errors attributable to all possible sources, not just those which result from the interference of the first language. Therefore, although error analysis and contrastive analysis are not mutually exclusive, the former can easily supersede the latter.

2.2 Procedures of error analysis

Error analysis generally consists of three stages, namely, identification, description and explanation.

2.2.1 Steps to identify errors

Errors of competence cannot be directly observed, and can only be inferred from errors of performance.

Corder (1977:276) provides a model, by which errors can be identified through three steps. The first step is identifying overt and covert errors. The second step is providing interpretations and constructing well-formed sentences in the target language. The third step is providing pairs of ill-formed or inappropriate sentences and reconstructed well-formed sentences in the target language for comparison.

2.2.2 The descriptions of errors

The description of errors is largely a linguistic activity, involving a comparative process and a descriptive one. Comparative process is a bilingual comparison, in which pairs of sentences are compared in terms of a common set of categories and relations of the same formal model. As for descriptive process, errors can be described in three dimensions. According to the stages in which errors are made, Corder (1977: 270-272) identifies three stages, presystematic stage, systematic stage and postsystematic stage. According to the general nature of errors, there are four mathematical categories of errors: addition, omission, substitution and ordering. According to the levels of language, there are errors in phonology or orthography, lexicon, grammar, and discourse.

2.2.3 Explanation of errors

The key to explanation lies in determining the sources of errors. In reality errors can be traced to various sources, linguistic, cognitive, affective and communicative. The major sources are inter-lingual transfer, intra-lingual transfer, transfer of training, communication strategies and cognitive and affective factors.

2.3 Previous studies on error analysis

2.3.1 Studies on error analysis abroad

Linguists began to study learners’ errors intensely in 1940’s. French (1949) provided a comprehensive account of common learner errors. Lee (1957) reported on an analysis of some 2,000 errors in the written work of Czechoslovakian learners (Ellis, 1994, P48). Telix (1981) and Pavesi (1986) conducted error analysis to compare the language produced by instructed and naturalistic learners. Bardovi-Harlig and Bofman (1989) wished to investigate differences between a group of learners who successfully passed the Indiana University Placement exam and a group who failed to do so by examining the nature of errors

committed in the two groups (Ellis, 1994).

2.3.2 Studies on error analysis at home

In recent years, Domestic linguists also found students' errors worthy of their attention and paid more and more to them. Aided by his graduates, Professor Yu Liming probed into students' writing errors to study language transfer in second language acquisition. Professor Wen Qiufang and Zhuang Yilin did researches to find advanced Chinese EFL learners could self-correct in their own inter-language system. Linguistic doctor, Wang Wenyu illustrated college students' writing process by studying their compositions. Gu Kai and Wang Tongshun (2004) obtained some positive achievements after students corrected their writings in a peer-review way. Such studies are but a drop in the sea on error analysis.

3 Description

3.1 Method of the study

The study adopts the theories of error analysis to analyze the features and characteristics of the language use of a student's composition. According to the performance analysis which Corder (Corder, 1975: 207) suggests, this study follows the steps of error analysis, as follows: collection of a sample learner language, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors and evaluation of

errors.

3.2 Procedures of the study

First of all, the student's writing was corrected by two teachers. Then the writing was found errors according to different categories. Before correcting students' writings, categories of errors were set clear to two teachers so as to ensure the correction was objective. The major methodology in this study is qualitative analysis (error analysis), so finally, on the basis of the error analysis theory, errors in student's writing were identified, described, explained and evaluated. Upon students' writings being corrected, the amount of errors on each type was counted (and percentages of the total number calculated if necessary).

4 Results and analysis

4.1 Data presentation

In this part, the main focus lies on finding out the main errors made by the student. The errors are classified into four levels: orthography errors, lexicon errors, grammar errors and discourse errors. In each level, an analysis is carried out through the statistical results of the occurrence and frequency of such errors. At last, based on the analysis, the frequent errors made by the student and the cause for such errors are found out and discussed. Overall statistics on the writing was made (see table 1).

Table 1. Statistics on student's writing errors

Types of errors	Examples	Numbers of errors	Proportions of errors
Orthography errors	it is hard for people to see eye to eye.	4	17%
Lexicon errors	In addition to, some people think English is superior than Chinese.	12	52%
Grammar errors	English do help us read English original works, but Chinese helps us learn a true China.	4	17%
Discourse errors	In me opinion, though English is for great significance, but English is after all a foreign language.	3	13%

4.1.1 Orthography errors

Errors at this level mainly involve misspelling, errors of capitalization and punctuation. Examples:

(1) In China, English is took to be a foreign language which many student choosed to learn.

(2) it is hard for people to see eye to eye.

In the first sentence, "foreign" is misspelled and the correct form should be "foreign". In the second sentence, "it" should be capitalized.

4.1.2 Lexicon errors

Lexicon errors in this study mainly refers to the

semantic or "conceptual" errors in lexis where the subjects used forms that exist in the TL but these forms didn't represent the meanings they wish to express. Lexicon errors mainly involve two types: namely errors in word choices and those in collocations. Examples:

(3) English is a internationally language which becomes importantly for modern world.

(4) In addition to, some people think English is superior than Chinese.

These two sentences contain the errors of word choice. Sentence 3) contains the error of

part of speech. Actually it should be English is an international language which becomes important for modern world. The suitable word in sentence 4) should be In addition, some people think English is superior to Chinese.

4.1.3 Grammar errors

Grammar has traditionally been discussed in terms of morphology and syntax, the former handling word structure, and the latter handling structures larger than the word. In this paper, morphological errors include morphological markers of plurality, third- person singular, etc. Syntactic errors include errors of phrase, clause, sentence and ultimately paragraphs. For instance, misordering sentence, dangling modifier, wrong sentence patterns, wrong verb tense, etc. Examples:

(5) English do help us read English original works, but Chinese helps us learn a true China.

(6) Learning a country's culture, especial its classic culture, the first thing is learn its language.

Sentence 5) contains morphological error of third-person singular. The correct form of “do” should be “does”. There is a dangling modifier in sentences 6): the subject of the main clause (the first thing) and the logical subject of the present participle phrase (we) are not in agreement. The better way of composing the sentence would be Learning a country's culture, especially its classic culture, we should first learn its language.

4.1.4 Discourse errors

Discourse errors involve problems in the organization of information into a coherent text (Ellis, 1994). We can conclude that, unlike grammatical choices, there is no “right” or “wrong” structure in discourse. In

this sense, “infelicity” is more acceptable rather than errors. When it comes to discourse, coherence comes first to handle. Therefore infelicity on coherence in students’ writings will be analyzed. Examples:

(7) In me opinion, though English is for great significance, but English is after all a foreign language.

(8) Only by characters Chinese literature can send off its brilliance.

Sentence 7) belongs to conjunctive error. The correct form of the sentence should be In my opinion, though English is for great significance, English is after all a foreign language. Sentence 8) contains error of wrong sentence structure. The correct sentence should be Only by characters can Chinese literature send off its brilliance.

4.2 Data Analysis

4.2.1 Analysis of lexicon errors

Table 1 clearly indicates that lexicon errors are most noticeable, which account for more than 50% of the total. This finding has just coincided with most findings on the errors of EFL learner’s writings (Grauberg, 1971: Meara,1984;Calvez, 2000).Wen Qiufang (1999) also found that lexis has more direct effect on writing compared with the other levels of language.

Doing correct spelling seems hard for Chinese college students, though they spend much time in memorizing new words, they still make many errors when they are writing compositions, letters, or other kinds of practical writings. Apparently, there are four types of lexicon errors, article, part of speech, passive voice, and collocation. You will see them in Table 2.

Table 2. Lexicon errors

Types	Numbers	Proportions
Article	2	16.7%
Part of speech	4	33.3%
Passive voice	2	16.7%
Collocation	4	33.3%

4.2.2 Analysis of the causes of students’ lexical errors

An analysis of the lexical errors found in the sample composition suggests that much of the wrong choice of words is caused by the interference of their mother tongue. This has been proved by some previous studies. In the research findings of Zughoul (1991), more than 73 percent of the 691 English lexical errors

found in the written texts of 128 university ESL students can be traced to the interference from L1 and that lexical errors due to L1 interference often appear in the form of incorrect word choice. In addition, some students’ depending too much on dictionaries and taking it for granted that bilingual dictionaries offer exact equivalents in meaning may be another

cause.

In China's English classrooms, when explaining an unknown word or a phrase, teachers usually spend much time explaining the formation, synonyms, and syntactic usage of the new item, little attention is given to cultural difference and pragmatic rules of the word. This kind of teaching practice can only be helpful for the students to memorize the word rather than acquire it because knowing that a letter string forms a word, or even knowing its meaning, does not tell us much about whether one is able to actually use the word appropriately and efficiently in communication (Ellis and Beaton 1993b).

5 Conclusion

Errors in learning are significant. Making errors is an inevitable and indeed a necessary part of L2 learning process. There is some value in categorizing errors and analyzing the causes of them, since this will lead at least to a greater understanding of the difficulties that learners have, and will assist in the development of pedagogic strategies.

Errors mentioned in this paper are analyzed at four levels: orthography errors, lexicon errors, grammar errors and discourse errors. However, the significance of error analysis never rests on it only. Firstly, due to differences between English and Chinese, students tend to commit many errors on lexicon, which can rank the top one in percentage of all the errors. Secondly, errors on discourse at sentence level count for very few because students resort to avoidance

strategy when they are faced with some language items. Thirdly, grammar or syntax is almost fossilized in students' mind where teachers' efforts are supposed to be necessary and urgent.

Based on these findings, the paper is expected to be useful and enlightening for improving English teachers' teaching strategies. Firstly, teachers should attach great importance to lexical teaching in class. Secondly, teachers should help students to get rid of the false assumption on the semantic and syntactic equivalence of English and Chinese words. Thirdly, teachers should have the proper way of correcting students' writing to give students the effective help.

References

- [1] Guo RH. Error Analysis in English Writing of Non-English major undergraduates [D]. Yanshan University, 2013.
- [2] Han D. Error Analysis and Enlightenment of Error Analysis [D]. Shanghai International Studies University, 2004.
- [3] He HQ. Analysis of Vocabulary Errors in Non-English majors' Writing -- A Corpus-based Study [J]. *Foreign Languages*, 2009, 3: 2-9.
- [4] Li H. Analysis of Language Errors in non-English majors' Writing [D]. Dalian Maritime University, 2003.
- [5] Meng LJ. Analysis of English Writing Errors of Vocational College Students [D]. Shandong Normal University, 2009.
- [6] Peng XY. Analysis of Errors in College Students' English Writing [D]. Jilin University, 2009.
- [7] Tian YF. Error Analysis and its influence on Foreign Language Teaching in China [D]. Sichuan University, 2006.
- [8] Le MY. *Applied Linguistics* [M]. Jiangsu: Nanjing University Press, 1999.