Intra-Lingual and Inter-Lingual Errors in Chinese College Freshmen's English Writing

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Abstract

In this paper, a statistical analysis was made on the errors in the freshmen's English writing based on the English compositions collected from a Chinese 211 project university. The analytical result showed that there are mainly 13 types of errors in the English writing of China's college freshmen, which can be categorized into "intra-lingual errors" and "inter-lingual errors", and each of these two categories can be subdivided into "lexical errors" and "syntax errors". Among them, the sentence inconsistency, errors in the articles, parts of speech errors or tense/voice errors take up the highest proportions. At the end, the inspirations from research results were introduced for English writing teaching.

Key words: English writing; Intra-lingual errors; Inter-lingual errors; Error analysis

INTRODUCTION

English writing is a critical component of English study, requiring learners to have a solid grammatical foundation. Nowadays, however, there are always different kinds of grammatical errors in Chinese college students' English writing, varying from lexical errors to syntax errors, and from intra-lingual errors to inter-lingual errors. In recent years, more and more scholars have started to study and analyze English learners' language errors, but there are limited studies on the errors that appear in Chinese college freshmen's English writing. The freshmen in Grade 2015 of a 211 project university were taken as the objects of this research, whose compositions were collected and corrected, and were categorized in a statistical way according to the standard of judging intra-lingual and inter-lingual errors, so as to help specifically improve the teaching and learning of English writing at the university period.

1. RELATIVE STUDIES

"Intra-lingual errors and inter-lingual errors" are the bases for the categorization of two major kinds of errors in English learning, put forward by Gao (2002) from the angle of linguistic factors generated in language errors and based on relative studies of James (2001) and other scholars. Inter-lingual errors refer to the kind of errors resulted from language transfer—the ones that appear due to a learner's native language, the rules, habits and models of which pose interferential errors during the process of transferring the native language into the target one. Intra-lingual errors mean the sort of errors caused by the mutual interference between the items in target language or by the incomplete learning of the items of target language— the internal interferential errors when the target language cannot be fully utilized due to the incorrect or incomplete understanding of the target language system that has been internalized by learners.

Foreign scholars with Corder as a representative have shown great interest in language error analysis. Professor Corder published two papers *The Significance of Learners' Language Errors* and *Idiosyncratic Dialects and Error Analysis* respectively in 1967 and 1971, marking the start of studies on language error analysis. In the paper *Error Analysis: A Tool to Improve English Skills of Undergraduate Students*, Zafar (2016) also pointed

out that studies on error analysis can be an effective tool to guide college students in their English learning. Their research results have contributed to the enrichment and innovation of foreign language teaching theories, making remarkable contributions to the development of applied linguistics.

Nowadays, Chinese scholars are also approaching the studies of English language errors. *Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC)* authored by Gui and Yang (2000) is the earliest research fruits on English language errors of college and middle school students in China. In *An Analysis* of Errors in Writing and Teaching Writing, Du (2001) analyzed the errors of students' English writing based on CLEC so as to discuss the teaching of English writing in China. Qiu and Xiao (2011) made a statistical analysis on the proportions of the appearance of "inter-lingual and intra-lingual errors" by carrying out a sample survey among a certain group of undergraduates, adopting the research method of error analysis. In *Study of Language Errors in the MA Theses of English Majors*, Jia and Qiao (2014) analyzed the reasons for the language errors generated in the theses of English-majored master students, and summarized the inspiration of the study result for the teaching of English thesis writing. But generally, the listing and statistics of the error types in Chinese undergraduates, especially freshmen's English writing were relatively insufficient, lacking the detailed categorization and studies on "intra-lingual errors" and "inter-lingual errors" appeared in English writing. Given this reason, these two kinds of errors will be explored and analyzed in this paper, respectively listed and calculated by category so as to help improve college students' English writing skill.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 Research Questions
The following questions will be mainly studied in this paper:

(a) What are the errors in Chinese college freshmen's English writing? How can these errors be categorized? What are the reasons for them?

(b) What are the meaning and inspiration that analyzing these errors can have for college freshmen's English writing and the teaching of writing?

2.2 Research Materials
The materials analyzed in this paper are the freshmen's English compositions from a 211 project university in China. A unified topic was assigned and the writings were collected at the same time for correction, ensuring the pertinence of this research.

2.3 Research Process
First of all, the compositions were gathered together and collected, and the errors were marked. Later, the errors

were sorted according to two standards of "intra-lingual errors" and "inter-lingual errors", and each category was subdivided into "lexical errors" and "syntax errors". After the categorization, each specific error was lined out and carefully analyzed. For example, the lexical errors in the category of "intra-lingual errors" can be subdivided into errors in parts of speech, article errors, conjunction errors, errors in modal verbs and collocation errors. Lastly, the amount and proportion of each error type were calculated and studied combining relative documents.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Error Description
Among the 46 compositions collected, the author summarized 13 types of errors, categorizing them into the "intra-lingual errors" and "inter-lingual errors" and subdividing them into "lexical errors" and "syntax errors". The types, amounts and proportions of these errors are shown as Table 1.

Table 1
The Type, Amount and Proportion of Errors

Error type		Amounts	Proportions (%)
Intra-lingual errors	Lexical errors	Errors in parts of speech	34	9.94
		Article errors	45	13.16
		Conjunction errors	22	6.43
		Errors in modal verbs	8	2.34
		Collocation errors	33	9.65
	Syntax errors	Clausal errors	15	4.39
		Inconsistency	61	17.84
		Incomplete sentences	24	7.02
		Tenses/voices errors	34	9.94
		Word order errors	11	3.22
Inter-lingual errors	Lexical errors	Collocation errors	21	6.14
	Syntax errors	Succession of verbs	17	4.97
		Chinese sentence patterns	17	4.97
Total		342	100

It can be seen from Table 1 that the intra-lingual errors are the major error types. Among them, the "inconsistency"

in the "syntax errors" takes up the highest proportion followed by the "article errors" in the sub-classification of "lexical errors"; the errors in the "tenses/voices" in the "parts of speech" and "syntax errors" in the sub-classification of "lexical errors" come at the third place. The three kinds of errors that were made at a lowest frequency are the errors in the "modal verbs" in the "lexical errors", "word order errors" and "clausal errors". The amounts and proportions of the "inter-lingual errors" were lower. In the following parts, examples with different above-mentioned errors will be given and analyzed.

3.2 Intra-Lingual Errors

3.2.1 Lexical Errors

Errors in parts of speech

(1) The eventually answer…

Generally, a noun should be modified by an adjective and the adjective should be placed in front of the noun. In this example, the adjective that modifies the noun "answer" should be "eventual".

Article errors

(2) The news has become the talk of class.

This example lacks the article "the". "The class" refers to all the students in the class. Similar usage includes "the rich" and "the town".

Conjunction errors

(3) Instead of just listening to teachers, but students should say their opinions…

This example falls under the category of conjunction misusage. The two clauses in this sentence are not adversative but progressive, and the conjunction "but" needs to be removed.

Errors in modal verbs

(4) Students and teachers can considering…

The modal verbs should be followed by a verb in base form, and it should be "can consider" in this example.

Collocation errors

(5) On one hand, … on another hand…

The correct collocation in this example should be "on the one hand… , on the other hand…"

3.2.2 Syntax Errors

Clausal errors

(6) This is the situation that we can get freedom.

The structure of the clause in this example is complete but the adverb part was misused. The relative adverb "where" should be used instead of the relative pronoun "that".

Inconsistency

(7) Someone think that

The subjective and the predicate are inconsistent here. The predicate verb after the third person should be the third-person singular. Therefore, it should be modified into "someone thinks".

Incomplete sentence

(8) When we comment on our teachers, using roundabout words and wearing a smile.

The sentence in this example is incomplete, lacking the subjective. It can be corrected as "when we comment on our teachers, we should use roundabout words and wear a smile."

Errors in tenses/voices

(9) Teachers must be fail…

The voice was misused here. In the active voice, the link verb "be" should not be used. Thus, it should be "Teachers must fail".

Word order errors

(10) This is a fierce debate about whether should students criticize teachers.

The word order is wrong in this sentence as the clause for "whether" should be a statement. It can be corrected as "This is a fierce debate about whether students should criticize teachers."

3.3 Inter-Lingual Errors

3.3.1 Lexical Errors

Collocation errors

(11) A few population…

Misled by the Chinese collocation, the word "few" collocated with "population" in this student's composition, which should be "A small population".

3.3.2 Syntax Errors

Succession of verbs

(12) We desire show ourselves…

Two verbs in base form should not be used together in English grammar, but there are a lot of such usages in Chinese language, resulting in numerous errors of "using verbs successively" in Chinese students' English writing. For instance, the student used "desire" and "show" successively in this example while the correct usage should be "We desire to show ourselves."

Chinese sentence pattern

(13) There are always many students understand.

The student wrote two predicate verbs according to Chinese word order. But in English, if there is another other verb after the predicate verb "be", it should be changed into a non-finite one to be the attribute or the sentence with this verb should be changed into an attributive clause. Therefore, this sentence can be rewritten as "There are always many students who understand."

CONCLUSION

In this paper, a statistical analysis was made on the errors appeared in 46 English compositions of the freshmen in Grade 2015 in a 211 project university in China, and the major conclusions are as below:

(a) There are generally 13 types of common errors in college freshmen's English writing, which can be subdivided as the "lexical errors" and "syntax errors" under the categories of "intra-lingual errors" and "inter-lingual errors".

(b) Among all the errors, the ones that are frequently made are inconsistency (17.84%), the article errors (13.16%), the errors in parts of speech and tenses/voices (9.94%), demonstrating that there is a great problem in writing consistent sentences in terms of syntax, and article usage poses a big problem for Chinese college freshmen in terms of vocabulary. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the sentence consistency and article usage. The reasons for making such errors are mainly the negative transfer of native language and insufficient comprehension and mastery over English grammar.

INSPIRATIONS

(a) For teachers, they should firstly present common error types to their students so that they can understand the basic error types and avoid making such mistakes in future writing. Meanwhile, the teachers should particularly pay attention to the high-frequency errors such as sentence inconsistency, article errors, errors in parts of speech and tenses/voices, so as to help students realize the seriousness of these errors and take the initiative to instruct them to collect these errors.

(b) For students, they should firstly understand the categorization of different errors so as to avoid them consciously in the writing. Secondly, the students should pay attention to the impact of the negative transfer of their mother language, and lastly learn English grammar carefully and do their best to comprehend and master it correctly and completely.

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