# An Empirical Study on the Writing Ability of College Students with the Error Analysis Approach

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**Abstract**

In English writing, learners' language output errors are common and even inevitable. English teachers are confronted with various kinds of output errors made by students in the course of their teaching. This paper is a study on the errors in the English writings of 13 junior non-English major students. Through Error Analysis Approach, we learn that the problems of Chinese learners of English lie mostly in grammatical and lexical level. Among the detailed items, errors concerning the collocation of words at the lexical level, transitional devices at the textual level, and paratactic sentences, concurrent structure and subjective-predicate structure at the grammatical level occur most frequently. Then detailed analysis of these errors shows that, apart from the learner's carelessness and incompetent knowledge of the target language, mother-tongue transfer is also an important reason that causes the English learners' unsuccessful mastery of the target language.

**Keywords:** English writing, error, error analysis

## 1. Introduction

Ever since the implementation of its reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s, China has been participating in the intensifying economic integration, political cooperation and culture exchanges around the world actively and extensively with unprecedented determination. The irreversible globalization in all aspects makes Chinese realize the importance of foreign language education, especially English education. Since China entered into WTO, hosted 2008 Olympic Games and held numerous international expositions, including 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, Chinese has been showing much greater enthusiasm towards English learning than ever before. A sequential and complete English education system—covering from even nursery school to higher education—has been established. College English Test[1] has developed into the greatest national language achievement test system. In the meantime, language teaching has always been laid on desirable attention and concern by the Chinese education department. Language learning, especially English learning, has become an indispensable part of most Chinese people's daily life, and English proficiency usually has been taken as a yardstick to make the judgment whether a new graduate is qualified for his post at the beginning of his career. Along with the prevalence and popularity of English learning in China, English education has made astonishing achievement by the improvement of facilities and the introduction and application of the latest theories and methods in this field. However, some undesirable problems in English education still remain and can not be overlooked. Being one of the most important output skills of language learning, writing has long been taken as a major benchmark to measure the linguistic competence and proficiency of a second language learner (Zheng, 2010). It has long been considered as the thorniest section in college English education. As Qin (2009) puts it, "on the one hand, many teachers find that despite great effort invested, improvement in students' writing competence is not highly achieved; On the other hand, students claim that it is really difficult to complete compositions of high quality even after repetitive drills." They are always troubled by various errors appearing in their compositions.

It is a common phenomenon that learners conduct all kinds of errors in their language learning. Just as Dulay and Burt (1974) claims, "You cannot learn without goofing." Writing is considered a complex task especially when it is carried out in a foreign language. If we want to better ourselves, we will produce odd errors, as Brown (2002) put it, "In the course of learning a second language, learners will produce utterances which are ungrammatical or

otherwise ill-formed, when judged by the generally accepted rules of the language they are learning." Researchers and teachers of second languages soon come to realize the importance of learners' errors in understanding the learning process.

Using the previous studies as references, this paper aims at a detailed analysis of the types and distribution of errors occurred in the English compositions of 13 third-year-college-students majoring in Russia, and tries to seek more about the explanations to the specific example of English learning. Thus, some related strategies that would be helpful to develop the learners' English writing competence would be proposed.

## 2. Methodology

This study would be carried out through Error Analysis Approach. The approach itself became a theory in the 1960s with Corder's (1967) *The Significance of Learner's Errors*. As its name suggests, Error Analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on errors learners make. *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (Richards et al., 2005) defines error analysis as "the study and analysis of the errors made by second and foreign language learners". According to Corder (1981), Error Analysis is a type of bilingual comparison, a comparison between learners' interlanguage and the target language. It is a methodology of describing second language learners' language systems. In simple words，error analysis is a procedure which involves collecting samples of learner language, identifying the errors in the sample, describing these errors, classifying them according to the hypothesized causes and evaluating their seriousness.

Errors in this study are categorized according to James criteria (2001), that is, on the level of language. According to James' classification, errors in this study are classified into substance errors, lexical errors, grammar errors and discourse errors. In addition, the errors could be further divided into several subcategories.

## 3. Subjects, Procedure of the Study

The subjects of this study are 13 junior students majoring in Russian in the Foreign Languages College of Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities. Although the subjects are from a university in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, they are actually of the Han Nationality. Their native language is Chinese and they have already studied English for six years before entering the University. Their English mark varied when they attended the National College Entrance Examination[2]. Their different level of English proficiency reflects the learning and teaching of English writing of college students to some extent. They take English as their second foreign language and English lessons are not taught until the latter half of their sophomore year so that they could focus on their major, Russian.

In this study, the subjects are required to write a composition of about 120 words on Greenhouse Effect and they were asked to finish it within 35 minutes under their teacher's supervision. The author chose a topic that was new for these students after consulting their teacher in order to ensure the validity of this research. Therefore, it would reflect the students' real writing ability.

With the help of a friend whose native language is English, the author goes through all the compositions thoroughly for several times, and finds out all the errors that subjects committed in their compositions and marks them. Then the linguistic errors are picked out and classified into four categories in accordance with James' classification (2001): substance errors, lexical errors, grammatical errors and discourse errors. Some of them can be divided into some subcategories. Lexical errors include errors in the wrong use of words or phrases, and errors in collocation; Grammatical errors deal with four aspects: Paratactic Sentence, Concurrent Structure, Non-finite Verbs and Subject- Predicate Structure; Discourse errors are errors in text structure and cohesion. In counting these errors, the same error that reoccurs in one composition will be counted as one.

## 4. Results

Table 1. General Distribution of the Writing Errors (Number of Students: 13)

| Categorization | Number of Errors | Ratio |
|---|---|---|
| Substance Errors | 5 | 2.31% |
| Lexical Errors | 74 | 33.33% |
| Grammar Errors | 92 | 42.59% |
| Text Errors | 45 | 20.83% |
| Total Number | 216 | |

Table 1 is a general analysis of the distribution of the errors and shows that the total number of errors in learners' writings is 216. Among those errors, there are 92 grammar errors which account for 42.59% of the total. Then it is the lexical errors taking up 74, 33.33% of the whole. The number of text errors is 45, which accounts for 20.83% of the total. The substance errors are the least, only taking up 2.31% of the total errors.

Table 2. Detailed Distributions of the Writing Errors

| Categorization | Details | | Number of Errors | | Ratio | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Substance Errors | Punctuation | | 5 | | 2.31% | |
| Lexical errors | Collocation | | 63 | | 29.17% | |
| | Spelling | | 11 | | 5.09% | |
| Grammar Errors | Plurals | | 4 | | 1.85% | |
| | Singular 3rd Person Pronouns | | 4 | | 1.85% | |
| | Sentence structure | Subject-Predicate Structure | 12 | | 6.02% | |
| | | Non-finite Verbs | 11 | | 5.09% | |
| | | Attributive Clause | 8 | 73 | 3.70% | 34.26% |
| | | Voice | 4 | | 1.85% | |
| | | Concurrent Structure | 16 | | 7.41% | |
| | | Paratactic Sentence | 20 | | 9.26% | |
| | | pause | 2 | | 0.93% | |
| | Tense | | 11 | | 5.09% | |
| Textual Errors | Text Structure | | 11 | | 5.09% | |
| | Cohesion | Reference | 7 | 34 | 3.24% | 15.74% |
| | | Transitional Words | 27 | | 12.50% | |

Table 3. Distributions of the Writing Errors of Individuals

Number of Students: 13    Total Marks: 15

| Students | Marks of Writing | Number of Errors | Substance | Ratio | Lexical | Ratio | Grammar | Ratio | Text | Ratio |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Student1 | 14 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 100% | 0 | 0 |
| Student2 | 13 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 100% | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Student3 | 12.5 | 6 | 1 | 16.67% | 2 | 33.33% | 2 | 33.33% | 1 | 16.67% |
| Student4 | 12 | 8 | 1 | 12.50% | 3 | 37.50% | 3 | 37.50% | 1 | 12.50% |
| Student5 | 12 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 50% | 2 | 25% | 2 | 25% |
| Student6 | 11 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 30% | 5 | 50% | 2 | 20% |
| Student7 | 9 | 16 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 37.50% | 7 | 43.75% | 3 | 18.75% |
| Student8 | 9 | 19 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 36.84% | 8 | 42.11% | 4 | 21.05% |
| Student9 | 8 | 21 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 28.57% | 10 | 47.62% | 5 | 23.81% |
| Student10 | 8.5 | 26 | 1 | 3.85% | 9 | 34.62% | 10 | 38.46% | 6 | 23.08% |
| Student11 | 8 | 28 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 35.71% | 13 | 46.43% | 5 | 17.86% |
| Student12 | 7 | 34 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 29.41% | 16 | 47.06% | 8 | 23.53% |
| Student13 | 7 | 37 | 2 | 5.41% | 12 | 32.43% | 15 | 40.54% | 8 | 21.62% |

Table 2 and 3 are a detailed analysis of the distribution of the errors. In Table 2, the 4 types are further divided into more detailed categories and their distribution is listed carefully. Among those, the ratios of words collocation errors and wrong-used transitional items are the highest, with the percentage of 29.17% and 12.50% respectively. Other frequently occurred errors include Paratactic Sentence, Concurrent Structure, Subject-Predicate Structure, Words Spelling, Non-finite verb, tense, etc.   Table 3 studies the numbers and ratio of each type of the errors made by individual learners in order to compare with the general statistics concerning the distribution of the errors.

To some extent, the statistical results are consistent with the observation from the real teaching practice. Both revealed the errors of the English learners in China. Then what are the causes of these problems? More analysis of the statistical data is conducted below so that we could find the answers.

## 5. Detailed Analysis with Examples

### 5.1 Substance Errors

The substance errors are the misuse of some punctuation in the process of writing. From Table 1, we could see that this type of errors only takes up of 2.31% of the total errors, which is the lowest. Also, Table 3 shows that most of the students are immune to this problem. Two errors made by student 10 and student 4 are that they mistakenly uses colon ":" instead of comma "," before a direct quotation. The other 3 errors made by student 3 and student 13 are showed in sentence (a).

(a) I kept thinking about what I should do?

In this sentence, the clause directed by Wh-word is an object clause and the choice of punctuation should follow the main sentence. Here, a full stop "." is proper.

It is known that in Chinese a colon ":" is often used before direct quotation. Lots of examples have shown that students at the beginning level often commit this error. We here just assume the example of student 10 as the carelessness about the difference between Chinese and English. As for example (a), maybe it is the ignorance of the knowledge concerning the sentence structure that has caused this error.

### 5.2 Lexical Errors

33.33% of the errors are lexical ones, which consist of errors on the form, i.e. spelling, and the semantic errors, i.e. words collocation, such as verb-object, objective-noun. The lexical errors are very common in the writings of English learners, no matter the learners are of higher or lower level.

Words collocation is also one of the most serious errors (See Table 2), taking up about 29.17% of the total. Research has shown that Chinese vocabulary is only 1%-2% that of English. In order to express large quantity of meaning, Chinese has to resort to its powerful collocation. This mode of Chinese language using is often imposed on the English language using by the English learners, thus some errors are inevitable. For example,

(b) It is a nightmare to share my parents' and friends' love to the other who is the same as me.

In sentence (b), the correct use is "share something with somebody". Here, "to" is a mistake. In Chinese, the word "share" has the meaning of "giving something to somebody", for example, "把你的爱分享给他人". However, in English, the meaning "having something together with another person" is emphasized. Here, the learner took the Chinese meaning for granted and chose the preposition "to" instead of "with".

Another case that should be mentioned is the use of some large words improperly in some not-so-formal context. For example,

(c) My parents purchased fish from far place and then sold them at the market.

Here, "purchase" is not wrong on the level of both grammar and meaning. However, in this sentence, it seems a little too formal. The word "buy" is more appropriate in this situation.

### 5.3 Grammar Errors

In this study, the ratio of grammar errors is the highest, about 42.59% of the total (See table 1). Among these errors, sentence structure is the most problematic. This part would focus on four items with the most errors (See Table 2).

5.3.1 Paratactic Sentence

The errors concerning the paratactic sentence are about 9.26% of the total errors, the highest among the grammar errors. The characteristic is to use several verbs paratactically in a sentence. In Chinese, this use of verbs is very common, but not in English, where only one predicate in an independent sentence is required. Though most of

the upper-level students are not unfamiliar with this principle, they are easily affected by the mode of their mother tongue. For example,

(d)When our birthday came, we often could find a lovely present prepare for us when waking up.

Clearly, the word "prepare" here is very inappropriate, violating the one-predicate principle of English structure.

### 5.3.2 Concurrent Structure

Among Chinese student's English writings, the concurrent structure shows itself frequently. This is a kind of structure that lists several simple sentences with commas or conjunctions "and"/"or". It is not wrong grammatically and in Chinese, it is Ok. However, English is different from Chinese and it is inappropriate to rely on this kind of sentences in writing. In this study, there are 16 errors of concurrent structure, taking up 7.41% of the total. And the students who got the lower marks seem to use this structure more frequently. For example,

(e) My parents are not strict with us at all, if we don't want to attend the tutorial classes, they would not send us there, so my brothers and I have a wonderful childhood.

Layers of meaning could be seen from this sentence. However, there is no clear stop from the beginning to the end. According to the English mode of illustrating thing, layers of meaning should be clearly defined by the conjunctions and relative words.

### 5.3.3 Subject-Predicate Structure

English is a language with Subject-Predicate structure and the part of subject or logical subject should never be avoided. However, in Chinese, only half of the sentences used in communication are with Subject-Predicate structure. It is often the Topic-Comment structure (Cai, 2000). Affected by the structure of the mother tongue, Chinese students learning English often make the mistakes about subject, i.e. using a "false subject". For example,

(f) Human cloning can clone a person who had made great contributions to society.

It seems that it is a full sentence. However, "Human cloning" is only the topic and it could not be used as the real subject because the action "clone a person" needs an agent.

### 5.3.4 Non-Finite Verbs

Errors concerning the non-finite verbs constitute about 5.09% of the total. In students' writings, this kind of errors are often made by the students of intermediate level and below intermediate level. English is a typical SOV language. It is very important for the subject to be consistent with the predicate. This is totally different from the Chinese grammar which emphasize on the relation of theme/rhyme, i.e. if the meaning could be recognized, it is not important to pay too much attention to the relation of subject and predicate verbs. Perhaps, Chinese learners of English often make some errors about the non-finite verbs. For example,

(g) Conclude from the experience of my little brother, I didn't think I would be punished.

The logical subject of the clause "conclude from the experience" should be consistent with the subject of the main clause, i.e. "I", which should also be the subject of "concluded". Concerning the nature of the word "conclude", it should be used as "concluding" after the subject to form an active relationship.

### 5.4 Discourse Errors

Generally speaking, a text should be meaningful and cohesive with full meaning and fluent expressing and could be used as a language unit for communicating the information (Li, 2003). According to Halliday (2006), every text must have a texture, including both the structural characteristics and non-structural characteristics. The former refers to the theme/rhyme structure and the information structure and the latter the cohesion of the whole text. The cohesion of the text is realized mainly by reference and transitional words, which are important visual symbols of a complete text.

In this study, the errors concerning the whole text are about 20.83% of the total. Though not the largest, it still deserves our attention.

### 5.4.1 Text Structure

The structural errors of the text are about 5.09% of the whole text. As mentioned above, the language structure of English is consistent with the information structure. It usually begins with the topic sentence as the part of theme, and then the rhyme part continues with each point of the information. However, it contradicts with Chinese mode of thinking, which always avoids the preconception. Before the topic is introduced, there would always be a lot of discussion, all of which is related to the whole or part of the main information. Comparing with English, it is

not easy to grasp the theme of a whole paragraph. The errors made by the Chinese students concerning the text structure are just of this kind. The paragraph below is an example.

(h) (1) Just like everything has two sides, human cloning is also a two-edged sword. (2) It can be dangerous to human kind. (3) For example, it will bring out the moral problems. (4) But views on new technologies will change over time. (5) Some looking strange today will become normal in future. (6) Besides, some people will use it for making huge profits on purpose. (7) So we should make law to ban these bad deeds. (8) And before the technology becomes mature, it may produce inferiors. (9) So what we have to do is to work hard to make the new technology perfect.

The most obvious problem in this paragraph is the contracture of the text. The first sentence is transitional. Then goes the second sentence which would be viewed as the topic sentence when first reading it. Then the third sentence gives an example. However, "but" in the fourth sentence changes the whole theme from the dangerousness of "human cloning" to "new technologies". Sentence (5) is an addition to the previous one. Then sentence (6) is a little ambiguous. From the perspective of the whole paragraph, it could be seen as continuing the discussion of sentence (3). Sentence (7) could be the proposed measure to the problem. However, the eighth sentence once again comes back to the topic of sentence (2). Sentence (9), like sentence (7), is another proposal to the problem. It is filled with entangled ideas and easy to get reader confused. We could tell from these problems that this student is still constrained in the Chinese mode of thinking while writing an English text.

5.4.2 Cohesion Errors

Errors concerning the cohesion of the whole text take up 15.74% of the whole. It consists of errors concerning the references and transitions.

Reference errors in these writing are mostly about the confusion caused by the using of some pronouns. Take sentence (6) in paragraph (h) as an example, the pronoun "it" is a little ambiguous at the first reading, because the referent "it" in sentence (1) is the same as that of sentence (2). The distance between the reference and the referent determines that it is not proper any longer to use "it" directly to wake the referent up in the readers' mind. The English is a well-knit form, quite different from Chinese.

Errors concerning the transition are about 12.50% of the total and they also constitute the largest portion of the total text errors. Transitional word is one important device that could make sure the whole text goes smoothly and fluently. This study on the learners' writing shows that they often misuse some transitional words. Here, we continue to take the sentence in paragraph (h) as the example. In sentence (6), a transitional word "Besides" is used. "Besides" in English usually means that when several items have been mentioned, there are still more that should be added. Here the message preceding sentence (6) only mentions one part of the danger of the "human cloning." It is not necessary to use "besides". Also, the sentences in the paragraph are not clearly and closely linked in meaning. Therefore, "besides" only add confusion instead of making the paragraph more well-knit. The misuse of the transitional words could also make it hard for the text to achieve completeness.

## 6. Discussion and Implication

This paper is a study on the errors made by students in their English writing. We try to learn more about the situation and causes of the problems occurring in the writing practice through error analysis approach. We learn that the problems of Chinese learners of English lie mostly in the grammatical and lexical level. Among the detailed items, errors concerning the collocation of words at the lexical level, transitional devices at the textual level, and paratactic sentences, concurrent structure and subjective-predicate structure at the grammatical level occur most frequently. This is consistent with the error distribution of individuals. Then detailed analysis of these errors shows that, apart from the learner's carelessness and incompleteness about the knowledge of target language, mother-tongue transfer is also an important reason that directly causes the English learners' unsuccessful mastery of the target language. Having been habituated to the Chinese culture and mode of thinking, the students would impose some principles on the language that they are learning, though unconsciously sometimes. The results are some sentences and texts that are possibly formal yet inappropriate in communicating the proper messages.

Therefore, in order to improve the overall English writing ability of students, teachers in the practice of teaching writing should pay more attention to help students learn to distinguish and fully understand the laws and principles of the target language. Some strategies that would be helpful are listed as follows:

(1) Strengthen the training on the basic knowledge of language in order to make students more familiar with the target language. Like the other abilities, the ability of English writing could not be cultivated in one day. The

foundational knowledge, such as the collocation of different words, the principles of syntactic and textual constructions is crucial to the further development of writing ability.

(2) Increase the comparative teaching practice concerning the different cultures and modes of thinking between mother tongue and target language, especially the latter one. Sometimes, even though the students know the principles and laws of the target language, they still make mistakes just because their the mode of mother tongue have deeply rooted in the mind. Only when they are quite familiar with the similarities and differences between the two languages, could they use the target language with much flexibleness and correctness.

(3) Encourage the autonomy of learners by making them learn from their own errors. The writings of the students could be revised by themselves or their classmates, which could make them more active and devoted to this practice. Knowing the mistakes they and their friends make could enable them to learn from the errors more effectively.

Although much effort is put on this study, yet this paper is with its limitations. This analysis is carried out within the structural linguistic framework, without referring to many other disciplines, such as cognitive linguistics, psychology, sociology, which may also be of influence to the many errors made by the students in the process of their writing. Besides, it should be noticed that the students in this study are Russian majors with English as their second foreign language. The influence of Russian on their use of English should also be under careful study.

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**Notes**

Note 1. The College English Test, better known as CET, is a national English as a foreign language test in China. The purpose of the CET is to examine the English proficiency of undergraduate students and postgraduate students in China and ensure that Chinese undergraduates and postgraduates reach the required English levels specified in the National College English Teaching Syllabuses.

Note 2. It is an important academic testing event for those who have accomplished high-school education and are applying to universities, colleges and other higher educational institutions in China.