

# A Corpus-based Study of the Infinitive Errors Made by Chinese College Students

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the infinitive errors made by Chinese college students. From the CLEC, all infinitive errors tagged as [vp5] are collected, and then the general distribution of the errors among 4 groups of college students is shown. Moreover, these errors are classified into 12 categories according to the characteristics of the usage. After manual classification, we can see the main distribution features of these errors clearly. The most common infinitive errors fall into the category of “doing→do”, i.e. misuses of a gerund where a base verb should be used. It is surprised to find that the category of “do→did/done” ranks the second in the number of errors in the CLEC in which case Chinese learners use the structure of “to + the past tense or past participle of a verb” in their written works. Finally, possible causes of these errors are given and ways to avoid them are suggested.

**Keywords:** Errors, Interlanguage, Learner corpora, English learning and teaching

## 1. Introduction

The infinitive represents a typical problem for Chinese learners in their process of learning English. They often find difficulty in using the infinitive correctly. Therefore, this study aims to find out the most common errors made by Chinese learners in their English texts based on the Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC).

The CLEC was built by Gui Shichun at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in 2002. It contains about 1 million tokens. The material consists of written texts by Chinese learners at different levels. They form 5 major groups of English learners in China: high school students (st2), lower grade college students (non-English major) (st3), higher grade college students (non-English major) (st4), lower grade college students (English major) (st5) and higher grade college students (English major) (st6). As this study focuses on the errors made by college students, we will select the material from st3, st4, st5 and st6, which amounts to about 800,000 tokens in all.

## 2. General Situations of Errors in Using the Infinitive by Chinese College Students

The CLEC is a tagged corpus with the errors of the infinitive tagged as [vp5]. However, this is not a narrow classification as incorrect uses of present participles and past participles are all grouped under this tag. Through data retrieval in the corpus, we got 437 [vp5] tags in the four sub-corpora of the CLEC. This means that the total number of errors made by college students is 437, and the number of errors made by each group of st3, st4, st5 and st6 is 138, 130, 109 and 60 respectively which accounts for 31%, 30%, 25% and 14% as shown in Fig. 1.

From the distribution of the errors, we can see that the number of errors decreases gradually with the increase in the number of years learners have spent in learning English or with the improvement of their proficiency in English. That is to say, the number of errors made by non-English majors is greater than that made by English majors because English majors generally acquire greater proficiency in English than non-English majors do. And lower grade students make more errors than higher grade students do. But in general, all categories of college students will make errors when they use the infinitive without obvious difference between each category. The reason why this situation arises may be due to the negative transfer of Chinese because we don't have the infinitive forms in Chinese. Thus, Chinese learners may overgeneralize the rules of the infinitive, and overuse the infinitive form where a present participle or a gerund should be used.

## 3. Classification and Analysis of the Infinitive Errors

In order to sum up the characteristics of Chinese learner's errors, the 437 errors from the CLEC are classified. The

infinitive is a basic form of a verb. In English, an infinitive is used by itself, or with *to*. According to its grammatical usage and the infinitive errors that Chinese learners may make, we classify them in 12 groups. For example, “do→to do” is a type of errors where learners misuse an infinitive without “to” with an infinitive with “to”. And “doing→did/done” is another type of errors where a past participle or past form of a verb is misused instead of a present participle. The classification is shown in Table 1.

Although the infinitive errors retrieved from the CLEC are 437, after classification and verification we found that some tagged errors were not actual infinitive errors but other types of errors. Moreover, some errors were not errors at all but tagged as errors due to the negligence of the annotators of the corpus. Below are some examples from the corpus:

Ex. 1 But the resources in the world is [vp5, 1-]limited. Therefore, isn't it very

Ex. 2 More people come to this world, they need drinking [vp5,1-] water.

Ex. 3 I've been growing up with girls fancying having [vp5,-] an elder brother

The above Ex. 1 is not an infinitive error, but the error in agreement between the subject and the predicate. Ex. 2 is ambiguous sentence. The annotator of the sentence might think that the modal verb “need” should be followed by an infinitive with “to” not a gerund. However, “drinking” here is a present participle, used to modify the noun “water”. It’s grammatically correct. The same is true with Ex. 3. Therefore, after removing these annotated mistakes, 368 out of the 437 tagged errors are real infinitive errors.

Fig 2 shows the classification of the infinitive errors. From the figure we can see that the greatest number of infinitive errors falls into the category of “doing→do”. That is to say, Chinese learners misuse an infinitive without “to” instead of a present participle of a verb or a gerund. In other words, this kind of errors can be further divided into these two sub-classes. For instance, Ex. 4 and Ex. 5 fall into the sub-class of misusing an infinitive without *to* instead of a gerund, and Ex. 6 into the sub-class of misusing an infinitive without *to* instead of a present participle of a verb. The following examples are all taken from the CLEC with the boldface highlighted by the author.

Ex. 4 all day and you can devote yourself to **study** [vp5,e-] and to work [vp5,3-]

Ex. 5 **Do** [vp5,-s] anything is the same as learning English.

Ex. 6 After **enter** [vp5,1-] into a career which they like and have ab

After a careful analysis of these errors, we find that Chinese learners often misuse an infinitive without *to* where a gerund should be used. This shows that Chinese learners find it difficult to distinguish between an infinitive and a gerund. This may be caused by the negative transfer of their mother language as in Chinese a verb doesn’t have any inflexed form. Besides, in classroom teaching the teacher may over-emphasizes the importance of the infinitive which causes the learners to overuse the infinitive without *to* but neglect the acquisition and use of the gerund.

In doing the classification, we have had an unexpected finding, i.e. in the compositions of Chinese learners there are many structures of “to + the past tense or past participle of a verb”. This kind of errors falls into the category of “do→did/done”, which ranks the second among all the categories. Below are some examples from the CLEC with the boldface highlighted by the author:

Ex. 7 .... his fist and warned him not to **appeared** [vp5,-] again.

Ex. 8 If you want to **built** [vp5,1-] a big building, the fake material will make

Ex. 9 He/she had to **economized** [vp5,1-] on food and clothing. As a result,

Ex. 10 It could **enlarged** [vp5,1-] one's eyeview [fm1,-].

Ex. 11 In my view, I prefer to often **exchanged** [vp5,3-1] job [cc4, 1-] rather than

From the above examples, we can see that Chinese learners make errors by using the past tense of a verb after the modal verb “could” or the auxiliary verbs “should” or “had” directly, or using the past tense of a verb after the particle “to”. However, these forms are not used to show the action or status of the infinitive happened or existed before that of the main verb. In that case, the infinitive should be in the form of a present perfect tense, e.g. I’m glad to have seen your mother. In classroom, the teachers would stress repeatedly that a base verb or a bare infinitive should be used after a modal verb or an auxiliary verb. However, as the students learned the simple past tense before they learn the infinitive, they may overgeneralize the rules of the past tense, and use the structure of “to + the past form”. In the above examples, most main verbs of the sentences indicate an action or state happening or existing in the past. This may be the reason why Chinese students make such errors in their production of the English texts.

Next comes the category of “do→doing”, which ranks the third in the number of the errors made by Chinese

learners. This kind of errors is to use a present participle instead of an infinitive without to. It has almost as many errors as the second category of “do→did/done” with the number being 55 and 57 respectively. And like the second category of errors, this kind of errors may be also caused by the overgeneralization of the English language as a Chinese verb doesn't have a gerund form. The students may overgeneralize the rules of the target language and use a gerund where a base verb should be used.

#### 4. Conclusions

In summary, the infinitive is a difficult grammatical point for Chinese learners to acquire. Therefore, they make various errors when using the infinitive. They not only misuse some infinitive structures and forms in special usage such as the infinitive without “to”, but also some simple infinitive structures and forms. For example, “want sb to do sth” is a grammatical structure that English learners learn it at the early stage of their English learning. It seems that even a beginner would have no problem in using it correctly. However, we find that this seemingly easy structure is one of the infinitive structures that have the greatest number of errors in Chinese learner's written works with a variety of erroneous forms.

In addition, Chinese learners tend to use an infinitive without “to” directly to replace a gerund or a present participle. That is to say, they misuse a base verb as the subject, object or other components of the sentence. This kind of errors may be caused by the negative transfer of Chinese as Chinese verbs can be used directly in a sentence as a subject or object.

Finally, the infinitive and gerund phrases are one of the most difficult parts for Chinese learners to learn and use the infinitive. Although the teacher would ask the students to practice the use of these phrases again and again in the classroom, they still make errors in their production of English. For example, the structure “is used to doing sth” only occurs three times in the CLEC. However, two of them are misused as “is used to do sth”. Therefore, in English teaching and learning, special attention should be paid to the use of the infinitive in order to avoid errors.

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Table 1. The classification of Chinese learner’s errors in using the infinitive

No.	Type of errors	Cited examples from the CLEC	Number of errors
1	do→to do	But I dare not to [vp5,2-] skate.	13
2	do→doing	Some people like to taking [vp5,2-] to a kind of job.	55
3	do→did/done	It took us half an hour to went [vp5,1-] there.	57
4	to do→do	We should do exercises prevent[vp5,-] from being ill.	30
5	to do→doing	The people considered it important owning [vp5,3-3] a health body.	24
6	to do→did/done	Fires maybe cause a lot of things burned[vp5,-].	3
7	doing→do	...can devote yourself to study [vp5,e-] and to work [vp5,3-]	88
8	doing→to do	I spent most of the time to do [vp5,s-] what I like to do but...	15
9	doing→did/done	I was once heard people asked [vp5,2-6] her if she was a...	34
10	did/done→do	So I have already have [vp5,-] a step up to my hope.	14
11	did/done→to do	-	0
12	did/done→doing	I was exciting [vp5,2-6] and eager to hear Mother's voice.	35
			368

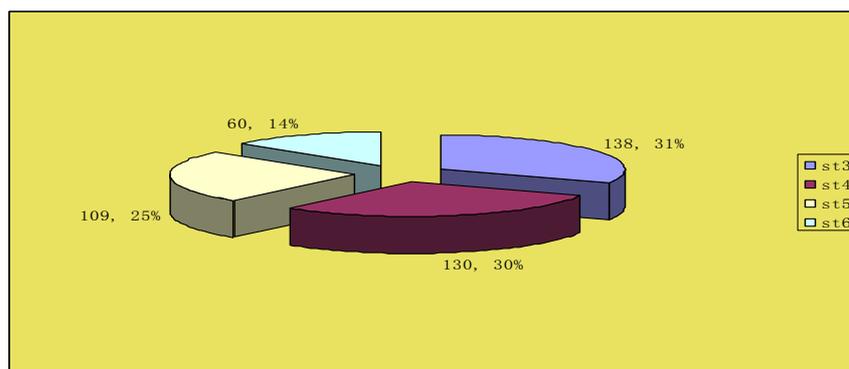


Figure 1. The overall distribution of the errors of the infinitive

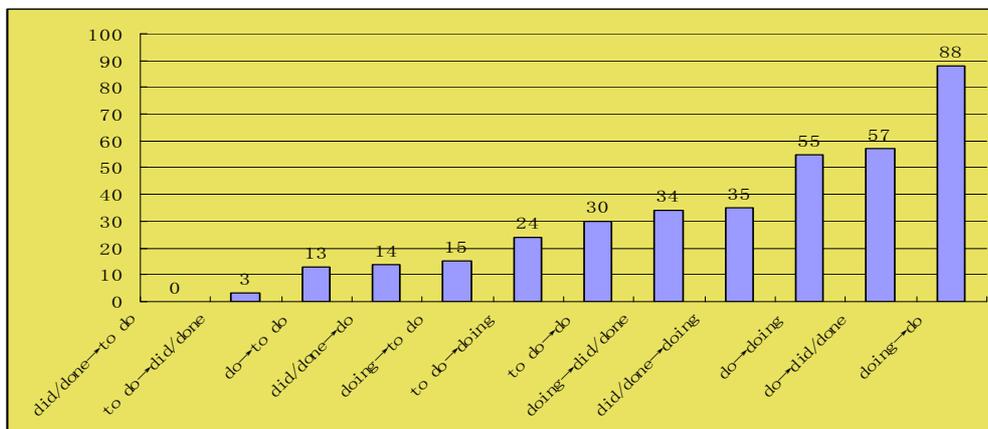


Figure 2. The distribution of the infinitive errors