Ungrammatical Patterns in Chinese EFL Learners' Free Writing

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Abstract

This paper investigated a number of common ungrammatical patterns that were found in Chinese EFL leaners' free writings, in order to find useful pedagogical implications for English grammar teaching in EFL setting, especially in China. The corpus of writing data is examined by the author together with a native English teacher. Our findings suggest that misuse of determiners is the most frequent grammatical error in Chinese students' writing. Other ungrammatical patterns such as Chinese-English expression, tense error, misuse of prepositions, are also considerably important and should be given due attention by EFL teachers, especially Chinese EFL teachers in their teaching practice.

Keywords: ungrammatical patterns, free writing, Chinese EFL learners, pedagogical implications

1. Introduction

The study and teaching of grammar has long been the greatest concern of EFL professionals across the world. In China, after more than 20 years' of grammar-centered classroom teaching practice, it is high time for EFL teachers to review and rethink about the pedagogical model of grammar teaching. The presence of grammatical errors is problematic, but also unavoidable for Non-Native Speakers (NNSs), especially adult NNSs. To some extent, native like grammar competence is almost impossible to achieve, and according to Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (2008), native-like ultimate attainment or near-nativeness is actually non-existent in principle. Jenkins (2000) believe that EFL teachers should adopt a more liberal attitude towards EFL learners' grammatical errors, provided their error patterns are consistent and intelligible. Thus'focus on form' should be favored over 'focus on forms', that is, both accuracy and fluency should be highlighted in our real grammar teaching practice.

However, highlighting the significance of fluency, does not mean that we should overlook the importance of accuracy. In fact, for L2 writing, accuracy is still playing an essential role and frequent occurrence of grammar errors can damage L2 writing quality seriously. In the evaluation of writing produced by NNSs, grammatical accuracy is still regarded as a significant criterion and incorrect language use is reported as having negative impact on NSs' perception of L2 writing quality (Johns, 1997; Johnson & Roen, 1989; Hinkel, 2002). For EFL teachers, they should help their students rectify and eradicate grammatical errors if possible, especially those who want to achieve advanced L2 writing proficiency (Hammerly, 1991; Hinkel, 2002). In addition, EFL learners also expect feedback from their teachers and they believe their grammatical accuracy and writing quality could be improved significantly on account of the attention and feedback they receive from their teachers (Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Fathman & Whalley, 1990). Moreover, error analysis, can not only make learners aware of the nature, distribution and frequency of their ungrammatical pattens, but also enable teachers to provide their feedback efforts more specifically and more efficiently (Corder, 1967; Wu, 1978; Chiang, 1981).

As to specific grammatical errors, different error types should also be treated differently by EFL teachers. Some errors, according to Vaughn (1991), are more detrimental than others to the overall quality of writing in holistic assessment of essays. For instance, verb inflections and uses of tenses, if misused, can obscure text meaning and create serious communication problems, thus must be emphasized and corrected effectively (Ellis, 1997; Hinkel, 2002). Other errors, for example, the misuse of definite article is also very problematic, but unlike the wrong use of tenses, it will not modify or change the meaning in a significant manner. Thus teachers should raise students' consciousness of this error type, but should not push them follow the standard norm if it is not achievable. This is because definite article is extremely difficult to acquire, especially for Chinese students, whose L1 does not

have this feature, and this opinion is shared by many scholars (e.g. Chesterman, 1991; Robertson, 2000; Master, 1997; Ortega, 2009).

Chinese EFL learners, due to the influence of Chinese information structure, are prone to write English in Chinese syntactic structures. Chinese is known as a topic-prominent language, in which information is organized through the statement of topic, while English is a subject-prominent language, in which sentences are organized around a subject and a verb, and topics are only marked when pragmatically needed (Ortega, 2009). Based on previous studies, we can make an assumption here that Chinese-English expressions, namely, organizing ideas using Chinese information and syntactic structure, will be a very common error pattern committed by Chinese EFL learners, and it may cause intelligibility problems for both NSs and NNSs of other L1 groups.

1.1 Aim of the Present Study

The primary aim of this study was to observe, identify and categorize Chinese EFL learners' grammatical errors, so as to find the most common ungrammatical patterns and the regularities in committing these errors, with the hope of generalizing useful pedagogical implications for grammar teaching in China.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Thirty full-time undergraduate students from an average university in Shandong province participated in this study. They are all juniors majored in English. The duration of their English study stretches from 12 to 15 years. In addition, their average age is 21.5 years old.

2.2 Materials

All subjects are asked to produce a piece of free writing of about 250-word on whatever topics they are interested in. Most students wrote about their comments and suggestions regarding a course titled Business English they were taking. Free writing style is preferred for this study. As argued by Lee (2010), the great advantage of free writing is that it reflects the sub-consciously internalized knowledge of students compared to other controlled tests. Thus our writing data are spontaneous and can present the commonest or most frequent grammatical errors of Chinese college students. Many of these errors are, of course, common to all non-native users of English, but some categories of error (e.g. Chinese sentence structure or Chinese-English expression), are particular to Chinese students. Writing samples were first collected and scanned into PDF files for further analysis.

2.3 Data Analysis Procedures

One native English speaker is invited to work together as the evaluator along with the author herself. All subjects' writings are reviewed prudentially and then typical error patterns are identified and summarized following the error analysis model of Keshavarz (1994). Error frequency was calculated, in order to identify the commonest errors committed by Chinese students and repetitive mistakes were also generalized for students who duplicate the same error a few times in their writing samples.

3. Results and Discussion

All together 323 tokens of error are collected from all the writing samples and they are classified into 13 error types. They are: 1) Lack of S-V Agreement, 2) Missing Verb (predicate), 3) Multiple Verbs, 4) Missing NP/Subject, 5) "to" Infinitive Error, 6) Wrong Tense or Verb Form, 7) Misuse of Determiners, 8) Misuse of Preposition, 9) Misuse of Adverbials, 10) Violation of Binding Theories, 11) Zero Use of Pronoun, 12) Misuse of Quantifiers, and 13) Chinese-English Expression. Lexico-semantic errors are excluded from this study and only syntactic grammatical errors are examined and categorized for analysis.

Table 1. Error types

Error Type	Number of Tokens	Percentage of Errors
Misuse of Determiners	119	36.84
Chinese-English Expression	43	13.31
Wrong Tense or Verb Form	37	11.46
Misuse of Prepositions	34	10.53
Lack of S-V Agreement	21	6.50

Misuse of Adverbials	20	6.19
Missing Verb (predicate)	16	4.95
Zero Use of Pronoun	10	3.10
Misuse of Quantifiers	7	2.17
Missing NP/Subject	6	1.86
Multiple Verbs	5	1.55
Violation of Binding Theories	3	0.93
"to" Infinitive Error	2	0.62
Total	323	100.00

According to our calculation, the average number of error tokens per student is 10.8.

3.1 Misuse of Determiners

Misuse of determiners is observed as the most common mistake in all of our writing samples, which totals at 119 and accounts for almost 37% of all the error tokens. It is well-established that articles (determiners) are considered as the most difficult grammar for EFL learners, and even advanced learners often make many errors in their use (Kennedy, 2003; Lee, 2010). Only 10% (3 students out of 30) of our writing samples are found free of determiner mistakes, for the rest 90%, two students' determiner misuse counts up to 12 and 11 respectively.

According to Lee (2010), the misuse of determiners can be further subcategorized as follows: 1) omission of the definite article "the", 2) redundant use of the definite article "the", 3) omission of the indefinite article, and 4) the substitution of definite article "the" for possessive determiners. All the following examples are taken from our subjects' writing samples.

a. At first few weeks, I was very interested in it. → the first few weeks,～

b. Now I really feel good to calculate some useful terms. → ～the/those useful terms.

c. I feel perplexed about the large amount of the various terms. → ～various terms.

d. I have almost lost the interest in it. → ～interest～

e. I value the large knowledge of the international trade.→ ～international trade

f. The teacher always makes us guess the terms first.→ Our teacher～

g. When you perfectly combine the knowledge which you learned with the life→ ～from our life

h. We must put more efforts to study it if you want to get job in this field. → ～get a job～

i. Through the knowledge of International Trade, the terms can be used in the commercial activities in the society.

j. What is more important, the PPTs about the class can give a great help to study.

The misuse determiner patterns in example sentences from a. to h. are obvious and easy to explain. However, the co-existence of other grammatical errors makes it very complicated for the last two tokens. In example sentence i., the definite article "the" occurs four times. As what we got from the literal meaning of this sentence, the relationship between "the knowledge" and "the terms" should be inclusive, thus it is better to rewrite "the knowledge" into "what we have learned". Also "in our society" is often more preferred than "in the society" according to our native speaker evaluator. While in example sentence j., both definite and indefinite articles are employed, however, not in an appropriate way. Here "the PPTs" obviously refers to the teaching materials produced by teachers or students, so it is better to use "our class" instead of "the class", and "our study" instead of "study".

Our results indicate that Chinese students tend to use definite article "the" universally whenever there is a determiner needed. Thus the frequency count of the redundant use of the definite article "the" is found to be the highest among all the four error patterns clarified above. Similar results are found in the studies of Chinese students carried out by other scholars. Take Papp (2004) for instance, he analyzed a 200,000-word corpus of Chinese ESL university students' written production and found the article system and 'number marking on nouns' very problematic for the students.

3.2 Chinese-English Expression

Chinese-English expression is the second most frequent error observed in our writing samples. By the term Chinese-English expression, we mean students resort to Chinese sentence structure, word order, and direct literal translation from Chinese to English in their writing. For Chinese readers, Chinese expression usage can be easily detected and perceived, while for native or other non-native speakers, it can cause serious understanding problems and even considered as nonsensical. Wei and Fei (2003) define Chinese English (Chinglish) as an interlanguage, usually manifested as Chinese-style syntax with English words, Chinese phonological elements in pronunciation or grammatical variations that attempt to follow Standard English rules but miss the mark.

A typical Chinese-English translation of a famous advice given by Chairman Mao "好好学习，天天向上"（hao hao xue xi, tian tian xiang shang）is translated literally as "good good study, day day up". It absolutely makes no sense for English learners other than Chinese, and a more appropriate translation would be "study hard and make progress every day". This kind of mistakes is identified as very common among our samples, 43 tokens out of 323. It has to be noted that our subjects are all English majors; presumably for non-English majors, the occurrence of Chinese-English expression could be a lot more. Typical examples from our samples are listed as follows:

a. On hearing the name of this course—International trade, I feel exhilarated to touch some calculation problems.

According to our native speaker evaluator, this example sentence is judged as improper by intuition, and he is confused by the latter part of the sentence "to touch some calculation problems". Even though "the name of this course" also seems awkward, but "touch problems" is simply absurd, and makes no sense at all. By "touch", the student actually means "get known to", or "learn about", and "problems" here refers to "methods". His inappropriate word choice demonstrates the usage of Chinese-English expression. Other example sentences are quoted as follows:

b. For the sake of loving, I am going to catch more knowledge but also experience—work experience!

c. There is another thing I should do, to hunt more companies or enterprises to have work experiences.

d. Under the joint effort of teacher and students, this course is showing harmonious future.

e. That is, theoretical is higher than the practice.

f. I know many deep meanings of certain words or terms in the business filed.

g. But I want to advice that the atmosphere of the class can be more vivid.

h. I have to make great efforts in order to reach a higher degree in learning this course and widen my horizon.

i. I have a perfect idea that we must combine English and commerce if we want to learn this subject well.

As explained by Wei and Fei (2003), "Individual learners, in using English, translate more or less from Chinese and tend to ignore the basic grammatical structure of English". This can be easily detected in the above examples from the writing data we collected for this study. Expressions like "Catch more knowledge", "hunt more companies", "showing harmonious future", etc., clearly sounds Chinese-like and can be ambiguous or even unintelligible for non-Chinese EFL learners and native speakers.

To conclude, the Chinese-English expression errors as listed in the above examples, result from learners' lack of practice in English way of thinking, and writing in English. It is also attributed to the different information structure of Chinese and English, as discussed in the previous section. L1 Chinese information structure transfer and interference could be one of the important reasons for the prevalence of Chinese-English Expression ungrammatical pattern. Chinese EFL learners obviously struggle a lot trying to develop Chinese varieties of English. This error pattern, to write English using Chinese information and syntactic structure, is particular to Chinese EFL learners.

3.3 Wrong Tense and Verb Forms

Wrong tense and verb forms ranks the third among all the error tokens, 37 out of 323 (11.46%) error tokens are found to have tense problems. Errors of wrong tense include using a verb form that does not correspond with the time or time adverbial when an action or condition is taking place, for instance, using simple present improperly instead of simple past or present perfect tense. Errors of wrong form include the misspelling of irregular verbs in their right tenses, for example, using "goed" instead of "gone" and forget to change the regular verb forms, for example, using "have recognize" instead of "have recognized".

Chinese EFL learners are often found to struggle a lot with different usages of various English tenses, as Chinese is a tense absent language, yet there are altogether 16 tenses in English and each has more than one usages. Thus

tense can be really confusing and complicated even for advanced learners of English in China. Similarly, Chen (1998) reported that most Taiwanese students have difficulties in the use of English tenses due to the absence of verb conjugation in Mandarin. Thus Fang (1999) highlighted the teaching of English verb tenses to prevent Taiwanese EFL students from misusing English tenses due to the linguistic difference. Examples are as follows:

a. I thought this course *may be* difficult before I *take*.

b. But after one class, I found *I'm* wrong.

c. I can not only *learned* something I haven't *know* ever, but also learned some words.

d. Since I have a touch of International Trade, I *learn* a lot from teacher's explicit teaching.

e. I may *realized* that there is another thing I should do.

f. I hope teachers can slow down your process of teaching and *giving* us several minutes to digest the problems well.

Again like all the other error patterns, tense misuse does not exist by itself; instead, it is always accompanied by other errors. The examples above demonstrate Chinese students' frequent misuse of simple past tense, especially in subordinate clauses. The present perfect tense is also problematic for Chinese students, and most students get confused when it is combined with subjunctive mood, or simply modal verbs. The incorrect spelling of past-participles, particularly of those irregular verbs is also found frequent in our writing samples. In addition, tense agreement is often ignored by Chinese students, and all these contribute to the high frequency of tense errors in their writings.

3.4 Misuse of Prepositions

As function words, prepositions serve significant functions in English, as well as many other languages. Their frequent occurrences in all varieties of both written and spoken English, plus their particular contribution in the formation of idioms, make it extremely difficult for English learners to master, even native English speakers make consonant mistakes with the usage of prepositions in their writing or speaking. This is found true with the Chinese subjects of this study. 34 out of 323 errors tokens are identified as misuse of prepositions. Examples are as follows:

a. I shall work hard *in* all earnest.

b. I think it is useful to deal with problems *by* mathematics.

c. *With* the cases, we can understand what we learn easily.

d. *For* I want to find a job *about* import-export trade.

Students have to be fully aware that prepositions which are part of particular phrases or idioms can not be replaced by others, such as 'with all earnestness' cannot be rewritten as 'in all earnestness' (see Example sentence a.). What's more, the misuse of prepositions can lead to serious interpretation problems, e.g. 'with the cases' in example c., readers might feel totally at lost when they read this without any contextual information.

3.5 Lack of S-V Agreement

a. *It help* me to ensured the parts that have something dim in my heart.

b. *It show* me the accuracy is important.

c. Only *one who think* twice before jump can finish the job perfectly.

d. Only one book and *several PPT* can tell us how the globe is working, *which help me* open my eye and then *give me* another choice to seek job.

According to the specifications of English grammar, a verb must agree with its subject both in number and in person. Depending on whether the subject is singular or plural, the verbs take corresponding forms. But this fact is often neglected by Chinese students, especially when it's third person singular case. Example a. & b. demonstrate the disagreement of verbs with singular subject 'it', while example c. & d. represent lack of agreement in compound sentences. The occurrence of this error pattern is relatively high compared to missing verbs or the employment of multiple verbs. 21 out of 323 error tokens, which make 6.5% in total, are found with lack of subject-verb agreement mistakes.

3.6 Misuse of Adverbials

In English grammar, adverbials are often divided into four classes: adverbial complements, adjuncts, conjuncts, and disjuncts. They often take the form of adverbs, adverb phrases, temporal noun phrases or prepositional

phrases. Improper use of adverbials is also very common among Chinese students, especially the misuse of time adverbials. 20 out of 323 (6.19%) of error tokens belong to this error type.

a. We have been learning International Trade for more than 10 classes *till now this term*.

b. *In this semester*, I've been learning the course of Import-Export Practices and Operations.

c. After all, one book may not be enough for us who are eager for the knowledge *on the course*.

Examples above are mainly about students' misuse of time adverbials. The overuse of adverbials, as shown in sentence a., 'till now' and 'this term' would seem inappropriate if clustered together like that. While in the other example sentences, the misuse of prepositions is responsible for the improper adverbial phrases.

3.7 Other Error Types

Other common error types include missing verbs, repetition of the same NP (noun phrase) many times in one sentence without using pronoun reference, misuse of quantifiers, missing NP or subject, multiple verbs without conjunction words, the violation of binding theory (i.e. vague or no reference to the anaphors, misuse of reflexives, unspecified reference to pronouns, etc.), as well as the misuse of "to" infinitive structure. Like what we have explained earlier, the errors we identified in students' writing are not confined to one type only, even within the same utterance, multiple errors coexist with each other. Examples drawn from our writing data are as follows:

a. There is *a* old saying that "practice makes perfect".

b. And ask myself what and how *can I do* if I under that case like the *textbook tell* us.

c. *I once afraid* of *this international trade*.

d. We students need *amount of* practice after class.

e. This course *make something change* in my mind.

f. I have *know* many knowledge about the international trade.

g. I think it is good for *myself* to learn the International Trade *in this term*.

h. She taught us the general introduction to International Trade, which made me know the *basic international business*.

i. In the class, *teacher not only teach new knowledge*, but also review the knowledge *which learn* before *the class*.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate Chinese EFL learners' most frequent ungrammatical patterns in their free writing, and our data suggest that Chinese students experience most difficulty in the usage of English article system. The second most frequent ungrammatical pattern is Chinese-English expression and it is unique to Chinese EFL learners. In addition, mistakes like wrong tense and verb forms, misuse of prepositions, as well as lack of subject-verb agreement and misuse of adverbials are also rather frequent and should be paid due attention to by Chinese EFL teachers in real English teaching practice.

One important cause of these errors is the inappropriate L1 transfer. As suggested by Brown (2004), L2 learners, tend to use L1 syntax in the target language (TL) and L1 interference can make them erroneous. Our findings further confirmed Brown's explanation. Chinese EFL learners, due to the discrepancies in the article system of English and Chinese, the absence of inflections and number agreement in Chinese, are likely to make higher frequency of grammatical errors in these aspects. Also, a lot of Chinese students resort to Chinese syntax and information structure in their English written production, thus the common Chinese-English expression errors are not at all surprising.

Explicit instruction on these frequent ungrammatical patterns are necessary and helpful. As argued by many scholars, explicit grammar instruction, can raise learners' conscious attention in the target forms, and can initiate learners' restructuring and internalization of these structures by making them more relevant and more applicable (Robinson & Ellis, 2008; Schmidt, 1990, 1993; Smith, 1981; Skehan, 1998). From this perspective, classroom analysis of frequent ungrammatical patterns is necessary and meaningful, as it can raise learners' awareness of target language structures and teachers could divert learners' limited capacity of study the most problematic grammar forms, so as to improve leaners' accuracy and fluency more effectively in their English writing production. Also one caveat we need to mention here is that due to the limited number of subjects and the small-scaled nature of this study, it is necessary to conduct long-term projects in order to reach final conclusions

about an efficient and improved grammar teaching model in China.

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