

Empirical Errors in PRC Students' English Compositions

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Since 1992, there have been Ministry of Education-sponsored PRC students doing the intensive English courses at CELC, NUS. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the common errors found in 45 PRC students' English compositions. The errors are divided into three categories: grammatical, lexical and syntactic, all of which are exemplified, rectified and, where possible, given reasons for their occurrence. To deal with the errors detected, the writer suggests an eclectic method for effective instruction and meaningful activities. Such a method will help the students form desired learning habits to avoid the recurrence of these errors and result in good English communication, both spoken and written.

Introduction

Error analysis is a fundamental step in providing an accurate assessment of the learner's competence in language and communication skills. Error analysis is useful in the following three aspects:

An error-based analysis of problems shows reliable results that indicate which materials can be used and what remedial work should be designed. A study of different types of errors gives the English tutor a good idea of the relative significance of the errors detected. If the tutor is cognisant of the frequencies of certain errors, he will be able to focus his teaching more on serious errors.

Through the findings of error analysis, language-syllabus designers, instructional material writers, and language instructors will have the opportunity to assess their work to determine if they have achieved the objectives laid down.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the errors found in 45 SM3¹ PRC students' English compositions in the final examination of an intensive English course at CELC and to suggest possible methods to deal with such errors. The errors identified can be divided into three categories: grammatical, lexical, and syntactical.

Empirical Errors

Grammatical Errors

Generally speaking, PRC students' knowledge of English grammar is quite good and they can construct correct simple sentences. Their competence in grammar and structure is much better than their command of vocabulary. However, as most of the students have not been actively exposed to English before coming to Singapore, their actual use of English grammatical structure is not as accurate as it should be. Besides, the negative transfer of their mother tongue, Chinese, may also have certain adverse influence. Hence the following grammatical errors:

Omission of Articles

Structurally, there are no articles in Chinese. As a consequence, Chinese students have encountered multifarious problems with the use of English articles. When an article is not needed, one may be added. When an article is needed, it may be omitted or wrongly used. Such problems occur not only in English compositions but also in Chinese-English translation. The following are some examples of omissions of articles 'a', 'an' and 'the'.

- (1) In my mind, ___ scientist is a great man. (a)
- (2) Several provinces prosper at ___ surprising speed. (a)
- (3) The problem is how to learn English well in such ___ environment. (an)
- (4) I chose engineering as my major in ___ National University of Singapore. (the)
- (5) The shift to market economy has tackled some problems in ___ old system. (the)

1 Senior Middle Three Students from the People's Republic of China

(6) Singapore is a good place. ___ air is fresh, ___ trees are green, and ___ streets are clean. (The, the, the)

Wrong Pronoun Reference

The problem of misused pronouns often lies in wrong references to preceding nouns and sometimes in erroneous omissions. The following are some typical examples of wrong reference, which occur both in English compositions and in Chinese-English translation.

- (1) Every day, I hope to receive letters. When I received *it*, I felt happy. (them)
- (2) Where was the young man? Had he forgotten about *their* date? (his)
- (3) I can hardly find any soil because most of *them* is under the grass. (it)
- (4) Our lecturers often praise some of us for *their* good performance. (our)
- (5) I think people can be successful only when *he finds* what *he is* interested in and *devotes himself* to it. (they find; they are; devote themselves)
- (6) When you came across a stranger, whether he was a Malay, an Indian or a Chinese, *they* would smile to you. (he or she; he)

Wrong Tenses/Tense Sequences

Tenses of verbs are frequently troublesome for most Chinese students. In English, the form of a verb changes according to the change in time. In Chinese, the change of a verb time does not necessitate the change of a verb form. In many cases, the surface tense of a Chinese verb has to be determined by its context. In other cases, it has to be determined by an adverb of time. When appearing alone, many Chinese verbs can refer to the present, the past, or the future. It is mainly due to this type of structural difference that errors in verb tenses arise. The following are some examples of misused tenses.

- (1) A few days later, *I am* used to the hot humid weather. (was)
- (2) Every day, I *hoped* to receive letters. (hope)
- (3) In old days, most of the people *are* very idealistic. (were)
- (4) I *have faced* many problems after I had come here. (faced)

- (5) Now, although I *did not make* a breakthrough, my vocabulary is enriched. (have not made)
- (6) When someone *ask* me something in English, how could I say, "Sorry, I don't know English." (asked)

Wrong Subject-Verb Agreement

Errors in subject-verb agreement constitute another great problem in PRC students' English compositions, as in

- (1) The wonderful goods *is* shown in the window-case. (are)
- (2) In which direction the bus will take me back *become* a new problem. (becomes)
- (3) With the help of the teachers, my English *have improved* very much. (has improved)
- (4) The island *give* me more joy than sadness. (gives)
- (5) Now, I often receive letters from China. *It is* a good medicine to my homesickness. (They are)
- (6) Most of the things you have seen in your life now *is* automatically operated. (are)

Errors in subject-verb agreement are obviously caused by interference from the Chinese language because there is no syntactic constraint in subject-verb concord in Chinese and any form of a verb may occur with a subject of any person in either plural or singular number.

Wrong Verb Forms

The changes in verb forms according to tenses of verbs bring in their wake another great problem; namely, errors in verb forms, which are intralingual errors because such forms occur in English but not in Chinese, so the verb-form errors are obviously caused by confusion in English itself, as in the following examples.

- (1) All wonderful goods are *showing* in the show-case. (shown)
- (2) The reform was *spreaded*. (spreading)
- (3) I *rided and rided*. (rode and rode)
- (4) I have already *hope* to be a scientist. (hoped)
- (5) How I wish I could master this *advance* technology. (advanced)
- (6) I hope I can find a way to cure AIDS by *change* the genes. (changing)

Wrong Number of Nouns

Errors in the number of nouns are illustrated in the underlined parts of the sentences below.

- (1) They are very popular in many Chinese family. (*families*)
- (2) Now I can talk to Singaporean in Chinese. (*Singaporeans*)
- (3) There are a lot of changes in other field. (*fields*)
- (4) These are the places of interest and natural sceneries. (*scenery*)
- (5) I breathed the fresh airs. (*air*)
- (6) The people began to go home to have their rests. (*rest*)

The first three errors are caused by the non-pluralisation of plural countable nouns, while the next three errors result from the pluralisation of uncountable nouns. One reason for such errors is probably due to imperfect learning. Another reason is somewhat related to Chinese interference, since the concept of Chinese pluralisation is, unlike that of English, not realised in the surface structure through the form of a noun.

Lexical Errors

Lexical errors, including misuse of phrases and idiomatic expressions, can be commonly found in PRC students' written work. In the compositions under analysis, these errors are wrong word forms, wrong word collocations, inaccurate use of phrases and idiomatic expressions, and misspellings.

Wrong Word Forms

- (1) The third problem was homesick. (*homesickness: adj > n*)
- (2) I cannot cope with the terrible hot here. (*heat: adj > n*)
- (3) The whole world will give you the most sincere bless. (*blowing: v > n*)
- (4) The Chinese have more prosper. (*prosperity: v > n*)
- (5) I felt sorrow. (*sorry: n > adj*)
- (6) Economy development has brought about great effects. (*economic: n > adj*)

The above errors partly show the students' ignorance of word classes and partly indicate an improper application of affixation rules at the morphological level.

Wrong Word Collocations

Wrong word collocations are problematic with PRC students. These errors look out of context in their sentence construction. They are mainly due to the mismatch between the verb and its object, as in (1) and (2) below. Besides, they may mean wrong choice of nouns, such as (3) and (4), adjectives, such as (5) and (6), and so on.

- (1) I cannot *meet* the terrible heat of the sun. (stand/cope with)
- (2) They *investigate* their subject in their labs day and night. (explore)
- (3) In which way will the bus take me back becomes a new *trouble*. (problem)
- (4) The corrupted Qing government signed many insulting *contracts* with foreigners. (agreements/treaties)
- (5) It is very difficult to find a *same* place in the world. (similar)
- (6) You can go to the supermarket to select your *fond* food. (favourite)

Misused Phrases and Idiomatic Expressions

Misused phrases and idiomatic expressions crop up from time to time, as in these examples.

- (1) Do you think that I must come true to my dream? (my dream will come true)
- (2) I was *born and grew up* in China. (born and bred)
- (3) When I saw the moon, *tears burst out*. (I burst into tears/I burst out crying)
- (4) You can *put all your attention on* your business. (pay all your attention to)
- (5) This power *consists* two parts: the political power and the economic power. (consists of)
- (6) When the country *became bad to worst*, ... (went from bad to worse)

One obvious reason for the wrong use of phrases and idioms is that they are literally translated. Though literal translation from Chinese into English, and vice versa, works at times, in many cases, it is problematic, if not erroneous, resulting in the production of expressions marred by awkwardness or non-English usage.

Misspellings

In the compositions under analysis, misspellings abound, especially pertaining to confusing words and lexical items with difficult pronunciation or error-prone alphabetical symbols, as in

- (1) Every family has a *frige*. (fridge)
- (2) A good *enviroment* can attract foreigners to invest in China. (environment)
- (3) Others: acumulate (accumulate); belived (believed); equiment (equipment); gradully (gradually); sence (sense); mangement (management); fundemantal (fundamental); inevidable (inevitable); acclamitise (acclimatise); fimaliar (familiar); topical (tropical); Malya (Malay); convinent (convenient); conque (conquer); vedio (video); compion (campaign); experence (experience); persiverence (perseverance); discription (description); benifit (benefit); existance (existence); abundent (abundant); courteus (courteous) accompy (accompany); awkewed (awkward).

Syntactical Errors

Misuse of syntactical elements or syntactical errors refers to misapplication of rules, ignorance of rule restrictions or failure of rule applications with regard to sentence construction.

Syntactical errors are mainly caused by interlingual confusion and defective learning of English syntax. They are found in sentence patterns, especially verb patterns, run-on sentences, and improper sentence constructions, including Chinese stylishness, wordiness, and non-parallel structures.

Errors in Sentence Patterns

English is full of sentence patterns, especially verb patterns, many of which differ from those in Chinese syntax. Hence

the inevitable interference. However, many sentence patterns prove difficult to non-Chinese learners, too.

Quite often, one finds sentences without a proper pattern, as in these examples.

(1) All I can do is going all out *for studying English*. (to study English)

(2) *The purpose I came to Singapore* is to study. (The purpose for me to come to Singapore .../ My purpose of coming to Singapore ...)

(3) *I was too hot* to do anything when I got off the plane. (It was too hot for me ...)

(4) I will try my best to let my greatest hope *to become* a fact in the future. (become)

(5) It is no use *to think* of that. (thinking of)

(6) The government has *provided every child* an equal chance of education. (provided every child with ...)

Errors in Run-on Sentences

In English, a complete sentence is indicated by a period at the end. If one complete sentence is followed by another complete sentence without a period (or sometimes a semi-colon) or a suitable conjunction, it is a run-on sentence, which is syntactically incorrect. This type of error involves interference from Chinese, since Chinese is not particular about the use of periods, nor is it overly concerned with connectives. The following are good examples:

(1) I could not sleep *early*, *this* affected my study. (... early. This ...)

(2) Singapore is not China, I certainly have to face some problems here. (... China. I certainly ...)

(3) Now, I can sleep in a single *room*, I can sleep earlier than before. (Now, I can sleep in a single *room*; I can sleep earlier than before./Now, I can sleep in a single room earlier than before.)

(4) I am going to enter the *university*, I will begin a new life. (I am going to enter the university *and* will begin a new life./As I am going to enter the university, I will begin a new life.)

(5) In China, I used to sleep at *9.30 pm*, *next morning*, I got up at about 6 o'clock. (... 9.30 am. Next morning, ...)

(6) I hope to be a biochemical *scientist*, I hope to help people. (... scientist. I hope to help people./As I hope to help people, I hope to be a .../I hope to be a ..., so as to help people.)

Improper Sentence Constructions

Owing to great differences in sentence structure between Chinese and English, improper sentence constructions are common in PRC students' written work in English. The following wrongly constructed sentences serve as good examples for *Chinese stylishness*, *wordiness*, and *parallel structures*.

(i) *Chinese stylishness* applies to English sentences with vestiges of Chinese structure. This type of errors makes sentences sound stilted. More often than not, it obscures the meaning of a sentence.

(ii) *Wordiness* means verbosity. A sentence may be grammatically correct and syntactically proper but may fail by being too wordy. Wordiness or verbosity renders the sentence tedious on the one hand and weakens its vigour on the other hand.

(iii) *Parallelism* or parallel structure requires that expressions similar in function be outwardly similar. The likeness of forms enables the reader to recognise more readily the likeness of content and function.

However, PRC students as well as others seem to be unaware of this syntactic feature and produce a lot of sentences marked by non-parallel structures. In the following examples, (1) - (4) show Chinese stylishness, (5) - (8) reflect wordiness, and (9) - (12) exhibit non-parallel structures.

(1) *The same as I thought.* (As expected/Expectedly)

(2) *The booming towns are more and more.* (There are more and more booming towns.)

(3) These are the *past* problems. (old/previous)

(4) *I felt a little difficult* to get used to the new society. (I found it somewhat difficult .../I had some difficulties in getting ...)

(5) She had been there for a long period of time. (... for a long time.)

(6) I have met another problem that is a religious problem. (... met with another problem religious in nature.)

(7) *The growth of economy of the whole country increases so fast.* (The economy of the whole country grows/increases so fast.)

- (8) At first, I got a flu. Secondly, I could not sleep well. Thirdly, *the problem was my homesickness*. (... I was homesick.)
- (9) The Chinese are in great trouble and *oppression*. (... under great oppression)
- (10) This place gives me more joy than *unhappy things*. (... sorrow)
- (11) I have come across two major problems in Singapore. One is homesickness. The other is *how to get used to the environment*. (... adaptability (to environment).)
- (12) Orchard Road is *crowded with not only the people from all walks of life but also numerous bright lights*. (... not only crowded with people from all walks of life but is also filled with numerous bright lights.)

Implications for English Language Instruction

Experienced English language instructors know full well that an adequate knowledge of the language structure and the differences between the two languages - English and the native language of students - will facilitate learning and the transfer of learning. Thus, a meaningful explanation of the structure of English and a clear understanding of its differences from students' native language are necessary, and perhaps even mandatory in classroom teaching. Competence can be developed if students understand what each rule is and how it functions before they are asked to practise and apply it to similar situations. This means that the class teacher should explicitly explain the rules in the target language and provide the students with sufficient opportunities for self-expression and experimentation in realistic situations. What is needed, therefore, are student-centred activities with the instructor as the facilitator of learning so as to create a supportive atmosphere, in which attitudes and interpersonal relationships are positive and conducive to language communication. For such activities to be effective, they should be well-designed, varied, lively and interesting. What is more important is that they should be combined with actual language use to underscore the fact that the target language English - like the mother tongue - is a valid means of communication. It is not beneficial to the students if the instructor continues to use the traditional way of pointing out students' errors without explaining to them the causes of such errors and the ways these errors can be minimised. For teaching to be effective, the students should first be made to realise their errors, or even better, to discover their problems. The instructor

should then be able to make use of cognition-oriented materials to help the students practise meaningful communicative drills and do useful exercises leading to the proper use of the target language - English. The following steps can be followed:

- Point out if the use of a certain item exists in both the target language and the mother tongue.
- Show the similarities and dissimilarities in usage between the two languages.
- Highlight the areas of possible confusion and negative transfer.

This type of practice is especially useful for teaching problematic structure and vocabulary. There are at least two reasons for this. The first reason is that structure and vocabulary tend to be erroneous in language use. The errors identified in this paper are good evidence. The second reason is that structure and vocabulary are essential for good language communication, be it speaking or writing.

Classroom experience shows that the following two types of exercises are useful for reducing, if not eliminating, students' grammatical and syntactic errors in both spoken and written English.

Type One requires the students to correct the errors and point out what type of error each one is. For example:

“Do you know *what is standard English?*”

Answer: “Do you know what standard English is?”

Reason: wrong word order.

“All learners of English should familiarise themselves with the various methods of word formation *if we want to enrich English vocabulary.*”

Answer: “... if they want to enrich English vocabulary.”

Reason: Wrong pronoun reference.

Type Two expects the students to identify the error, then correct it, and finally explain it. For example:

“Those student who need financial aid must apply within the date stipulated.”

Answer: “Those students ...”

Reason: Wrong number of the noun.

Explanation: The subject is plural in number, so the noun is “students”, not “student”.

“To encourage the workers to learn advance skills of technology, some companies have set up staff training centres.”

Answer: “... learn advanced skills of technology ...”

Reason: Wrong verb form.

Explanation: The noun modifier here is a past participle. The verb “advance” must therefore be “advanced”.

The advantages of these self-correcting exercises include the following four aspects:

- A wide range of grammatical and syntactic items can be covered. Whatever the instructor wishes to include can be included.
- Similar types of errors can be set in different contexts and varied situations.
- As the students are trying to identify errors, both theirs and their peers’, their motivation is bound to be high.
- Such exercises can be done individually or in groups. At times, they can even be done on a competitive basis, such as language games, to enhance learning .

At an advanced level, such error-correction exercises may be based on extended texts or short articles where syntactic areas to be practised or tested can be designed for identification, rectification, and rationalisation.

For the elimination of vocabulary errors, the following three steps are recommended:

(1) Analysing word formation.

An English word may be a root, a compound word, or a derivative word. If a learner of English can use an English root

word as a point of departure, understands the basic meanings of major prefixes and suffixes, and learns to form derivative words and compound words, he/she will learn English vocabulary more effectively. After that, the teacher should make the learner use the vocabulary in context by providing exercises on context vocabulary.

(2) Determining meanings of words and expressions.

Do we know how to use a word accurately after memorising its meaning? Only after we are very familiar with the various meanings of a word in different context, can we try to use such a word or expression correctly. Similarly, to alert students to the importance of vocabulary meanings, context exercises on determining meanings of vocabulary and expressions should be included in class teaching.

(3) Determining the meanings and usage of confusing words.

In English, there are confusing words and expressions caused by (i) some similarity in form but great differences in meanings, and (ii) great differences in form but some similarity in meaning. Such words tend to be misused unless suitably pointed out, explained and illustrated.

The suggested methods for vocabulary acquisition are practical and practicable though not necessarily innovative and curative. However, if English-language learners treat such exercises as a guide to vocabulary enrichment and persevere in their learning, they will find their path to English vocabulary development smoother, and their efforts towards that end, more rewarding.

Conclusion

As has been shown in this paper, there are different types of errors in PRC students' English compositions. To deal with such errors, the writer suggests that attention be given to meaningful learning, meaningful practice, and meaningful 'application' activities. Such being the case, English language instructors should stop conducting classroom activities based on mechanical imitation and parrot-like repetition. Instead, they should methodically resort to all kinds of drills and exercises through 'elicitation' techniques.

Based on the eclectic approach, drawing upon the techniques for analysing and describing the target language with concentration on specific categories of errors, relying upon the instructors' own knowledge and cumulative experience, and allowing the students to play a central role in the learning process, it is possible to open up vast vistas for productive English language teaching and learning.

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