Error Analysis: Four Sentence Structural Errors Made by Chinese EFL Students

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Keywords: EFL, Error Analysis, Sentence Structure.

Abstract. English has been widely used as a lingua franca. More and more Chinese students learn English as a second language and employ English in various contexts. Writing, as an important part to evaluate English proficiency, tends to be least performed by Chinese ESL learners. The research aims to investigate the extent to which Chinese learners of English are influenced by their first language in their English writing. It will focus on the analysis of the mistakes made on sentence structure by university freshmen in their English writings with specific reference to "that" relative clauses, "which" relative clauses, topicalization, and verbs. Sample writings for analysis are produced by a class of freshmen in Wenzhou-Kean University, a Sino-American university that uses English as the main medium of communication in meetings, classes, and assessment. This study defines four most predominant errors made by WKU students, that are, “which” clause problems, “that” clause problems, topicalization, and verb problems. Topicalization is observed to be possibly due to the influence of mother tongue language as Chinese is a topic-prominence language, opposing English which is subject-prominence. The construction of “serial-verb construction” widely used in Chinese might be one reason for predicates problems, while the wrong analogy of a similar parallel-verb structure may also be a reason. Errors in “which” and “that” clauses are likely to be caused by inadequate knowledge in the target language and its original complexity. The research will have a valuable contribution to ESL teaching to Chinese students. It will shed light on the design of ESL curriculum, teaching materials, and learning activities for Chinese ESL students in a university context.

1. Introduction

Writing has been the hardest part to master for many Chinese EFL learners, compared to listening and reading abilities. This is partly because the English sentence structure is very different from Chinese, which makes it hard for Chinese EFL students to produce correct expressions. Errors made on the sentence level can create difficulties in interpreting the writer’s intention and act as an indicator for the writer’s low English proficiency. Analyzing sentence structural errors is thus important for understanding the learning process of Chinese EFL students. However, sentences, as the basic unit carrying communicative functions, is less investigated in previous error analysis research on Chinese EFL learners. Few past studies have been focused on errors based on sentences, but rather on Chinese students’ writing problems. Chan and Li identify four main types of errors (i.e., errors in phrase, errors in word order, and the omission of sentence components such as subject, auxiliary words, and preposition) made by Chinese EFL students and explore the negative transfer of students’ native language [1]. Li explains several writing difficulties encountered by Hongkong
students related to independent clauses and topicalization [2]. Wang and Sui evaluate the coherence in Chinese EFL students' writings [3]. This research aims to identify and analyze sentence structural errors made by Chinese EFL students, with specific reference to "that" relative clauses, "which" relative clauses, topicalization, and verbs, and explore possible causes of the errors made.

2. Literature Review on Error Analysis Research on Chinese EFL Students

2.1. Error Analysis Research on Chinese EFL Learners

Error Analysis (EA) emerged in the early 1970s as a new teaching/learning theory. Li and Luk states that errors made by learners are governed by rules and thus reflect the learner’s “interlanguage (IL)” system [4]. EA theory proposes a new hypothesis for language acquisition theories, that is, learners are consistently approximating the target languages norms over several separate stages. Corder defines five stages of Error Analysis research, including error collection, identification, description, explanatory, and evaluation [5]. Corder believes that EA research has two purposes [5]. One is theoretical, that is, to understand how learners acquire a new language. The other one is practical, which gives lights to teachers on how to help learners acquire a target language drawing upon their previous knowledge [5]. In fact, many studies have been done to prove the value and implications of EA research in pedagogical practice. Hinnon confirms the value of EA referring to her experience of teaching Thai EFL students, noting that EA allowed her to teach more accurately and precisely facing different levels of students [6].

2.2. Sources of Errors

2.2.1. Interlingual Error

According to Richard, errors can be divided into two categories: interlingual errors and intralingual errors [7]. Interlingual errors occur when learners wrongly apply rules in their first languages to the target language. Language transfer and cross-linguistic influence are viewed as two major sources of interlingual errors when learners learn a new language. According to former Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, learners’ learning competence on the target language is influenced by the knowledge of acquired languages, which is known as transference [4]. Krashen explains that transfers occur when learners’ knowledge about the target language is insufficient, at which point learners naturally refer to their previous experience [8]. Positive transfer refers to the outcome that knowledge of previous languages does not interfere with learners’ acquisition of the target language norms [4]. In contrast, negative transfer represents errors caused by the influence of previous languages. Although the learning outcome can indicate either positive or negative transfer, most research has been conducted to explore the negative transfer for its accessibility. It was observed from previous research that negative transfer tends to be more visible and traceable [4].

Chinese students tend to use an inappropriate independent clause as the subject of a sentence, which indicates the potential influence of Chinese [9]. Li and Luk’ research pointed out that the tendency to topicalize a subject among Chinese students, which is also a hint of negative transfer [4]. In research done by Zheng and Park, researchers compare and analyzed errors in English essays produced by two separate groups of students, Chinese and Korean [10]. The results showed that despite errors made by two groups of learners varied in different ways, it was certain that the negative transfer of their native languages was the major source of errors [10]. Similarly, Liu found that errors made in English sentences wrote by Chinese participants were mostly caused by the influence of their mother languages [11].
2.2.2. Intralingual Errors

Compared to interlingual errors which reveal the inter influence between independent languages, intralingual errors are caused by insufficient knowledge about the target language where learners wrongly apply the rules in the target language to produce outcomes [7]. Those rules are produced by learners themselves that do not reflect interference of the first languages, but generalization based on an inadequate exposure to the target language [7]. Brown notes that interlingual errors often appear at early stages of language learning, but when the learner begins to acquire some knowledge about the new language, the transfer within the target language (i.e. overgeneralization of rules) becomes dominant [12]. Ricard states four categories of intralingual errors: over-generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized [7].

2.3. Previous Studies on Sentence Structure Errors Made by Chinese EFL Students

Despite the abundant number of theories related to EFL learning, not much research has been done focusing on Chinese EFL learners’ sentence structural errors. Chen and Li refer to errors in sentences as syntactic errors that mainly includes errors in phrases, word orders, and the omission of articles [1]. They conclude that errors are made due to the difference between English sentence structures and Chinese equivalents, indicating the negative transfer of Chinese [1]. Moreover, Li analyzes errors in Hongkong students’ English writings [2]. One noticeable problem he found that made by elementary and even advanced Chinese EFL learners was the misuse of an independent clause as the subject of a long sentence. Li attributes this type of error to one common Chinese sentence structure named a “serial-verb construction” and claims that it is caused by the cross-linguistic influence [2]. Li also mentions a wrong structure used by Hongkong learners and names it the ”pseudo-tough movement' structure” which he believed was caused by two reasons jointly, that is the mother tongue language and the complexity of a similar English structure called “postponed carrier” [2]. Moreover, topicalization is seen as a prevalent trend in Chinese learners' writings. Chinese is a topic-prominence language, while English is subject-prominence. This typological difference between Chinese and English helps researchers understand the tendency of topicalization and unidiomatic expression produced by Hongkong EFL learners [2].

2.4. Objectives of the Research

This research aims to identify, classify and analyze sentence structural errors made by Chinese EFL learners with specific reference to the categories of errors regarding "that" relative clauses, "which" relative clauses, preposition, topicalization, and verbs. Furthermore, this study will also explore the possible causes of the errors made in sentence structures by Chinese EFL students and investigate the extent to which Chinese EFL students are influenced by their first languages in their English writings.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants of this study were freshmen studying at Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU), a Sino-American University uses English as a medium of instruction. All participants took a two-week period of an English enhancement program called Pre-University Intensive English Program (PIEP) before they got enrolled, and they were all in the second semester of their first year at WKU. According to the school policy, students got enrolled in Wenzhou-Kean University in the year of 2019 attained a score of a minimum of 110 out of 150 in the subject English in the Gaokao, except for candidates from Shanghai and Zhejiang Provinces where there was no limitation.
Students from Jiangsu Province all had a minimum of 80 out of 120 points in English. Art majors all met the requirement of scoring 95 or above. In general, the English ability of the participants was above the average in their English proficiency.

3.2. Collected Writing Samples

Sample writings were collected during an online English composition course. Participants were required to write an argumentative essay related to the following topics: 1) online learning versus face-to-face learning; 2) the advantages of deforestation versus its disadvantages; 3) online shopping versus traditional malls; 4) advantages of big data versus its disadvantages; 5) whether cell phones and social media brings people closer or not; 6) smartphone is harmful versus smartphone is beneficial; 7) eBooks versus print books.

Sample writings investigated were the second drafts of the argumentative essay assigned as a core assessment. All papers submitted and studied were approximately 1000 to 1200 words in length.

3.3. Data Collection

There are four stages of data collection and categorization. They are briefly described as followed:

Stage 1: All samples were properly collected and marked by the researcher. A table was produced to record identified errors, and only errors related to sentence structures (e.g., errors in clauses, prepositions, run-on sentence) were recorded.

Stage 2: Classify errors according to James’ model at the syntax level, including phrases, clause, sentence and paragraphs [13].

Stage 3: Four most prominent error types (i.e., errors in "that" relative clauses, errors in "which" relative clauses, topicalization, and verb problems) were chosen for further qualitative analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

Four major error types, namely errors in "that" relative clauses, error in "which" relative clauses, topicalization, and verb problems, will be analyzed separately, and each type will be investigated according to the following procedure:

Stage 1: Explain the nature of the error.

Stage 2: Investigate the causes of the error.

Stage3: Explore the degree of the influence of their native languages (mandarin Chinese).

4. Results and Discussion

A total of 36 errors were recorded. The researcher divided the errors into eight big categories and described each category. The top four prominent big categories were selected for further analysis and discussion. They are "that" clause problem, "which" clause problem, topicalization, and verb problems. In the discussion, Examples will be used to illustrate each error type, following the possible causes and the degree of influence of students’ mother tongue language.

4.1. Errors in “that” Clause

There are seven tokens in the category of "that" clause problem. A “that” relative clause refers to a defining relative clause that starts with the relative pronoun “that” that aims to give essential information about someone or something. This study observed that many students were unable to use “that” clauses correctly. Examples 1-4 shows that students failed to use a “that” clause after a noun.
Example 1: One of the primary reasons that deforestation is harmful to our environment is that it is a trigger for air pollution.

Example 2: There is an inherent weakness in online learning that the obstacle of the screen.

The above two examples produced incomplete sentences by omitting some necessary parts of a “that” clause. In Example 1, the first “that” clause is incomplete as it lacks a main verb between the subject “deforestation” and the adjective “harmful”. Similarly, there is no main verb in the “that” clause in example 2.

Example 3: But sitting in front of the computer every day, watching the teaching video recorded in advance, or taking a class that with less communication.

In addition to the omission of predicates, some students would wrongly place a prepositional phrase after the relative pronoun “that” as Example 3 illustrated.

Little mother tongue interference is observed because there seems to have no equivalent in the Chinese sentence structure. The insufficient acquisition of “that” clause may be the main cause.

Example 4: It is online learning that cannot offer.

Suggested Correction: It is something that online learning cannot offer.

As Example 4 shows, the structure of this sentence is not clear. The original incorrect sentence can be viewed as a direct translation of its Chinese version (“这是在线学习不能提供的”). Hence, the incorrect form of the structure “it is something that …” is likely to be caused by the influence of the similar Chinese sentence structure.

Overall, students seem to be aware of the main function of the “that” clause (i.e. add more information about something or someone that is necessary for understanding the sentence), but they had problems in using this grammatical structure correctly. This inability is mainly caused by the insufficient knowledge about the target grammar point, as well as a limited influence of the mother tongue.

4.2. Errors in “which” Clause

There are five tokens in the category of "which" clause problem. “Which” clauses are widely used by Chinese EFL students, but those applications often appear to be unnecessary and inaccurate. This study finds that most of the time, students employed "which" clause as a method to attach extra information to a theme. While some of the attempts were appropriate, some failed to make use of the function of "which" clauses, and sometimes even revealed a low proficiency of using "which" clauses. The "which" clause is another a type of relative clause that will add more information to someone or something. Different from "that" clauses, "which" clauses can be either restrictive or non-restrictive. Information added by restrictive clauses cannot be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence, and the information described by a non-restrictive clause is not essential for understanding the sentence.

Example 5: In addition, I prefer to choose a book in a bookstore rather than an online store which makes me feel the pleasure of reading more directly not doing multiple-choice questions.

Example 6: People use mobile phones, which really brings great convenience to people's lives.

Example 7: Transpiration requires energy, which is extracted from the surrounding air, thereby cooling the climate by consuming energy.

Examples 5-7 show an insufficient knowledge of distinguishing restrictive clauses and unrestrictive clauses. The “which” clause used in Example 5 is not clear about which antecedent it is referring to due to this restrictive form. According to the content, the antecedent of the “which”
clause in Example 5 is likely to be “bookstore”; however, using a restrictive clause will mislead readers to relate this added information to the noun “online store”, which can cause confusion in understanding this sentence.

The “which” clause in Example 6 is a non-restrictive relative clause; however, it is rather redundant. The information provided in the “which” clause is necessary for readers to understand this sentence, which is, in this sentence, to emphasize on the importance of mobile phone. Example 7 also has the same problem. It would be better if the students could change this non-restrictive clause to a restrictive clause.

Since there seems to be no similar structure in Chinese, the mother tongue interference is less likely to intervene. Instead, as “which” clauses are commonly used in English writings, students may attempt to use “which” clauses as a way to improve the quality of writings. In addition, as students were trained in order to get a high grade in the Gaokao, most of them were told to use relative clauses like “which” clauses as frequent as possible in their compositions. The “which” clause was regarded as a high-level construction that represents a good mastery of English, so students who employ “which” clauses are likely to leave a good impression to the examiner. This may help explain why students used “which” clauses excessively even though they did not fully understand the mechanism behind.

4.3. Errors Related to Topicalization

Topicalization is sometimes found to be a prominent problem in Chinese students’ writing, possibly due to the structural distinction between Chinese and English. As a subject-prominence language, a subject is an essential part of every English sentence, and the subject determines the verb. The Chinese language, on the other hand, normally places a topic at the beginning of a sentence. A topic is not commonly seen in English, and when it occurs, it is usually under a particular circumstance as Example 8 I created below shows:

Example 8: That bird— I want to catch it!

Here, the verb does not agree with “that bird”. Hence, it is inappropriate to claim “that bird” is a subject. Instead, it is considered to be the topic of this sentence. In another situation where there is no verb, like Example 9 I created below, “Mary” the lady is regarded as the topic of this sentence rather than a subject in the grammatical sense.

Example 9: Mary – what a beautiful lady!

Example 10: Can restore memories and its comfort seem to be the only reasons why print books still exist.

Example 11: Competing with online shopping is the traditional mall.

Examples 10-11 indicate students’ tendency to topicalized the subject in their writings. Example 10 shows an ungrammatical structure at the position of the subject, which is using a verb phrase to act as a subject. An acceptable correction may be “the ability to restore memories”. By doing so, the underlined part will change from a verb phrase into a noun phrase which is suitable for being a subject. Example 11 is grammatically correct in the form, but it is semantically incorrect. The underlined part (“Competing with online shopping”) is more like a theme or a topic of this sentence, and the subject seems to be “traditional mall”, which is placed at last. It would be more reasonable if it is organized like “The shop that competes with online shopping is the traditional mall.” or “Traditional mall is competing with online shopping”, depending on the author’s focus.

It is possible that the mother tongue language interferes with students’ writing outcome. Sentences with problems of topicalization usually have a strong tendency of translation from Chinese, such as Example 11. Example 11 is literally the word-by-word translation of its following
Chinese counterpart: “与网购竞争的是传统商店”. Meanwhile, for students who are conscious of the necessity of a subject, they are likely to make mistakes in the word choice. While it is usual to use a verb as the subject of a sentence, English limits the word choice of the subject within only noun phrases (NPs). This difference can be seen in Example 10, which, the Chinese equivalent of the underlined part (“可以储存记忆”) is a commonly used subject in Chinese. As a result, the influence of mother tongue language might be the main cause of topicalization, and students’ inadequate mastery of structural knowledge is likely to be another cause.

4.4. Verb Problems

The verb is essential in an English sentence. The main verb, which is usually the first verb, is in the finite form and agrees with the subject in tense, number, aspect, etc., and the following verbs will be in the non-finite form. This means that there is only one finite-verb allowed in every English sentence. The subsequent verb has to be written in a non-finite form. In this study, Chinese EFL students were observed to produce sentences with two or more finite verbs.

Example 12: When you are bored, you can also use mobile phones watch the video or movie you want to watch.

In Example 12, the main verb is “can (also) use”, so the second verb should be in the non-finite form. However, the student used a finite verb “watch”.

Mother tongue interference is possibly a major cause. Although such construction violates grammatical rules in English, they are very, on the contrary, very common in Chinese. In fact, such a structure is called “serial-verb construction” [2]. Since there is also no inflection in Chinese, verbs in the base form can be placed one after another in a sentence. Example 13 created by myself shows the pattern of Chinese serial-verb construction with verbs being underlined:

Example 13: 明天我打算用电脑看电影听音乐, 然后出门逛超市买一些蔬菜。(Tomorrow I'm going to use the computer to watch movies and listen to music and then go out to the supermarket and buy some vegetables.)

It is noticeable that there is no conjunction word between verbs in Chinese. Thus, Chinese EFL students may neglect English rules and naturally apply knowledge from their native language to construct sentences. However, there is one situation that may show a sign of inter-language influence. In English, if the verbs all agree with the same subject, they are called parallel verbs. Example 14 is created by myself using the parallel-verb structure with verbs being underlined:

Example 14: I wake up, wash my face, eat breakfast, and go to school every morning.

Compare Example 14 with Example 15 produced by a student:

Example 15: For example, they will stay up all night, do not eat, just to play more mobile games or watch movies.

Example 15 has a similar pattern when compared with example 14, and it is possible that the student attempted to employ the parallel verb construction, but failed to realize that auxiliary verbs should not be used.

5. Discussion on Significant Findings

The error types were based on the material that EFL students in Wenzhou-Kean University produced during a composition course. Most EFL students made the errors regarding "that" relative clauses, "which" relative clauses, topicalization, and verbs. This study compares the sentence structural differences between English and Chinese, which is necessary for Chinese EFL learners to notice.
The results of this research may help Chinese EFL students learn to avoid some mistakes in sentence writing. However, the complexity of the sentence structure is not easy to acquire. Teachers might pay more attention to help students learn the structure of English sentences, either through practice or thorough explanation. Meanwhile, it is also important to remind students to be cautious when using Chinese sentence patterns for English sentences as this may lead to producing Chinese-like sentences.

6. Conclusion

In the process of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), most Chinese students will encounter problems with sentence structure problems. Compared with producing outcomes at other levels (e.g. words and phrases), learning sentence structure involves a deeper understanding of the target language. In this paper, I have discussed four main sentence structural error types commonly made by Chinese EFL students in their writings, namely errors in "that" relative clauses, errors in "which" relative clauses, topicalization, and verb problems.

In addition, this study explores the causes of four identified error types. Topicalization was observed to be possibly due to the influence of mother tongue language as Chinese is a topic-prominence language, opposing English which is subject-prominence. The construction of “serial-verb construction” widely used in Chinese might be one reason for predicates problems, while the wrong analogy of a similar parallel-verb structure may also be a reason. Errors in two types of relative clauses are likely to be caused by inadequate knowledge in the target language and its original complexity.

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https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.3.8.1342-1351


