A Study of EFL Learners' Writing Errors and Instructional Strategies

Hui-mien Tan

Center for General Education, Kun Shan University

ABSTRACT

Good English writing competence is widely recognized as an important skill for educational, business and personal reasons. English writing instruction is thus assuming an increasing role in foreign language education. The present study seeks to explore EFL learners' major writing difficulties by analyzing the nature and distribution of their writing errors. The participants were 95 second year non-English majors of Kun Shan University. The error analysis revealed that the top four most commonly made errors were word choice, verb form, missing subject and verb tense. The major causes of these errors were attributable to limited vocabulary size, poor grammar knowledge and interference from first language. Six appropriate instructional strategies were suggested so that teachers can adopt a more effective approach to enhance students' writing proficiency.

Keywords: error analysis, writing difficulties, instructional strategies

I. Introduction

The ability to write effectively in English is becoming increasingly important in our global community as communication across language becomes ever more essential. Good English writing competence is widely recognized as an important skill for educational, business and personal reasons. Writing is a complex process which demands cognitive analysis and linguistic synthesis. It is even harder to learn to write in a foreign language, and it takes considerable time and effort to become a skillful writer. English writing instruction is thus assuming an increasing role in foreign language education. The present study seeks to explore EFL learners' major writing difficulties by analyzing the nature and distribution of their writing errors. Instructional strategies are then suggested so that teachers can adopt a more effective approach to enhance students' writing proficiency.

II. Literature Review

Studies of Error Analysis

Chiang (1993) examined error types of 160 compositions written by senior high school students in Taiwan. The low proficient group wrote mainly in simple sentences. As far as global errors were concerned, the three most commonly made errors were conjunctions, run-on sentences and subjects-objects-complements. The investigation of learning strategies showed that language transfer accounted for 70.58% of all the errors.

Liu (1999) conducted a study of lexical and grammatical collocational errors from 127 copies of students' final examination papers and 94 copies of students' compositions. The majority of the errors were attributable to negative interlingual transfer and four kinds of intralingual transfer, among which ignorance of rule restrictions resulted in more errors than the other three.

Huang (2001) investigated the nature and distribution of different kinds of grammatical errors made by 46 English majors of a Taiwanese university. A total of 1700 errors were found and categorized into 13 error types. The top six common errors were (1)Verb (2)Noun (3)Spelling (4)Article (5)Preposition and (6)Word Choice. Overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, simplification, incomplete application of rules and L1 transfer were reported as the major causes of EFL learners' errors.

Chan (2004) investigated writing errors made by 710 Hong Kong Chinese ESL learners at different proficiency levels with the focus on 5 error types, namely (a) lack of control of the copula (b) incorrect placement of adverbs (c) inability to use the *there be* structure for expressing the existential or presentative function (d) failure to use the relative clause and (e) confusion in verb transitivity. The results showed confirmatory evidence for syntactic transfer from Chinese to English with regard to the five syntactic patterns selected for experimentation, and the extent of syntactic transfer was particularly large for complex target structures and among learners of a lower proficiency level.

Huang (2006) presented an analysis of 34 Taiwanese English majors' writing errors based on a web-based writing program, which included error categories of grammar, mechanics, style, and usage. The distribution of errors was usage (55%), mechanics (20%), style (16%) and grammar (9%). Huang concluded that most of EFL students' writing errors were not due to insufficient command of linguistic complexity. On the contrary, they made a big portion of basic errors such as the subject-verb agreement or incomplete sentences.

III. Method

Participants

The participants were 95 second year non-English majors of Kun Shan University, who have enrolled in the college of engineering, college of information technology, and college

of commerce and management. They were allotted to level B after taking an ability grouping test by the end of the first academic year. Currently, all non-English majors of Kun Shan University are placed at three levels of classes on the basis of their test scores, and level B represents intermediate English proficiency at this school. They have to take a listening and speaking course in the first year, and a reading and writing course in the second year. Teaching time is 100 minutes per week.

Data Collection

The participants were requested to respond to one of the articles posted on the researcher's English blog in about 50 words. These articles were adapted from news report on current events; topics included Wang Chien-ming, Sit in Rallies, Bus Crash, Tragic Family Suicide, Tour Bus Safety, and Earthquakes…etc. Each article was about 150 words with discussion questions provided, but participants had the option to follow them or not. The purpose of this assignment is to motivate students to express their opinions, feelings and experiences after reading current events in which they have some background knowledge and personal interest.

The compositions were completed during the fall semester of 2006. After collecting their online writing, grammatical and lexical errors were examined and counted manually by the researcher. Error counts and examples of each error type were then reported in a table of descending order.

IV. Results and Discussion

Sentence Types

Altogether 315 complete sentences and 72 sentences fragments were written in response to a total of 11 articles. Some students wrote less than the required number of words. Out of the 315 complete sentences, 242 sentences (76.8%) were simple sentences, 49 (15.6%) were complex sentences, and 24 (7.6%) were compound sentences. More than half of the complex sentences were written with the subordinate conjunction *because*.

It was also found that only four sentences were constructed with relative clauses and none of the sentences were written with the expletive *there*. These findings were in line with Chan's study (2004). The existential or presentative functions are often expressed by using the *there be* structure in English. The corresponding existential meaning is, however, normally expressed as *have* in Chinese. Therefore Chinese learners of English often have problems with the *there be* structure. Whereas English uses different relative pronouns, there are no explicit relative pronouns in Chinese. Because the position of relative clauses in English and Chinese also differs, many Chinese ESL learners in Hong Kong have problems with complex English sentences involving relative clauses. The limited use of relative clauses and the *there be* structure in this study may be explained by the similar cause of L1 interference. The

participants might avoid using these constructions, which sound difficult or unfamiliar to them.

Error Types

Table 1   Analysis of Error Types

Error Type	Count	Percentage	Examples
Word Choice	45	13.9%	*I can learn his composed. I am a vacation student.*
Verb Form	41	12.7%	*Will found, is not have, was took, am not live*
Missing Subject	38	11.8%	*Find family and friends. Is not good.*
Verb Tense	36	11.1%	*I'm eating dinner when the earthquake occurred.*
Preposition	27	8.4%	*I am afraid earthquakes.*
Word Order	25	7.7%	*Many problems we have to face. I very worry.*
Article	23	7.1%	*If I have problem,*
Parts of Speech	21	6.5%	*It is very danger. I'm worry about my safe.*
Spelling	17	5.3%	*Sloly, passibly, screech*
Missing Object	16	5.0%	*I have not bought.*
S-V Agreement	14	4.3%	*I were playing. The earthquakes is very terrible.*
Missing Verb	12	3.7%	*Different people different views.*
Passive Voice	8	2.5%	*Excessively old buses should eliminate.*

A total of 323 common errors were examined and categorized into 13 error types. Errors related with lexical knowledge (word choice, spelling, parts of speech) accounted for 25.7%. Errors related with sentence structure (missing subject, missing object, missing verb and word order) accounted for 28.2%. Other grammatical errors (verb form, verb tense, passive voice, preposition, article, subject-verb agreement) accounted for 46.1%.

Table 1 shows the count and percentage of each error type in a hierarchy of descending order. They are (1) word choice (2) verb form (3) missing subject (4) verb tense (5) preposition (6) word order (7) article (8) parts of speech (9) spelling (10) missing object (11) subject-verb agreement (12) missing verb (13) passive voice. The top four commonly made errors make up about 50% of the total.

The participants had the greatest difficulty in choosing correct or appropriate words to express their ideas clearly. Some messages were totally obscure due to incorrect word usage. This finding was similar to Chen's study (2001) on 89 EFL institute students, who ranked 'insufficient vocabulary and phrases to express their ideas freely' as their top writing difficulty based on a self-report questionnaire. Some participants wrote very little, and this might be explained by their limited vocabulary. They couldn't think of appropriate words and

phrases to express their ideas.

Verb form was the second common error. Some participants made awkward errors on verb forms of the simple present and simple past, and some were very confused about the use of modal auxiliaries. This kind of error indicated students' poor knowledge of basic verb forms.

The third common error was missing subject. Chinese students tend to exclude the subject. Chen (2004) investigated the learning of overt subjects and overt objects for 513 Taiwan college students. The findings revealed that less proficient students had the same difficulties in detecting null subjects and null objects in English while more proficient students were more able to detect incorrect null subjects than incorrect null objects Syntactically, the topic rather than the subject plays a prominent role in Chinese grammatical relations while English is viewed as a subject-prominent language. Chinese allows null subjects whereas English doesn't. In English, all sentences must have a subject and this accounts for the use of the expletive *it*. However, structural subjects in Chinese are not an obligatory element of the sentence, and Chinese does not have such an expletive as *it*.

The fourth common error was verb tense. A number of participants used the simple present tense for all cases. They seemed to be ignorant of other tenses. This finding revealed that students did not have comprehensive knowledge on the use of different verb tenses.

To summarize, participants have major writing difficulties in choosing appropriate words, constructing complete sentences, and using verb form and verb tense accurately. Causes of errors are mainly attributable to limited vocabulary size, poor grammar knowledge and interference from first language. The writing performance of these 95 participants should allow us to infer that most level B students are low proficient English writers, who will write mainly in simple sentences or sentence fragments with lots of grammatical and lexical errors. Furthermore, a portion of them are unable to communicate ideas clearly enough in understandable written English.

V. Instructional Strategies

Vocabulary Learning

It is essential for students to acquire the most frequently used words. It is common that students of level B have not reached the vocabulary size of 2000-word level. Class reading of theme-based units will give students a better chance of learning the recurring vocabulary. Vocabulary learning strategies like word association, analysis of parts of speech, affixes and suffixes, collocation activities, guess from textual content can be applied whenever appropriate to facilitate their learning process.

Instruction of Basic Grammar

Good writing is certainly beyond grammar manipulation. Yet it will be very difficult to compose a clear, logical and fluent paragraph if a writer is unable to write reasonably

acceptable simple sentences and does not possess the mastery of some complex sentence structures. Results of the present study indicate an urgent need in upgrading students' basic linguistic competence. Explicit teaching on salient grammar points like types of sentences, syntax, verb forms of some commonly used tenses is highly recommended in the first semester. In the meantime, it is also important to convey the idea that error-free sentence production is not the prime target for writing practice but as the means with which to better express one's meaning.

Guided Pleasure Reading Scheme

Class teaching of vocabulary and grammar is necessary but insufficient to bridge the gap due to limited class time. The benefits of reading to writing are apparent. Students can pick up important features of writing like syntax, vocabulary, prepositions and articles from regular reading. Lee (2005) used a hypothesized structural model that attempts to explain the relationship of writing in English as a foreign language by Taiwan university students to a variety of factors. The findings showed that free voluntary reading was the only significant predictor of writing performance. The study also confirmed that the more one reads, the less one feels apprehensive about writing, and the less one suffers from dysfunctional composing. Free voluntary reading might also help reduce writer's block by increasing knowledge of the written language. A clear implication of these results is that free reading should be emphasized as a part of developing writing ability. Nevertheless, non-English majors with lower intermediate proficiency usually lack the initiative to read English voluntarily and regularly outside class. Instead of depending on this kind of elusive goal, the researcher suggests a guided online reading scheme for freshmen to read and write during the long summer vacation. This scheme should provide a wide variety of interesting articles for students to choose with the length, vocabulary and syntax carefully controlled to meet the target group's English proficiency. Writing prompts can be designed to guide them to respond briefly after reading. The scheme can be implemented as a prerequisite for enrolling in the second year reading and writing course, and preferably be awarded with prizes if funding is available. Most non-English majors with vocational background need guidance to enjoy the benefits of pleasure reading before they can develop their own regular reading habit.

Selective Error Correction and Class Conference

The efficacy of error or grammar correction in second language writing has been a controversial issue. Truscott (1996) claimed that grammar correction should be abandoned because it was ineffective and harmful. On the other hand, a number of researchers have provided empirical evidence on the positive effects of error feedback. (Bitchener, J; Young, S; & Cameron, D., 2005; Chandler, 2003; Chang, 2000) Regarding students' preferences, 67% college students in Leki's study (1991) preferred their teachers to show where the error was and to give a clue as to how to correct the error, or directly providing the correct form. Ferris

(2004) also concluded that error treatment including error feedback by teachers is a necessary component of L2 writing instruction.

However, comprehensive error feedback for several large classes would be a very exhausting and time consuming task. The heavy work load of correcting 100 to 200 copies of writing each time may somehow inhibit teachers' motive of assigning more creative writing tasks. Therefore, selective error correction and class conferences are more practical and effective. The researcher suggests direct correction of lexical errors and a few major grammatical errors at a time. There is no need to correct every wrong grammar structure, especially those for which students are not yet ready. For example, correcting the verb into the passive voice does not have much value if the student has no idea of this construction. Group editing followed by class conference is another alternative for correcting every assignment. The teacher can choose some sample sentences for the class to edit and revise in groups. After group reporting, the teacher then makes further feedback and explanation to clarify confusing concepts.

Awareness of L1 interference

Switching interactively between first and second language has been recognized as one of the salient characteristics of L2 writing. Woodball (2002) suggested that language switching may be driven by the mental operations of private speech for solving L2 problems with L1 resources and the results of his study suggested that less proficient L2 learners switched to their L1s more frequently than more advanced learners. According to Wang's finding (2003), the low proficient participants often concentrated on direct translation from their L1 into the L2 to perform their L2 writing to compensate for their L2 linguistic deficiencies. Composing their writing tasks in this way might have helped them overcome writing difficulties without exerting much mental effort. Cases of direct translation were also observed in this study, for example, '*My nickname is schoolmate takes. English name is I elects. Give to fortune teacher to calculate.*' In addition, students have the tendency to exclude the subject or object and fail to use certain constructions due to L1 interference.

Therefore, teachers can help students become aware of interlingual errors by highlighting the structural and lexical differences between Chinese and English in areas when their use is first introduced or reinforced. If interlanguage is likely to occur, then consciousness-raising can help students self-edit their errors when interference occurs.

Writing Motivation

Generally speaking, writing motivation is encouraged through stimulating reading, relation with daily life experience, and support of relevant vocabulary. Pre-writing activities are crucial for unskilled writers. After selecting an appropriate writing task, some relevant reading passages should be introduced. However, the reading materials should only serve as sources

for stimulating ideas and learning of relevant vocabulary rather than models to copy. Students have to write on a new but closely related topic. They still have to generate and refine their own ideas as well as construct their own sentences. Even students of low proficiency level should be given the opportunity to experience writing as a creative act of discovery. The process approach is also applicable to low proficient students provided that thoughtful stimulus and guidance are available. As Zamel (1982) concluded, " If, however, students learn that writing is a process through which they can explore and discover their thoughts and ideas, then product is likely to improve as well." (p.207)

VI. Conclusion

This study has diagnosed word choice, verb form, missing subject and verb tense as the top four common writing errors committed by EFL learners at Kun Shan University. Six instructional strategies were proposed to overcome students' general weakness in limited vocabulary size, poor grammar knowledge and L1 interference, which are major causes of their writing errors. Growth in vocabulary size and vocabulary knowledge is anticipated with emphasis on learning of frequently used words and effective implementation of the guided pleasure reading scheme. These two strategies aim to reduce students' errors in choosing incorrect words. Instruction of basic grammar, selective error correction and class conference, and awareness of L1 interference are strategies to help students write accurate complete sentences. Students will make fewer errors in incorrect verb form, verb tense and missing subject if they grasp the basic elements essential to English writing. Overall improvement in writing performance will also be achieved if students have real intrinsic motivation to write. This is the goal of enhancing writing motivation.

Writing in a foreign language is by no means an easy task. Teaching foreign language writing to large classes of unskilled writers is a demanding job. Though significant progress may not be easily achievable within limited time, enhancement of writing proficiency can still be anticipated if teachers have better understanding of their students' writing difficulties and well prepare themselves with effective instructional strategies, which integrate reading, writing as well as vocabulary and grammar instruction in a skillful way.

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