



Implications of Interlanguage Error Analysis and Research on English Language Testing and Teaching

MI Ning^{1,*}

¹ Lecturer, Qufu Normal University, China. Research field: English teaching methodology.

*Corresponding author.

Address: Foreign Languages Teaching & Research Department, Qufu Normal University, Qufu, 273165, China.

Received 3 January 2012; accepted 25 March 2012.

Abstract

Writing ability is important for English learners. But for most Chinese learners, even advanced learners, many errors have been made during writing compositions. This paper is a tentative analysis on writing errors in compositions written by graduate students at Qufu Normal University and suggests some possible reasons which cause these errors. Finally, this paper sheds light on implications for English teaching and testing.

Key words: Writing; Error analysis; Implication; Teaching and testing

MI Ning (2012). Implications of Interlanguage Error Analysis and Research on English Language Testing and Teaching. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 2(2), 4-7. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/j.hess.1927024020120202.1344> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.hess.1927024020120202.1344>

INTRODUCTION

One cannot learn a language without committing errors. In the process of learning a foreign language errors seem to be unavoidable. They need not be seen as signs of failure. On the contrary, they give some evidence for the learner's interlanguage systems. From 1950s to 1970s the study of errors has roughly experienced three phases: Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and the theory of Interlanguage. EA is not entirely satisfactory. However, the study of learners' errors is significant in pedagogic field. As teachers, they are inevitably confronted with many errors made by their students. Only by trying to find

out the errors and seek the causes of their errors can the countermeasures be worked out to correct them and help students get to the target language - English. The focus of the study is about advanced English learners' writing errors, aiming at finding out the errors, analyzing the errors and showing some implications on English teaching and testing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Errors are common phenomena in language learning for new learners. The study of errors began in 1957, when Lado's revolutionary book *Linguistics Across Culture* appeared. A new branch of linguistics-Contrastive linguistics began to flourish and it gave rise to the contrastive analysis which compares the mother tongue and target language at the level of language, grammar and culture. In 1972, American linguistics Larry Selinker created the new word - "interlanguage" which refers to the separateness of a second language learner's second language systems, a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target language. In the development of learners' interlanguage, Error Analysis(EA) could play an important role.

There are many researchers focusing on interlanguage error analysis, such as J. C. Richards, J. Schachter, S. N. Sirdhar, M. Celce-Murcia, J. M. Hendrikson whose research include types, reasons, essence of learning errors.

Chinese researchers, such as Gui Shichun, Dai Weidong, Shu Dingwang, and so on, do some relevant theoretical study. Gui Shichun (2000) pointed out in the book named *Psycholinguistics* that error analysis is a very common teaching way. By analyzing errors teachers can find out personal points and common points in language errors. Dai Weidong and Shu Dingfang (1994) narrated and made further comments on abroad contrastive analysis, error analysis and interlanguage theory and points out problems. In recent years with the corpus development, more

researchers did more empirical study related with error analysis. For example, Chen Wanxia (2002) aims at collocation errors in compositions written by junior students at PLA University of Foreign Languages and suggests some possible reasons which cause these errors.

From the above narration, it can be seen that error analysis have been used in foreign language learning as an effective research way. But most study focus on undergraduate students, less on graduate students. In this paper 150 compositions are collected from first-year graduate students who are non-English majors. All writing errors are identified and described according to James' EA theory. Resulting from these errors detected from sample compositions, some findings can be discovered.

METHODOLOGY

Three research methods are employed in the study.

The first is that James' related theory (2001) in EA is employed to describe errors. James classified errors by reference to three criteria: modality, medium and level. "level" refers to the levels of language, which is identified by James as three components: substance, text and discourse. For the sake of convenience of discussion, in the study errors are classified according to James' criterion. Errors at the level of substance include punctuation errors and spelling errors. The author thinks that at the level of substance errors have less impact on writing competence than errors at the level of text and discourse. These errors can be avoided if students pay more attention. So punctuation and spelling errors, that is to say, the errors at the level of substance, will not be discussed in the study.

The second is the corpus-based analysis, which is used in the study since it is scientific, quantitative and reliable. The analysis is based on a corpus which includes writing errors made by advanced English learners. The statistical software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) is used to analyze the data collected. In the study first-year graduate students who are non-English majors are selected as subjects. The subjects with English learning experience of at least ten years can be regarded as advanced English learners. They all passed College English Test Band Six (CET6) when they were undergraduates and got a good score in National Entrance Test of English for MA/MS Candidates (NETEM). Chinese is their native language. Sixty-four students are selected from three departments of Shandong Normal University. They are Chinese Department, Educational Science Department and Population, Sources, and Environment Department. The purpose of the study is to find what features they have in English learning and which kinds of errors they make. In September, 2011,

new enrolled graduate students who passed College English Test Band Six were required to take part in an English test. 1396 graduate students took part in it. They were given two hours to finish the English test paper in classrooms. The paper includes several parts, such as multiple-choice, cloze test, reading, error correction and writing. The writing task is a picture composition in no less than 150 words. During the period of exam, there was no instruction or suggestions from the teacher, neither could they discuss with their classmates nor consult dictionaries. Of 1396 compositions collected, 150 from six departments at random are taken as the sample compositions. With the help of the native English speaker invited as the consultant, the linguistic errors in the sample compositions have been found out. And they are classified into text errors and discourse errors. Each category is divided into subcategories. The errors will be counted by hand instead of machine or computer. The following is the composition that is given in the test paper.

The third one is self-designed questionnaire. A self-designed questionnaire for students is conducted in this study to gain a deeper understanding of students' errors and some problems in EFL testing and teaching. Out of the 150 subjects, thirty chosen at random are required to give their response to it. The students are all advanced English learner, so they can understand the questionnaire written in English clearly.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After counting the 150 pieces of sample compositions by hand, what is discovered is that the advanced English learners also commit many errors. 1684 errors have been found in the sample compositions. In the following parts, errors are categorized and described at the level of text and discourse. Among errors there are some errors that can be classified as neither grammatical errors nor lexical errors. They are called ambiguous errors. This kind of errors will be accounted for separately as well as discourse errors. The types and number of text errors and ambiguous errors are listed in table 1, which also present the errors in percentages.

Lexical Errors of Text

Lexis takes a central role in language study. However, it has been a headache for most Chinese learners. Many problems in reading, writing, listening and speaking are caused by vocabulary. Lexical errors can be divided into two broad categories: formal errors and semantic errors. From Table 1 it has been found that students make less lexical errors than grammar errors, but there are still some problems about lexis.

There are 202 instances in formal errors. Among

Table 1
The Number and Percentage of the Errors

	Lexical errors		Grammatical errors		Ambiguous errors	Total Number of errors	Total length of samples in words
	Formal errors	Semantic errors	Morphology errors	Syntax errors			
Number	202	185	556	640	101	1684	23520
Percentage	12%	11%	33%	38%	6%	100%	

them, there are 164 instances in misselection, 12 in misformation, 26 in distortion. Among errors in misselection many students always make such errors that a verb should be put in a sentence instead of a noun, an adverb instead of an adjective, a noun instead of a verb, an adjective instead of a noun. These lexical errors indicate that students are not clear about parts of speech. Another indication is that students seem not to grasp the basic rules about grammar.

There are 185 instances in semantic errors. Compared with formal errors, the number of semantic errors is less. Among them collocation errors make up a large proportion of vocabulary errors, accounting for 43%. There are three types of errors in collocation, that is, collocation of nouns and verbs, collocation of adjectives and nouns, collocation of nouns and nouns.

There are also some other errors that cannot be classified as errors in collocation. These include: Errors in confusion of sense relation; Errors in verbosity.

Grammar Errors of Text

There are 556 errors in morphology, accounting for 47% of the total grammar errors. Among them, errors in verb morphology account for 76%, including 1) subject-verb disagreement (including unmarked third person singular verbs) (53%); 2) wrong tense (27%); 3) incorrectly formed verb (20%). Among these errors subject-verb disagreement (including unmarked third person singular verbs) and misuse of tense, are the most conspicuous ones. Errors in noun morphology mainly fall into four categories. They are singular nouns that should have been plural(61%); singular nouns incorrectly marked as plural(4%) ; incorrectly formed plurals(2%) and uncountable nouns used with the plural mark(33%). Errors in adjective/adverb morphology cover the incorrect form of the comparative or the superlative, and adjectives are wrongly used to modify verbs. In this category, only two instances of confusion of adjectives and adverbs are detected.

Syntax errors occur in texts larger than the word, namely phrase, clause, sentence and intersentence. Errors in syntax turn out to be the most frequent type, accounting for 38% percent of the total. Next, phrase, sentence, clause and intersentence will be discussed in sequence. Among all the syntax errors, errors in phrases account for

37%, errors in clauses 48%, errors in sentences 6%, errors in intersentences 9%.

Errors in phrases cover incorrect noun phrases, adjective/adverb phrases, verb phrases and preposition phrases. About noun phrases, many students are used to treating a general object as a specific or unique thing. Errors in verb phrases mainly refer to addition, omission or misuse of preposition in intransitive verb-preposition construction. Some researchers think that these errors should be classified as misuse of preposition. However, misuse of preposition is a large category that includes several subtypes. One type refers to errors in verb-preposition construction. The preposition usage is closely related with the verb. Such errors represent misuse of verb rather than omission of the preposition preceding a noun phrase. The number of errors in verb phrases is small, while errors in preposition phrases rank the first.

Errors in clauses involve whole phrases entering into the structure of clauses (James 2001, p.157). Deviance will arise in each of the following five conditions, that is, omission(15%), superfluity(18%), disorder(16%), misselection(27%) and blend errors(24%).

Errors in sentences involve errors in selection and combination of clauses into larger units. Errors in sentences are consolidation errors, comprising the two subtypes of coordination and subordination errors. No consolidation errors are detected in the study. All are errors in subordination. Total 38 instances are found. These errors are divided into misuse of participle phrases and errors in complex sentences.

Errors in intersentences covers all errors in cohesion, including grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. Errors can be divided into four types: errors in ellipsis, reference, substitution and conjunction. There are total 57 instances detected. Almost all the errors are in conjunction. This type includes omission of conjunctions and misselection of conjunctions. Only 12 instances are misselection of conjunctions.

Ambiguous Errors

Like many other error analysis, there are some errors that cannot be classified into any existent categories. These errors include expressive errors, logic errors, literal translation and redundancy. Among the four types literal translation is the most frequent. It is obvious that these

errors stem from MT interference. Students make these sentences just basing on their native language.

Discourse Errors

At the discourse level coherence errors mainly appear in written work. Coherence errors are the global errors that are diffused throughout the sentences or large unites of a text. They are classified as topical coherence, relational coherence and sequential coherence. From the angle of discourse most students among the subjects can organize the composition completely. This point can also be found from the designed questionnaire. Out of 30 students 27 students pay more attention to their compositions' discourse. But some problems still occur. For example, about errors in relational coherence, 35 students make one or more such errors in their compositions. Most errors occur in the first paragraph. This shows that students have more difficulty in describing something than giving their comments.

CONCLUSION

From the errors made by advanced English learners results can be found. Firstly, among text errors there are more grammar errors found in their compositions than lexical errors. Of all the grammar errors students make more errors of core grammars than those of peripheral grammars, especially in S-V disagreements, confusion of noun singular and plural, misuse of article, misuse of tense. Secondly, among all the errors they make fewer discourse errors than text errors. Thirdly, mother tongue interference is still one of the main causes of errors in the foreign language learning for advanced English learners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EFL TESTING AND TEACHING

In the study according to the errors found and students' responses for the questionnaire some causes of errors can be found. The main causes are mother tongue interference, misuse of strategies and negative influence from English testing.

For testing, firstly, rethinking the relationship between errors and testing. Teachers and students should keep a sound perspective towards the relationship. Testing should be regarded by students as a good way of promoting their learning instead of only a test. Secondly, there is a must to have some adjustments to English testing. It is a need to adjust writing structure, types of writing test, and the method of composition marking. More writing tasks should be put in English testing in order to improve students' writing ability. Not only argumentation but also other types should be tested in English tests. Analytic method should be employed to EFL classroom. For teaching, from the aspect of lexical teaching, one way is that teachers should give an explanation for a new word mainly in English, and in Chinese only when necessary. Another way is to put the word in a given context when introducing a new word to the students. From another aspect of grammatical teaching, teaching English grammar is necessary. In EFL teaching teachers should emphasize core grammar and take some measures to improve the students' ability of application of English core grammar.

REFERENCES

- CHEN, Wanxia (2002). Collocation Errors in the Writings of Chinese Learners of English. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, 1, 60-62.
- DAI, Weidong & SHU, Dingfang (1994). Problems of Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and Interlanguage Research - the Second Theory of Foreign Language Teaching Research. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, 5, 1-7.
- GUI, Shichun (2000). *Psycholinguistics*. Shan Hai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics Across Cultures*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- James, C. (2001). *Errors in Language Learning and Use: Exploring Error Analysis*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Richards, J. (1974). *Error Analysis*. London: Longman Press.
- Schachter, J. & Gelce-Mnrcia, M. (1977). Some Reservations Concerning Error Analysis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 4, 441-451.
- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *IRAL*, 3, 201-31.