An Investigation of English Majors' Discourse Errors: Based on Micro-Level

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Abstract

Based on the theories of error analysis, discourse analysis and language transfer, this thesis aims to investigate the discourse errors made by English majors' in their English writing. Discourse errors are analyzed at micro-level, cohesion. Cohesion errors are examined from four aspects: reference, conjunction, substitution and ellipsis, lexical cohesion. The results indicate that the students' essays display some common weaknesses in term of discourse errors at the micro-level, which includes ambiguity in reference, misuse or overuse of conjunction and repetition, misuse of lexical items, etc.. The possible causes of errors are pointed out.

Key words: Discourse analysis; Error analysis; English majors; English writing

INTRODUCTION

Writing is difficult in foreign language learning, especial difficult to EFL students. Even those essays without serious grammatical errors or misspellings, they can also give the readers impression of incoherence and illogicality, which is mainly caused by the errors at the discourse level. Discourse errors are more serious than any other errors at different levels, because they may result in failure of communication, misunderstanding and culture shock. Therefore, it is important to analyze Students' discourse errors. Through analyzing discourse errors, teachers can help students to improve their writing skills and help students to communicate more effectively.

By using theories of error analysis, discourse analysis and language transfer, this thesis tries to analyze the students' micro-level discourse errors, find out their possible sources and give students some suggestions on how to avoid discourse errors.

1. THEORIES

1.1 *Discourse Analysis*

The term "discourse analysis" was first used in Harris's (1952) *Discourse Analysis* and this essay is considered as beginning of modern discourse analysis. McCarthy (1991) indicates, "Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the relationship between language and the context in which it is used. It grew out of work in different disciplines in the 1960s and ear 1970s, including linguistics, semiotics, psychology, anthropology and sociology." Connor (1996) defines discourse analysis as the analysis of language "beyond the sentence." Richards' definition is "examples of language use, i.e. language which has been produced as the result of an act of communication (Huang & Gi, 2006).

We can draw a conclusion these conclusions from above definitions. a) The formal or structural definition is that discourse can be larger or smaller than language unit in the process of communication. b) Discourse is a semantic unit and it isn't a grammatical unit larger than sentences. c) Another important feature of discourse is the interactive factors. Only in this state, the communication function of the discourse can be realized. The core of the discourse analysis research is the social interaction. d) the functional meaning of discourse lies in this point that any discourse must meet seven criteria distinct discourse from

non-discourse put forward by Beaugrande and Dressler (1981): cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativeness, situationality and intertextuality. Therefore, discourse has distinct texture, namely, cohesion and coherence. All in all, "discourse" is made up of sentences having the properties of cohesion and coherence!

Scholars have different understanding about the distinctions between discourse and "text" due to different perspective. discourse and text in this thesis refers to both written and spoken passages and they are used interchangeably without distinctive differences.

1.2 Cohesion and Coherence: Discourse Analysis at Micro-Level

It is commonly admitted discourse should be analyzed from two perspectives: Micro-level and Macro-level. In this thesis, I will investigate the micro-level discourse errors.

In 1976, Halliday and Hasan published *Cohesion in English*, which marked the establishment of cohesion theory. In Halliday and Hasan's opinions, the concept of cohesion is described as "a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text and that define it as text" (1976, p.4). For the occurrence of cohesion, they explain that:

> Cohesion occurs where the INTERPRETATION of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another. One PRESUPPOSES the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it. When this happens, a relation of cohesion is set up, and the two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into a text. (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p.4)

After the publication of Cohesion in English (1976), Halliday and Hasan continued to study cohesion and further developed their theory of cohesion in their subsequent works. Hasan (1984, 1985) enlarged the concept of cohesion and divided cohesion into structural and non-structural cohesion. The former includes parallelism, theme-rhyme development and given-new organization. The latter includes componential relations and organic relations. In componential relations, there are grammatical devices (such as reference, substitution and ellipsis) and lexical cohesive devices (such as general and instantial relations). In organic relations, there are grammatical devices (such as conjunctives and adjacency pairs) and lexical cohesive devices (such as continuatives).

Hu (1994) in his book, *Discourse Cohesion and Coherence* follows Halliday and Hasan's model but distinguishes four types of cohesion in Chinese, namely, the referential, structural, logical and lexical cohesion. He tries to categorize cohesive ties according to structural features of Chinese. Drawing on some of the progresses in the traditional model, Hu believes that cohesive relations can also be found in other functional categories, such as transitivity at the semantic level, the thematic structure at the syntactic level, and intonation and sound patterns at the phonological level. What's more, he describes the development of the theory from cohesion to coherence, in which the context, pragmatics, and the relationship between discourse structure and discourse elements are also discussed. Based on these developments, Hu comes to the conclusion that textual cohesion and coherence should be analyzed at various levels and develops a multi-level model of discourse cohesion and coherence.

1.3 Error Analysis

Corder (1967) put forward the error analysis in the Significance of Learners' Errors. He believes that language learners have their own built-in syllabus, which determines learners learning quantity and sequence in the process of their language study. Intake is different from input. Errors that learners commit belong to the language knowledge which they intake according to their own built-in syllabus. Errors are not the corpus that teachers instruct the students to learn according to the teaching syllabus. In other words, errors reflect what students have learned rather than what teachers instruct them to learn. Response to the learners' errors is an important type of communication or exchange with students, because error analysis explicitly reveals the weakness of their internal language knowledge. Corder considers that applied linguists' focus on second language leaners' error is not a "bad habit" to be eradicated, but is a way of insight into learners' learning process. He points out errors are essential and important parts in students' learning because they can reveal the differences between leaners' transitional language grammar and target language grammar.

Corder (1974) believes: "Committing errors are a necessary part of learning process" (Norrish, 1983, pp.1-9) in his book Language Learners and Their Errors, he quoted an Italian proverb: We learn through our errors. He also believes that making errors or error itself can be viewed as an essential and quite useful part of the language learning process because errors are the things that language teachers and language learners will go through. Making errors are the reflection of the nature of students' learning process. Teachers should know why students make errors. It is not enough for teachers to correct students' errors. The teachers should let students know why they make such errors and how they can avoid making such errors. Only in this way can teach object achieves. Therefore error analysis is of great significance to language teaching.

Brown (1980) stated four sources of errors (a) interlingual transfer, (b) intralingual transfer (c) Context of Learning, (d) communication strategies,

According to Corder, steps of error analysis are: a) collect samples of learner language. b) identifying the errors. c) describing the errors. d) explaining the errors. e) evaluating/correcting the errors.

1.4 Language Transfer

Language transfer is a common phenomenon in the process of second language acquisition. While communicating with target language, students try to apply their pronunciation, structure, semantics and culture to express their ideas, which will be results in the transfer phenomenon. Language transfer can be divided into three types: positive transfer, negative transfer and zero transfer. When the characteristics of the native language are similar or identical to the target language, the positive transfer will occur. For example, English and Chinese have the basic word order S+V+O (subject + predicate + object). Chinese students can easily make a sentence with English words by using the word order of Chinese. When the characteristics of native language are different from the target language, negative transfer will come out. In this case, when native language interferes with the target language, students are likely to make errors. Zero transfer means that native language neither enhances nor hinders acquiring the target language. Zero transfer is classified into negative transfer by some linguist. Linguists and teachers are more interested in the negative transfer of the language.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Questions

This article aims to examine two questions:

a) What kinds of micro-level discourse errors do students make their writing?

b) What are the causes of the errors?

2.2 Research Subjects

The subjects in the study are 60 sophomore students in college of foreign language in Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities. All of them have passed the TEM4. The reason I choose these students is that they are believed to have a relatively better command of English. A small number of misspellings and grammatical errors will not affect the correct comprehensive of the whole text.

2.3 Research Instruments

a) Writing test. The participants are required to write a passage of 160 words within 40 minutes on the topic "Surfing on the Cellphone". They have to provide evidence to support opinions.

b) Students' questionnaire. The questionnaire is the one designed by Fang Yan in Tsinghua University and also refers to the questionnaire designed by Yang Qianjin in Central China Normal University. Other questions, including textual cohesion, coherence discourse structure, interference of Chinese thinking mode, are added according to discourse analysis and language transfer. The questionnaire consists of six parts: emotional factors, situation and difficulty, students' discourse awareness, the involvement of Chinese in writing, discourse awareness of teaching. It is expected that students' discourse errors are analyzed comprehensively and the causes of errors are found out. Questionnaire is in appendix II.

c) Teachers' questionnaire. It aims to investigate these questions: What are the major obstacles when students write article? What are the general teaching steps and focuses when teaching writing? How to treat the discourse errors in students' writing? What teaching measures should teachers take in dealing with students' discourse errors?

2.4 Research Procedures

a) Collecting and analyzing data. The author collects 60 test papers and takes them as the corpus. Based on discourse theory, adopting qualitative and quantitative methods, the author counts the numbers of students' discourse errors. These errors are classified into two catalogues: cohesion errors and discourse structure errors. This thesis focuses on cohesion errors. The causes of the errors are examined.

b) Handing out and collecting questionnaires. The author hands out 124 copies of students' questionnaire and collects 120 effective questionnaires.

c) Carrying out teachers' interviews. It mainly revolves around students' writing errors.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Cohesion Errors

169 cohesion errors were found in students writing papers, as can be seen from Table 1. Cohesion errors are classified into four types according to comparative taxonomy. They are referenced, substitution and ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. The most frequent errors are lexical errors, followed by reference, conjunction, substitution and ellipsis.

Table 1
Cohesion Errors

Types	Reference errors	Substitution and ellipsis errors	Conjunction errors	Lexical cohesion errors	Total
Number	39	23	38	69	169
Percentage	23.08％	13.61％	22.48％	40.83％	100％

3.2 Reference Errors

Reference is composed of three sub-categories: personal reference, demonstrative reference, and comparative reference. Table 2 shows the number and percentage of each sub-category reference errors. The most frequent reference error is demonstrative reference, followed by

personal reference and comparative reference. Errors in comparative reference belong to the least errors which students make, but it's hard to say Chinese students have a better command of comparative reference because students have the tendency to avoid using comparative reference.

Table 2
Reference Errors

Types	Errors of personal reference	Errors of demonstrative reference	Errors of comparative reference	Total
Number	16	21	2	39
Percentage	41.03％	53.85％	5.13％	100％

Here is some reference errors found in students' writing samples.

1) Errors of Personal Reference
Example 1:

Some students think the benefit of surfing on the cellphone is more than harm it brings; others believe that the benefit of surfing on the cellphone is less that the harm it brings. As far as I am concerned, I cannot agree with them. (Sample 4)

In this sentence group, personal reference "them" is ambiguous to the readers. Readers have no way to know what the author's attitude is.

Example 2:

Surfing on the cellphone is a convenient way for us to have access to all kinds of information. At the same time you can relax yourselves by watching movies, etc.. (Sample 16)

In this sentence group, personal reference is shifted from the first plural from to the second plural form. These shifting may bring readers the feeling of inconsistence or even confusion.

2) Errors of Demonstrative Reference
Example 4:

College students have long access to many advanced electronic products. Some have laptops, some have i-pads and others have elegant cellphones. This is a common phenomenon in our university. (Sample 19)

"This" cannot refer to a specific thing mentioned previously in English language. So "this" in example 3 is misused. It should be changed into "that".

Example 5:

Nowadays, all the university students have cellphone. Some are addicted to the fun of surfing on the phone, addicted to the virtual world. They look down on the phone all day long. Little by little they become estranged with the families and friends in∧the real world. They are separated from∧the real world. (Sample 21)

The definite article "the" should be used before "real world". From the context of the sample, we know the author hope to make a comparison between students' life in virtual world and life in the real world.

Example 6:

Spending too much time surfing online, playing games, watching movies, and chatting will waste us much time. When we realized it, it is too late. (Sample 17)

In this sentence, it should be changed into "that" which refers to something that is a little far in space or time,

or something that has just been mentioned. By the way, "this" refers to something that is near in space and time, or something that will follow.

Example 7:

Most university students come from ordinary family. Their parents afford everything for them. How can those students use∧parents' money to buy so expensive cellphones as i-phone 6. (Sample 48)

This student omits obligatory articles in example 7. However, students add unnecessary ones as in example 8.

Example 8:
I think the students on campus can take advantage of surfing on the cellphone to serve for their studies.

"The" in example 8 is unnecessary and redundant.

3) Errors of Comparative Reference
Students seldom use comparative ties in their articles. The most occurred comparative expression of students' samples is "more and more". Except that, comparative were not used as extensively as personal and demonstratives.

Example 9:

As a student, we should lay importance on the study than anything others. (Sample 31)

The sentence part "anything others" should be changed into anything else or any other things.

3.3 Substitution and Ellipsis Errors

Table 3
Substitution and Ellipsis Errors

types	Absence of substitute	Misuse of substitution and ellipsis	Total
Number	16	7	23
Percentage	69.57％	53.85％	100％

Some students have difficulty using substitution and ellipsis in sentences; as a result they fail to give a natural and cohesive expression. Substitution and ellipsis errors consist of absence of substitute and misuse of substitution and ellipsis. Example 1 and 2 belong to the absence of substitute.

Example 1:

Do we need to surf on the cellphone in our class? If we need to surf on the cellphone to look for useful materials that are beneficial to our subject, we can surf on the cellphone in the class. (Sample 50)

In example 1, the underlined part makes the statement tedious and verbose. "If we need to surf on the cellphone" can be replaced with "if so".

Example 2:

Some students think that the benefit of surfing on the cellphone is much more than the harm it brings. But I don't think benefit of surfing on the cellphone is much more than the harm it brings. (Sample 43)

Substitute "so" can be used to avoid making sentence tedious. This sentence should be changed into "I do not think so".

Example 3:

Some students have different opinions about surfing on the phone with other students. (Sample 36)

"Other students" in this sentence can be replaced with "other ones". Like this student, many other students choose to avoid using substitute when substitute should be used.

Besides the absence of substitute, some students misuse the device of substitution and ellipsis. The example 4 is the evidence of misusing the device of substitution and ellipsis.

Example 4:

On Valentine's Day, we can enjoy the love air everywhere, while in other days, we don't have one.

Student in example 4 wants to use "one" to replace "air". But, "air" is an uncountable noun, which should be replaced with "any" instead of "one".

3.4 Conjunction Errors

Conjunctions should be used to create the logical relation among the sentences. However misuse of conjunctions makes students' writing redundant. Conjunction errors are composed of three sub-categories: misuse or absence of adversatives, misuse or overuse of additives and absence of temporal devices. The numbers and percentage of errors are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Conjunction Errors

Types	Misuse or absence of adversatives	Misuse or overuse of additives	Absence of temporal devices	Total
Number	13	16	9	38
Percentage	34.21％	42.11％	23.68％	100％

The highest frequent adversative word is "but". "On the contrary" and "however" only appear in students' writings occasionally. That shows students are not competent enough to use other words to indicate opposing meaning such as "rather" and "instead". Students are inclined to use addictive devices because they help connect phrases, clauses and sentences in writing. The highest frequent addictive words are "and, besides and what's more". These frequent addictive words belong to the easy words and expressions. As for temporal devices, some students do not use temporal words, others preferred using "first, firstly, second, secondly" etc. to indicate the sequence of time or importance, etc..

Here are some conjunction errors chosen from students' writings:

Example 1:

I don't think surfing on the cellphone alienates ourselves from others. On the contrary, it could make us closer to each other. (Sample 31)

Example 2:

However, each coin has two sides. On the other hand, because the teenagers have a low self-control, they always easily addicted to the cellphones. (Sample 45)

"On the contrary" is used to express contrastive meaning that is very different to what has just been said before. This student puts forward two ideas, but we cannot see any contrast between the two ideas, so "on the contrary" is misused here. Example 1 is a sentence where adversatives are used in the situation no conjunction or

additive might have been proper. Example 2, it needn't use "however" and "on the contrary" together. That makes the sentences redundant.

Example 3:

But technology is a double-edged sword. Overuse of cellphone also has some negative effects. Always look down the cellphone which will do harm to our spines and eyes. And always chat on the internet will lose the ability to a face-to-face interpersonal skill. (Sample 27)

Example 4:

But others are against to the argument. Sometimes they accidentally see some bad information in web sites and it may dirty their mind. Also it may hurt your eyes if you spend too much time on line. (Sample 39)

Example 5:

Surfing on cellphone is very convenient to us. We can surf on cellphone on bus, on break even the bath which makes us can study, relax and shop no matter where. And we can acquire the latest news which comes from all over the world. (Sample 55)

Example 3, example 4 and example 5 are the examples of its misuse or overuse of additive. Example 4 also has reference errors.

Example 6:

Surfing on cellphone has many advantages.∧It is beneficial to our study. We can look up new words through surfing online and search for all the useful information and material that benefit to our study. We can know about the latest news and current affairs and keep up to date.∧It is beneficial to our communication. We can use QQ, WeChat and e-mail to keep contact with our families and friends.∧It is beneficial to our life. We can shop

online. ∧ *It is beneficial to our entertainment. We can watch movies, focus on the weather and look for the map through surfing on the phone.* (Sample 19)

Example 6 is an example of absence of temporal devices. This student puts forward his attitude on the topic "surfing on the cellphone" and explains his reasons. But this student arranges the reasons in a loose way that it is not clear enough for readers to understand. This sentence seems lack of coherence with less temporal conjunctions.

3.5 Lexical Cohesion Errors

In Halliday's (1976) point of views, lexical cohesion refers to cohesive effect achieved by the choice of words. Use of lexical cohesive ties means shows logical relations between different parts of a text. Recurrent uses of the same content words or of related words convey a sense of integratedness of a text. Since such linkage is all predicated on the relations between word uses and meanings, this is called lexical cohesion. English lexical cohesive ties, according to Halliday, fall into the following categories: repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy, general nouns. Lexical cohesive ties have great influence on textual coherence.

Table 5
Lexical Cohesion Errors

Types	Repetition	Hyponym	Synonymy	Collocation
Number	30	8	12	19
Percentage	43.48%	11.59%	17.35	27.54

From Table 5, we can see repetition errors account largest percentage of use, followed by collocation, synonymy, and hyponym.

Example 1:

The ideal college life is a life someone can free themselves. An *ideal life should consist of study and outdoor activities.* (Repetition) (Sample 12)

Example 2:

Y*ou will buy food, clothes or books to online. Many* things *would be on sale. Online shopping is very convenient.* (Hyponym) (Sample 23)

Example 3:

The students look for a better life in college, and they seek *nothing but something exciting.* (Synonymy) (Sample 44)

Example 4:

Everything around me teaches me to be a person who should have a strong mind and perseverant heart. Everything here asks me to be a man as strong as a pine. (Collocation) (Sample 36)

In example 2, if the word "thing" were changed into "commodity" or "good", the cohesive relationship would be closer. In example 3, "look for" is replaced by "seek", but the meaning of the sentence is changed. Example 4, in western countries, there is no such idiom as "as strong as pine". It should be changed into "as strong as oak".

3.6 Causes of Cohesion Errors

Discourse errors are caused by several reasons. Two primary reasons are: lack of grammar rules of the target language and different rhetoric conventions in Chinese and English.

3.6.1 Language Transfer

Repetition of the same words is a common practice in students' writing. That is to say, the repetition of the same word will be regarded as construct cohesion in a text, but in English language repetition of the same words is considered redundant. The causes of repetition errors may be that Chinese is paratactic, referring to the realization of the connection of them without the help of the language form, and will focus on the significance of the continuous coherence through the repetition. But English is hypotactic, realizing the connection of the words or phrases with the help of language forms, including vocabulary and forms. Therefore, Chinese writers are more likely to stress some literary devices as repetition to show cohesiveness and unity.

3.6.2 Cultural Transfer

In students' writing samples, sample 36, there is a sentence part "as strong as pine". The student tries to express the personality of determination and perseverance using as "strong as pine". In China, pine is a symbol for determination and perseverance. But in western countries, people use "oak" instead of "pine". So in English language, using "as strong as oak" is authentic.

3.6.3 Lack of the Grammar Rules of the Target Language

Participants in this study are all English Majors who passed the TEM4. They are supposed to have a relatively better command of English. However, grammatical errors destroy the correct comprehension of the whole text to some degree. Because of lack of grammatical rules, a large number of errors in cohesion were found. For examples, the misuse of the definite article "the", the errors of comparative ties and some inappropriate presentation of substitutes and conjunctions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the theories of discourse analysis, error analysis and language transfer, the thesis tries to investigate the micro-level discourse errors made by Students. Many discourse errors are found in students' compositions. The errors relating to discourse are identified at micro-level. Micro-level discourse error is the cohesion errors, which include reference errors, substitution and ellipsis errors, conjunction errors and lexical cohesion errors. The analysis of students' writing samples makes us realize that are abundant micro-level discourse errors in Students' English writing.

The sources of errors are analyzed. Students do transfer their mother tongue into their writings, resulting in the failure of communicating effectively.

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