An Analysis of Errors in College English Writing in China*

WANG Huan
Harbin Engineering University, Harbin, China

This paper first explores the importance and significance of college English writing in China, then the current problems and the main reasons in teaching Chinese college students. The author classifies the main errors that Chinese college students always commit in detail, gives the analysis of errors referring to the error analysis theory, puts forward the principles and methods that both Chinese teachers and Chinese college students can use, finally talks about the analytical significance and how to improve Chinese college students’ writing abilities.

Keywords: error, analysis, writing, principle

Introduction

Writing is a crucial act in the process of learning English, since it has become the language of global communication. In China, it has also been set as one of the teaching goals for both college English majors and non-English majors, because writing is one of the four important language skills in the course of learning a foreign language. As an important productive skill of the language, writing can show students’ comprehensive abilities. In order to express what one really means, he/she must employ the right words, because the ability to write clearly is essential to effective communication and crucial to employment and production in the contemporary world. However, it is difficult for learners to acquire communicative skills, which is essential in today’s information society. Many college students fail in employing appropriate words, and hand in the so-called compositions. Therefore, many college English teachers have taken great pain in correcting and proofreading students’ compositions. However, a student will repeat the same mistake over and over again, even after being corrected many times, so the exercise books are often covered with corrections in red. It has created great difficulty for their teachers who have to deal with correcting the large amounts of composition work they generate. Therefore, how to help college students to reduce errors in compositions is a complicated problem that requires careful consideration.

Problems of Chinese Teachers in Teaching Writing in College

As we know, the final purpose of English teaching is to cultivate students’ communicative skills. The productive ability is one of the important aspects of communicative skills, that is, speaking ability and writing ability. The student’s writing level is the efficient response to his/her English level. College English writing in China is the comprehensive measure in the aspects of students’ basic language knowledge and the ability to use the language. The writing ability comprehensively embodies human beings’ understanding, thinking, and language applications. Although college English teaching has greatly gained the big achievements in the

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WANG Huan, M.A., Foreign Languages Department, Harbin Engineering University.
previous 20 years, college students’ writing ability has not met the teaching and the social requirements. The results of various investigations indicated that college students did very well in reading and listening, but showed poorer ability in writing. In the course of English teaching, we can find that students who have the high achievement scores and the good reading and listening comprehensions are not necessarily the ones who have the good writing abilities. From the scores of CET-4 (College English Test Band Four), we are not content with the writing scores year after year. According to the statistics given by CET examination center, the average scores of writing part are six to eight. Therefore, how to improve students’ writing ability has become an important subject of English teaching recently.

In China, college teachers and educators are currently faced with the challenge of adopting and developing a wide range of methods to accomplish effective teaching of English writing. This, of course, is not an easy task. An alarmingly large number of students in China continue to fail to master the basics of the English language even after six years of formal education. There are two obvious causes: (1) lack of writing courses: There is no college English writing course for non-English majors, the English writing ability can only be cultivated in the intensive reading class; and (2) the attitude of both teachers and students: A large majority of college teachers still stick to the traditional teaching—“the teaching of force-feed duck”. They pay more attention to acquiring knowledge, but neglect the cultivation of ability. Therefore, the typical practice of teachers is to assign the writing homework after class. Students merely pay attention to the teacher’s final comments, but not the strengths and weaknesses of their compositions, and thus, damaging the purpose of improving compositions. The level of difficulty is significantly higher when a foreign language is involved. Differences in the language structures, the manner of expressing thoughts, writing styles, and other culturally varying factors greatly affect the writings of a foreign (second) language learner (Benson & Heidish, 1995). In college non-major English teaching and learning, much daily work aims to cope with CET-4/6. Given the importance of communicative skills, fluency of language expression has become another major concern. Errors are therefore an important part of the learning process and quite informative and useful both for the learner and the teacher. With a year’s essential English training, they have obtained a fair knowledge of English grammar and they have difficulty in original writing, for they only have a limited vocabulary and a few idiomatic expressions. “Grammar and vocabulary are the essential means by which we communicate” (as cited in SHEN, 2003, p. 75). When they are assigned to write on a given topic, they would complain that they have nothing to say. It is difficult for them to express themselves in English. Hence, teachers should firstly attach importance to writing, and change the teaching methods in order to improve students’ writing abilities.

Error Analysis Theory

Error analysis theory was engendered under the ground of the challenge and criticism of the comparative analysis in the early 1970s. The error analysis is one of the ways to study the second/foreign language acquisition. As far as the traditional comparative analysis is concerned, the main barrier to foreign language learning derives from the interference of mother tongue. Its main purpose is to have the effective teaching method by comparing systematically the similarities and differences between the mother tongue and target language. Afterwards, people find that errors caused by foreign language learners can not be predicted totally and accurately by comparative analysis. Besides, the interference of mother tongue, there are other factors in the course of English learning as well.

The error analysis, which comes into being in 1970s, gives full understandings of errors. Corder published
The Significance of Learner’s Errors in 1967, which came the error analysis theory. Corder (1967) mentioned that learners’ errors had provided the foundation of how to learn a foreign language. The aim for error analysis is to know the learners’ learning strategies and reasons for causing errors. According to error analysis theory, Corder gave the procedures of error analysis: collecting errors, analyzing errors, differentiating errors, classifying errors, explaining the reasons for errors and evaluating errors.

Main Errors of Chinese College Students and the Analysis of Errors

The essence of the main errors is the interference of different thinking mode, that is, the mother language involvement results in the confusions and mistakes of language output, which we also called interlingual. The interlingual is apparently serious in the aspect of expressing meanings.

(1) Students are not well familiar with the cultural thinking mode of English nation. They perform the word transformations via the mother language (Chinese) involvement, which results in the following errors because of the wrong use of words: “*yellow books” and “people old and young” (*The sentences with the asterisk are some of the Chinese college students’ writing sentences with the Chinese thought patterns.).

The native English speakers are not in accordance with Chinese in many aspects: as mentioned above in the meaning of color, the attitude towards the old (attaching importance to the young but not the old), the attitude towards trading compliments and so forth. If non-English speakers are not well aware of this kind of thing, and using the transformations directly, it will come to the inevitable errors.

(2) Students are not explicit of the logical thought pattern of English nation. Only can they put the words and sentences together via the mother language, that is, Chinese thought patterns (see Example 1):

Example 1: *Yesterday I played.

*This mountain is six thousand feet high, (and) it is only four miles from the airport, (and) the field is not a very large one, but no plane has crashed on it.

*at ten o’clock, we left because the next day had to go to work and go to school.

*Most importantly, when we are writing, we will surprise to find that only a few words we can use frequently.

“We will surprise to find...” is the kind of Chinese habitual expression, rather than English, which also appears in the arrangement of sentence structure, for example, “*There are many people can read difficult essays in English but can not write or speak themselves in English”. English logical thought pattern attaches importance to the analysis and concretization, which is more direct and concrete, however, Chinese logical thought pattern pays more attention to entirety and dialectic.

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Students are not aware of the contextual thought pattern of English nation. Only can they perform the writing according to the English thought pattern, which comes to the poor English, for instance, at the very beginning of English compositions, the expression is Aristotelian-linear, but Chinese writing is circular or approach by indirection at the end of Chinese writings. Chinese students are good at writing the words like “I should learn English well in order to contribute to the instruction of our country”, so this is the problem of two themes in English compositions. It is not permitted to have two themes in English compositions.

As mentioned above, it is the question of the interlingual errors. Look at the following examples: “*family/home teacher”, “*if they single study…”, “*educational college”, and “*goods seller”. It is obvious
that those errors are directly translated from their Chinese equivalence. Those errors are classified as inappropriate word choice. When we count the percentage of thinking-in-Chinese-then-translating-into-English and students writing in English, the answer is from 50% to 80%, even as high as 100% for some individuals. Interlingual errors result from lexical interference and grammatical interference, especially in written tasks. In students’ language output, we can find many errors of unidiomatic English or Chinglish. In errors taxonomy, we divide lexical verb errors into inappropriate main verb choice, overuse of one verb and structural problem with verb as well as tense. Here are some of the other common errors that Chinese college students always commit (see Example 2):

Example 2: (1) Chinglish
   *Although I study hard, but I can not pass the exams.
   Although I study hard, I can not pass the exams.
   *I think he can not speak English.
   I don’t think he can speak English.

   (2) Tense and voice of verbs
   *He go to school yesterday.
   He went to school yesterday.
   *He have been learn English from 2000.
   He has been learning English from 2000.
   *If you want to speak English well, you should be paid attention to your pronunciation.
   If you want to speak English well, you should pay attention to your pronunciation.

   (3) Singular and plural form of nouns
   *He borrowed some book from me.
   He borrowed some books from me.
   *This old lady has three childs.
   This old lady has three children.

   (4) Articles and prepositions
   *I want to be teacher in the future.
   I want to be a teacher in the future.
   *You should pay much attention to your pronounce.
   You should pay much attention to your pronunciation.

   (5) Spelling mistakes
   *You should not be pesimistic. (pessimistic)
   *… in the morden society. (modern)

   (6) Misuse of part of speech
   *… then you can have a good healthy. (health)
   *… in the social. (society)

   (7) Misuse of synonyms
   *know of society (understand)
   *They can talk about to all kinds of people. (talk to)
   *save the parents’ pressure (unload/relieve)
   *Their families can’t give their education costs. (afford)
All those errors in Examples 2(1) to 2(6) are the common ones that Chinese college students should have
dealt with in the middle school. The errors in Example 2(7) are classified as the main errors. They can be
explained as confusion between synonyms, e.g., “action” and “activity”, “know of” and “understand”, or the
use of words in general meaning, such as using “give” to describe a specific behavior, that is, the learner is
ignorant of the collocation between predicate and its object. Usually the delicate semantic difference between
synonyms is explained explicitly in class, but still a lot of such errors are made. It is really a headache because
the ability to tell the difference between synonyms is a must for college students, and these errors destroy the
quality of a composition, especially when scored in CET-4/6.

From the study, we find that students are often confused with words of synonyms.

This problem arises because they take it for granted that all synonymous words are fully similar in meaning and hence
can be used interchangeably, especially when the English words have the same Chinese equivalents. Most of our college
students have bilingual dictionaries, and could find a relatively corresponding English or Chinese word to express their
ideas. But as we know, when an English-Chinese dictionary is compiled, the important step is to translate English lexical
item into Chinese, though not all English items have a Chinese equivalents, which arises from the (dis)similarity of
different languages and cultures. Moreover, from speaker/writer to listener/reader, in the process of language
communication, some information was lost, so, in the translation from English to Chinese, the original meaning of an
English word does not equal the meaning of its Chinese translation. So we are not justified in believing these “synonyms”
consulted from an unconditionally. We urge students to think about the delicate and decisive difference between those
“synonyms”, or use a unilingual dictionary. (ZHANG, 2003, p. 73)

Only half of the students try to confirm that their English sentences have conveyed their thoughts by
translating English into Chinese. Although they have mastered English grammar and practiced much in middle
school, they fall back on Chinese grammar unconsciously at college.

Principles and Methods

The fundamental way to eliminate errors is to teach students how to learn more effectively and efficiently. Students need to develop an awareness of the learning processes and strategies that lead to success, such as planning how to proceed with a learning task, monitoring their own performance on an ongoing basis, finding solutions to problems encountered, and evaluating themselves upon task completion. Learning strategy instruction can help students become better English learners. In addition, skill in using learning strategies assists students in becoming independent and confident learners (ZHANG, 2003, p. 74).

Consolidate Grammar and Lexical Teaching

From the problems mentioned above, large majority of errors results from poor grammar knowledge. Some errors that should be dealt with in the course of middle school are brought to the university, which resulting in many writing errors. Therefore, college teachers cannot overlook grammar teaching. Not only should teachers mention some basic grammar points, but also give the writing assignments after class. On the other hand, vocabulary is the most important and elementary part for English learning. From the error analysis discussed above, misuse of synonyms and Chinglish are the main typical errors, but other errors, such as prepositions, spellings, singular and plural forms are referring to vocabulary. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to collocation and derivation while teaching.

Correct Compositions in the Form of Classroom Discussion

“Students are directed to locate mistakes at the sentence, paragraph and composition level and to correct
them by themselves” (LU, 2003, p. 8). “Exercises in which learners locate and identify error patterns in their peer’s work can raise their awareness of parallel problems in their own writing” (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, p. 214). It is important for the teacher to walk round the class checking that students do in fact re-read their compositions and locate their mistakes which used to be pointed out and corrected for them by the teacher. At the very beginning, students often find it difficult to locate their own mistakes. With practice, their corrections in this way are better in helping students to avoid making the same mistakes in later compositions. When students are forced to go back to their own compositions to look for mistakes and to correct them on their own, they actually correct the work more effectively. If the teacher corrects each mistake, the students could easily ignore the corrected version and might simply not bother to learn from it.

It is quite natural that one is apt to see others’ errors and ready to point them out, while he himself often makes the same mistakes. This time he points out others’ mistakes, and later he tries to anticipate some possible criticisms. This will certainly help him to reduce his own errors.

**More Reading Is Another Important Factor to Improve Writing Ability**

Reading and writing are the most important input and output ways. According to the second language acquisition theory by Krashen (1987), “the more input, the more output”. Just as the Chinese saying goes, “Having read more than ten thousand books one writes with miracles”, to read a great many good writers will surely help to improve the students’ writing ability. The author often urges the students to read as much English essays as possible, especially those easy readings with only a few new words, say, less than five in each page. They are also encouraged to write down sentences and passages they think worth copying in a notebook, and try to learn them by heart. Writing is more related to reading. Reading is an effective way to strengthen writing skills. The good way to improve English is to live among the English native speakers, on the other hand, is to read more.

**Taking Great Advantage of Chinese Writing Skills**

Brainstorming is an effective thinking process before writing. Teachers can let students discuss together, think respectively, speak or write their perspectives and points of view, according to the typical writing topics.

It is the simple and feasible way before writing. According to the writing topics, teachers guide the students to speak out or think of the corresponding words, then display the words by pictures, which can stimulate the students to brainstorm quickly and to give the comprehension of writing topics (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. An example of students’ brainstorming.](image)

This activity requires students to pose questions like “who, what, when, where, why, and how” according to the theme and purpose, the author’s expectations, perspectives and attitudes and the basic structure of the composition.
Conclusions

With the increasing number of students in universities, the low level of English basic knowledge has been one of the common problems that teachers have to confront. There are some causes: Because of the lack of English teachers, there are no grammar courses in many universities; teachers have so many teaching assignments, thus they are so busy that they have no more time and energy to correct and proofread compositions; some teachers think that grammar points, tenses and passive voice, etc. should be dealt with in the middle school, it is not necessary for college teachers to tackle this kind of things; the final purpose of college English teaching syllabus indicates that cultivating students’ communicative skills is the most important thing, however, more students pay more attention to listening and speaking rather than basic language points and writing, referring to the communicative skills. Therefore, how to help college students to reduce errors in compositions is a complicated problem which requires consideration.

Since our final objective is to help the students to improve their writing ability, their teacher should never lose sight of this objective in whatever he does to help the students to reduce errors in compositions. Only with this objective in mind can the teacher do his/her best to turn the process of correcting errors into a process of active learning for the students instead of one in which the teacher passively checks and assesses the students’ work. Error correcting can quicken the pace of foreign language acquisition and is helpful for foreign language learners. (HONG, 2003, p. 20)

References