

Analysis on Lexical Errors in College English Writing

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Abstract

This article uses the corpus to investigate the lexical errors occurring in 134 compositions in CET4. Through induction and analysis, four main kinds of errors are found: part of speech errors, substitution errors, absence errors and redundancy errors. The sources of errors are both mother tongue interference and incomplete learning and understanding of the target language rules.

Key words: Corpus; Lexical errors; Error analysis

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, error analysis based on cognitive psychology arose. In 1967, Corder published the article “the Significance of Learners’ Errors” (Corder, 1967) which points out that learners’ errors are the language system learners use in the process of the language acquisition at some stage. As for the teachers, errors show how far towards to the goal the learner has progressed and what remains for him to learn. As to the researchers, errors provide their evidence of how language is learnt or what strategies or procedures the learner is employing. As to the language learners, errors are indispensable to the learner himself, making errors is a way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning. Error Analysis

is integrated with language teaching from the very beginning: Error Analysis considers interlanguage as its foundation, looks learners as the center of language study, regards errors as the inevitable course of foreign language learning, reveals the general rule of second or foreign language learning and enriches the second language acquisition theory. The occurrence of error analysis has great significance for foreign language teaching. It enriches the theory of foreign language teaching, deepens people’s understanding of the teaching process and provides practical assistance for teaching activities. In the study of second language acquisition, errors are no longer seen as the signs of poor learning ability but seen as the basis of learners’ learning strategies and learning styles. In China, English is consciously learned in the classroom, non-natural environment, which means Chinese learners’ errors are much more inevitable. Therefore, the study and analysis of college students’ English writing errors and understanding the characteristics of their interlanguage’s development are of great importance to knowing learners’ foreign language level, to improving learners’ learning ability, to reducing the probability of making mistakes and to improving college English teaching. Researches at home and abroad find that linguistic errors of foreign language learners are mainly embodied on lexical aspect. However, systematic study of lexical errors is few. Taking second-year English majors as study objects, this study aims to make statistical analysis on the lexical errors in their English writing and investigate the causes of the errors so as to provide reference for English teaching in China.

1. LITERATURE REVIEWS

In recent years, with the establishment of a few large corpora, such as Yang Huizhong and Du Shichun’s *Chinese Learners’ English Corpus* (CLEC) (Yang & Du, 2003) and Wen Qiu Fang and Wang Lifei’s *Chinese*

Students Oral and Written English Language Corpus (Wen & Wang, 2005), a number of researchers launched to study the linguistic errors in these corpora. In CLEC, lexical errors add up to 17,742, which accounts for 24.46% of the total errors (Yang, Du, & Yang, 2005). Lexical errors are second to morphological errors. Researchers analyzed the lexical errors in CLEC, for example, substitution errors, errors on parts of speech, and collocation errors, conjunction errors, and definite article errors (Ibid.). Owing to the fact that these corpora come from different groups, different writing tasks and non-concentration of the vocabulary these research didn't analyze the lexical errors systematically. Building corpora by themselves, other researchers made an analysis on common errors in learners' oral and written language. For examples, Li (2003) and Wen (2005) in their study found those college students' lexical errors of the written language accounted for 70% among the total errors. Li (2005) believes that lexical learning strategies have a direct link with lexical collocation errors. But all these samples are small, the classifications and sources of the lexical errors are not systematic. At abroad, Pit Corder systematically states the nature, significance and classification of errors based on the principle of cognitive psychology and puts forward a set of relatively complete methods of error analysis. In recent years, articles on errors analysis are quite a few, Grauberg analyzed the linguistic errors of a group of advanced German learners and drew a conclusion that "lexical errors are dominated. Among the 193 errors he recorded, there are 102 lexical errors (James, 2001). Meara found that lexical errors are three or four times more than other forms of errors (Ibid.). Jame (2001) wrote monographs on error analysis, *Errors in Language Learning and Use: Exploring Error Analysis*. This book gives critical reviews a large number of errors researches and points out the research achievement, research level, research differences and research problems. From reading this book, we can not only deepen the understanding of the error analysis, but can also learn the methodology of carrying out error analysis.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTS AND DATA COLLECTIONS

Gui Shichun in Guangdong University of Foreign studies built a corpus, CLEC (Chinese Learner English Corpus), which is composed of more than one million words. This corpus collects learners' written language which includes composition material from high school English tests, college English Test Band 4, College English Test Band 6, Test for English Majors Band 4 and Test for English Majors Band 8. A mark table of linguistic errors based on word forms, verb phrases, noun phrases, pronouns, adjective phrases, adverbs, preposition phrases, conjunction, vocabulary, collocation and syntax

is designed. This table includes 61 detailed items of language slips. In CLEC, lexical errors are called lexical slips, which include word order errors, parts of speech errors, substitution errors, absence errors, redundancy, repeated errors and semantic ambiguity. These errors are marked with "W1", "W2", "W3", "W4", "W5", "W6" and "W7". Written materials of this study come from sub-corpus, Test for English Majors Band 4. Due to the fact materials of this corpus come from different writing tasks, words are not concentrated, which is not convenient for the study of vocabulary. Therefore, the study corpus chosen is only from one writing task, which is titled "Practice makes Perfect". There are altogether 25000 words in 134 compositions, which are retrieved by ConCapp language retrieval software.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Through retrieval, 633 lexical errors are found in this corpus, including 17 word order errors, 116 part of speech errors, 209 substitution errors, 96 ellipsis errors, 100 redundancy errors, 3 repeated errors and 92 semantic ambiguity errors. Word order errors, repeated errors and ambiguity errors are excluded from this study because word order errors, repeated errors only account for 3.3% and semantic ambiguity is difficult to determine. This study only analyzes 4 kinds of lexical errors with higher frequency.

3.1 Part of Speech Error

Part of speech error means that root is correct but part of speech is wrong. The corpus of this study has 116 parts of speech errors, accounting for 18.3% of the total errors. Of these 116 parts of speech errors, there are 22 errors (Example 1) concerning using adjectives as adverbs, 4 errors (Example 2) relating to using adverbs as adjectives, 30 errors (Example 3) concerning using verbs as nouns, 8 errors (Example 4) relating to using nouns as verbs, 9 errors (Example 5) concerning using nouns as adjectives, 8 errors (Example 6) relating to using adjectives as nouns, 5 errors concerning using verbs as adjectives (Example 7), 30 errors relating to the verb conjugation (Example 8). The following sentences are the error examples:

Example 1 There are a great many examples in the world to explain it *correct* [correctly].

Example 2 It's *obviously* [obvious] that we can benefit much from that.

Example 3 In our *live* [life], we will find much Examples.

Example 4 If we can insist on, we will *success* [succeed].

Example 5 When you begin to do something first, you can feel *difficulty* [difficult].

Example 6 It is a process from *unfamiliar* [unfamiliarity] to *familiar* [familiarity].

Example 7 If we want to be a *succeed*[successful] man, we must obey the word—Practice Makes Perfect.

Example 8 the story of “the old man of *sale* [selling] oil” tells us.

These errors are caused by the fact that the ending of the content words are not the derived form that the context requires. In essence, Chinese students ignore the characteristics suffixes of different part of speech. These errors belong to both interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors are caused by language transfer. Interlingual error results from learners’ mother tongue; intralingual error is not caused by language transfer and it results from the errors of target language and incomplete learning. On one hand, Chinese and English belong to different language families, so they have much difference on lexicology and morphology. Chinese characters have no morphological change, a number of words such as “容易, 正确, 小心” can act both adverbs and adjectives. However in English a lot of adjectives require “-ly” to form corresponding adverbs, for example, “easy-easily, correct-correctly”. Affected by Chinese, Chinese students often neglect the characteristics of suffixes of different part of speech of English language, causing the above errors. On the other hand, the suffixes of English words are complex. Some suffixes change the part of speech, for example “care-careful-carefully” and some suffixes not, for example, “memory-memorization”. Because of the complexity of these suffixes themselves, it is difficult for students to remember them and it is likely for students to commit errors on part of speech.

3.2 Substitution Error

Substitution errors mean that in a certain context, the word used is right from grammatical point of view, but it doesn’t make sense from the semantic point of view.

The frequency of substitution errors is the highest and accounts for 33%, almost covering all part of speech. For examples:

Example 9 We are lacking in *insistence* [perseverance].

Example 10 We must join their society and *study* [learn] from the people.

Example 11 That’s our *respectful* [respectable] father.

Example 12 The moon is always *specially* [especially] round on that day.

Example 13 We can read, write and so on *under* [in] the light.

Example 14 I couldn’t hold my tears *but* [and] just cried.

Example 15 People in *a* [the] same village will sit together.

These errors are mostly caused by the poor grasp of English vocabulary. English synonyms are abundant, such as “study and learn”, “world and universe”, but complete synonymous words are very few. These so-called synonyms are subject to the limit of the context, the

usages of these synonyms are not exactly the same. Some lexical errors are caused by the habit of direct translation of Chinese. Example 13 “under the light” is directly translated word by word from the Chinese.

3.3 Absence Error

Absence error accounts for 15.1% of the total lexical errors. Of all the part of speech, the frequency of the absence of articles is the highest, especially definite article “the” (Example 16, 17). The meaning of the article in English is complicated and confusing, the usage is also complex. A large number of languages including Chinese have no corresponding words (Yang, Du, & Yang, 2005). Auxiliary verbs in front of adjectives are likely to be omitted affected by Chinese expression habit (example 18, 19). In Chinese, adjectives can be directly used as a predicate while in English, there should be an auxiliary verb before the adjectives, and they together constitute a predicate. In Chinese, adjectives can act as predicate, however in English, adjectives should follow auxiliary, constituting predicate, for example “你漂亮”, “you are beautiful”. Affected by Chinese, conjunctions and pronouns are also wrongly omitted (Example 20, 21). Content words omission is less, which often occurs in idioms and phrases (Example 22, 23).

Example 16 It means that [the] more practices you do; [the] more fluently you can speak in English.

Example 17 It’s also [the] same in many other respects.

Example 18 If we always practice, we can [be] sure we will do like a real basketball player.

Example 19 Yes, but you [are] unable to swim.

Example 20 So we keep on writing, listening, [and] reading, we’ll come to make a progress.

Example 21 When a person gets a new job, at the first time he (she) doesn’t know how to deal with [it].

Example 22 For another [example], a carpenter can make the tables or chairs while we can’t.

Example 23 And everybody knows that a large [number] of practices will make one do things better.

3.4 Redundancy Error

Redundancy error accounts for 15.8%. Conjunction redundancy is relatively common, “if, then (that)” structure of examples 24, 25 is the direct translation from Chinese “如果, 那么”. Conjunction “so” wrongly occurs on 13 times (example 26, example, 27), and it shows that Chinese learners’ English has apparently oral characteristics. Article also has redundancy (eg 28, 29). Article redundancy is caused by learners’ overusing articles. “I’m like” structure in example 31 is the typical intralingual errors, which are the mixture of “I am” and “I like”. “Such as in terms of” in example 31, “All kinds of types of” in example 32 and “fit for in” in example 33 are all the redundancy errors, which caused by intralingual errors. Examples 31, 32, 33 show that learners fail to grasp the use of English idioms.

Example 24 If we can insist, *then* we will success.

Example 25 If you do the same thing many times *that* you will find the best method to do it.

Example 26 Some practice makes perfect, *so* you will succeed in doing everything.

Example 27 It tells us we must learn something from practices, *so* we can master a skill or knowledge.

Example 28 If you are learning *the* English, you will think that “practice makes perfect” is useful.

Example 29 For *a* instance, in the study of English, how can we improve our English level?

Example 30 I *'m* like play football I watched all of the matches played in Qing Dao last year.

Example 31 Such as in terms of our English study, it is very important for us to improve our level.

Example 32 *All kinds of types of* sentences must be remembered.

Example 33 It is *fit for* not only in studying English but also in doing the other thing.

CONCLUSION

Through the classification, induction and analysis of lexical errors in learners' writing corpus it is found that Chinese students' lexical errors mainly include: part of speech errors, substitution errors, absence errors and redundancy errors. Part of speech errors is both due to the difference of word formation in English and Chinese languages and poor learners' English word-formation knowledge. Substitution errors have the highest frequency. They are caused by the wrong understanding of the lexical semantics especially synonyms with a slight difference, which should be paid by attention to. Absence errors and redundancy errors are much related to function words. Among them, article errors have the high frequency. Article error includes both absent errors and redundancy errors; the use of the article is the most difficult thing for Chinese students, and it would

take Chinese students a lot time to learn the use of the article.

Vocabulary ability is an important aspect of language application ability. The above analysis shows that lexical errors are related to not only mother tongue interference, but also incomplete understanding of rules of the target language. In order to reduce and overcome these errors, learners, on the base of knowing the difference between English and Chinese and the specific rules of English language, should increase language input through various ways. In the meantime, through speaking and writing—these output activities, learners should try to consolidate the vocabulary knowledge and gradually improve the learners vocabulary skills.

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