Analysis of the Grammatical Errors in Chinese Undergraduate Students' Online English Writing

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Abstract

Learners' language data present an interesting phenomenon that can be used to explain the processes that learners go through in the continuum of learning a second or foreign language. The aim of this study was to examine the grammatical errors in the English writing of the Chinese undergraduate students. The sample was drawn from the second-year students studying Communication in Shandong Normal University. All the second-year students studying Communication were asked to write one composition online from which a random sample of 90 scripts was selected. The study was based on the following objectives: (a) to identify and categorize the most common types of grammatical errors in the second-year undergraduate students' English writing; (b) to find out the frequency of these errors; (c) to infer, with the help of available literature on error analysis, the possible causes of these errors; (d) to extract from the available literature on error analysis pedagogic strategies to reduce these errors.

The Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972) guides the interpretation and description of the phenomenon observed in the study data. Using the "Let the Error Determine the Categories" approach the errors in the following grammatical categories were identified: Noun Phrase, Verb Phrase, Preposition, Adjective, Adverb, Complementation, Word order, Concord, Negation and Clause Link.

The identified errors were then described using the Error Analysis Method (Corder, 1974). The errors were determined through a consideration of the deviations of the students' grammar from the norms of the target language (English) as described for example in Quirk et al. (1985). The data analysis showed that Verb Phrase related errors were the most frequent and the word order errors were least frequent.

On the basis of the available literature on error analysis, the study discusses some causes of the errors observed and identifies some pedagogic strategies that can be used to alleviate these errors. After considering various causes, it was evident that overgeneralization was the main cause of the grammatical errors found in the English writing of these second-year undergraduate students.

Key words: Error analysis; Grammatical errors; Interlanguage; Online English writing

INTRODUCTION

A. Background to the Study

English has become a language of international communication and business dealings. It has been the major language used for scientific and technological research and publications worldwide. English is an important foreign language in China and many Chinese wish to be proficient in it. English is viewed primarily as a necessary tool which can facilitate access to modern scientific and technological advances.

One of the general objectives for teaching English in China is to enable the learner to use its grammar correctly and appropriately. This involves not only the effective use of the main grammatical structure, for example, sentences,

clauses, phrases and words, but also the ability to write logically and coherently on a given topic. The learner is expected to demonstrate creativity and flexibility in sentence structures. Yet most students leave school with limited competence in English despite the relatively high priority given to the learning of English in China.

At the university level, it is assumed that the students are well versed in the mechanics of the language. Nevertheless, a look at the writing of Chinese university students shows that there is a great problem in sentence construction and the use of other grammatical features such as verbs, nouns and prepositions in their English writing. Many of the sentences are long-winded hanging phrases and ambiguous, while others are hardly comprehensible due to the numerous glaring errors. Glaring errors in syntax, punctuation, tense and spelling are frequent in the university students' English writing and greatly interfere with overall comprehension of ideas being expressed.

In a research on the grammatical errors of the undergraduate English writing in China, Zhang (2008) observes that most Chinese learners of English do not display a high level of English proficiency. According to the author's findings, syntactic errors are the most common in the students' written compositions. It is from this background that this study seeks to examine the online English writing of the second year undergraduate students majoring in communication, focusing on the grammatical errors that the students make as they express themselves in online English writing.

B. Statement of the Problem

This study seeks to examine and analyze the grammatical errors in the online English writing of second-year undergraduate students studying communication in Shandong Normal University, China. According to Richards et al. (1985) an error refers to the use of a linguistic item in a way which a native speaker of the language regards as showing fault or incomplete learning. In this study, an error refers to a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and similar conditions of production would in all likelihood, not be produced by native speakers.

Available literature on second and foreign language learning indicates that learners of English at all levels are bound to make grammatical errors in their attempt to master the language. Grammatical errors occur in the structure of words, phrases, clauses and sentences. The study focuses on the errors that occurred in the students' online English writing, for example, in the use of nouns and noun phrases, verb phrase, complementation, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions, word order and concord.

A systematic identification and analysis of the errors made by the participants is necessary in order to create an awareness of the possible causes of these errors and with the help of available literature on error analysis, propose pedagogic strategies that can be used to reduce these errors.

C. Research Objectives

The study had the following objectives:

a) To identify and categorize the most common types of grammatical errors in the second-year undergraduate students' online English writing.

b) To find out the frequency of these errors.

c) To infer, with the help of available literature on error analysis, the possible causes of these errors.

d) To extract from the available literature on error analysis pedagogic strategies to reduce these errors.

D. Research Assumptions

This study assumed that:

a) There are various types of grammatical errors in the online English writing of the second-year undergraduate students in China.

b) Verb phrases related errors are the commonest in the students' online English writing.

c) Overgeneralization is the main cause of grammatical errors in the students' online English writing.

d) There are certain pedagogic strategies in the current literature on error analysis that can be used to reduce the students' errors.

E. Justification of the Study

The findings of this study are hoped to have some pedagogic implications. A study of the grammatical errors will create greater awareness of the nature and possible causes of the errors which second year undergraduate students majoring in communication in China make. The findings will reveal the common areas in which the students need help, and which relevant departments at the universities in China need to address in order to guarantee production of competent graduates in general and of international communicators in particular.

F. Scope of the Study

This study falls within the field of applied linguistics. Its central concern is to examine and analyze the grammatical errors that occur in the online English writing of second year undergraduate students majoring in communication in China. Specifically, the study will focus on second year students studying communication in Shandong Normal University, Jinan, Shandong Province, China.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Early Studies on SL Learners' Errors

Human learning is fundamentally a process that involves the commitment of errors. Inevitably, learners will make mistakes in the process of acquisition, and indeed will even impede that process if they do not commit errors and then benefit in turn from various forms of feedback on those errors. The mistakes and errors that a person makes in the process of constructing a new system of

language need to be analyzed carefully for they aid in the understanding of the learner. This is a view that Corder (1967, p.167) observes when he notes that a learner's errors are significant in that they provide the researcher with evidence of how language is learned or acquired, and what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language. Els et al. (1984) similarly point out that in second language learning, learner regularly produces deviations from the L2 norm.

That a learner's first language (L1) influenced his learning of a second language (L2) was an assumption held very strongly by contrastive analysts such as Lado (1957). Contrastive analysis (CA) was founded on the belief that it was possible, by establishing the linguistic differences between the learner's L1 and L2, to predict what problems the learner of a particular L2 would face. Later, in the 1960s the CA hypothesis was submitted to empirical investigation. The question arose: Were the learner's errors traceable to the effects of the L1? The findings of researchers such as Dulay and Burt (1974, 1975) raised doubts about the negative transfer as a major factor in the process of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). They concluded that CA was flawed from the onset by its static product orientation. It sought to explain psycholinguistic phenomena (SLA) by exclusive linguistic means (description and comparison of languages).

Nyamasyo (1992) points out that CA is not appropriate when using learner performance data obtained from learners in a multilingual environment. This is because it does not take into account the possibility that the learner may be learning two or more languages at the same time. It also does not take into consideration the existence of two or more languages in the learning environment.

1.2 EA as an Approach of Studying Learners' Errors

The fact that learners do make errors and that these errors can be observed, analyzed and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner led to a surge of study of learners' errors called Error Analysis (EA). EA became distinguished from CA by its examination of errors attributable to all possible sources (Richard's, 1971), not just those which results from negative transfer of the native language.

Ellis (1985), in his discussion of error analysis notes that there has long been great interest in the collection, description and classification of learners' errors. He, however, observes that investigation of the psycholinguistic causes of error was scanty since CA accounted for errors in terms of interference.

1.3 Elicitation of Learners' Errors

Richards (1974) enumerates a number of controlled elicitation techniques used by many applied linguists in their research on learner's transitional competence and the underlying systematic rules involved. These techniques include transition, free composition, elicited imitation, picture composition, sentence completion tasks, structured interviews and story-telling.

Richards (1974) used the translation technique in an analysis of English errors produced by a number of adult students with different L1 background. He observed that many errors emanate from the strategies used by the learner in the language acquisition process and from the mutual interference of structures within the target language. He further noted that the causes of interlingual errors are overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete applications of rules and false concepts being hypothesized.

1.4 Studies on SL/FL Learners' Errors

The findings of linguists such as Corder (1967, 1971); Selinker (1969, 1972); Richards (1971) revolutionized the concept of Error Analysis (EA). Corder's (1967) seminal paper claimed that errors are not only unavoidable, inevitable or imperative, but also a requisite component of the language learning process. Thus it was Corder (1967) who focused attention on error from a language processing and language acquisition perspective. Long and Sato (1984) note that an important feature of Corder's (Ibid) ideas is that the learner makes a significant contribution to learning. This is a view held by other linguists such as Chomsky (1965) in his notion of Language Acquisition device (LAD) and Selinker (1972) in his notion of latent Psychological Structure that depict the learner as an active participant in the learning process.

A number of studies in China have focused on the study of learners' language. Gui (1985), for example, points out in his book "Psycholinguistics" that Error Analysis is a common method used by teachers of English to identify the areas of difficulty their learners are experiencing.

Wang (1990) asserts that Error Analysis reflects that second language or foreign language learning is a process that involves construction of language errors by the learners as they continue to receive input in the target language. He further adds that errors are the window through which the teacher can understand the psychological processes that learners go through in foreign language.

1.5 On Describing Learners' Errors

With regard to the methods of EA, Norrish (1983) as quoted in Maina (1991, p.20) has observed that there are basically two main approaches. The first one is for the researcher to set up his own categories of errors on the basis of pre-conceptions about the learner's most common problems. The second is to classify identified errors into particular areas of grammatical and syntactic problem, that is, the errors determine the categories. The first method is referred to as 'pre-selected category' and

the second as "Let the Errors Determine the Categories". The present study adopted the second approach through a process of sorting and resorting of errors written on cards.

1.6 Review of the Theoretical Bases

On the "interlanguage" theory, Selinker (1972) has proposed a theoretical construct to account for the "approximative system" which is a separate linguistic system employed by the learner in attempting to utilize the target language (Nemser, 1971). According to Selinker, the most crucial fact that any description of IL must account for is fossilization. Fossilization linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules and sub- systems which non-native speakers of a particular language will tend to keep in their interlanguage. Yang (1996) introduced the term "fossilization" in China studies and noted that some errors retain in the interlanguage for a long time, despite much practice and explanations given to the foreign language learners. Selinker (1972) noted that many second language learners fail to reach target language competence, that is, they do not reach the end of the interlanguage continuum.

2. DATA ANALYSIS

2.1 Theoretical Bases of the Study

The analysis of the students' errors in this study was based on the theoretical construct of "interlanguage" (hence forth IL). Error analysis, the concern of this study, has been rightly placed within the "interlanguage" theory by second language researchers such as McLaughlin (1987) and Ellis (1985). The present study is aimed at analyzing the grammatical errors in the second year undergraduate students' English writing and thus it falls within the field of error analysis (EA). As such the "Interlanguage" theory is the most appropriate framework.

The assumptions underlying IL theory were stated by Nemser (1971) as: (a) at any given time the approximative system is distinct from the L1 and L2 (b) the approximative system forms an evolving series and (c) in a given contact situation, the approximative system of learners at the same stage of proficiency roughly coincide. The grammar of the "interlanguage" is therefore different from that of the learner's first language and that of the learner's target language.

Selinker (1972) suggests that five processes operate in the IL. These are (a) language transfer (b) overgeneralization of the TL rules (c) transfer of training (d) strategies of L2 learning (e) strategies of L2 communication.

2.2 Research Design

The study adopted the broad qualitative research design and used the descriptive design whose main purpose is to describe a certain phenomenon. This design was appropriate for the present study because the main focus was to describe the grammar in the online English writing of second year undergraduate students in China.

2.2.1 Study Population

The population in this study was second-year undergraduate students studying communication at Shandong Normal University in China. The group of subjects that was used was heterogeneous in the sense that they were from different regions in China, and were of varied gender and academic ability.

2.2.2 Data Collection

All the 90 essays written online by the undergraduate students were used to provide the required language data. The researcher also conducted library research in order to find out from the available literature on error analysis the possible causes of the students' errors and to propose possible pedagogic strategies to reduce them. Studies on second language learning, such as Richards (1971, 1974), Corder (1967, 1974, 1981), McLaughlin (1987), Els et al. (1984), Ellis (1985, 2000), Davies et al. (1984), were consulted to help in achieving the third and fourth objectives of this study.

2.2.3 Methods of Data Analysis

Error Analysis in this study was done according to Corder's (1974) procedure:

a) Selection of a corpus of language,
b) Identification of errors in the corpus,
c) Classification of the errors identified,
d) Explanation of the possible causes,
e) Evaluation and pedagogic implication.

The analytic approaches of "Let the errors determine the Categories" (Norrish, 1983) and "Linguistic Category Taxonomy" (Dulay et al., 1982) were used to categorize and present the grammatical errors. The categories were indicated on cards to facilitate the sorting out. The cards were useful in that they could easily be re-ordered and re-categorized. In this way, various types of errors were categorized.

A comparative frequency count of all errors was performed to find out how many times an error type occurred. The errors that were identified indicated the grammatical categories. Through the "Linguistic Category Taxonomy Approach," the types of errors that could be categorized as falling under the grammatical component of English were identified. Linguistic Category Taxonomy stresses on two classifications in the presentation of errors observed in language performance data. On the one side, there is Linguistic Category and Error Type while the other side has an example of learner error observed in the data. Frequency ratings were illustrated by means of tables showing frequency counts or percentages.

The following mode of presentation of grammatical errors is used in the study.

Table 1
A Sample Linguistic Category Taxonomy Noun Group Errors

Linguistic category and error type	Example of learner error
A: Morphology	
Plural morpheme omission.	He carried two mobile phone.
B: Syntax	
Determiners indefinite article omitted.	I saw student.

2.3 Verb Phrase Related Errors

The majority of the errors observed in the data fell under the grammatical category of the verb phrase (123 out of 567 errors).

Table 2
Taxonomy of Verb Phrase Related Errors

Linguistic category and error type	Example of learner error
A Morphology	
(1) Errors in the structure of the main verb	To my surprise, I <u>heared</u> him very well on the phone. (Instead of heard).
B Syntax	
(1) Failure to distinguish between the use of simple present tense and simple past	Last year, mobile phones <u>bring</u> (instead of brought) great changes to our life.
(2) Use of past perfect instead of present perfect tense	But some students <u>had</u> used it in wrong ways: for chatting with their friends, even for cheating in the exams. (Instead of have used: reconstruction from preceding discourse).
(3) Use of present perfect instead of past perfect	On the phone he sounded worried. I wondered what <u>has</u> happened to him. (Instead of had).
(4) Errors in the use of "do" Particle	My friend insisted that instead of playing on the computer as we always <u>do</u> we should try the mobile phone for a change. (Instead of did)
(5) Omission of present perfect marker "have"	The mobile phone is very advanced and beautiful, I _decided to buy it. (Omission of have).
(6) Omission of past perfective marker "<u>had</u>"	With the help of mobile phones, it seemed easy to communicate with my girlfriend to explain what _ happened. (Omission of had)
(7) Redundant use of past perfective marker <u>had</u> present perfective	I had never <u>had</u> seen such a beautiful mobile phone in my life. (Redundant use of had).
(8) Errors in the use of infinitive	Students use the mobile phone <u>to listened</u> to music and send short messages to others. (Instead of listen).
(9) Wrong choice of modal	That made me understand that I <u>will</u> never succeed if I spent all my time on the mobile phone. (Instead of <u>would</u>).
(10) Failure to use a modal where it is obligatory	I _ go to the city center and buy a mobile phone of my choice. (Omission of <u>shall</u>/<u>can</u>).

2.4 Prepositional Errors

As stated in the introduction, some brief remarks on the English prepositional phrase are given before examining the errors related to the prepositional phrases which were observed in the data (Huddleston, 1984, p.336).

Leech (1989, p.375) observes that a preposition is a word that typically goes before a noun phrase or a pronoun to express a relationship of meaning between two parts of a sentence, most often showing how the two parts are related in space or time.

a) He traveled <u>by bus</u>.
 prep. noun phrase

b) <u>From what he said</u> he was innocent.
 prep. wh – clause
c) He started the day <u>by</u> <u>swimming in the pool</u>.
 prep. – ing clause

It was observed that a majority of the errors in this category were related to the omission of necessary prepositions. The following examples from the data illustrate omissions of crucial prepositions.

2.5 Noun Phrase Related Errors

Quite a large portion of the observed errors fell under the noun phrase category, especially in use of determiners and modification.

The definition of the verb phrase given in Huddleston (1984) and Quirk et al. (1985) guides this study. According to Huddleston (1984, p.128) the English verb phrase consists of a head element (verb), an obligatory element, and optionally, one or more dependents. Quirk et al. (1985) say that the verb phrase consists of a main verb, which either stands alone as the entire verb phrase, or is preceded by up to four elements of an auxiliary function. This means that the English verb phrase can consist of a single verb (main verb) or the main verb accompanied by one or more auxiliary verbs. The interlanguage errors observed in the students' use of the verb phrase are presented below.

Table 3
Taxonomy of Prepositional Errors

Linguistic category and error type	Example of learner error
Syntax	
(1) Omission of obligatory prepositions	It does make us more convenient to keep_ touch with others. (omission of <u>in</u>).
(2) Wrong choice of preposition	Others argued that in the classroom especially <u>at</u> the university classroom students were playing games. (instead of <u>in</u>)
(3) Redundant use of preposition	The mobile phone made everybody <u>to</u> talk with mobile in class. (Redundant use of <u>to</u>).
(4) Incomplete complex preposition	He was walking __ <u>with</u> his girlfriend when I called him. (instead of <u>along</u> <u>with</u>).

a) I bought <u>a</u> same mobile phone (instead of "<u>the</u>") that my friend showed me.
b) As <u>a</u> (instead of "<u>the</u>") saying goes, experience is the best teacher.

Errors were also observed where the students used the definite article "the" instead of the indefinite article "a" as in.

a) It was very quiet in the classroom and suddenly <u>the</u> (instead of "<u>a</u>") ring of the cell phone broke the silence.
b) In the dormitory I tried to find <u>the</u> (instead of "<u>a</u>") mobile phone charger but I could not find one. (No mention of the mobile charger in the preceding discourse).

2.6 Word Order Errors

Word order, as stated by Leech (1989, p.550) refers to the order of the elements in a sentence, phrase or clause. According to Quirk et al. (1985, p.48) an English clause can be analyzed into five different types of clause elements: Subject (S) Verb (V) Complement (C) Object (O) and Adverbial (A). Examples are:

43. <u>Amazingly</u> <u>he</u> <u>became</u> <u>a teacher</u>
     A   S   V   C

<u>The hyena</u> <u>greedily</u> <u>ate</u> <u>the piece of meat</u>
    S   A   V   O

English word order is generally fixed because the order tells us which element is the subject or object. In English, the unmarked word order in a statement is exemplified below.

44. <u>They</u> <u>elected</u> <u>him</u> <u>chairman</u> <u>last year</u>.
    S   V   O   C   A

The first set of errors in the Word Order Category involved unacceptable fronting of the object. The determination of this sub-category of errors is based on the style of the whole composition that the students wrote. The following examples from the data demonstrate:

Table 4
Taxonomy of Word Order Errors

Linguistic category and error type	Example of learner error
(1) Unacceptable object fronting	Beautiful mobile phones I would hang around the neck.
(2) Order within phrases	My boyfriend bought me a quite beautiful cell phone.
(3) Double use of adverbial	In my pocket I keep my mobile phone there.
(4) Verbless structures	My mind not really on the class.

2.7 Adjective Errors

Adjectives are words which express some feature of quality of a noun or a pronoun. Quirk et al. (1985, p.402) note that four features are commonly considered to be characteristic of adjectives, they are indicated in the table below.

Table 5
Taxonomy of Adjective Errors

Linguistic category and error type	Example of learner error
A <u>Morphology</u>	
(1) Use of other word categories as adjective	Having a mobile phone on campus makes our modern life <u>convenience</u>. (for <u>convenient</u>).
(2) Use of the absolute as comparative construction	If you are given two choices, which will you choose, the common one or the <u>good</u> one? (Discourse required use of comparatives).
B: <u>Syntax</u>	
(1) Use of mixed grading	I thought that it was the <u>most worse</u> influence that I had ever felt.
(2) Double superlative/ comparative	It is the <u>most</u> prettiest mobile phone that I had ever seen.
(3) Use of morphological grading where lexical is the appropriate process	The phenomenon in my university becomes <u>seriousest</u> . (instead of "most serious").
(4) Omission of adjective	…mobile phones have __influence on student's daily life than before. (omission of more).

2.8 Adverbial Errors

Leech and Svartvik (1975, p.202) define adverbs as words that modify the meaning of a verb, adjective or other adverbs. Adverbs express different meanings, the most common being manner (e.g. slowly, quickly), place (e.g. upstairs, outside), time (e.g. after words, next year), degree (e.g. very, much), frequency (e.g. always, sometimes).

By means of a Linguistic Category Taxonomy, the errors related to the adverb that were observed in the students' written English are now illustrated.

Table 6
Taxonomy of Adverbial Errors

Linguistic category and error type	Example of learner error
A <u>Morphology</u>	
(1) Error in derivation of adverbs	Mobile phone is <u>obvious</u> essential to us.
B <u>Syntax</u>	
(2) Wrong choice of adverbs	Without mobile phone, we can spend the time more <u>adequately</u>. (instead of <u>wisely</u>)

2.9 Complementation Errors

Quirk et al. (1985, p.65) use the term complementation to refer to the function of a part of a phrase or clause which follows a word and completes the specification of a meaning relationship which that word implies. In English there is verbal, adjectival and prepositional complementation. We will mainly deal with verbal complementation.

The following Linguistic Category Taxonomy table presents various types of errors observed in the complementation category.

Table 7
Taxonomy of Complementation Errors

Linguistic category and error type	Example of learner error
<u>Syntax</u>	
(1) Omission of mono- transitive	…a mobile phone call can solve__. (omission of object: it)
(2) Omission of an obligatory adjunct	In my opinion, I would advise all the students __. (ommision of <u>to switch off the mobile phone</u>)

2.10 Concordial Errors

According to Quirk et al. (1985, p.755) concord (also termed agreement) can be defined as the relationship between two grammatical units such that one of them displays a particular feature (for example, plurality) that accords with a feature displayed in the other. Leech and Svartvik (1975, p.220) state that concord is the phenomenon where certain grammatical items agree with each other in number and in person.

With the help of a Linguistic Category Taxonomy table, a cross section of errors found in this subcategory is illustrated.

Table 8
Taxonomy of Concordial Errors

Linguistic category and error type	Example of learner error
(1) Singular subject followed by plural verb	It is acknowledged that <u>mobile phone make</u> our life more convenient.
(2) Plural subject followed by singular verb	<u>Students has</u> wasted too much time in order to play that games.
(3) Antecedent _ anaphora agreement	Mobile <u>phones</u> have become so important in our life and we can't ignore <u>its</u> influence.

2.11 Negation Errors

According to Quirk and Greenbaum (1973, p.184) the negation of a simple sentence is accomplished by inserting "not" between the operator and predication.

With the use of Linguistic Category Taxonomy table, a cross-section of errors found in the students' use of negation is presented below.

Table 9
Taxonomy of Negation Errors

Linguistic category and error type	Example of learner error
<u>Syntax</u>	
(1) Use of wrong negation	There is <u>no</u> even a second-handed mobile phone in my dormitory.
(2) Omission of operator	For some reason I even__ not know today they bought very cheap mobile phones.
(3) Omission of negative particle	I looked in the mobile phone for the message but I could find <u>any</u>.

2.12 Clause Link Errors

There are two important processes of combining two clauses in English, namely, coordination and subordination. Coordination involves the expansion of a constituent, phrase or a clause through the use of a

coordinating conjunction for example, "and", "or", "but". It involves the use of these conjunctions to link two units of the same status into a single unit.

The errors observed in this category are summarized in the table below.

Table 10
Taxonomy of Clause Link Errors

Linguistic category and error type	Example of learner error
(1) Errors in the use of coordinators	I arrived at the classroom and other students.
(2) Omission of coordinators	Everyone should come to the classroom on time __turn off his mobile phone. (omission of <u>and</u>)
(3) Omission of subordinators	I was __excited about the new mobile phone that I could not sleep at the night. (ommission of <u>so</u>)
(4) Use of double linkers	Some mobile phones are imported from other countries <u>and while</u> others are made in China.

2.13 Tabulations and Interpretation

Table 11
Frequency of Errors Observed in Each Grammatical Category

Grammatical category	Frequency	%
Verb phrase related errors	123	21.69
Concordial errors	114	20.11
Prepositional errors	92	16.23
Noun phrase related errors	86	15.17
Adjective errors	52	9.17
Complementation errors	49	8.64
Clause link errors	17	2.99
Negation errors	15	2.65
Adverbial errors	12	2.12
Word order errors	7	1.23
Total	567	100

Table 11 shows the distribution of types of errors observed in each grammatical category in the study data. It is evident from the table that the verb phrase related errors were the commonest in the students' English with a percentage of 21.69% of the overall frequency of error types. The second highest was concordial errors. The least frequent was word order errors with a total frequency of 7 which is 1.23%.

It can be concluded, therefore, that most of the errors made by the second-year undergraduate students of Communication related to the use of the verb and its constituents while the least errors related to the use of word order. This could be explained from the point of view of obligatoriness and optionality.

Table 12
Frequency of Errors in the Verb Phrase Sub-category

Subcategory	Frequency	%
Tenses	96	78.05
Infinite	14	11.38
Perfective	9	7.32
Modals	4	3.25
Total	123	100

Table 12 illustrates the frequency of errors in the sub-categories in the verb phrase related errors. Four sub-categories, namely tenses, infinitive, perfective and modals determined themselves. There were a total of 123 errors within the verb phrase related category.

Errors related to the use of tense were the most frequent with a total frequency of 96 which makes 78.05% of the total number of verb errors. The least frequent errors related to the use of modals with a total frequency of 4 and a percentage of 3.25 each.

Table 13
Frequency of Errors in Concord

Sub-category	Frequency	%
Singular_verb agreement	92	80.70
Antecedent _ anaphora agreement	22	19.30
Total	114	100

Table 13 shows the frequency of errors in the sub-categories of concordial category. There were 114 errors in this category. Errors in subject-verb agreement constituted the most frequent errors with a frequency of 92 and a percentage of 80.70 and errors related to complement, anaphora/pronoun not agreeing with co-referent NP were least frequent.

Table 14
Frequency of Errors in Preposition

Sub-category	Frequency	%
Wrong choice of preposition	39	42.40
Omission of preposition	25	27.17
Redundant preposition	19	20.65
Incomplete complex preposition	9	9.78
Total	92	100

Table 14 shows the frequency of prepositional errors in specific sub-categories. There were errors within the category of preposition. Errors were most frequent in the wrong choice of prepositions with a total frequency of 39 which is 42.40% and least in the use of incomplete complex preposition.

Table 15
Frequency of Errors in the NP

Sub-category	Frequency	%
Determiners	45	52.32
Plural	17	19.77
Possessive	12	13.95
Pronoun	9	10.47
Omission of nouns	3	3.49
Total	86	100

Table 15 shows the frequency and percentages of errors in five categories that fell within the Noun Phrase (NP) related errors. There were a total of 86 errors in the NP related category. The most frequent errors fell under the sub-category of determiner with a frequency of 45 which makes 52.32% of the total number of errors. The least frequent was errors related to the omission of nouns.

Table 16
Frequency of Errors in Adjectives

Sub-category	Frequency	%
Use of other word categories as adjective	20	38.46
Omission of adjective	7	13.45
Lexical instead of morphological	6	11.54
Grading and vice versa	6	11.54
Use of absolute as comparative	5	9.62
Mixed grading	3	5.77
Double superlative /comparative	3	5.77
Use of article "THE" followed by ordinary/ comparative forms	2	3.85
Total	52	100

Table 16 illustrates the frequency of errors in the sub-categories that fell within adjectival errors. There were 52 errors within this category. Errors related to the use of other word categories were most frequent with a total frequency of 20 which is 38.46%. Due to the fact that most of the students mainly used minimal NPs, not many adjectives were observed in the language data.

Table 17
Frequency of Errors in Complementation

Sub-category	Frequency	%
Omission of mono-transitive	26	53.06
Object	13	26.53
Omission of obligatory adjunct	6	12.25
Omission of two objects	4	5.16
Total	49	100

Table 17 shows the distribution of errors in the sub-categories in complementation. There were 49 errors in total. The most frequent errors occurred in the students' omission of the object of mono-transitive verbs with a frequency of 26 and a percentage of 53.06% and the least frequent were errors in the omission of two objects.

Table 18
Frequency of Errors in Clause Link

Sub-category	Frequency	%
Errors in the use of coordinators	9	52.94
Omission of coordinators	5	29.41
Omission of subordinators	2	11.77
Use of double linkers	1	5.88
Total	17	100

Table 18 shows the frequency in the sub-categories of clause link. There were 17 errors in this category with errors in the use of coordinators being most frequent with a frequency of 9 and a percentage of 52.94. The lowest number of errors was in the use of double linkers.

Table 19
Frequency of Errors in Negation

Sub-category	Frequency	%
Wrong negative	8	53.33
Omission of the operator	4	26.67
Omission of negative particle	3	20
Total	15	100

Table 19 shows the distribution of errors in the use of negative constructions. There were a total of 15 errors in this category. Three sub-categories emerged in this category with use of wrong negatives from being the most frequent with a total frequency of 8 which is 53.33%.

Table 20
Frequency of Errors in Adverbs

Sub-category	Frequency	%
Error in derivation of adverb	6	50
Omission of adverb	3	25
Repetition of adverb	2	16.67
Incomplete bipartite adverb	1	8.33
Total	12	100

Table 20 shows the frequency of errors in the sub-categories that fell within the adverbial category. There were a total of 12 errors in this category with errors in the derivation of adverb having the highest frequency of 6 which makes 50% and errors that related to the use of incomplete bipartite adverb were least frequent with a frequency of 1 and a percentage of 8.33. Errors within this category were not very frequent.

Table 21
Frequency of Errors in the Word Order

Sub-category	Frequency	%
Object fronting	3	42.86
Order within phrases compound construction	2	28.56
Double marking of adverb	1	14.29
Verbless structurers	1	14.29
Total	7	100

Table 21 shows the frequency of errors in the sub-categories of word order. The total number of errors in this sub-category was 7 with the highest number of errors occurring in the sub-category of object fronting, with a total frequency of 3 and a percentage of 42.86% and the lowest number of errors related to the use of double marking of adverb and verb-less structures.

3. CAUSES OF ERRORS AND ERROR REDUCTION STRATEGIES

This chapter deals with two main issues: first, the causes of the errors observed in the study data are discussed, on the basis of available literature on error analysis. Secondly, pedagogic strategies that can be used to reduce these errors are suggested. Thus, on this basis, the chapter is divided into two main sub-sections.

3.1 Causes of Errors

It is difficult to determine with any certainty that a certain error is related to a particular cause. Scholars on Error Analysis have invoked linguistic and psychological theories in order to explain the causes of errors. Linguistic theory provides the terminology for talking about the nature of errors, for comparing the language of the learner with the target language, and for describing what the learner did and what a native speaker would have done in the same circumstances. The following is some of the causes of errors in second language learning; Overgeneralization; Ignorance of Rule Restrictions; First Language Interference; Incomplete Application of Rules; False Concepts Hypothesize; Universal Hierarchy of Difficulty.

3.2 Proposed Strategies to Reduce the Errors

To most proponents of error analysis, errors are seen as strategies that learners employ in language learning. Corder (1967, p.25) states that a learner's errors provide evidence of the system that he has learned at a particular point in the course. He argues that the learner is using some system all the time although it is not the right system. He further says that errors tell how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him to learn. Some of the proposed strategies include: Frequent Examination of the Learners' Interlanguage; Re-teaching Language Structures; Use of Contrastive Analysis; Use of Pattern Drills and Drama; Use of Correcting Codes; Use of Error Analysis; Remedial Teaching; In-service Courses for English Teachers; Sensitization of Teachers of Other Departments

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Major Findings

The findings observed in this study are consistent with the findings of other studies based on performance language data second language learners in other contexts (Ellis, 1985, 2000). It is interesting to note that second-year students studying communication at the university level are as yet to master certain basics of English grammar. For example, a majority of these students have problems in the use of tense. The present study's finding and findings of other researchers in second language learning point to the fact that some grammatical difficulties are common to all learners of English regardless of the different educational levels or contexts.

4.2 Implications

The findings of this study have implications for the teachers of English at middle school and university levels in China. Bearing in mind the frequency of errors observed in this study (see Chapter 3), it was evident that the students had not mastered some important basics of English grammar by the time they joined the University. The findings of this study are, therefore, significant to enable middle school teachers of English in China to see where students have difficulties and perhaps organize remedial lessons to deal with these areas of difficulty such that by the time the students join university, they will not be displaying as many errors as those observed in this study.

Further, the study has implications for the departments of Communication in universities in China. The findings of this study indicate that most students studying Communication are yet to acquire the competence which is required of them at the University level. Considering the errors observed in this study, the departments of English in Chinese Universities need to, for example, put more emphasis on courses that focus on grammar in the syllabus to help the students achieve a higher level of competence in the English language.

4.3 Areas for Further Research

This study focused only on the grammatical errors. However, from the language data collected it was evident that the university students have errors too in other levels of English. There were glaring errors in lexis and semantics. Thus, further research is needed to describe the semantic and lexical levels of the students' English in order to come up with exhaustive observations of the English of the second-year undergraduate students.

The study only concentrated on the students' English writing and left out the aspects of their English speaking. Research on the English speaking of the students could complement the findings of this study by establishing whether the same grammatical errors are evident in their spoken language.

4.4 Limitations of the Study

The study had the following limitations. First, it would have been ideal to focus on second-year undergraduate students of all majors in a university and even universities in China so as to have a higher level of representativeness.

But because of the time and financial constraints, this was not possible, and the focus was only on second-year students majoring in communication from one University.

However, it is hoped that the sample used in this study is in a way representative of the entire Chinese undergraduate population learning English and that the findings that have emerged from the study can be used to address the issues that relate to the teaching and learning of English in Chinese Universities. The argument advanced in this study is that in most cases, the students in all Universities in China will have been exposed to English language for six years during their junior middle school and senior middle school. In addition, the students follow similar books and syllabus before joining University programs.

Second, the focus should have been on all levels of English grammar, such as lexis and even discourse structures such as paragraphing, cohesion and coherence. But doing so would have made the scope too wide and difficult to achieve.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that the second-year undergraduate students have not attained near-native proficiency in English grammar. This means that there is still a lot in this area that the second-year undergraduate students have to learn. Language is rule governed and learning a language involves internalizing the rules of grammar. The suggestion proposed is that university teachers and middle school teachers of English in China will work out strategies of ensuring a better output. This is necessary to ensure that the students are able to communicate in English fluently, accurately, effectively and intelligently since English is an important language for global communication.

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