

## A Corpus-Based Investigation on Mongolian Students' Writing in English

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### Abstract:

This thesis, based on related principles and theory of linguistics, makes an analysis of Mongolian students' writing problems by using the methods of contrastive analysis, error analysis and discourse analysis. The study is made based on the automated scoring system of writing in China. With the evaluation of the automated scoring system, and the teacher's assessment of Mongolian students' writing, an example of discourse analysis is made afterwards. After that, a discussion of Mongolian students' writing from the perspectives of their way of thinking and cultural differences is followed. Through this study, the relation between language, thought and culture is discussed. The author aims to get an overall knowledge of students' writing abilities and put forward some useful suggestions to improve Mongolian students' writing skills.

**Key words:** English writing; Discourse analysis; language transfer; Culture differences

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### INTRODUCTION

Writing is regarded as an instrument through which people communicate with one another in time and space,

transmitting their culture from one generation to another. Writing as one of the main and productive language skills, which was once considered as the domain of well-educated people, is becoming an essential tool for everyone in today's community (Cushing, 2002). With the integration of technology into teaching, writing is carried out in a new way. Students write a composition on line and then hand in their compositions by uploading their compositions to the designated website. In the past few years, many corpora have sprung up worldwide. Corpus is a collection of text, now usually in machine-readable form and compiled to be representative of a particular kind of language and often provided with some kind of annotation. A corpus can be analyzed using software tools, much like those used to find keywords on the internet, but with greater sophistication. By evaluating the results of these studies, it is possible to see how language is really used and what problems students are most likely to encounter.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Corpus is a collection of materials that has been made for a particular purpose, such as a set of textbooks which are being analyzed and compared or a sample of sentences or utterances which are being analyzed for their linguistic features. (Richard, Platt, & Platt, 2000, p.110). Corpus offers a good way for students to proceed their writing activities and it is also an effective auxiliary tool for the teacher to conduct his teaching of writing. Biber, Conrad and Reppen (1994) wrote *Corpus-based Approach to Issues in Applied Linguistics* and illustrated the application of corpus approach in three areas: English grammar, lexicography and ESP and register variation. And again, these three linguists in 1996, wrote *corpus-based Investigation of Language Use*, in which they discussed the essential characteristics of a corpus-based investigation. Many Chinese scholars come to realize

the importance of corpus and pay close attention to the researches in this respect. He Anping in her article Corpus Research mentions "with a constant interaction between the human brain and the computer, corpus analysis shows its power in describing language, building language model, renewing research methodology and improving language teaching" (He, 1997).

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## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

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### 2.1 Discourse

Discourse in context may consist of only one or two words as in stop or no smoking. Alternatively, a piece of discourse can be hundreds of thousands of words in length, as some novels are. A typical piece of discourse is somewhere between these two extremes. (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002)

Discourse is the way in which language is used socially to convey broad historical meanings. It is language identified by the social conditions of its use, by who is using it and under what conditions. Language can never be "neutral" because it bridges our personal and social worlds. (Frances & Tator, 2002)

In the first sense-usage (semantics and discourse analysis), the term discourse is studied in corpus linguistics, the study of language expressed in corpora (samples) of "real world" text. In the second sense (the codified language of a field of enquiry) and in the third sense (a statement, un énoncé), the analysis of a discourse examines and determines the connections among language and structure and agency. Moreover, because a discourse is a body of text meant to communicate specific data, information, and knowledge, there exist internal relations in the content of a given discourse; likewise, there exist external relations among discourses. In the humanities and in the social sciences, the term discourse describes a formal way of thinking that can be expressed through language; the discourse is a social boundary that defines what statements can be said about a topic.

### 2.2 Language Transfer

Language transfer typically refers to the learner's trying to apply rules and forms of the first language into the second language. The term can also include the transfer of features from one additional language to another (such as from a second to a third language), although this is less common.

Contrastive analysis, discussed above, sought to predict all learner errors based on language transfer.

As subsequent research in error analysis and interlanguage structure showed, this project was flawed: most errors are not due to transfer, but to faulty inferences about the rules of the target language.

Transfer is an important factor in language learning at all levels. Typically learners begin by transferring sounds

(phonetic transfer) and meanings (semantic transfer), as well as various rules including word

order and pragmatics. As learners progress and gain more experience with the target language, the role of transfer typically diminishes.

### 2.3 Contrastive Analysis

Selinker (1972) noted that in a given situation, the utterances produced by a learner are different from those native speakers would produce had they attempted to convey the same meaning. Before interlanguage hypothesis rose to prominence, the principal theory of second-language (L2) development was contrastive analysis. This theory assumed that learners' errors were caused by the difference between their L1 and L2. This approach was deficit-focused, in the sense that speech errors were thought to arise randomly and should be corrected.

Selinker (1972) claims that three kinds of language should be depicted when learners learn foreign language: mother tongue (MA), interlanguage (IL), and the target language (TL). James (1998) suggests that relating to the comparison of three kinds of language, three diverse linguistics ways are offered: firstly, contrastive analysis (CA); secondly, error analysis (EA); thirdly, language transfer analysis (TA).

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## 3. METHODOLOGY

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### 3.1 Participants

Mongolian students encounter many problems when they write a composition. The students surveyed are Mongolian students from Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities. They are sophomores major in clinical medicine and medicine making. 198 students participate in the writing task. A small part of them are language beginners and they are weak in writing abilities. Many of them have learned English for a few years and they have grasped a certain amount of vocabulary and master the rules of grammar. Most of them feel it hard to do well in English writing.

### 3.2 Research Design

A writing task with the title *My University Life* is assigned by the teacher to the students with the purpose of investigating the main problems that students make in their English writing. With the samples provided in the corpus, the teacher intends to make a discourse analysis. From the discourse analysis, the teacher aims to reveal the relationship between language, thinking mode and culture. In the research, a discourse is analyzed from the perspective of language transfer, errors, thinking mode as well as the cultural differences.

### 3.3 Procedure

The survey is made in the following steps.

- (a) The teacher arranges writing assignment in Juku automated scoring system. Writing requirements and the deadline of composition submission are made clear in the automated scoring system. Because of the rich linguistic resources online, no copy or stickup is allowed in the writing process.
- (b) Students are firstly asked to sign up in Juku automated scoring system. Then students are required to finish the writing task before the deadline. After students upload their samples of composition, they will get the scores graded by Juku automated scoring system. The teacher makes his own comments and evaluation according to the data and scores provided by Juku automated scoring system.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The average score they get from Juku automated scoring system is 63.1. The highest mark is 84.9, the lowest mark is 12.8. There are altogether 2986 mistakes found in students' compositions. The most common mistakes are Misplaced Modifier, Sentence Fragments, Dangling Modifiers, Misuse of Parts of Speech, Troubles in Diction, Redundancy, and Incoherence.

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## 4. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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The teacher takes one of the samples as an example. The student has got 83 marks in the composition. He has a good command of English and some mistakes he made are the typical errors that most of the students are inclined to make. The teacher analyzes the discourse of the student and the comments are as follows.

### My University Life

Time spent at a university is a most worthwhile period in a young person's life. This is a time when a student begins to form his or her ideas about life in general. Attending classes and studying in the library keep a student busy and provide him or her with access to valuable information, adding to his or her knowledge base.

Campus life can also be rich and colorful. Most universities offer a variety of extracurricular activities such as sports events, contests, and other social gatherings, enabling the students to experience relief from study and homework. Students often form lifelong friendships through the varied experiences of university life.

During the time a student spends at university, he not only develops his intellectual abilities, he also develops social skills as well as knowledge and wisdom necessary for choosing a future career. By learning how to balance intense study and recreation, a student will be well prepared for the challenges of future responsibilities.

a) The teacher's Comments: Good handwriting; Please pay more attention to word order. Be careful of your

spelling. All the points have been covered. Well organized. It is wonderful to use proper conjunctions between sentences. Better pay more attention to the relationship between sentences. It is better for you to increase the use of academic words and increase the use of complex sentences and clauses appropriately.

b) Time spent at a university is a most worthwhile period in a young person's life.

This is a Chinglish sentence. It should be expressed in this way:

For young adults, university life is a most valuable period that is worth cherishing.

c) This is a time when a student begins to form his or her ideas about life in general.

Incoherence: The sentence can be expressed in this way: Generally, students begin to have his or her own ideas about life during this period.

d) Attending classes and studying in the library keep a student busy and provide him or her with access to valuable information, adding to his or her knowledge base.

This is a Chinglish expression. The sentence can be expressed in this way: Students are busy attending classes and studying in the library to get more knowledge and valuable information.

e) Students often form lifelong friendships through the varied experiences of university life.

Misuse of collocation: Students often win lifelong friendships through the varied experiences of university life.

f) During the time a student spends at university, he not only develops his intellectual abilites, he also develops social skills as well as knowledge and wisdom necessary for choosing a future career.

i) Spelling mistake: "Abilites" should be "abilities".

ii) Morphological error: not only ...but also...

iii) Sentence Fragments: The phrase "necessary for choosing a future career" should be replaced by an attributive clause: "That are necessary for ..."

iv) Redundancy: The phrase "necessary for choosing a future career" should be replaced by "necessary for his future career".

So the correct sentence should be: "During the time a student spends at university, he not only develops his intellectual abilities, but also develops his social skills as well as professional knowledge and wisdom that are necessary for his future career."

g) By learning how to balance intense study and recreation, a student will be well prepared for the challenges of future responsibilities.

i) Interlingual error: A student will be well prepared for the challenges of future career.

ii) "By learning how to balance intense study and recreation" is Chinglish, it should be: By making a reasonable arrangement of study and entertainment.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Since Chinese and English speakers have different thinking mode, some scholars (Wang, 2000; Wang & Wen, 2002a, 2002b) began to investigate Chinese influence on English writing from the perspective of thinking mode aiming to explore influences in lexical choice, sentence pattern, and structure, and to find ways to overcome the negative language transfer to improve writing capability. Another central perspective that affects Chinese Mongolian students' English writing is culture.

### 5.1 Different Way of Thinking

Saussure believes language is a symbol system of expressing thought. Language is an important means of thinking and information transform, and it is also a response mechanism that only exists in human beings physiology and psychology. Thinking is the process of using your mind to consider something carefully. Thinking and language are interactive with each other and also relatively independent. The writing samples may reflect different ways of thinking between Mongolian people and English people. For Mongolian students, mother tongue is Mongolian, their second language is Chinese and their foreign language is English. There are some differences between English and Mongolian. For example, there are not prepositions in Mongolian language, which is quite different from English. In Mongolian language, verbs just modify their forms with the changing of cases, tenses and voices. According to the rules of Mongolian language, when there is a numeral in front of a noun, the noun should use its singular form instead of the plural form. That is why Mongolian students make such errors as "two book", "five apples" etc.. "Tense" is another aspect in which Mongolian is different from English. Some students do not have a good command of grammar "tense". In English, past tense is usually expressed by the verb form. While affected by Mongolian, if there is no adverbial of past time, Mongolian students tend to express the sentence of past tense in the present tense. This kind of error can be found in the following sentence.

How do you finish the work? (你怎么完成这份工作的?)

Where does he find his wallet? (他在哪找到他的钱包的?)

In addition, the position of adverbs in English is flexible while the position of adverbs in Mongolian is fixed. In Mongolian, adverbs can only appear right before words (verbs or adjectives) they are modifying. No elements are allowed to be inserted between adverbs and verbs/adjectives. Actually, one prominent feature of the syntax of Mongolian language is that verbs always appear at the end of the sentences, therefore, no words, except interjections, can appear after verbs. However in English, according to rules some adverbs can only be placed after verbs. This is why the errors occur.

### 5.2 Culture Differences

Language and culture are interdependent, and they are mutually influenced.

Language is an important carrier of culture; culture restricts the use of language.

Language plays a very important role in all human activities, and it is an indispensable part of human social life. The following parts present the differences between Mongolian, English and Chinese. There is a Chinese saying about monks fetching water. One monk, two buckets; two monks, one bucket; three monks, no bucket, no water. The saying means more hands, less work done. However, in English we can hardly find equivalents for the saying, and the saying "Many cooks spoil the broth" carries the similar meaning. Likewise, "Gild the lily" bears the meaning of doing useless work, which is much alike to the Chinese idiom "add feet to a snake" (画蛇添足). Furthermore, Chinese are inclined to use the idiom "play music to an ox" (对牛弹琴) to suggest people who can not appreciate beautiful or valuable things. While in English, the saying "cast pearls before swine" is in accord with it (Zhao, 2014). In English, "dog" is used to expression a person, for example, "lucky dog" (幸运的人), "dead dog" (没有价值的人). Some similar English proverbs like: "Every dog has its day" and "Love me, love my dog". However, we can hardly find the same expressions in Mongolian and Chinese, because it must be a curse to use "dog" to describe a person. Mongolian people regard the sky as the God and they say it in Mongolian as "腾格里". This is Mongolian's belief in god. While in English, the sky is only an important part of the earth and it carries no meaning of "God". "God" and "Jesus" are used in English to express people's belief in God.

## CONCLUSION

From what has been discussed above, we can draw the conclusion that when a study of the errors that Mongolian students most often make is conducted, attention should not only be paid to the grammatical, syntactic, and lexical mistakes, a discourse analysis is of utmost importance for the teacher to analyze students' writing. In addition, the difference of thinking mode affects Mongolian students' ability to use English as well. A good way to eliminate the negative transfer of native language is to form a good habit of thinking in English. Students should change their way of thinking and get familiar with the features of English language. Furthermore, culture is another factor that needs to be seriously considered. A good command of English culture is very essential for students to get rid of the influence of Chinglish. This paper is just a primary study of Mongolian students' writing in English, and more consideration should be taken into the research of the differences of students' methods of writing conception.

Besides, culture comparison should need to be further explored to enhance students' writing abilities.

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