

Analysis of Errors in English Argumentative Essays Written by Chinese University German Majors

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Abstract. Although many people choose to learn a third language as globalization advances, English still plays an important role in the world. However, the intervention of a third language makes the sources of errors in English composition more complex and diverse. Therefore, in order to summarize the main types and causes of errors in English writing among Chinese German college students, the author conducted an empirical study. The participants were 30 sophomores majoring in German from Northeastern University in China, with Chinese as their first language, English as a second language and German as a third language. They were asked to write an argumentative essay of about 200 words in English in 30 minutes. After collecting all the essays, the author interviewed 8 participants. According to the research of predecessors and the characteristics of student errors, the author divides errors into four levels: substance errors, lexical errors, grammatical errors, and discourse errors. Each of these error types contains subcategories. According to statistics, there were a total of 260 errors in the sample, of which grammatical errors accounted for the highest proportion, accounting for 39.7%, followed by substance errors, accounting for 27.1%, and errors of misspelling occurred the most. Combined with interviews, it is found that the main causes of errors include L1 Chinese transfer, L3 German transfer, L2 English intralingual transfer, students' fear of English writing, and negative attitude towards teacher's feedback. Finally, according to the research results, this paper summarizes some implications of English teaching for Chinese German college students.

Keywords: Error Analysis; English Writing; Second Language Acquisition; Third Language Acquisition.

1. Introduction

With the development of international trade, English, as a world language, has maintained an unshakable position since modern times. English is the main language used in transnational communication, and is learned by most people as a mother tongue or second language. The learning of English includes four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, among which the writing level can best reflect the comprehensive ability of the learner, so it is often considered to be the most difficult skill to acquire. With the continuous development of globalization, more and more people began to learn a second foreign language besides English, i.e. L3, among which German, which is also a Germanic language, has become the object of choice for many people. However, the involvement of third languages makes the phenomenon of transfer between languages more complicated and can thus influence the learning of English. According to Graham Burton (2013)'s research, there was a cross-linguistic influence among learners' non-native languages which can cause lexical transfer [1]. Zhang (2011) found that the acquisition of French as a third language for native Chinese speakers affects the identification of English lexical as a second language [2]. Chinese German majors are required to learn and use German, English, and Chinese at the same time, which makes the types and causes of errors in their second language English writing process more diverse. However, most of the existing research on Error Analysis focuses on learners who speak English as their mother tongue or the only foreign language. The study of English composition for non-English speaking college students is very general and does not realize the particularity of trilingual learners, and third language acquisition is a new field of research. Most of the research mainly focuses on the process of third language acquisition, and there is little research on the possible impact of this process on a second language. Therefore, this paper aims to provide new ideas for English teaching by

German language students in China through the study of English composition errors of Chinese German students, and at the same time hopes to continue to supplement and enrich the research theory of error research and develop the research of trilingual acquisition.

2. Literature Review

2.1. TLA vs SLA

Third language acquisition (TLA), as a newly developed area of foreign language learning, is attracting more and more attention from researchers all over the world. However, TLA was once regarded as a sub-category of second language acquisition (SLA) by many scholars since SLA was defined as the learning of languages except the mother tongue. As the research progressed, the differences between TLA and SLA became apparent, and finally, TLA became an independent research field. Cenoz (2003) defined TLA as the acquisition of a non-native language by learners who have previously acquired or are acquiring two other languages [3].

2.2. Contrastive Analysis

The linguistic concept of Contrastive Analysis (CA) was first systematically elaborated in Robert Lado (1957)'s book *Linguistics across Culture* published in 1957. Lado argued that the only source of errors in the target language was the negative transfer of learners' mother tongue [4].

2.3. Error Analysis

With the development of the research on second language acquisition, researchers were becoming more and more aware of the limitation of contrastive analysis. People found that the mother tongue was not the only cause of errors. In order to further analyze errors and find out other causes of different errors, the theory later labeled Error Analysis (EA) emerged as the time required. As a part of applied linguistics, EA originated from CA and became a separate theory by the late 1960s. As a pioneer in the development of EA, Corder (1967) elaborated the procedure of EA, including the following five steps: Collection of a sample of learner language; Identification of errors; Classification of errors; Explanation of errors; Evaluation of errors [5].

In this paper, the researcher mainly followed the first four steps stated by Corder.

2.4. Error Classification

Error classification is an essential part of EA, which can provide the scientific categorizing basis and help teachers find the causes and countermeasures of corresponding errors according to classification, so as to effectively improve the educational effect.

Corder (1967) first distinguished between the concepts of error and mistake, arguing that mistakes can reflect the learner's current level of mastery of the target language to a certain extent while the occurrence of mistakes is contingent and uncertain [6]. At the same time, he pointed out that the two concepts were difficult to distinguish [6]. Corder (1974) supplemented the previous classification in subsequent studies, dividing errors into pre-systematic errors, systematic errors and post-systematic errors [7].

Richards (1971) distinguished interlingual errors and intralingual errors, defining the former being errors caused by learners' mother tongue interference, and the latter being errors developed within the L2 itself, by applying the rules partially or wrongly, e.g. overgeneralization [8].

Carl. James (1998) divided errors into three levels when distinguishing errors, including substance errors, text errors and discourse errors [9]. Among them, substance errors mainly refer to errors in pronunciation or spelling; text errors mainly include lexical and grammar errors; discourse errors mainly refer to pragmatic and coherent errors [9].

In this paper, according to the characteristics of the collected students' essay errors, the author organized the above different types of errors, and was mainly guided by Carl. James's theory of the

classification of errors, the study is carried out from the following four levels: substance errors, lexical errors, grammar errors and discourse errors, and each level has several subcategories.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Questions

The present research focuses on the following questions:

- 1) What are the errors and their distribution in Chinese German majors' English writing?
- 2) What are the possible reasons for these errors?

3.2. Context

The present research was conducted at Northeastern University (NEU), a state-owned, highly accredited university in Shenyang, China, where English courses were compulsory for all first-year and second-year students including non-English majors. In China, the vast majority of students begin their study of English as a second language in primary school and enter university with English as one of the subjects in the college entrance examination. Upon entering the university, all students of Northeastern University's College of Foreign Languages took a standardized English placement test before the start of the semester, and based on the score ranking, students chose the languages they wanted to study as majors at the university, including German, Russian, Japanese, and English. The number of people choosing to study German was the first to reach the upper limit, which meant at the time of admission, the second language English proficiency of German majors was relatively high among all students in the college of foreign languages, Northeastern University. After the major was finally decided, German majors started to learn German as a third language and at the same time attend weekly compulsory courses of College English during the first and second years of university, i.e. students whose L1 was Chinese studied both L2 English and L3 German simultaneously in the first two years. During college, all non-English majors were required to take College English Test Band 4, or CET-4, a national English test administered by the Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education of China. According to statistics, all German students who participated in this study have passed CET-4.

3.3. Participants

30 Chinese college students from Northeast University in Shenyang, Liaoning, China majored in German enrolled in the research. They were in their second year of college and their age ranged from 19 to 21. They started to learn English as their second language during primary school and used English to attend the college entrance examination in China, which helped them enter this university. They passed an English placement test to decide their major after entering college and during college, they all passed CET-4 (College English Test 4). They did not learn German until entering college and had all learned German for at least one and a half years.

3.4. Instrument

3.4.1. Student Texts

Free composition is the best reflection of language competence, thus all the participants were not informed in advance for fear that special purpose would prevent them from writing freely. All the participants were asked to write a 180 to 200 words argumentative essay on the given topic about foreign language teaching selected from IELTS in 30 minutes without the help of other people or dictionaries.

3.4.2. Interviews

In order to further analyze and supplement the causes of the errors, the author conducted specific interviews with 8 students who were selected according to their writing levels this time. A total of 8 questions were set up in the interview. The first two questions were about students' affective factors

towards English writing; the third and fourth questions were about students' own explanation of the sources and possible causes of the errors; the following two questions were about interlingual errors that appeared in the writing; the seventh question was designed to figure out students' attitudes towards teacher's feedback; the purpose of the last question was to gather students' suggestions for English writing teaching.

3.5. Procedure

Considering the pandemic, almost all the participants were not at school, thus the data were collected online. The collection of writing samples was carried out with the help of the meeting app in January 2023. The participants were asked to enter the meeting room online, where the writing topic was given. The duration of the meeting was 30 minutes and participants had to write on paper for around 200 words about the given topic during the meeting and hand in pictures of their work before the meeting was over. All the pictures were collected by the researcher through WeChat. After marking out all errors and preliminary analysis of error types, the authors interviewed eight students through phone calls in their spare time and recorded the contents of the interviews.

3.6. Data Analysis

Combined with the interview results, these compositions were scored by the researcher with the help of a professional English teacher and all the errors were marked out, analyzed and then counted so as to summarize the types of errors in students' essays and their distribution. The types of errors were decided according to the previous study, and the number of errors under each category were counted through Excel and presented in the table below.

4. Results and Errors Analysis

4.1. Results

In this study, 30 Chinese sophomores majoring in German were selected to collect their argumentative essays, and detailed statistics and analyses of errors were carried out. Of the 30 valid essays collected in this study, a total of 5662 words were included, of which 262 errors were identified. All of the errors were divided into four types, namely substance errors, lexical errors, grammar errors, and discourse errors. Among them, substance errors include three subcategories: misspelling, capitalization, and punctuation; Lexical errors include three subcategories: misselection, collocational errors, and borrowing; Grammar errors include morphological errors and syntactic errors, and morphological errors include errors of verb, noun, adjective& adverb, article and pronoun. The number and proportion of each kind of errors are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The types and distribution of errors.

Types	Subcategories	Number	Proportion in each type	Proportion in the total	
Substance errors	Misspelling	43	60.6%	27.1%	
	Capitalization	12	16.9%		
	Punctuation	16	22.5%		
Lexical errors	Misselection	24	39.3%	23.3%	
	Collocational errors	29	47.5%		
	Borrowing	8	13.1%		
Grammar errors	Morphological errors	verb	22	21.2%	39.7%
		noun	25	24.0%	
		Adjective& adverb	11	10.6%	
		article	21	20.2%	
		pronoun	2	0.02%	
	Syntactic errors	23	22.1%		
Discourse errors	Logical errors	11	42.3%	9.9%	
	Coherence	15	57.7%		

As Table 1 shows, among all the errors identified, the number of grammar errors was the highest, 104 in total, accounting for 39.7% of all errors. Substance errors were the second most errors, 71 in total, accounting for 27.1%, followed by lexical errors, 61 in total and made up 23.3% of all errors. Discourse errors were the fewest (26), accounting for only 9.9% of the total.

4.2. Error Analysis

4.2.1. Substance Errors

Substance errors are always considered tiny ones which are rather easy to be ignored in writing. However, based on the research, substance errors including misspellings, capitalization and punctuation occur in the compositions frequently, accounting for 27.1% of all the errors.

a. Misspelling

Word misspellings account for the highest proportion of substance errors, accounting for 60.6%, and of all the errors, errors of misspelling also appeared the most, with 43 in total. The followings are some examples:

- (1) Kownlege (knowledge)
- (2) Globalisation (globalization)
- (3) Morthor (mother)

b. Capitalization

Generally speaking, in English writing, the first letter of the first word of each sentence should be capitalized. Proper nouns such as personal names, place names, country names, and language names, etc. all need to be capitalized. The first letter of every notional word in the title of the composition should also be capitalized. According to the analysis of writing samples, typical errors in capitalization are as follows:

- (1) As is previously mentioned, Globalization (globalization) is progressing.
- (2) Last (Last) but not least, learning language and master it is a long process.
- (3) The Chinese (Chinese) government

c. Punctuation

Major punctuation errors include separating clauses with periods and separating sentences with commas, for example:

(1) Some people teach foreign languages to children in primary school. (.) But others think that's wrong.

(2) To begin with, learning foreign languages at an early age can help develop a better sense of languages, (.) we couldn't study some rules about the language, because...

Some students used German punctuation marks in their English compositions, for example:

(3) As the old saying goes, ,, you are never too old to learn anything “. (“ ”)

4.2.2. Lexical Errors

a. Misselection

Misselection here refers to the selection of inappropriate or wrong words or the forms of words. Many English words are spelled similarly but have completely different meanings, such as older and order, and they can be easily confused in the process of English writing. Another part of the errors of miss election is word class confusion, such as using the noun form of the word where an adjective should be used. The following are some typical examples:

- (1) As they grow order... (Older)
- (2) ...face more pressure from difficult aspects... (Different)
- (3) In this respect (aspect)

b. Collocation errors

Collocation errors rank the highest of lexical errors, accounting for 47.5%. Collocations refer to the words which always keep company with each other conventionally in English, such as some fixed phrases and verb prepositional collocations. For example, “saying English” seems grammatically

correct, but native speakers are more accustomed to saying “speaking English”. The following are some examples:

- (1) In one side, in other side, (On the one hand, on the other hand)
- (2) Saying (speaking) English
- (3) The relationships of people all over the world become more and more nearly (closer and closer)

c. Borrowing

Borrowing here means using words from the languages previously learned in the target language directly. A few students used German words instead of English words to express similar meanings, for example:

- (1) Natürlich (the German word for “of course”)
- (2) Englisch (the German word for “English”)
- (3) Suchen (the German word for “find”)

4.2.3. Grammar Errors

Grammar errors accounted for the highest proportion in all errors, accounting for 39.2%. In this study, all the grammar errors were divided into morphology errors and syntactic errors.

a. Morphology errors

Most of the grammar errors identified were morphology errors, including errors of verbs, nouns, adjectives & adverbs, articles and pronouns.

1) Errors of the verb

The errors of verbs accounted for 21.2% in all grammar errors, and the most of them were errors of verb conjugation. In English, the forms of verbs need to be changed with the changes of person and tense. Many students did not change the forms of verbs or did that incorrectly, for example:

- (1) Our country need (needs) a number of elites
- (2) If I were a young girl, I will (would) be very willing to learn more
- (3) It may bring (bring)

2) Errors of the noun

The errors of nouns accounted for the largest proportion in all grammar errors, for 24.0%. All of them were about the singular and plural forms of nouns, for example:

- (1) More time and chance (chances)
- (2) Different idea (ideas)
- (3) Childs (children)

3) Errors in adjective& adverb

Errors of this type mainly include errors in the use of comparative degree and adjective-and-adverb confusion, for example:

- (1) More wise (wiser)
- (2) It sure rises (surely)
- (3) Errors of the article

Some students added articles where they did not need to use them, or omitted articles where they were needed. And some are confused about the use of “a” and “an”.

5) Errors of the pronoun

There were only two errors of pronoun: (1) bad for they (them); (2) ourself (ourselves)

b. Syntactic errors

Syntactic errors accounted for 22.1% of grammar errors and are mainly the missing sentence components and word order errors, for example, in the sentence “they may too young to master this new language”, the verb “be” was missing.

4.2.4. Discourse Errors

a. Logical errors

Since the writing instruction was very clear, all the essays were not off-topic, and most of the students’ views were clear. However, a few students did not have a clear point of view or their

statement did not support their own opinion, and a small number of sentences even appeared inconsistent.

b. Cohesion errors

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion errors mainly include errors in reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction and lexicon cohesion [10]. The cohesion errors in this study are errors of conjunctions, which mainly include the missing or incorrect use of conjunctions, for example: Some people say that teaching foreign languages to children in primary school is good, * others don't think so. (But/while)

5. Reasons Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Cross-linguistic Influence

Cross-linguistic influence, also called language transfer, was originally conceived as the influence of learners' mother language on second language acquisition [11]. However, L3 learners' language learning process is much more complex since three languages are involved. Odlin (1989) defined language transfer as "the influence resulting from similarities and dissimilarities between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" [12]. Based on text analysis and interview results, in the process of English writing, English as the target language has been influenced by L1 Chinese and L3 German.

5.1.1. Negative Transfer of L1 Chinese

Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family while English belongs to the Germanic language family, and the distance and difference between the two is very large, which makes the negative transfer from L1 a rather common phenomenon in Chinese students' English writing. The errors caused by the negative transfer of L1 Chinese are mainly lexical and grammar errors. According to the interviews, all of the students said that they usually think in Chinese when writing English essays. Moreover, many of the conventional expressions related to English culture are foreign to Chinese students. As a result, students may misselect some inappropriate words due to direct translation from Chinese to English. In addition, verbs in Chinese hardly change with tense and person, and nouns in Chinese do not always change singular or plural forms. Therefore, due to the negative transfer of Chinese grammar, many students neglected the changes of verbs and nouns, etc. in English.

5.1.2. Negative Transfer of L3 German

Although both English and German are from the Germanic language family, and have many things in common, there are still tiny or large differences between them, which were ignored by many students in use. The errors caused by the negative transfer of L3 German are mainly capitalization, punctuation, lexical errors and grammatical errors. There are different rules of capitalization in writing different languages. In German, the first letter of every noun needs to be capitalized, while in English only a few nouns need to be paid special attention. However, some of the students mistakenly capitalized the first letters of nouns that do not require capitalization in English. In addition, there are some cognates in English and German which look alike, for example, "Englisch" in German is only one letter (c) more than "English" in English, and some students tended to confuse the two.

5.2. Intralingual Errors

Apart from the errors caused by cross-linguistic influence, which are also called interlingual errors, there are some errors caused by the rules in the target language itself.

5.2.1. Overgeneralization

Generalization is common in the process of language learning and can make learning easier. However, not all English grammar rules can be generalized, and if the students incorrectly amplify the scope of use of the grammar rules they have learned, they overgeneralize them. For example, the past participle of most English verbs only requires the suffix "-ed", but a part of verbs need to be

changed specially. One student in this study thought that all past participles of verbs were ended with the suffix “-ed”, so she wrote “teached” instead of the correct form “taught”.

5.2.2. Incomplete Application of Rules

Some students did not master some rules yet but still partially used them in their essays. For example, one student intended to express that “the more skilled you are at speaking a foreign language, the better your understanding of the world will be”. However, the sentence he wrote was “More skilled you speak a foreign language, the better understand you will have of the world”, and the biggest problem was that he knew that a comparative degree was needed in this sentence, but he forgot that the two articles “the” were also indispensable in this expression.

5.3. Other Reasons

Apart from the causes above, there are other reasons which are not about language itself but about students’ attitudes, including their emotional attitudes towards English writing and attitudes towards errors correction.

5.3.1. Negative Emotional Attitudes towards English Writing

According to the results of interviews, the emotional attitudes of interviewees towards English writing are mostly negative. Most students do not like or have the habit of English writing and think writing in English is difficult. Krashen (1982) pointed out that emotional factors play an important role in the language acquisition process [13]. Language input must be filtered by learners’ emotions which act as the affective filter before being absorbed to become the language intake [13]. In addition, students with more negative emotions have a higher affective filter, which may hinder their acquisition of foreign languages [13]. The anxiety and fear of English writing have led to resistance to English writing, and this is one of the reasons why many students do not perform well in writing.

5.3.2. Attitudes towards Errors Correction

According to the interviewees’ answers to the seventh question, most students only focused on scoring rather than errors after receiving the teacher’s evaluations. Instead of correcting the errors immediately, students tend to ignore them, which can lead to them not knowing the real causes of errors as well as the correct answers.

6. Conclusion

According to statistics, there were a total of 262 errors in the sample, of which grammar errors accounted for the highest proportion, accounting for 39.7%, followed by substance errors, accounting for 27.1%, and errors of misspelling were the errors that occurred most frequently, the number of which was 43. Combined with interviews, it is found that the main causes of errors include L1 Chinese transfer, L3 German transfer, L2 English intralingual transfer, students’ fear of English writing, and negative attitude towards errors. Finally, according to the research results, this paper summarizes some implications of English teaching for Chinese German college students.

After analyzing the types and causes of errors in English argumentative essays written by Chinese university German majors, the author hoped to gain some implications for college EFL teaching in order to provide effective countermeasures to reduce the error rate.

First of all, teachers should emphasize the similarities and differences between Chinese, English, and German in terms of lexical and grammar, etc., in order to reduce interlingual errors. According to the analysis of students’ essays and interviews, Chinese students majoring in German tended to confuse the rules of these three languages, such as vocabulary and grammar, etc. Compared with students who learn English as their only foreign language, Chinese German majors have more sources of distractions in their English writing. However, the English classes for Chinese German majors in college are totally the same as the classes of all non-English majors.

Secondly, it is important for teachers to pay attention to the teaching of basic and fundamental knowledge, such as collections, spellings, grammar, etc., to reduce the occurrence of intralingual errors. According to the results, there were many intralingual errors, which were mainly caused by students' poor mastery of basic knowledge. The most common errors were misspellings, and the number of lexical and grammar errors was large, all of these could be largely reduced by emphasizing the teaching of basic and fundamental knowledge.

Thirdly, teachers should try to make the writing lessons interesting and relaxing, so that students can be motivated to write. Interest is the best teacher for students. However, most students were not interested in English writing or even hated it. Teachers ought to create an interesting and relaxing learning atmosphere to reduce students' learning anxiety towards English writing.

Last but not least, teachers must guide students to reflect and review and correct their attitude towards errors. Most of the errors occur time and time again, and most of these errors could have been avoided if they had been corrected and taken to heart the first time they appeared.

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