

ENGLISH ERRORS AND CHINESE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the errors committed by second language learners in English essay writing based on eight selected grammatical items and makes recommendations to improve English writing skills in Malaysia. While errors were once regarded with contempt and looked upon as something to be avoided at all cost, they are now perceived to represent stages of language acquisition. The objectives of this paper are to identify and classify comprehensible and incomprehensible errors committed by the respondents, and attempt to explain the probable causes of such errors. Analyses of data revealed that most of the errors committed by the respondents were comprehensible ones. With reference to the selected grammatical items, the analysis established that respondents faced particular difficulty in the use of verbs, prepositions and spellings. The research further showed that the errors committed by the respondents were due to over-generalization and simplification. The paper thus recommends the incorporation of explicit grammar instructions in the teaching of English as a second language in order to improve grammatical competence in English writing.

Key words: English language, second language, written errors, Chinese learners.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a crucial act in the process of learning any foreign language, but more so in English since it has become the language of global communication. The ability to write clearly is essential to effective communication and critical to employment and production in the contemporary world. Individuals are expected to be capable of writing for a variety of audiences in differing styles, including standard themes, business writings, financial proposals, and technical and professional communications.

In Malaysia, both speaking and writing of English are considered important. Although the National Education Policy in 1970 had changed the medium of instruction in national schools from English to Bahasa Malaysia or the national language, the former continued to be taught as an essential second language in the country. With the recent reintroduction of English in the teaching of Science and Mathematics in national schools, English writing skills have once again assumed a critical significance in Malaysia.

Educators in Malaysia are currently faced with the challenge of adopting and developing a wide range of methods to accomplish effective teaching of English writing. This, of course, is not an easy task. An alarmingly large number of students in Malaysia continue to fail to master the basics of the English language even after nine years of formal education (from Standard One to Form Three). It is more alarming to learn that many fifth formers, with the exception of those from the international schools, continue to struggle with even the rudiments of English grammar. The deterioration of the English language

among students is so evident that for the past few decades the language has, in fact, assumed the position of “English as a Foreign Language” (EFL) rather than “English as a Second language” (ESL).

When the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) replaced the Grammar Translation Method (GMT) and the Structural Approach, it was thought to be a good idea. The former, it was argued, emphasized the importance of communicative competence whereas the latter had focussed on grammatical rules, memorizing of vocabulary and various declensions and conjugations, translation of texts and written exercises. The principal argument, therefore, for advocating CLT was its greater emphasis on the processes of communication rather than on the mastery of language forms. At first glance, therefore, it appeared to have the ability to produce more expressive individuals. The objective reality, however, was that the overemphasis on communicative competence did not necessarily ignite creativity in individuals. Many students still remained passive and diffident. This goes to show that with the implementation of CLT, the students lagged behind not only in developing effective communication skills, but also in grammatical competence.

Thus, holding the view that competence in grammar is as consequential as competence in communication, the authors sought to investigate and identify the grammatical items which pose difficulty to students so that teaching-learning activities can be catered towards students’ needs, particularly writing skills.

Significance of the Study

This study highlights the importance of explicit grammar instruction in teaching English writing, as CLT approach is unable to effectively assist students in developing effective writing skills. According to experienced examiners of the SPM English Paper, students obtain no higher than a grade D (21–25 marks out of 40 marks in Continuous Writing) if there are many errors detected in their essays.

Although the present trend is to move away from the “product” approach (which emphasizes the accuracy of grammar) to the “process” approach (which stresses the fluency of ideas), the mastery of the basic tenets of grammar must never be compromised. This is especially so if both above average and mediocre students are to attain higher marks in the examinations.

On the other hand, with the rudiments of grammar in hand, students can compose any kind of writing be it narrative, descriptive, argumentative and so forth with confidence. Some educators, of course, may argue that the product approach is obsolete. But what is the use of having ideas and vocabulary when one is unable to string the words together to express his or her thoughts in a coherent manner?

METHODOLOGY

This research employed the qualitative method, that is, the collection of empirical data in the form of respondents’ essays for an analysis of grammatical errors committed. Eight major grammatical errors selected for this study were nouns, pronouns, adjectives, articles, verbs,

modal verbs, prepositions and spellings. Many of these errors are, of course, common to most non-native users of English.

The population of this study consisted of 305 Form Four students studying in a national-type Chinese secondary school in Penang in northern Malaysia. Out of this, three groups of five respondents each who obtained grades A, B, and C (in the public examination) respectively were chosen. Table 1 shows the distribution of students selected for the study as well as the criteria for selection.

Table 1. Respondents of the Study

Group	English grade for the PMR result	Description of criteria
A (5 Students)	A (Excellent)	Competent and accurate use of language. Minimal errors. Task given fulfilled effectively.
B (5 Students)	B (Above Average)	Appropriate use of language and able to communicate meaning. A few errors detected. Task given fulfilled satisfactorily.
C (5 Students)	C (Average)	Sufficiently correct use of language and meaning usually not in doubt. Errors are more frequent. Task given fulfilled partially.

All respondents sat for a one-hour essay test where they were given a single topic to write on: *The Day When Everything Went Wrong*. In order to get more reliable and uniform data, respondents were instructed to write their essays in the range of 300–350 words in an hour (the same as the time suggested for Continuous Writing in SPM English paper). Respondents were urged to compose their essays on their own without referring to their friends or consulting the teacher/researcher present. This was to ensure the authenticity of the data collection for analysis.

Although the data collected were based on the fifteen essays written by the selected respondents, explicit analysis of errors were only based on 6 respondents' essays, or the essays with the least and most errors of Group A, B and C. This was due to time constraint and the complexity in carrying out the error analysis. Also, the rationale for this selection was based on the concept of triangulation. By choosing the essays with the least and the most errors of each group, the researchers were able to cover the "in-betweens" and the "average" of respondent errors. In other words, the researchers obtained a more generalized data set without having to analyze all the errors committed by the 15 respondents. In addition, only comprehensible and incomprehensible errors were analyzed as they were indicative of the respondents' grammatical incompetence.

After the identification of errors, the probable causes as to why such deviance occurred were investigated. This study employed Error Analysis (EA) to explain the occurrence of errors. The errors were then discussed, where applicable, in terms of over-generalization,

ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false concept hypothesized.

It should be added that all the respondents had their primary education in vernacular schools where Chinese (Mandarin) was the medium of instruction and English was taught as an additional subject within the school curriculum. An informal survey revealed that all the respondents were from Chinese-speaking homes, with Hokkien as the dominant dialect. Even those respondents who belonged to other Chinese dialect groups like Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, Hokchew, Hainanese, etc., were able to converse well in Hokkien (Penang variety). The majority of the respondents were from low SES (socio-economic status) groups. Most of the parents were either hawkers or blue-collar workers.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The occurrence of multiple errors in a single sentence was very common among the respondents. That is, the same sentence may be quoted several times in different categories of errors. For the purposes of analysis, however, only comprehensible and incomprehensible errors were taken into account. The following discussion focuses on errors in the use of nouns, pronouns, adjectives, articles, verbs, modal verbs and prepositions, and on spelling errors.

Errors in the Use of Nouns

A noun is defined as a word that is used to name any person, animal, thing, idea, state, or quality (Russell, 1993).

Errors in the use of nouns found in this study include:

- (a) Errors involving countable nouns where the s is left out
E.g. (i) 20 minute (minutes)
(ii) many bus (buses)

Some researchers such as Jain (1974) and Tan (1978) have attributed morphological errors like the above to over-generalization and a simplification strategy on the learners' part. This means that in order to simplify things, learners often sub-categorize certain countable nouns as uncountable nouns and vice versa. Thus, the respondents' failure to mark plural countable nouns could probably be due to a subconscious learning strategy employed by them to lighten their memory load when managing new English data input. That is, when these respondents as well as other Chinese learners encounter both singular and plural versions of the same countable nouns, they subconsciously select the singular form for storage instead of retaining both forms. A possible explanation of this selection is that the singular form contains the core meaning they need to know about the new English item. The inclination to use the singular form could also be due to the system they encounter in the dictionary whereby all the entries of countable nouns are in the singular form.

- (b) Errors involving singular countable and uncountable nouns where the s is included:
 E.g. (i) a pieces of paper (piece)
 (ii) buy foods in the canteen (food)

While some respondents are inclined to leave out the s morpheme in plural countable nouns, others have an affinity for inserting the s morpheme in singular countable nouns as well as uncountable nouns. These errors could be repercussions of constant corrections to mark their plural nouns, and thus the learners are prompted to insert the s morpheme when they should not and cannot do so.

Errors in the Use of Pronouns

According to Jarvie (1993), a pronoun is usually defined as a word that stands for a noun, or a noun phrase, or something relating to one. He adds that the meaning expressed by a sentence containing pronouns tends to be less specific than the meaning of a sentence containing nouns.

The errors involving pronouns in this study include:

Omission of pronouns.

- E.g. (i) When / reached home, I saw my little brother crying.
 (ii) I was upset because / punish by the discipline teacher.
 (I was upset because I was punished by the discipline teacher.)

A possible explanation of this type of error is over-generalization and simplification. As the pronoun “I” has been mentioned several times previously, respondents in this study over-generalized the use of pronoun and considered it appropriate to omit some of them lest they are faulted for repetition or redundancy.

Errors in the Use of Adjectives

Adjectives are defined as words that describe or give information about nouns or pronouns. Adjectives are usually easy to recognize in a sentence, often describing or modifying an object’s size, colour or amount (Jarvie, 1993).

Errors involving adjectives in this study include:

Errors in comparative and superlative forms

- E.g. (i) ...she became more angry ... (angrier)
 (ii) ...the most fierce teacher ... (fiercest)

A possible explanation of errors of this class is ignorance of rule restrictions. Perhaps such errors are committed after the learners learnt some (irregular) adjectives of the comparative and superlative forms, which cannot be inflected but must be tagged with “more” and “most” to show the degree or extent of a noun description. It is possible that

from here the respondents presume that it is not wrong to tag all adjectives with “more” and “most” regardless of whether the adjectives should be inflected or otherwise. As it is correct to write “more/most patient,” “more/most serious” and “more/most gentle,” the respondents may deem it perfectly appropriate to use “more” and “most” on “angry” and “fierce” as well.

Errors in the Use of Articles

According to Russell (1993), an article is a kind of adjective. There are two articles—the definite (the), and the indefinite (a, or, preceding a word beginning with a vowel, an).

Errors involving articles in this analysis include:

(a) Insertion of articles:

- E.g. (i) But the God looked very sad ...
 (ii) ... it was the recess time.
 (iii) I want to buy a bread ...

Chinese learners of English have no frame of reference for articles, as articles do not exist in the Chinese linguistic system. Thus, the absence of articles in Chinese indirectly influences them to commit errors when using English articles. Errors related to article usage found in this study could be due to ignorance of rule restrictions. Many Chinese learners are either ignorant or unaware of the various conditions existing in English that require the use of different articles and the zero article. For instance, with reference to the errors found in this study, (i) and (ii), “God” and “time” are considered universal, therefore no definite article is required before the two nouns.

In addition, Chinese learners are also inclined to perceive certain uncountable nouns (in English) as countable simply because they can be literally counted. Thus, there is a tendency to insert an indefinite article before the noun when zero article is required, for instance, “I want to buy a bread...” instead of “I want to buy bread ...” The rudiments of English grammar regard bread in general as uncountable but bread, if it is in slices or loaves, is countable. Thus, it is either “I want to buy bread” or “I want to buy a slice or a loaf of bread.” Perhaps the ignorance of this rule can be accounted for this insertion error.

(a) Omission of definite articles

- E.g. (i) He written down my name and took me to / discipline master room.
 (He wrote my name down and took me to the discipline master’ s room.)
 (ii) ... to buy food in / canteen ... (the)

While Chinese learners have a tendency to insert definite or indefinite article in some structures, they sometimes omit definite articles (in this study) where they are required. Omission of “the” before a noun in contexts such as above could be a result of incomplete application of rules. It is possible that Chinese learners presume that the definite article is unnecessary since there is only one such place/context in each of the sentence, that is, there is only one discipline room and one canteen in school.

Errors in the Use of Verbs

A verb is defined as a word that indicates an action or a mental or physical state (Russell, 1993). In this study, verbs refer to “doing” words or “action” words (for instance, run, jump, walk, stand, shake) and auxiliary or “helping” verbs (such as be, have, do). Modal auxiliary verbs (such as will, can, may, shall, would, could, might, should, must) however, are excluded, as they will be discussed separately later. In addition, this study also looked into verb agreement or concord. According to Jarvie (1993), concord (or agreement) is a rule that ensures the harmonizing of different grammatical units. Number concord is the most important type of concord in English, and ensures that a singular subject is always followed by a singular verb, and a plural subject by a plural verb.

Errors involving verb forms in this study include:

(a) Concord errors

- E.g. (i) ... Mrs. Lim who teach us Biology ... (teaches)
 (ii) ... she refuse to give me a bowl of noodles. (refuses)

Concord errors are common among Chinese learners as they are inclined to generalize and simplify in order to reduce the linguistic burden. The omission of the third person *-s*, is an over-generalization because it removes the necessity for concord, thus relieving the learner of considerable effort. Since (in English) all grammatical persons take the same zero verbal ending except the third person singular in the present tense, omissions of the *-s* in the third person singular may be accounted for by the absence of the *-s* of all other ending forms. Thus, based on the current study, it is possible to argue that the omission of the third person singular subject verb marking is due to the way Chinese learners store English linguistic items for later retrieval. Instead of storing both the singular verb and the plural verb, they lighten their learning load by focusing on the verb stem which holds the core meaning needed. The stem form is the one more likely to be retrieved when a verb is needed, thus producing these concord errors.

(b) Wrong use of be, have, do

- E.g. (i) It had already 7.30 a.m. (was)
 (ii) ... but mother was not prepare my lunch ... (did)

In an attempt to show that both events happened in the past, the respondents in this study over-generalized the use of auxiliary verbs and committed the errors above. Thus, instead of “It was already 7.30 p.m.” and “... but mother did not prepare my lunch ...,” the learners displayed confusion in the use of English auxiliaries. Indeed, where the auxiliaries be, have and do are concerned, Chinese learners have no frame of reference, and therefore there is a possibility that the absence of such auxiliaries in Chinese is indirectly responsible for Chinese learners’ errors.

(c) Insertion of be

- E.g. (i) When I was came to school ...
 (ii) ... Mr. Chew was caned me ...

Another weakness of the Chinese learners is a tendency to commit errors involving the insertion of be in their sentence structures. Insertion errors such as the above where be is used with verbs in the past tense form show that these learners have hypothesized false concepts regarding certain rules for forming the simple past tense. Their errors indicate that although they have internalized some features of the passive voice structures, they have not quite mastered them yet.

(d) Wrong use of simple, past, continuous and perfect verb tenses

- E.g. (i) ... my mom had went out. (gone)
 (ii) ... a big and foolish dog was slept on the road. (sleeping)
 (iii) ... I didn't brought money to school. (bring)

The Chinese respondents in this study also over-generalized the use of perfect verb tense for past verb tense and as a result, they produced sentences like "... my mom had went out" instead of "... my mom had gone out" and "You had took your brother's tuition bag ..." instead of "You had taken your brother's tuition bag" This could be traced to the fact that the Chinese tense system, in general, is rather simple and straightforward regarding the concept of time, and Chinese learners have the inclination to simplify their learning pertaining to the English tense system. Thus, they express past action by just using past tense instead of perfect tense as required.

Another example that clearly shows Chinese learners' confusion regarding the use of tense is in sentence (ii). The data collected show that, on the whole, many of the learners apparently perceived and over-generalized the simple past tense, past continuous tense, the present perfect tense, and the past perfect tense as a single group which can be used to express any past action regardless of aspect and context. Therefore, a sentence such as "... a big and foolish dog was slept on the road" instead of "was sleeping" is a common occurrence in Chinese learners' essays.

The third sentence in the same category of errors, "... I didn't brought money to school," is also another example of over-generalization. The sentence, which has double past tense markings, could have been caused by hypercorrection. A sense of insecurity related to past tense marking could have produced this type of error. As Chinese learners realize that their mother tongue and the target language verb systems differ, it is possible that they gave both the auxiliary do and the main verb bring past tense inflection to ensure against errors.

(e) Errors involving verbs followed by an "-ing" verb

- E.g. (i) I could see sunlight shone behind the undrawn curtains. (shining)
 (ii) I could see my classmates ran out from the classroom. (running)

The two sentences above are also examples of errors caused by over-generalization. These errors could be the result of perceiving that the event has happened, and therefore the past tense structure is applied to the second verb in the sentence instead of the "-ing" form.

(f) Errors involving verbs followed by an infinitive "to"

- E.g. (i) I had to cycled as fast as possible. (cycle)
 (ii) ... I wanted to buy bread to ate ... (eat)

(g) Errors involving verbs followed by an infinitive without “to”

- E.g. (i) I can only walked home ... (walk)
 (ii) I still can't found my wallet. (find)

Errors in category (f) and (g) are examples of incomplete application of grammar rules. According to Hughes & Heah (1993) most Chinese learners are not aware that the infinitive is the basic form of a verb, without any ending. Some examples of infinitives are go, eat, sleep which can be used with or without “to.” However, being used to their simple Chinese verb tense, Chinese learners often find it stressful to remember the complicated English linguistic structures and as a result they often forget to apply the rules as required. Thus, we have “to cycled,” “to ate,” “can ... walked,” “can't found” and so forth instead of the base form “to cycle,” “to eat,” “can walk” and “can't find.”

(h) Errors involving mixed-up verb tense

- E.g. (i) I was late already. I immediately wear my school uniform ... (wore)
 (ii) I go to my seat and realized that ... (went)

Both the above sentences contain errors committed due to over-generalization. According to Richards (in Richards, 1974), over-generalization “may be the result of the learner reducing his linguistic burden.” It is possible that the mixed-up verb tense perpetrated by many Chinese learners is a result of the way these learners store English linguistic items for later retrieval. Instead of storing the past verb tense (and even the perfect verb tense), they often lighten their learning load by focusing on the verb stem which holds the core meaning needed. Hence, the stem form is the one likely to be retrieved when a verb is needed.

This subconscious selection of verb stem for learning in preparation for later use is most probably the cause behind this particular type of tense errors. Instead of inflecting the verbs to indicate the required tense in English, Chinese learners in this study have the tendency to use verb stems freely. As such, they are predisposed to switch from past tense to present tense and vice versa, whereby they usually end up using verb stems (present tense).

(i) Passive/active verb forms

- E.g. (i) Correctly, it was happened ... (had)
 (ii) Besides, I was forgot to bring my English exercise books. (had forgotten)

According to Richards (1971), the errors mentioned above could derive from “faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language.” He added that these were sometimes due to poor gradation of teaching items whereby the form was may be “interpreted as a marker of the past tense.” This developmental error termed as false concepts hypothesized is a common occurrence among Chinese learners. Thus, instead of writing the correct form “Correctly, it had happened ...” and “Besides, I had forgotten to bring my English exercise books,” the learners added the form “was” which gave a passive voice to the sentences when it should not be so.

So far, all the errors discussed, from (a) to (i), are comprehensible errors where the arrangement of the subject-verb-object or subject-predicate is still comprehensible. This

means the errors committed do not obstruct the understanding and interpretation of the text. However, the analysis of the data also encountered an incomprehensible error made by one of the six respondents as follows:

(j) Confusion over verb use

E.g. After school, I quickly (quickly) went home to take my lunch,
but my mother was not prepare my lunch, because she was busy to work.

Although the arrangement of the subject-verb-object in this sentence was comprehensible, it was full of errors. In addition, the third clause of the sentence was vague. The authors could not make out what the respondent was trying to say. Could it be that his mother “was busy working” or perhaps his mother “was busy going to work” or maybe his mother “was busy preparing to go to work.” As such, the researcher has classified it as an incomprehensible error because it was difficult to establish what was exactly the respondent’s intended idea.

A possible explanation for the occurrence of this error is incomplete application of rules. It is possible that this error is a result of using questions to teach. As Richards (1974) postulated, “the use of questions is a common teaching device. Typically they are used, not to find out something, but as a means of eliciting sentences.” Besides indirectly influencing learners to create deviant sentence structures, this teaching device also invites answers that are short and inaccurate. Granted that if a learner were asked “Was your mother busy?” the natural response, of course, would be “Yes, she was busy to work.”

Errors in the Use of Modal Verbs

Modal verbs are defined as a category of the auxiliaries in that they too are “helping” verbs. They help the main verb to express a range of meanings: possibility, probability, certainty, permission, requests, instructions, suggestions, offers and invitations, wants and wishes, obligation and necessity (Jarvie, 1993). Some of the more common modal verbs are will, can, may, shall, would, could, might, should, and must.

Errors involving modal verbs found in this analysis include:

(a) Wrong use of modal auxiliaries

E.g. (i) At this time, I can very sure ... (was)

(ii) ... I guess that I must be scolded by the teacher ... (would)

A possible explanation for such errors could be false concepts hypothesized, which is a result of faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language. In the absence of equivalent Chinese modals, Chinese learners have practically no frame of reference regarding the use of English modals, and they learn this grammatical item through reading and listening alone. This is where the problem begins as they sometimes pick up incomplete or incorrect structures. For instance, we sometimes say, “I can be very sure he is not coming for sports practice today” or “I am very sure he is not coming for practice today.” Perhaps, taking a preference to the first structure, the respondent in question decides to load the structure into his memory bank. But unfortunately, he unwittingly leaves out the lexical verb

be, and thus when he retrieves it for use, he writes without the lexical verb be as well. This is a hypothesis of the researchers regarding the error. Without the lexical verb be, the use of the modal verb can (when actually it should be could as the context is the past) in the sentence is incorrect. Looking at this sentence construction (i), the form was is more correct grammatically.

In the second sentence, the respondent wrote “I must be scolded” instead of “I would be scolded” because he meant he was absolutely sure that he will be scolded and there was no way he can avoid it. Perceiving that the modal verb “must” is used to express obligation and necessity, he thought he chose the correct modal verb because he was definite of the impending scolding from his teacher. He, however, failed to consider the probability factor since it involved another person who may or may not carry out the act, and as such “would” (used as a past verb form of “will”) is a more correct choice.

(b) Errors involving modal auxiliaries “would” and “could”

E.g. (i) What will happen to me? (would)

(ii) I still cannot sleep. (could not)

In the book *Common Errors in English: Grammar Exercises for Malaysians*, Hughes and Heah (1993) said, “Malaysians and Singaporeans very often make the mistake of using would and could to refer to the present or the future.” However, according to them, would and could are actually “the past tenses of *will* and *can*.” Thus, the most probable explanation for this type of error is over-generalization. To Chinese learners, the English language is basically complicated and confusing most of the time. As there are many grammar rules to remember, Chinese learners often reduce their linguistic burden by storing either the base form or the frequently used structure. Granted that, of course Chinese learners will unquestionably select “will” and “cannot” rather than “would” and “could” since the first two modal verbs are more commonly used.

Errors in the Use of Prepositions

Prepositions as defined by Jarvie (1993) are words like on, at, to and before. They show the relation of a noun or noun equivalent to the rest of a sentence. As the name suggests (“pre[ceding] position”), they usually come before the words they complement. Most often, they show how two parts of a sentence are related in time or space.

Errors involving prepositions in this study include:

(a) Wrong choice of prepositions

E.g. (i) I jumped on my feet ... (to)

(ii) In a hot terrible morning ... (on)

A possible explanation for the occurrence of the errors above is ignorance of rule restrictions. As Chinese learners have no frame of reference in Chinese for English prepositions, they tend to make analogy of what they have learnt and apply it in new situations. For instance, after learning, “on foot,” “on one’s feet” and “stand on one’s own

(two) feet,” the learners may have associated “on” with “foot/feet.” Thus, “I jumped on my feet” seems to be perfectly correct to them.

With respect to the second sentence, because “in” is often associated with the time of the day—for instance, “in the morning,” “in the afternoon” and “in the evening”—changing the phrase “in the morning” to “in a hot terrible morning” looks grammatically correct to them. Indeed, Richards (1974) cannot be more apt in saying “analogy seems to be a major factor in the misuse of prepositions.”

(b) Insertion of prepositions

E.g. (i) My mother was comforting at him.

(ii) She ran back to home.

Errors involving insertions of prepositions when a zero preposition is required could also be a result of ignorance of rule restrictions. Since most Chinese structures require zero preposition usage, these respondents have to resort to other English structures as a guide. This is when they make errors, especially when they substitute verbs to complete their sentences. If “My mother was looking at him” and “My mother was shouting at him” are accepted as grammatically correct sentences, “My mother was comforting him” definitely does not seem right without the “at” in these learners’ eyes. The same conclusion can also be made for the second sentence. If it is perfectly all right to say, “went back to school” or “walked back to class,” “ran back to home” seems to be more correct rather than “ran back home.”

(c) Omission of prepositions

E.g. (i) When she heard / the accident, she ... (about)

(ii) ... wash my face and change / my uniform in a short time. (into)

Again, the errors above are strongly believed to be a result of ignorance of rule restrictions. Chinese influence and analogy based on zero preposition use with the verb saw (instead of heard) and wear (instead of change) could have caused the omission of the prepositions.

Spelling Errors

Spelling is defined as the action or process of forming words correctly from individual letters (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, 1995).

Spelling errors found in this study include:

(a) Omission of letters

E.g. (i) dicipline teacher (discipline)

(ii) demerit maks (marks)

(iii) quikly went home (quickly)

As speech precedes writing, Chinese learners tend to spell the way they pronounce their words. Thus, in that way, they are simplifying the spelling of the words based on the sound system that they practice and articulate.

(b) Doubling of consonants

E.g. (i) appologized for being late (apologized)

(ii) a bowl of noodless (noodles)

This is a case of over-generalisation on the learners' part. Perhaps, after learning “appear,” “appreciate,” “apply” and “appoint,” all with double letter p, the respondent in question is influenced to spell “apologize” with a double p. The same scenario could be said for “noodles.” Perhaps, having learnt “needless,” the particular respondent stores it in his memory bank and later reproduces “noodless” by just substituting the double e's with double o's.

(c) Words ending with “*ily*”

E.g. (i) I wore my school uniform untidely ... (untidily)

(ii) ... luckly he didn't decide to punish me ... (luckily)

A probable explanation for the occurrence of the errors above could be due to incomplete application of rules. Although the respondent who wrote the first sentence (i) knew he has to omit the y in “untidy” to form the adverb “untidily,” his knowledge of the rule application for the suffix “*ily*” is incomplete. As such, instead of applying “*ily*” to form “untidily,” he mistakenly applied “*ely*” in his essay.

Another common spelling error committed by Chinese learners is the word “luckily” whereby the letter i is often missing. It is strongly believed that the error could be a result of pronunciation as the [i] sound in “luckily” is not so distinct and as a result, learners tend to omit the letter i.

DISCUSSION

To recapitulate, the eight selected grammatical items represent some of the main areas of difficulties faced by most students in the school under study in terms of English writing. The errors were ranked in terms of frequency of occurrence based on the eight selected grammatical items.

Frequency and Ranking of Errors

As a reminder, respondents were divided into three groups—A, B and C based on the grades that they obtained for their English paper in the PMR examination. On the whole, respondents from group A committed fewer errors (below 23) compared to the other two groups (B and C) except for one respondent from Group A (with 33 errors). All respondents in Group B committed 23 errors and above (except for two respondents with 21 errors). One

respondent topped the list with 49 errors. All respondents in Group C committed 31 errors and above (from 31 to 47 errors).

Out of the total 453 errors committed, 239 errors were due to incorrect use of verbs. This seems to be the most difficult item for all the respondents, the weakest area, as ten out of the fifteen respondents committed ten errors and above. The second grammatical item that posed problem to respondents was prepositions. A total of 66 errors were committed. The third item of difficulty was spelling whereby a total of 59 errors were committed. The least errors were committed in adjectives (a total of only 6 errors made).

Comprehensible errors topped the list with a total of 420 occurrences while incomprehensible errors occurred only 3 times in the whole study. This shows that the respondents in this study had a weak grasp of the grammar component. However, 99% of the errors committed can still be comprehended and corrected. Comparatively, all except one of the respondents in Group A, made less than 23 errors. Like the rest of the groups, these respondents demonstrated that they too faced difficulties in using verbs (including modal verbs) and prepositions. Their spelling ability was weak as they made unnecessary errors and careless mistakes. With regards to the other four grammatical items (nouns, pronouns, adjectives and articles), however, respondents in this group committed very few errors. While some respondents made one or two errors at most for each of the four items, others handled the items reasonably well.

As for respondents in Group B, most of them demonstrated a poor grasp over the use of verbs and prepositions. Their essays also disclosed that they were not competent in their handling of articles, nouns and modal verbs. They also made more spelling errors and careless mistakes compared to respondents in Group A. It must be noted, however, that both groups committed mistakes and comprehensible errors. That is, although numerous errors were detected in their essays, the arrangement of subject-verb-object or subject-predicate was still comprehensible. Their written work could still be understood and meaning was never in doubt.

Finally, all the respondents in Group C displayed difficulties in handling verbs (including modal verbs), prepositions and spelling. Their poor grasp over the use of verbs was especially apparent as all three incomprehensible errors found in this study were related to this grammatical item (and they were committed by three of the respondents in this particular group). Their inability to handle the correct use of verbs caused confusion and uncertainty in the essays written. In addition, a majority of respondents committed fewer errors in the use of nouns (except for two respondents), pronouns and adjectives. A possible reason for this is that these respondents kept to simple and compound sentences and hence such errors were reduced. Nevertheless, all the respondents in this group (except one) committed two or three errors in the use of articles. All in all, this group committed the most errors, that is 191 errors, compared to Group B with a total of 160 errors and Group A with a total of 102 errors.

In examining the two most “error-prone” grammatical items, verbs and prepositions, it was obvious that respondents showed a tendency to produce more deviance in certain types of errors in a particular grammatical item as compared to others. For instance, with regards to verb use, respondents in Group A tended to commit more errors in simple, continuous and perfect tenses, verbs followed by “*ing*” forms, and verbs followed by an infinitive without “to” compared to other types of errors related to verbs such as concord or the use of be, have, and do. Respondents in Group B and C, however, had a tendency to mix up their

tenses (switching from present to past and vice versa) that indicates a lack of confidence and a poor grasp of the rudiments of grammar concerning the temporal aspect. In addition, respondents from both groups also committed several errors related to simple, continuous and perfect tenses, and insertion of the verb be.

With regards to prepositions, while respondents in Group A (with the exception of one respondent) made only two or three errors in the selection of appropriate prepositions for the contexts, respondents in Group B and C committed 60% more errors related to insertions and omissions of prepositions.

CONCLUSION

It can thus be concluded that respondents still have a long way to go in writing satisfactory essays in English. The way they composed their essays clearly shows their weak grasp of the basic tenets of English grammar.

As the Communicative Approach currently adopted does not exactly yield desired results, it may be time to emphasize explicit grammar instruction in the classroom as was done in the past. Perhaps if grammar (or a few of the more difficult and problematic items such as tenses and prepositions) is taught formally and extensively at the upper secondary level, one can perhaps reduce students' grammatical errors in essay writing and at the same time give them more confidence to compose. This is because grammatical or linguistic competence serves as a catalyst for accuracy and fluency in second or foreign language learning.

To consistently blame the curriculum specification, which emphasizes communicative competence and downplays grammatical competence, for students' lack of proficiency in the language is a futile exercise. As proactive and concerned teachers, one should try to ascertain which aspects of English writing continue to impede students in their written work, particularly with reference to grammar. It is only then can one plan teaching modules in accordance with our students' needs.

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