Error Analysis of the Non-English Majors' English Writings and the Countermeasures in College English Teaching in Newly-built Undergraduate University

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Abstract. The improvement of English teaching depends on the understanding of the learning process. Studies on errors in students' English writings can not only throw some light on the process of English learning, but also help us gain some insights into the strategies learners employ in the learning process. Based on the theory of Error Analysis, this paper takes the English writings of non-English students in Xinxiang University, a newly-built university, as the subjects. Through analyzing most frequent errors in students' writings, the author tries to find out the common features of the writings, analyze the causes of writing errors, and propose some suggestions for English teaching in newly-built undergraduate university.

Introduction

As is known to us all, college English education plays a very important role in Chinese higher education, including newly-built university. According to College English Curriculum Requirements, the objective of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges.[1] So as for newly-built university, it is an urgent need to cultivate students' English communicative capability, in which writing plays an important role. During many years of teaching practice, the author identifies that students' writing capability are not in line with their reading capabilities. Students who are apt at reading are not necessarily good at writing; whereas students who are weak at reading are surely to be bad at writing. It can be seen from statistics of CET4 that the scoring average of writing is very low. Although teachers have made arduous efforts on writing, the efforts produce little effect. We still find that there are a lot of lexical or grammatical errors in students' writings. Sometimes their compositions are just piles of words or expressions which do not make any sense to the reader. And although some students have a large enough vocabulary, they fail to express their ideas freely and clearly. So the students in newly-built universities still have difficulties in writing and using English. The author considers that only through understanding students' difficulties in writing and analyzing their writing errors, can teachers adopt effective strategies of teaching English writing in newly-built university. And in the process of analyzing students' errors in English writings, teachers should consider the realistic conditions of newly-built university as well, which means that college English teachers should not only analyze the errors linguistically but find the main causes leading to errors by investigating the English learning and teaching process in newly-built universities.

So in view of this concept, the author attempts to explore the features of errors in students' English writing and classify their writing errors into different categories and analyze the reasons, especially the reasons that why the students in newly-built university are weak in writing competence, and then put forward some effective strategies for improving students' writing skills

and college English teaching.

Error Analysis and Its Significance to the Teaching of English Writing

The theory of Error Analysis was first put forward by Corder in1974 error. In 1967, he published in the IRAL journal "The Significance of Learners' Errors", which opened the prelude to the Error Analysis theory.

The Error Analysis refers to the analysis and research of the learning errors committed on second language and foreign language, its purpose mainly includes the following aspects: (1) in order to find out to what extent the learners understand the second language; (2) to find out how they are learning a foreign language; (3) to find the common difficulty in second language learning; (4) to provide compiling help to teaching and writing textbook.

As a branch of applied linguistics, Error Analysis plays an important role in second language teaching and learning. It helps researchers understand the process and strategies of second language learning, thus enriching theories of second language acquisition. It helps teachers realize the common characteristics shared by language learners, which can promote the progress in English as a foreign language teaching. It also helps students gain some insights into the difficulties during the learning process, which can result in the improvement in their learning methods.

Error analysis, applied in English writing teaching in university, can help teachers to get to know which factors influence students' writing process and what difficulties they have, and in turn, effectively organize the teaching in order to prioritize the severity. For learners, error analysis is his incentive mechanism to learn a language, and also a validation rules that they learn the language. It is the errors that enable a learner know how to correct. And it is the opportunity to correct the errors that makes the errors less and less. Therefore, studies on Error Analysis will be very helpful for the theoretical research on teaching of English writing. Through analysis of writing errors, a teacher can learn that how and why the learners make mistakes in the process of writing, so that he or she can take some measures to correct the mistakes, and then the students could get a proper guidance so as to improve their English writing level. [2]

Research Design and Findings

Research Design. This research is designed to make a study on non- English majors' writing errors and English teaching, especially writing teaching in newly-built university. The aim of the study is to find out the causes leading to writing errors in students' compositions by analyzing errors in their English writings and eventually help the teachers solve the problems in English teaching and improve the writing competence of non-English majors.

Research Subject. In this study, 200 subjects were randomly selected among the freshmen in five departments of Xinxiang University. They were selected as the subjects because they were different in English proficiency, which could make the result of the present study more reliable.

Method and Procedure. In this research, an error analysis of sample writings, questionnaires, and interviews were adopted.

In this study, the subjects were given forty minutes to write a composition of their own in the classroom. They were required to write in the same length (about 120 words) during the same period of time (40 minutes), and in this way the compositions could truly reflect their language proficiency. At last, 200 compositions were collected, in which 190 were chosen as the samples and the remaining 10 were excluded because they were not finished within the time limit.

After getting the sample compositions, the author asked another teacher to help her go through all the compositions thoroughly two times and marked errors found in them. Then the errors were picked out and, according to James' classification (James, 2001) ,classified into five different types--- substance errors, lexical errors, grammar errors, discourse errors and Chinglish.[3]

And then the total number of each type of errors was counted to see which type of errors occurs most frequently. After that, the possible causes of committing errors were analyzed. To get further knowledge of these errors, 150 copies of questionnaires were given respectively to students and 120 valid sheets were returned. Then the answers in the questionnaires were classified and

analyzed by the author for the purpose of the addition to the explanations of writing errors and reference of language teaching. In the meantime, the interviews to the students were taken randomly, which is helpful for the author to check her teaching strategy and adjust the classroom teaching.

Major Findings

Results from Error Analysis. The actual number of the errors collected from the sample compositions is presented in Table 1. The result shows that a total of 1957 errors were collected out of all the writings. Of all these errors，Grammar errors are the most distinctive, which count 540, about 28% of the total; next come 447 Chinglish and 414 Lexical errors，accounting for 22.8% and 21.2% respectively. The numbers of the errors on the level of Discourse and Substance are 305 and 251，accounting for 15.6% and 12.8% respectively. Among all the proportion of each type of errors, we can find that Grammar errors, Chinglish and Lexical errors are the greatest amount of total errors, Discourse errors are in the middle, and Substance errors are the least.

Table 1 The Total Number and Proportion of Each Type of Errors

Types of Errors / Distribution of Errors	Substance	Lexical	Grammar	Discourse	Chinglish	Total
Numbers of Errors	251	414	540	305	447	1957
Proportion	12.8%	21.2%	27.6%	15.6%	22.8%	100%

Results from the Questionnaires and interviews. By collecting and analyzing the information presented in the questionnaires and interviews, we can find that, in newly-built university, the students' English level is rather low and they usually have a big individual difference.

Secondly, although most of the students know that English writing are very important, few of them practice English writing during their spare time.

Thirdly, the students are lack of knowledge of cultural difference between Chinese and English.

Besides that, some students do not have good learning method or strategy, which lead to low-efficiency learning and at last influence their interest in the study.

The Causes of Errors

Based on the above research, the author thinks that the followings may be the possible causes of writing errors:

(1) Interlingual errors are usually caused by the learners' native language influence. Negative transfer or interference may lead to errors on both surface level and deep level. That is to say, a lot of linguistic errors, discourse errors and pragmatic errors may be traced back to the L1 transfer.

(2) Intralingual problems cannot be traced back to differences between L1 and L2, but they relate to a specific interpretation of the target language and manifest themselves as universal phenomena in any language learning process. Technically, they are caused by the faulty or partial learning of one item of the target language upon another. Learning strategies and communication strategies are concerned here.

(3) Lack of practice. Owing to various reasons, writing is not paid adequate attention in present language teaching activity. The most important reasons may be: time limit, test-centered teaching, and misunderstanding about writing, etc.

(4) Other factors. These factors that attribute to errors can be regarded as nonlinguistic interference. For example, when learners are absent-minded or too nervous, they are likely to commit errors; the noisy environment can also restrain learners' ability of putting language into practice and therefore cause errors in learners' language expression process. Besides, individual differences should be paid attention to.

Pedagogical Implications of EA in English

Since possible causes of learner errors have been found, it is necessary for us teachers to take measures to help the learners reduce certain interference. Here are some principles for error correction and countermeasures we should take.

Our Attitude towards Learner Errors and Some Principles for Error Correction. Teachers should correct students' errors so as to help them to change their conscious mental representation of a rule and establish the correct language forms. In the meantime, we must keep in mind that excessive correcting may make students frustrated and consequently hinder classroom activities. Therefore, whether to correct students' errors or not depends on the type of errors they have made, the kind of classroom activities they are doing and the objectives of doing a particular activity.

Some basic principles of correcting errors are suggested as follow:

(1) We prefer fewer error corrections in free conversation than in written work and grammar exercises.

(2) We should correct "global" errors, errors that interfere with comprehension. "Local" errors, errors that do not hinder communication are sometimes best left uncorrected so the learner is free to continue with a thought or a pattern.

(3) The degree of linguistic deviance is also an important criterion. A grossly malformed sentence though comprehensible in context should also be corrected for the sake of shaping correct linguistic forms.

(4) Errors that cause the most unfavorable reactions should be corrected.

(5) The particular objective of a lesson is also important. For example, in a class of simple past tense, one might expect to correct errors in past tense and to ignore certain other errors.

(6) Errors that occur most frequently and that most students commit should be given top priority to correct.

Focusing on the Basic Language Knowledge. Regarding the poor performance of students' writing ability, the language teachers should focus on the basic knowledge and strengthen their writing skill. Lexis and grammar are the two basic factors and the most important means to think and communicate. In order to improve the college English writing teaching and better the students' writing competence, it is imperative to attach the importance to grammar teaching and lexis teaching. During the teaching process, the language teacher should strictly follow the syllabus and offer some useful learning strategies.

Raising Students' Motivation to Write. In the author's opinion, the following measures should be taken: First of all, let students realize the importance of writing in their study and life, even in their future work. Second, teachers can also introduce some tasks and activities to stimulate students' interests and strengthen writing training. For example, teachers can ask the students to write down their feelings freely after reading books or articles, or encourage them to make comments on some movies or the latest hot issues.

Strengthen the Awareness of Cross-cultural Communication. In order to reduce and avoid errors which result from ignorance of the culture of target language, we teachers should also teach some cultural knowledge besides the English language itself in class. And the English teachers should take the responsibility to help the students differentiate the two languages (Chinese and English) in their phonological, lexical and grammatical levels and explain the differences between the two ways of thinking. In addition, reading a large amount of materials in English is a good way for the learners. The teachers should give more input to the learners to guarantee their intake and the quality of output. The teachers' task is to value the learners, to prize their attempts to communicate, and to provide them with necessary feedbacks. In this way the learners may make fewer and fewer errors of intralingual type and may approach the target language bit by bit.

The Need to Improve Teachers' Capability. Sometimes, the errors in students' writings may be aroused by the ineffectiveness of teaching. That is to say some of the learners' errors are due to the teachers' fault. This has to draw our attention. Therefore it is essential for the English teachers to be equipped with systematic modern linguistic knowledge, necessary integrated understanding of the process of second language learning, different methods of English teaching and effective techniques.

Even if teachers have acquired different methods and techniques, they should choose the suitable ones in different situations. Because no one method or technique can be said to be better than another in any absolute sense. The teachers should be flexible in order to suit a wide variety of teaching situations. In this way the students' success in learning a second language can possibly be achieved.

Summary

Teachers in newly-built university should improve their own skills of teaching and enlarge their knowledge about language. And the most important task for these teachers are that they should try their best to cultivate students' interest in learning English and foster students' self-study competence.

Of course, there are some limitations in this study. For example, the number of the subjects is relatively small and the experimental design has limitations that future research in this area is suggested to involve more case studies with larger number of participants, a longer experimental period and some competent teachers. Furthermore, we should keep on working out new techniques and methods to apply the theory into practice.

References

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