

Error Types and Strategy in the Acquisition of Simple Past Tense: A Study on Chinese Fifth-Grade ESL Learners' Writing

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ABSTRACT

Today in China, learners start to learn English at increasingly early ages. However, for fifth graders, simple past tense is still difficult in writing. This study investigated simple past tense errors in a writing assessment from three participants. It also examined if the correction feedback strategy is effective. All three participants are Chinese non-native speakers in fifth grade. A specific writing assessment including a paragraph writing task and a blank-filling task was given to the participants. Both the assessment and the revised version were collected and analyzed in order to answer the following questions: (1) What are the most common types of errors on simple past tense made by Chinese fifth grade ESL learners? (2) Is the feedback strategy effective? The results showed that the four most common errors in their writing are not doubling the final consonant before adding *-ed*, changing *-y* to *-i* in verbs ending in vowel+*y*, using simple past tense verbs in a general question and not realizing to use simple past tense in a sentence without definite past adverbials of time. Also, the revised assessment analysis result revealed that the strategy is effective for participants to identify their errors and give the correct answers. The findings may have useful implications for ESL teachers in understanding ESL learners' difficulties in simple past tense learning and provide an appropriate and effective feedback strategy for ESL teachers.

Keywords: error analysis, strategy analysis, simple past tense errors, Chinese fifth-grade students

1. INTRODUCTION

English has been part of the compulsory courses in elementary schools in China since 2003 [1]. More and more attention has been paid to English learning in recent years. However, compared to previous years, more errors have been found in ESL learners' writing assessment [2]. One of the most important reasons is the change in the English writing teaching approach. The emphasis on the teaching of writing has shifted from grammar and words to content and logic [2]. According to them, this student-centered approach can inspire learners' interests and motivation, but increase chances to make mistakes. Grammatical errors can be made by English learners at any level [3]. Errors made by ESL learners and the reason why they make such mistakes [4] and strategies to help them to improve have been studied by many researchers and scholars [2-9], such as using global context [5]. But none of the studies has focused on the fifth-grade students

and their simple past tense errors.

Therefore, in this paper, writing assessments from three participants are collected both before and after the strategy is used. All three participants are Chinese L1 speakers learning English in fifth grade. The writing assessment includes a paragraph writing task and a blank-filling task. After the first submission, the participants get the feedback only with the total number of errors made. The participants then have an opportunity to go over the correct usages of simple past tense and revise their writing assessments. The works are collected and analyzed again to find whether the strategy is effective for the participants. The purpose of this paper is to identify the simple past tense errors made by the fifth-grade ESL students in writing and investigate whether the feedback strategy is effective in learners' correction.

In this article, first, the previous studies on grammatical error types in writing and direct and indirect corrective feedback will be reviewed. Second, the

methodology including participants, data collection and data analysis will be detailed. Third, the results of the current study will be presented. Following this, a discussion of the results will be addressed. Finally, a conclusion of the current study will be drawn.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Grammar teaching and learning has been the focus of researchers for a long time. Several types of grammatical errors have been studied, such as Subject – Verb Agreement (SVA), preposition and adjective omission, misuse of articles, misformation of verb and adverb, and so on [3, 8]. Also, how to improve students' accuracy on grammar usage has been studied by many researchers. Teacher's corrective feedback is considered to be important in improving learners' accuracy in writing [2, 3, 6, 10, 11]. While some of them supported that indirect feedback from the teacher is effective in improving the learners' English [11], others believed that learners who receive direct feedback performed better in error correction [11]. Meanwhile, it was reported that even though both types of feedback have an influence on the learners' English acquisition, there is no significant difference between them [2].

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data collection

This research is carried out in a fifth-grade class during two classes respectively in two days. The participants are three Chinese L1 speakers learning English in this class. A writing assessment is given to the participants to collect data.

In the first class, the participants are given a writing assessment including two tasks: (1) A free writing task. The participants are asked to write a paragraph about what they did on last Saturday. They are provided three groups of verbs. They should choose one group from them and use the proper forms of them to write the paragraph. (2) A blank filling task. The participants are asked to fill in the blanks with the proper form of the given words according to the contexts. At the end of the first class, all the assessments are collected.

In the second class, the participants are told how many errors on simple past tense they have made in last class and are given a chance to review the correct usages of simple past tense. Then the participants are asked to find and correct their errors.

3.2 Participants

This research is carried out in an elementary school in China and the participants in this study are 3 fifth-grade students of non-native speakers of English. All of them are girls aged from 10 to 11 from the researcher's class.

At the time of research, the participants have already learned English for more than 5 years. Although they have a similar English learning background, their English is not at the same level. Also, their language learning ability and understanding ability are not the same. The simple past tense was learned by them in the semester prior to the study.

3.3 Data analysis

The dataset from the writing assessment is collected in two parts. The first part states the findings of the types of errors; the second part shows the influence of the strategy on errors correction. A qualitative approach is used to answer the two research questions. In the final analysis, a total number of nine tokens is analyzed.

4. RESULTS

The data from the first day showed that there are four most common errors in the participants' writing assessments. The data from the second day showed that this strategy is effective in helping the participants figure out and correct the first three types of errors. When mastering the rules of simple past tense and being told a definite past adverbial of time, the participants were able to recognize the tense of the sentence was simple past tense and use a correct-form verb. However, when the participants need to judge the tense according to the context, rather than a definite past adverbial of time, even though after the strategy was used, they still could not make the correction.

4.1 Error types

The first error type is not doubling the final consonant. For monosyllabic, monosyllabic and monosyllabic ending verbs, as well as disyllabic, stressed second syllable and monosyllabic ending verbs, it is needed to double the final consonant and add *-ed* to change them into simple past tense. All three participants were confused about this rule. For example, one of the participants wrote, "Last Saturday, I ran to my friend's house, then I stopped at the door." Another participant wrote, "I planned to go to the supermarket." The other participant used "grabbed" correctly because she had learned the word "grab" in the week before this class. She remembered the way to write the word "grabbed", instead of knowing the rule of doubling the final consonant and adding *-ed*.

The second error type is to change *-y* to *-i* in verbs ending in vowel+y. For the verbs ending in vowel+y, people directly add *-ed* to change them into simple past tense; for those verbs ending in consonant and y, people change *-y* to *-i* and add *-ed*. Most of the participants mixed up these two rules. They changed *-y* to *-i* in verbs ending in both vowel+y and consonant+y. Two of the participants made this error in their writing assessments.

One of them wrote: "Last Saturday, I read an interesting book and I enjoyed the book very much." The other wrote: "We played games with my best friend last Saturday."

The third error type is to use simple past tense verbs in a general question. In a simple past tense general question, people use the root form of verbs after the word "Did". However, two of the participants filled in the blank and completed the sentence as "Did you brushed your teeth?" "Did you watered the flowers the day before yesterday?"

The fourth error type is that the participants cannot realize to use simple past tense in a sentence without definite past adverbials of time. For example, in the sentence "James and I had a good time this afternoon.", the participants used "had" instead of "have" because they saw "this afternoon". However, in the sentence "-- How do you know that? -- I see some of them on the table." They mistakenly used "see", rather than "saw", because there is not a definite time sign to show the action "see" happened in the past, although the tense could be recognized and decided from the context. Another example is "--Whose cookies are those? --They are not mine. I bring chocolate from my home." All the participants used "bring" rather than "brought".

4.2 Correction results

In the second class, after giving the participants a chance to review the rules and examples of the simple past tense and telling each participant how many mistakes they have made on the simple past tense assessment, they are asked to find out and correct the errors. The revised assessments are collected at the end of the second class.

The data showed that all the participants figure out and correct the mistakes of the first three types of errors. However, only one student figured out the last type of error and corrected all errors she have made in the first class.

As a kind of indirect corrective feedback, the feedback strategy was proved to be effective in helping students reduce simple past tense errors. This strategy works because it helps students focus on teachers' lecture and explanation, since they know they need to find errors by themselves. However, this kind of strategy does not work for the last type of error is because to correct this kind of error, the participants are supposed to focus more on the meaning of the context, not only completing the tasks by using rules.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to answer two research questions respectively: (1) What types of errors on simple past tense are most likely to be made by Chinese fifth grade ESL learners? (2) Will the feedback strategy be effective in students' correction? A writing assessment

including a paragraph writing task and a blank-filling task was given to three participants as the way to collect data to answer these questions. The major findings are shown as follows:

Firstly, there are four most common errors on simple past tense in the participants' writing. The fifth graders are most likely confusing the rule to double the final consonant before adding *-ed*. Other three common errors respectively are changing *y* to *i* in verbs ending in vowel+*y*, using simple past tense verbs in a general question and not realizing to use simple past tense in a sentence without definite past adverbials of time.

Secondly, the strategy used in the study is effective in improving learners' accuracy of using simple past tense in writing, which is shown by the improving of the correction rates.

This paper assessed the writing of three participants to collect and analyze the data. The findings answered the two research questions. However, there are two limitations in this study. First, this study lacks an interview part. This study only used one writing assessment to discuss the questions and come to the findings. Only types of errors and their frequencies and the numbers of the mistakes were shown in the writing tasks. However, the reasons of the errors could not be seen from the study. Some of the errors might be caused by carelessness, not by misunderstanding. Second, the writing assessment has a set context, which helps participants understand that they need to use the simple past tense for assessment. This may decrease the mistakes they have made.

Based on the findings, the study has some implications for teachers on grammatical teaching. First, ESL teachers of English learners at this grade or level should pay attention to the four most common simple past tense teaching errors mentioned in this study. Teachers should give more explanations or exercises on the four aspects in order to help their learners have a thorough understanding and firm consolidation. Second, in grammatical teaching, teachers could use the strategy, only giving feedback of the total number of errors made by the learners and letting them find the errors and correct them. Before letting the learners do the correction, teachers need to lead them to the correct usages of the rules of grammar points and inform them that they need to find and correct the errors by themselves. When the learners know that they have to find the mistakes by themselves and correct them, they will focus more on the teacher's lecture. Consequently, the correction rate and the accuracy will be improved.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

First of all, I would like to thank Delin Deng for her help with narrowing down the topic of the article and her constant encouragement and guidance. Secondly, I would

like to express my gratitude to Ziru Xing for his help in working out my problems during writing the article. Thirdly, I want to thank my parents for their support and encouragement. Finally, I want to thank myself for my persistence and hard working.

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