

Study of Error Analysis on English Composition*

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Abstract—Writing ability of Chinese students is one of the core skills emphasized in English teaching, it is also the significant indication to measure the students' communicative competence. As a result, writing ability plays an important role in English teaching. Writing ability is an integrated reflection of words application ability, grammar master ability, and thinking ability, which is also the embodiment of students' comprehensive language ability. The occurrence of errors and mistakes always appear in the composition of Chinese students, and those errors and mistakes have distinctive characteristics. This thesis mainly focus on classifying and analyzing errors, according to the error analysis theory in second language acquisition, to find out the root of those errors. Through the analysis of error analysis and combing with examples, this thesis tries to seek the solutions so as to enhance Chinese students' writing ability and input and output ability.

Keywords—writing ability; English teaching; error analysis; second language acquisition

I. INTRODUCTION

With the development of the cooperation of world economy and culture, and the establishment of the reform and opening up policy, Chinese people start to give emphasis on the study of English; therefore, English has become one of the major subjects in Chinese students' learning process no matter from pupils to college students. As English has become an important part in the globalization which includes tourism, economy, education, culture and et cetera, the demand of modern society to talents endowed with English has increased sharply.

Language is a bridge for people to communicate with each other, and nowadays English almost has become as the global language, it is used for people from different countries to communicate without any barrier, which is also the initial reason for students in China to study English. Language communication relies on the language output, thus improving the ability to communicate is to enhance the language output ability which is the checkout of the input. The English level of different students is different. The reasons are various, for example, if a student live in the city, it is possible for him to be in a high level than those in the rural areas, since students in city have the better learning conditions, although this is not always completely correct. As a result, it is necessary to formulate plans according to students' personal situation. Although different student's

English level is different, errors occurred in students' composition can be categorized in several groups. Therefore, integrating with the error analysis theory, it is easier to find out ways to improve the language ability.

Concerning of the importance of error analysis theory, this thesis mainly focus on the explanation of error and error analysis theory, examples occurring in the students composition, categorizes of errors and the analysis. Finally, as an ending part to analysis of error analysis on English composition, this thesis comes to the part of solutions to the errors in the composition. Consequently, this paper mainly stress on the explanation of error analysis with the examples and solutions to errors, which could be a contribution to obtain a feasible understanding towards error analysis, and seek a method to solve the problems in English compositions no matter for students or teachers.

II. ERRORS AND ERROR ANALYSIS

Generally speaking, errors are significant in telling teachers what should be noticed in teaching, in telling learners how to test their hypotheses about language to be learned.

A. Definition of Error

Errors usually arise from the learners' lack of knowledge; it represents a lack of competence. In other words, the learner does not know the right form or is unable to use language correctly (Hu). In efforts to categorize learners' errors and to find out ways to remedy errors, errors are always divided into interlingual errors and intralingual errors.

The interlingual errors (transfer errors) occur when the learner misuses an item because it shares features with an item in native language. The intralingual errors (developmental errors) are mainly from faulty or partial learning of the target language, independent of the native language such as overgeneralization and cross-association.

As mentioned above, errors can be defined as deviations from the norms of the target language, but a question appeared, what does mistake mean in English learning class? An error takes place when the derivation arises as result of lack of knowledge, which represents a lack of competence. Mistakes often occur when learners fail to perform their competence. In other words, the learner has already learned the knowledge or skill but simply fails to function correctly due to lack of attention or other factors.

*Sponsored by Funds of Xi'an University of Technology; No. xqj1506

B. Background of Error Analysis

Error analysis is one of the research areas in the study of second language acquisition, which is a branch of applied linguistics. The appearance of error analysis is not accidental. It was first advanced by Corder in 1960s to replace contrastive analysis in his famous article "The significance of learners' errors".

Before the 1960s, contrastive analysis is overwhelming; it is a way to compare language in order to determine potential errors for the ultimate purpose of isolating what needs to be learned and what does not need to be learned in a second language learning situation (Gass and Stinker). The contrastive analysts thought errors occurred just because the learners negatively transferred their mother tongue habits in to the target language. In their opinion, interference took place whenever the habits of their other tongue differed from those of the target language. As time goes by, the fact that not all errors are explicable by CA resulted in disillusionment with contrastive analysis was recognized by linguists. Gradually, CA was replaced by EA.

Generally speaking, the research on error analysis started from the late 1960s, and entered its heyday in 1970s; it is oriented from contrastive analysis.

C. Definition and Procedure of Error Analysis

1) *Definition of error analysis:* Error analysis involves describing the learners' interlanguage and a comparison to locate mismatch. It is an approach influenced by behaviorism through which applied linguists sought to use the formal distinctions between the learners' first and second languages to predict errors.

Different with contrastive analysis, it gives less consideration to the native language. Error analysis showed that contrastive analysis was unable to predict a great majority of errors, although it is more valuable aspects have been incorporated into the study of language transfer. A key finding of error analysis has been that many learner errors are produced by learners making faulty inferences about the rules of the new language.

2) *Procedure of error analysis:* In the year of 1967, Corder raised the opinion: errors served as devices by which the learner discovered the rules of the target language. In other words, Corder thought that process of L2 acquisition should be noted. And in 1974 Corder suggested five steps in EA research including collection of a sample of learner language, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors, and evaluation of errors.

In terms of collection of a sample of learner language, we can identify three broad types of EA according to the size of the sample. A massive sample involves collecting several samples of language use from a large number of learners to obtain a comprehensive list of errors. A specific sample includes one sample from a limited number of learners. Finally, an incidental sample consists of only one sample from a single learner. Considering the accuracy of research, it is better to collect well-defined samples of learner language (Rod Ellis).

Identification is a way to deal with a sentence produced by the language learner. We should first ask whether the sentence is grammatical correct. If the answer is negative, errors exit, vice versa. All in all, a negative answer indicates a mistake.

The description of errors involves a comparison of the learner's idiosyncratic utterances with a reconstruction of those utterances in the target language. For example, if the meaning of sentence is not clear, we may refer to the learner's native language to find out what he means and carry out a contrastive analysis.

When an error is recognized and described, we make hypothesis about the psychological process which have caused the learner to commit errors. Explanation is concerned with establishing the source of error. This stage is the most important for SLA research as it involves an attempt to establish the process responsible for L2 acquisition.

Error evaluation involves a consideration of the effect that errors have on the persons addressed, which can be gauged either in terms of addressee's comprehension of the learners' meaning or in terms of the addressee's affective response to the errors.

3) *The limitations of error analysis:* Like other research field in SLA, there are still some problems with error analysis. Firstly, it is inadequate to rely on errors to study how L2 is learned. We need to consider errors as well as nonferrous to get the entire picture of a learner's linguistic behavior. Secondly, it is difficult to determine what an error is. Thirdly, error analysis over-stresses production data and fails to account for error avoidance (Gass and Selinker).

III. ERROR ANALYSIS IN COMPOSITION

Writing, working as an important language skill, pays a significant role in the language output; however, it is also a difficult part in the English teaching, especially for those who have a weak basis. The errors in students' composition are always various and in different form, and the same type of errors occurs frequently. As a result, how to deal with the errors in the student's composition and how to help students to correct errors to enhance the students' English level are the urgent problem now.

This thesis quoted one research from "The Research on Error Analysis for VTCS in English Writing". Through the category of error analysis in the research, the author tries to find the reason to those errors and provide some practicable solutions.

This research was carried among the 130 students in Northeast Normal University; the requirement of composition is in the following:

说明：假定你是新蒂服装公司 (Cindy Garment Co. 销售经理 丁志文)

根据下列内容给客户写一封信函。

写信日期：2008 年 6 月 22 日

内容：

1. 告知产品价格上调, 因原材料(raw material)价格上涨;
2. 原订货物维持原价;
3. 随函寄出调整后的价目单(price list);
4. 表示歉意, 敬请谅解。

There are 130 students in the science and technology school, part of their composition contains the form of letter, which could be graded to one to three points. And there are also lots of students who could not finish the composition to meet the requirement. Since those students have already given up the English study, the errors in their composition could not be counted. As a result, there are eighty-six samples in the final.

A. *Category of Error*

According to the research carried by Mr. Fu, three main errors can be obtained consisting of contextual errors, grammatical errors, and lexical errors.

Firstly, the connection error between sentences is one of the errors in contextual errors, for example, the improper use of the grammar and vocabulary. Another is the inappropriate contextual structure, for instance, the focus of Chinese is in the front of the whole sentence, but the core of English is in the end of the whole sentence; therefore, influenced by the mother language, and large amounts of students make sentences in the Chinese sentence order which cause the layout errors.

Secondly, in terms of the grammatical errors, the occurrence of errors involves the improper use of articles, conjunctions, predicate, tense and et cetera.

Last but not the least, lexical errors is also in a large proportion in the research. The wrong spelling of words is the main source of errors. Another error is the creation of words according to some imagined rules which is not correct for all. For instance, the past participle of go, some students use "goed" instead of "gone".

B. *Reason to Error*

Searching for the reason of the errors collected above, interlingual transfer is the most important reason, that is to say influenced by the native language, and students transfer too much elements of native language to the target language.

The so called the negative transfer of mother tongue, which means language learners bring the principles, lexical meaning, and sentence structure into the language study improperly. When one of the principles in the target language is different from the native language, it will bring disturbance to the language learners. Concerning students have the same source language background would make similar errors in the language learning process, some solutions will be provided in the next section.

IV. SOLUTIONS TO ERRORS

According to the previous research, although the errors could be categorized into three groups, it is better for teachers and students to seek different methods to their

students and themselves. Teachers should point out the errors, not give the correct answer directly, and try to guide students to recognize their errors and know rules of English. Concerning the research above, several inspirations could be obtained.

Firstly, enhancing students' interest of learning English and arousing the curiosity of students is in an important position to improve students' language ability. Curiosity is the premier for language study; meanwhile, the enhancement of language ability also can motive curiosity. Teachers should help students know the importance of writing, and encourage them to communicate with foreigners and classmates.

What is more, no matter for teachers and students, both of them should pay attention to the training of writing. Two ways could be used for reference. It is well known to all practice makes progress; one way to practice is to require students to get all kinds of writing samples such as letter form, description, narration, comparison and contrast to write. Practice is an important element, but lacking of input would lead to a failed composition. As a result, students should spend part of their time on reading no matter from magazines in English, or dialogues in the movie. According to the previous research, contextual, vocabulary, and grammatical errors are the three main problems in the composition. As a result, training for these three sectors should be emphasized.

Last but not the least, there is a big difference between Chinese and English. For instance, Chinese is dynamic, but English is static; Chinese pays attention to the front of the sentence, but English emphasis in the end of the whole sentence. Searching for the reason, the cultural difference comes into people's view. Therefore, for teachers, it is better for them to guide students to acknowledge the target language culture; and for students themselves, they should try to read more books about the cross-cultural, watch the movies and TV programs as much as possible so as to fill the gap.

V. CONCLUSION

As a part of language out, writing plays an important role in the English teaching. How to make a relatively perfect composition? This appears in front of teachers and students. Errors are in There are numerous errors in the students writing, which could be categorized into three big branches including contextual errors, grammatical errors, and vocabulary errors. All in all, this has brought thinking to teachers and students how to make perfect composition?

Since errors are the biggest problems affecting the quality of composition and in order to make a perfect composition, this paper combines error and error analysis with composition. In the first section, error and error analysis has been introduced, which could be considered as base to the following parts of error analysis in composition and solutions to errors. Meanwhile, errors in students' composition are various; therefore, this thesis quoted a research to categorize the errors from samples in the research, which is illustrated from the context, grammar, and

vocabulary. The final part of this thesis is the solutions to errors in students' composition according to the research.

After all, this thesis is only a brief introduction about error and error analysis, and a simple analysis between error and students' composition. The shortage of this paper is clear, for example, the imperfection of research and solutions, which could be ameliorated in a more detailed research. However, this brief analysis just is formed to present teachers and students where the errors occur and what kind of errors exit in the students' composition. The final wish of this thesis is to guide teachers and students to find their own way to deal with errors personally.

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