

ARTICLE MISUSE: A NEGLECTED PROBLEM IN CHINESE EAP STUDENT WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The English article system is problematic for learners of English, especially for those whose L1s have no articles. The Chinese language does not have an article system, and studies have indicated that articles are very problematic for Chinese learners. My examination of a corpus of 50 essays written by Chinese EAP (English for Academic Purposes) students shows that mismanagement of the article system is the most frequent cause of grammatical error in the students' writing. Findings from a small survey of EAP tutors, however, show striking discrepancies between the corpus analysis results and teacher perceptions in terms of article errors. The discrepancies suggest that article misuse is a neglected problem as teachers may systematically neglect the teaching of the article system in favour of other grammar areas which they perceive to be more communicatively important. This paper reports on the corpus analysis results, the tutors' perceptions, and the discrepancies between them. It is concluded that article errors should be prioritised for treatment considering that they may have been neglected for some time and that they may continue to occur in the writing of the Chinese EAP students if proper pedagogical intervention is not rendered.

Introduction

Recently there has been a substantial increase in the number of Chinese students studying on British Higher Education Foundation programmes. The programmes are designed to help international students improve their general English and English for academic purposes and develop both subject knowledge and study skills for their future degree study; students are expected to gain the necessary academic background and confidence for British higher education after completing the course. The Warwick Higher Education Foundation Programme is one such programme. In the past, most of its students came from countries where English is spoken as a second language, but nowadays many of the participants are Chinese. In a recent survey, the English language tutors commented that Chinese students were generally weaker than their European counterparts in academic writing and made recurring grammar errors that they found difficult to correct (Wei, 2003).

Most undergraduate students at British universities are required to produce a considerable amount of writing for assessment purposes, and so written accuracy is an important factor for the foundation students' future academic success. A lack of written accuracy "may interfere with the comprehensibility of their message (or ideas) and mark them as inadequate users of the language" (Ferris, 2002: 9). As Richards (1973: 131) points out, "deviancy from grammatical or phonological norms of a speech community elicits evaluational reactions that may classify a person unfavourably". Studies of error evaluation have found that levels of error tolerance vary among different academic disciplines (Vann,

Meyer & Lorenz, 1984; Santos, 1988, Janopolous, 1992), nonnative readers tend to be less lenient (Vann, et al., 1984; Santos, 1988) and so are younger professors (Santos, 1988). The research evidence leads Ferris (1995, 1999, 2002) to conclude that making typical ESL errors may stigmatise students and negatively affect the grading of their work. The conclusion has an important implication for Chinese foundation students: to prepare for their future studies, apart from developing all kinds of language skills, improving written accuracy is also an essential.

Although written accuracy is no less important than written fluency, British L2 writing classes are often more concerned with academic literacy than with grammar. Grammatical, lexical and syntactic errors in written work may be corrected and commented on by tutors, but class time tends to be spent discussing rhetorical structure rather than morpho-syntactic problems. A typical academic writing component tends to “focus on the writing process and encourage the brainstorming, researching and organising of ideas; this will then be followed by planning, writing a draft, editing of work, etc” (Jarvis, 1997: 44). Grammar is not one of the focuses, and far more attention is paid to the development of fluency than to the improvement of accuracy in the writing syllabus. Of course, through repeated exposure to suitable models, students may eventually learn to produce work at an acceptable level of accuracy, but this process can be speeded up and levels of accuracy can be further enhanced by providing learners with opportunities to explicitly study grammatical forms and their roles in communicatively effective text. Many SLA researchers have advocated the importance of formal instruction in promoting more rapid L2 acquisition and higher levels of accuracy (Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1985; Long, 1983, 1991; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Spada, 1997; Ellis, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2001). Foundation year students need to reach a satisfactory level of accuracy in a relatively short period of time (less than a year), and so explicit grammar instruction can certainly play an important role in this process.

To provide effective grammar input for Chinese foundation students, it is first necessary to identify problematic linguistic features in their written production. Through error analysis researchers can build “hierarchies of language learning features” and establish priorities “for correcting errors selectively and systematically” (Hendrickson 1978: 392). The researcher thus compiled a corpus of 50 essays written by Chinese students on the Warwick Higher Education Foundation Programme. All the contributors to the corpus were from Mainland China, with Mandarin Chinese as their L1. Most of them had recently completed their middle school education in China and had intermediate or upper intermediate English language proficiency (6.0 in IELTS or equivalent). The essays attempted to follow the conventions of undergraduate academic writing and dealt with serious topics in the Social Sciences, such as the European Monetary Union, the ethics of genetic engineering, methods of restricting car use, and the advantages and disadvantages of identity cards. After the compilation, the corpus was systematically scrutinized. The analysis procedure and results are briefly reported in the following section.

Chinese foundation students’ formal errors

A corpus linguistics based error analysis (EA) was carried out, in which the 50 student essays (88000 words) were scrutinized for formal errors. The entire EA process involved data collection, error identification, classification, quantification, explanation and remediation. The 50 typewritten essays were first converted into electronic form; a native-speaker EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teacher identified errors and provided

corrections for them; the researcher tagged the identified errors, following a tagging system especially developed for the study; error types were then counted and instances of each type were retrieved for further examination, using WordSmith Tools version 3.0 (Scott, 1999); the retrieved errors were systematically described and (as far as possible) explained, and suggestions for remedial materials were proposed.

A total of 5232 errors were identified. An examination of all the errors shows that the foundation students' formal errors fell into broad categories. The top ten broad categories were determiners (23.7%), nouns (15.3%), verbs (7.6%), grammatical prepositions (6.9%), lexical misconceptions (5.8%), punctuation (5.1%), sentence parts (4.1%), tenses and aspects (3.8%), modals (3.5%) and lexical-grammatical prepositions and syntactic complementation of a word (3.3%). A further examination shows that the top ten most frequent error features and their frequencies (% out of all errors) were:

(1) Missing definite article	10.1%
(2) Bare singular count noun for plural	8.8%
(3) Redundant definite article	8.5%
(4) Misselection of preposition	6.1%
(5) Lexical misconception	5.8%
(6) Wrong tense and aspect	3.8%
(7) S-V non-agreement	2.4%
(8) Wrong collocation	2.1%
(9) Missing 'a'/'an'	2.0%
(10) Comma splice	2.0%

The data show that the top three most frequent errors are 'missing definite article', 'bare singular count noun for plural' and 'redundant definite article'. Two of these involve the definite article, whilst the remaining one, 'bare singular count noun for plural', involves the omission of the plural morpheme and is therefore related to the \emptyset article. As Palmer (1939, cited in Master, 1997: 221) suggested, there may be two forms of the zero article, one that occurs with non-count and plural nouns and the other that occurs with certain singular count and proper nouns. This would mean that the top three errors, together with the ninth most common error (missing *a/an*), all concern the English article system. Similar findings have been reported in other studies. For example, Milton (2001) examined Hong Kong university students' interlanguage and found four kinds of article errors among the top ten most frequent errors in his corpus. They are 'singular noun for plural, \emptyset for indefinite article' (1st), 'indefinite article for \emptyset ' (3rd), 'definite article for \emptyset ' (6th) and 'definite article for indefinite article' (8th). Papp (2004) analysed a 200,000-word corpus of Chinese ESL university students' written production and found the article system and 'number marking on nouns' very problematic for the students. All the research evidence shows that articles are very problematic for Chinese learners of English. Studies have indicated that the articles (*a*, *an* and *the*) are used extremely frequently in writing. The COBUILD (Collins Birmingham University International Language Database) frequency count (Sinclair, 1991) indicates that *the* is the most common word in English and that *a* is the fifth most common. Since *the* and *a/an* make up 8.5% of all text (Sinclair, 1993), any difficulties with the article system are bound to make themselves apparent in learners' language production.

The foundation tutors' perceptions

In order to identify which errors to prioritise for treatment, the researcher conducted a small-scale survey of seven Warwick foundation language tutors, in which they were asked to identify the types of formal error they believed to be most frequent and most serious in the Chinese students' writing. The questionnaire items (reproduced in the appendix to this paper) listed the main error types identified in the Chinese foundation corpus. They were redundant definite article, bare singular count noun without determiner (which includes missing definite article errors), singular noun form instead of plural, non-agreement between S-V or NP-V, wrong preposition, wrong tense and aspect and lexical misconception. An extra error type, relative clause, was also included because although this kind of error is very infrequent in the corpus, foundation tutors indicated that relative clauses are problematic for Chinese students (Wei, 2003). Research also shows that the use of relative clause is a difficult area for L2 learners generally, and that L2 learners are likely to avoid relative clause constructions (Schachter, 1974).

Perceived error frequency

To calculate the perceived frequency of each error type, I assigned scores to the three options in the question. 'Very frequently' was assigned a score of 3, 'quite frequently' was assigned 2 and 'not frequently' was assigned 1. This means that the higher the score, the more frequent the error is. Table 1 shows the tutors' perceptions of the relative frequencies of the eight error types (from most frequent to least frequent). On a scale from 1 to 3, the error types "tense and aspect" and "singular noun form instead of plural" both score 2.8; "lexical misconception" scores 2.4; "subject-verb agreement" and "bare singular count noun without determiner" both score 2.3; "redundant definite article" and "wrong preposition" both score 2.1; "relative clause" scores 1.9.

Error type	Score
Tense and aspect/ Singular noun form instead of plural	2.8
Lexical misconception	2.4
Non-agreement between S-V or NP-V/ Bare singular count noun without determiner	2.3
Redundant definite article/ Wrong preposition	2.1
Relative clause	1.9

Table 1: Tutors' perceptions of error frequency

The results indicate that the foundation tutors generally feel that errors of "tense and aspect" and "singular noun form for plural" are most frequent in Chinese students' writing; lexical misconception errors are also frequent, followed by errors of S-V non-agreement and errors of bare singular count noun without determiner. Redundant definite article errors or wrong prepositions are thought to be less frequent. Relative clause errors are not thought to be frequent (the least frequent error in the list).

Perceived error gravity

To calculate the perceived gravity of each error type, I also assigned scores to the three options in the question. ‘Very serious’ was assigned a score of 3; ‘quite serious’ was assigned 2; ‘not serious’ was assigned 1. This means that the higher the score, the more serious the error is. Table 2 shows the tutors’ perceptions of the gravity of the eight error types (from most serious to least serious). On a scale from 1 to 3, the error types “tense and aspect”, “singular noun form instead of plural” and “lexical misconception” all score 2.7; “subject-verb non-agreement” scores 2.4; “bare singular count noun without determiner” and “wrong preposition” both score 2.3; “redundant definite article” and “relative clause” both score 1.9.

Error type	Score
Tense and aspect/Singular noun form instead of plural/Lexical misconception	2.7
Non-agreement between S-V or NP-V	2.4
Bare singular count noun without determiner/ Wrong preposition	2.3
Redundant definite article/ Relative clause	1.9

Table 2: Tutors’ perceptions of error gravity

The results show that the tutors generally feel that errors of tense and aspect, singular noun form for plural or lexical misconception are all very serious in Chinese students’ writing. S-V non-agreement errors are also thought to be serious, followed by errors of bare singular count noun without determiner and wrong preposition. Redundant definite article errors and relative clause errors are both regarded as the least serious in the list.

Discrepancies between EA results and tutor perceptions

I noticed a striking difference between actual and perceived error frequencies when comparing the error analysis results and the results from the survey of tutors concerning their perceptions of error frequency, as illustrated in Table 3.

Error analysis results	Tutor Perceptions
1. Missing definite article	1. Tense and aspect/Singular noun form for plural
2. Bare singular count noun for plural	2. Lexical misconception
3. Redundant definite article	3. S-V Non-agreement /Bare singular count noun without determiner
4. Misselection of preposition	4. Redundant definite article/ Wrong preposition
5. Lexical misconception	5. Relative clause
6. Wrong tense and aspect	
7. S-V non-agreement	

Table 3: A comparison of actual and perceived error frequencies

The error analysis results show that ‘missing definite article’ (10.1%), ‘bare singular count noun for plural’ (8.8%) and ‘redundant definite article’ (8.5%) are the most frequent error types, while ‘tense and aspect’ errors (3.8%) are much less frequent. The tutors, however, believed that article errors (redundant definite articles and missing articles) are less frequent than tense and aspect errors. This suggests that the tutors may have failed to notice their students’ problems with the definite and indefinite articles although they have observed the error type ‘bare singular count noun for plural’, which involves the zero article. One possible reason for this is that tutors do not think that article errors greatly affect communication, and so they tend to ignore them. Another possibility is that tutors misunderstand their students, and assume that their use of articles reflects their intended meaning.

The survey also shows that tutors think tense/aspect is the most serious error in the students’ writing while ‘bare singular count noun without determiner’ (e.g. a missing definite article) is less serious; redundant definite article errors is considered the least serious errors. This suggests that the tutors may systematically neglect the teaching of the article system in favour of other grammar areas which they perceive to be more communicatively important (e.g. tense and aspect).

Prioritising article errors for treatment

Studies of L2 error correction indicate that it is necessary to correct salient and serious errors promptly and systematically, probably a few at a time. Hendrickson (1978: 392) identifies a consensus among language educators that three types of errors are worth treatment: “errors that impair communication significantly; errors that have highly stigmatising effects on the listener or reader; and errors that occur frequently in students’ speech and writing”. Ferris (2002) also echoes this view in her procedure for deciding which errors to correct in L2 student writing. She advises teachers to first focus on global errors (errors affecting a reader’s comprehension of the whole text) and then on local errors (errors which do not affect a reader’s comprehension). They should also focus on high-frequency errors and on particular structures elicited by the assignment or in-class discussions. Hendrickson’s and Ferris’ advice suggests that frequent errors are amongst those which deserve priority treatment.

As researchers and language educators indicate, the English article system is complex and problematic for learners of English (Whitman, 1974; Master, 1990, 1997, 2002; Berry, 1993, Swan, 1995). Learners whose L1s have no articles are particularly likely to have problems (Swan, 1995), and it takes about “one interlanguage level’ for them to “become aware that such a thing as an article system exists” (Master, 1997: 218). A number of studies have already indicated that article errors are very frequent in the written work of Chinese learners of English (Milton, 2001; Papp, 2004). The present study has found that mismanagement of the article system is the most frequent cause of error in Chinese foundation year student writing. The discrepancies between actual and perceived error frequencies suggest that article misuse in the Chinese foundation corpus is a neglected problem. Without proper pedagogical intervention, article errors may become increasingly fossilised and difficult to eradicate. Unfortunately, English language teachers tend to dislike dealing with article use. Master (2002) points out that the article system involves multiple concepts (for example, countability, number, definiteness and genericness) and its complexity makes teaching the system a daunting task. Direct teaching can produce positive results, however. Master (1994) reports on an experiment involving an experimental group who

received systematic article instruction and a control group who only received simple error correction. The experimental group outperformed the control group in subsequent tests of article use, and Master suggests that the article system is likely to be successfully learned as long as sufficient time is spent on practising different features, one at a time. He further argues that ignoring the article is irresponsible; teachers should provide ESL/EFL learners with some means of using the articles properly, “especially when it comes to academic writing that is to be graded in part for grammatical accuracy” (Master, 2002: 335).

Conclusion

Mismanagement of the article system is the most frequent cause of grammatical error in the Chinese foundation corpus. The discrepancies between the corpus analysis results and tutors’ perceptions imply that article misuse is a neglected problem, and is unlikely to be given priority treatment during the foundation course. It is concluded that article errors should be prioritised for treatment and self-study materials should be developed for the students to use outside class considering that they may have been neglected for some time and that they may continue to occur in the writing of the Chinese foundation students.

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Appendix

Excerpt from a questionnaire administered to Foundation Programme English tutors

3. In terms of grammar, what kind of formal error do you feel occurs very frequently in Chinese students' writing?

(3 = very frequently, 2 = quite frequently, 1 = not frequently. Please tick ✓ the answer)

1	2	3	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Redundant definite article
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Bare singular count noun without determiner
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Singular noun form instead of plural
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Non-agreement between S-V or NP-V
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Wrong preposition
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Tense and aspect
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Relative clause
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Lexical misconception
			Other _____

4. What kind of formal error do you think is serious enough to be given special attention in the learning programme?

(3 = very serious, 2 = quite serious, 1 = not serious. Please tick ✓ the answer)

1	2	3	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Redundant definite article
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Bare singular count noun without determiner
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Singular noun form instead of plural
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Non-agreement between S-V or NP-V
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Wrong preposition
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Tense and aspect
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Relative clause
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Lexical misconception
			Other _____