



A STUDY ON THE WRITING ERRORS AMONG THE BEGINNER LEVEL CHINESE LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract:

This paper investigated a large number of errors found in beginner level Chinese language learners in teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) classroom in secondary education, Sri Lanka. This especially provided an analysis on errors in order to find useful pedagogical implications for Chinese language teaching and writing instructions in TCFL context. Students' errors related to Chinese sentence structure, prepositions, adverbs, punctuation marks, word choice and measure words were found by the author. The findings suggest that, misuse sentence structure, prepositions and adverbs was the most frequent error among Chinese language beginner learners in Sri Lanka. The teachers who engage in TCFL education should pay attention to all the errors specially, those frequent ones and try to find out what leads to those errors, thus, it is important give effective grammar and writing instructions for Chinese language learners who are in beginner stage to help them with effective Chinese writing.

Keywords: beginner level learner, Chinese writing, error analysis, secondary schools, TCFL classroom

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing research interest in the analysis of errors the learners make while learning a second or foreign language. In the 1960s, Error Analysis, which studies the types and causes of language errors, developed as an alternative to the Contrastive Analysis approach in applied linguistics. Corder (1981) explained two rationales for conducting error analysis: theoretical reason and practical reason. Theoretically, he claimed error analysis could help in the investigation of the language learning process. Practically, it can guide the remedial actions teachers need to make in order to correct the errors for learners. This is also useful for teachers especially who are

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teaching for beginner level learners to use to diagnose Chinese learners' writing problems, analyze the reasons for the problems and thus provide effective remedies.

"One belt one road initiative" concept caused to strengthening China – Sri Lanka bilateral relations considerably during last years and as a result of it a vast number of Sri Lankan students are motivated to learn Chinese language based on its significant impact on Contemporary Sri Lankan society. In order to promote the Chinese language learning, Sri Lanka general education system, Sri Lanka has designed a Chinese language curriculum including Chinese character writing and composition as a complementary part of it, focusing on the successful achievements of local students in source language environment.

Chinese language is being taught in general education in four components; reading; writing; speaking and listening. Students face difficulties in the writing component compared to reading, writing and speaking. Similarly, writing place an important skill in learning and teaching so the difficulties faced by the students, needs to be addressed which is the intension of this study to make a perception about the writing problems faced by the students. Hoping that such perceptions helps the teachers to adapt their teaching methodologies according to the frequent writing errors made by the learners. As a result of the different language sentence patterns and sentence structures, Sri Lankan learners may encounter some difficulties to master the Chinese language specially, in the writing component involving grammatical errors in source language environment. Hence, this paper focuses on following matters in order to enabling students to overcome their difficulties in writing tasks.

- 1) What are the common writing errors that students make in writing their composition?
- 2) What are the measures taken to prevent students from repeating the errors while writing composition?

2. Literature review

2.1 Errors in the foreign language learning

Yang (2010) described the different types of errors and highlighted the fact that errors may not always be caused by the influence of L1; they could also reflect some common learning strategies. Heydari and Bagheri (2012) provided an overview of almost all the previous research in the field of error analysis, hoping that foreign language teachers and educators could become more familiar with students' errors and thus utilize appropriate teaching strategies along with their colleagues and learners. James (2001) points out that error analysis is the study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance. Learners' ignorance of teaching language can be expressed in terms of four categories: grammaticality (well-formedness), acceptability, correctness, strangeness and infelicity. Grammaticality involves forms, context-free, while acceptability involves contexts. It is grammar who decides whether

something said or written by a learner is grammatical, and it is the users who decide whether an utterance is acceptable.

Basically, an error refers to an identifiable alteration of the grammatical elements of a native speaker, presenting the learners' competence in the target language (Brown, 2007). Errors are viewed as the nonnative outcomes of the learners' inadequate linguistics knowledge. Corder (1973) defined an error as "*those features of the learner's utterances which differ from those of any native speaker*" (p.260). Lennon (1991) supported Corder's definition by referring an error to "*a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar conditions of production would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers' native speakers' counterparts*". In addition, errors in language learning occur systematically and repeatedly without any notice by the learners (Gass & Selinker, 2008). The errors are identifiable only by teachers or others who possess an accurate knowledge of grammatical system.

2.2 Interlingual and intralingual errors

2.2.1 Interlingual errors

Brown (1994) and Connor (1996) group errors in to two categories. They are those errors that result from L1 interference which are external, and those which result from interference from the L2 system itself. The first category is caused by inter-lingual transfer. Inter-lingual transfer errors are errors caused by the interference of the learner's L1. Richards (1971) defined inter-lingual errors as the errors caused by the interference of the native language. These errors are the results of the learners' application of the native language elements in their spoken or written performances of the target language. When encountered with new language, people tend to consciously or unconsciously draw a connection between what they already know and what they do not. Learners carry over the existing knowledge of their native language to the performance of the target language (Ellis, 1997). These errors are referred to the errors that occur because of the ineffective traits of learning such as faulty application of rules and unawareness of the restrictions of rules (Richards, 1971). In Thailand, Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) analyzed writing errors caused by the interference of the Thai language in three writing genres: narration, description, and comparison/contrast. The results revealed that interlingual errors fell into 16 categories: verb tense, word choice, sentence structure, article, preposition, modal/auxiliary, singular/plural form, fragment, verb form, pronoun, run-on sentence, infinitive/gerund, transition, subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, and comparison structure, respectively.

2.2.2 Intralingual errors

Therefore, Intra-lingual errors are the second category of the errors. These errors may be caused by inadequate learning, difficulties inhabitant in the target language itself, faulty teaching, confused thinking or lack of contrast of both languages (Ho, 1973). According to Kaweera (2013), the intra-lingual errors, are irrelevant to the native language

interference, but led by the target language itself. In the language learning process, these errors normally occur when the learners have acquired insufficient knowledge.

Despite the fact that many research studies were conducted to offer insights into the possible errors occurred in students' compositions, teachers face challenge when teaching L2 writing to students in foreign language classroom. The problems in writing of Chinese learning as a foreign language student still exist. As a result, the analyses of errors in writing are continuously needed to be carried out.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Sampling

The student sample was recruited from 52 students who engage in Chinese language learning as G.C.E. Advanced level learners in secondary schools, Sri Lanka. To select the participants of the present study, a simple random sampling method was used. The participants selected for this study, are between 17 and 18 years old. All of them were native speakers of Sinhalese, who are still in the basic knowledge of Chinese. Almost all the students who participated for this study had three months to one year experience in learning Chinese.

3.2 Data collection

The research instruments used in this research study consists of written essays of 52 participants and the questionnaire. All the learners are asked to produce a piece of free writing of 150-200 Chinese characters on whatever topics they are interested in. Most students wrote about their thoughts about the Chinese lesson and the teacher. They were not allowed to use dictionaries and free writing style was preferred for this study. Through the questionnaire basically asked ten questions related to students' attitudes and difficulties on Chinese writing and also gathered data about the influencing factors of Chinese errors in TCFL classroom.

3.3 Data analysis procedure

The data from written work were gathered and analyzed. According to the three levels of a language, the error types are decided from three aspects: substance, text and discourse. When learners are operating the substance systems, substance errors such as punctuation errors may occur. When learners are operating the lexica-grammatical system to produce or process text, text errors may arise, including lexical errors and grammatical errors. Since grammar has traditionally been discussed in terms of morphology and syntax, grammar errors contain morphological and syntactical errors, those in word structure and in structures larger than word such as phrase, clause, sentence and paragraphs. All subjects' writings are reviewed elaborately by the author. Error patterns are identified, and the actual frequent error patterns are summarized.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results of the experiment

The table below shows the total number of errors made by the students for each category of writing errors, the results were tabulated and categorized as follows:

Table 1: Total number of errors made
by the students for each category of writing errors

| No. | Types of errors | Number of errors | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1. | Errors in sentence structure | 11 | 21.15 |
| 2. | Errors in adverbs | 13 | 25 |
| 3. | Errors in prepositions | 9 | 17.31 |
| 4. | Word choice | 5 | 9.62 |
| 5. | Errors in punctuation marks | 6 | 11.54 |
| 6. | Errors in measure words | 8 | 15.38 |
| Total number of students | | 52 | 100 |

Overall, the results from the research have indicated six categories of the grammatical errors took place. The percentage of the research show that six most common errors made by the students are sentence structure (21.15%), adverbs (25%), prepositions (17.31%), word choice (9.62%), punctuation marks (11.38%) and measure words (15.38%).

a. Sentence structure

Sentence structure is the syntactic arrangement of words in a sentence. Chinese language follows the subject + verb + object order in a sentence and the learner makes errors more frequently on this sentence order as the sentence order of L1 follows subject + object +verb structure in a sentence.

Error identification (1): 我们都汉字、语法和文化学习。

We all learn Chinese characters, grammar and culture.

Error correction (1): 我们都学习汉字，语法和文化。

Error identification (2): 今天我学校来了。

I came to school today.

Error correction (2): 今天我来了学校。

b. Adverbs

Apparently, many sentences contained inappropriate or inaccurate vocabulary which deviated the meaning of the written text.

Error identification (1): 我的汉语老师很好，也她很漂亮。

My Chinese teacher is very good, also she is very beautiful.

Error correction (1): 我的汉语老师很好，她也很漂亮。

Although “and” can be used to connect sentences in English language, but in Chinese it is not connect to use two sentences. Hence, learners in TCFL classroom easily make errors due to the inadequate knowledge about this language point.

Error identification (2): 我学习汉语和我喜欢我的汉语老师。

I learn Chinese and I like my Chinese teacher.

Error correction (2): 我学习汉语，我还喜欢我的汉语老师。

c. Prepositions

A preposition is a word that shows the relationship between a noun or pronoun and other words in a sentence. In general, prepositions precede the subject of the sentence in Chinese, but due to the interference of L1 of the Chinese language learners, the learner applied linguistic rule of the native language and committed a propositional error. Hence, the great majority of the Chinese language learners in TCFL classroom demonstrated confusion for the right usage of prepositions.

Error identification: 我学习汉语在X学校。

I am learning Chinese at X school.

Error correction: 我在X学校学习汉语。

d. Word Choice

Apparently, many sentences contained inappropriate or inaccurate vocabulary which deviated the meaning of the written text. A sample of using a wrong word choice has been indicated below.

In Chinese there are two separate words for the meaning of “class”. “教室” gives the meaning of classroom (classroom in physical) while “班” carries the meaning of “class” (for ex: our class, your class). Although in learners’ mother tongue or in their second language, we cannot find a difference in between these two words, but, in Chinese, it gives two different sense. In this case, the word “班” is a better selection of word.

Error identification: 我们汉语教室有十六个学生。

Our Chinese class has sixteen students.

Error correction: 我们汉语班有十六个学生。

e. Punctuation marks

Omission of punctuation marks at the end of the sentences was common at all levels of Chinese language learning. Punctuation errors are usually done by learners who are not

yet competent in target language. Most of the beginner level Chinese language learners get confused with Chinese language punctuation system as it has significant differences from learners L1 or second language.

Error identification: 我们学习汉字, 生词, 语法和中国文化。

We learn Chinese characters, new words, grammar and Chinese culture.

Error correction: 我们学习汉字、生词、语法和中国文化。

f. Measure words

Chinese has a measure word for each and every noun which use in between the quantity and the noun of a phrase or a sentence. This is quite difficult language point for the learners whose mother tongue is Sinhalese.

Error identification: 我们也有一个中国老师。

We also have one Chinese native teacher.

Error correction: 我们也有一位中国老师。

Regarding the errors derived from intralingua sources such as overgeneralization, faulty application of rules, and ignorance of rule restrictions, the errors in adverbs, sentence structure and word choice were found as the most frequently types of errors among beginner level Chinese language learners in secondary school education, Sri Lanka.

4.2 Results of the survey

Table 2: The techniques used by Chinese teacher to correct written errors

| No. | Error correction techniques | Number of students | Percentage |
|-----|---|--------------------|------------|
| 1. | Underline the error. | 16 | 30.77% |
| 2. | Teacher writes the correct answer. | 13 | 25% |
| 3. | Teacher puts a cross next to the error. | 11 | 21.15% |
| 4. | Peer correction. | 8 | 15.39% |
| 5. | No correction at all. | 4 | 7.69% |

This data analysis reveals that, the teachers of TCFL classroom used to practice traditional correction techniques rather than using new techniques such as peer corrections and game-based corrections. Similarly, few students stated that, none of the techniques were used to correct their errors. In such case, it's very easy to deteriorate learner's interest and motivation towards practice Chinese writing.

Table 3: The learner’s attitude towards Chinese writing practice in classroom

| No. | Students’ attitudes | Number of students | Percentage |
|-----|--|--------------------|------------|
| 1. | Your teacher always helps you during your writing process. | 7 | 13.46% |
| 2. | I’m afraid of been monitored by teacher when I am writing. | 5 | 9.62% |
| 3. | I never feel sure when I am asked to write a composition in class. | 18 | 34.62% |
| 4. | I never seem to be able to write down my ideas in Chinese clearly. | 14 | 26.92% |
| 5. | I may get nervous because of the fear of making errors. | 8 | 15.38% |

According to this data analysis, we can observe that, majority of students never felt sure when they were asked to write compositions as they were afraid of making errors. By analyzing this data, we can predict that, the learners who are in beginner stage of learning Chinese lack of well-planned Chinese writing lesson in Sri Lanka.

Table 4: The difficulties of the learners regarding Chinese writing

| No. | Difficulties | Number of students | Percentage |
|-----|--|--------------------|------------|
| 1. | Teaching methods are not adequately interested. | 17 | 32.69% |
| 2. | Chinese writing is different from source language. | 15 | 28.85% |
| 3. | Not sufficient time to practice Chinese writing in classroom. | 8 | 15.38% |
| 4. | Teaching materials relevant to Chinese writing are not sufficient. | 12 | 23.08% |

This data analysis reveals that, the major difficulties to practice Chinese writing are poor teaching methods and language differences in between the L1 and L2. The teachers hardly follow new approaches and strategies to encourage students to write in Chinese. Moreover, they are not aware of using creative methods to help the learner identifying the difference in between source and target languages by enabling them to overcome the source language interference in writing. Classroom teaching and learning also lacks sufficient time and teaching materials to conduct writing sessions. This may also affect the implementation of systematic error correction strategy and students’ active participation in Chinese writing.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In general, the study has shown the difficulties face by the students in writing and the grammatical errors made by them which should a high percentage in sentence structure, adverbs, prepositions, wrong word choice punctuation marks and measure words. Data has revealed that, students tend to translate when writing due to the influence of the L1 of the learners. The learners get confused with whether the correct form of grammar is as the same as Sinhalese language. When this takes place, student makes errors in writing components. Expressing themselves in Chinese language is not as easy as the interference of learner’s mother tongue is constantly taking place.

It can be concluded that, TCFL has attached great importance to language points. But the learners have difficulties in Chinese writing. Error correction is a cognitive process and errors cannot be removed until they have a clear awareness of them. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to regard the correction as a long-term project. Also, the teachers who engage in TCFL should be aware of what is going on in the field of error analysis and keep eye on the related theories. While placing an emphasis on error correction in the classroom, as foreign language teachers they should take the teaching objectives, students' linguistics competence, their affective factors and the effectiveness of the error correction into consideration. Consequently, more flexible strategies in error correction should be used in the TCFL classroom. For example, by asking students to correct peer's writing, doing some exercise like correcting sentence errors, in cooperating language arts or games in teaching the grammar as students tend to be more focused and able to learn fast. It is also helpful to find new approaches to help the students master Chinese language knowledge and apply it to their written productions accurately and fluently. Similarly, Improvements should be introduced as to bring the students' level to a higher one and made known to them that as they learn, they progress from one stage to another and that gives them the pride and motivation to learn and write better.

Error analysis is significant, but it also has its limitations. First, there is a danger in too much attention to learners' errors and in the Chinese language classroom teacher tends to become so preoccupied with noticing errors that the correct utterance in the foreign language will go unnoticed. Start (2001) in his study, which also explained that the teachers need to view students' errors positively and should not subscribes to the view that errors are normal and inevitable features of writing. While the diminishing of errors is an important criterion for increasing language proficiency, the ultimate goal of foreign language learning especially in the beginner's level is the attainment of communicative fluency in a language.

Finally, the leaners' errors are seen as a symptom of ineffective teaching or as an evidence of failure of the TCFL in general education system, Sri Lanka. Therefore, an integration of the TCFL classroom is needed to deal with the complexities of foreign language acquisition and provide empirical evidence for the improvement of teaching methodology, syllabus designs and teaching techniques in Chinese language teaching classroom in general school education.

The present study is restricted to linguistically analyzing learners' errors which are particularly pertinent to core grammar of Chinese language. Other aspects of Chinese composition such as Chinese spellings and organization of ideas are not dealt in this paper. Future researches on learners' written productions should consider the aforementioned aspects of Chinese language which in order to come up with a more detailed and comprehensive findings that enables us to design appropriate ways of improving foreign language teaching and learning in Sri Lanka.

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Authors' research work:

(1) Books

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