

A Computer-aid Error Analysis of Chinese College Students' English Compositions

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Abstract

This article is an empirical study of error analysis of Chinese college students' English compositions. We first collect samples of the errors in Chinese students' compositions with the help of Bingo English Intelligent Essay Review System, or BEIERS. Then, we will identify and classify the errors, helping the students and teachers to find out the reasons and rules of errors, and finally correct the errors.

Keywords: error analysis

AES or Automated Essay Scoring is a new technology of composition evaluation and scoring. This new technology was first introduced to China in the 1980's, but it has only become mature and popular in Chinese colleges and universities since the past decade. PEG (Project Essay Grader), IEA (Intelligent Essay Assessor), E-rater (Electronic Essay Rater), IntelliMetric and Writing Roadmap are all very popular automated essay scoring systems.

Starting from the previous semester, Bingo English Intelligent Essay Review System (Hereinafter referred to as BEIERS) was introduced to my college. This new essay scoring system was developed jointly by School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang University and Hangzhou Network Technology Co., Ltd. With the aid of this new computer system, the compositions of the students in my college can be scored all by computers. At the same time, the errors in the compositions can be identified and even corrected by computers as well. Although this system is very "intelligent", it is not "intelligent" enough to spot all the errors, not mention give sound suggestions to each student. Therefore, it is rather necessary for the teachers to make rational use of this new technology. The teachers try to combine AES with MES, or Manual Essay Scoring to give students sounder suggestions, and thus improve their English writing level.

This article is a computer-aid error analysis of my college students' English compositions. Since this is an **error** analysis, it is important to distinguish errors from mistakes in the first place. The errors were considered as resulting from learner's lack of proper grammatical knowledge, while the mistakes were seen as being failed to utilize a known system correctly. (Brown, H. Douglas 1994). Generally speaking, mistakes can be self-corrected with or without being pointed out to the speaker but errors cannot be self-corrected. (Nika Purwati et al.) This article is to collect samples of the errors in Chinese students' compositions with the help of BEIERS. Then, we will identify and classify the errors, helping the students and teachers to find out the reasons and rules of errors, and finally correct the errors.

I. *Typology of Errors.*

i. **Inter-lingual errors**

In Chinese students' English compositions, many errors are caused by native migration. These errors are inter-lingual errors. In learning a foreign language, certain similar or identical characteristics between the mother tongue and foreign language can make the learning easier, while the inconsistencies or differences between the native and foreign language can bring more difficulties to the learners. This is because with the similar or identical characteristics, the language learners benefit from positive native migration; but with different or distinctive characteristics, the language learners feel interfered by negative native migration.

In communication, when it is difficult for Chinese students to find an exact words or expressions to express themselves, they often resort to the form or habits of their native languages. For example, we Chinese seldom use a passive sentence. In fact, in our mother tongue, an active sentence can be understood to have a passive meaning. It is not surprising to find sentences like "The conference will hold tomorrow" in Chinese students' compositions. These inter-lingual errors can be classified as vocabulary or lexical errors, syntactic errors, grammatical errors and discourse errors.

1. vocabulary or lexical errors. Chinese students seem very difficult to avoid errors in prepositions in their writings. In Chinese, the number of prepositions is very limited and the principles of using these prepositions together with verbs are not very strict. Therefore, it is very common to find errors in prepositions in Chinese students' writings. Examples are as follows:

e.g. Some people think that this will bring parking problems. (Wrong)

Some people think that this will bring up parking problems.

e.g. My mother is very strict to us. (Wrong)

My mother is very strict with us.

e.g. The school provides me free books. (Wrong)

The school provides me with free books.

e.g. I just stared the my husband. (Wrong)

I just stared at the my husband.

e.g. It was a process for a girl during the way to success. (Wrong)

It was a process for a girl along the way to success.

e.g. I think I should give a hand for her..... (Wrong)

I think I should give a hand to her.....

Literal translation is another headache for Chinese English teachers. Nowadays, many websites provide free on-line translation service. Some students take advantage of this automated translation system to complete their writing tasks. Errors in literal translation are quite common in Chinese students' compositions. Examples are as follows:

e.g. If someone's family situation is not well, he can apply for loan to the bank. (Wrong)

If one can not get financial support from his/her family, he has to apply for credit from the bank.

e.g. Students now drive to school are not as rare as twenty years ago. (Wrong)

The phenomenon that Chinese students drive private cars to school is not as rare as it was twenty years ago.

2. syntactic errors. Errors in sentence patterns and collocations are also common in Chinese students' writings. In Chinese, sentence patterns are comparatively simple, while the words (especially the nouns and verbs) are very meaningful and play a more important role in expressing the ideas. Due to this negative migration of the native language, we Chinese are quite weak in structuring the sentences. Examples are as follows:

e.g. It was two years since they met again. (Wrong)

It was two years before they met again.

e.g. In the strange city, there wasn't a single person that she could turn for help. (Wrong)

In the strange city, there wasn't a single person to whom she could turn for help.

e.g. How fine weather we're having! (Wrong)

What fine weather we're having!

e.g. As the days going on, he was beginning to realize the importance of his family. (Wrong)

With the days going on, he was beginning to realize the importance of his family.

e.g. I can take pride only this. (Wrong)

This is the only thing I can take pride in.

e.g. Those who are brave enough taking adventures will be praised by the teacher. (Wrong)

Those who are brave enough to take adventures will be praised by the teacher.

e.g. It's very friendly for you to have us at your home. (Wrong)

It's very friendly of you to have us at your home.

Chinglish, or Chinese English is another common syntactic error. Influenced greatly by their native Chinese language, the students write ungrammatical or nonsensical sentences in their compositions. Examples are as follows:

e.g. Never say such words to me. (Chinglish)

Never say that to me.

e.g. Either you are busy or not, call me. (Chinglish)

Give me a call no matter how busy you are.

e.g. He let me have a wider sky. (Chinglish)

He provides me with more freedom and opportunity.

e.g. I thought it too. (Chinglish)

I thought so.

e.g. Why did I say like that ? (Chinglish)

Why did I say so?

3. Grammatical errors. Complicated English grammar is a great headache for every English learner in China. The misuse of verb tense, verb agreement and many other grammatical errors are here and there in their writings. In Chinese, we don't have to pay attention to verb tense or verb agreement since there is NO such grammar at all. We just use nouns of time to show when it happens. And no matter the subject is single or plural, the verbs remain the same. It is not surprising to find the following grammatical errors:

e.g. I am not born in An Hui province. (Wrong)

I was not born in An Hui province.

e.g. I don't pay money that day. (Wrong)

I forgot to pay money that day.

e.g. It is wonderful to have a person stands by me. (Wrong)

It is wonderful to have a person standing by me.

e.g. I was brought up by my grandma when I am a little girl. (Wrong)

I was brought up by my grandma when I was a little girl.

e.g. Not until I came back home, he left for Beijing. (Wrong)

Not until I came back home did he leave for Beijing.

e.g. But when we arrived there, I change my mind. (Wrong)

But when we arrived there, I changed my mind.

e.g. The earlier you knows, the more quickly you succeed. (Wrong)

The earlier you get to know the significance of it, you more quickly you manage to realize your dream.

e.g. Only you try your best to do it, can you succeed to get your goal. (Wrong)

Only when you try your best to do it, can you succeed to achieve your goal.

e.g. More and more people are surfing on sites in their free time. (Wrong)

More and more people surf the internet at their spare time.

e.g. Do not to cheat on exams. (Wrong)

Do not cheat on exams.

4. Discourse errors. Cohesion errors, logical errors and many other discourse errors are also common. These kinds of errors can hardly be identified by the intelligent computer system and the teachers need more efforts to identify and correct them. It is better for the teachers to discuss these kind of errors with the students face to face, so that the student know better why some sentences should be re-structured and some words must be changed. Examples are as follows:

e.g. More and more traffic accidents are due to Drunken Driving, but why some people still drive after drinking in spite of knowing it is dangerous?

Drunken driving causes lots of traffic accidents. Why some people still drive after drinking in spite of knowing it is dangerous?

e.g. Firstly, Lots people have an idea of leaving things to chance when they drive after drinking. What's more, the car is increasingly popular with the development of economy, and the rising rate of the cars result in the growth of Drunken Driving.

Firstly, lots of people have an idea of leaving things to chance when they drive after drinking. What's more, with the development of economy, private cars become Household necessities. The chances of drunken driving increased with the rising rate of private cars.

e.g. It is very important to set your goals, because a person has no goals, just like a bird with no eyes that it will fly here and there and to nowhere

It is very important to set your own goals and follow them. This is because a person with no goals is like a bird with no eyes which will not fly here and there, but nowhere.

e.g. In addition, you can study more efficiently, and you will also acquire a large stock of knowledge.

In addition, if you can study more efficiently, you will acquire more knowledge.

e.g. In the first place, making a goal is the most important thing . we should find the goal. Then how to find the goal, the goal must be that you want to get something from.

Setting a goal is the most important thing for us. What is your goal? Your goal is something that you hope to achieve, especially when much time and great efforts will be needed.

e.g. Now the society, the social network site is very popular. For example, Renren, Facebook, QQ. People can know the new friend in the above, you can keep your feelings to write on. Most people are in order to meet new friends and relax the mind to social networking sites.

Nowadays, the fashion of making friends on social network sites sweeps the country. Renren, Face book, QQ and many other websites become extremely popular among young people. You can keep on-line diaries, make new friends, keep in touch with your old friends and relax yourselves in the visual world.

II. Intra-lingual errors

In learning the second languages, the learners can also make intra-lingual errors. These errors also result from the learners' previous learning experience. Their former incorrect knowledge or incomplete competence in the second language produces new errors. For example, the learners will combine "He is coming" with "He comes", and produce "He is comes".(Richards, Platt & Platt, 2000). These intro-lingual errors include communications-strategy based errors, induced errors and etc.

For the communications-strategy based errors, we Chinese are very easy to make due to the differences between Chinese culture and Western culture. "Are you married?" "How much do you earn every year?" "How old are you?" These "private questions" are not very private in China. These questions are often asked between friends, acquaintances and even strangers. Nobody will feel awkward to ask or be asked by these questions. We Chinese people are often characterized by the conservative style in communication. Some common taboos in western culture are never avoided by we Chinese, and vice versa. "You put up some weight recently." This sentence might make some foreign friends feel offended, but not in China. These communications-strategy based errors are here and there in Chinese students' oral English, but not very often in the written compositions.

Stenson uses the term 'induced errors' to refer to learner errors "that result more from the classroom situation than from either the students' incomplete competence in English grammar or first language interference." (Stenson, 1983: 256-262)¹. For example, if in class, the teacher repeats "I **am** an English teacher." "I **am** a good mother." "I am from Beijing." The students might draw a wrong conclusion that "I" must be followed by "am". Thus, they make up a wrong sentence "I am get up at six in the morning." These induced errors are not rare in Chinese students' compositions.

II. Principles of correcting the errors

1、 **Instant Correction.** It has always been a huge burden for English teachers to read large number of students' compositions and correct errors within a short period of time. Sometimes teachers spend tens of hundreds of hours before their writing table feeling exhausted.

¹http://books.google.com.hk/books?id=BY6ng_gop1QC&pg=PA3&dq=Stenson,+1983:+256-262&hl=zh-CN&sa=X&ei=zRMSUr7TCY-ViQeX5ICQAw&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Stenson%2C%201983%3A%20256-262&f=false

While the students only feel indifferent to find their compositions drown in the red ink. Zhu Ming, a senior student once said, "I don't bother myself to read the writing again, even if I know my English teacher is responsible enough to correct every single error in it. The main reason is that it takes too long to get my essay back and I almost forget what I have written." But nowadays, this problem has been solved with the aid of the computer system BEIERS. The students find their compositions can be corrected immediately after the deadline. They can read the feedbacks and suggestions before they almost forget about what they have written about.

2. Face-to-face talk and MES. Automated essay scoring can never take place of manual essay scoring since computers are never intelligent enough to take place of human beings. In my college, certain percentage of compositions will be chosen to be samples of manual essay scoring. These students will be invited to have a face-to-face talk with their teachers about their compositions. The teachers can point out the errors in the compositions, have a discussion and correct the errors together with the students. Students benefit a lot from the face-to-face talk since this process gives them much deeper impression than just getting an e-mail from mailbox.

3. Model writing and "Errors Show". After each writing training activity, the teachers select two to three excellent essays as models for students to observe and learn. At the same time, some essays with typical errors will be showed in front of everyone. The students can be divided into several groups to discuss, identify and finally correct the errors in the composition with the help of the teachers.

Although we have made efforts to analyze the errors in Chinese college students' English compositions, we still know relatively little about why the students make errors and how to avoid the errors. The opportunities for researchers to contribute to this issue are many.

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