รูปกริยาภาษาอังกฤษที่ผิดไวยากรณ์ในเรียงความของนักศึกษาระดับมหาวิทยาลัยในสาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีน

Changqing Chen[1], เปรมินทร์ คาระวี[2] และปฐมา อักษรจรุง[3]

[1]M.A.(Applied Linguistics), Associate Professor,

คณะภาษาต่างประเทศ,

Southwest University of Political Science and Law, China

E-mail: cqchenn@yahoo.com

[2]Ph.D.(ภาษาศาสตร์), ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์,

[3]Ph.D.(การรับรู้ภาษาที่ 2), ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์,

คณะศิลปศาสตร์, มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้เป็นการศึกษารูปคำกริยาที่ผิดไวยากรณ์ (ungrammatical verb forms) ในเรียงความ ประเภทเรื่องเล่า (narrative texts) ของนักศึกษาชาวจีน กลุ่มตัวอย่างในงานวิจัยนี้เป็นนักศึกษาสาขากฎหมาย ชั้นปีที่ 3 จำนวน 170 คน ที่กำลังศึกษาอยู่ในมหาวิทยาลัยด้านการเมืองและกฎหมายแห่งตะวันตกเฉียงใต้ของ สาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีน การวิจัยนี้ใช้เครื่องมือที่สำคัญ 2 ส่วน ได้แก่ แบบทดสอบชนิดเติมคำ (cloze test) และ แบบทดสอบการเขียนเรียงความ (writing test) กรรมวิธีการวิจัยเป็นแบบวิจัยเชิงปริมาณ ที่แสดงประเภทและ จำนวนของรูปคำกริยาที่ผิดไวยากรณ์ และอัตราส่วนร้อยละของรูปกริยาเหล่านั้น ผลการวิจัยพบว่า มีรูปคำกริยาที่

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ผิดไวยากรณ์ ทั้งสิ้นจำนวน 9 ประเภท โดยมีรูปคำกริยาที่ผิดไวยากรณ์ในเรื่องรูปอดีตกาลของคำกริยาอปกติ และ รูปคำกริยาที่ผิดไวยากรณ์ในเรื่องการใช้โครงสร้างกรรมการก (passive voice) อย่างไม่จำเป็น เกิดมากที่สุด ข้อค้นพบยังชี้ให้เห็นว่า 1) รูปคำกริยาที่ผิดไวยากรณ์ ที่เขียนขึ้นโดยนักศึกษาในมหาวิทยาลัยจีนนั้นสัมพันธ์ โดยตรงกับอิทธิพลของภาษาแม่ และการเรียนรู้เรื่องกาล (tenses) จากภาษาที่ 2 ที่ไม่สมบูรณ์ 2) แวดวงการเรียน การสอนภาษาอังกฤษควรสร้างความตระหนักต่อผู้เรียนในเรื่องรูปคำกริยาที่ผิดไวยากรณ์โดยการเปรียบต่าง ระหว่างภาษาอังกฤษกับภาษาแม่ของผู้เรียน และควรสร้างความตระหนักด้านอิทธิพลของภาษาแม่ที่มีต่อการรับ ภาษา ที่ 2 เข้ามาของผู้เรียน

คำสำคัญ: การสร้างรูปกริยา, โครงสร้างกรรมการก, ประเภทของหน่วยภาษาที่ผิดไวยากรณ์, ระดับของความ ชำนาญด้านภาษาอังกฤษ, รูปคำกริยาที่ผิดไวยากรณ์, รูปอดีตกาลของกริยาอปกติ

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ungrammatical English Verb Forms Performed by Chinese University Students

Changqing Chen[1], Premin Karavi[2] and Patama Aksornjarung[3]

[1]M.A.(Applied Linguistics), Associate Professor,

Faculty of Foreign Languages,

Southwest University of Political Science and Law, China

E-mail: cqchenn@yahoo.com

[2]Ph.D.(Linguistics), Assistant Professor,

Faculty of Liberal Arts,

[3]Ph.D.(Second Language Acquisition), Assistant Professor,

Prince of Songkla University

Abstract

This study investigated Chinese university students' ungrammatical verb forms in English narrative texts. The subjects in this study were 170 third year law students from Southwest University of Political Science and Law (SWUPL), China. Two instruments were used to collect data. They were a cloze test and a writing test. The data analysis was conducted qualitatively, using numbers of incorrect verb forms and their percentages to demonstrate the types of errors. Nine types of ungrammatical verb forms were identified, of which errors in past irregular verbs and the unnecessary use of the passive voice structure were most conspicuous. The findings suggested that 1) ungrammatical verb forms made by the Chinese university students were associated with the influence of their mother tongue and their incomplete acquisition of L2 tense form rules, and 2) pedagogical efforts should be made to raise the learners' awareness of the errors in verb forms due to analogy and L1 influence.

Keywords: English proficiency level, passive voice structure, past irregular, tense formation, types of errors, ungrammatical verb form

Introduction

Languages have different ways to encode time concepts. English uses temporal adverbials and verbs to express time references. The main verb in the English language gives explicit time reference in verbs, as shown in the following sentences:

(1) *Dave buys shirts every month.* and

(2) *Dave bought shirts yesterday.*

In sentence (1) the main verb *<buys>* signifies the present time when the main verb *<bought>* signifies the past time. Compared with English, Chinese does not have inflectional verbs for the reference of time. Chinese speakers and writers mostly locate time in an utterance or writing by temporal adverbials (Fang, 1992). Sentence (3) and (4) can well illustrate this fact (The number at the end of each words signifies the Chinese tones.):

(3) Dave mei4 yue5 dou2 qu5 mai4 chen5 shan2.,

'Dave buys shirts every month.',

(4) Dave zuo3 tian2 qu5 mai4 le1 chen5 shan3.,

'Dave bought shirts yesterday.'

It is clearly seen that the main verbs <qu5 mai4>, literally means 'go (and) buy' in both sentences which represent the present and the past time respectively, have the same form, and not different from each other as in English. This difference between Chinese and English in temporal expressions may pose problems to Chinese L2 learners in English tense acquisition and give them difficulties in understanding time inference in English and giving correct tensed verb forms. With the total scores of 710, the high and the low

English proficiency groups got the mean-values of 561 and 420 respectively.

Take Chinese students' writing for example. Here are the sentences, *I had a hard time in the past days. My baby has being ill. My wife has losed her job. And I had a quarrel with my boss last week.* Errors in both temporal conceptions and verb forms were identified from these examples. First, the student misused "*was ill*" and "*lost her job*" in the discourse context set in a past time frame. Second, the tensed verbs of "*has being*" and "*has losed*" took ill forms in expressing the temporal perceptions. Many a time we encounter sentences from our students like these.

Tense has been tackled in the L2 classroom for our students at the very beginning stage of their English learning. Yet it has been generally acknowledged by English language teachers as one major problem to obstruct students' successful English expressions. In her *Analysis of errors in written work by first year business administration students at Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai campus,* Srichai (2002, 80) reported that the global verb morphology errors took up 100% and the local verb morphology errors constituted 78.46% of morphological errors.

The present research is to investigate Chinese university students' ungrammatical verb forms in a hope that the data will display problems in Chinese students' English tense formation and the identification of the common errors in tense construction will help both English teachers and students to be aware of such kind of errors and produce correct and coherent tensed verb forms, thus achieving meaningful temporal expressions in

L2 writing.

Lastly, discussion of problems in tense formation by Chinese students is hoped to shed light on tense problems of other EFL learners whose first languages bear similarities in temporality with Chinese. Therefore, identifying the common errors in Chinese students' tense forms becomes the main purpose of the present research.

Sources of Errors

When researches attributed errors of L2 learners during their processes of the second language acquisition to many factors which involved L1, sociolinguistic situation, learners' psychological processes of second language learning (Brown, 2000; Jain, 1974; Odlin, 1989; Richards & Sampson, 1974), language transfer (L1 dependent errors) and intralingual interference (L1 independent errors) were the most admitted phenomenon identified in L2 learners' errors. According to Odlin (ibid.), transfer took place in all linguistic levels: discourse, semantics, syntax, phonetics, phonology, and writing systems. George (1972, as cited in Richards et al., 1974) found that one-third of deviances from L2 learners could be attributed to language transfer. In contrast to this contrastive approach to error analysis, Richards (ibid.) proposed that several types of errors in second language acquisition did not derive from transfers from another language. Instead of being the kind of errors resulted from learners' inability to separate his L1 during the process of L2 acquisition (L1 interference), these errors were "intralingual and developmental errors" (Richards, 1974, p. 173), which displayed some characteristics of language

acquisition. These errors were originally concerned with the L2 structures and developed during the process of that second language being acquired and taught. They reflected a learner's attempt to establish a system for the L2 learning from his experience of the language in the classroom or in the textbook. However, this experience was limited and errors were produced during the process. Another characteristic of the intralingual and developmental errors was their prediction. These errors were predictable since "they are expect[ed] from anyone learning English as a second language" (Richards, ibid.). They recurred from one generation to another generation with any group of L2 learners.

Types of errors

Dulay et al (1982) reviewed the literature concerning ESL/EFL learners' errors during the language acquisition and categorized them into four groups: linguistic category, surface structure, comparative analysis and communicative effect, among which the most common errors concerning tense formation are (1) "double marking" in both the past tense and such as in the sentence *She didn't went back* (p. 138) and the present tense such as in *Joe doesn't likes it* (p. 168); (2) "regularizing" of past tense such as in *He putted the cookie there* (p. 148). Other errors associated with tense formation are "substitution" of the progressive for the simple past tense such as in *Then the man shooting with a gun,* etc. It is expected that this study would identify these errors in Chinese students' verb form performance since these errors are developed when L2 learners are building themselves an L2 rule

system in their second language acquisition (Ancker, 2000; Duley, et al., 1982; Richards, 1974).

Simplicity versus Complexity

During his discussion of practice in second language acquisition, Krashen (1982) distinguished a relationship between grammar rules that are easy to acquire but hard to learn, and grammar rules that are easy to learn but hard to acquire. Most often than not, the second type of phenomenon is found with many L2 learners. The typical example is the acquisition of the third person –s, which is simple in form and function but it takes many years of being acquired by L2 learners. The complexity of this kind of problems can also be found with acquisition of English tense. In English, when communication takes place in utterance or in writing, verbs are obligatory to give temporal information (surely, adverbials of time have this temporal function). When the present tense and the past tense are being used, the inflectional morpheme becomes difficult for non-native speakers. Because the morpheme expresses more than one meaning at that time. Take –s for example. It expresses the present tense, third person and singular subject. Another example is –be doing. The complexity of the verb forms gives trouble to the non-English speakers: singular or plural, past or present and progressive or not progressive. This complex relationship between form and function of the inflectional verbs induced ungrammatical verb forms in L2 learners' tense formation.

Methodology

This study was actually part of the research which investigated Chinese university students' tense and temporal interpretation in English narrative texts. The ungrammatical verb forms that involved in tense formation were investigated in this study. One hundred and seventy subjects from Southwest University of Political Science and Law (SWUPL) in China participated in the research. At the time of the research, they were third-year students and had finished FE 4 (Foundation English 4). The 170 subjects as the result of a random sampling of the 1,500 population (Yamane, 1967) were divided into two groups: the high English proficiency group and the low English proficiency group, based on the scores of the proficiency test of CET/4 for all China university students of non-English majors, and thus each group got 85 subjects.

The instruments were a cloze test and a writing test. The subjects were asked to fill in 39 blanks in the narrative texts of the cloze test with the individual base verb forms provided. These 39 blanks were composed of 22 verbs, some were action verbs and some were stative verbs. They were *lead, die, control, fight, come, decide, lose, escape, announce, close, provide, start, hit, accuse, hoot, sleep, do, enter, take* and *spend;* and *care* and *be.* The writing test was designated as a narrative writing guided by the topic My unforgettable experience, in which the subjects produced their verbs freely.

From the cloze test, 3315 tokens of the tensed verbs were collected from the two groups respectively. From the writing test, 1885 and 1676 tokens of tensed verbs were collected from the high proficiency group and the low proficiency group respectively. The number of verbs used by each subject varied from 10-39 and the average

number of verbs that each subject produced in his /her writing was 24.48 verbs in the high group and 21.22 verbs in the low group.

Results

Nine groups of ungrammatical verb forms were identified and categorized for both the cloze test and the writing test. They were: (1) modal auxiliary and past verb (modal + v-ed); (2) passive voice structure (be+past participle); (3) progressive tense structure (be+present participle); (4) perfect tense structure (have+v); (5) pure present participles (v-ing); (6) analogy, or a process by which unknown forms are constructed according to the pattern of other forms that the learner knows (past irregular); (7) subject-verb disagreement (third person -s);

Table 1 Ungrammatical Verb Forms in Cloze Test

	Types	Ungrammatical verb forms			
		Number		Percentage (%)	
		High group (n = 85)	Low group (n = 85)	High group	Low group
1.	Modal + v-ed	6	3	1.50	0.46
2.	Be + past participle	22	51	**5.49**	**7.85**
3.	Be + present participle	12	22	2.99	3.39
4.	Have / has / had + v.	11	27	2.74	4.15
5.	V-ing	19	57	4.74	8.77
6.	Past irregular	45	91	**11.22**	**14.00**
7.	Plural-singular	228	305	**56.85**	**46.92**
8.	Part of speech	3	13	0.75	2.00
9.	Misspelling	55	81	**13.72**	**12.46**
Total		**401**	**650**	**100%**	**100%**

Table 2 Ungrammatical Verb Forms in Writing Test

	Types	Ungrammatical verb forms					
		Number				Percentage (%)	
		High group (n = 77)		Low group (n = 79)		High group	Low group
1.	Modal + v-ed	5	(7.97)	7	(12.87)	7.46	5.51
2.	Be + past participle	13	(20.71)	20	(36.76)	**19.40**	**15.75**
3.	Be + present participle	3	(4.78)	7	(12.87)	4.48	5.51
4.	Have / has / had + v.	7	(11.15)	8	(14.70)	10.45	6.30
5.	V-ing	0	(0)	2	(3.68)	0	1.58
6.	Past irregular	15	(23.90)	34	(62.49)	**22.39**	**26.77**
7.	Plural-singular	4	(6.37)	7	(12.87)	5.97	5.51
8.	Part of speech	11	(17.52)	14	(25.73)	**16.42**	**11.02**
9.	Misspelling	9	(14.34)	28	(51.46)	**13.43**	**22.05**
	Total	**67**	**(106.74)**	**127**	**(233.43)**	**100%**	**100%**

Note: Numbers in brackets are the transformed data to the standard of the test unit number which adds up to 39.

(8) word classes (parts of speech); (9) misspelling (misspelling).

The results were presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

From Table 1, *plural and singular subject-verb disagreement*, *misspelling*, *past irregular verbs*, and *be + past participles* represented the top four ungrammatical verb forms with respect to both the high and low groups. They were the most common errors found in the cloze test. Under the *plural-singular*, the *third person –s* remained the highest error rate in the verb filling cloze test. Except for *misspelling*, the other three types of errors concerned tense formation. The total errors accounted for 405 (12.22%) for the high group and 663 (20%) for the low group respectively. Errors such as "*be*", "*to be*", "*be done*", "*has*", "*should*", etc. were not categorized because of their small numbers.

The categories used to analyse the ungrammatical verb forms in the cloze test were used as tentative frames to initiate the analysis of the ungrammatical verb forms in the writing test in the hope of seeing whether there were any similar or different ungrammatical verb forms produced in the writing test.

The ungrammatical verb forms identified in the writing test were presented in Table 2.

Of the total verbs collected from the writing test, ungrammatical verb forms did not take a sizable proportion (4.24% for the high group and 9.01% for the low group). Including those uncategorized errors such as "*be*", "*to be*", "*be done*", "*has*", "*should*", only 80 ill verb forms for the high group and 151 for the low group in writing were found. The potential reason for the difference

between erroneous verb forms in the cloze test and the writing test might go to the avoidance or inability of using complex verbs and tenses by the subjects in their writing. However, the types of ungrammatical verb forms in the writing test were similar to those in the reading cloze test.

As shown in Table 2, except the plural-singular subject-verb agreement of the third person –s of the present tense, the other three that ranked top of the ungrammatical verb forms in writing were those identified in the cloze test (see Table 1). they were *past irregular, be + past participle structure*, and *misspelling*. This suggested that when the Chinese university students interpreted time in different types of narrative texts, they sometimes had the similar problems in constructing correct tense forms. The discussion of these incorrect tense forms will focus on *irregular past verbs* and *passive voice structures*, the two top ungrammatical verb forms in both the narrative reading test and the narrative writing test.

Discussion

1. *Past irregular*. This type of ungrammatical verb form arises in a manner described by Crystal (1985). Basically, it is a phenomenon happening during the process of language acquisition in which the regularization of the grammar of a language affects the exceptional forms in that language. In English verbs, it results in the use of incorrect regularized past verb forms instead of the correct irregular past verbs. Crystal described this kind of errors by L2 learners as "analogy". It has other names: overgeneralization, overextension (Richards, et al., 1992) and regularization errors (Dulay, et al.

, 1982). Three types of analogy errors were found in the subjects' given verb forms: (a) using irregular verbs as regular; (b) using regular verbs as irregular verbs; and (c) using one irregular verb of one group as another irregular verbs of the other group. The examples were found in the verbs (a) *leaded*, *losed*, *hited*, *taked*; (b) *hoot, heet*; and (c) *lead, faught, fighten, hitten*. The analogical creation of irregular verbs into regular past verbs (for example, *fighted*) and of irregular verbs into incorrect irregular verb forms (for example, *hitten*) was most noticeably seen in verbs like *lead* (10 errors in the high group and 19 in the low group), *fight* (11 errors in the high group and 22 in the low group)*,* and *hit* (11 errors in the high group and 19 in the low group). The two subject groups "created" 45 and 91 errors in the seven irregular verbs of the cloze test (see Table 1), which listed the third most occurrence in all types of ungrammatical verb forms in the cloze test.

Compared to those in the reading cloze test, the past irregular verbs by analogy in the writing test appeared in the largest number among the groups of incorrect verb forms.

Twenty-four of them were found in the high group and 62 of them found in the low group. Three types of analogy errors were found in the subjects' verb forms in their writing: (a) using irregular verbs as regular such as *bursted, catched, choosed, falled* and *feeled*; (b) using irregular verbs as irregular such as *run, sit, had knew,* and *known*; and (c) using correct irregular form and also add the past tense morpheme (-ed) to them, such as *camed, founded* and *saided*. The analogy errors of type (c) were not found in the previous cloze test.

The analogy errors in the writing test similar to those found in the cloze test suggest that analogy of irregular verbs is a major problem to learners' temporal expression.

2. *Passive voice structures*. The unnecessary "be" was found in use with the past or the past participles leading to a passive voice structure "be + past or past participle" such as *is died, was died, was fighted, was closed, was provided* and *are escaped*. A considerable number of verbs were produced by the subjects in this form, 22 for the high group and 51 for the low group in the cloze test. From the perspective of "sentence construction" (Crystal, 1985), it was found that the errors often affected when the subjects used the following intransitive verbs: *to die, to escape, to care, to fight* and *to sleep*. That is Chinese students sometimes gave the passive voice structures.

With regard to the transitive constructions in the use of verbs, the learners' first language, Chinese, the subject of a sentence is not required as strictly as is the case for an English sentence (Fang, 1992). In many cases, the subject is not needed or is omitted from a sentence. Second, Chinese syntax places the word or the set of words which actually will be at the center of the sentence at the beginning of a sentence as the subject, and that is why when they write the English sentences they neglects the potential relationship between the subject and the verb. The subject, therefore, is not necessarily as meaningful as that in an English sentence (ibid.). As a result, when coming across a language that requires a syntactic subject in the sentence, the learner used a passive voice structure in that language of which the construction of a

passive structure was first based upon a subtle perception of non-subject or loose subject-verb relations like Chinese syntax. So the verbs used in a Chinese sentence sometimes have no subject. In cases that the subject was indispensable in an L2 sentence and that the verb happens to be transitive, the learner used a passive voice structure in which the subject was not the real subject. In his sense, it was not the real subject because this temporal subject was derived from the object of the original Chinese sentence. The remedial practice of an L2 passive voice structure was what the learner could deal with the want of a subject in an L2 sentence.

Three points can be made in conclusion to this discussion. First, the use with numerous verbs of the unneeded *be* in "be + past or past participle" structures suggests that this is a common practice among the learners. Second, this type of errors is influenced by L1 sentence structure. Third, this type of errors is reflective of L1 interfering inversely to the degree of L2 proficiency. The high and the low groups of 22 and 51 persons in the cloze test and 21 and 37 persons in the writing test respectively used this passive voice structure. It is obvious that learners at the lower proficiency level more often employed this ungrammatical verb form respectively.

Conclusion

Of those ungrammatical verb forms in the cloze test, the most numerous were those of subject-predicate disagreement. Irregular past verbs and misspelling were the second most frequent. Incorrect use of passive voice structures came third.

Of those in the writing test, the most numerous were irregular past verbs, followed by passive voice structures, misspelling and incorrect word classes. Save for subject-predicate disagreement, all the other three kinds of major ungrammatical verb forms existed in both narrative reading and writing productions. Irregular past verbs and passive voice structure use were incorrect verb forms directly related to tense forms. The nine types of errors observed in the cloze test and the writing test shared similar features and came from three areas.

1. L1 influence or *language transfer*
Ungrammatical verb forms produced by the subjects exhibited interference from their mother tongue (Richards & Sampson, 1974, p. 5). In sentences such as *I was hesitated* and *I was feared that …*, it can be seen that the verb forms were shaped in a similar way to the equivalent Chinese verb structure as in the following sentence:

我   很   犹豫,   我   对 ....
I   alot   hesitated,   I   of ....
感到   恐惧.
felt   afraid.
(be)

'I hesitated a lot, I am afraid of…….'

This "shape" suggests that the subjects looked for an English verb form while their thoughts were in Chinese. They used a passive voice structure to express meanings which were demanded in an active voice structure of English. Error Type 2 represents examples of this source of error.

2. Intralingual interference Ungrammatical verb forms produced by the subjects revealed that the learners developed their own rules when

practicing the L2 (Richards & Sampson, 1974, p. 6). These rules were neither from their mother tongue nor from the target language. Errors thus produced reflect the subjects' incomplete acquisition of the target language and wrong analogy of the target language rules. They double marked the verbs when giving tense forms. They used analogy to make irregular past verbs. Error Types 2, 3, and 6 represent examples of this source of error.

3. Under-acquisition Ungrammatical verb forms produced by the subjects showed their lack of ability in using the target language grammar in tense forms. Error Types 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 illustrated the learners' insufficient acquisition of the target language. Some of the errors were connected with tense forms such as *have try*, *have been used being* and *teached*, and some were common errors of L2 learners such as misspelling errors. But both of these sources would interfere with the learners' smooth expression of time reference.

Lastly, it must be pointed out that the two subject groups behaved quite differently in giving ungrammatical verb forms. That is the subjects' ability was found to be associated with their English proficiency levels. The high English proficiency group outperformed the low English proficiency group in correct verb forms. This might suggest that errors in tense formation may fall under the category of developmental errors in L2 acquisition.

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