Error Analysis of Chinese Students' Writing and Speaking English: A Case Study of Chinese Students in Business English Program (English), Dhonburi Rajabhat University

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were 1) to study the common mistakes of Chinese students' writing, 2) to study the problems in their speaking and pronunciation, and 3) to collect the problems in writing and speaking English to improve the learning of Chinese students. This study's sample consisted of 16 Chinese first-year students of the Business English Program in the second semester of the academic year 2019. The data in the writing part were collected from students' final examination papers and the speaking from the researchers' observation and students' presentation. The results showed that there were several areas of grammar that need improvement including verb-tense errors (63% of the students), spelling errors (38% of the students), subject-verb agreement errors of the verb to be (25% of the students), and the misuse of the articles a, an, and the (19% of the students). The speaking results showed two main issues, including a lack of intonation or proper speed of speech (89% of the students) and using the incorrect pronunciation for words ending in consonants (43% of the students).

Keywords: error analysis, grammar, pronunciation

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Introduction

A group of 16 Chinese students came to study Bachelor's degree in Business English Program in the second semester of academic year 2019 at the International College, Dhonburi Rajabhat University. Before entering the program, they had two-month intensive English course reflecting their different levels of English. However, most can communicate well. They studied seven subjects for the first semester with five American teachers and two Thai teachers. Their first semester was quite rough and the study was interrupted with some incidents. They studied for almost two months and went back to China for their Chinese New Year. When they were about to come back, the Covid-19 was seriously spread in China, caused chaos and affected their ticket confirmation - booked, canceled and rebooked many times. After a 14-day quarantine, they went back to normal study for 1.5 weeks, then had to switch from classroom learning to online to finish their classes. It seems like students had a hard time to concentrate on their studies continuously. Silva (2020) and Ladi (2019) indicate that teaching method is one factor that affects students' motivation. Ladi (ibid) also mentions the availability and frequency of the use of adequate teaching materials and the amount of exposure to the target language affect the students' learning as well. Therefore, the researchers would like to explore these students' writing and speaking skills. Their study was interrupted with different incidents and changed from classroom to online learning. As a second language learner, to study the second language well and effectively, especially writing, one needs to concentrate and practice using it all the time, since it involves grammar rules in which the first language is totally different from English. This is in accordance with Bowen (2008), one suggestion is that a grammar based approach is one way we learn language. Here their study was very fragmented and they stayed together in the university hotel, apart from practicing English during class with their teachers, they do not have anybody to speak with or listen to, especially during the Covid19 pandemic. Therefore the researchers would like to explore their writing to observe what type of mistakes they made and also any problems that are formed in the speaking by these Chinese students.

Objectives of the study

1. To study the common mistakes in Chinese students' writing.

2. To study the problems in their speaking and pronunciation.

3. To collect the writing and speaking English problems to improve the learning of Chinese students.

Scope of the study

1. This study focuses on the Chinese students who came to study in the second semester of academic year 2019 at the International College, Dhonburi Rajabhat University.

2. This study looks into two domains of English skills: writing and speaking.

Methodology

1. Samples

This paper looks at the 16 Chinese students' writing and speaking skills. They are studying Business English Program at the International College, Dhonburi Rajabhat University. It was their first semester studying abroad and using English as the medium of learning. These subjects were taught by American teachers.

2. Research instrument

The data for writing were from the final exam papers of English Structure and speaking from the teachers' observation and student presentation including practice speaking during class.

3. Data collection

For the writing section: the researchers collected the data from 16 Chinese students' final exams on the subject of English Structure. It was a written exam consisted of tenses, comparative, superlative, modal verbs. Students needed to write the answers by themselves, no multiple choices were provided. The researchers counted the number of mistakes made in each area of the grammar examined: verb tenses, spelling, subject-verb agreement using the verb to be, and the use of articles. This type of exam can let the teachers know clearly the faults of students' English. Sixteen Chinese students registered in this subject.

For the speaking section: reviews were conducted based on the students' classroom activities, assignments, quizzes, tests, and exams; including work focused on reading, conversation, presentations, role plays, and group work. The research studied the students to look for common errors. The common errors uncovered from analysis of the students work were cross referenced to past published educational articles and papers to determine possible cause and potential solutions.

4. Data Analysis

This part presents the analysis of students' writing and speaking. For writing, the data were compiled from the grammar exams. The researchers looked for common mistakes among the group of students, then calculated the percentages of the students who made each common error. If the students made the mistake at least two to three times, depending on the mistake, the researchers would count that student as part of the error percentage. For speaking, the data analysis was done through observation of the speaking results for the entire group. Consistent errors of the students were tracked. Percentages are based on the number of students that demonstrated a specific issue. The study takes both qualitative and quantitative methods. Percentage and description will be used to analyze the data.

4.1 Writing Skills

A group of sixteen, undergraduate, (first-year) Chinese ESL students studied English structure during their first semester. After analyzing their final examinations, the researchers have found that several types of grammatical errors had been made. The table below consists of the percentage of students who made these errors. The writing samples were collected from the submitted examinations. The most common errors include incorrect tense use, the lack of using articles, spelling mistakes, and the contrast between singular and plural nouns verb agreement. Several contributing factors for these errors include, but are not limited to, students' cultural and educational backgrounds, an absence of English language knowledge, and the inconsistent application of the English language throughout students' daily lives.

The following table lists the most common errors made by the students from their final examination of their English structure course.

Table 1: Types of errors made

Error Type	Number of Students with Errors (16 students)	Percentage of Errors (%)	Overall Percentage of Errors (%)
1. Incorrect Tense of Verbs	10	63	43.45
2. Spelling Errors	6	38	26.21
3. Subject-Verb Agreement with to be	4	25	17.24
4. Lack of Article Use	3	19	13.10

The most common error found in the students' writing samples is incorrect tense and verb usage (43.45%). Zhan (2015, p.75) states within his research that, "The error in tense and verb form ranks the first among all the error tokens, which totals at 337 and accounts for approximately 26% of all error types."

Zhan's research correlates with our own findings. Although the students could possibly identify the main verb within the sentences, they had difficulties when forming verb conjugations. This type of grammar, grammar of orientation, is concerned with the conjugating of verbs into the various tenses including the simple-past and present-continuous tenses. Several examples of this error are as follows:

*"Jack **does** homework yesterday."*

*"I **doing** my homework yesterday."*

*"Han **comed** to Thailand last week."*

As one may see from the previous examples, the students have a clear understanding of the term "past tense," given that they included the time phrases, yesterday, and last week. Although they succeeded in including, and producing the correct time phrases, their accuracy for conjugating the verbs was low. The individual students did not know the

correct past-tense verb form. For example, to make the past-tense of the verb do, students produced the verb forms do, does, and doing. This is an accuracy error, which we mainly feel is caused by the lack of knowledge of the correct verb form did.

Zhan (2015, p.75) has also come to the same conclusion based on his research analysis. He concludes that, "Errors in verb form means that writers may know what tense should be used in the context, but write down the wrong verb form, as a result of not knowing the correct form or forgetting to change the verb to the needed form or changing into a wrong form."

In addition, several students conjugated the irregular, past-tense verb, come, incorrectly. They added the –ed ending, which is only used for past-tense regular verbs. The researchers feel that the students are not able to apply the accurate base verb forms.

Another example of incorrect tense usage includes the present-continuous tense. Several examples of this misused tense are as follows:

*"They **are study** English in school."*

*"I **am walk** to 7-11."*

Again, the students understand the concept of the present-continuous tense, for they effectively used the correct helping verb. Although they produced and conjugated the verb to be correctly, they were not able to successfully conjugate the main verb by not adding the -ing ending. The results show that 63% of the total number of students produced a high number of verb tense errors.

The next error that was observed was spelling mistakes (26.21%). Though there were spelling errors, the students managed to include enough context clues to fully understand the meanings. The primary spelling mistakes consisted of basic, common words, which did not interfere with the meanings. A few examples are as follows:

*"I made fried rice and **fired** chicken yesterday."*

*"Did you like eat some **chiese** dumplings?"*

*"I **went** drink **watter** more sweet than **soul**."*

As one may see, these mistakes consist of either transposed letters within the words, missing letters, or adding extra letters. Although these errors were made, they are still easily recognizable and phonetically spelled. The researchers had no issues in understanding the meaning of the words even with their misspellings. The results show that 38% of the total number of students produced a high number of spelling errors.

The next error that was observed from the research was the agreement between subjects and verb to be (17.24%). The correlation between the subject and verb must agree with one another (singular or plural). One must not use both forms in a given sentence; otherwise, there is no agreement. Previous related research from Kong (2013) explains that, "Subject-verb agreement has the highest frequency of selection errors among the verb form categories," (p. 48).

The following subject-verb agreement samples from the students' examinations illustrate the frequent errors made.

"I (am a) sweet man, so I more handsome than Tanner."

"Are (Is) there have any food?"

"Derrick (is) shorter than Tanner."

"The watermelon (is) sweeter than apples.

As one can see from the previous sample errors (in parentheses), the students have omitted the verb to be. It was observed that this error was produced multiple times.

Kong (2013) also explains, "The most common errors in subject-verb agreement are the use of a singular be verb for a plural subject... the use of an improper be verb for a subject" (Wen p. 49). Her explanation also correlates with the research found from the students' examinations. Although there were not many errors with a singular be verb and plural subject, the students omitted the verb to be from the sentences. They did not use any verb in their sentences at all. The results show that 25% of the total number of students produced a high number of subject-verb agreement errors using the verb to be.

The final error found in the writing samples includes the omission of English articles (13.12%). The Chinese language does not contain articles such as, a, an, or the. This is quite evident in the collected writing samples. Two examples are as follows:

*"I should going **to (the) gym** right now."*

*"I will **watching (a) movie** at home."*

As one may see from the above samples, the meanings are clear, yet the students omitted the articles the and a, which are presented in parentheses. This common error could possibly have stemmed from the interference between their first language and English.

Corder (1971, p. 201) states, "The difficulties of learners could be predicted by a comparison or contrast between the structures of the mother tongue and the target language and appropriate steps could then be taken to minimise the difficulty and reduce the interference".

Corder (ibid)'s statement agrees with our analysis that there are disconnects between the students' first language of Chinese and English when using the English articles. The results show that 19% of the total number of students produced a high number of errors in the use of the articles a, an, and the.

4.2 Speaking skills

The students speaking tests and activities were monitored for review through three classes in their first year. In review of speaking, issues with communicating ideas clearly were the focus. This review of speaking does not pursue issues similar to writing, such as grammar and vocabulary. The focus of this speaking review is to find errors in the students tone, pace, and clarity when speaking English. These are also known as temporal variables in speech. Speaking fluency is a perceptual concept requiring judgment by someone native or deemed qualified. Judgment on fluency is based on the articulatory, syntactic, and temporal properties of speech. The temporal elements are the most easily perceived and judged to determine fluency (Hu, 2006). Identifying these errors for correction will allow the students to become more effective communicators as they improve their other English language skills.

Many of the students demonstrated very similar temporal problems in spoken communication. Below is a review of repeated issues in speaking English among the group. The study showed even student with a strong grasp of English demonstrated some of the problems. There were two main speech issues impacting the clarity of the students' spoken communication; the pace and pronunciation of their speech and the use of the filler "ah" between words.

Speaking Errors of Students
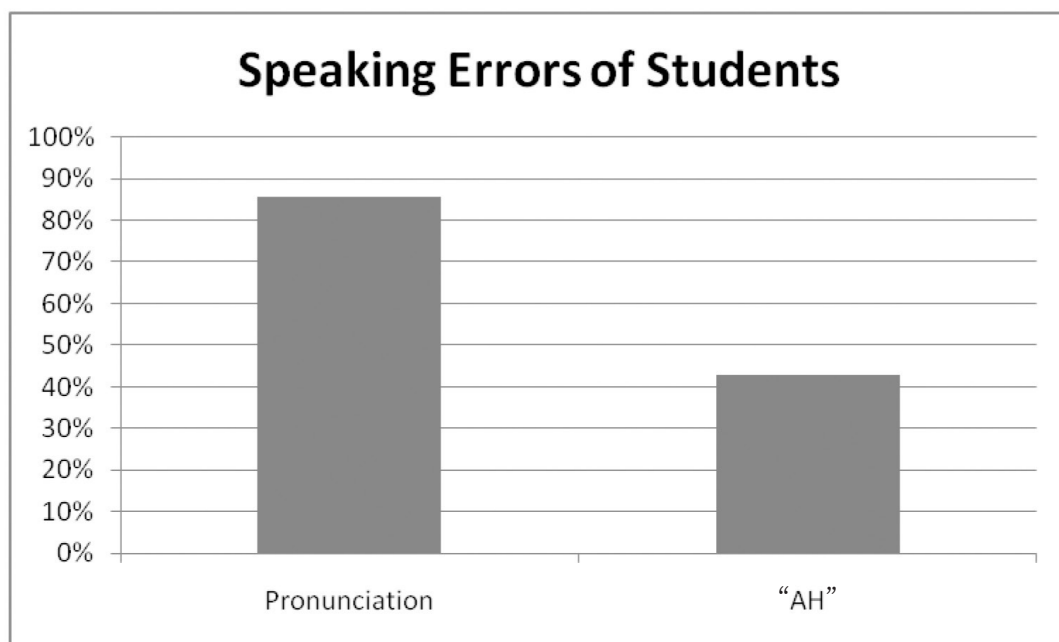
The major error was the students speed and pronunciation during speaking. The students' speed of speech far exceeds typical speech in communicating English (Quan & Li. 2014, p.347). As judged by the perceived speed and clarity, 89% of the sample spoke at an elevated rate or lacked pronunciation of words.

The steady rapid rate of speech demonstrated by a large number of the students impacts the clarity of the spoken message. The importance of the students' ideas and/or key points were not emphasized at this rate; leading to strained communication. This strain reduces the understanding of the listener (Anderson-Hsieh & Koehler, 1988). It also reduces the impact of the speech. The overall impact of the increased rate of speech increases the overall time required to communicate ideas.

Related to the students rate of speech is pronouncing and separating each word when speaking. The base of the poor speed of the group's speech is their lack of pronunciation. In pronunciation, the students with lower and higher levels of English both demonstrate this trait. The habit is more pronounced in the higher level students, as they can more fluidly convey a sentence. The students with lower levels of English proficiency demonstrate the trait more prominently when presented with opportunities in speaking common or comfortable sentences. This error might be demonstrated in a written form below by removing the punctuation and speed from the sentences.

Example:

Hinicetomeetyouthankyouforcomingintoday.

Instead of: Hi, nice to meet you. Thank you for coming in today.

Lastly, the verbalization of the "ah" sound after many spoken words is a typical error of the students. In the group of students studied, 43% used the filler "ah" when speaking. The use of fillers is common with native English speakers as well, such as "um". This is known as the pause filler or hesitation form in English. Native English speakers use these to fill the empty speed or silence in speech while showing intent to continue. The Chinese students appear to use the "ah" for different reasons. The native English speaker uses the filler as a notable pause in speech; sometimes, used to give time to think of what to say next. While the Chinese students do not indicate any pause or question in what they will say next. The students use the "ah" even when reading basic English text they are familiar with.

The error is very pronounced in the 43% of the students; using the filler multiple times in one sentence. It is also used following many words in one sentence at times and typically used in every sentence. The use of the "ah" filler by the Chinese national students seems to be a difficult habit to break. This error might be demonstrated in a written form below by adding the "ah" to the sentence.

Example:

I want to eat a piece of cake in my room.

Iwant"ah"eat"ah"piece"ah"cake"ah"inmyroom"ah".

Conclusions and Discussion

The written results show that the most serious errors with the students' grammar are verb-tense errors (63% of the students), spelling errors (38% of the students), subject-verb agreement errors of the verb to be (25% of the students), and the misuse of the articles a, an, and the (19% of the students). The speaking results showed two main issues including a lack of intonation or proper speed of speech (89% of the students) and using the incorrect pronunciation for words ending in consonants (43% of the students).

The written results show that there are several areas of grammar that need improvement. The students' writing assignments also show that the task achievement of their writing samples, when answering open-ended questions, was high. When required to write their answers, the students were able to successfully complete a sentence or paragraph to convey the meaning in order to complete the task.

Several suggestions for improving the students' grammar skills include, but are not limited to: peer-correction, provide more independent practice, grammar deduction exercises, noticing exercises, as well as, increasing the amount of motivation given to students. Also, adding emotional depth when teaching allows for a more enjoyable learning experience and will increase their language acquisition.

When interpreting and analyzing the data collected from the speaking observations and testing; potential reasons for the errors, as well as, techniques to help the students improve were found. The speed and lack of pronunciation may be attributed to the lack of understanding of the English tone (Quam & Creel, 2017, pp. 293-305). Tone or intonation in English is a key communication tool, changing the inherent meaning and context of what is being said. Although tone is common in Mandarin, it is typically used to change one word to a different word, where as in English, tone typically changes the meaning of the same word. (Ortega-Lleberia, Nemoga, & Presson, 2017, pp. 267-383). In English, the tone may

convey sarcasm, skepticism, firm statements, or questions depending on use. For example, "thanks" may be said a number of ways in English depending on the situation. Saying "thanks" may mean "thank you" but it could just as easily mean the opposite. Educating the students on the many meanings and potential ways to convey those meaning may be an important step in their progress of English fluency.

To pursue this fluency in intonation, understanding of the potential through demonstration and examples will be important. Showing the potential to convey insults, sarcasm, or conveying the seriousness of a conversation through tone with repeated examples should help the students' master this piece of English communication.

Research into the students' issue with adding filler sounds into English sentences found the potential cause. The students' native language does not normally end in consonants, excluding n and ng. The ending vowel in their native language normal is commonly "ah" or "oh" (Chan, 2006). This speaking error appears to have less to do with being a filler for pauses in thought or speaking, as it is with native English speakers, and more with the students need to develop a comfort with consonants at the end of words. As with many language studies, focus on the language point and practice of proper emphasis on the ending word consonants may help this issue. With identification of the issue, repetition, reinforcement, training, and study, many of the students should improve English fluency.

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