

The Distribution and Frequency of Grammatical Errors in Second Language Writing: A Case Study of Chinese High School Students

Zhonghui Liu^{1,a,*}

¹Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, Zhuhai, 512000, China

a. s230025043@mail.uic.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: As Error analysis in second language writing remains controversial, this study aims to investigate errors with high frequency in L2 writing of high school students in China and reveal the relationship between writing tasks and error types. By analyzing compositions in high school English exams, the study will discover the distribution pattern frequencies of different errors and make comparisons of students at different levels. The findings indicate that verb tense errors are the most frequent but decrease as students progress in grade level, while syntactical errors become more prevalent in more complex tasks, such as continuation writing. This study highlights the persistent challenges students face in constructing grammatically accurate sentences in flexible writing tasks. These insights provide empirical evidence for targeted grammar instruction, emphasizing verb usage and sentence structure complexity to improve overall writing proficiency.

Keywords: Error analysis, L2 writing, Grammatical error.

1. Introduction

Error analysis (EA), as an important topic in second language acquisition (SLA), plays a vital role in second language (L2) writing and teaching evaluation. In China, numerous learners are studying English as their second language. However, various errors, including grammatical, pragmatic, lexical, and semantic errors, frequently occur among second language learners during the writing process, significantly impairing the overall quality of L2 composition [1]. Among these errors, grammatical errors act as one of the most influential factors in high school English writing.

Previous scholars, such as Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, James, and Ferris have deeply studied grammatical errors in L2 learning [1-3]. However, different views exist on the frequency of various types of grammatical errors in L2 writing such as the study of Ellis and Barkhuizen in 2005 and the study of Bitchener, Young, and Cameron [4,5]. Additionally, previous studies, such as those by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, primarily explored the learning processes of all second language learners in general, without specifically focusing on learners at particular stages, such as high school students [2]. This broader approach may overlook the unique challenges and needs faced by learners at different educational levels.

Thus, this study aims to fill the gap in existing studies by examining grammatical errors appear in the writing part of high school test papers. Furthermore, this study wants to determine the distribution patterns of different error types and provide empirical evidence to support grammar teaching.

2. Literature Review

Much research has been done over the past few decades on the essential role of EA. According to Corder, the errors that learners make during language acquisition are not simply failures in learning the target language but an inevitable part of the learning process [6]. The errors reflect the language system that the learner is constructing and, additionally, demonstrate the learner's exploration and attempts toward the target language. Before Corder, the dominant view in language teaching, such as Fries, Lado, and Skinner, believed that errors are negative phenomena caused by the learner's mother tongue and should be avoided as much as possible [7-9].

More research on EA in L2 writing is made in the book published by James in 1998 [1]. He systematized the theoretical framework of EA and categorized it into four types, including grammatical errors, pragmatic errors, lexical errors, and semantic errors. Additionally, he further divides grammatical errors into four components: morphological, syntactical, concord, and propositional. Nevertheless, a different classification method was made by Ferris in 1999, innovatively dividing grammatical errors into verb tense and form errors, article errors, and subject-verb agreement errors [3]. Different from Ferris's claim, two studies from 2005 reached divergent conclusions. One study by Ellis and Barkhuizen found that high-frequency error types in L2 writing include pronoun errors and word order errors [4]. In contrast, another study by Bitchener, Young, and Cameron concluded that the most common errors in L2 composition involve syntactical structure, as well as adjective and adverb usage [5]. These findings suggest that different aspects of language structure present persistent challenges for second language learners in their writing.

As discussed above, it is easy to notice that there is a controversy in the types of errors existing in L2 writing, and the group that is being analyzed is not specific. Therefore, two corresponding research questions are raised to fill the gap.

3. Research Purpose and Research Questions

3.1. Research Purpose

This study aims to fill a gap in existing research on second language writing by focusing on the types and frequencies of grammatical errors in the English writing of Chinese high school students. This study aims to analyze common grammatical errors across various composition tasks and compare students' writing at different proficiency levels. By identifying the distribution patterns of different error types, the research seeks to provide empirical evidence to support grammar instruction in second-language teaching.

3.2. Research questions

- 1) What is the distribution pattern of grammatical errors in the English writing of Chinese high school students?
- 2) Are there specific grammatical errors that are more prevalent in certain types of writing tasks?

4. Method

4.1. Context

The writing samples are collected from a public high school located in Guangdong, China. The school is a full-time educational institution where 10th- and 11th-grade students have six English classes per week, while 12th-grade students have eight English classes per week. Each English class lasts for 45 minutes.

For 10th- and 11th-grade students, only one type of composition task is contained in their English exam: practical writing. Practical writing is a writing format people use in daily life, study and work to handle real-world situations, usually in the format of a letter. In the common English exam, students are required to write an 80-word composition in English according to the given context within usually 20 minutes.

For 12th-grade students, a new composition genre, continuation writing, is introduced in the exam. Continuation writing is a reading-based writing task, and students are required to read a half-finished story and write two paragraphs within 150 words in around 40 to 50 minutes to complete the story.

4.2. Participants

30 test papers from different grades were collected from the participating high schools. Each grade contributes 10 test papers, of which five papers for the 12th grade are for practical writing, and five are for continuation writing.

4.3. Instruments

The study utilizes a blended error correction checklist, which integrates key factors from the research of Ferris, Ellis and Barkhuizen, and Bitchener, Young, and Cameron [3-5]. This checklist analyzes the distribution patterns of grammatical errors in students' compositions, providing a comprehensive approach to understanding common error types and their frequencies. The checklist contains six grammatical error (GE) categories, including verb tense and form errors (VF), article errors (AR), subject-verb agreement errors (SV), pronoun errors (PR), syntactical structure errors (SS), adjective and adverb errors (AA).

5. Results

After examining 30 test papers and analyzing the grammatical errors, the complete checklist is shown below.

Table 1: Blended error correction checklist.

GE / Grade	10th	11th	12th (Practical)	12th (Continuation)
VF	27	20	17	14
AR	5	3	1	5
SV	6	5	2	5
PR	2	1	1	5
SS	5	5	4	12
AA	5	4	2	3

In Table 1, the checklist demonstrates the distribution pattern of grammatical errors in different grades and writing tasks. According to the result, VF is the most common type of grammatical error across all grades, and they become less frequent as the grade increases. Furthermore, AR, AA and

SV are less frequent in the practical writing task for 12th graders but are more noticeable in the other grades and tasks. These errors are relatively basic grammatical mistakes, and students tend to demonstrate better control over these aspects in structured tasks such as practical writing. The results indicate that although article errors are not the most common type of error in high school students' writing, they are still prominent in more complex writing tasks, such as continuation writing. Similarly, Liu and Gleason found that the use of the article "the" is particularly challenging for second language learners, especially when referring to specific objects in certain contexts [10]. More importantly, a significant increase in sentence structure errors is observed in the continuation task for 12th-grade students. Additionally, there are more SS and PR in the continuation task as it requires students to read and continue an incomplete story, which demands more complex use of sentence structures and accurate pronoun usage in various contexts. However, there are fewer AR and SV in practical writing since practical writing tasks tend to be shorter and more formulaic. It has less variation in sentence structures, resulting fewer errors related to articles and subject-verb agreement. In contrast, the flexible character of the continuation writing leads to more grammatical errors as students attempt to write more complex and advanced sentences.

6. Discussion

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the distribution of grammatical errors in L2 writing among Chinese high school students. Since the data reveal several key trends in EA and L2 composition, further discussion is needed.

One of the most notable findings is that students persistently struggled with verb tense and form errors despite their language proficiency improving as the grade level advanced. As Housen pointed out, verb tense and form are among the most difficult grammatical aspects for second language learners to master [11]. The learners in this study also showed confusion between the past tense and present tense. Moreover, errors in irregular verb forms increased significantly in continuation writing tasks, which may be due to the learners' insufficient knowledge of verb morphology. This suggests that verb tense is inherently challenging for learners, which is likely due to the complex tense system in English compared to the simpler structure in Chinese. The phenomenon of these errors appearing frequently across all grades indicates that more targeted instruction on tense usage, especially in less structured writing tasks like continuation writing, is required.

Another significant observation is that 12th-grade students tend to have more syntactical errors in continuation writing tasks. Continuation writing, which requires students to extend an incomplete story, has greater demands on their ability to construct complex and cohesive sentences. The flexibility of this task allows for creative expression but also increases the likelihood of errors as students need to construct longer and logically correct sentences. This suggests that students may benefit from more explicit teaching of advanced sentence structures, such as the use of subordinate clauses and varying sentence lengths, to create more logical and authentic writing.

The lower frequency of basic grammatical errors, such as article and subject-verb agreement errors, in the practical writing tasks for 12th-grade students, reflects the more formulaic and structured nature of these tasks. Practical writing usually demands shorter, more predictable sentence patterns, which may limit the opportunities for students to make these types of errors. However, the importance of these basic errors can not be overlooked. Teachers could emphasize the application of these basic grammatical rules in a variety of writing contexts to ensure students can maintain accuracy across different tasks.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the distribution and frequency of grammatical errors in the English writing of Chinese high school students, aiming to reveal common challenges and patterns across different grade levels and writing tasks. The results show that verb tense and form errors (VF) are the most prevalent across all grades, though their frequency decreases as students progress to higher grades. Additionally, syntactical structure errors (SS) become more significant in continuation writing tasks, particularly for 12th-grade students, reflecting the increased complexity of the task and the demands for more advanced sentence structures.

The findings suggest that while students improve their control over basic grammatical elements such as articles and subject-verb agreement as they advance in their studies, more complex writing tasks, such as continuation writing, expose persistent challenges in constructing grammatically accurate and varied sentences. This highlights the need for more targeted instruction in sentence structure and verb usage, especially as students engage with more flexible and creative writing formats.

These results have important implications for English language instruction in Chinese high schools. For instance, teachers should focus on reinforcing students' understanding and application of verb tenses while also introducing more sophisticated syntactical exercises that prepare students for advanced writing tasks. Tackling these specific grammatical weaknesses can enhance the overall quality of student writing and better equip learners for future academic challenges.

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