

# A Contrastive Analysis between English and Chinese Syntax in English Writing of Chinese Undergraduate Students

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**Abstract.** *The purposes of this study were to identify and analyze the error patterns in English written texts of Chinese undergraduate learners who were taking EFL courses. Their grammatical errors were used to compare with those of the Chinese language in order to devise teaching procedures to improve the students' writing skills. Fifty-two students were selected purposively to participate as sample group in their study. All of their writings collected were corrected to identify major grammatical errors, then were categorized and calculated for a contrastively analysis between Chinese and English. The results of this study showed that there were 11 categories of grammatical errors that students made in their English writings at a syntactic level. Five top grammatical errors were: tense; SOV (Sentence structure); Chinglish; articles and agreement of subject and its predicates. These major errors were obviously different between Chinese and English. Recommendations were made in several ways for Chinese students in writing English and for teachers to improve their attitudes, strategies and methods of teaching English writing.*

**Keywords:** Contrastive analysis, Error analysis, English Writing, Chinese undergraduate students

## Introduction

As a productive and active skill, writing is an important standard to judge students' comprehensive language ability and communicative competence. However, there are lots of problems existing for Chinese students, such as improper word choice, incorrect collocations, for example. Two main reasons were: first, in English writing teaching, teachers could not provide an effective standard for teaching; and, second, students could not find a correct way to overcome the problems they meet during the process of writing. Moreover, their Chinese language thinking styles they have deeply influenced their writing.

In writing classes, Chen, (2002) and Wu, (2008) found that students were struggling to transform their thoughts into words. Besides, students are confused with word usage, sentence structure, and they are constrained by a shortage of vocabulary, alternative expressions and cultural knowledge. It is clearly known that native language has great influence on the second language (L2), especially the output of learners. On comparing the

differences between Chinese and English writing, the key point for improving English writing is how to make use of the first language (L1) to support the effective English writing. Among the various syntactic levels of language usages, grammatical points take an important place.

In 1945, the American linguist C.C. Fries (cited in Pan, 2009) stated that the most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner. Therefore, the way to improve Chinese students' English writing is to compare Chinese with English. According to related research studies, there is no systematic study conducted on the basis of students' writing errors focusing on grammatical points. To investigate this issue, this study was made to make a contrastive analysis between Chinese and English.

## Objectives

There were two objectives for this study:

1. To identify and analyze the patterns of

grammatical errors found in English written texts of Chinese undergraduate learners, and to compare these errors with the grammatical patterns used in the Chinese language.

2. To devise teaching procedures to help the students deal with these grammatical patterns.

## Research Questions

There were three mainly preliminary questions to explore in this study based on the syntactic level.

1. What are the English grammatical errors found in Chinese students' writing?
2. What are significant errors in contrastive analysis between English and Chinese grammatical rules?
3. What English grammatical rules do Chinese students need to improve their writing?

## Literature Review

After Fries (cited in Pan, 2009) has proposed that the paralleled description of the native language learner, based on a scientific description of the target language, is the most effective materials, and that contrastive linguistics (CA) owes to this original ideas. CA means a systematic comparison of specific linguistic characteristics of two or more languages. The objectives of contrastive analysis are summarized in Van Els, et al as in the followings (1984):

- a) Providing insights into similarities and differences between languages;
- b) Explaining and predicting problems in L2 learning;
- c) Developing course materials for language teaching.

James (1998) said that one way of trying to catch a clearer glimpse into L2 learner's mind is to look not only at the correct forms that he or she produces, but also at the errors. According to Corder (cited in Zhang, 2008), a learner's errors provide evidence of the system of the language he is using at a particular point in the course. He concludes three ways to manifest the significance of the errors: first, teachers will know how could the learner do to arrive at the objective and what he or she must learn; second, they provide enough authentic materials to show how learners acquire the language and what strategies they use; and the key point is that to show how the learners make

such errors to explore reasons; and third, it is unavoidable to let learners learn from their errors. The study of errors is called Error Analysis (EA).

Sawrey & Telford (cited in Zhang, 2002) argued that transfer is one of the basic conditions for learning because subsequent learning depends much on what has been learned in the past. From the 1950s, it was often deemed the most important factor to consider in theories of L2 learning as well as in approaches to L2 teaching. To recent years, however, a more balanced perspective has emerged in which the role of transfer is acknowledged and in which transfer is seen to interact with a host of other factors in ways not yet fully understood. When it occurs, it is often the most baffling to readers and the most intractable for writing instructors. It is helpful to consider the linguistic complexities that writing in the English demands of ESL students. In the foreword to *linguistics across cultures*, a highly influential manual on contrastive analysis by Lado (cited in Pan, 2009) stated that learning L2 constitutes a very different task from learning L1. The basic problems arise not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the new language themselves but primarily out of the special 'set' created by the L1 habits. Particularly when L2 shares a wide range of structures with the mother tongue, transfer is a powerful process that can already take the learner deep into the new system (Odlin, 1989). Wang (2008) maintained that, for the Chinese learner, transfer usually performs a helpful role, for example, by providing awareness of basic word order conventions or the distinctions between major word classes.

## Research Approach

The approach for this study was the qualitative approach because the researcher collected materials of students' English writing as the documentation for analysis, and then contrasted the errors of grammatical patterns occurring in their target language with those in the native language.

To analyze the differences between Chinese and English, the researcher focused on the findings about the differences of grammatical patterns of the two languages on students' writings. Major grammatical errors were then contrastively analyzed according to the language structure and their usages. Therefore, this research adopted a qualitative approach.

## Population and sample size

The study employed purposive sampling which was very comprehensive to explore the problem. The idea behind this qualitative research was to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that would optimally help the researcher to understand the problems and the research questions (Creswell, 2003). This study compared the differences between English and Chinese languages in grammatical aspects according to their major errors which exist in their writings at a syntactic level. The participants were Chinese undergraduate students who had learnt English at least seven years and were studying in English at the International College, Burapha University in Thailand. The researcher selected 52 participants from the classes who had attended the Writing Course in their first academic year in 2009.

## Research instruments

Actually there are four kinds of research instrument which are mainly used in qualitative research: observations, interviews, documents and audio-visual materials. But because of time constrain this study used only documents which were the students' English writings to collect the data.

## Data collection and analysis

For the selection of a corpus of language, following the guidelines offered by Ellis (1995), a sample of written work was collected from stu-

dents. These students were asked to write a 150 word-article describing their first year life at Burapha University. Their daily writings were collected in their normal classes to avoid their worries about the scores they were given. Each student provided these daily writing as their documentation.

The students' writings were corrected by native speakers focusing on only grammatical errors. The researcher identified all of these errors and categorized them by the definitions of grammatical errors at a syntactic level, and counted the frequency of each grammatical error in different categories. Based on the frequency of their grammatical errors, the significant grammatical errors were counted for contrastive analysis between Chinese and English, and from the results of the analysis, suggestions for an effective way of English teaching for Chinese students were provided.

## Findings and Discussion

This part presents the results obtained from the participants' writings that answered the three research questions. Those 52 participants had been required to write seven compositions in their writing course. The writing topics were: "Cooking is an important skill"; "Introduce myself"; "How to send an SMS"; "An experience"; "Have fun in Bangkok"; "A picture" and "The quality of a good neighbor". This study collected 165 pieces of writings and classified the errors occurred in their writings.

**1. Grammatical errors existing in students' writings based on syntax;** there were 11 aspects of errors listed in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Error Elicitation

	Errors of grammar	Frequency of errors	Error proportion (%)
1	Tense	(292)	38.99
2	SOV: Sentence structure	(132)	17.62
3	Chinglish	(108)	14.42
4	Articles	(64)	8.54
5	Agreement of subject and its predicates	(62)	8.28
6	Third person singular:	(45)	6.01
7	Subject	(17)	2.27
8	Consistency	(14)	1.87
9	Passive forms	(11)	1.47
10	Lack of transitional words	(3)	0.40
11	Comparative degree	(1)	0.13
	Total amount:	749	100

(Abbreviation: SOV: S stands for subject; O stands for object and V stands for verb.)

**2. Contrastive analysis on grammatical errors exists in their writings;** 5 top errors with higher frequency from 11 grammatical errors were carefully chosen as shown in Table 1.

### 1. Tense:

All sentence structures are organized by tense, especially when people want to express their ac-

tions well. There are four major problems of tense existing in the students' writings: tense categories, time phrase and tense, verb forms and consistency of verb.

Bo (2005), stated that four time categories mainly used are present, past, future and past future; in addition, for action aspects, there are also four categories. All of these times and actions form 16 categories of tense, see Table 2:

**Table 2:** Categories of tense

	Simple	Perfective	Progressive	Perfective progressive
Present	I work	I have worked	I am working	I have been working
Past	I worked	I had worked	I was working	I had been working
Future	I shall work	I shall have worked	I shall be working	I shall have been working
Past future	I should work	I should have worked	I should be working	I should have been working

Although there are 16 categories of tense, in practical writing most students just prefer to use past and present tenses; consequently, these two are the most frequently misused. In addition, most students still have an unclear recognition of different categories of tenses. In the study, many mistakes were found even for the common simple tenses. The reason why tense is so frequently misused lies in that the Chinese language has no such a tense system as English does. Chinese is a tenseless language as Chinese has no tense marker to express tense and actions. This point is typologically and generically different from English, which uses verb affixes to sign the relation between the time of the occurrence and the situation.

In English, the usages of categories of tenses are depended by time phrases. For example:

- 1) Yesterday I went to Bangkok.
- 2) Now I am going to Bangkok.
- 3) Tomorrow I will go to Bangkok.

In each sentence, it is required to use a different form of verbs e.g. "went", "am going" and "will go" instead of the same form of "go" because of different time phrases as: "yesterday", "now" and "tomorrow" are used. These time phrases require the use of different forms of verbs. However, the use of different tenses does not exist in Chinese. It is thus being difficulties for students to learn the verb forms used in different tenses, including regular and irregular verb forms. In Chinese, there are no inflectional suffixes as in English (Dai, cited from Zhou, 2008).

Consistency of tense is also a problem in tense aspect because in Chinese, it is not necessary to be consistent in using the verbs when expressing two things which happen at the same time. In Chinese, you can say: "昨天我去曼谷, 买了一件衣服" which is translated word by word in English as "Yesterday I go to Bangkok, buy clothes". It is acceptable in Chinese but not in English.

### 2. SOV: Sentence structure

Odlin and Greenberg (cited in Zhao, 2009), mentioned that the vast majority of human languages have their basic word order, such as SVO, SOV, and VSO, and the English usage takes such a word order as SVO. Compared with Chinese which often takes various forms corresponding to the meaning of the sentences, English is a kind of rigid word order language, Chinese is quite relatively flexible language, in which the word order is not fixed and quite free, and it can be changed according to semantic purpose rather than grammar regulations.

### 3. Chinglish

Chinglish is a common and popular phenomenon which exists and mainly influences Chinese students in writing English. Most previous studies are done to explore the relationship of English writing and Chinese thinking. It is a serious problem existing in English writing for Chinese students because they prefer to think in Chinese writing way and then translate into English when writing. Thus, the influence of Chinese thinking

way causes lots of errors in writing. However, the researcher did not account the Chinese thinking way in this study, only grammatical points were taken into consideration to find the phenomenon of Chinglish. However, it was also found that problems of Chinglish in grammar point could be part of students' writing errors.

#### 4. Articles

In English, there are two classes of articles: the definite article "the", and indefinite article "a/an". In Chinese no articles are needed; numbers are used to express instead of articles. Therefore, Chinese writers of English will always struggle with articles.

#### 5. Agreement of subject and predicates

The relationship of agreement between subject and verb is also called subject-verb concord. English is a flexible language. Singular subjects take singular verbs, and plural subjects take plural verbs. This is the simple Descriptive Rule of subject-verb number agreement in English. The subject-verb concord refers to the agreement between words in person, number, gender, and case. Chinese is an inflexible language, in which there are no rules about agreement between subject and predicate. Influenced by Chinese, students will ignore the flexible endings. The great difference becomes the main obstacle for Chinese learners to express English in terms of concord.

**Grammatical rules to be improved:** Summarizing the findings from above, the researcher targeted three issues:

1. The tense problem is the necessity and important problem in Chinese undergraduate student's English writings.
2. Although students have learned English for many years, the basic and simple errors in their English writings still exist. These top five grammatical errors need to be corrected on the basis of contrastive analysis and any other teaching ways.
3. From the contrastive analysis, five major grammatical errors were found out because of the differences in grammatical patterns of the two languages. The more differences between Chinese and English, the more errors occurred.

#### Implications

It is very useful for undergraduate students to realize the different usage of some grammatical issues based on their errors. The realization of the contrastive analysis of two kinds of language allows them to be able to pay more attention to these differences when they write. It will also be beneficial to the teachers when they teach English writing to Chinese students. The application of contrastive analysis may be an unfamiliar way but it can be an alternative teaching method to develop English writing teaching.

#### Recommendations

**Improve Chinese students' English writing in attitude:** Chinese students should pay more attention to the differences between Chinese and English in their English writings and have more concentration on their errors existing in their writings in order to avoid repetitions of the same errors. Teachers should also consider these differences of the two languages in order to clearly explain the grammatical patterns they are teaching to the students in order to help the students avoid making errors again and again.

**Improve Chinese students' English strategy writing:** the researcher recommends two kinds of strategies to use in writing teaching: contrastive analysis and error analysis strategies. There are differences and similarities between Chinese and English, based on this study, errors are made because of the differences between Chinese and English. Therefore, it is very necessary to build a system of contrastive analysis strategy in writing teaching.

At the same time, teachers and students should make a good use of error analysis strategy which could decrease the possibilities of making the same error in their future writing. Teachers should present students errors and let them compare these between Chinese and English, then organize and design into a fixed system.

**Improve Chinese students' English writing method:** it is encouraged to provide a modern English writing teaching class for students instead of traditional teaching methods. Here the researcher suggests adding more contents in English writing for Chinese students which could let them master English writing well. Teachers should introduce



English culture to help students know and understand more about the English language and the English cultural aspects. The translation teaching method should also be adopted to promote in

English writing based on the contrastive analysis way to investigate the errors the students made in their writings.

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