

Grammatical Errors in Written Assessments of Non-Native English-Speaking Undergraduate Students and Pedagogical Implications in Correcting Mistakes

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Abstract: This paper examines the English grammatical errors and their patterns in the written assignments of a General Education course at City University of Hong Kong. Subjects are 60 local and non-local (exchange) undergraduate students who are all L2 learners with diversified education and disciplinary background (i. e. their major of study) which are unrelated to English language studies. The objective of this paper brings to the foreground a broad discussion of L2 undergraduate learners' average syntactic ability in terms of written assessment. This paper is an attempt in classifying the patterns and categories of grammatical errors committed by students who were brought up and educated in non-native English-speaking countries. Thus, pedagogical recommendations are offered for both L2 learners and educators in tertiary education settings in such ways as to calibrate how and in what manner English language as the medium of instruction can lead to more enduring effects in learners within non-native English-speaking countries.

Keywords: Syntactic Errors, Second Language Acquisition, Pedagogy

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Introduction

English is the medium of instruction in all universities in Hong Kong. Local students who acquired Chinese as first language (L1) and English as second language (L2) can generally handle simple English communication in class. However, grammatical errors are often noticed when it comes to English writings, as it is considered the most difficult skill to acquire by many English L2 writers (Nunan, 1999).

L2 learners tend to apply the rules and structures of Chinese language in their English writings (Timina, 2013) This direct transfer of the mother tongue linguistic structure and rules to the target language is defined as L1 interference. L1 interference results in grammatical errors caused by the influence of the L1, which is nothing new in L2 acquisition. Yet, it is still an essential factor to be considered regarding education in Hong Kong, as

Hong Kong is a bilingual community with British colonial and historical influence.

Since Hong Kong is a bilingual community, with Chinese Language (both Cantonese and Mandarin) as L1 and English Language as L2, it is of paramount importance for undergraduates to equip themselves with respectable English writing proficiency before graduation. According to Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council (2017), one of the key learning outcomes is to “emphasize the importance of *text grammar* through heightening students’ awareness of how *grammar* affects the coherence, structure and tone of a text.”. Hence, there is a need to examine L2 learners’ writing proficiency in terms of grammar accuracy under the context of tertiary education in Hong Kong.

Objectives

This qualitative case study aims to (1) Identify the common grammatical errors found in the individual self-reflection reports written by L2 undergraduate students; (2) Examine the specific difficulties faced by L2 learners of English under the context of tertiary education in Hong Kong; (3) Explore pedagogical strategies and give advice in terms of course design for both teachers and learners to enhance teaching and learning effectiveness.

Literature Review

Various studies have pointed out that there is an interference or transfer of students’ L1 (Chinese language) to their writings in L2 (English language), which explained their grammatical errors in English writings. (Ghabool et al., 2012; Ye, 2013; Dipolog-Ubanan, 2016; Ngangbam, 2016; Yu & Chen, 2021; Al-Saggaf et al., 2022) When students whose L1 is Chinese write in English, the linguistic rules of their L1 tend to be adopted due to a direct translation from Chinese into English. The result is referred as “Chinglish”, a mixture of Chinese and English, which is ungrammatical and problematic in academic writing (Timina, 2013).

Ghabool, et al., (2012) has investigated Malaysian L2 students’ English writing problems. The findings demonstrated that L2 students have problems in writing tasks, especially in grammar. L1 interference was also noticeable in their English writings. On the other hand, Al-Saggaf et al. (2022) has conducted a research on 73 Malaysian L2 students. The findings of this study have also manifested that L1 interference can be observed from written assignments in terms of grammatical mistakes and spelling mistakes.

Relevant studies were previously conducted on university students in Hong Kong, but usually with a narrower research focus or with a different sample group. Flowerdew (2006) identified a range of errors in the use of signaling nouns (e.g. argument, fact) in argumentative essays written by Cantonese L1 first-year students at a university in Hong Kong, whilst Lee (2004) conducted error analysis on a group of Hong Kong high school L2 students, with emphasis of how teachers can give constructive feedback on students’ grammatical mistakes.

In regards of the above-mentioned studies, certain difficulties were faced by ESL learners in both secondary and tertiary education contexts. It can be interpreted that ESL learners most likely encounter difficulties in tense, verb forms, language use (grammar) and subject-verb agreement errors. Thus, this paper sheds light on bringing a broader scope of the area of research under tertiary education context.

Methodology

Error analysis is a branch of applied linguistics emerged in the 60s (Khansir, 2012). In this case study, data was collected in the form of individual self-reflection report for an undergraduate course. Students were asked to reflect on the learning experience throughout the course, which encourages them to express personal observations and jargon-free thoughts. There was no restriction on the structure of the report, students were encouraged to write in a free-thinking mode.

Subjects were 60 undergraduate students who were all L2 users with diversified education background. They were taking a General Education course at City University of Hong Kong. All the samples were collected from an online internal platform where students were asked to submit their reports via an internal online submission link. Samples were encoded with student ID numbers instead of the students' names. 52 out of 60 students are local students in Hong Kong, who acquired Chinese as their mother tongue and English as their second language. The remaining students acquired other languages as L1, such as Urdu and Korean; and they also acquired English as second language. All these students were year 1 to year 4 undergraduate students from School of Business, School of Science and Engineering, School of Social Science, School of Arts and School of Law. Their major of study were not in the area of English language or linguistics.

This study focuses on examining the following categories of grammatical mistakes committed by undergraduate students in individual written assignments: (1) Tenses and (2) Subject-verb agreement. The error-analysis procedure was conducted according to the following three steps (Huang, 2002)

1. Data collection
2. Identification of errors
3. Categorizing errors into different types

Errors of the collected data in the form of individual self-reflection report were identified and classified into different error categories by two raters who were reliable English grammar experts.

Discussion

Incorrect Tense

The linguistic system of English tense is found to be one of the biggest challenges for L2 students. Referring to Dulay et al. (1982), we can understand cases of L1 interference by comparing the language systems between L1 and L2. The system of Chinese language does not involve verb tense, in which time adverbs are inserted in

sentences to illustrate the time of action, regardless of whether the action takes place in the past, present, or future, the Chinese verb remains the same in both spoken and written discourse. (Dipolog-Ubanan, 2016). The following are some of the illustrations:

“Since the Hong Kong government *close* all sports centres last year”

“In the past, we *are* difficult to reach the manufacturer which *is* the reason why there *is* fewer entrepreneurs in the past”

“A company or brand *become* less popular after finding a wrong KOL in past year”

“These have absolutely *build* trust between me and the brand”

“Before taking this course, I always *assume* that small businesses probably do not have enough budget to hire a team for conducting a detailed marketing plan for them”

“They have *make* purchases on the captured item”

“I remember while I *am* discussing the class exercise with my group mates”

“Before this course, I *have* a sense that Hong Kong Business opportunities are diminishing when *compare* to other countries and cities.”

“The interest in business industries, operations and management has *lead* me to choose this course”

“The lesson pointed out the 6 major marketing variations including public relations and brand identity which I had never *spot* them before”

“I have realized that digital marketing through social media will *comes* to a problem about the trustworthiness”

“I *learn* that many people buy NFT for emotional or practical purposes but NFT *had already been* popular on business platforms”

No Subject Verb Agreement

Apart from English tense error, subject-verb agreement is another noticeable problem for L2 learners. In English, a subject-verb agreement is a must in all sentences, which involves singular/plural forms of verb; whereas the Chinese writing system does not require subject-verb agreement, since the quantity of subject or object is merely indicated by numbers (Hsieh, 2009; Timina, 2013). It is therefore explainable that some students found it confusing to determine whether a particular term is countable or uncountable, singular or plural, and whether a particular subject or object can be added with the suffix “-s”. The followings are some examples.

“For most *peoples* in the world, they compare Hong Kong to Singapore”

“The inspiring career-oriented guest talk was very fruitful in my *learnings*.”

“Every bad *news* about a company *spread* so quickly that it easily affects the company's image”

“To be more clear, if one KOL *are* dedicate”

“...Which is the reason why there *is* fewer entrepreneurs in the past”

“The inspiring career-oriented guest talk was very fruitful in my *learnings*.”

“Acquiring new customers are undoubtedly essential for businesses.”

“At last, we have agreed that as long as the child are not forced to work and given a good working condition”

“In addition, the class exercise of lecture 2 provide the opportunity to discuss how metaverse foster the economy with the groupmates”

“Other countries like Singapore is growing fast in the recent years.”

“When the company utilize blockchain technology”

“It is universal knowledge that when the company collect client’s personal information”

“The metaverse refers to people performing a series of activities in the virtual world with virtual images, such as entertainment, economy, academic, other activities in different fields and reduce the dependence on the real society”

“Technology advancements has also created a platform for cybercrime and fake information”

The root cause of tense error that students committed can be perceived as the consequence of the differences in grammar between their L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English). Brown (2006) claimed that the difficulties for students to learn L2 depend mostly on the differences between L1 and L2. Thus, the bigger differences there are between the two language systems, the more the L1 would interfere in L2 learning.

Conclusion

The errors were found committed due to mother-tongue (L1) interference and lack of grammatical knowledge. The findings of this case study coincide with previous relevant research studies by Ye (2013), Timina (2013), Dipolog-Ubanan (2016), Ngangbam (2016), Yu & Chen (2021), Al-Saggaf et al. (2022). This study sheds light on potential future research directions, such as how to explore in what other forms of syntactic errors (e. g. incorrect use of adverbs and prepositions) with a larger sample group, or to compare by comparing L2 students whose major of study are English language or linguistics. Additionally, quantitative research tool including questionnaire can be adopted, in which L2 students are asked to rate which aspect of L2 acquisition do they find the most difficult. Apart from the above-mentioned approaches, qualitative methodology can be a possible research tool, such as conducting interview with L2 students to better understand their needs in English language learning.

Recommendations

Pedagogical tactics are suggested to be modified in order to accommodate the needs of L2 students, so as to enhance learning effectiveness in terms of English writing. In the short term, teachers are suggested to specify the common grammatical mistakes committed by L2 English learners, to avoid language interference and for a more effective impact in learning and writing in English language. It is also advised to design classroom activities that integrate writing with other language skills (e. g. Designing business negotiation simulation or debate with a focus on subject-verb agreement). In the long run, a well-designed pedagogy giving specific

attention to the needs of L2 learners of different proficiency levels, such as providing organizational proofreading support. Educators should embrace the diversity with positive attitude, given that L2 learners of English language may possess different English proficiency.

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