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An Empirical Study of Errors in Chinese EFL Learners' Writing

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Abstract: Based on the theory of Error Analysis and the error classification of Carl James, this paper makes an analysis of the errors in the online writing of 19 minority preparatory students in a college in Beijing and explores the types of errors and underlying causes. The findings reveal: firstly, the proportion of substance errors was the highest, with spelling errors being particularly severe. The verb and article errors were more obvious in grammatical errors. Secondly, inter-language transfer and intra-language transfer were the main causes of errors, and inter-language transfer was more obvious. The findings complemented existing research on foreign language writing with third language learners' evidence. Some possible explanations in relation to these findings were discussed. In addition, implications for teachers and researchers of EFL were offered.

Keywords: English writing; Error analysis; Preparatory students; Language transfer

1. INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road initiative has accelerated the deepening of external exchanges in China's ethnic minority regions. The demand for trilingual talents proficient in Mandarin, English, and a minority language has become increasingly urgent. Among these skills, proficiency in English writing has emerged as an indispensable competence for trilingual individuals. Preparatory education for ethnic minorities constitutes a distinctive tier within higher education and plays a crucial role in the overall higher education landscape, garnering gradual attention from national authorities and relevant departments. However, researches in this domain reveal inadequate attention from teachers towards addressing errors in student language learning, and a deficiency in providing accurate guidance^[1]. This oversight is particularly evident in the myriad errors present in the English writing of ethnic minority students, indicative of a need for improvement in the quality of English language instruction. In light of these challenges, this study employs error analysis theory to investigate the errors in English writing among Uyghur ethnic minority preparatory students and to explore the underlying causes. The aim is to assist students in enhancing their writing skills, contributing to the cultivation of trilingual talents in the new era.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Error is defined as a deviation from the target language norms^[2]. In the 1970s, Corder introduced the theory

of Error Analysis (EA) as a replacement for Contrastive Analysis (CA), shifting the focus to the language actually used by students. Error Analysis theory is built upon the foundations of cognitive psychology and generative linguistics. Its objective is to analyze and evaluate errors made by students during language acquisition, aiming to identify the strategies they employ and the underlying reasons for the errors in the process of language learning. Scholars have explored various classifications of errors. Corder^[3] initially made a distinction between errors and mistakes, later evolving into errors of competence and errors of performance. Errors of competence was further divided into intra-lingual and inter-lingual errors. It established the basic theoretical framework for error analysis. Richard^[4] further categorized errors into inter-lingual errors, intra-lingual errors, and developmental errors, contributing to a significant impact in the field of education. Then, James^[5] identified errors at three levels: substance errors, encompassing spelling, capitalization, and punctuation errors; text errors, including vocabulary and grammar errors; and discourse errors, involving coherence and pragmatics.

Numerous scholars have dedicated their efforts to the field of error analysis. Politzer & McGroarty^[6] conducted a study on errors made by Czech English students in their compositions and found that assessing students' proficiency based on the types and frequencies of errors is a relatively effective method^[6]. Other scholars, such as Zhang^[7], investigated errors in graduate students' writing, and Jia^[8] examined Chinese English students' errors in gerund collocation based on cognitive grammar. However, overall, the focus of error studies has predominantly been on second language students, with limited research addressing in the trilingual acquisition of ethnic minority university students.

Among the few studies conducted, Wang & Aimaiti^[9] analyzed compositions from Uyghur university students, identifying errors as intra-lingual, inter-lingual, and unclassified, with inter-lingual errors being prevalent. Huang^[10] took contrastive analysis and error analysis as theoretical frameworks, examining grammar errors at the morphological, lexical, and syntactic levels. The study revealed that errors were caused by both L2 Chinese and native language transfer. Wang^[11], using Mongolian students as subjects, analyzed common errors in English writing at the lexical, grammatical, and sentence

structure levels, and the reasons of it.

However, the aforementioned studies predominantly focused on grammatical errors, overlooking other linguistic levels, and the exploration of error causes was not enough. Given these considerations, this study comprehensively analyzes the errors in Uyghur preparatory students' English writing and delves into their underlying causes. The study aims to address the following two questions:

- (1) What are the most common types of errors made by Uyghur preparatory students in their English writing?
- (2) What are the reasons behind the occurrence of errors in the writing of Uyghur English students?

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research participants

The research focuses on 19 Uyghur students from a minority pre-university program at a university in Beijing. These students participate in the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) as ethnic minority candidates, utilizing the same examination papers as their Han Chinese counterparts. The linguistic and educational background of the participants is as follows: their native language is Uyghur, and they received education in Xinjiang before entering the pre-university stage. They commenced learning L2 Chinese from kindergarten. The majority of students initiated their English language studies in high school, with instructors delivering English classes in Mandarin during both high school and the pre-university stages.

3.2 Research tools

Writing tasks and retrospective interviews were used in this study. Utilizing a learning platform for online learning, data were collected on a learning platform on which participants were asked to finish a composition. The writing tasks were similar to College English Test-Band 4. This process was conducted over a three-week interval, with a total of four writing task assessments administered. The students were required to complete each writing task within one day. Subsequently, four representative students were selected for online retrospective interviews to obtain more detailed information. The interview protocol is outlined as follows:

- (1) In your daily life, what language do you commonly use?
- (2) Have you learned the basic norms of English? Have you studied the rules of English pronunciation?
- (3) Taking "My favorite fruit" as the topic, please think about the essay. When you write it, do Chinese and Uyghur influence your writing?
- (4) In your English learning, what types of mistakes do you often make? and what factors contribute to these errors? Could you elaborate on the particular errors in

these four writing compositions.

- (5) Do you carefully review the error feedback provided by the machine? What can the teacher do for you?

3.3 Research method and Data collection

Based on the theory of error analysis, the study followed the procedural framework proposed by Corder ^[12], which encompasses five stages: data collection, error identification, error categorization, error explanation, and error evaluation, to analyze the errors occurring in writing. Firstly, data were collected by 74 valid examination papers. Subsequently, a small-scale corpus of Uyghur minority writing was established, and errors were automatically identified through the Learning Platform and the received error detection reports were manually assessed. Thirdly, qualitative research tool Nvivo 20.0 was employed for coding and categorizing errors, referencing James's error classification, with subsequent quantitative analysis of error frequencies. Fourthly, the study investigated the patterns and underlying reasons for errors in writing. The results, together with pre-study findings, guided the formulation of interview protocols for in-depth interviews with four participants, providing further insights into the causes of errors. Finally, the fifth stage involved the analysis and discussion of the error outcomes.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This study followed the framework of James's classification to conduct a quantitative analysis of errors. As shown in table 1, the statistics revealed that the total number of errors was 503, with 287 substance errors constituting the majority, accounting for 57% of the total errors. Among text errors, students were most prone to verb errors with 53 instances, which included errors related to tense, verb omission, and subject-verb agreement. Article errors ranked second with a count of 42, predominantly involving the omission of indefinite articles and the misuse of definite articles. Some errors, such as those related to word class, non-finite clauses, and adverbs, occurred less frequently and are not discussed further in the subsequent sections.

4.1 Substance Errors

Substance errors encompass spelling errors, capitalization errors, and punctuation errors. The investigation revealed that spelling errors were the most frequent and had discernible patterns, which would be discussed in subsequent sections. Due to the basic rules of capitalization and punctuation in English writing, this study categorizes them collectively for analysis.

Table 1 The number of errors in each classification

Types	Specific types	Number	Rank
Substance error	Capitalization	87	2
	Punctuation	63	3
	Spelling	137	1
Text errors	Work class	6	13
	Number of noun	11	11
	Tense	28	7
	Verb omission	12	10
	Subject-verb agreement	13	9
	Non-finite verb	8	12
	Preposition	30	6
	Article	42	4
	Pronoun	12	10
Discourse errors	Adverb	4	14
	Chinese way of thinking	17	8
	Run-on sentences	33	5

4.1.1 Spelling errors

Spelling errors primarily result from the phonetic transfer from the native language and the over generalization of target language rules. Firstly, they may be linked to students' mispronunciation of words [13]. An analysis revealed four predominant patterns as follows:

Example (1): The recollection of my childhood is like drem*.

Example (2): so every yer* they hoped that the spring fstival would come soon.

Example (3): For me, the most unforgettable experience of childhood shold* be about my father is car accident.

Example (4): I waw born in the contryside*, and i did not have many toys, just like other kids in may hometown.

In the examples mentioned above, omission of letters within vowel combinations is observed in the misspelling of words containing the letter combinations "ea", "ou", such as in the words "dream", "year", "should", and "countryside", where the combinations are pronounced as /i:/, /i:/, /ə/, and /ʌ/ respectively. Due to the lack of systematic exposure to phonetics and pronunciation rules, the participants possessed limited knowledge of the pronunciation rules associated with letter combinations in English. Moreover, Uyghur speakers often modulate long and short vowels based on contextual variations rather than fixed letter combinations; for instance, "alma" signifies "apple", while "a-lma" conveys "do not take". Consequently, when it comes to the pronunciation of vowel combinations, students tend to erroneously perceive it as a single-letter sound, leading to the omission of the second letter in vowel combinations.

Example (5): Family mean of so Mach* for me.

Example (6): Hlleo. everbady *I like football, my childhood time in football .

Example (7): English is very good klass*, I very like

it.

In the composition, English letters were substituted with those from the native language or Mandarin Chinese sharing similar pronunciations. As noted by He [14], the majority of spelling errors among secondary school students were closely associated with pronunciations, a phenomenon possibly linked to negative transfer from L2 Chinese. Mandarin Pinyin and English share common letters in their written forms, yet their pronunciation systems diverge significantly. Due to participants in this study receiving bilingual education from an early age, Chinese exerts a profound influence, leading to instances where certain sounds in English bear resemblance to Mandarin Pinyin and share nearly identical spellings. Consequently, L2 transfer may occur in their English spelling. For instance, in the word "much", the /ʌ/ sound is represented by the Mandarin Pinyin letter "a", while in "class", the /k/ sound is represented by the Mandarin Pinyin letter "k". In "football", the /ɔ:/ sound is represented by the Mandarin Pinyin letter "o". Additionally, Uyghur language incorporates loanwords similar in both spelling and pronunciation to English, such as "kamera-camera" and "kompeyoter-computer", further impacting the students. However, to ascertain whether these influences stem from their L1 Uyghur, L2 Chinese, or a combination of both requires further exploration into the sources of linguistic transfer.

Example (8): finaly* I hope every one can go back home to families get together to celebrate festivals, to injoy family's wearm.

Example (9): Yet l stil *can not forget the happy clay figuers when l was a little boy and was a prince in the family.

Example (10): I remember incident that hapyed *in my childhood

In instances where a word contains two consecutive consonant letters and are pronounced as a single sound, there is a tendency to omit one of the consonant letters.

As the example (8) to (10) shown, students may misspell words like “finally”, “still”, and “happen” as “finaly”, “stil”, and “hapy”, respectively. This phenomenon arises from the negative transfer of L1 Uyghur, wherein the pronunciation of both consonant letters is required when they appear consecutively. Consequently, due to the negative transfer from Uyghur, there exists errors among Uyghur students to omit consonant letters in English writing.

Example (11): I like my childhood, evry bady childhood with good, my nam is kaisaier, i kan from xinjiang kashe, i lik *to be my jiaxing.

Example (12): From then on, colleg* has been my motivation for learning.

Example (13): I also remember the days when I fell sick and had to be confind* to bed.

Neglect the silent final vowel “-e”. Uyghur, belonging to the Altaic language and utilizing the phonetic script, lacks silent vowels at the end of words. Students, influenced by negative transfer from their native language, omitted the final “-e” in words such as “like”, “college”, and “confine”, resulting in spelling errors.

Secondly, spelling errors are also associated with an overgeneralization of target language rules. Overgeneralization refers to students applying the rules of the target language that they have learned, excessively transferring one grammar rule to another.

Example (14): she teach we tow class, so she extremely tird, but she never did not expresstion*, every day she play with we.

Example (15): Thousands of fireworkes* fly into the sky and use the most gorgeoues flowers im my life.

Example (16): May perents were then the most unhappy persons* in the world.

In the examples (14) to (16), students demonstrated a linguistic competence of the nominal suffix “-tion” in words such as “tradition” and “invention”. However, there is a tendency to overlook the morphological variations of “-tion”. Specifically, when a verb ending in ‘t’ transforms into a noun, it typically concludes with “-tion”, while if verbs end with ‘s’ convert to nouns, they generally end with “sion”. The misspelling of the word “expresstion” was attributed to the overgeneralization of the “-tion” suffix. Furthermore, errors in the spelling of “Fireworkes” and “persons” result from the overgeneralization of pluralization rules, neglecting the nuanced application of either adding “-es” or “-s”, which indicated that participants in this study have not fully mastered the pluralization rule.

4.1.2 Capitalization errors and punctuation errors

Example (1): When i was a child,my parents once went to play with me.

Example (2): I learning english in hight school.

Example (3): i come from xinjiang china.

Example (4): hello,my name is osman.

The conventions of English writing encompass basic requisites, wherein punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and format constitute integral components of

English writing pedagogy, but often overlooked by teachers and students^[15]. From the writing production, it revealed a prevalent occurrence of the “run-on sentence” in punctuation usage. Fundamental rules of capitalization, such as inconsistencies in the capitalization of initial letters and proper nouns, remain inadequately mastered, leading to capitalization errors. Notably, within proper nouns, the errors involving the words “I” and “English” were more obvious. Insights derived from interviews attribute the phenomenon to two principal factors. Firstly, despite exposure to normative writing standards, participants performed an insufficient grasp of fundamental rules and tend to disregard their application in the practice. Secondly, unfamiliarity with online operations, with a majority of students mentioning limited computer use as a factor leading to discomfort with online typing. Addressing these challenges necessitates teachers emphasizing the significance of punctuation and capitalization in subsequent instruction, coupled with exercises designed to enhance students’ proficiency in online writing skills.

4.2 Text errors

4.2.1 Noun errors

Example (1): all the student* and teachers cried very sadly than day.

Example (2): my mother* and my fathers have many brother and sisters.

Example (3): The Spring festival is one of the traditionai festval* in China.

Noun errors predominantly included errors of word class and errors of number. Students always omitted the plural marker “-s” when forming plural nouns. This tendency can be attributed to the language transfers of Chinese and Uyghur, where the singular and plural forms of nouns remain unaltered when quantified, as exemplified in Chinese with phrases like “yibayaoshi” (one key) and “wubayaoshi” (five keys), where the word “yaoshi” (key) remains invariant. Similarly, in Uyghur, “ئۇ ئالما” (an apple) and “بەش ئالما” (five apples), the form of “ئالما” (apple) does not change. However, in English, as illustrated by “an apple” and “five apples”, the morphology of the noun “apple” necessitates modification by appending “-s” to denote plurality. Consequently, Uyghur students often exhibit a tendency to transfer patterns from their native language or Chinese when expressing plural nouns in English, inadvertently misusing the singular form.

4.2.2 Verb errors

Example (4): When I was a child, the most unforgettable thing was that I made medicine give my mother, when I was a child , I like* my mother so much ,so I did this.

Example (5): My two brothers very intelligent*.

Example (6): she help* me in my difficult.

Verb errors predominantly included tense error, verb omission, and subject-verb agreement. Tense errors occur frequently in verb usage. In Uyghur, the tense of

the verb is achieved through verb forms and auxiliary words, while Uyghur verbs do not have tense and do not require changes in form. Under the influence of Uyghur, students are prone to making tense errors in composition. The omission of the linking verb is another common error. Linking verb connects the subject and the predicate, indicating the nature, characteristics, and qualities of the subject. In English, the auxiliary verb “is”, “am”, “are” must be consistent with the subject and cannot be omitted. In Uyghur, there are auxiliary verbs to express different persons, but these auxiliary verbs can be omitted. Therefore, Uyghur students are prone to omitting the linking verb under the influence of their mother tongue, such as in example sentence (5) My two brothers very intelligent, the verb “is” is omitted. In subject-verb agreement errors, English has a strict grammatical meaning, and the words should be consistent in terms of person, number, and case, and the verb endings should change for different persons. However, the Chinese verbs do not have inflection changes. Students are often influenced by Chinese, which leads to the inconsistency between the predicate and the subject. For example, in sentence (6), the student used “help” without changing the third-person singular form according to the subject.

4.2.3 Pronouns errors

Example (7): she *so beautiful and celever, all children like she, me too.

Example (8): she teach we tow class, so she extremely tird, but she never did not expresstion, every day she play with we* .

In English, personal pronouns have strict rules: the nominative case includes he, she, it, we, and they, and the objective case includes him, her, it, us, and them. The Chinese pronouns have a fixed character form and do not require changes in form regardless of the part of speech. In Uyghur, all third-person singular pronouns use the same word, and the pronouns need to be suffixed when they serve as the object instead of directly selecting the corresponding objective case form ^[16]. Therefore, minority students often confuse the nominative and objective case forms of pronouns. For example, in sentence (7), “all children like she” should be “all children like her”, and the “we” in sentence (8), “every day she play with we”, should be “us”.

4.2.4 Article errors

Example (9): English is* very good klass, I very like it.

Example (10): I also have* unforgettable experrince

Example (11): No matter how busy they are, they will come home for the* dinner.

Example (12): However, family parties are usually at home because *most elder people don’t like the noisy restaurants or pubs.

In Uyghur, the articles are rich but they are not always necessary, so they are inclined to be omitted. Therefore, Uygur students often make mistakes in the use of the

article when learning English. The phenomenon of missing indefinite articles and misusing definite articles is more serious. For example, in example (9) and (10), the indefinite article “a” and “an” are missing, and in sentences (11) and (12), the definite article “the” is misused. The correct forms should be “come for dinner” and “the eldest”.

4.2.5 Preposition error

Example (13): Family mean of so Mach for* me.

Example (14): I like New Year, people in the New Year’s day, to stick couplets on* the Spring Festival.

Example (15): So young people should spend more time at* family ceremoines?

Prepositions are the most difficult part of speech for English students to master. For example, the Chinese word “zai” can be translated into English as “in”, “on”, “at”, etc. It is difficult for Uyghur students to learn these words because there are no prepositions in Uyghur, and the relationship between nouns and other words depends on the “case” in Uyghur. For example, in Uyghur, The time, place, purpose, and manner in Uyghur are not expressed by prepositions but by the postposition word or case addition which is added after a noun ^[17]. Therefore, Uyghur students are prone to misuse prepositions, especially in the use of “zai”. The preposition in Example (15) should be “at”.

4.3 Discourse errors

Example (1): Unfortunately, on that day, it began to rain, we had to go back early.

Example (2): I this person is very special, unlike some people like quiet, where busy I went to drill.

Example (3): I hope my sister and brother can come back home in next year’s spring festival, because can meet them is unusual thing, I very miss them.

The English language emphasizes sentence structure, utilizing various connecting devices to combine sentences. However, Chinese prioritizes the meaning of the words, and the sentence structure is often loose without the use of connecting words. Therefore, Chinese students are often influenced by Chinese logic thinking, and they often overlook the connecting devices in English. For instance, in the first sentence, the student did not use a connecting word to connect the sentence, which resulted in an incomplete sentence structure. The sentence should be “Unfortunately, it suddenly began to rain that day, so we had to go back early.” The second and third sentences are influenced by the interference of Chinese thinking patterns. The second sentence is influenced by Chinese spoken language “wǒ zhè gè rén fēi cháng tè bié, b ú xi àng bi é rén xǐ huān ān jìng, wǒ xǐ huān rè n ào”, and the third sentence “because can meet them is unusual thing, I very miss them” is influenced by Chinese sentence “n àng jì àn dào tā men shì bú róng yì de shì, wǒ fēi cháng xiǎng niàn tā men”. These sentences directly translate Chinese into English without paying attention to the rules of English sentences, resulting in the discourse errors.

5. DISCUSSION

The results indicate that substance errors are the most severe among all errors, suggesting that errors caused by the neglect of fundamentals and rules among Uyghur students cannot be overlooked. This study found that spelling errors are the most severe among Uyghur students, reflecting a significant lack of English fundamentals among preparatory students, with substantial issues in word spelling. Uyghur students are influenced by interlingual transfer between their native language and Mandarin when creating vocabulary, that is, they creatively reconstruct the morphology and phonetics of the target language influenced by other languages^[18]. Moreover, overgeneralization of target language rules also has an effect on spelling. This indicates that words related to phonetic learning, such as those with similar sounds and irregular verb forms are challenging for students to memorize^[19]. Verb errors are also prominent in text errors, with tense errors being a frequently overlooked issue by students. Meanwhile, Shui^[20] found that Uyghur college students exhibited text errors such as subject omission and inversion of the subject-verb-object order in their English compositions. Nonetheless, this study does not validate the aforementioned findings and further investigation is needed to explore specific reasons. The research reveals that interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer are the main causes of errors, with interlingual transfer playing a more noticeable role.

In addition to the factors of interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer, Uyghur students' writing is also affected by learning strategies and their affections. Through interviews, they reported that "Mandarin is encouraged in our school so I am inclined to generate English by the means of Chinese." and "Our English teacher teaches us English in Chinese, so we have developed Chinese-style English thinking". Due to the vigorous promotion of Mandarin by the government, students predominantly use Mandarin for communication, and years of Mandarin learning have led to the formation of Chinese-style English thinking pattern. As a result, many students employ a Chinese translation strategy to learn English, failing to develop an English thinking mode. Therefore, they tend to produce some English sentences that do not conform to grammar rules. In addition, anxiety is another factor contributing to errors. "I feel anxious as if there is no systematic process in my English learning. I am in a state of confusion." Students believe that anxiety is common during exams and has a bad influence on their English writing.

In response to the aforementioned findings, this study proposes the following recommendations: Firstly, the great importance should be attached to the positive transfer. Teachers are supposed to be adept at recognizing the similarities and differences among Uyghur, Mandarin, and English so as to tutor student English corresponding to those in Uyghur with similar

forms and pronunciation to strengthen positive transfer from the native language. Meanwhile, it is also necessary to emphasize the differences between Uyghur and English to minimize negative transfer. Secondly, cultivating students' English thinking abilities is a necessity. Many students employ Chinese-style English thinking pattern when writing in English. During routine English writing training, teachers should pay attention to the development of their English thinking abilities. For instance, they can encourage brainstorming to associate English words, conduct simple and interesting short reading exercises and expand the input of authentic English reading and recitation materials. Thirdly, alleviating student's anxiety is also necessary. Interviews reveal that anxiety significantly impacts English learning. Teachers are expected to create a conducive learning environment to enhancing students' enthusiasm and proactivity in English learning. When necessary, a diversified feedback model combining online feedback, peer feedback, and teacher feedback is welcomed to provide comprehensive feedback to students, facilitating the maximum improvement of errors.

6. CONCLUSION

This study analyzes students' errors based on Uyghur students' English online writing, categorizes statistics on common errors and analyzes the causes. The results showed that substance errors were the most predominant, and lexical spelling was more severe and mostly related to phonological transfer. Among the text errors, verb errors and article errors are the most serious. The reasons for Uyghur students' writing errors were mainly attributed to intralingual and interlanguage transfer, but personal factors such as Chinese-style English thinking pattern and anxiety were also triggers for the errors. There are some limitations in this study, such as the length of time given for a single writing session and the lack of objectivity in determining the cause of errors. Future research could explore the extent of the influence of first and second language on trilingual transfer in writing errors based on the selection of students with different levels of native language and Chinese language proficiency, or utilize methods such as psychological experiments to further identify the sources of transfer. Students' writing errors is a serious and complex problem, and the results of this study provide some data on the aspect of Uyghur writing errors, which is expected to help improve Uyghur English writing and contribute to the cultivation of trilingual talents in the new era.

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