Ineffectiveness of Sentences in English Writing by Chinese Postgraduates: Problem Analysis and Solutions

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Abstract: English writing, a crucial medium of language communication, is a skill which needs comprehensive use of knowledge and the most challenging one for L2 learners among the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. With a view to finding out the current situation of English writing by Chinese postgraduates, the author conducted a survey in the university. It is found that the postgraduate students have some problems in sentence effectiveness, namely conciseness, emphasis and variety. Therefore, this thesis will mainly focus on the analysis of the common syntactical problems in English writing from those three aspects, and then the countermeasures will be found out to help them improve their writing.

Keywords: English Writing by Chinese Postgraduates, Problem Analysis, Solutions

1. The Importance of English Writing

English writing, along with other basic skills (listening, reading and speaking), has always been an issue of great concern to EFL teachers and researchers. Despite the strong desire to write well in English, quite a number of Chinese university students still remain incompetent in English writing. Both students and teachers increasingly feel frustrated and complain about the quality of the learning outcome. Therefore, a survey is conducted with a view to finding out the existing problems with Chinese postgraduates' English writing to search for ways of bettering students' writing skill.

By means of conducting questionnaires among the postgraduates in Tianjin University of Finance and Economics in China, this thesis attempts to have a thorough analysis of the syntactical problems the postgraduate students have in their English writing from the aspect of making effective sentences. Through the analysis of students' compositions, the author finds that apart from some grammatical mistakes, students are more susceptible to the syntactical problems in conciseness, emphasis and variety owing to the fact that most of them do not have a clear idea about making effective sentences or haven't realized the significance of effectiveness in English writing.

2. Error Analysis

Error Analysis, as was pointed out by Sridhar (1981), has a long tradition. At first, however, Error Analysis is mainly about impressionistic collections of 'common' errors and their linguistic classification. The goals of traditional Error Analysis were pedagogic -- errors providing information which could be used to sequence items for teaching or to devise remedial lessons. The resurgence of interest in Error Analysis took place in the late 1960s. A series of articles by Corder both traced the resurgence and helped to give it direction (Rod, 1985).

According to Corder, the procedure for the Error Analysis is as follows. 1) A corpus of language is selected. This involves deciding on the size of the sample, the medium to be sampled, and the homogeneity of the sample. 2) The errors in the corpus are identified. 3) The errors are classified. This involves assigning a grammatical description to each other. 4) The errors are explained. In this stage of the procedure an attempt is made to identify the psycholinguistic cause of the errors. 5) The errors are explained. This stage involves assessing the seriousness of each error in order to take principled teaching decisions. Error analysis is only necessary if the purpose of Error Analysis is pedagogic (Rod, 1985).

The context for the new interest in errors was the

recognition that they provided information about the process of acquisition. Error Analysis provides two kinds of information about interlanguage. The first concerns the linguistic type of errors produced by L2 learners. While the second type of information concerns the psycholinguistic type of errors produced by L2 learners. Richards (1974) identifies various strategies associated with developmental errors, such as overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false concepts hypothesized. Perhaps the most ambitious attempt to explain SLA by analyzing the psycholinguistic origins of errors is to be found in George (1972). He argues that errors derive from the learner's need to exploit the redundancy of language by omitting elements that are non-essential for the communication of meaning. Implicit in the types of analysis provided by both Richards and George is the assumption that at least some of the causes are universal. Error Analysis can be used to investigate the various processes that contribute to the interlanguage development (Rod, 1985).

The most significant contribution of Error Analysis lies in its success in evaluating the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide to the inner workings of the language learning process. As a result of interlanguage theory and the evidence accumulated from Error Analysis, errors were seen as evidence of the learner's active contribution to SLA. This contribution appeared to be broadly the same irrespective of differences in the learner's backgrounds, suggesting that the human faculty for language may structure and define the learning task in such a way that SLA, like L1 acquisition, universal in nature. (Rod, 1985)

3. A Survey of the Present Situation of English Writing to the Postgraduate Students

English writing is a highly integrated and practical course, which has become increasingly important. The training of it effectively promotes learners' comprehensive ability to acquire English. In Chinese universities, English has always played a great part in the students' learning process which can be demonstrated by the importance attached to CET-4 and CET-6. However, most students still can not master the language well, especially in writing. Therefore, a questionnaire is conducted among the postgraduate students with a view to getting a basic understanding of the students involved.

3.1. Introduction to the Questionnaire

Conducted among the 30 postgraduate students from 2012, 2013 and 2014 in Tianjin University of Finance and Economics, the questionnaire is designed to find out the students' feedbacks from four aspects, namely students' overall English level, their learning habits, problems in English writing and their chosen ways to improve writing skills.

3.2. The Analysis of the Questionnaire

Based on the questionnaire results, the following parts give a general description of the students' responses to those questions asked.

3.2.1. The Overall English Level of the Postgraduate Students

Through the analysis of the results of the questionnaire, the author finds that the overall English level of the students is averagely good judged from their results in reading courses, pass rate in CET-4 and CET-6, and their accumulated vocabulary. The questionnaire shows that all the students have passed CET-4 with 13 students above 525, but when it comes to CET-6, 15 students passed with 8 of them scored over 525 and 7 between 425-525, which is slightly worse than the outcome of CET-4 concerning the increased difficulty of the test. As for the vocabulary, 12 of them believed they have acquired over a sum of 4,500 words, 4 between 3,500-4,500, while the rest two below 3,500 which is not a good thing for English writing. In a word, the students' basic English skill looks fine from their feedbacks.

3.2.2. Students' Learning Habits

In terms of their learning habits, the author further divides them into habits students have when they are actually composing their essays and after-writing work such as checking, correcting and summarizing.

Speaking of students' habits when they are writing, gladly, with only 2 exceptions, most of the students have the habits of outlining, be it regularly or occasionally, which would be beneficial for the construction of structure and the flowing of thoughts. Another point worth mentioning is that in the light of putting the complex sentences they have learned into use, more efforts need to be made from the students. Only 2 of the students mentioned that they would often do so, while the number of students who would only occasionally use the complex sentences they have just learned reaches 10. Worse still, six of the students asked seldom apply what they have learned in writing. However, when it comes to seeking outside help in writing, nearly all the students, with 13 regularly and 5 occasionally, welcome the idea of turning to dictionaries when they are not so sure about some words.

With respect to after-writing work, such as grammar or spelling check and problem summary, students are enthusiastic enough to make them regular. Most of the students have the habits of checking their compositions and have the mistakes corrected, just not so very frequent. As for the summarizing, which in fact matters the most for learning, the students' responses were not as positive as they did in checking, 10 students seldom summarize their problems in writing. Even for the rest of the students who do summarize, the attention paid was far from satisfying.

3.2.3. Students' Problems in Writing

Concerning the students' major problems in writing, grammar tops the whole list, with respect to the seriousness and significance of writing, followed by text structure. The

next in line is the difficulty in topic-analyzing, while vocabulary matter lies at the bottom. Moreover, Chinese way of thinking still has a grip on students' writing.

Speaking about the attitude towards English which plays a great part in affecting one's passion and interest in English and the improvement of it, 8 of the students agreed, slightly or to a large degree, that their purpose of learning English is to pass the exam, 6 students mentioned their aim is to improve their overall English level, while only 4 of them expressed their love towards English.

When asked about the attention paid to the text coherence when they were writing, most of the students gave the answer of "sometimes" which is not satisfactory or enough for effective sentences.

3.2.4. Ways Students Choose to Improve their Writing Skills

Practice leads to improvements. Most of the students agreed that practicing is a good way to enhance their writing skill, while some other students chose to immerse themselves in English backgrounds by reading English materials or watching movies.

However, as for the preparation before writing, students are not so passionate. For example, only 4 of them would often collect data related to the topic, 7 students indicated they would do it occasionally while the others rarely do the material-gathering thing.

4. Ineffectiveness of Sentences in English Writing by Chinese Postgraduates: Problem Analysis

Writing a wonderful essay means more than building up words without grammatical mistakes or misspellings. English writing is an art which deserves better consideration and deliberation for each and every word you've chosen to make up a composition. And to achieve that goal, we've got a long way to go.

Self-evidently, grammatical correctness alone does not make a good sentence. It has to be effective at the same time. Effective sentences have some or all of the following qualities: unity, coherence, conciseness, emphasis, and variety.

The corpus for this thesis was collected from the 30 postgraduate students from 2012 to 2014 in Tianjin University of Finance and Economics in China. In their first term on campus, each of the 30 students wrote 8 compositions based on seven different ways of developing a paragraph. For the convenience of error analysis, the author numbers the 30 students from X1 to X30 and the 8 compositions from P1 to P8 in accordance to the sequence above.

From the analysis of the college English writing corpus, the author finds that most students can express their ideas correctly in English without serious grammar mistakes. However, when it comes to the effectiveness of sentences, it is quite a different thing. The next part of this thesis mainly focuses on the analysis of the common syntactical problems based on students' English writing from conciseness, emphasis, and variety.

4.1. Conciseness

We write sentences to express ideas. The use of words in a sentence, therefore, is decided by the idea it expresses. Needless words do not help express ideas; on the contrary, they obscure the meaning and confuse the reader. So one of the rules of sentence making is to use only the necessary words, or as few words as possible so long as the meaning is fully expressed (Ding & Wu, 1998: 65).

But often we tend to put a superfluous word here and there in a sentence. This habit may come from the way we talk. It is common in speaking to repeat a word, use words of similar meanings together, and change words we have said and even structure of a sentence in the middle of it. However, it is not advisable to do so in writing. And it is possible for us to avoid that from happening because when we write we have time to check what has been written and delete all the words that are not needed for the expression of ideas, or to make our sentences concise (Ding & Wu, 1998:65). And to achieve that goal, there are some hints which we can follow in writing:

a. Use a pronoun instead of repeating a noun;

b. Use a word instead of a phrase with the same meaning, and use a phrase instead of a clause with the same meaning;

c. Do not repeat words or phrases, if possible, in a sentence or in one that follows;

d. Do not use different words or phrases with similar meanings in the same sentence;

e. Do not repeat the same idea in different sentences except for emphasis.

Eg 1 (X11p5) *Firstly, the traffic vehicles such as cars, buses and motorcycles often produce the noises of whistles and working engines on the road, whether in the day or at night.*

In this sentence, *the traffic, the* before *noises* and *on the road* can be deleted without loss of meaning, and make the sentence briefer in fact. Besides, *whether in the day or at night* can be shortened to *day and night* without any negative influence on the whole sentence. Thus the revised version would be as follows.

Firstly, vehicles such as cars, buses and motorcycles often produce noises of whistles and working engines day and night.

Here is another example:

Eg 2 (X18p5) *In more detailed, many buildings, right next to schools and communities, are under construction with the ignorance of time days and nights.*

The beginning of this sentence, *In more detailed* is wrong and can be replaced by *more detailedly*. And there is no need to put the *right next to schools and communities* between two commas and regard it as the parenthesis of *many buildings*. One more thing, *with the ignorance of time* and *days and nights* actually are of the same meaning and function to the sentence, thus only one of them is needed. A simplified sample would be as follows.

More detailedly, many buildings next to schools and communities are under construction day and night. (OR with ignorance of time)

One more example:

Eg 3 (X12p3) *In every early morning we can see there are*

many students reading or reciting texts around lake.

The sentence can be shortened as follows.

Every early morning, we can see many students reading or reciting texts around the lake. OR

Every early morning, there are many students reading or reciting texts around the lake.

Here is a paragraph stating the reasons for the popularity of tours to forests and mountains:

Eg 4 (X16p7) *What causes this result? As we all know, most people stay indoors for the whole day and they face with the documents or the computer screen. They have got tired of the quick fix society. They want to put themselves into the nature and relax completely. Therefore, they like the forests and mountains rather than some modern facilities or historical spots. It is easy to see that the famous mountains such as Mount Tai, Mount Huang and so on are always crowded with tourists on holidays. Even when they are full of visitors, more and more people are still willing to rush there to enjoy their holiday.*

On the whole, the paragraph gives a clear account of the reason why people choose to visit some forests and mountains on holiday, but in some places it is wordy. There are sentences that can be combined and words that can be omitted. Let's start with the second sentence, it seems a bit trivial using *and* to connect two sentences expressing ideas which can be easily and clearly expressed in one. Then the next several sentences all begin with the same subject *They,* which, for better effect, can be combined. Moreover, the last two sentences gives a description of the fact that many people keep rushing to some famous resorts which are already exceedingly crowded. Yet the two sentences tend to be a bit redundant. Below is an improved version.

What causes this result? As we all know, staying indoor reading documents or staring at computer screens for the whole day, most people have got tired of the quick-fix society. Therefore, they are inclined to relax themselves in natural resorts like forests and mountains rather than modern sites or historical spots. Famous mountains, such as Mount Tai and Mount Huang, are always flooded with tourists, no matter how crowded they already are.

The new version is shorter by over 30 words and is more readable than the original passage. What's more, no information is missing in it.

The above examples show that students are susceptible to lengthy problems in writing. It is quite possible to simplify some of the sentences or delete some words from the compositions, and this will clarify instead of obscuring the meaning. In fact, wordy sentences and redundant words can only make the meaning hazy and the main points inconspicuous. It is always necessary for, not just students, all of us to reread what we have written and try to improve it by simplifying it and making it more concise.

4.2. Emphasis

As everyone knows that ideas differ in importance. An English sentence is made up of several parts, which are not equal in their value. One part of it receives more emphasis than the rest since it carries the most important piece of information. If you need to show one idea is more important than the others, the expression of it should change in emphasis. There are many ways of putting emphasis on a particular element of a sentence. You may emphasize ideas in many different ways -- by word order, by periodic sentences, by the use of active voice or by repetition (Ding & Wu, 1998: 67).

4.2.1. Using Sentence Beginnings and Endings

Readers automatically seek a writer's principal meaning in the main clauses of a sentence -- that is, in the subject that names a topic and the predicate that comments on the topic. Thus you can help readers understand your intended meaning by controlling the relation of the main clause and any modifiers attached to it. The most effective way to call attention to information is to place it at the beginning or at the end of the sentence, reserving the middle for incidentals. Easy as it may sound, hard to manage it well.

Eg 5 (X2p7) *Considering all these factors, what people obvious reason that high speed development of our society leads to people's discontents and confusion.*

To begin with, the sentence is not logically right. What the student tries to say here is that the main reason for the popularity of tours to forests and mountains is discontents and confusion caused by the high speed development of the society. At first glance, it is really hard to make out what the actual point of the sentence is, not to mention the emphasis. The question is what exactly the student wants to emphasize here, the high speed development or the discontents and confusion resulting from development. To make it clear, some alterations need to be made as follows.

Considering all these factors, discontents and confusion caused by the high speed of development was the most obvious reason. OR

Considering all these factors, the main reason for people to do so is the high speed of development and the discontents and confusion along with it.

The first version puts emphasis on the *discontents and confusion* by moving it to the beginning of the sentence and by subordinating *the high speed of development*. The second version, however, emphasizes the *high speed of development* and *the discontents and confusion* at the same time by placing them at the end of the sentence.

4.2.2. Using Active Voice

In writing, when the receiver of an action is not more important than the doer, the passive voice is preferable. While in other situations, verbs are generally more emphatic than nouns or any other part of the speech.

Eg 6 (X6p5) *There are three reasons can be easily found for this.*

This sentence seems to be a bit redundant and complex for the simple idea it tries to convey. When writing a sentence, sometimes it is better to put it in more complicated language for the sake of increasing the overall level of the sentences. Nevertheless, it is never advisable to put some simple ideas in an unnecessarily sophisticated way, which might actually obscure the main point of the sentence. In this case, a brief and

short sentence will do. Therefore, the *can be easily found* is completely unnecessary. The sentence can be revised in the following ways.

There are three reasons for this. OR
We can find three reasons for this. OR
Three reasons account for this.

As mentioned just above, simple ways for simple matters. There is no need to express the same idea over and over again, in the same sentence which may easily lead to redundancy or ambiguity.

4.2.3. Climatic Sequence

In enumerating things or ideas, we should start from the least important and end with the most important, or in the climatic sequence which would not only present a sense of order but also a gradually increased emphasis (Ding & Wu, 1998: 68). However, that is not an easy task to accomplish without the awareness of the sequential order. Take the following sentences for example:

Eg 7 (X6p5) *Nowadays the environment are damaged by people become gradually bad than before. For example, we have noise pollution, rubbish pollution and light pollution. The noise pollution which influences people's health the most.*

For emphatical purpose within this sentence, it would be better if the ideas were enumerated in a different order. The student mentioned three pollutions, namely noise, rubbish and light, to support the idea that environment has been greatly damaged. However, the student chose to place noise pollution in the first place followed by rubbish and light pollution. It's not that ordering showing this is wrong, not is it that the other two sources of pollution were less severe than noise. It's just that since the topic of this essay is about the noise pollution in big cities, it would be more emphatic and reasonable to put the more emphasis on noise pollution, that is to put the noise pollution at the end of the sentence. Moreover, the sentence followed starts with *noise pollution*, which deepens the effect. Sadly, the last sentence was not so wonderfully written. Here is a revised version of these sentences:

Nowadays the environment has been damaged by people and gradually was worse than before. For example, rubbish littered here and there, light pollution and noise pollution are prevalent in our daily life. And it is the noise pollution that influences people's health the most.

5. Ineffectiveness of Sentences in English Writing by Chinese Postgraduates: Solutions

The process of learning English as a foreign language is actually a process of making errors, correcting errors and promoting the acquisition level. The objectives of error analysis are to show the problems existing in the process of learning so as to correct them timely, and to adopt effective proposals in future learning to avoid errors. To realize such a goal, English writing can be improved in the following aspects.

5.1. Extensive Reading

It is generally agreed that one of the effective ways to learn a foreign language well is through extensive reading, which, unlike the reading comprehension tests, can help to increase students' interest. Moreover, extensive reading can also serve as an effective way, far more effective than simply memorizing words and meanings, to increase one's accumulation of vocabulary. Furthermore, the special sense of language acquired by immersion in English can benefit ESL learners in a way that no other methods can. On the basis of this, English learners should be encouraged to read extensively, which enlarges vocabulary, provides information of the cultures of foreign countries and helps learners form the habit of thinking in English. Learners had better choose bilingual reading materials with Chinese version attached and read them within a certain period of time while their English level is not good enough to fully understand the English patterns and thoughts. Extensive reading is necessary for English learners in that, first, learners can learn many words through reading, and use dictionaries to master the usage of them afterwards. In this way learners will be able to accumulate some synonyms which might be of great help to avoid the monotonous use of the same word over and over again. Second, reading broadens the minds of learners, enriches their knowledge and provides them with various materials available for writing, and helps the learners develop their own perception of events and increases the presence of self-identity in writing.

Meanwhile, there is also something the professors can do in the extensive reading process. For example, professors can remind the students of the importance of note-taking, which, as an aid to memory, can help students recall the information they will need when they finally come to plan and write the essay. Besides, notes provide the raw materials on which one's mind must work in relation to the set essay topic. The process of taking notes helps students to summarize ideas and arguments, select points relevant to the purposes, and finally understand and interpret the original sources. Therefore, it takes the joint efforts of both professors and students to the improvements of college English writing.

5.2. Various Forms of Practice

Though students do practice in their English learning, but the thing is, as is mentioned before, most of the practice is exam-based which may only benefit students to a certain degree due to the limitation of the style. To fundamentally develop students' writing skill takes more practice of diversified forms. By diversified forms, the author means essays written free from the influence of test-oriented guidance. When practice for tests, students may not have many opportunities to write something of their own as the tests-based essays usually have fixed structures.

The various forms could be a diary, a speech, a report or just some freely-written words to express feelings. They all require students to express their own ideas and thoughts which are the main points for the self-identity of essays. What's more,

these informal writing practices will also develop students' interest in writing. Writing, to be honest, is probably the least interesting one among the four language skills of English learning. With students' interest gradually growing, students will be more willing to write something individual and different from the model texts they've memorized, that is, the self-identity of the essays will increase as well. As the saying goes, practice makes perfect. However, practice alone does not necessarily contribute to good essays. Those essays need to be corrected and revised and then the problems summarized so that students can have a clear idea of where they are going.

5.3. Logic Developing

For Chinese students, most of their problems in writing, be it the lack of unity, the absence of coherence, or the misplaced emphasis, are the result of a different thinking pattern, or at least the deficiency of logical thinking. One way of developing logical thinking is through public speaking, especially the impromptu speech. In public speech, one has to deliver a speech in a logical, coherent and concise way based on a given topic or several requirements. The prepared speech part can present the students with the opportunity to develop their logic thinking deliberately since all the contents of the speech, be it a delightful sense of humor one uses to live up the atmosphere or the example one cites to support a statement, should somehow be related to the main idea for the unity and coherence of the whole speech. Meanwhile, the impromptu speech which requires a quick response to the given materials can not only force students to develop logical thinking unconsciously within the time limit, but also exert students' potentials in language organizing. Furthermore, in a public speech contest, there usually exists another session, that is the QNA (question and answer). To answer a question, it requires a strong sense of logic and relatedness based on the question asked. Through public speaking, students' oral English can be greatly enhanced which would also be helpful to the improvement of the overall English level.

6. Conclusion

The findings in this study provide some insight into the current situation of English writing by postgraduate students.

Firstly, although students can convey their ideas in English, they are not proficient enough to make effective sentences. The main cause for this is probably the lack of knowledge and awareness of effectiveness. So teachers can spend some time introducing those factors which influence the effectiveness of a sentence.

Secondly, despite the fact that students have learned English for such a long time, they are still rather unfamiliar with and have a relatively insufficient knowledge of English grammar. Therefore, grammatical issue is still a great difficulty for postgraduate students and a great concern for professors.

Thirdly, from the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire, students' interest in English learning still needs special attention. As is widely acknowledged, interest is the best guide in learning. So is it in English writing. To achieve the goal of improving the writing skills, then their general English level, interest cultivation is the first priority for postgraduate students.

Furthermore, the development of critical thinking and students' subjective initiative in English writing deserves better deliberation.

Although this study can shed some light on the learning and improving of English writing, there are some limitations. The subjects in the present study come from the same college, and the data is not big enough to draw a generalized conclusion. In addition, the classification of the questionnaire items into individual learning strategies is somewhat subjective and the given choices for some questions are not specific enough to get a concrete idea of college English writing. Therefore, further studies should be carried out to complement the results of the present study in order to confirm the effectiveness of college English writing.

Acknowledgments

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