

Analysis of Common Syntactic Errors in Spoken English of Chinese College Students

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Abstract. This research focuses on syntactic errors in the English production of Chinese college students. First, it stratifies participants by their level of English proficiency, administers tests with unified standardized oral English tasks, and transcribes the recorded speech into textual corpora to systematically identify and classify different types of syntactic errors. Based on Error Analysis Theory, the study investigates the root causes of these errors, supplemented by student interviews to identify both subjective and objective factors of influence. The results show that such errors are basically divided into five categories: misuse of tense time, disagreement between subject and phrase, incorrect placement of articles and sentences, incomplete or mixed sentence structures, and misuse of non-finite verbs. Significant differences are also observed in error types and frequencies among students at different levels of learning. The results can provide empirical evidence for stratified oral English teaching, facilitating coordinated improvements in the accuracy and fluency of students' English conversation.

Keywords: College Students, Oral English, Syntactic Errors, Error Analysis, Second Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

Oral English proficiency is a major component of Chinese college students' comprehensive foreign language literacy, which serves not only as a key indicator of academic scores, but also as a vital core element of international academic exchanges and intercultural communication. At present, non-English majors in domestic mainstream universities are widely faced with known problems, including syntactic confusion, incomplete propositional components, and incorrect word order in improvised interpretation, which directly impede the daily effectiveness of intercultural communication.

Existing domestic research mainly focuses on English writing errors, while targeted empirical research on stratified spoken syntactic errors remains relatively inadequate [1]. Against a mature theoretical background of the classical basis of Corder's error analysis and Ellis' Interlanguage Hypothesis in the field of Second Language Acquisition [2, 3], this study selects 66 non-English major students stratified into high, medium, and low proficiency groups. Using a single standardized TOEFL-style oral assignment, 5-minute improvised speeches are recorded and fully transcribed,

followed by systematic corpus analysis, manual error annotation, and semi-structured student interviews to identify common syntactic errors and their underlying causes.

This research examines the dynamic nature of interlingual development, provides solid empirical evidence for differentiated oral English teaching, and offers direct practical pedagogical implications for enhancing the accuracy of students' spoken output and intercultural communication.

2. Research design

2.1. Research participants

This study selected 66 non-English major students from mainstream universities as participants. They are divided into three groups based on their performance in the oral English test: high-skilled, medium-skilled and low-skilled students. This stratified design, which fits the basic paradigm of stratified second language acquisition research, explores differences in syntactic errors between groups with different language proficiency levels [4].

2.2. Data collection

Classic universal TOEFL conversation topics are adopted uniformly to ensure standardization, consistency and professionalism of test materials, eliminating experimental deviations caused by differences in topic complexity.

All assignments are designed as individual monologic oral presentations without interactive questions and answers to exclude external interference and to guarantee the autonomy of students' language output.

Each participant independently completes a 5-minute oral presentation, with the entire recording process to preserve the original audio materials and unify the standard of corpus duration [5].

After recording, the audio is sufficiently rewritten into text, with the removal of invalid filling words to create a full stratified spoken corpus and ensure the authenticity and authenticity of the corpus.

After all syntax errors are counted and summarized, each participant is provided with individual error feedback one by one. Interviews are conducted in person to directly enquire about the subjective causes and difficulties of learning various syntactic errors, in order to enrich investigative measurements of the causes of errors [6].

2.3. Research methodology

The corpus collection is completed in uniform standards, adhering to the academic principle of natural housing collection.

Syntax errors are strictly distinguished from phonological and lexical errors. The classification of errors is completed by focusing on the syntactic and grammatical level to precisely define the scope of research for spoken syntactic errors [7].

Students' subjective accounts are combined to supplement the objective causes of error by realizing the integration of objective data and subjective perception.

Error analysis theory is applied to the interpretation of general experimental data and phenomena to enhance the academic rigor of research findings [8].

2.4. Data processing

On rewritten spoken texts, checking for syntactic errors, annotations and calculations is carried out. The frequency and proportion of different syntactic errors in the three groups of students with different levels of proficiency are calculated statistically.

The syntax error characteristics of different groups are compared and analyzed, and the cause findings are improved in conjunction with interview content to ensure the objectivity and validity of data analysis results.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Types and distribution of syntactic errors

Time errors: Including confusion between present and past tenses, as well as mismatches between tenses and adjectives of time. A typical example is the incorrect statement "I learn English yesterday" for the assigned meaning "I learned English yesterday."

Subject-verb agreement errors: Mostly manifested as missing the suffix "-s" or "-es" on predicates after the third-person singular subjects, and other single-plural mismatches between subjects and verbs, such as the erroneous sentence "He go to school every day."

Errors in Articles and Prepositions: Including misuse of unspecified articles "a/an" and the specified article "the", as well as incorrect collocations between prepositions and nouns/proper names, for example, the incorrect phrase "in the morning" instead of the standard "at the morning".

Sentence structure errors: Including incomplete proposal components, mixed proposal structures, and incorrect word order in interrogative sentences. A representative case is the redundant structure "Although I work hard, but I failed the exam" for the designated Chinese meaning.

Infinitive errors: Mostly reflected in confusion between infinitive and gerund forms, such as mixed use of the incorrect "I like to swim" and the grammatically acceptable but contextually incorrect "I like to swim" for the usual meaning of "I like swim".

The stratified analysis shows that students with low-proficiency learners have a much higher level of error in basic syntactic knowledge such as tenses and articles than the other two groups, reflecting their weak foundation in English grammar. Secondary school students have mastered the basic rules of grammar with far fewer fundamental errors, but make far more structural errors in constructing complex sentences. Highly qualified students have the least common errors, almost without errors in everyday basic sentence patterns, and their errors are concentrated only in advanced syntactic applications such as complex clauses and coherence structures [9]. It can be seen that students' English proficiency has a significant positive correlation with the type and severity of their syntactic errors [1].

3.2. Causes of syntactic errors

Objective language factors: Chinese is an isolated language without strict time shifts, transformations of the entity agreement and business and rules for using articles that exist in English. Huge grammatical differences between the two languages easily cause a negative transmission of the native language, forcing students to subconsciously apply Chinese syntactic logic in spoken output and create established habits of syntactic errors [9]. Meanwhile, most students have fragmented syntactic knowledge without a systematic grammatical system, leaving obvious gaps in their knowledge reserve of the target language.

Subjective learning factors: Student interview results show that most current college students overemphasize fluency and blindly strive for speed in oral practice, deliberately ignoring the grammatical accuracy of propositions [6]. In addition, students lack targeted after-class instruction in spoken syntax as well as accumulating standard correct sentence patterns and regular oral output practice, making it difficult for them to develop standardized thinking for spoken English production

Factors of the learning environment: Current teaching of English grammar in college mainly focuses on written testing, limited to the interpretation of exercises on exams, and lacks practical syntactic training in everyday communicative scenarios. Traditional grammar lectures do not help students flexibly apply the rules of grammar, making it difficult for them to properly use the various syntactic structures in improvised spoken English.

4. Pedagogical consequences

College English teachers should establish a scientific approach to error correction, strictly adhere to the basic principles of error analysis theory, and rationally handle the syntactic errors in students' oral expression. They should take students' various syntactic mistakes as an important basis for assessing their progress in language acquisition and identifying gaps in knowledge, and never completely deny the achievements of the students' oral expressions [2].

Implement a differentiated and layered oral syntax learning model. By following the high-frequency types of student syntax errors at the basic, intermediate, and advanced levels, customized personalized syntax learning content can be developed to accurately address students' oral syntax learning difficulties at all nodes.

Add standardized topical oral presentation training to your daily English classes and conduct exercises by simulating the formal oral test process. This helps students develop the habit of correctly using syntactic structures in regular tutorials and improves the accuracy of improvised oral output [2].

Create exclusive personal oral syntax error growth files for students in the classroom. Regularly collect and sort out sample sentence errors that occur in students' daily oral practice, provide timely feedback and interpretation, and guide students in independent review of their incorrect usages and consolidate their grammatical knowledge.

Adjust the emphasis of teaching oral English classes in college, balance the teaching ratio between fluency and pronunciation accuracy in oral English teaching, and correct students' misconceptions that they should prioritize speaking speed over grammatical standardization.

5. Conclusion

This study confirms that the oral syntactic errors of Chinese college students have fixed categories and different distribution patterns that are highly correlated with their English proficiency. These errors are caused by several interacting factors, including negative L1 transfer caused by Chinese-English language differences, systematic gaps in grammar acquisition, and limitations of existing modes. Essentially, language errors are a normal part of second language acquisition and should be viewed as opportunities to improve competencies rather than negative outcomes.

Empirical analysis clearly identifies the types, layered features, and causes of the formation of common syntactic errors among Chinese college students at different levels of learning. Although the results offer valuable insights into the oral teaching of English in colleges, the study still has limitations: its 66 samples from non-English majors, all from a single university, with a limited size and a single source, do not compare differences between disciplines or foreign languages in entrance

exams in the academic calendar. It only conducts error annotation on static oral output, without longitudinally dynamically tracking the evolution of errors of the same subjects at all stages of learning.

Future research can be expanded in two directions: first, by expanding sample coverage to include students from different universities, majors and regions, to further verify the generalizability of conclusions and explore differentiated features; second, carry out long-term longitudinal tracking studies with AI-assisted corpus annotation, to systematically analyze the changing rules of syntactic errors within a 1-2 year learning cycle, and more accurately depict the development trajectory of Chinese learners' oral English syntactic competence.

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