

A Study of Noun Errors in Non-English Major Undergraduates' English Use

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Abstract: Noun errors often exist in non-English undergraduates' English use, which are serious grammatical mistakes that can lead to confusion or even wrong understanding of meanings because of improper ways of English expressing. The study uses questionnaires to draw an overall picture of noun errors in non-English undergraduates' English from five universities in Beijing. The study reviews the theories of Mother Tongue Transfer, Second Language Acquisition and Collocations in order to test the sensitivity of undergraduates in noun errors and investigates the underlying reasons why they tend to make those mistakes. The results indicate that the subjects make noun errors probably because they are apt to be misled by Chinese vocabulary with similar meanings. Numerous mistakes are made due to the unfamiliarity with parts of speech and the number of nouns, small vocabulary and the confusion of same-root nouns, etc. Based on the findings, the study provides suggestions that students should be greatly encouraged to accumulate and practice collocations, read more high-quality articles published in English or watch authentic video clips in English instructions, etc.

1. Introduction

Noun errors, which imply the misuse of noun words, are serious grammatical mistakes in non-English major undergraduates' English use at present. They are generally classified into the following categories: the misuse of nouns with gerunds, verbs or adjectives, the confusion of same-root nouns or different nouns with similar Chinese meaning, and the unfamiliarity of the number of nouns. According to Long (2007), it is widely considered that grammar plays a crucial role in English using and is regarded as one of the important "common cores" of the language. For the sake of linguistic accuracy and authenticity, noun errors should be completely removed from student's English use, particularly in their written and oral work.

However, through the precise examination of the randomly-selected undergraduates' English assignments, it is not difficult to find numerous noun errors nearly in every piece of work. The grammatical mistakes keep influencing the validity and the accuracy of English use, if not be corrected, which bring practical problems including indistinct meanings or improper implications as well.

In light of this situation, the research aims to study the full picture of noun errors. Relevant theories are seriously reviewed including Mother Tongue Transfer, Second Language Acquisition, Grammar and Collocations. Frequent examples and cases are carefully picked out from undergraduates' English exercise. This helps examine the misuse of noun words, analyze results, causes and reasons of the misuse, and also provide suggestions on how students can enhance their ability to write correct, native and appropriate noun words, as well as how professors can improve their teaching methods and materials in English courses.

2. Literature Review

College professors often tend to overemphasize the importance of large vocabulary, while ignoring other aspects of English learning, which makes students believe that they should not stop reciting words when studying English. However, compared with objective questions, students generally get a lower score on writing tasks in English examinations, even though they may have an equivalent vocabulary compared with students from other nations. The underlying reasons are Chinese students, in their writing, are not only thoroughly unaware of correct grammar and collocations that are proper and native, but also misled by most Chinese definitions of English words and hence affected, massively, by blunt literal translation, without sufficient attention to the English interpretation provided by dictionaries. Therefore, it is essential to consider the influence of mother tongue and English instructions on Chinese students' English competence.

2.1. Mother Tongue Transfer Theory

Concerning Mother Tongue Transfer, Chen (2012) posted a definition: "Learners are more willing to transfer the features and characteristics of their native cultures and languages into second or foreign languages learning." It is fully understood that the language using habits of learners have a tremendous effect on their acquisition of second or foreign language, whether positive or negative. If the influence of learners' first language on the foreign one is affirmative (in other words, it is beneficial to second language learning), it is more likely to be recognized as positive transfer; if the influence is adverse (in other words, it is harmful to second language learning), it is more likely to be recognized as negative transfer then. They usually happen when the previous information in learners' mind assists with or thwarts the learning process; in other words, they occur when learners' prior observation or experience is applied to the current fresh knowledge acquisition. Su (2000) holds a view that different and various histories, geographical conditions and culture settings are the most decisive factors on the forming process of different languages. Accordingly, the discrepancies among languages are huge and wide, including meaning, connotation, implication and part of speech. In that case, Chen (2012) recommends that Chinese undergraduates should make an endeavor to comprehend phrases, collocations and sentence patterns as much as possible rather than the single words; read in

English extensively and practice writing repeatedly, as a Chinese old saying goes, "skill comes from practice, which makes perfect"; keep the eyes on the logic of thinking, due to the fact that culture differences are more likely to cause problems in terms of syntactic logic and usages, and students are supposed to learn and comprehend how to use the second language correctly and why native speakers are using language in a certain way.

2.2. Second Language Acquisition Theory

Second Language Acquisition is the process of learning a second language by non-native speakers. There are two main approaches of Second Language Acquisition: natural acquisition and in-classroom learning (Zhou, 2003). The latter, which, if applied in the right method, undoubtedly has positive effects to Second Language Acquisition, is directly connected with professors of English courses. Wang (2014) points out that in-classroom teaching is still the primary method of language input for learner. Professors are required to choose a befitting environment and effective teaching methods for students' input. Second Language Acquisition also has a guidance and inspiration for language teaching. Professors give much assistance to L2 learners on the condition that they, as language experts, have a deep understanding of Second Language Acquisition owing to their better comprehension over the learning process, psychological and educational backgrounds of learners. Roar Ravem (1968) argues that L2 learning process or acquisition distinctly differentiates from mother tongue learning. One dominating difference is that L2 learners are not virtually learning "language", because they have already been able to speak their mother tongue; rather, they are learning an unfamiliar system or organization of a foreign language and culture. In effect, Huang (2009) presents her viewpoint: "It is a general misunderstanding that English teaching is tantamount to instructions of linguistic information and skills in the long run in China, because English courses are not merely instructions of words and grammar, or of reading, speaking, listening and writing; English teaching is supposed to be educating cultures, enabling students to use English in their daily expressing and communicating." In another research, Zhou (2003) illustrates that it would be better for professors to choose authentic materials in English instructions, including real recordings, television clips, news broadcasting, and real charts or diagrams extracted from magazines and other publications; this helps students get a comparable feeling and a similar background, so that they may be much likely to believe themselves learning in a native environment. Under the circumstance, then, students normally tend to perform better and grasp quicker in the process of English learning.

2.3. Grammar and Formulaic Sequences Related Theories

Grammar, as an important foundation of English learning, can help students master complicated and intricate linguistic phenomena better. As An (2000) indicates, teaching methods of grammar are various and practical, and are supposed to be a combination of grammar, reading and writing instructions as well as an interpretation of long, difficult sentences, paragraphs and passages. The comprehension of reading and the skills of writing need to be developed and trained as the necessities of studying grammar. In addition, grammar instruction is not purely about teaching grammatical regulations. It is also about building grammatical awareness in order to help students understand language implications. A number of studies have shown that comprehensive learning plays a significant role in studying grammar, particularly when contexts generate a specific background and

message which makes language learners more easily to accept, digest and memorize (Long & Liu, 2007). As stated by Alison Wray (2000), one of the vital components of grammar learning is the proficiency of formulaic sequences, namely, idiomatic forms of expression, including collocations, idioms and fixed sentence patterns. By formulaic sequence, the professor's definition is as follows (Wray, 2000): a continuous or discontinuous sequence of words or other meaning elements, which appears to be constructed beforehand. In other words, it is kept in memory and searched by learners when they need to use in speaking, as a substitute for generating or analyzing through the existing grammar in learners' mind. In fact, the single words in formulaic sequences are “stuck with each other” and will be delivered as much “bigger words”. (Ellis, as cited in Wray, 2000) Learning those “bigger words”, formulaic sequences including fixed expressions and patterns, can serve as an efficient and fruitful means of approaching grammar and lexicon. Furthermore, the advantages of formulaic sequences are distinct: using fixed phrases and patterns can save speakers' time of organizing language and expressions, since those sequences have already furnished speakers with pre-made frameworks of their ideas, and speakers do not have to truly pass the way of generating an utterance every time they illustrate their points. Through a few studies concerning formulaic sequences, researchers find themselves coping with the issue of "multi-word strings", which is involved with lexical and grammatical information in L2 speakers' accumulation. Eventually, they reach a conclusion that "bigger words" are able and supposed to be perceived by both speakers and professors. When it comes to the methods of teaching formulaic sequences, it is generally suggested that learners keep practicing fixed patterns and expressions in their L2 speaking, reading domestic and professional publications as well as watching local films or plays for gaining native information, collocations and expressions. Thus, learners will be more likely to be able to develop confidence when presenting their perspectives, as well as fluency and accuracy in their presentations, if all the above instructions are done with deliberate efforts.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

This study intends to see the overall picture of noun errors in a comprehensive way, analyze how and why noun errors have become and always been the major grammatical and lexical problems in Chinese undergraduates' English use.

Three questions will be addressed and investigated in the study: 1. What kinds of noun errors do Chinese non-English major undergraduates usually have in their English use? 2. What are the underlying reasons that Chinese non-English major undergraduates usually made noun errors in their English use? 3. What changes should college professors make to help L2 learners avoid noun errors in their English use?

3.2. Methodology

The study uses questionnaires to collect and analyze data to dig the underlying causes of the appearance of noun errors in undergraduates' English use.

The participants are from five different universities in Beijing: Tsinghua University (THU),

Capital University of Economics and Business (CUEB), China University of Political science and Law (CUPL), China University of Mining and Technology in Beijing (CUMTB), and Beijing Information Science and Technology University (BISTU). Six participants' questionnaires are collected in each university; totally, thirty effective questionnaires are collected. All the thirty participants are non-English major undergraduates. The questionnaire has three different sections: Section one is True or False questions in which ten sentences are included: the participants are required to judge whether each sentence has grammatical or lexical mistakes or not. Every false sentence will be carrying one or more noun errors for the participants to locate. Section two is Error Correction: the participants will be told the answer of section one after finishing the ten questions, and they should give their own versions of the correct forms for each false sentence. Skipping is allowed if they are not able to offer any answers. Section three is Chinese-English Translation: four Chinese noun phrases and one sentence are included, whose appropriate version are difficult to obtained by Chinese students because of their lack of English proficiency in the usage of nouns. Skipping is allowed either if they are not able to offer any answers.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the subjects' performance in the questionnaire are presented as follows. In general, the result of Section One is quite optimistic. Thirteen students give correct answers of seven to ten questions, another thirteen students four to six questions, and the rest of them, five students, one to three questions. THU has the majority of undergraduates who got most answers correct, four to be specific, in the range of seven to ten correct answers, while BISTU has the minority of the same range, merely one person to be specific. Furthermore, both THU and CUEB have no students who give wrong answers more than six. In other words, they are all in the range of four to ten correct answers. On the contrary, CUMTB and BISTU both have two students, the maximum, in the range of one to three correct answers.

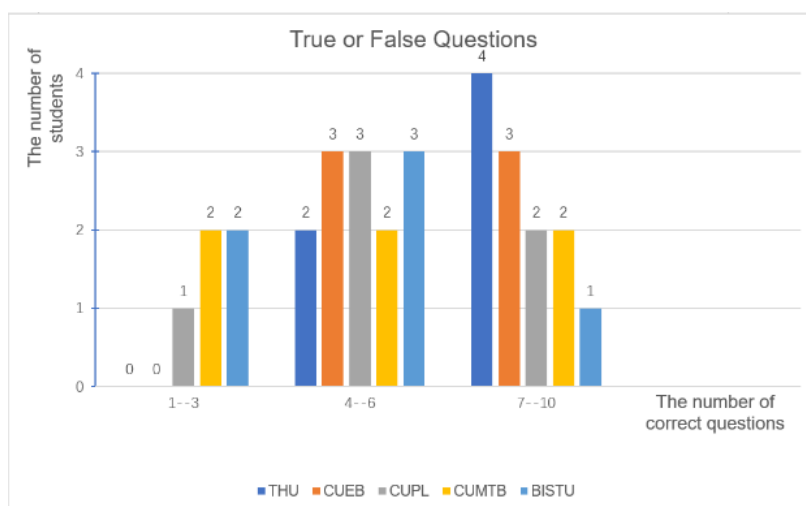


Figure 1: The results of True or False Questions

The following analyses are instances of the first four questions of the questionnaire.

Question one and two are focusing on the misuse of nouns with verbs or gerunds: Q1: (in brief) “Festivals celebrate events” instead of “Festivals celebration events”. Here a predicate verb should be used rather than a noun. Q2: “Chisholm was known for advocating the interests of the poor” instead of “... for advocacy the interests of ...”. Here a gerund should be used after the preposition “for”, serving as the predicate in the phrase “advocating the interests”.

These two questions are relatively easy for participants to judge, and have got the most correct answers compared with other questions. Most participants say that they recognize the mistakes immediately after they saw the questions, because for Q1 there is no predicate verb in the sentence, and for Q2 it is a verb phrase that are supposed to be used after the preposition “for”, according to sentence meaning. They believe that the grammatical points involved in the two questions are quite easy and common so they can identify the errors without hesitation. Only several students claim that they did not notice the two wrong words because the correct words share the similar Chinese meanings with the wrong words provided in the two questions. Besides, they are not very sensitive to English words’ parts of speech for the reason that the Chinese words they use every day do not have clear boundaries among different parts of speech. However, they also explain that they could have found the errors if they had been extremely familiar with the wrong words, so they will not deny that the complexity of the two words influenced their judgment to some extent. In other words, their vocabulary needs to be enlarged.

Question three and four are focusing on the misuse of nouns with adjectives: Q3: “... to help avert severe business decline” instead of “... to help avert severity business decline”. “Severity” is a noun which cannot serve as an attributive before the noun phrase “business decline”, so that its adjective form “severe” should be used here. Q4: “... an editorial in Nature Biotechnology” instead of “... an editorial essay in Nature Biotechnology”. The word “editorial” are able to serve both as an adjective meaning “involved in preparing a newspaper, magazine, or book for publication” or “involving the attitudes, opinions, and contents of something such as a newspaper, magazine, or television program”, and as a noun directly meaning “an article in a newspaper that gives the opinion of the editor or owner on a topic or item of news”. Thus, there is no need to put a word like “essay” or “article” after “editorial” in the sentence for the purpose of using noun elements here.

The error rates of Q3 and Q4 are quite high. More than half of the participants say that they seldom use or even see the word “severity” in their English writing or reading, so they are not sure what the part of speech it is when doing Q3, and they are not able to figure out which root of the word “severity” is, so they did not come up with the adjective form of it, “severe”, though it commonly appears in many magazines and news for describing situations or problems. This indicates that the instructions of roots and affixes should be emphasized, and students are required to pay special attention to same-root words, namely, conjugates, as well as accumulate them on purpose in their daily English practice. Besides, for Q4, most participants say that they never have a thought that the word “editorial” can also serve as a noun: on one hand, they did not see such usage previously; on the other hand, they were misled by the affix “-ial” because they believed words with the affix “-ial” are all supposed to be adjectives. This reminds professors that extensive reading is indispensable for students on language sense building, and it is equally important to underline words with special usages during instructions of general rules in roots and affixes.

Compared with Section One, the overall performance concerning university level in Section Two roughly remains the same. Undergraduates in THU have done the best jobs, with three students getting seven to ten correct answers and others getting four to six. Students in CUEB has got better results as well, with one student getting seven to ten correct answers and other five students four to six. Unfortunately, no undergraduates in CUPL, CUMTB or BISTU have given right answers in the range of seven to ten. Rather, the students are mostly gathering in the group of one to three and four to six correct answers, eleven students in total for the former and seven students for the latter.

Q1 and Q10 are the easiest mistakes to be corrected, while Q4, Q5 and Q9 are the most difficult mistakes to be recognized and corrected. It is not always the grammatical problems that confuse students, sometimes it is the words which students are unacquainted with due to their inadequate vocabulary. It is unfortunate that for a few times, students are able to distinguish the errors but are not capable of revising them.

Section Three is Chinese-English translations about collocations in native and authentic English, which is the toughest part of the whole questionnaire. There are eight collocations of nouns that needed to be translated. The participants are required to fill in the blanks with appropriate and proper nouns in order to complement the incomplete collocations whose Chinese meanings are provided under the lines. The missing nouns are usually special whose common meanings or interpretations do not usually apply. Consequently, it is unlikely for the undergraduates to figure out the right nouns unless they have encountered, learned and memorized the exact collocations previously.



Figure 2: The results of Error Correction

For the third time, undergraduates in THU apparently perform the best in subjective questions compared with their counterparts: five students give more than three right answers; what's more, one student even presents seven correct nouns out of eight, which is indeed an extremely remarkable accomplishment. Nevertheless, it is a regret that there are still a couple of students in CUPL, CUMTB and BISTU who are not able to come up with simply one answer. For the entire survey, we are glad to see the majority of the participants from all five universities have had some of the correct versions of nouns, and meanwhile, they still need to spend more efforts to accumulate and get familiar with

collocations.

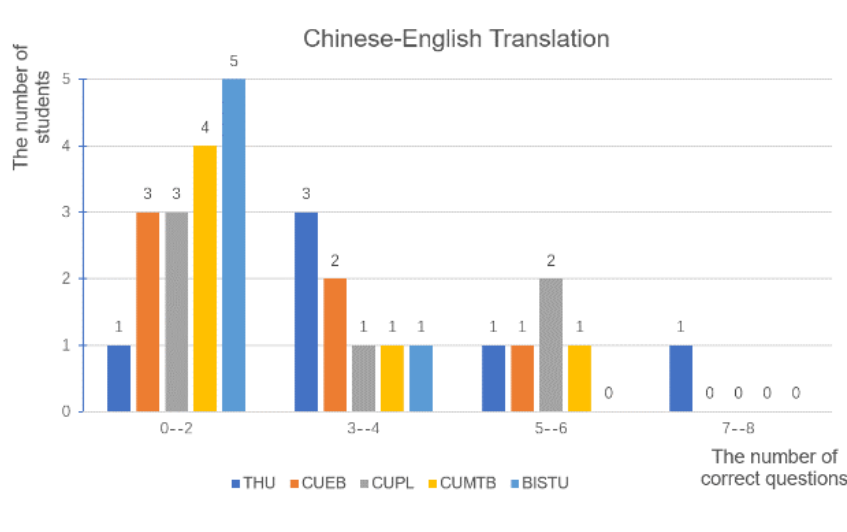


Figure 3: The results of Chinese-English Translation

The following is the suggested answers to questions in section three: Q1: “Turn the tables” means causing a complete reversal of the circumstances. Q2: “Get off the ground” means getting started or set in motion successfully. Q3: “Give somebody the cold shoulder” means being indifferent to or unconcerned about somebody. Q4: “Black sheep” means someone who is regarded by other members of their family or group as a failure or embarrassment. Q5: “Under the weather” means someone is somewhat ill or prone to illness or does not feel comfortable. “With flying colors” means having done something with conspicuous success or triumph. “Free hand” means unrestricted freedom to act (especially using in the phrase “give someone a free hand”). “Watch one’s step” means doing things very carefully or with great caution.

Some of the participants hold the view that it is difficult to remember all the derivatives or sometimes they get confused about those diverse words with the same root. The reason behind this is that there are huge differences between Chinese and English word-building. According to Liu (2006), most Chinese words are able to have a couple of parts of speech at the same time, while except a few, most English words merely have a single one. They may be nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs, or sometimes both nouns and verbs, etc. Learners must not use words randomly and carelessly without consideration of their parts of speech.

When analyzing Q9 and Q10 in Section One and Two, we find that the meanings of students' mother tongue tend to have negative effects on selecting accurate English words. Su (2000) points out that owing to language transfer, there may be distinctions in connotations or implications among those English words that share a same Chinese meaning. For instance, the word “president” and “principal” both have a meaning of headmaster, but in different areas in the United States. Therefore, the last thing professors of English courses should do is require their students to recite English words and their corresponding Chinese meanings one by one. It would be better if students are strongly recommended to comprehend the English words with interpretations provided by dictionaries when

they are enlarging their vocabulary.

Additionally, the number of nouns in English is another factor for undergraduates to pay special attention to, Q7 and Q8 taken as examples. On one hand, uncountable nouns do not have plural forms, including collective, abstract and material nouns. If the amount of something uncountable need to be specified precisely, measure words can be used to assist in expressing, such as a lump of (sugar), slices of (bread), a school of (fish), and a flash of (lightning). On the other hand, students should deliberately summarize different interpretations between the singular form and plural form of an equivalent word. It should not be ignored that there are numerous words which contain common meanings in singular form and exceptional ones in plural forms, such as interest-interests, quarter-quarters, minute-minutes, glass-glasses and good-goods. Students are more likely to present native and authentic English only if they can grasp the strict usage on the number of nouns.

It can be concluded at ease through the review of correct answers (provided above in results analysis) that the nouns appearing in five questions do not employ their general meanings and basically do not have those meanings if not used in the certain collocations. Rather, along with their partners like other verbs, adjectives or prepositions, they constitute various phrases and collocations that are endowed with fresh and novel interpretations. Consequently, it is hardly possible for undergraduates to tell, without hesitation, the accurate meanings of these types of collocations unless they have come across them previously or learned them with efforts in advance. Students are supposed to list the collocations and pay special attention to them through comprehending and memorizing so that they can master them perfectly. They are also recommended to carefully read foreign language magazines or periodicals in order to obtain and accumulate expressions that are native and idiomatic because languages in well-known publications are usually of high quality and through strict proofreading.

5. Conclusion

The study investigates noun errors and the underlying reasons of them through questionnaire analysis, as well as provides suggestions for undergraduates and college professors in English learning and instructions.

5.1. Brief Answers to Research Questions

Chinese non-English major undergraduates usually have the following types of noun errors in their English use: the misuse of nouns with gerunds, verbs or adjectives, the confusion of same-root nouns or different nouns with the same Chinese meaning, and the unfamiliarity of the number of nouns. The underlying reasons might be: the differences between Chinese and English expressions and collocations; the impact of mother language's semantics on L2 learning; the improper language learning methods of undergraduates and teaching methods of professors in College English courses; the lack of native, high-quality language input in or outside the classroom, etc. The changes professors can attempt to make are: abandoning the method of word reciting and introducing collocations into courses; using authentic materials for instructions and giving reading assignments on foreign magazines and periodicals; frequently collecting students' assignments and correcting their mistakes; etc.

5.2. Suggestions for College English Instruction

First, professors should stress the importance of extensive reading. It is a prevailing method for students to enlarge vocabulary and get a broad range of knowledge. It is also the most essential way of improving English proficiency. Second, students can be taught roots and affixes in class to better grasp different uses of derivatives and same-root or -affix words. Third, English interpretations of words provided by authoritative dictionaries should be carefully learned by students in order to help them distinguish subtle differences and avoid misuse of similar words. Fourth, parts of speech and the number of nouns should be strictly instructed in English courses, including relevant regulations and special meanings for students to accumulate. Fifth, professors are highly recommended to lecture collocations and formulaic sequences rather than teaching students a single word and its Chinese meaning; those word blocks can be extracted from foreign language magazines or periodicals, in which they are native and idiomatic. Students are more likely to express themselves with native language after studying collocations and fixed expressions. Sixth, professors may use authentic reading and listening materials to help students obtain or input standard and native English, as well as inviting foreign professors to correct mistakes in students' English speaking and writing practice, improving the quality of their language performance.

5.3. Limitations of the Present Study

The study gives an overall introduction about noun errors. However, there are still a number of limitations on the research. First, the participants are all studying in Beijing, no undergraduates from universities in other cities are covered. The result of the study may be not universal enough for the reason that the quality of English teaching and students' performance are various in different areas. Second, the sample size in the questionnaire part is not large enough. The study merely distributes six eligible questionnaires in every university, thirty in total, which, to some extent, are not enough to summarize the features of students' noun errors in their writing. The range of choices in universities involved is limited as well, so a large group of undergraduates are not being included and studies in the research. Third, quantitative analysis is lacking in the study. The discussions in the research are using qualitative analysis to present reasons and suggestions, while quantitative analysis does not arise in discussions. It would be more convincing and credible if a large-scale group of samples are analyzed through quantitative analysis with valid data provided.

5.4. Suggestions for further Research

In the future studies, the following suggestions is provided for further promotion in English grammar, writing research and instructions: First, the scope of survey should be extended, for example involving more participants and collecting more data samples. Second, writing samples of a specific group of students should be extracted from their daily and test writings, for further pointed and in-depth research. Third, professors should be included as well to acquire educators' standpoints on noun errors, which may help future researches make clearer comparison between educators' and students' perspectives.

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