A Brief SLA Data Analysis from Chinese Students’ Writing

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Abstract. Through analyzing the collected samples in ICLE project, this analysis project aims to describe the grammatical status of some non-native features in Chinese students’ writing and to answer the following two questions: 1) Do these features seem to be performance mistakes (i.e. are they random) or is there evidence that they reflect an inter-language grammar (ILG) (i.e. where they appear to be systematic errors)? 2) In the case of systematic errors, do they seem to be errors transferred from the L1 (first language of the students) or do they seem to be developmental errors (shared by learners from other L1 backgrounds)?

Introduction

It is a brief SLA analysis. The data I am using is from the ICLE project. I chose three pieces of writing as a group at random from ICLE as my samples. They are respectively labeled by different numbers: 0071, 0090, 0099. The three writers are Chinese-English learners.

(Note: The ICLE project collects Portsmouth Chinese-English learner corpus. Most of the Chinese learners in the project are from Mainland China with a small minority from Hong Kong and Taiwan (about 10%). On average, learners were 22 years old (with a range of 19-35 years), two thirds female and one third male. Most of the students have spent on average 8-9 years studying English at school and 2-3 years studying English at university level.)

Description of the Grammatical Status of the Non-native Features

Feature 1: Unclear Distinction between Plural Nouns and Singular Nouns

Simply speaking, it seems that the students I chose are not so sure about noun forms. In most of the cases, they just listed the singular nouns they needed without any articles and without considering the context in which plural nouns are needed, whereas, instead of singular nouns, plural nouns were used inappropriately in some sentences. In addition, this feature appears to be systematic errors because all of the three students made the similar mistakes at this point.

For example, the following words, according to the context, should be changed into plural nouns:

In student 0071’s work:
- programme, chance, customer, teacher, good thing, match, opinion, thing, event, side
In student 0099’s work:
- news report, programme, eye, challenge, parent, thing, dialogue, opinion
In student 0090’s work:
criminal, mistake
On the other hand, some plural nouns were misused:
For example, in student 0099’s work:
“this kinds of programme” should be changed into “this kind of programmes”

Feature 2: No Verb Change for the Third-Person Singular or Uncountable Nouns as Subjects
Like Feature 1, the students just listed the verbs’ original forms they needed without considering changing the verbs when their subjects are the third-person singular or uncountable nouns. And it could be recognized that the errors at this point are systematic.

For example, in student 0071’s work:
Three “make”s, four “provide”s and one “have” are not changed into “makes”, “provides” and “has” when their subjects are “television” which is an uncountable noun when it means “the programmes broadcast in pictures and sounds” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2004, p.2058). Besides, there is a “have” which should be changed into “has” as its subject is “everything”.

In addition, a point in this student’s work cannot be ignored. In the second and the last paragraphs, he/she used “television has” and “television is” correctly. In this case, it could be inferred that the students has been aware of the grammar function of “television”, but it seems that he/she has not established such a habit to change predicates correctly when their subjects are the third-person singular or uncountable nouns every time.

In student 0099’s work:
This student used an example to illustrate his/her opinion: the stereotyped experience of “the main character or actor” in some programmes. But he/she left all the verbs which are the predicates of “the main character” unchanged: face, work, make, overcome, fail, fall, and go.

Besides, the student 0099 also used verbs’ original forms (“contain”, “reflect”, “make” and “experience”) without considering that their subjects “it” and “everybody” are typical third-person singulars.

In student 0090’s work:
This student made fewer such mistakes, but it could be inferred that he/she still has difficulty in identifying the third-person singular, even though the subjects in his/her work are more subtle to recognize.

For example: someone—support; the capital penalty—appear; the government—show; the death warrant—change

Feature 3: Collocation
Collocation plays a very important part in English learning. Some Chinese-English learners tend to make mistakes at this point. Among the three students I chose, they made a few mistakes in use of collocation. However, in comparison with the frequency of Feature 1 & 2, it may not be reasonable to describe such errors as “systematic errors”. In other words, I prefer to describe such mistakes in my data as “performance mistakes”.

For example, in student 0071’s work:
The student wanted to use “at present”. At the first time, he/she used “in present”, then he/she realized that “present” is an adjective, therefore, he/she changed the word formation in the following paragraph: “in presence”.

In the third paragraph, the student made mistake in using “a lots” instead of “a lot”;
In the fourth paragraph, the student could not use collocation “enjoy doing something” correctly. But we could find he/she is capable of using “share one’s opinion”, “play a … role”, etc. Therefore, such mistakes are seen as “performance mistakes” are more appropriate than “systematic errors”.

**Feature 4: Part of Speech**

As the students who have learned English as the second language at least for 8 years, the students I chose are hardly confused by part of speech, except student 0090. This student made a few mistakes at this point. However, it is not a common phenomenon among all of the three pieces of writing. Therefore, like Feature 3, it may be better to describe such mistakes as “performance mistakes” made by a particular student rather than a group.

For example, in student 0090’s work:

- At the end of the first paragraph, the student used “society conditional” to express his/her intentional meaning “social condition”;
- In the last second paragraph, in a passive voice sentence, the student used “are imprisonment” instead of “are imprisoned”;
- In the last paragraph, instead of adjectives “just” and “equal”, he/she used nouns “justice” and “equality” to describe “the capital punishment”.

**Systematic Errors**

Harmer (2001, p.99) introduces “two distinct causes for the errors” made by students who learn English as a second language. According to Harmer (2001), the two causes are “L1 interference” and “developmental errors”. For the former cause, he points out “students who learn English as a second language already have a deep knowledge of at least one other language and where L1 and English come into contact with each other there are often confusions which provoke errors in a learner’s use of English”. In order to explain this cause, he shows some examples to readers. One of the examples he mentions is about Japanese students. He observed “Japanese students have problems with article usage because Japanese doesn’t use the same system of reference” (Harmer 2001, p.99). For the latter cause, his explanation is simple and clear: developmental errors seem to be happening in “over-generalizing a new rule that has been (subconsciously) learnt” (Harmer 2001, p.100). In fact, this phenomenon has been noticed by researchers in child language development. Like children who start learning English past tense by saying “Daddy goed” and “They comed” instead of “Daddy went” and “They came”, foreign language students may make the same kind of errors as well. And Harmer (2001) describes “errors of this kind are part of a natural acquisition process” (Harmer 2001, p.100).

In the case of systematic errors of my data, I believe, Feature 1 & 2 are influenced by students’ L1 (Chinese). In other words, such errors they made are caused by L1 interference. Like the example mentioned by Harmer (2001), Japanese students always have problems with article usage in English because they have no chance to keep in touch with such a system in their mother tongue. For the same reason, the three students in my data keep making mistakes in Feature 1 (unclear distinction between plural nouns and singular nouns) and Feature 2 (no verb change for the third-person singular or uncountable nouns as subjects), because, in Chinese, there are no plural nouns and no verb change for the third-person singular or uncountable nouns as subjects. In Chinese, people use demonstrative pronouns (this, that, these, those, etc.) to modify whatever
countable nouns and uncountable nouns. But for the nouns themselves, they have no
any transformations in any cases. And for the verbs, including “be” verb and other
general verbs as predicates, in Chinese, people are not expected to change the verbs (for
example, like English, adding a “s” to the end of the verbs), even though their subjects
are the third-person singular or uncountable nouns. Like the three students did in their
work, in Chinese, people just list the nouns and verbs they need without considering
anything.

Therefore, it could be inferred that the systematic errors made by the three
Chinese-English learners stem from the learners’ L1. Nevertheless, they may make
improvement in the future and gradually overcome the L1 interference in their later
English learning. As Harmer (2001, p.100) concludes, “errors are part of the students’
interlanguage, that is the version of the language which a learner has at any one stage of
development, and which is continually reshaped as he or she aims towards full
mastery”.

In addition, it cannot be denied that there are some errors in the data are difficult to
categorize. For example, in student 0090’s work, in the third paragraph, he/she wanted
to illustrate the importance of the capital penalty. One of the effects of such a penalty is
decreasing crimes. He/she said in this way: “the capital penalty appear in the law which
can help someone to stop the crimes to happen and it can threaten criminals to
decrease”. It’s a quite strange expression. From the literal meaning, it is not so hard to
understand; but native speakers do not express things in this way. In fact, it is not so
difficult to trace the Chinese expression style in the sentence which some people called
“Chinglish”. We may categorize such errors into “stylistic” errors, but we should be
aware that there are no obvious mistakes, at least grammar mistakes, in such a sentence.
In this case, it could be a long way to Chinese teachers of English to teach their students
correct grammar as well as the native ways of expression.

A Hypothesis about the Features of the ILG of This Group of Learners

I have a hunch that Chinese-English learners may also have problems in dealing with
“tense” when they are learning English. From the interlanguage point of view, students
tend to make mistakes in the second language learning in some systems which don’t
exist in their mother tongue. Because there is no “tense” usage in Chinese (In Chinese,
people use adverbial phrases to illustrate different time without changing the verbs.),
Chinese learners who learn English as the second language, therefore, may have
troubles in using tenses correctly.

The information from ICLE may not provide enough data for me to prove and
investigate my hunch. There are two reasons: 1) most of the data in ICLE is from those
learners who had a period of time spent in an English-speaking country for an average
of 9 months prior to data collection. Even though some data was collected in Mainland
China, where learners had never been to an English speaking country, this kind of data
is fewer. 2) the assigned topics, like “capital penalty”, “television”, cannot provide
enough room to students to show their mastery of “tense” due to the common narrative
character of such general topics.

Therefore, in order to collect more grounded evidence to support my hunch, I would
collect my data in China. And most of the data providers have never been to English
speaking countries before. Besides, I am thinking the data collection could be from
three ways.
The first task may follow what ICLE project did. But the writing topics may differ. In order to collect more valid data on their using of tense, for example, they would be asked to write an essay on narrating an event which happened in their childhood or a dream they wish. In this way, they have to use different tenses in their writing.

The second task may involve a cloze test in multiple choice type, in which the missing words mainly would be verbs. Students are encouraged to choose the most appropriate tense of the words according to their interpretation of the context in which the cloze involves.

The third task could be a role play. With a specific topic they are familiar, for example, *Snow White, Little Red Hat*, etc., students would be observed in using tenses in the oral language. And in order to keep the reliability of such a method, data in the role play would be taped.

Thereby, through the three tasks above, it could be easier and more objective to observe how Chinese-English learners, in their context, use tenses and whether they have problems in using tenses with the L1 interference.

**References**

