



An Analysis of Writing Errors Among Chinese Language Learners in an International School in Malaysia

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Abstract

Chinese is offered as a foreign language in the majority of international schools in Malaysia. Many previous studies on error analysis mainly focused on one aspect such as Chinese character writing, vocabulary or word order and on groups like Chinese-speaking children or Malaysian students in Chinese universities. Currently, there is still a lack of research done on analyzing composition writing errors from a comprehensive perspective among Chinese learners in the international schools in Malaysia. This study aimed to investigate the writing errors (including Chinese character-, lexical- and sentence-level errors) of 46 Malaysian high school learners of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL). The instrument in the study was a composition on the topic of My School (我的学校) or My Family (我的家人) in about 80 to 100 characters. Participants were given 45 minutes to complete the composition. Drawing upon descriptive and error analysis, the study found that the substitution of characters with pinyin accounted for the largest proportion of errors at character level, lexical formation at lexical-level errors and misaddition at sentence-level errors. The findings of the study are discussed with pedagogical implications and future research suggestions.

Keywords: *Chinese as a foreign language, composition writing, writing errors, error analysis, descriptive analysis*

1. Introduction

In second/foreign language (L2/FL) acquisition writing errors have been widely investigated. Being aware of writing errors, teachers are able to take remedial actions to correct the errors for language learners and students are able to identify their shortcomings in the learning process. Errors are seen as the non-native consequence of learners' insufficient linguistic knowledge and negative transfer of their mother tongue. According to Corder (1973), an error is any element of a learner's utterances that is different from a native speaker's [1]. Errors can reflect learners' language ability, level of interlanguage or development at a certain time and learners cannot fix the errors by themselves.

Like English, Chinese is also taught in four aspects: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Learners face more difficulties and challenges regarding writing [2]. Previous research on Chinese writing errors has focused on different aspects. For example, Chen and Yang (2018) analyzed the Chinese character writing errors among Thai Chinese learners. In this study, errors were categorized into stroke errors, component errors and character usage errors, among which stroke errors were the most prominent [3]. Besides, the study of Zhou (2018) examined the vocabulary acquisition errors among Pakistani learners in terms of lexical formation, semantics, cultural additional meaning and improvised vocabulary [4]. As for the sentence-level study, Liu et al. (2023) investigated the elementary-level Mandarin syntactic errors made by Indonesian adult learners. The results showed that omission and disorder were the most frequent syntactic errors [5]. When it comes to Malaysian Chinese learners, Zhang (2019) explored the errors of characters with similar forms among university students at the primary stage of learning Chinese [6]. In addition, Ngo (2021) investigated the lexical errors in Chinese-speaking pupils, with the finding showing that word misuse was the most frequent error [7]. Moreover, some studies focused on grammar-level errors such as attributives and cause-effect complex sentences in Malaysian Chinese FL learners [8, 9]. In summary, previous research on Chinese error analysis in Malaysia has mainly focused on one aspect such as character errors, lexical errors or grammar errors, and there is insufficient study on comprehensive errors that include all the



aspects. In Malaysia, there are also international schools where Chinese is taught as a foreign language. However, there is a lack of research examining their Chinese writing errors. Therefore, it is of significance to explore comprehensive Chinese writing errors among this group. The study aims to investigate the character-, lexical- and sentence-level errors of high school Chinese learners in an international school in Malaysia.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

An international school in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia was chosen to conduct the research out of convenience. Forty-six participants (24 female students) from Grade 11 took part in the study voluntarily. In this school, English is the medium of instruction and Chinese is taught as a foreign language. Their dominant languages include English, Malay, Tamil and Korean. They have been learning Chinese for at least three years. They were regarded as intermediate learners of Chinese based on their academic performance on school tests.

2.2 Research design

The researcher conducted the study at the international school during the last semester of the 2022 academic year. The guardians and participants consented to participate in the study. These high schoolers were required to compose an 80-100 characters essay on the topic of My Family or My school. Students were given 45 minutes to complete the essay and were not permitted to use Chinese dictionaries during their writing. They wrote the essay in pencil and paper format in classrooms. After the writing, the researcher collected their composition and analyzed character-, lexical- and sentence-level errors. Error analysis was applied as the primary criteria for data analysis in this study. According to Corder (1981), the error analysis process was as follows: learners' language sample collection, error identification, error description and error explanation [10].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Errors in character level

In Table 1, it can be seen that participants made the most errors on the substitution of characters with pinyin (39.51%), followed by stroke errors (31.95%), wrong characters (14.88%) and component errors (13.66%). In summary, the substitution of characters with pinyin and stroke-related errors accounted for a larger percentage of errors, while component-related and character-related errors took up a smaller percentage. For example, one of the participants wrote: *我很喜欢游泳因为很 hao wan*, and in this sentence *好玩* was substituted with its pinyin hao wan. Mushangwe and Chisoni (2015) also found that Zimbabwean students used pinyin as a substitute for characters in their Chinese language acquisition and explained that it was because their native language is not character based. Similarly in this study, the participants native languages are English, Malay, Tamil and Korean, which is the main reason that they are more familiar with using pinyin [11].

Table 1. Character-level errors

Types of errors in character level	Number of Errors	Percentage (%)
Stroke errors	131	31.95%
Component errors	56	13.66%
Wrong characters	61	14.88%
The substitution of characters with pinyin	162	39.51%
Total number of errors	410	100%

3.2 Errors in lexical level

As for the lexical-level errors in Table 2, the most frequent errors were found in lexical formation (50.98%), followed by self-invented words (25.49%), collocation errors (21.57%) and the least frequent errors on the part of speech (1.96%). It suggested that lexical formation accounted for half of errors at the lexical level. Lexical formation errors include synonymous words with a common morpheme, synonymous words with different morphemes, monosyllables and dissyllables with a common morpheme and homophones. For example, one of the participants wrote: *学校位于人口紧密的市中心*. The word 紧密 is wrongly applied in this sentence. To describe *人口* (population) the word *密集* should be used here, although they share the same morpheme *密* which means dense or close. This



finding is consistent with that of Zhou (2018) who found that lexical formation also accounted for the majority of lexical-level errors. He mentioned it was caused by overgeneralization in which learners prefer replacing one word with another synonym due to their limited language knowledge [4].

Table 2. Lexical-level errors

Types of errors in lexical level	Number of Errors	Percentage (%)
Lexical formation errors	26	50.98%
Part of speech errors	1	1.96%
Collocation errors	11	21.57%
Self-invented words	13	25.49%
Total number of errors	51	100%

3.3. Errors in sentence level

From Table 3, participants made the most errors on misaddition (31.08%), followed by misinformation (21.62%), omission (20.27%), juxtaposition (16.22%) and the least errors on disorder (10.81%). The result indicates misaddition is the major error at sentence level. For instance, one of the participants wrote: 她是中国人和来自北京. In this sentence, the conjunction 和 was mistakenly added. It was most probably influenced by the usage of the conjunctive “and” in English and “dan” in Malay, which can directly connect two or more predicative components. However, the most frequent type of sentence-level error varied in studies for it depends on the learner’s Chinese proficiency and native language backgrounds [5].

Table 3. Sentence-level errors

Types of errors in sentence level	Number of Errors	Percentage (%)
Disorder	16	10.81%
Omission	30	20.27%
Misinformation	32	21.62%
Misaddition	46	31.08%
Juxtaposition	24	16.22%
Total number of errors	148	100.00%

4. Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to examine writing errors among Chinese language learners in an international school in Malaysia. The findings revealed that the participants made the most errors at the character level compared with those at the lexical or sentence level. As for character-level errors, the substitution of characters with pinyin accounted for the largest proportion. Regarding lexical-level errors, lexical formation was identified as the most frequent one. At sentence level, misaddition was found to be the major error. Concerning the most prominent errors that occurred in their writing, they could be caused by learners’ negative transfer from the native languages, overgeneralization in which they could not distinguish the synonyms and Chinese language proficiency. The study contributes to our understanding of Malaysian high schoolers’ Chinese writing errors at the character, lexical and sentence levels. The teachers should prioritize character-oriented teaching thus motivating students to reduce the pinyin as substitutes and incorporate more synonym differentiation into curriculum design. However, this current study is limited by a relatively small sample size, which only included intermediate learners. Future research might include beginner and advanced learners of Chinese. In addition, further research might explore learners’ developmental changes in their writing errors at different stages.

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