

## Ungrammatical Patterns in Chinese EFL Learners' Free Writing

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### Abstract

This paper investigated a number of common ungrammatical patterns that were found in Chinese EFL learners' free writings, in order to find useful pedagogical implications for English grammar teaching in EFL setting, especially in China. The corpus of writing data is examined by the author together with a native English teacher. Our findings suggest that misuse of determiners is the most frequent grammatical error in Chinese students' writing. Other ungrammatical patterns such as Chinese-English expression, tense error, misuse of prepositions, are also considerably important and should be given due attention by EFL teachers, especially Chinese EFL teachers in their teaching practice.

**Keywords:** ungrammatical patterns, free writing, Chinese EFL learners, pedagogical implications

### 1. Introduction

The study and teaching of grammar has long been the greatest concern of EFL professionals across the world. In China, after more than 20 years' of grammar-centered classroom teaching practice, it is high time for EFL teachers to review and rethink about the pedagogical model of grammar teaching. The presence of grammatical errors is problematic, but also unavoidable for Non-Native Speakers (NNSs), especially adult NNSs. To some extent, native-like grammar competence is almost impossible to achieve, and according to Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (2008), native-like ultimate attainment or near-nativeness is actually non-existent in principle. Jenkins (2000) believe that EFL teachers should adopt a more liberal attitude towards EFL learners' grammatical errors, provided their error patterns are consistent and intelligible. Thus 'focus on form' should be favored over 'focus on forms', that is, both accuracy and fluency should be highlighted in our real grammar teaching practice.

However, highlighting the significance of fluency, does not mean that we should overlook the importance of accuracy. In fact, for L2 writing, accuracy is still playing an essential role and frequent occurrence of grammar errors can damage L2 writing quality seriously. In the evaluation of writing produced by NNSs, grammatical accuracy is still regarded as a significant criterion and incorrect language use is reported as having negative impact on NNSs' perception of L2 writing quality (Johns, 1997; Johnson & Roen, 1989; Hinkel, 2002). For EFL teachers, they should help their students rectify and eradicate grammatical errors if possible, especially those who want to achieve advanced L2 writing proficiency (Hammerly, 1991; Hinkel, 2002). In addition, EFL learners also expect feedback from their teachers and they believe their grammatical accuracy and writing quality could be improved significantly on account of the attention and feedback they receive from their teachers (Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Fathman & Whalley, 1990). Moreover, error analysis, can not only make learners aware of the nature, distribution and frequency of their ungrammatical patterns, but also enable teachers to provide their feedback efforts more specifically and more efficiently (Corder, 1967; Wu, 1978; Chiang, 1981).

As to specific grammatical errors, different error types should also be treated differently by EFL teachers. Some errors, according to Vaughn (1991), are more detrimental than others to the overall quality of writing in holistic assessment of essays. For instance, verb inflections and uses of tenses, if misused, can obscure text meaning and create serious communication problems, thus must be emphasized and corrected effectively (Ellis, 1997; Hinkel, 2002). Other errors, for example, the misuse of definite article is also very problematic, but unlike the wrong use of tenses, it will not modify or change the meaning in a significant manner. Thus teachers should raise students' consciousness of this error type, but should not push them follow the standard norm if it is not achievable. This is because definite article is extremely difficult to acquire, especially for Chinese students, whose L1 does not

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