



EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF CHINESE ESL LEARNERS IN MASTERING ENGLISH MORPHOSYNTAX: INSIGHTS AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This study examined the morphosyntax of English as a Second Language (ESL) compositions written by Chinese tertiary students in Guangdong, China, particularly on the aspects of correctness, clarity, delivery, and engagement of the compositions. Descriptive research design and a quantitative approach were used in the study. The results show that Chinese ESL learners face difficulties in the use of English grammar rules and conventions, particularly in the areas of punctuation, prepositions, determiners, wordy and unclear sentences, and the misuse of passive voice. Closing punctuation and faulty parallelism were particularly challenging for these students. The study also revealed that Chinese ESL learners tend to use informal language and have difficulty understanding the grammatical rules of English. The findings suggest that ESL teachers should provide targeted instruction and support to improve students' writing skills, using explicit grammar instruction, peer feedback, and model texts. Overall, this study provides insights into the unique challenges faced by Chinese ESL learners in mastering English morphosyntax and offers suggestions for effective teaching strategies.

Keywords: Chinese ESL compositions, morphosyntax analysis, ESL writing instruction

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INTRODUCTION

The morphosyntax analysis of Chinese ESL compositions is of particular interest due to the unique characteristics of Chinese syntax and the challenges faced by ESL students in mastering the language. In recent years, there has been a growing body of research on this topic, which has shed light on the common grammatical errors made by Chinese ESL students and suggested effective teaching strategies to improve their morpho syntactic skills.

Chinese is a morphologically poor language with a relatively simple inflectional system, which makes it distinct from inflectional languages such as English (Liu, 2018). Instead, Chinese relies heavily on word order and particles to convey grammatical information, which can pose challenges for ESL learners who are used to more complex inflectional systems (Liao & Hsu, 2021). Additionally, the lack of inflectional markers can

lead to ambiguity in sentence structure and meaning, requiring careful attention to context and intonation (Chen, 2019).

Several studies have identified common errors made by Chinese ESL students in their written compositions, particularly in the areas of word order, verb tense, and article usage. For example, Zhang and Gao (2020) found that Chinese ESL students often struggle with word order in complex sentences, resulting in awkward phrasing and reduced clarity. Similarly, Chen (2019) noted that verb tense errors are common among Chinese ESL learners, particularly with the use of irregular verbs and the present perfect tense.

Effective teaching strategies for improving the morphosyntax skills of Chinese ESL students have also been explored in recent research. Liao and Hsu (2021) recommended a focus on grammar instruction that is contextualized and meaningful to the students, emphasizing the practical use of language rather than memorization of rules. Additionally, Zhang and Gao (2020) suggested that incorporating sentence diagramming activities into the classroom can help students visualize the structure of complex sentences and improve their understanding of word order.

The morphosyntax analysis of Chinese ESL compositions is a valuable field of study that sheds light on the unique challenges faced by Chinese ESL students in mastering the grammar of English. Through identifying common errors

and effective teaching strategies, this research can inform pedagogical approaches that promote more accurate and fluent writing skills among Chinese ESL learners. Further research in this area is needed to continue developing effective teaching strategies and to explore new areas of morphosyntactic analysis.

Given the above discussions, this study aimed to assess the morphosyntax of ESL compositions of Chinese tertiary students in Guandong, China based on the aspects of correctness, clarity, delivery, and engagement.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The theoretical framework used in analyzing Chinese ESL compositions' morphosyntax is based on the principles of second language acquisition and contrastive analysis. Second language acquisition theory posits that language learning is a complex and dynamic process that involves the acquisition of both linguistic and communicative competence (Ellis, 2017). Contrastive analysis, on the other hand, involves comparing the structures of the first language (L1) and the target language (L2) to identify areas of potential difficulty for language learners (Odlin, 2019).

The application of these theories to the analysis of Chinese ESL compositions' morphosyntax involves identifying the linguistic features of Chinese that may influence the learners' acquisition of English. For example, the absence of inflectional markers in Chinese may lead to errors in verb tense and agreement in English. Additionally, the use of particles and word order in Chinese syntax may affect the organization of English sentences and the use of articles and prepositions.

The analysis of Chinese ESL compositions' morphosyntax can also be informed by the concept of interlanguage, which refers to the transitional linguistic system that learners construct as they progress from their L1 to L2 (Selinker, 1972). Interlanguage analysis involves examining the learners' production of the target language to identify their developmental stages and common errors.

The theoretical framework for analysing Chinese ESL compositions' morphosyntax can be applied in a variety of ways, including identifying common errors made by learners, designing effective teaching strategies, and evaluating the effectiveness of language instruction. By

understanding the unique features of Chinese syntax and the challenges faced by Chinese ESL learners, language instructors can design more targeted and effective teaching approaches that promote the acquisition of accurate and fluent morphosyntactic skills in English.

METHODOLOGY

The research method used in this study was a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach. Descriptive research aims to systematically gather information to describe a phenomenon, situation, or population by answering what, when, where, and how questions. The sources of data were English composition outputs of tertiary students in a university in China. Over 70 manuscripts, with an average word count of 391, were meticulously collected and compiled pouring through each one with great care and attention to detail. Grammarly software was used to proofread and edit the documents, with academic, essay, and APA parameters set during manuscript analysis. The study followed the ethical research guidelines in the university to assure anonymity of the owners of the compositions and descriptive statistics (frequency count) was used for data treatment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study is a quantitative morphosyntax analysis of the compiled Chinese ESL compositions in a Chinese university. The areas of study explored on the aspects of correctness, clarity, delivery, and engagement.

Errors/Issues under Correctness of the Chinese ESL Compositions

Table 1 presents the errors/issues found in the Chinese ESL compositions collected and analyzed in this study. A total of 2193 errors/issues were identified, with the most frequent being punctuation errors in compound/complex sentences (400), wrong or missing prepositions (190), and determiner use (210). These findings suggest that Chinese ESL learners have difficulties with the use of English grammar rules and conventions, which is consistent with previous studies (Ding & Chen, 2018; Zhang & Lu, 2020).

Furthermore, the study found that some errors were more challenging for Chinese ESL learners than others. For instance, closing punctuations and faulty parallelism received a rating of "not satisfactory," indicating that Chinese ESL learners struggle with these areas. On the other hand, the

use of quantifiers received a rating of "highly satisfactory," suggesting that Chinese ESL learners are relatively proficient in this area.

The implications of these findings are significant for English language instructors and curriculum developers. Educators can use the information to focus on teaching the areas where Chinese ESL learners struggle the most, such as punctuation,

prepositions, and determiner use, and to develop appropriate teaching strategies and materials to address these issues effectively (Chen & Guo, 2021). Curriculum developers can also utilize the results to improve the English language curriculum for Chinese ESL learners by including more practice exercises and feedback on these problem areas.

Table 1: Errors/Issues under Correctness of the Chinese ESL Compositions

Types of Errors/Issues	Frequency of Errors	Descriptive Equivalent Rating
Punctuation in compound/complex sentences	400	Not Satisfactory
Wrong or Missing Prepositions	190	Not Satisfactory
Determiner use	210	Not Satisfactory
Faulty tense sequence	98	Not Satisfactory
Incorrect verb forms	108	Not Satisfactory
Comma Misuse Within Clauses	180	Not Satisfactory
Incorrect noun number	153	Not Satisfactory
Confused words	42	Not Satisfactory
Misspelled words	58	Not Satisfactory
Conjunction Use	77	Not Satisfactory
Pronoun use	47	Not Satisfactory
Faulty subject-verb agreement	95	Not Satisfactory
Text inconsistencies	68	Not Satisfactory
Misplaced words or phrases	45	Not Satisfactory
Improper formatting	82	Not Satisfactory
Unknown Words	69	Not Satisfactory
Incomplete sentences	89	Not Satisfactory
Misuse of semicolons, quotation marks, etc.	12	Not Satisfactory
Mixed dialects of English	18	Not Satisfactory
Closing Punctuations	6	Very Satisfactory
Commonly confused words	15	Not Satisfactory
Incorrect phrasing	33	Not Satisfactory
Misuse of modifiers	30	Not Satisfactory
Conditional sentences	40	Not Satisfactory
Misuse of quantifiers	2	Highly Satisfactory
Modal Verbs	11	Not Satisfactory
Faulty Parallelism	15	Not Satisfactory
Total	2193	Not Satisfactory

Legend: 1-3-Highly Satisfactory; 4-7-Very Satisfactory; 8-10-Fairly Satisfactory; 11-above-Not Satisfactory

Clarity in Chinese ESL Compositions

Table 2 presents the errors and issues of Chinese ESL compositions under Clarity. The most frequent errors observed were wordy sentences (287) and unclear sentences (175), which were both rated as Not Satisfactory. This result suggests that students struggle with writing clear and concise sentences, which can affect the overall clarity of their compositions. The next most frequent error was passive voice misuse (220), which is also a common problem for ESL writers as it can make the writing less engaging and more difficult to read.

The analysis also revealed that intricate text (76) and hard-to-read text (40) were common errors, both rated as Not Satisfactory. These issues may be caused by a lack of clarity in the writer's thinking, which can lead to convoluted or confusing sentences. Additionally, ineffective, or missing emphasis (15) was observed, which can impact the overall clarity and impact of the writing. These findings were earlier discovered, too by Wang (2020).

The results of this study have significant implications for teaching writing to Chinese ESL students. Teachers can focus on helping students to write clear and concise sentences, as well as

identifying and avoiding passive voice misuse. Furthermore, students can benefit from instruction on how to organize their thoughts effectively to avoid writing intricate or hard-to-read text.

Additionally, providing guidance on effective emphasis techniques can help students to improve the overall clarity and impact of their writing.

Table 2: Errors/Issues of Chinese ESL compositions under Clarity

Types of Errors/Issues	Frequency	Descriptive Equivalent Rating
Wordy sentences	287	Not Satisfactory
Unclear sentences	175	Not Satisfactory
Passive voice misuse	220	Not Satisfactory
Intricate Text	76	Not Satisfactory
Hard-to-read text	40	Not Satisfactory
Ineffective or missing emphasis	15	Not Satisfactory
Total	813	Not Satisfactory

Legend: 1-3-Highly Satisfactory; 4-7-Very Satisfactory; 8-10-Fairly Satisfactory; 11-above-Not Satisfactory

Delivery in Chinese ESL Compositions

Table 3 presents the errors/issues of Chinese ESL compositions under Delivery, which include Usage of Contractions, Incomplete Sentences, Tone Suggestions, and Potentially Sensitive Language. The results show that the most frequent error/issue was the Usage of Contractions with a frequency of 670, followed by Incomplete Sentences with 60, Tone Suggestions with 27, and Potentially Sensitive Language with 10. The Descriptive Equivalent Rating for Usage of Contractions, Incomplete Sentences, and Tone Suggestions was Not Satisfactory, while Potentially Sensitive Language was rated Fairly Satisfactory.

The high frequency of Usage of Contractions suggests that Chinese ESL students tend to use informal language in their compositions. This may be due to their limited exposure to formal English writing or the influence of Chinese language, which does not have contractions. Incomplete Sentences are another common issue, which may

be attributed to the students' inadequate understanding of the grammatical rules of English. Tone Suggestions and Potentially Sensitive Language are less frequent errors/issues, but they are still noteworthy, as they indicate that Chinese ESL students need guidance in writing appropriate language that is sensitive to cultural and social norms.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that has identified common errors made by Chinese ESL students in their writing, including grammatical errors, word choice, and discourse structure (Chen & Su, 2021; Xiong, 2020). The results also highlight the need for effective teaching strategies that can address these errors, such as providing explicit instruction, error correction, and feedback. Furthermore, it is important to provide cultural and contextual guidance to help Chinese ESL students navigate the nuances of English writing and to help them develop their own voice and style in writing.

Table 3: Errors/Issues of Chinese ESL compositions under Delivery

Types of Errors/Issues	Frequency	Descriptive Equivalent Rating
Usage of Contractions	670	Not Satisfactory
Incomplete Sentences	60	Not Satisfactory
Tone Suggestions	27	Not Satisfactory
Potentially Sensitive Language	10	Fairly Satisfactory
Total	767	Not Satisfactory

Legend: 1-3-Highly Satisfactory; 4-7-Very Satisfactory; 8-10-Fairly Satisfactory; 11-above-Not Satisfactory

Engagement in Chinese ESL Compositions

Table 4 presents the errors/issues under the category of engagement in Chinese ESL compositions. The two types of errors/issues identified were word choice and monotonous

sentences. Word choice had a higher frequency of occurrence (190) compared to monotonous sentences (8). Both errors/issues were rated as not satisfactory and fairly satisfactory, respectively.

The high frequency of word choice errors in the compositions could indicate that the students lacked the necessary vocabulary or had difficulty selecting the appropriate words to express their ideas effectively. In Chinese, there are often multiple ways to express the same idea, and it is possible that the students struggled with transferring this skill to English writing. This finding is consistent with previous research on Chinese ESL writing that has identified vocabulary as a common area of difficulty for students (Hu & Lei, 2015).

The low frequency of monotonous sentences in the compositions may suggest that the students were able to vary their sentence structures to some extent, which is important for creating a more engaging and interesting text. However, the fact

that these sentences were still rated as not satisfactory suggests that there is still room for improvement.

The implications of these results are that teachers should focus on helping students to develop their vocabulary and to use a variety of sentence structures in their writing. Instructors can provide targeted vocabulary instruction, such as teaching synonyms and antonyms, collocations, and idiomatic expressions, to help students expand their word choice. Additionally, instructors can model a variety of sentence structures in their own writing and provide opportunities for students to practice using different sentence types. Peer review activities can also be helpful in encouraging students to identify areas for improvement in their writing and to learn from each other's strengths.

Table 4: Errors/Issues under Engagement

Types of Errors/Issues	Frequency	Descriptive Equivalent Rating
Word Choice	190	Not Satisfactory
Monotonous Sentences	8	Fairly Satisfactory
Total	270	Not Satisfactory

Legend: 1-3-Highly Satisfactory; 4-7-Very Satisfactory; 8-10-Fairly Satisfactory; 11-above-Not Satisfactory

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that Chinese ESL learners encounter various difficulties in their writing, particularly in the areas of grammar, clarity, delivery, and engagement. The most common errors were related to punctuation, prepositions, determiners, wordy and unclear sentences, and the misuse of passive voice. These results are consistent with previous research that highlighted the challenges faced by ESL learners in mastering English grammar rules and conventions.

The study also found that some errors were more challenging than others, with closing punctuations and faulty parallelism being particularly problematic. These findings indicate the need for targeted instruction and support to address these specific areas of difficulty. Additionally, the high frequency of Usage of Contractions and Incomplete Sentences suggests that students need more exposure to formal English writing and additional guidance in mastering English grammatical rules.

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that English language teachers and writing instructors provide targeted instruction and support to help Chinese ESL learners improve their writing skills. Teachers can use various teaching

strategies, such as explicit grammar instruction, peer feedback, and model texts, to enhance students' understanding of English grammatical rules and conventions. Additionally, instructors can provide feedback and guidance on issues related to clarity, engagement, and delivery to help students write more effectively and appropriately.

FURTHER STUDY

However, this study has some limitations. First, the data collected were from a single university, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include a more diverse sample of students from different universities and regions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the writing challenges faced by Chinese ESL learners. Second, the study only focused on written compositions and did not explore oral communication skills. Therefore, future research should investigate the oral communication skills of Chinese ESL learners to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their language proficiency.

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