

# *The Effect of Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue in English Compositions of the Graduate Candidate Test*

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**Abstract:** This paper takes some non-English majors at NCUT who participated in the Graduate Candidate Test for examples and collects a total of 60 compositions that students practiced during the preparation period. By error analysis and data analysis, this paper aims on the research question: What negative transfer effects, if any, are there on English composition learning for non-English graduates at NCUT?

This paper analyzes linguistic errors as three parts: lexical errors, syntax errors and pragmatic language failure. Lexical errors contain 5 error types, syntax errors contain 5 error types, and pragmatic language failures contain 2 error types. This paper finds that the negative transfer of mother tongue is an important part in English writing, and it is a beneficial tool for foreign language acquisition to treat the negative transfer of mother tongue correctly and learn to make effective use of the transfer of mother tongue.

## **1. Introduction**

As many as 3.4 million people signed up to take the 2020 Graduate Candidate Test (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China). In the Graduate Candidate Test, English is a compulsory subject for most examinees, among which scores of the writing part are large. Therefore, in preparation for the Graduate Candidate Test, it is particularly important to pay attention to English writing and make proper use of the transfer of mother tongue to study English.

Writing tests students' ability to describe things or express their own ideas through the use of language points such as morphology and syntax. Grammatical errors are common in students' writing and it is very obvious that the phenomenon of Chinglish in language and culture are caused by negative transfer of mother tongue. However, these grammar problems are also very easy to solve through the mastery of language points and the intentional avoidance of negative transfer of mother tongue.

## **2. Data Analysis**

This paper collects 60 draft compositions from students who were taking the Graduate Candidate Test in non-English majors. Then this paper sorts out and summarized the grammatical errors in the 60 compositions. This paper makes a total of 146 mistakes in the 60 draft essays. These errors can be roughly divided into grammatical errors and spelling errors. There are 112 grammatical errors, accounting for 84% of all errors.

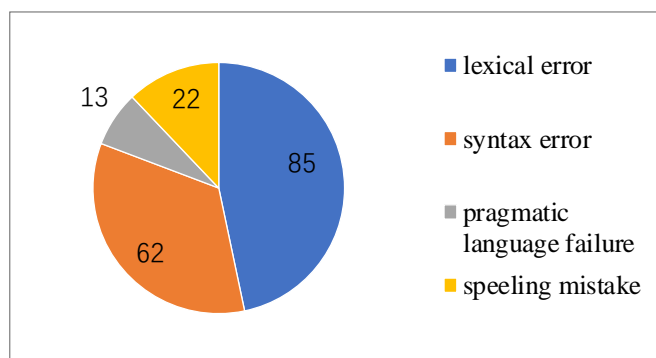


Figure 1: Errors in the Compositions

The errors of language point in the 60 compositions can be roughly divided into three types: Lexical errors, syntactic errors and pragmatic errors.

### 3. Description and Analysis of Errors

#### 3.1. The Lexical Errors

Morphology refers to the understanding and use of vocabulary. The lexical errors that students tend to make are mainly errors on language points in various parts of speech. Lexical errors can be roughly divided into the following aspects.

##### 3.1.1. Third-Person Singular

Students often misuse the singular when nouns should be plural and the plural where they should be singular. There are also cases where uncountable nouns are misused in the plural form. In the process of writing students often write such sentences because of the ignorance of third-person singular:

(1) This reason makes a number of people to regard learning in the higher grade as an ideal means to be a better person; hence it has gradually become their new favorite.

However, the correct way of writing should be based on the modifiers and predicates before and after nouns to verify the singular and plural forms of nouns. The specific corrections are as follows:

(2) This reason makes a number of people regard learning in a higher grade as an ideal means to be a better person; hence it has gradually become their new favorite.

As the forms of words in Chinese are simpler and more straightforward than those in English, it is easy for students to ignore the third-person singular in the writing process. In addition, the change rules of third-person singular in English are relatively more complex and flexible. Students tend to be confused when they apply the rule of third-person singular, because of the negative transfer of mother tongue on the difference of tense form between the two languages.

##### 3.1.2. Misuse of Part of Speech

Students often confuse the parts of speech in the process of phrasing, such as the preposition as a verb. When students memorize words, they only pay attention to the meaning of the words and ignore the part of speech, so they often write sentences like this:

(3) As a student, a systematic accumulation of relevant knowledge on your major in would be the first task to ensure that you can graduate successful.

The mixture of adverbs and adjectives is a common mistake among students. They tend to misuse adjectives in modifying verbs and sentences or misuse adverbs in modifying nouns. The correct way to write it is as follows:

(4) As a student, a systematic accumulation of relevant knowledge in your major would be the first task to ensure that you can graduate successfully.

In general, Chinese parts of speech have two characteristics: first, there is basically no fixed form; second, the part of speech is very flexible. And English grammar structure and part of speech use is very rigorous. As a result of the difference in part of speech, Chinese students tend to ignore changes in parts of speech when using English.

### 3.1.3. Incorrect Collocations of Phrasal Verbs

The sentence errors and ambiguities caused by improper collocation are also a problem in writing when using some phrasal verbs. A small preposition can directly affect the meaning of the phrase. At the same time, there are many similar collocations. The students' inaccurate memory of these phrasal verbs and the specious sentences they produced directly affected the quality of the writing, such as:

(5) On the other words, I have been signed in an urgent task by my university, which deprived me of time and energy.

(6) Basis on that, I would wonder if there is some space in our apartment that can take exercise.

Fixed phrasal verbs often represent a fixed meaning. If the preposition is added or subtracted incorrectly or replaced with another preposition, it will completely change the meaning of the phrasal verb. The correct sentence is:

(7) In other words, I have been signed on an urgent task by my university, which deprived me of time and energy.

(8) Based on that, I wonder if there is enough space in our apartment that can take exercise.

The whole phrasal verb is still a verb component in the sentence, but the actual meaning cannot be inferred from the verbs of the phrase itself and from the sketch words. However, Chinese word collocation is more closely related to the actual meaning. The negative transfer of mother tongue on word collection leads us English students to pay less attention to these phrases and become more accustomed to memorizing individual words.

### 3.1.4. Repetition of Meaning

Due to the lack of correct understanding of some words and the meaning of short words in English, students will repeatedly use some words with the same meaning in the same sentence in the writing process, which makes the sentence appear cumbersome and illogical. Such as:

(9) In my opinion, I think relaxation is equally as important as study.

The correct sentence is:

(10) In my opinion, relaxation is as important as study.

If college students use some repetitive words in the process of writing in order to make the words

in the article more gorgeous, which is unreality, they will not make the article better, but will have the opposite effect. Unlike English, in Chinese we are used to using repetitive words to emphasize sentences.

## 3.2. The Syntax Error

### 3.2.1. Incorrect Placement of the Center Word and Modifier

Students tend to ignore the placement of modifiers and take it for granted that modifiers can be placed anywhere. But the reader is completely unable to understand what the author is trying to say. As a result, students often make the following mistakes:

(13) Second, it's worse still, I have not enough time in the near future.

(14) The man in that house very likes the white little lamb.

Due to the wrong position of modifiers, we cannot understand what the above two sentences mean. In addition, when the same central word has more than one modifier to modify, modifiers also have order. So the corrected sentence is:

(15) Second, it's worse still, I don't have enough time in the near future.

(16) The man in that house likes the little white lamb very much.

When modifying the main word in Chinese, the order of modifiers is different from that in English. For example, Chinese surnames put the family name before the individual name. When it comes to time and place in China, the order is "big" before "small".

### 3.2.2. Missing Conjunction (Comma Usage Error)

In English writing, if there is no period or semicolon between two sentences, there must be a missing conjunction between the two sentences. According to the parallel and subordinate principle of grammar, a compound sentence must have a conjunction; otherwise it is not in accordance with the rules of grammar. Students tend to ignore conjunctions and use commas to connect two sentences directly. Specific examples are as follows:

(17) I don't have pets, don't worry about that.

The misuse and underuse of connectives is so severe that the text is incoherent, fluid, and illogical. If students use connectives properly and reasonably, they can not only increase the coherence of the text, but also make the structure of the text clearer. Two or more sentences may be joined together by using a semicolon or adding a conjunction, so the corrected sentence is:

(18) I don't have pets, so don't worry about that.

### 3.2.3. Subject-Predicate Consistency

In English compound sentences, if the subjects of the two clauses are the same, you can omit the subject. However, when students write compound sentences, they tend to omit the subject regardless of whether the subject is consistent, resulting in inconsistent subjects and semantic confusion between the two clauses. Specific examples are as follows:

(19) Again, it's my pleasure to have your invitation and maintain that students can learn Chinese culture well.

In this sentence, the subject of the clause is not consistent, but the subject is omitted. As a result, we cannot understand the meaning of this sentence. The revised sentence is as follows:

(20) Again, it's my pleasure to have your invitation and I maintain that students can learn Chinese culture well.

Chinese syntax emphasizes refinement. Therefore, in a certain context, some self-evident elements are often omitted without misunderstanding. If the subject is inconsistent, the subject cannot be omitted. This difference between Chinese and English language causes negative transfer of the mother tongue. If abused, this will lead the meaning of the sentence be confused.

### 3.2.4. Tense Errors

Tenses are an important indicator of when something happened. Students often pay no attention to tenses when writing English compositions. Specific examples are as follows:

(21) When I was a child, I often go fishing with my father.

The revised sentence is as follows:

(22) When I was a child, I went fishing with my father.

English is a temporal language, which needs corresponding tenses to convey different temporal information. In Chinese, the concept of time is determined by time adverbs and modal particles. English uses various language marks (mainly grammar) to make both parties understand each other's meaning and avoid ambiguity. Tense is a language marker that explains the time of action. As a high-context language, Chinese does not need special grammatical markers to highlight the meaning, but avoids ambiguity through the common background knowledge of both sides.

## 3.3. Pragmatic Language Failure

### 3.3.1. The Tone Errors

In English composition, the topic of giving advice often appears. Students often use words like “should”, “must” to give advice.

(25) We must remember more words to improve our English level.

(26) We should use technology method to do some works that we can't do.

In the first example, the expression "should/must" is used to persuade too directly and impolitely, giving readers a tone of lecture that feels like a forced acceptance of the author's point of view. In the second example, there is a mood error. We can use “can” instead of “must” and change this sentence into the passive sentence “technology method can be used to do some works that we can't do”. In this way, the viewpoint will be more objective, fair and easy to accept. The correct sentence is as follows:

(27) We'd better remember more words to improve our English level.

(28) Technology method can be used to do some works that we can't do.

The failure of social pragmatics is caused by cross-cultural differences. Chinese culture stresses modesty, while European and American culture pursues individual freedom, so in the way of expression formed their characteristics. In terms of writing, this feature is highlighted in the expression of sentence patterns. Chinese thinking emphasizes whether something should be done or not, which is the difference between the two languages in expressing requests and appeals. The lack of understanding of culture often leads students to feel some cultural taboos in writing without knowing it.

### 3.3.2. Idioms Errors

Idioms are formed in the specific national culture and are the reflection of national culture. Because of the differences in social system, religious belief, customs and ways of thinking, the cultural individuality of English and Chinese nationalities is more than the commonality. There are

great differences in idiomatic expressions.

(29) The rain was so big that we were as wet as chickens.

This sentence is clear and there is no grammatical error, but it does not conform to the pragmatic habits of English. First of all, the expression of heavy rain is not accurate. Secondly, because of the differences between Chinese and western cultures, the meanings of the same word in English and Chinese languages should also be considered when using animal metaphors. In English, the associative meaning of “chicken” is “fear” and “timidity”, so this expression is bound to cause pragmatic failure.

(30) The rain was so heavy that we were all as wet as a droned rat.

It is not only the associative meaning of the word animal that is different in Chinese and western cultures.

There are other types of words that have different meanings in the west. For example: “at sea” means at a loss. Since navigation was not well developed, sailors were orientated by the position of the land. If the ship is blown out to sea in bad weather, the sailors are at a loss of direction. In addition, in the west, red means loss and black means profit. In China, black means dark and sad, and it’s the costumes at the funeral.

#### 4. Discussion

With the 60 compositions, there are 12 main mistakes caused by negative transfer of mother tongue in three aspects: lexical error, syntax error and pragmatic language failure.

Because of the difference on the tense form in languages, Students usually negative the principle of third person singular. And misuse of part of speech is a simple mistake made by students. Due to the flexible usage of Chinese, students tend to ignore the changes in parts of speech. Besides, the difference on the word collection between Chinese and English lead the incorrect collections of phrasal verbs. And Chinese used to use repetitive words to emphasize sentence, so students always use some repetitive words in writing which is superfluous. In addition, the structure of language is different between Chinese and English, so that students misuse conjunctions sometimes. The above are lexical errors in student’s compositions. This paper suggests that students can attempt to memorize words according to context to try to avoid these errors. It’s an effective method to have a deep understanding of the meaning of a word.

Students place the center word and modifier on incorrect position because of the different order of center word and modifier between Chinese and English. Moreover, the loose structure of Chinese results in the neglect of conjunctions. And subject-predicate consistency is the other error caused by negative transfer of mother tongue. Furthermore, the tense error which will lead to the confusion of meaning is the result of the different way to express time between Chinese and English. Because of the different language structure of Chinese and English, Chinese students tend to ignore the subject in English. To solve these syntax errors, this paper believes that practicing of syntax analysis is a basic way to improve the ability to use English.

As for the pragmatic language failure, there are two kinds of errors in compositions. The root cause of the tone error is cross-cultural different. Because of the different culture and the lack of understanding, idioms errors often appear in the students ‘compositions. Enhancing the understanding of cultural knowledge, no matter in class or after class, the lack of culture knowledge will be improved.

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