Inter- and intralingual errors in Chinese students’ compositions

A case study

Förstaspråks- och målspråksfel i kinesiska studenters uppsatser
En fallstudie

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Abstract

In this quantitative study, time controlled written English compositions by 39 Chinese university majors of English were analyzed by means of Error Analysis (EA) in order to find out what grammatical errors were made. It investigates errors made by more than one fifth of the participants, in order to see whether they can be ascribed to either interlingual or intralingual influence. An error taxonomy based on previous research was created specifically for the errors encountered in the EA. The following grammatical errors were analyzed in the error analysis: article errors, noun number errors, prepositions errors, and verb errors. The results of the error analysis showed that while Chinese learners of English make mistakes due to both interlingual and intralingual influence, the vast majority are due to interlingual influence. These findings strengthen previous notions that when the target language belongs to another language family than the L1, errors are due more often to interlingual influence (also referred to as negative transfer) than to intralingual influence.

Keywords: second language acquisition, interlingual errors, intralingual errors, Chinese learners of English, Error Analysis

Sammanfattning på svenska


Nyckelord: andraspråksinlärning, förstaspråksinterferens, målspråksinterferens, kinesiska studenters engelska, felanalyt
1. Introduction

Achieving proficiency in a second language is not an easy task, and to be traveling down the long road of language acquisition can sometimes require painstaking efforts. There are no shortcuts to be had, but the right conditions can facilitate a transition from one language to another. These conditions, or features, are like mortar for the building blocks of second language acquisition (henceforth SLA). The field of SLA has “expanded and developed significantly” and its “body of knowledge . . . has seen increased sophistication” (Gass and Selinker 2008: 1) since the 1960s, which has led to a major improvement in the way a learner learns and a teacher teaches a second language (L2). The field, however, is still considered rather “complex . . . [and its] focus is the attempt to understand the processes underlying the learning of a second language” (Gass & Selinker 2008: 5). Littlewood (1984: 22) expressed similar ideas. He compared SLA with how children learn their first language (L1) and explained that the L2 learner “contributes by actively forming rules, sometimes overgeneralising them, and gradually adopting them.” During this process, the learner is bound to make errors; these were previously often categorized as failures. However, already in the 1980s, SLA studies tended to distance themselves from labelling errors as failures, and according to Littlewood (1984: 22), errors should instead be seen as “evidence for the learner’s developing systems.” The importance of understanding the process behind the errors and why they occur cannot be stressed enough. Such knowledge can potentially help not only future researchers, but also teachers and students in the field of SLA.

One source of errors in SLA is language transfer (LT). It refers to the transfer of words and patterns from one language to another, or as Rod Ellis puts it, “L1 transfer usually refers to the incorporation of features of the L1 into the knowledge systems of the L2 which the learner is trying to build” (Ellis 1994: 28). The literature usually distinguishes between two types of transfer – positive and negative transfer (Gass & Selinker 2008: 94). Positive transfer refers to the use of structures in one’s L1 that are similar to the L2, thus helping the acquisition. Negative transfer refers to when these structures hinder the production, i.e. structures that are different in one’s L1 are transferred to the L2, thus causing interference.

Another way of categorizing errors is to regard them as either interlingual errors – “errors due to transferring rules from the mother tongue” or intralingual errors, also known as developmental errors – “errors which show that they [the learners] are processing the second language in [their] own terms” (Littlewood 2008: 22f.). This way of looking at learner errors may further explain why different variables, such as L1, affect the acquisition of an L2. If the L1 has different rules than the L2, interlingual errors can be expected, whereas intralingual errors in SLA would suggest that the learner is using strategies similar to those used when
learning his or her L1, for example, overgeneralization (Littlewood 1984: 23). Negative transfer can occur due to the lack of similar structures in the target language. However, overgeneralization, which is considered a developmental error, can also be due to a lack of similar structures, e.g., an equivalent system in the L2. For instance, Arifuzzaman (2015) shows that English (definite and indefinite) articles are difficult for Bengali learners of English, due to the fact that no equivalent system exists in Bengali. This can be seen in the example *many people says that the zoos are a good source of education*, taken from Arifuzzaman (2015: 30). The noun *zoos* refers to all zoos and the zero article should therefore be used. One explanation for this error could be that the student has learned that articles are used with nouns in English and therefore uses it also when it should not be used. Heny (1994: 163) says that when learners are introduced to a whole new type of word which is not present in their L1 (like English articles), serious problems can arise. Two of Heny’s examples of Chinese English speakers’ overgeneralization of the use of the definite article are a) *He finished the school last year*. b) *He smashed the vase in the rage*¹ (Heny 1994: 163). The definite article *the* is overgeneralized in both examples. While these examples are quite easy to categorize as L1 interference, “most cases are not so clear-cut” (Heny 1994: 163).

1.1 Aims and research questions

The aim of this paper is to do an error analysis of compositions written by Chinese university students majoring in English in order to determine whether the most frequent errors can be said to be interlingual or intralingual. The study will not only categorize the errors, but also compare these categories to each other in order to establish what kinds of grammatical errors are most frequent in the texts, and, suggest how such errors can be reduced. The underlying rules of Mandarin are very different from those of the English language. By understanding which grammatical features are the most difficult for Chinese learners of English, students and teachers alike will know what to focus on. This paper will investigate to what extent the native language can be said to affect the learning of English grammatical structures by Chinese students. The following questions will be addressed:

- What kind of grammatical errors occur in time controlled written essays by a group of Chinese university students who are majoring in English?
- What kind of grammatical errors are the most frequent, i.e. made by more than one fifth of the students?

¹ Since there are three instances of the definite article *the*, my boldface is used to point out the two errors.
• What kind of error is more common – interlingual or intralingual?

Since the study is based on a limited set of data, it might be difficult to generalize the results. It might be better to consider the study a case-study which can be extended in further research.

2. Background

This part of the paper will introduce the field of SLA (2.1) and how it has evolved over the last 50 years. Section 2.2 will present the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). The focus of Section 2.3 is Error Analysis (EA), which is the theoretical framework used in this paper. Types of errors, such as interlingual and intralingual errors, along with language transfer will be explained in 2.4.

2.1 The field of second language acquisition

The study of SLA is an ever-changing field which has researchers constantly trying to contribute new ideas which will help in the understanding of how an L2 is learned. From its beginning, the field revolved around how L1 affects the acquisition of L2, and early theories even indicated that L1 was the main component in learning an L2 (Gass & Selinker 2008: 89). When learning an L2, it is assumed that all learners depend on their L1 – the use of L1 in L2 became known as language transfer (Gass & Selinker 2008: 89). As early as 1957 Fries said that “learning a second language, therefore, constitutes a very different task from learning the first language. The basic problems arise not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the new language themselves but primarily out of the special ‘set’ created by the first language habits” (quoted in Gass & Selinker 2008: 95). The reason why Fries talked about habits is because he was a proponent of behaviourism – the predominant theory of language learning at the time. The notion of habits was the flagship of behaviourism. However, while L1 plays a role in L2 acquisition, it is not alone responsible for the process but is, rather, joined by other factors that affect development. Ellis (1997: 4) suggests that in order to understand how learners process language, researchers need to offer an “[explanation] identifying the external and internal factors that account for why learners acquire an L2 in the way they do.” Some of the factors that Ellis talks about are motivation, age, and already known languages, to mention a few, all of which work as proof that the “phenomenon [of SLA cannot] . . . be reduced to a single explanation” (Gass & Selinker 2008: 99f.). It is instead assumed that the process of SLA looks different for each individual, because all learners are differently shaped to process an L2 (Gass & Selinker 2008: 100).
One of the many areas studied in the field of SLA is learner errors. As mentioned in the introduction, errors were previously seen as negative transfer which had to be avoided or corrected. However, already in 1967, Corder (1967: 168) pointed out that while a lot of the errors a learner makes are related to the strategies of his L1, they should not be seen as “old habits” but instead as “signs that the learner is investigating the systems of the new language” (Corder 1967: 168). Gass and Selinker (2008: 102) mention Corder (1967) as being the turning point in how errors were perceived. On the topic of errors being seen as faulty imitation they summarize Corder by saying that

> second language errors are not a reflection of faulty imitation. Rather, they are to be viewed as indications of a learner’s attempt to figure out some system, that is, to impose regularity on the language the learner is exposed to. As such, they are evidence of an underlying rule-governed system. (Gass & Selinker 2008: 102)

Corder (1967: 165) said that just as “no one expects a child learning his mother tongue to produce from the earliest stages only forms which in adult terms are correct or non-deviant,” this should not be expected from a learner of an L2 either. Errors should rather be seen as evidence of SLA and used for future pedagogical reference. This has, therefore, made the errors students produce in an L2 interesting in the way they can reflect the learning process. Yule (2014) gave an example of this process by referring to a Spanish speaker’s error in English L2:

> Rather than consider a Spanish (L1) speaker’s production of *in the room there are three womens* as simply a failure to learn correct English (which can be remedied through extra practice of the correct form), we can look at this utterance as an indication of the natural L2 acquisition process in action. (Yule 2014: 191)

As seen in Yule’s example above, the Spanish speaker has learnt the difference between the singular noun *woman* and the plural noun *women*, but is still developing the rules regarding the plural –s morpheme.

### 2.2 Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

With Contrastive Analysis (CA), behaviourists paved the way for how to analyze learners’ errors. CA originates from the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which was formulated by Lado in 1957 (Gass & Selinker 2008: 101). The CAH predicts that the greater the difference between a learner’s L1 and his L2, the more errors will occur. The hypothesis is founded on the understanding that the more one language differs from another, the more different will the underlying rules be, thus leading to more errors in L2 production. Lado (1957: 59) explained it like this:

> Since even languages as closely related as German and English differ significantly in the form, meaning, and distribution of their grammatical structures, and since
the learner tends to transfer the habits of his native language structure to the foreign language, we have here the major source of difficulty or ease in learning the structure of a foreign language. **Those structures that are similar will be easy to learn** because they will be transferred and may function satisfactorily in the foreign language. **Those structures that are different will be difficult** because when transferred they will not function satisfactorily in the foreign language and will therefore have to be changed. (My emphasis)

According to Gass and Selinker (2008: 97), the framework of the CAH consists of two positions, namely the strong (a priori) vs the weak (a posteriori) view. These two are also defined as the predictive and the explanatory view, in which the strong view makes predictions about learning, whereas the weak view has the analysis of learners' recurring errors as a starting point (Gass & Selinker 2008: 97). The theory has, however, received a lot of criticism. Littlewood (1984: 19) says that “the behaviourist approach claims that we can predict difficulties and errors by means of contrastive analysis,” a statement which he says has not been supported by sufficient evidence. One of the drawbacks of CA is, therefore, that a lot of the errors it predicts do not occur in the learner's language. Montrul (2014: 81) also noted that “the study of transfer or interference lacked theoretical rigor and predictive power under [the CAH].” Another criticism CA has received points to the fact that errors resulting from a learner’s attempt to impose regularity on an irregular verb, as in the example *He comed yesterday* (Gass & Selinker 2008: 98), are not accounted for by CA. It became one of the many arguments for moving away from the CAH, which eventually led to the theory which replaced it, Error Analysis.

### 2.3 Error Analysis

Like the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Error Analysis (EA) aims at describing how learning takes place by analyzing learner errors. EA resembles the weak version of the CAH, the difference being that the comparison is made with the L2 and not the L1, and it therefore focuses on learner errors produced in the L2 (Gass & Selinker 2008: 102). EA shows that errors are not only produced due to the influence of a learner’s L1, but they can also be attributed to specific learner strategies because, just as Littlewood (1984: 40) said, “learning is guided partly by the learner’s mother-tongue knowledge (e.g. transfer) and partly by factors independent of the mother tongue.” Therefore, whereas CA only studies interlingual errors made by the learner, EA goes one step further by studying both interlingual and intralingual errors (Khansir 2012: 1027f.). According to Littlewood (1984: 32), “[e]rror analysis is based on the assumption that the [learner’s L2] production is still sufficiently regular to enable us to make generalisations about the system.” One of the advantages of EA is, therefore, that it enables teachers, syllabus designers and textbook writers to understand and remediate the problem areas of SLA (Khansir 2012: 1029).
Even though EA, for the most part, is the analysis preferred in this type of research, it has also been the target of criticism. One of the arguments against it is that it does not account for the avoidance strategy, i.e. the structures that learners avoid because they know that they might not be able to produce them correctly, thus causing them to only use structures they are sure of (Ellis 1994: 68, Khansir 2012: 1030). Ellis provides an example from Schachter (1974), who did a comparative study of relative clause errors produced by two sets of learners. One group was Arabic and Iranian, and the other Chinese and Japanese. Even though the latter group’s languages do not possess relative clause structures, they produced fewer errors than the first group. The reason for this was concluded to be due to avoidance, since the first group used relative clauses with a much higher frequency.

The steps taken in conducting an error analysis involve (1) collecting data, (2) identifying data, (3) classifying errors, (4) quantifying errors, (5) analyzing errors, and finally (6) remediating errors (Gass & Selinker 2008: 103).

### 2.4 Language transfer, interlingual errors, and intralingual errors

According to Littlewood (1984: 29) there are three main processes in the errors that a learner makes. The first one he mentions is transfer of L1 (interlingual), the second is generalization and overgeneralization of L2 rules (intralingual), and the third process is redundancy reduction – also known as simplification – which he says deals with the omission of elements (intralingual). He further adds that they can all be seen as forms of simplification (Littlewood 1990: 29). Transfer will be dealt with in 2.4.1, interlingual errors in 2.4.2, and intralingual errors in 2.4.3.

#### 2.4.1 Language transfer

Language transfer is the usage of one language in the acquisition of another. As mentioned in the introduction there are two kinds of transfer – positive and negative. Similar structures in an L1 will help in the acquisition of an L2, resulting in positive transfer, while different structures will generate difficulties, and result in negative transfer. In 1972, Selinker published an article called Interlanguage (IL) which asked “whether there is a linguistic system that underlies the output of the second language learners” (Tarone 2014: 7). The focus of the Interlanguage Hypothesis was to prioritize “the discussion of learner language data, probing the possibility that learner language has an underlying linguistic system, and that systematic processes are used in second language acquisition” (Tarone 2014: 21). Selinker (2014: 224) explained that language transfer has always been seen as a kind of interlanguage process. He also adds that there are different types of transfer, such as transfer within the IL and reverse
transfer (Selinker 2014: 224). Reverse transfer works from an L2 to an L1 while IL transfer is from one IL to another. A study by Moattarian (2013: 45) shows that reverse transfer is more prone to happen when producing L1 sentences based on the L2. Moattarian concluded that the participants only cared about the semantic aspect, and not the individual language systems when producing the sentences, thus causing reverse transfer. Therefore, while language transfer enables the learner to draw on previous knowledge in her L1 in order to produce the L2 (Littlewood 1984; Ellis 1994; Gass & Selinker 2008), she could also draw on knowledge from any other known languages. Montrul (2014: 81) suggests that language transfer is the major reason for many of the errors produced in SLA. Depending on the similarity between the L1 and the L2, different degrees of positive and negative transfer can be expected (Ringbom 2007: 5f.). According to Ringbom (2007: 69), when a learner’s L1 lacks a grammatical feature present in the L2, such as articles, the learner finds it difficult to know when to use and when to omit articles, and often finds herself producing errors in these situations.

Positive transfer, also known as facilitation, is when similarities between the languages help in the acquisition of the L2 (Gass & Selinker 2008: 93). Languages originating from the same language family usually share a number of features, which makes it likely that students can benefit from positive transfer. For example, a Swedish learner of English can make use of positive transfer from Swedish in order to produce the correct word order Are you hungry? in English. Positive transfer may also help a Swedish student of English in the spelling of words. A word like hand, for example, is spelt the same in both languages. Positive transfer can of course occur between languages very different from each other as well. Chinese learners of English can positively transfer subject-verb-object word order. In Mandarin the word order is the same as in English for he likes cars = 他喜欢车 (He like car). The language does not, however, possess verb conjugation, i.e. the verb form is the same regardless of the subject (Guo 2008), and that could lead to an interlingual error. Such errors will be covered in 2.4.2.

### 2.4.2 Interlingual errors

Whereas positive transfer helps SLA, negative transfer hinders the process. Negative transfer, also known as interlingual errors, can be explained as the errors caused by transferring rules from the learners’ L1 in the acquisition of the L2. Heny (1994: 163) mentions a study by Swan and Smith (1987) in which they found that Scandinavians are likely to say She spoke to me quite polite. They said that this interlingual error happens due to the fact that “Scandinavian languages make no overt distinction between adjectives like polite and their corresponding adverbs (here, politely)” (Heny 1994: 163). Negative transfer therefore happens because the learners assume that, just like in their native language, a single form will be sufficient in English as well. Although Swedish and English originate from the same language family, there
are bound to be differences which may cause problems for the language learner. If the L2 belongs to another language family, however, the frequency of errors can be expected to increase. One such language which is very different from both Swedish and English is Mandarin. It is a non-inflectional language which lacks an article system – it uses classifiers instead of articles. The lack of an equivalent article system in Mandarin could therefore lead to omission in the usage of articles in the production of English. Zheng and Park (2013: 1346) provide the following example of omission of the definite article (in brackets): *Always telling the truth cannot be (the) most important consideration in any relationship.* But the lack of an equivalent article system, as mentioned in the introduction, can also lead to overgeneralization which means that Chinese learners of English may use the definite article in places where it should not be used. Such interlingual errors can hence be explained as errors caused by interference from the learners’ L1, in contrast to intralingual errors.

### 2.4.3 Intralingual errors

The presence of intralingual errors in learner language suggests that the learner is using strategies similar to the ones he used when learning his L1. Ellis (1994: 58), quoting Richards (1971), describes intralingual errors as “reflect[ing] the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply.” Ellis (1994: 58f) says that while Richards (1971) distinguished between interlingual and developmental errors, “most researchers have operated with a general distinction between transfer errors . . . and intralingual errors.” This paper therefore adopts the latter framework with a modification. Instead of having developmental errors as a sub-category they will simply be called intralingual errors, just as transfer errors will be called interlingual errors.

Intralingual errors appear because the learner is attempting to create “hypotheses about the [L2] . . . on the basis of limited experience” (Ellis 1994: 58). One type of intralingual error is overgeneralization. Overgeneralization is when the learner makes use of a grammatical rule in the L2 and implements it in structures where its usage is incorrect (Ellis 1994: 59). Ellis provides the example *He can sings* instead of *He can sing* and *He sings*. While overgeneralization deals with structures used where they should not be, overproduction happens when structures are used too frequently, i.e. in places where they are not necessary. The opposite of overproduction is underproduction, which refers to when words instead are left out where they are required.

Hypercorrection, another reason for errors, happens when language users replace a correct form with an incorrect form because the latter is prevalent in the target language. A Swedish
speaker, for instance, might pronounce words beginning with v as /w/, despite the fact that /v/- but not /w/- is a phoneme in Swedish (see Partridge 2010: 253). Eckman et al. (2013: 257f.) explains that hypercorrection occurs due to a linguistic insecurity. They say that a major factor behind hypercorrection is prestige, and mention Labov’s study of the post-vocalic /r/ in New York City. Labov compared the social dialects and found that the use of post-vocalic /r/ varied between different social classes. The most interesting find, according to Eckman et al. (2013: 258f.) was that the lower middle class produced the post-vocalic /r/ more often than the upper class, which by default would have a higher prestige and usage. In other words, the lower class overused a form of language to a high extent to sound more like the people they tried to imitate, similar to what L2 speakers sometimes do.

Another frequent strategy in L2 production is avoidance. As previously stated, avoidance may be due to a fear of making mistakes in the L2. If the learner is uncertain of a structure, she might, therefore, choose to avoid it. Ellis (1994: 60) also mentions induced errors which “occur when learners are led to make errors by the nature of the instruction they have received.” He provides an example of how faulty explanation of grammatical points can give rise to errors: “the use of ‘any’ to mean ‘none’ when the students were told that ‘any’ has a negative meaning” (Ellis 1994: 60). Another sub-category of intralingual errors is simplification. Simplification refers to errors caused by learners simplifying the structures of an L2. However, Littlewood (1984: 29), as mentioned in 2.4, says that simplification can account for interlingual as well as intralingual errors.

While errors “can be easily identified, it is often problematic to determine what the error consists of” (Ellis 1994: 57). Ellis provides the example sentence I am worried in my mind, which could be reconstructed in several ways, e.g. I am feeling worried or I have a problem on my mind (1994: 57). He says that depending on which reconstruction is chosen by the analyst, the description of the error will vary. As mentioned before, Littlewood says that some of the errors that learners produce are ambiguous, and thus, can be attributed to both inter- and intralingual influence, as seen in the above-mentioned simplification. Ellis (1994: 60) also points out that it is difficult to distinguish between interlingual and intralingual errors. He says that “where one researcher identified the source of an error as transfer, another researcher identified the source of the same error as intralingual” (Ellis 1994: 62).

Similar to what Ellis said about it being problematic to determine the nature of some errors, this study sometimes found it difficult to determine whether an error should be attributed to interlingual or intralingual influence. It was especially problematic when a word was erroneous in both languages or when the grammatical morpheme was produced correctly in other parts
of the text. Is it interlingual influence that causes an error when the student has previously produced it correctly, or should it be ascribed to intralingual influence?

3. Methods

As stated in Section 1.1, the overall aim of this paper is to determine whether the most frequent errors made by the Chinese students whose essays make up the data of this study can be said to be interlingual or intralingual. The approach that I will use, in order to determine the errors, is the one proposed by Gass and Selinker (2008: 103) mentioned in 2.3. The methods section will deal with participants (3.1), data collection (3.2), and categorization (3.3).

3.1 Participants

The initial sample consisted of English compositions written by 40 Chinese second-year students at a top rate university, out of three possible university classifications, in China. One student discontinued his studies at the university half way through the data collection, and therefore the sample was reduced to compositions written by 39 students. The students were all English majors who had been studying English since they were between nine and eleven years old. The majority of the participants in this study were girls. Out of the 39 students only five were boys. All the students shared the same teacher, an American native speaker of English. In their first year, their teacher had also been a native speaker of English.

3.1.1 Ethical considerations

When talking about ethical considerations, Denscombe (2010: 59) says that there is a ground rule that exists in all social research: “Researchers need to protect the interests of the participants.” Protecting the interest of the participants means that researchers need to conduct their research in an ethical manner. The research needs to be as honest, open, and as transparent as possible (Denscombe 2010: 59).

The participants in this study were approached during one of their classes where a brief introduction to the study was given and a request to use their written compositions was put forward by the researcher. In order to avoid putting pressure on the students by having them accept or turn down the request face to face, all students that wanted to participate were asked to sign a letter of consent. The letter of consent was handed to the researcher during the following class by the students’ teacher. No students declined the request.
Denscombe (2010: 64f.) also stresses the need for confidentiality and anonymity. The students were therefore made aware of the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation. Since the compositions were written during class time and since they were part of the students’ regular written proficiency class, the students did not have to sacrifice any of their own time or do any extra work, which is an important factor when conducting social research (Denscombe 2010: 64). No names are mentioned anywhere in this paper, including participants, school, and staff.

As for the third person singular pronoun, she will be used exclusively in the results section. Since the majority of the participants were girls, the use of she is preferable to he or a mixture of the two.

3.2 Data collection

The data collected for this paper were compositions written in the middle of the students’ third semester at the university and they were part of their regular writing class. The students met once a week for ten weeks and the compositions collected as samples were written on three different occasions, from which a sample of one essay per student was drawn.

The compositions were written under controlled conditions, i.e. during so-called quick writes, and the students had five minutes to write a composition about anything they wanted. However, the teacher did provide inspiration through the means of songs or pictures. The compositions were written in class under the supervision of their teacher. The average word count in the compositions was 110 words, with the lowest number of words in a composition being 67 and the highest 161. After the students were done, the compositions were handed in to the teacher who marked all the errors before handing over copies to me. The errors marked by the teacher were used and they were indeed helpful for the research. Nevertheless, in order to assure the validity of the study, the researcher also went over the compositions in case some errors had not been noted.

Since one student dropped out half-way through the semester, a total of 117 compositions were collected instead of 120, from which a sample of 39 were used. The reason for using 39 compositions instead of the whole set was due to time limitations. The data were analyzed manually.

3.3 Categorization

The initial categories for this paper were inspired by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen’s (1982) surface strategy taxonomy of errors (taken from Ellis 1994: 56). The same taxonomy has been used as
a background for a taxonomy in a previous study of errors in Chinese and Koreans students’ English essays (Zheng & Park 2013: 1344). However, as mentioned earlier, the categories did not cover all types of errors identified in the students’ texts and therefore the taxonomy used in this paper was arrived at inductively, based on the errors encountered during the error analysis. Since this study aimed to find out what kind of grammatical errors occur and which grammatical errors are produced in one fifth or more of all the compositions (i.e., made by at least eight of the 39 students), and not account for errors made by very few students, some of the categories used in the previous study will not be included in the results section. In Section 3.3.3, Exclusions, there is a list of categories not considered further.

3.3.1 Error taxonomy and examples

The errors were divided into the following main categories: article errors, noun errors, preposition errors and verb errors. Table 1 shows the error taxonomy with subcategories and descriptions of the categories as well as examples of errors belonging to each category. The examples are taken from the students’ compositions and some of them may need the context of the text in order to be understood.

**Table 1. Error taxonomy.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Article errors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addition</td>
<td>An unnecessary or incorrect item is added.</td>
<td>What a terrible news!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>A required item is omitted.</td>
<td>It’s _ exciting experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect form</td>
<td>An incorrect form is used.</td>
<td>It’s hard for a 18-year old boy to live alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Noun errors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect form – plural</td>
<td>Singular is used instead of plural.</td>
<td>The most frightening thing for me is to attend competition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect form – singular</td>
<td>Plural is used instead of singular.</td>
<td>I got a part-time jobs in McDonalds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preposition errors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addition</td>
<td>An unnecessary or incorrect item is added.</td>
<td>I knew it’s about dancing when I attended the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>A required item has been omitted.</td>
<td>We look down _ ourselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect form</td>
<td>An incorrect form is used.</td>
<td>My friend, Joe, provided me with a good job in the beach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verb errors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing verb</td>
<td>A required item is omitted.</td>
<td>I _ afraid of making mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past tense errors</td>
<td>Either the tense or the form of a verb requiring the past tense is erroneous.</td>
<td>I walked alone and nobody be with me. I drew some fruits. I was really surprised that I can draw such a picture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3.2 Explanation of examples and statistical numbers

This section explains the rationale for having a different number of examples in the results section as well as how the different numbers should be interpreted.

Examples of student errors initially included two examples for each category. Since many of the errors were very similar, several examples seemed redundant. Instead, the analyses in each subsection are illustrated by one example per type, which means that if all errors derive from interlingual influence, only one error is presented. If the errors occur for more than one reason, i.e., if some errors in the category can be considered to be due to interlingual influence and others to intralingual influence, two examples are presented.

In order to showcase the extent to which errors occur as well as by how many students they were produced, both the total number of errors and the ratio of student compositions where a certain type of error was found were calculated. Whenever the latter is presented, the number of compositions is added after the ratio (e.g., 38% (N=15)). As for percentages, all the tables in the results section have had their numbers rounded to the nearest whole percent.

3.3.3 Exclusions

This section accounts for errors that were found in less than one fifth of the data and hence excluded from the results section.

Errors were produced in the use of both adjectives and adverbs but since they were not frequent enough, they were excluded from further analysis. While few students made errors involving an adverb, adjective errors occurred more often, suggesting that adjectives do cause problems for Chinese students. They seem to be especially troublesome when they are used as complements of linking verbs, for example, as seen in the sentence he is scared of flying where scared is the correct adjective.

Another category, conjunction errors, was excluded due to the low frequency such errors. Some compositions had conjunctions and prepositions mixed up, i.e., instead of connecting two sentences with a conjunction, a preposition was used. For example, one participant wrote we talked warmly with smelling the perfume of osmanthus (the context being that someone remembers how they always talked surrounded by Osmanthus flowers). The preposition with was used instead of the conjunction while. Therefore, in order for these errors not to affect the category prepositions and the validity of the study, errors involving conjunctions were not included in the EA.

For the most part, general and specific determiners as well as quantifiers were excluded because they showed a low error frequency throughout the data. The only determiners included
in the study are the articles because of their high frequency. However, if another determiner, such as *this* or *that* was used incorrectly for one of the articles, it was still counted as an article error. Just as with determiners, the category noun also has items excluded from the study. Only errors of noun number are included. Plurals of nouns that change vowels (such as *man/men*), nouns that change spelling completely (*mouse/mice*), as well as foreign nouns (e.g. *cactus/cacti*) are not included in the category.

Verbs also have items excluded. The following categories showed few errors and were not considered for further analysis: errors involving the *ing*-form, the infinitive, and superfluous verbs. Even though there were a number of instances of verbs inserted in places where they were not required, they were not frequent enough to be part of the results section. Initially, auxiliary verbs and modals had their own categories which were made up of errors of tense and form (for example *will* instead of *can*, or *do* instead of *did*). However, since the errors more often than not were of tense, they have instead been included in the category past tense errors. They remaining errors of form were not frequent enough and have therefore been excluded.

While article errors of addition (8% (N=3)) and singular noun errors (18% (N=7)) fit the description of categories being excluded from further analysis (i.e., errors made by less than one fifth of the students), they were included to better show the difference between inter- and intralingual influence, as well as to make the results section more comprehensive.

### 4. Analysis and results

The current section presents the error analysis and results. In Section 4.1, article errors are presented. Noun number errors are presented in 4.2, while preposition errors are dealt with in 4.3. Verb form errors are presented in 4.4 and 4.5 consists of an overall comparison of the errors along with a comparison between interlingual and intralingual frequency. Each section presents a survey of the use of each category in the compositions, as well as a survey of the error frequency in the different subcategories.

As for the examples provided to each analysis, the incorrect sentence from the data is presented first, followed by the correct sentence in Mandarin, which in turn is followed by a word for word translation of the Mandarin sentence. All examples were analyzed with the help of a native speaker of Mandarin, who also worked as an English and Mandarin teacher.
4.1 Article errors

The current section presents the overall correct and faulty usage of definite and indefinite articles as well as the frequency of the different article errors. Addition errors are presented in 4.1.1, incorrect choice errors in 4.1.2, omission errors in 4.1.3, and a summary of article errors can be found in 4.1.4.

Out of 286 instances of definite and indefinite articles appearing in the compositions, 60 are incorrect. Only nine compositions do not contain article errors. Table 2 presents an overall survey of article usage. Table 3 presents the number and ratio of errors in the subcategories.

Table 2. Survey of students’ use of the definite and indefinite article in their compositions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Definite articles</th>
<th>Indefinite articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct choice of article</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faulty choice of article</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Type of definite and indefinite article error in the students’ compositions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Definite articles</th>
<th>Indefinite articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addition</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect choice</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each type of error will be dealt with in more detail in Sections 4.1.1 – 4.1.3.

4.1.1 Addition

Errors of addition are found in three different compositions, and as such it is the least frequent article error. There are only three errors in total. Article errors of addition are considered to be interlingual. Below is an example and an analysis of such an error.

(1) What a terrible news!
    多么糟糕的一个消息!
    What terrible one *measure word* news!

In example (1), the indefinite article a has been used with an uncountable noun. However, in English the indefinite article is only used with countable nouns. In Mandarin, there are no articles. Instead, a noun is usually made general or specific through the means of demonstratives, numerals or quantifiers, along with a classifier. The equivalent of example (1) in Mandarin would be what terrible one news. This suggests transfer from the L1. The error is classified as interlingual, since the basis of the problem is that Mandarin uses a numeral for the noun news.
4.1.2 Incorrect choice

Errors of incorrect choice of article were found in 38% (N=15) of all the compositions. Out of a total of 60 errors, as many as 21 (i.e., more than one third) involve the wrong choice of article. When results are broken down, it turns out that only six of these concern the indefinite article while as many as 15 involve the definite article. 14 errors were classified as interlingual, while the remaining seven were ascribed to intralingual influence. Below are examples and analyses of such errors.

(2) The teacher asked me to write a application for my class.
老师要求我写一份课程申请书。
Teacher ask me write one *measure word* class application.

(3) I’ve heard this song “hero” before.
我之前有听过 hero 这首歌。
I before have hear *finished action* hero this song.

When a noun starts with a vowel sound, the indefinite article an needs to be used. However, in example (2), a is used instead of an before the noun application. The writer knows that an article should be used in English, but makes an incorrect choice. This is thus a developmental error, and hence intralingual.

From the context concerning example (3), it is understood that the song titled “hero” is being spoken about in general. There is no previous reference to it in the text that would enable the determiner this. In Mandarin there are no definite articles. Instead this or that are used as determiners in those cases where English would use the definite article. The error is classified as interlingual. Not all definite article errors were rendered incorrectly as this or that; they were also rendered incorrectly as a (for example my grandmother lived in a country side).

4.1.3 Omission

Omitting an article is the most frequent article error and it is found in 56% (N=22) of all the compositions. The category comprises 36 errors. Article errors of omission are considered to be interlingual. Below is an example and an analysis of such an error.

(4) I couldn’t move for a whole day after _ operation.
手术后我一整天都不能动。
After operation I one whole day cannot move.

In example (4), the noun operation refers to a foot operation and has a specific meaning in the text and as such, the definite article the is required before the noun. In Mandarin there is no such requirement; in fact, the correct way of saying the phrase after the operation is after
operation. The structure has been transferred from Mandarin and the error is hence classified as interlingual.

### 4.1.4 Summary of article errors

As seen in Table 2, the total number of articles was 286 (167 definite articles and 119 indefinite articles) with a total of 60 being erroneous (41 and 19 respectively).

Altogether, there were only three errors where an article had been added where no article is required (two indefinite articles and one definite article), which suggests that incorrect addition of article errors is not really a problem for the students in this study. The reason why errors of addition are not so frequent can be ascribed to the fact that because Mandarin does not have articles, learners are less likely to overuse them. However, as can be seen from the analysis of example (1), nouns can be made general or specific through other means using words which resemble the articles. This was the case with all three errors of addition, and as such they are all considered to be interlingual.

The ratio of errors concerning incorrect choice of article was much higher for definite articles (15 errors) than for indefinite articles (two errors for *an* and four for *a*). Chinese learners of English usually do not have as much difficulty when producing the indefinite articles as they do with the definite article. Instead of articles, Mandarin has other ways to signal if a noun is specific or general, which could both lead to positive and negative transfer for a Chinese learner of English. Some errors of incorrect choice were classified as interlingual (14 errors); others as intralingual (seven errors).

Errors of omission were the most frequently made errors with a total of 60%. However, only 11 errors concern the indefinite article while as many as 25 involve the definite article. Errors of omission are easily ascribed to interlingual errors since Mandarin lacks articles. The noun phrases where articles are omitted in the compositions correspond to the same phrase structure in Mandarin. All in all, the lack of an equivalent article system in Mandarin appears to be the chief reason for article errors being made by Chinese learners of English.

### 4.2 Noun number errors

This section presents the overall correct and faulty usage of noun number errors as well as the frequency of the different categories. Errors where a plural noun is rendered as a singular are presented in 4.2.1, while the opposite case (plural form used where the singular is required) is presented in 4.2.2.
Out of 512 instances of nouns in the compositions, 25 are incorrect. 22 compositions do not have any noun number errors. Table 4 presents an overall survey of noun number usage. Table 5 presents the number and ratio of errors in the two subcategories.

**Table 4. Survey of students’ use of nouns in their compositions.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correct choice of number</th>
<th>Plural</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>112</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
<td>375</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faulty choice of number</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td></td>
<td>126</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>386</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5. Type of noun number errors in the students’ compositions.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singular instead of plural</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural instead of singular</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each type of error will be dealt with in more detail in Sections 4.2.1 – 4.2.2.

In order to make the analyses of singular and plural nouns easier to understand for non-Mandarin speakers, a short introduction to noun number in Mandarin is presented here. Mandarin is a non-inflectional language, meaning that words only have one grammatical form. In contrast to English, Mandarin does not mark grammatical number. Instead, to express the plurality of inanimate nouns, such as clothes for example, a quantifier is used. For plural animate nouns, as well as plural personal pronouns, on the other hand, a plural marker is added right after the noun. In Mandarin the plural marker is *men* (们). However, if there is a numeral or quantifier in front of the noun, the marker (们) is not used. Examples illustrating the differences between English and Mandarin are presented below.

**English:** I bought a lot of clothes.
**Mandarin:** 我买了很多衣服。
**Translation:** I buy *finished action* *quantifier* *singular form of clothes*.

**English:** The students went there.
**Mandarin:** 学生们去了那里。
**Translation:** Student *plural marker* go *finished action* there.

**English:** Two students want to travel to another country.
**Mandarin:** 两个学生要去别的国家旅行。
**Translation:** Two *measure word* student want go another country travel.
4.2.1 Singular instead of plural

Errors where a plural noun is rendered as singular are found in 28% (N=11) of all the compositions. There are 14 errors in total. All errors of this type are classified as interlingual, except for one that is undetermined. Below are examples and analyses of such errors.

(5)  For example, they didn’t like to answer my question in class.
    例如，他们不喜欢在班上回答我的问题。
    For example, they do not like in class answer my question.

(6)  But for pleasing my follower, I pretented it was a little cake.
    但是为了让我的追随者放心，我假装很简单。
    But for let my follower please, I pretend very easy.

From the context of the written composition it is understood that teachers not answering the student’s questions is a recurring phenomenon; hence the plural form should be used in example (5). Mandarin does not mark the plurality of inanimate things which can explain why the noun questions appears in its singular form. The student has transferred from the L1, making it an interlingual error.

In example (6), the context of the text is about someone trying to please several followers. Follower is faulty in both English and Mandarin, since expressions of human number in Mandarin requires the plural marker men (们). Because there is no attempt to mark the plurality, it is difficult to determine why the error has occurred. The error is undetermined.

4.2.2 Plural instead of singular

Errors where a singular noun is rendered as plural are found in 18% (N=7) of all the compositions. There are only eleven errors in total. All errors of this type are classified as intralingual. Below is an example and an analysis of such an error.

(7)  I was not top students in my class and my class was not the best.
    我不是我班上优秀的学生而且我的班级不是最好的。
    I not am my class top student and my class not are best.

In example (7), singular is incorrectly rendered as plural. From the context it is understood that she was not the top student of her class and therefore the noun needs to be in its singular form. The reason for an error like this happening could be due to hypercorrection, i.e., a form which is prevalent in the target language is used. Since Mandarin does not use any plural marker (such as men (们)) in a sentence like the one in number (7), the error is classified as intralingual.
4.2.3 Summary of noun errors

As seen in Table 4, the total number of nouns (singular and plural) was 512 (386 in the singular and 126 in the plural) with only 25 being erroneous (11 and 14 respectively). Out of the 39 compositions, 16 contained noun errors. In seven compositions the singular was erroneously used for the plural, and in eleven compositions the plural was used for the singular (in five compositions no plural forms were used at all).

A larger ratio of the nouns in the singular were correct when compared with the plural forms. This suggests that singular and plural errors happen for different reasons. If they occurred for the same reason, say, frequency of usage, it could be expected that the errors would be more evenly spread out. The explanation for the errors lies in Mandarin’s lack of grammatical number. Since plural does not exist in Mandarin (except for the plural marker men (们)), errors where plural is rendered as singular happen because of negative transfer. Singular nouns, on the other hand, are similar to singular nouns in Mandarin, and therefore errors made when singular is rendered as plural are rather due to faulty application of rules. All such errors were classified as intralingual, in contrast to errors where plural is rendered as singular which were all classified as interlingual errors. The reason for classifying them as interlingual is because they are clear cases of L1 interference – the errors are produced by transferring a language pattern from Mandarin.

4.3 Preposition errors

This section presents the overall correct and faulty usage of prepositions, as well as the frequency of the different subcategories. Addition errors are presented in 4.3.1, incorrect choice of preposition in 4.3.2, and omission errors in 4.3.3.

Out of 352 instances of prepositions, 54 were erroneous. Eleven compositions did not have any preposition errors. Table 6 presents an overall survey of preposition usage. Table 7 presents the number and ratio of errors in the subcategories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6. Survey of students’ use of prepositions in their compositions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct choice of preposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct choice of preposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faulty choice of preposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7. Type of preposition error in the students’ compositions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Preposition Error</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Addition</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect choice</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each type of error will be dealt with in more detail in Sections 4.3.1 – 4.3.3.

4.3.1 Addition

Errors of addition are found in 23% (N=9) of all the compositions. There are 12 errors in total. Eight errors in the category are classified interlingual and four as intralingual. Below are examples and analyses of such errors.

(8) I had made a lot of mistakes in when I was speaking to others.
    在我跟别人说话时，我犯了很多错误。
    When I and other people speak, I make many mistakes.

(9) It’s in a big mistake.
    它是一个大的错误。
    It is one *measure word* big mistake.

In example (8), the preposition in is incorrectly added to the sentence making it erroneous. If in is removed, the use of when would be correct in both languages. As can be seen from the translation above, when (zai (在)) is used as an adverb in Mandarin, marking in what situation the mistakes happen. However, to write when in the sentence, both zai (在) and dang (当) can be used in Mandarin, as adverbs. Perhaps there was an uncertainty about which one to use in English, which led to both being used. Or perhaps it was meant to be written as I made a lot of mistakes, in* the time when I was speaking to others (with in being used incorrectly in place of during). Nonetheless, the preposition in is incorrect and it is happening due to zai (在) having a one-to-many mapping in English. It is classified as interlingual.

Example (9) consists of a similar error as example (8), with in being incorrectly added to the sentence. If the sentence instead was written as the problem lies in a big mistake the use of a preposition is correct, which also makes sense from the context of the text. From the translation it is clear that there is no preposition used in Mandarin, which suggests that the preposition is added because of the development of rules concerning the English language. The error is classified as intralingual.
4.3.2. Incorrect choice

Errors of incorrect choice are found in 41% (N=16) of all the compositions. There are 24 errors in total. 17 errors are classified as interlingual and seven are ascribed to intralingual influence. Below are examples and analyses of such errors.

(10) Teachers always had bad comments on me.
    老师们总是对我有不好的评论。
    Teacher *human number* always on me have bad comment.

(11) I’m so familiar in it.
    我很熟悉它。
    I very familiar it.

Example (10) is incorrect because the preposition on is used instead of the correct about. In Mandarin prepositions have a one-to-many mapping. The one used here zài (在) can mean on, at or in. It is clear that the structure of L1 is causing errors in the production of the L2, and therefore the error is classified as interlingual.

Example (11) is about a special kind of noodle that the writer is very familiar with. Instead of using the preposition with, which is required in English, in is used. No preposition is required for the sentence in Mandarin, which suggests that there is a faulty application of the rules governing prepositions. The error is classified as intralingual.

4.3.3. Omission

Errors of omission are found in 32% (N=12) of all the compositions. There are 18 errors in total. All errors in the category are classified as interlingual. Below is an example and an analysis of such an error.

(12) I came _ the new campus by the school bus.
    我搭乘校车来到了新校车。
    I take school bus come *finished action* new campus.

In example (12), the preposition to is omitted. In English the preposition to is used to indicate the end point. From the context it is understood that the writer is going from her hometown to the new campus. The equivalent in Mandarin is I take school bus come new campus. The error is therefore classified as interlingual.

4.3.4 Summary of preposition errors

As seen in Table 6, out of a total of 54 errors, incorrect choice of preposition really stood out, comprising almost half of all the errors (24). Errors of omission were second highest, 18 errors, while addition was the least frequent error category with only twelve errors. Out of 39
compositions, 28 had preposition errors, which means that this is a difficult area of acquisition for Chinese students. Incorrect choice errors were found in 24, and omission in 18, while addition errors can be found in nine compositions. Eight compositions have errors belonging to two categories.

As can be seen from the analyses of the different errors above, preposition errors are due mainly to interlingual influence. Eight addition errors are considered to be due to interlingual influence and four are ascribed to intralingual influence. 17 errors of incorrect choice are ascribed to interlingual influence and seven are classified as intralingual. All the errors of omission are considered to be interlingual. The reason for some errors being classified differently is because Mandarin prepositions have a one-to-many mapping. While some of the prepositions can be positively transferred, many cannot.

### 4.4 Verb errors

This section presents the overall correct and incorrect usage of verb forms as well as the frequency of the different verb categories. Missing verbs are presented in 4.4.1, and past tense errors in 4.4.2.

Out of a total of 422 verbs, 131 are erroneous. Verb form errors are the most frequent errors throughout all the compositions. Table 8 presents an overall survey of verb usage. Table 9 presents the number and ratio of errors in the subcategories.

#### Table 8. Survey of students' use of verbs in their compositions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct verb form</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faulty verb form</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Table 9. Type of verb error in the compositions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missing verbs</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past tense errors</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each type of error will be dealt with in more detail in Sections 4.4.1 – 4.4.2.

#### 4.4.1 Missing verbs

Missing verbs are found in 41% (N=16) of all the compositions. There are 20 errors in total. 16 are ascribed to interlingual influence, while the other four are undetermined. Below are examples and analyses of such errors.
I had faith that I can do it.
我有信心我可以做到。
I have faith I can do.

It was very kind of them.
他们非常友善。
They very kind.

In example (13), the infinitive do is missing, making the sentence incorrect in both English and Mandarin. Mandarin does not use the pronoun it in sentences like example (13); instead they say I can do. Interestingly, this is an error found in three other compositions as well. It is unclear why it occurs. The error is marked as undetermined.

In example (14), the copula was has been left out. When expressing that others have been kind, the way to say it in Mandarin is they very kind, which means that no copula is needed. I therefore concluded that the error is an example of transfer from Mandarin. It is hence ascribed to interlingual influence.

4.4.2 Past tense errors
Past tense errors are found in 82% (N=32) of all the compositions. There are 111 errors in total. The errors made in this category are all classified as interlingual. Below is an example and analysis such an error.

When I first come to X², my father send me to the train station.
当我第一次来到X时是我的爸爸载我去火车站的。
When I first time come finished action X is my father take me to train station.

In example (15), both come and send are incorrect. Indicating a past event, come needs to be in the past tense. Send is supposed to be in the past tense, since it says what the father did when the writer went to her new school for the first time. As previously mentioned, Mandarin does not have verb inflection. Instead past tense is marked by an adverbial of time. In this example the adverbial is When I first, which tells us that the following verbs need to be in the past tense. Both errors are classified as interlingual.

4.4.3 Summary of verb errors
As seen in Table 9, out of 131 errors, past tense errors are the most frequent. Past tense errors (111) were found in a total of 32 compositions while missing verbs (20) appeared in 16. Out of

²The letter X replaces the name of the university in order to not to reveal the whereabouts of the study.
the remaining seven compositions, six had no past tense errors, even though the past tense was used. One composition was written in the present tense.

Mandarin verbs are not conjugated which means that in Mandarin, verbs have only one form. Past, present, and future are expressed by adverbials, for example, *I ate beef noodles yesterday* = 昨天我吃牛肉面 (yesterday I eat beef noodles). The time of the action could also be determined by the completion marker *le (了)*, which is put at the end of the sentence or right after the verb to indicate a finished action. An example where *(了)* is used to mark tense could then be - *have you eaten? 你吃了吗* (you eat *finished action*?).

All past tense errors are classified as interlingual errors. As for the missing verbs, 16 are classified as interlingual errors, while four are undetermined. As such, verb errors are primarily caused by an interlingual influence. The fact that Mandarin is a non-infllectional language results in negative transfer.

**4.5 Overall comparison of errors**

In this section, an overall comparison of the errors is presented in Section 4.5.1, and a survey showing in how many compositions each error type was found, along with their total frequencies, is found in Table 11, in Section 4.5.2. A comparison of interlingual and intralingual errors and their frequency is provided in Table 12, in Section 4.5.3.

**4.5.1 Error analysis including all categories**

Table 10 includes all the categories and indicates the number of times used, the number of errors, and the ratio. Only verb and article errors have a frequency over 20%, with 31% for verbs and 21% for articles. Preposition errors have a frequency of 15%, while noun errors have a frequency of only 5%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Articles</th>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th>Positions</th>
<th>Verbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total times used</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total no. of errors</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addition</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect choice</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing verb</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past tense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error frequency (%)</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5.2 Compositions containing errors analysed in the study

Table 11 presents a survey of the number of compositions containing each error category and hence the ratio of students who made this error. All compositions included errors from more than one category, except for one (which only had two preposition errors). Past tense errors are by far the most common error (82% (N=32)), while addition of the articles is the error type that causes the least problems for the students (8% (N=3)).

Table 11. Composition and error frequency per category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compositions</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Article errors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addition</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect choice</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Noun errors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural errors</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular errors</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preposition errors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addition</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect choice</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verb errors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing verbs</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past tense errors</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.5.2 Interlingual and intralingual error frequency

Table 12 shows the frequency of interlingual and intralingual errors, as well as the frequency of undetermined errors, for all the categories.

Table 12. Frequency of interlingual and intralingual errors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Articles</th>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th>Prepositions</th>
<th>Verbs</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number and ratio (N/%)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interlingual error(s)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intralingual error(s)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined error(s)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from Table 12, all categories had a majority of interlingual errors. While the ratio of interlingual errors in most categories were 80% or higher, only the noun category was divided, with 52% interlingual errors, and 44% intralingual errors. Both nouns and verbs had cases of undetermined errors, while this problem did not occur with articles and prepositions.
5. Discussion

What does the ratio of interlingual and intralingual errors tell us about Chinese students’ learning of English? First of all, from the results it is clear that the majority of the grammatical errors analyzed in this study is caused by negative transfer from the L1. When a non-existing feature in the L1 exists in the target language, errors of production mainly occur through negative transfer. Secondly, errors committed with features that exist in both languages can instead be taken to be influenced by the development of rules. The difference in frequency between the categories can be understood through the differences in the languages, that is, while many of the features in English do not have equivalents in Mandarin, others follow different rules. For example, prepositions are fewer in number in Mandarin, and often have a one-to-many mapping. However, while some features do exist and are similar in both languages, errors still occur (e.g., example (13)). Why is this? What is the underlying reason for such errors when they are incorrect in both the L1 and the L2? Is it simply to be written off as sloppiness? I think not, but in order to answer the question more research would be needed. Finally, the results tell us that certain grammatical categories require more time to learn than others, e.g. past tense and the articles. Even though the errors found in the compositions were not produced by everyone, the errors in all categories except for two were produced by more than one in five participants, and others by more than two in five participants. The category with the most errors was the past tense category, in which errors were made by 32 students out of 39.

While most errors clearly belong to either an interlingual or intralingual influence, some cannot be ascribed to either. One example of such an error is when the production is faulty in both English and Mandarin and there is nothing in the context of the text that can help the analyst. In order to understand the undetermined errors, the students who made it would have to be interviewed as to why they made it. However, there were only six undetermined errors in total and as such they did not have any significant effect on the general results (which on the other hand can be a product of the data being so limited). Another aspect of analyzing errors is that two different researchers analyzing the same errors might not come to the same conclusion. What is considered an error in this study might not be considered an error by someone else. For example, the use of the determiner this instead of an article could be accepted as correct by other analysts.

As mentioned in the aims of the study, the findings can potentially give us an insight into how students can improve their foreign language acquisition by offering suggestions on how to conduct foreign language teaching. Based on the results, this study can offer suggestions what parts of grammar the teacher should focus on. For example, one can potentially decrease the
number of errors by stressing the relationship between nouns and articles and the rules governing them. That does, of course, require that each feature be taught at its proper time. Cook (2008:25) mentions the research conducted by Dulay and Burt (1973) which investigated the grammatical sequence of L2 learners’ acquisition. The results showed that learners tend to learn different structures in a specific order, namely from the easiest to the most difficult. In a list of eight, the easiest structure to learn was plural –s, while articles were placed fifth. These findings can therefore be used when planning teaching English to Chinese students. Which feature should be introduced first? When following the list established by Dulay and Burt (as seen in Cook, 2008:26f.), it is important that teachers allow L2 learners sufficient time to learn the plural –s before being introduced to the articles. And just as with noun plurals and articles, the past tense and verb conjugations are learnt in a specific order. Forms of the copula be should be learnt before irregular and regular past tense forms, for example. The results of Dulay and Burt’s study show that most learners of an L2 have the same order of acquisition, despite their first language, and while Chinese students might find certain features of the language more difficult than others, due to the nature of their L1, it is still suggested that teachers become aware of, and follow the sequence of acquisition in order to provide the best learning conditions.

Finally, in order to see what can be done differently in foreign language teaching, a study of the current teaching methods in Chinese schools and universities is needed. Such a study could, for example, analyze teacher beliefs and practices, as well as the Chinese syllabus (or perhaps a comparison of syllabi between different seats of learning). Teachers often try to include as many parts of a syllabus as possible, which might not be the best strategy. Instead, when taking research on Chinese students’ production of English into account, certain features of English that the students have a difficult time with need to be prioritized and given sufficient time. By doing so, the students’ motivation may increase which, in turn, can contribute to faster acquisition.

6. Conclusion

The main aim of the present study was to find out what grammatical errors occur the most frequently in time and topic controlled compositions written by a group of Chinese learners of English. It also aimed at finding out which of these errors can be said to derive from either interlingual or intralingual influence. While there were errors produced in all word classes, except for interjections, some were more frequent than others. Based on how frequent the error was in the compositions, only articles, nouns, prepositions, and verbs were included in the
study. The analysis showed that a majority of the errors across all the categories derive from interlingual influence, that is, when a structure is faultily transferred from the first language. However, it is not true in all cases of a specific word class. Instead, whether the error can be ascribed to interlingual or intralingual influence depends on what kind of error is made (that is, which subcategory it belongs to) and whether an equivalence exists between the features of the two languages. While plural nouns rendered as singular are almost exclusively ascribed to interlingual influence, singular nouns rendered as plural are ascribed to intralingual influence.

There were some limitations to the study which may have affected the results. Firstly, having a limited amount of data drastically reduced the validity of the study, since it limited the possibility of generalizing the results to a larger population. Because the compositions were written in controlled situations, some errors might have been due to the time limit, i.e., the students did not have time to go over and revise their texts. Another limitation is that the data was made up of students' writing, and it was not always clear why an error was made. Some errors could possibly be interpreted better if the researcher could sit down with each student individually and try to find out whether certain errors were due to sloppiness or if the student did not know the correct form.

One suggestion for further study is therefore to focus not only on the errors, but also the underlying reasons, such as student motivation and their understanding of English grammatical morphemes, as well as the teachers’ beliefs and practices. Combining an error analysis with an interview could potentially offer more insight into how a foreign language is acquired and how teaching can be conducted in order to facilitate students’ learning. Another suggestion is to have more relaxed conditions with texts written on several occasions to see if the results would change.
References


