

Grammatical Errors in L2 English Speakers of *there/their/they're* Homophones

Angela Sharpe

Christine Liang

Nouf Alkahtani

Sookhee Jeong

Colorado State University

Abstract

This research explored grammatical errors of *there/their/they're* homophones in intermediate level L2 English speakers at INTO CSU. Previous research results pertaining to a misuse of homophones indicated a misuse of *there/their/they're* homophones as one of the most common errors for English speaking native speakers as well as non-native speakers. However, the present research results showed that a misuse of *there/their/they're* homophones was not as high as we had thought. In the case of the Chinese and Japanese L1 speakers, almost all correctly used *there/their/they're* homophones.

Keywords: homophone, misuse, L1

Grammatical Errors in L2 English Speakers of *there/their/they're* Homophones

Homophones are words that have identical pronunciation but have different spellings and semantic meanings, and different forms (Abdul Ameer, 2010). Misusing homophones is common amongst English speaking native and non-native speakers. Homophone errors such as a misuse of *there/their/they're* in writing is one of the most common formal errors in English writing of American college students (Conners & Lunsford, 1998). Misusing homophones can cause a lot of comprehension problems. It is very important for students to distinguish between different homophonous spellings and their associated meanings. Our research was to inspect these homophone errors that L2 learners make in terms of the use of homophones.

In this study, we specifically studied the homophones *there/their/they're*. An elicitation instrument was distributed amongst L2 learners in the INTO CSU Intermediate level, aiming to address three main hypotheses: 1) There will be a misuse of the English homophones *there/their/they're* among L2 English learners. 2) The misuse will vary depending on native language. 3) The misuse will vary depending on the length of study in a native country and English speaking environment.

Literature Review

Homonym processing can be difficult for L2 learners because it requires metalinguistic abilities, that is, L2 learners of English must treat homonyms as both tools for language usage and objects of study. Homophonous words, such as *there/their/they're* are contextually specific. According to Sereno, Brewer and O'Donnell (2003), sentence context influences the degree to which the alternative meanings are activated. However, when presented in a neutral sentence context, the more frequent, dominant meaning of an ambiguous word is activated more quickly than less frequent, subordinate meanings. Homophonous words then, not only necessitate

competency in metalinguistic processing, but also visual orthographic skills to disambiguate meaning. Koda and Zehler (2008) refer to this processing competency as grapho-morphological awareness or the ability for L2 language learners to discriminate homophones which share the same pronunciation, but have different semantic meanings and different orthographic forms.

With regard to potential language transfer, homonyms do occur in Arabic language and usually have relation in their meanings. However, unlike English homonyms, where they have the same sound but different meanings, homonyms in Arabic more closely resemble the definition of English polysemy. Furthermore, Arabic is a homographic language whereas homographs are one part of homonymy in English (Abdul Ameer, 2010).

Method

Participants

The participants were nine students from an Intermediate level grammar class at INTO CSU. The participants were composed of different L1 backgrounds. Four of them spoke Chinese as their L1, two were Arabic L1 speakers, one was a Japanese L1 speaker, one was a Russian L1 speaker, and one was Spanish L1 speaker. Their age range was from 18 to 24 years old with their English language experience ranging from 6 months to 16 years of EFL learning in their native country. Their exposure to English in the United States ranged for 1 month to 3 years.

Material

An elicitation instrument was used to examine the participants' understanding of the usage of *there/their/they're*. The participants were also asked to fill out questions concerning their language background information. The elicitation instrument was adapted from Scholastic *Scope* Activity (2011) which consisted of 10 sentences. The elicitation instrument is in Appendix

A. In each sentence, the participants had to circle the correct form of *there/their/they're* according to the context of a sentence.

Procedure

The elicitation was administered at the end of their grammar class. Instructions were given orally by the researchers. One point was given if the answer was correct in the sentence. A total of 10 points was given if all 10 sentences were answered correctly.

Results

As shown in Table 1, the results showed that the average score on the homophones test was 7.78 out of 10. In particular, Chinese and Japanese students showed higher scores than any other student as shown in Figure 1; their average score was 9.75 and 9.00, respectively. The study also found a correlation of 0.58 between the length of study in a native country and a score; there was no correlation between the length of study in an English speaking country. The more detailed statistics are in Appendix B.

Table 1

Length of English Study and a Test Score of Homophones

	Native Language	Study in a Native Country (year)	Study in an English Speaking Country (month)	Score (out of 10)
1	Arabic	0	12	5
2	Arabic	6	4	3
3	Chinese	9	1	10
4	Chinese	10	1	10
5	Chinese	16	36	9
6	Chinese	10	1	10
7	Japanese	13	1	9
8	Russian	4	2	6
9	Spanish	0.5	1	8
Mean		7.61	6.56	7.78
SD		5.13	10.95	2.39

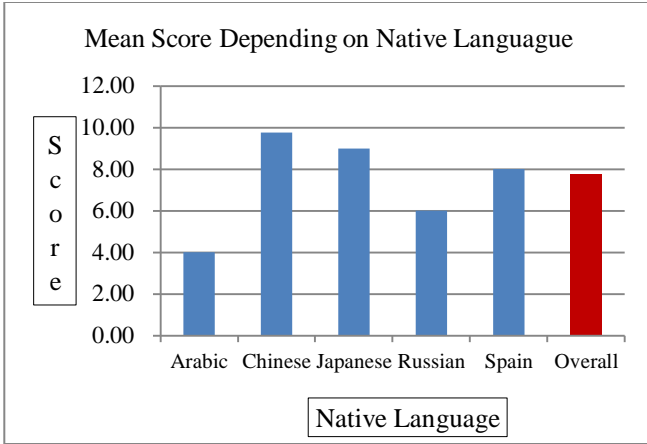


Figure 1. Mean Score Depending on Native Language

Discussion

In regard to our three main hypotheses: 1) There will be a misuse of the English homophones *there/their/they're* among L2 English speakers, 2) The misuse will vary depending on native language, and 3) The misuse will vary depending on the length of study in a native country and English speaking environment, we found the following results:

We were able to conclude firstly, that there was a misuse of the homophones, but there was not as a great a misuse as we originally thought. Secondly, the data showed that the Chinese and Japanese L1 speakers scored higher than other language backgrounds. We feel that this may be due to a greater focus on the study of grammar in Chinese and Japanese EFL curriculum. We also concluded that the length of study in the native speaking environment positively correlated with correct homophone usage, however, the length of study within an English speaking environment did not affect the correct usage of the homophones in this study. Further study on this topic with a larger number of participants could implicate different results as to whether or not exposure to English in an English speaking country has an effect on correct homophone selection.

References

- Abdul Ameer, A.M., (2010). *Lecture: Homonymy in English and Arabic: A contrastive study*.
Retrieved from University of Babylon Department of English.
- Connors, R.J., & Lunsford, A.A. (1998). Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research. *College Composition and Communication*, 39 (4), 395-409.
- Koda, K., & Zehler, A. (2008). *Learning to read across languages*. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Sereno, S.C., Brewer, C.C., & O'Donnell, P.J. (2003). Context Effects in Word Recognition: Evidence for Early Interactive Processing. *Psychological Science*, 14, 328-333.

Appendix A

Native Language:

Age:

How long did you study English in your native country:

How long have you studied English in an English speaking country (including INTO):

Directions: Circle the correct boldface word in each sentence below.

1. The Kavanaghs have lived in Madrid for three years, but **there/their/they're** moving back to Seattle next month.
2. Megan already left for the party. Priscilla is meeting her **there/their/they're** after dinner.
3. Aja carried the twins' birthday cake, and I carried **there/their/they're** presents.
4. Feyi said **there/their/they're** are four kittens sleeping in a box under the porch.
5. The Barrett boys explained that **there/their/they're** parrot flew away when they opened the window.
6. Leo prefers Brazilian green peaches because **there/their/they're** smaller and milder than American peaches.
7. When it finally ended, I was more than ready to get out of **there/their/they're**.
8. Usually, I avoid playing games with them because **there/their/they're** terrible cheaters.
9. Princess, the cat likes to sleep **there/their/they're**.
10. The girls obviously didn't like **there/their/they're** tiles.

(Adapted from Scholastic *Scope* Activity, 2011. Retrieved from:

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/magazines/scope/pdfs/SCOPE-REPRO-121211-All.pdf>)

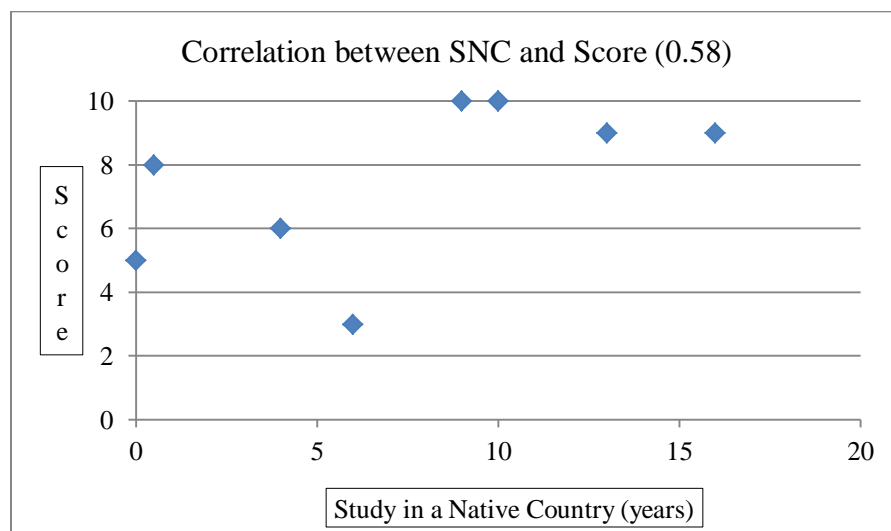
Appendix B

1. Mean and SD Depending on Nationality

	Arabic	Chinese	Japanese	Russian	Spain	Overall
MEAN	4.00	9.75	9.00	6.00	8.00	7.78
SD	1.00	0.43	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.39

2. Correlation between the length of study in a native Country (SNC) and a score of homophones test

	SNC	Score
SNC	1.00	
Score	0.58	1.00



3. Correlation between the length of study in an English speaking country (SESC) and a score of homophones test

	SESC	Score
SESC	1.00	
Score	-0.02	1.00