

Verb Errors Made by Generation 1.5 and ESL Writers with the same L1 (Chinese):

A Comparative Study

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Abstract

As the number of Chinese immigrants and international students coming into the United States (U.S.) rapidly increases, the demographics of U.S. colleges are changing. Although sometimes seen as a homogeneous group, first language (L1) Chinese Generation 1.5 (Gen 1.5) and traditional English as a Second Language (ESL) students have different characteristics and educational needs. This research proposal seeks to identify English verb-related errors made by 40 students enrolled in the highest level developmental writing class at a community college. Through a qualitative text analysis, verb-related errors will be identified and analyzed with the goals of helping ESL composition teachers make a distinction between these two groups of nonnative English speakers (NNSs), informing different pedagogical approaches to teaching L1 Chinese Gen 1.5 and ESL students in college writing classes, and to contribute to the research related to Chinese L1 NNSs.

Keywords: Generation 1.5, ESL students, English verb errors, error analysis, error correction, L1 Chinese

Verb Errors Made by Generation 1.5 and ESL Writers with the same L1 (Chinese)

Considering the rapidly increasing number of Chinese immigrants and international students coming into the U.S., the number of Chinese students enrolling in U.S colleges is expected to rise (see Appendix A for additional demographic information). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), the projected growth of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. will increase 146 percent by the year 2050. ESL teachers at higher-education institutions need to consider how to better teach this population in order to keep up with the demand of increasing L1 Chinese Gen 1.5 and traditional ESL students. To begin with, it is important to define Gen 1.5 and traditional ESL students. Doolan and Miller (2012) describe these two groups based on the following criteria. Gen 1.5 are students who: (a) do or did regularly speak a language other than English at home, (b) have been in the U.S. educational system for four or more years, (c) are less than 25 years old, (d) have relatively strong English listening and speaking skills, while traditional ESL students are students who: (a) do or did regularly speak a language other than English at home, (b) and they have been in the U.S. educational system for one to three years.

It should be noted that L1 Chinese Gen 1.5 and traditional ESL students have different characteristics and educational needs although they are sometimes seen as a homogeneous group. To be specific, it has been argued (e.g., Doolan & Miller (2012) and Reid (1997) that Gen 1.5 students and traditional ESL students make different types of grammatical errors in their writing. In addition, Gen 1.5 students generally are not familiar with parts of speech, while ESL students are because they have studied English grammar (Singhal, 2004), which is discussed in the literature review section in more detail. Though they have distinctively different backgrounds in regards to English language learning, the differences may not be recognized by ESL and college composition teachers and their specific needs may be overlooked.

English writing proficiency is widely recognized as an important skill for educational, business and personal reasons. The purposes of this research proposal are to identify distinct differences in English verb errors between Chinese L1 ESL students and Gen 1.5 Chinese students at a Community College, and to help ESL teachers develop materials for remedial teaching, and to determine what type of feedback is more effective in addressing these errors with the two groups. It is hoped that the results from this study will help improve English writing proficiency for these different types of students.

Literature Review

The present research proposal addresses the questions of if and how Gen 1.5 writing may differ from traditional ESL writing regarding verb-related errors and what this might mean for writing teachers. Although the research related to Gen 1.5 writers is fairly limited, there is a considerable body of research related to writing differences between native English speakers and ESL students. Before attempting to address possible differences between ESL and Gen 1.5 writing, we begin with a brief look at some general characteristics of ESL student writing that have been identified in the research.

Silva (1993) examined 72 empirical studies in order to ascertain actual similarities and differences that exist between L1 and ESL writers, with a focus on the differences that “stems from the belief that understanding these differences is crucial to comprehending and addressing ESL writers’ special needs” (p. 660). Silva’s (1993) synthesis of the research included approximately 27 different L1s, with most participants representing Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish L1 backgrounds.

Based on the studies that Silva (1993) synthesized, he concluded that “there is fairly strong evidence to suggest that L2 writing is a less fluent process” (p. 662). In terms of the

“accuracy” of L2 writing, Silva (1993) noted a number of studies illustrating “that L2 writers make more errors overall” (p. 663). Specifically, the studies he reviewed indicated that L2 writers make more morphosyntactic errors, lexicosemantic errors, more errors with verbs, prepositions, articles, and nouns. Although Silva indicates that the types of errors L2 writers make are wide-ranging, the focus of this research proposal will be on verb errors in ESL and Gen 1.5 writing with Chinese L1 speakers.

Pedagogical recommendations for addressing the different needs of L1 and L2 writers are also prevalent in the research. Harris and Silva (1993) discussed how to approach ESL academic writing problems, which they stressed are different from native speaker (NS) writing problems, from the standpoint of effectively prioritizing the ESL student’s concerns and thus most effectively instructing these students. More specifically, Harris and Silva (1993) addressed how best to tutor ESL students in the writing center conference (they noted as well that their article should be helpful to composition instructors when conferencing with ESL students). Specifically, Harris and Silva (1993) emphasized the importance of approaching writing errors from a global perspective, giving errors which “will interfere with the intended reader’s understanding of the text” (p. 526) priority. Harris and Silva (1993) proposed “exploring writing process differences” (p. 529), and based on the synthesis of research conducted by Silva (1993), they suggested that tutors “stretch out the composing process” (p. 529) by including more work on the planning stage, having ESL students write in stages, and separating the revising and editing processes (p. 529), for which they also suggested that tutors “provide realistic strategies...that do not rely on intuitions ESL writers may not have” (p. 529). This last observation begins to get at the crux of the problem the current research proposal aims to address: What if the NNS in question does have a certain type of intuition about the language, having lived in an English speaking

environment for an extended period of time and having acquired his or her English skills almost exclusively by ear?

In observing the changing demographics in community colleges, Singhal (2004) examined differences between Gen 1.5 students and traditional ESL students enrolled in community college writing classes, general characteristics of Gen 1.5 students, and academic writing needs of Gen 1.5 students. Although researchers vary in how they define Gen 1.5 students, Singhal (2004) adds the following defining characteristics: they are nontraditional ESL learners who were born in the U.S. or who came here at a young age; they have learned English by ear, not through extensive reading and writing; they are inexperienced and tend to lag behind native English speakers in reading and writing; and they may sound like native speakers because they have learned English from speaking and listening. Additionally, Gen 1.5 students tend to struggle with grammar and metalinguistic teacher feedback because they have not studied grammar as in-depth as traditional ESL students and may not be familiar with grammatical terms.

Findings in Singhal's research determined that although many Gen 1.5 students attended American high schools, they are often put in ESL writing courses in college "because their writing may exhibit some features of second language writers" (Singhal, 2004, p. 3). Additionally, Singhal (2004) reported of Harklau's (2003) study that this group of students tends to struggle in regular freshman college classes "either because they are often taught by instructors with little or no training in second language teaching methods or by those who have limited experience and training in working with students from non-native English-language backgrounds" (Singhal, 2004, p. 3) and who are unaware of how to help Gen 1.5 students develop their writing skills. Singhal (2004) cited Valdes' (1992) claim that traditional ESL students "are incipient bilinguals in that they are still in the process of learning English while the

latter [Gen 1.5] are functional bilinguals” (Singhal, 2004, p. 3). Singhal (2004) stated that because of the differences in English language ability between these two groups, it is important that educational institutions develop a way of addressing their unique language needs.

Both Thonus (2003) and Singhal (2004) propose the need for instructor training for those working with Gen 1.5 students and ESL writers who are enrolled in freshman college writing courses. Moreover, Singhal (2004) suggests that college writing instructors struggle with some of the following issues in terms of offering pedagogically appropriate and effective instruction to these groups of students in academic English areas; these include linguistic, cognitive, strategic, metalinguistic awareness and grammatical conventions of Standard American English.

Reid (1997), primarily addressing teachers in tertiary institutions who do not teach ESL writing, observed that different NNSs (e.g., Gen 1.5 students and traditional ESL students) “have learned their English differently, so their language problems have different sources and different solutions” (p. 17). According to Reid (1997), Gen 1.5 students (whom she was then referring to as “U.S. resident (language minority) students”) write in a manner that often “displays the conversational, phonetic qualities of their ‘ear-based’ language learning, as well as the use of their self-developed language ‘rules’ that may, upon examination, prove to be overgeneralized or false” (p. 18). Reid (1997) observed that verb errors are common, often in part due to L1 transfer (e.g. if the L1 is not inflected or lacks auxiliary verbs) as well as from “‘ear-learning’...because the English verb tense system is complex...and because these students have listened to the language rather than studied it” (p. 19). Also, according to Reid (1997), “because the mistakes they make may not have interfered with their ability to communicate orally, they may have structured rules for verb use that will seem idiosyncratic to the teacher” (p. 19). Reid (1997) argued that “discovering whether that student is a U.S. resident (language minority)

student or an international student is the first step in identifying the student's problems and recommending resources for remediation" (p. 21).

In attempting to identify characteristics which may be used to distinguish these two types of English language learner (ELL), Doolan and Miller (2012) conducted a study that compared error patterns in the writing of developmental L1, traditional ESL, and Gen 1.5 students. Their results indicated that there are indeed different errors produced by these three groups of writers, and, most pertinent to the current research proposal, that there are "specific patterns of difference between Gen 1.5, L1, and L2 verb error production" (p. 1). Of particular interest to the current proposal is the "grammatical complexity" attempted by Gen 1.5 writers in their study which "demonstrates a creativity and experimentation not as frequently seen with more traditional L2 students" (p. 9). Doolan and Miller (2012) observed that some constructions attempted by the Gen 1.5 writers, though containing errors, require "extremely advanced language knowledge or intuition" (p. 9), which according to Silva and Harris (1993) traditional ESL students may not have. One example they cited in their study is that of "negotiating a verb tense within a *wh*-cleft involving a hypothetical *what would have been helpful...*" in which "the *wh*-cleft fronts given information" (p. 9). They found that in the Gen 1.5 writing samples "the verb errors were...often situated within rather complicated clausal structures" (p. 9) such as these, and when these writers made errors, their writing "often deviated from this structure in almost native-like ways" (p. 9). According to Doolan and Miller (2012), this indicates that "Generation 1.5 writers are grappling with complex embedding and inversion structures that they may not yet control linguistically. Yet, their attempts at these advanced structures may represent a difference between Generation 1.5 and L2 texts" (p. 10). Doolan and Miller (2012) also observed that

traditional ESL writers may make fewer verb errors because they avoid many of the more complex structures attempted by the Gen 1.5 writers.

To analyze EFL/ESL students' errors, we need to differentiate the meaning of an *error* and a *mistake*. According to Brown (1987), a mistake refers to a performance error produced by a learner though a learner knows the language rule correctly, while an error is more systematic and it shows the competence of a learner who is in the process of learning the language. The key difference between a mistake and an error depends on whether or not it can be self-corrected or not. In other words, mistakes can be recognized and self-corrected by the speaker if necessary, but an error cannot be self-corrected (Gass & Seliker, 2008). Corder (1967 & 1974) identified a model for error analysis which includes three stages: data collection, description, and explanation, the ultimate object of error analysis (as cited in Falhasiri, Tavakoli, Hasiri, & Mohammadzadeh, 2011, p. 253). In addition, Corder (1967) stresses the significance of learners' errors in three different ways:

First to the teacher, in that they tell him...how far towards the goal the learner has progressed...Second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired...Thirdly (and in a sense this is their most important aspect) they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn. (p. 167)

In regards to error analysis, Xie and Jiang (2007) argue that EFL teachers should be aware of the importance of error analysis and interested in the theories related to error analysis. It is believed that teachers should help and guide students effectively only after analyzing students' errors first instead of a standardized treatment to anybody.

Chan's (2004) study examined and categorized errors with L1 syntactic transfer from Chinese to English in the writings of 387 Chinese intermediate-level ESL students. In the category of errors with English verbs, omission of the copula and confusion in verb transitivity were among the most frequently occurring errors. Tan's (2007) study, which included 95 L1 Chinese students in a Chinese university ESL class, examined a variety of errors and found that almost fifty percent of errors were verb-related, and included errors in form and tense. Both Chan (2004) and Tan (2007) concluded that the cause of these errors is related to L1 interference.

It is believed that many Chinese EFL learners' errors arise from inter-lingual transfer. According to Duan (2011) and Wei (2008) the majority of errors are misuse of the verb tense in Chinese students' English compositions. Wei (2008) argues that it is derived from syntactic fossilization among Chinese students and suggests that teachers should know the characteristics of EFL/ESL students' L1 first, and Duan (2011) insists it is the result of the unsystematic teaching of tenses. To be specific, "There is no concept of tense in Chinese language, so when Chinese students write a Chinese composition, they need not consider which tense should be chosen (p.179)."

Shoebottom (2012) drew attention to some differences between English and Chinese verbs. For example, English auxiliaries and verb inflection carry a great deal of information, whereas Chinese is uninflected and meaning is conveyed through word order, adverbials, or contextual understanding. Furthermore, time in Chinese is not represented by tenses and verb forms, and questions are conveyed by intonation, not by subject-verb inversion. Finally, Shoebottom (2012) pointed out that English has a number of phrasal verbs (take on, give in, etc.) which do not exist in Chinese.

Chan (2004) recommended the following pedagogical implications: given that errors are indicative of the learners' interlanguage, teachers must be aware of language differences to be able to better help ELLs improve their English; with this knowledge, teachers can implement more effective corrective feedback, anticipate learning problems, and implement error-correction activities for targeting problematic syntactical areas. Chan (2004) highlighted that recent research in SLA shows that form-focused L2 grammar instruction has positive effects on acquiring the grammar structure (Chan, Kwan, & Li, 2002b; Li & Chan, 2000, as cited in Chan). Additionally, Chan (2004) discussed the need for emphasizing the differences between Chinese and English, and to "highlight salient structural and lexical differences between the L1 and L2" (p. 68). If teachers know that the errors by Chinese students are derived from inter-lingual transfer, in advance, teachers could predict students' errors and guide them more efficiently. However, the question remains as to the similarities and differences of the errors of ESL learners and their Gen 1.5 counterparts. With teacher guidance, students will have more success in mastering the grammatical differences.

Once recurring errors have been identified and analyzed, the question arises as to how to address this problem. Does written corrective feedback help or harm students? How much and what kind of feedback should be given? Error correction in grammar for English language learners has been the subject of great debate between two researchers in the field of second language writing, Dana Ferris and John Truscott. Truscott (2007) maintains that written error correction for ESL students has a harmful effect on their ability to write accurately, and if benefits exist, they are small. He looked at a number of studies that combined qualitative and quantitative analysis focusing on different types of corrective feedback (i.e. coded, explicit, uncoded, combination, and conferences) and concluded that "correction has a small harmful

effect on students' ability to write accurately, and that we can be 95% confident that if it actually has any benefits, they are very small" (Truscott, 2007, p. 270). Finally, Truscott claims that "research has found correction to be a clear and dramatic failure" (p. 271) and offers no pedagogical advice for teachers in his article.

On the other side of the argument, Ferris (2004) maintains that students who receive error correction produce more accurate writing than those who do not. Ferris also reports that research by Ashwell (2000), Fathman and Whalley (1990), Ferris and Roberts (2001) and Kepner (1991) are in agreement with her claim. In addition, Ferris (2004) notes that Chandler (2003), Ferris (1995a, 1997), Ferris and Helt (2000), Frantzen (1995) among others claim that students who receive written error correction improve over time. Ferris (2004) posits that existing and recent Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research shows that ELLs who receive written error feedback demonstrate more positive results in their writing and that it may be a motivational factor in helping students to self-correct and to work harder. "Focus on Form (in both written and spoken language) strongly suggests that adult second language acquirers in particular need their errors made salient and explicit to them so that they can avoid fossilization and continue developing linguistic competence" (Ferris, 2004, p. 54). In addition, L2 student writers "value error feedback from their teachers and consider it extremely important to their success" (p.55).

Method

Participants

The prospective participants in this study are students at an urban, two-year community college in the western U.S. All participants will be L1 speakers of Chinese NNSs of English. The community college that these students attend serves a large ethnic Chinese population. Over the years, many Chinese have chosen to make this area home, and perhaps partly as a result of

this, many Chinese international students are enrolled in this college's ESL program.

Participants will be enrolled in the highest level developmental writing class in the college, the completion of which allows them to enroll in a transfer-level freshman composition class. The target number of participants for this study is at least 40, with approximately half of those (20) classified as Gen 1.5 students and the other half (20) classified as traditional ESL students.

Participants will first be identified as L1 speakers of Chinese due to the fact that there are other L1 backgrounds represented in this developmental writing course. Following identification of their L1, the participants will be classified as Gen 1.5 or ESL writers. The determination of L1 Chinese background and Gen1.5 or ESL will be based on participant responses to a written survey that will be administered prior to being given the writing prompt (see Appendix B for the survey).

Materials and Procedures

Each student will complete a survey and an essay that will serve as the data for this study; both will be given at the end of the semester-long course. The survey will be administered in the class period preceding the final class meeting, during which the students will complete an in-class essay in response to a prompt (see Appendix C for the writing prompt). The survey will be used to determine whether a potential participant is an L1 speaker of Chinese as well as for grouping purposes. Participants will be classified as Gen1.5 students based on the four criteria described in the introduction of this proposal.

Students will have 75 minutes to complete the writing task which will be graded and included as part of their final course grade. All participants will respond to the same prompt from Doolan and Miller's (2012) study which asks them "to reflect on their experience in high school and college and to discuss what they and their high schools could have done to better

prepare them for college” (p. 5). Doolan and Miller (2012) observed, “The prompt is indeed a challenging one in terms of the way in which writers must manage time frames” (p. 10), and they deemed it appropriate for both groups of NNSs. The prompt was successful in their study in eliciting salient differences in the types of errors—including verb errors, which is the focus of the present research proposal—produced by Gen 1.5 and ESL students (as well as L1 English speakers in their study). The length of the essays will be approximately two pages, or 500 words.

Analysis

Participants will first be identified as either Gen1.5 or ESL writers based on their responses to the survey and this study’s defining criteria for Gen1.5 status described in the introduction. The researchers will perform a qualitative verb error analysis of each of these short essays.

Qualitative error analysis

An important focus of Doolan and Miller’s (2012) study was on verb error production; they noted, “Perhaps the most frequently cited Gen 1.5 errors discussed in the previous literature are verb errors” (p. 3). Thus the present research proposal will also focus on verb errors produced by these two groups of non-native student writers. The researchers will first analyze each essay independently in an exploratory attempt to (1) note to what extent the L1 Chinese ESL writers make verb errors consistent with those found in the previous literature, and (2) to explore what types of verb errors are made by L1 Chinese Gen 1.5 students. This research proposal is intended to be exploratory; however, in order to make the qualitative analysis more manageable the researchers will begin with three verb error types delineated by Doolan and Miller (2012). These are: (1) verb form errors (this category does *not* include subject-verb

agreement); (2) “lack of internal consistency within the verb string” errors, e.g. *would had driven*; and (3) errors in verb tense, i.e. the tense used is not the tense required by the context.

After each researcher analyzes the essays independently, attempting to categorize the identified verb errors, the researchers will compare their results, noting any differences in verb errors that were identified or the way in which they were categorized; they will also discuss any errors that were identified but which do not fit into any of the verb error categories taken from Doolan and Miller (2012) noted above. Similarities and differences in verb errors made by L1 Chinese Gen1.5 and L1 Chinese ESL students will be discussed, as well as whether the findings support or refute the notion that these learner groups did indeed possess an interlanguage, and thus learning needs, sufficiently distinct to warrant different pedagogical approaches for each type of student.

Conclusion

This exploratory research proposes to examine whether there are differences clear enough to distinguish two groups of L1 Chinese ELLs through verb-related error analysis. Error analysis is an essential tool for diagnosing and evaluating language learners’ problems and it helps teachers better understand how to teach English. The number of Chinese students at higher education institutions will continue to increase in the U.S.; therefore, focusing on verb-related errors that this distinct group of students makes is important in informing teachers on how to meet their distinct instructional needs. In addition, this research proposal can provide ESL and college composition teachers with methods of remedial teaching and discovering the types of feedback that are most beneficial for Chinese L1 Gen 1.5 and traditional ESL students.

Although it is true that the analysis of forty essays written by two groups of learners (L1 Chinese Gen 1.5 and traditional ESL) has some limitations, the current research proposal would

contribute to an area in which more research is needed. This research proposal may be limited by having a relatively small sample size. Also, in using a qualitative analysis with a small sample size, it may be difficult to generalize the findings. In addition, the current proposal aims to look only at students who are enrolled in one institution. Another limitation might be that the writing prompt is meant to elicit rather complex, specific verb structures. There are many grammatical errors related to the writings of ELLs. While this proposal seeks to identify verb-related areas that L1 Chinese Gen 1.5 and traditional ESL students make, to distinguish between these groups of students, and to inform pedagogy, further research could be conducted to address the limitations mentioned above.

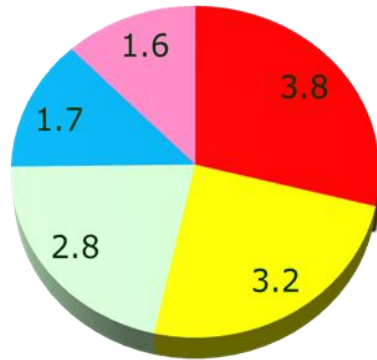
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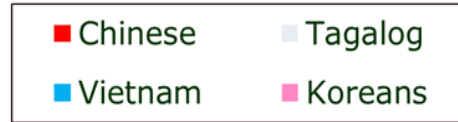
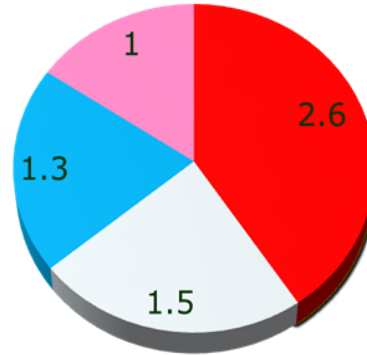
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Appendix A. Demographic information

Number of Asians in the U.S. in 2009
(unit: million)



Asian Languages at Home
(unit: million)



U.S. Census Bureau (2011)

Appendix B. Biographical information survey

1. How old are you?
 19 or Less 20-24 25-29 30-34 35-39 40-49 Over 50
2. Were your parents born in the US? Yes No
3. Were you born in the US? Yes No
4. If you were born in another country, how long have you been living in the United States?
 Less than 5 years 5-10 years 10-15 years Over 15 years
5. With your family (or in the house where you spent most of your childhood), do/did you regularly speak a language other than English?
 Yes No (If no, skip to question # 7)
- If yes, what language? _____
 Hmong Spanish Russian Armenian Punjabi Hindi Other
6. In this language other than English, how many years of formal (school) education have you had?
 None 1-3 years 3-5 years 5-8 years More than 8
7. Outside of the home, what percentage of your day do you use this non-English language?
 5-15% 15-30% 30-50% 50-75% 75-95%
8. How old were you when you started learning English?
 1-3 years old 3-5 years old 5-8 years old 8-16 years old 17 years+
9. How many years of formal (school) education have you received in the United States
 1-3 years 3-5 years 5-10 years More than 10
10. Did you graduate from high school in the US? Yes No
11. How would you describe your speaking and listening abilities in the non-English language listed above?
 Very limited Weak Good Very Good Excellent
12. How would you describe your reading and writing abilities in the non-English language listed above?
 Very limited Weak Good Very Good Excellent
13. How would you describe your speaking and listening abilities in English?
 Very limited Weak Good Very Good Excellent
14. How would you describe your reading and writing abilities in English?
 Very limited Weak Good Very Good Excellent

(Doolan & Miller, 2012, pp. 16-17)

Appendix C. Writing prompt

Looking back to high school and knowing what you know now, how could you have been better prepared for college? In other words, what might you have done differently regarding your behavior during those high school years—e.g., study habits, attitude, etc.? And what might your high school have done differently? For example, your high school could have made changes in coursework, teaching methods, counseling, etc. Write an essay where you discuss the changes you would make. Be sure to have an introduction, 3–4 points supported by clear and detailed examples, and a conclusion that draws the essay to a close.

(Doolan & Miller, 2012, p. 17)