

A Study on the Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue in Undergraduate's English Writing

-- Take Undergraduates in Zhejiang Yuexiu University as an Example

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Abstract

Recently, an increasing attention has been paid to the role of English writing in undergraduate's English course. Nevertheless, it is recognized that undergraduates often make some errors in their English writing on account of the negative transfer of mother tongue. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to find out the main types of errors made by the negative transfer of mother tongue in undergraduates' English writing and the causes of these errors. By means of questionnaire, English composition sample and semi-structured interview, it can be found that the errors caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue are categorized into four main types: substance error, lexical error, syntactic error and discourse error. In light of comparative analysis and error analysis, table, radar chart and pie chart were used to analyze the results of questionnaire and English composition samples. And then the interview with professional English teachers made the results of questionnaire and English composition more comprehensive and persuasive. Finally, some effective strategies including being cautious about spelling and punctuation, teaching grammar and usage of words, attach importance to extensive reading and writing practice and learning the way of expressing ideas in English were proposed correspondingly for teachers and undergraduates to overcome the impact of negative transfer of mother tongue on English writing. In the meantime, this study provided insights in different aspects affecting the future investigations into undergraduates' English writing.

Keywords

Undergraduates; English writing; Negative transfer; Strategy.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Research

Language competence refers to the ability of understanding and expressing meanings by listening, reading, speaking, writing and so forth [1]. Hence, student's English ability can be evaluated by four aspects: listening, reading, writing and speaking, among which writing plays a vital role in exhibiting their English competence. However, the English writing ability of Chinese students has not significantly improved for a long time [2]. Therefore, it is exceedingly crucial for students to attach great importance to English writing.

The guideline for College English Test band 4 and band 6 [3] proposed specific requirements on undergraduates' English writing: the undergraduates from lower grades and upper grades should respectively pass band 4 and band 6. The English writing abilities requirements at Band

4 demonstrates that students can clearly express their own opinion in a composition of at least 120 words on topics that they are familiar with within half an hour. Nevertheless, the fact is that not every undergraduate is capable of meeting such requirements on account of the negative influences of mother tongue on the English learning of undergraduates, especially English writing. Language transfer plays a significant role in the process of second language acquisition.

According to Odlin [4], he believes that “Transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired”. And this transfer is either positive or negative [5]. So some students might make errors in their English writing due to negative transfer. In the College English Test, writing part contributes a hefty slice of score, which could to some extent show the importance of English writing. Therefore, some measures need to be taken to cope with the problems caused by the influence of language transfer.

1.2. Significance and Purpose of the Research

Currently, the majority of investigations on the negative transfer of mother tongue in English writing focus on middle and high school students, whereas only a limited number of studies pay attention to undergraduates. By searching key words: “English writing” and “the negative transfer of mother tongue” in CNKI, 1918 theses involving this topic are found, while only 107 of them focus on the undergraduate. Hence, based on language transfer, contrastive analysis and error analysis, the researcher intends to investigate the negative transfer of mother tongue in undergraduate’s English writing by examining their English compositions and questionnaires and points out some resolutions to mitigate such phenomenon. As a result, this research will arouse teachers’ awareness of improving their teaching method for English writing. And this research will simultaneously motivate students to perfect their learning strategy for English writing so as to reduce the negative transfer of mother tongue. Besides, this research will provide insights into the teaching method of English writing in undergraduate and the study of negative transfer of mother tongue for later study.

2. Literature Review

This chapter is about to review relevant literature, covering the overview of second language acquisition, definition of language transfer and classification of language transfer. Furthermore, the theoretical foundation of language transfer (contrastive analysis and error analysis) is also discussed in this chapter.

2.1. Overview of Second Language Acquisition

With the development of the economic globalization, the second language is becoming increasingly important. In this setting, a number of studies have focused on the field of second language acquisition [6, 7, 8]. Second language acquisition is regarded as the acquisition of a language after the mother tongue has been mastered [9]. SLA is also connected with what is acquired of a second language, what the principles behind this process are and the explanation of success and failure in the course of acquisition [10]. The former merely defines the SLA in terms of the process, while the latter puts more emphasis on the content of SLA. During the process of second language acquisition, some learners make more errors than others due to the transfer of mother tongue as a matter of fact. Hence, language transfer is an important and indispensable portion of the second language acquisition.

2.2. Definition of Language Transfer

Language transfer has already been an important issue for a long time in the field of Applied Linguistics and second language acquisition and many scholars have investigated this domain

[11, 12]. The concept of “language transfer” was put forward in 1950s. Language transfer is frequently seen as a phenomenon happening from the learner’s mother tongue to target language [13, 14]. In this case, it seems that language transfer only occurs between first language and target language. Language transfer is also regarded as a process that utilizing any languages the learner have learned when they are writing or speaking a new language [15]. Similarly, Rod Ellis [16] holds the viewpoint that language transfer would happen when the linguistic characteristics of one language have an impact on another language. These two opinions illustrate the language transfer in a broader sense. By way of contrast, Schachter [17] maintains that language transfer is by no means a process, but a “constraint” impeding the learner’s language acquisition. This concept simply describes the adverse impacts of language transfer and neglected the positive sides. Odlin [4] makes every endeavor to improve the notion of language transfer and puts forward a comprehensive definition, which is an “influence” produced by the “similarities” and “differences” between the target language and the language that has already been learned. Odlin’s definition reveals the nature of language transfer and has been widely accepted by large numbers of linguists. This makes a great contribution to the development of second language acquisition. To summarize, the view of Odlin will be helpful to this study.

2.3. Classification of Language Transfer

In terms of the source of errors, language transfer can be categorized into two kinds: Interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer [18, 19]. From the perspective of influences on second language acquisition, language transfer could be generally divided into two major types: Positive transfer and negative transfer [20, 21].

2.3.1. Interlingual Transfer and Intralingual Transfer

Interlingual transfer is a transfer that caused on target language by the learners’ first language. Since the learners are unfamiliar with the elements of the target language like grammar as well as cultures, the learners are likely to make many errors in the process of using target language [22]. For instance, Chinese usually emphasize the “the first person” by put “the first person” behind “the second person” and “the third person”, so the learner is likely to make sentences like “I and he will travel to Beijing together next year.” or “I and her sister went to the shopping center last Friday.” Though native speakers could understand such sentences, these sentences seems unsuitable and strange to them. The reason is that native speakers are used to place “the first person” behind “the third person” and “the second person.”

Intralingual transfer happens because of the wrong or partial leaning of the target language. And this also might be caused by the portion of target language that the learner has learned upon another [18]. For example, many English learners could make some expressions like “I writed my composition and I submitted it to my teacher.” In this case, the learner thinks the past tense “-ed” suffix can be applied into any verb. However, in fact, there are some irregular verbs in English.

2.3.2. Positive Transfer and Negative Transfer

Positive transfer is “an L1 structure or rule is used in an L2 utterance and that use is appropriate or “correct” in the L2” [23]. This means when the mother tongue and second language have similarities, the process of leaning will be facilitated. For instance, in terms of syntax, both English and Chinese have the SVO sentence structure, which means Chinese learners are easy to understand and write sentences like “she is my mother”, “he likes singing” and so forth.

English and Chinese belong to different language families. Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family, while English belongs to Indo-European family [24]. Due to this reason, there are a host of differences between Chinese and English and thus the Chinese learners are likely to make many errors when they learns English. Here comes the negative transfer, which is also regarded

as interference. When L2 learners meet a new language, they tend to ask for help from their L1, considering that they have been accustomed to their mother tongue. The negative transfer of mother tongue is described as the differences between L1 and L2 and the interferences of L1 that would have adverse influences on the L2 acquisition [25]. Similarly, Brown [20] reckons that while “previous performance” interferes in the “performance of a second task,” the negative transfer will happen. This is likely to become the obstacles in the course of second language acquisition. As a matter of fact, the negative transfer of mother tongue is a prevalent phenomenon and exists at every levels of language. For example, with regard to vocabulary, some people perceive books written for adult as “adult books”. But the true meaning of “adult books” is erotic books. And in terms of syntax, Chinese students might write sentences which lack the subject like “As a senior citizen, our society often tends to give more respect to them.” In this paper, the negative transfer of mother tongue will be deeply studied so as to propose effective measures for English teachers to alleviate the influence of negative transfer in students’ writing. As for students, this study will enable them to have a deeper understanding of their errors in writing and help them to avoid such errors.

2.4. Theoretical Foundation of Language Transfer

2.4.1. Contrastive Analysis

From 1950s to 1960s, the theory of contrastive analysis gradually developed on the viewpoints of structuralist and behaviorist [26]. In light of Gass and Selinker [19], contrastive analysis is a method to find the potential errors by comparing languages with the purpose of figure out what is necessary to be learned and what is not. The ultimate goal of the contrastive study is to find out what part of target language is easy for learners to acquire and what part is different to acquire. However, with regard to both practical and theoretical respects, the contrastive analysis has many problems. If most of the errors made by the learners are not produced by the mother tongue, the contrastive analysis would become less meaningful. Besides, many other factors like the learners’ attitude also have direct influences on the practical values of this theory [27].

2.4.2. Error Analysis

Given that the limitations of comparative analysis mentioned above, error analysis comes into being to cover the shortages. Error analysis was prevalent in 1970s. This theory can help teachers to figure out why learners make errors and realize what common errors learners make [28]. Hence, EA makes many achievements to the field of applied linguistics. It provides us with various origins of errors made by learners and improves the position of errors in research objective and course instruction [29].

The error analysis is divided into 5 procedures [30] (See Figure 1):

- (1) Collecting the learners’ samples. Deciding the subjects the study will involve and how to collect the samples. The language samples of learners can be both written and oral sample.
- (2) Identifying the errors in these samples. Error refers to the grammatical misuse that can arise when the learner lacks the relevant knowledge or skills. Mistake means a pragmatic misuse that happens when the learners have learned the knowledge but fail to use them correctly sometimes.
- (3) Describing these errors. After identifying errors, it is necessary to classify them into different types based on different principles. According to the monograph *Errors in Language Learning and Use* written by James [31], he classifies language errors into three levels: substance errors, text errors and discourse errors. Errors can also be categorized into morphology, syntax and vocabulary [32].
- (4) Explaining the reasons of these errors. The explanation of these errors is an significant steps. Interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer are the two likely types of errors. Interlingual

transfer is a transfer that the learner's mother tongue has negative impacts on the target language, while intralingual transfer occurs due to the incomplete or wrong learning of the target language.

(5) Evaluating these errors. Analyzing these errors learners make can enable the English teachers know the mastery degree of the target language and what still need to be taught. And this can also help the teachers to improve their teaching techniques.

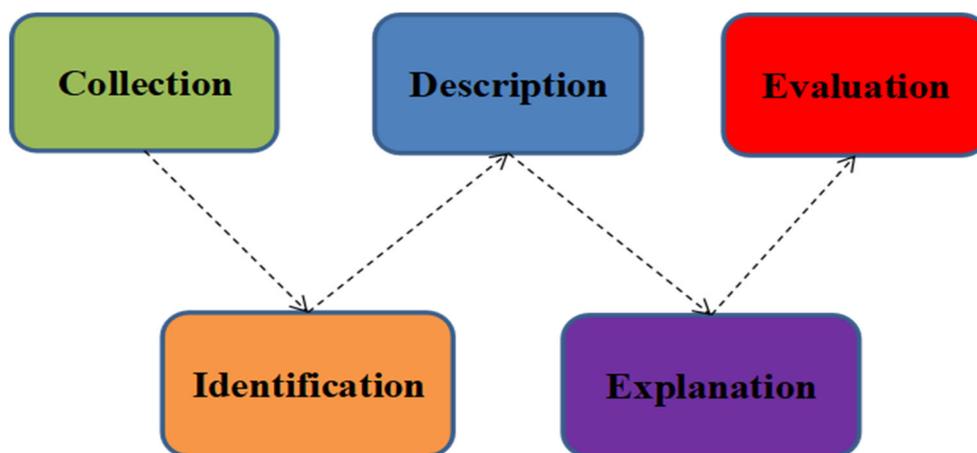


Figure 1. Procedures of Error Analysis

Until now, this error analysis approach is still being extensively applied. Generally speaking, considering that both of the two approaches have their own benefits and drawbacks, English teachers should combine the contrastive analysis and the error analysis in the meantime to formulating scientific and effective teaching strategies.

3. Research Methodology

This chapter illustrates the research methodology utilized in this study, which is comprised of research objectives, research subjects, research instruments as well as the procedures of the research.

3.1. Objectives of the Research

This research aims to answer the following three questions:

- (1) What are the main types of errors made by the negative transfer of mother tongue in undergraduates' English writing?
- (2) What are the main reasons of errors caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue in undergraduates' English writing?
- (3) What are the effective measures that can be taken to overcome such errors in undergraduates' English writing?

By answering these questions, some methods will be proposed with the hope of mitigating the negative transfer of mother tongue in undergraduates' English writing, as a result of which the undergraduates' English writing abilities will be improved to a large extent.

3.2. Subjects of the Research

All the subjects in this research were freshmen from Zhejiang Yuexiu University. Students of two parallel classes were chosen to partake in this research and there are 65 students in total. Many aspects were taken into account so as to avoid the interferential factors.

In order to avoid the influences of gender factor, two parallel classes with similar proportion of males and females (see Table 1) were chosen as subjects.

Table 1. Gender Data of Subjects

Gender \ Class	Class1	Class2
Male	4	6
Female	29	26
Total	33	32

Besides, the English score in college entrance examination (see Table 2) can clearly reflect freshman's English Ability. It can be seen that the English level in the two parallel classes is similar.

Table 2. Distribution of English Score in College Entrance Examination

Class \ Score	≥130	129-120	119-110	109-100	99-90	<90
Class1	2	3	13	10	2	3
Class2	1	7	12	10	1	1

From the perspective of the student's English learning experiences, the majority of these freshmen chosen began to learn English since the third grade of primary school. In other words, most of them had studied English for 10 years, which means they had acquired certain amount of English knowledge. Nevertheless, in fact, they had not yet learned the differences between English and Chinese in a systematic way. For this reason, they were likely to make loads of errors in their English compositions on account of the negative transfer of mother tongue.

With regard to the sample itself, using the English composition of freshmen as sample was more feasible and persuasive. Because the freshmen had just enrolled in the university and they were in the transitional period from senior high school to university. More errors can be shown and found in their compositions than students in other grades due to the lack of enough comprehensive training of English writing in relevant college English courses.

3.3. Instruments of the Research

In this research, both quantitative method and qualitative method were used. They were questionnaires, student's English compositions and interviews.

3.3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was composed of the following parts.

Part 1 - Demographic information of subjects: name, gender and English score in College Entrance Examination.

Part 2 - Negative transfer of mother tongue (12 items)(Adapted from [33])

Table 3. Questionnaire for Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue

	Level	Number of item
Part 2	Substance Error	2
	Lexical Error	3
	Syntactic Error	4
	Discourse Error	3

3.3.2. English Composition

Analyzing the samples of undergraduates' English composition was an effective way to figure out the negative transfer of mother tongue in undergraduates' English compositions. In order to guarantee the credibility and reliability of the samples, two English compositions were collected from each student. One was from the mock test arranged by the school for College English Test Band 4, while the other was from writing practice in Integrated English class. After students finished the compositions, they were collected and generally classified into four levels: substance, lexis and syntax (grammar) and discourse. This method of error classification was partially adapted from Carl James [31].

3.3.3. Semi-structured Interview

In order to make the data that had been collected more and convincing and had a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of errors in the undergraduates' English writing, five professional English teachers were invited to participate in the interview, which focused on errors in undergraduate's English writing and contains 4 questions. The questions were adapted from Nair and Hui [34] and modified on the basis of her questions. The interview questions in this research were as followed:

- (1) What kinds of errors do your students make frequently in English writing?
- (2) Why do you think they make these types of errors frequently in English writing?
- (3) What methods do you use to help your students to reduce the errors in English writing?
- (4) Do you find the measures you use effective?

3.4. Instrumentation - Pilot-tested and Analyzed for Reliability

In order to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, the research conducted a pilot test with 33 students in the same grade from another parallel class at first. The Cronbach's alpha was computed by software SPSS (23.0) to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire that was composed of Likert-type scales and items. Cronbach's Alpha was reported at 0.802 (Table 5), which indicated a high level of internal consistency.

Table 4. Reliability Analysis of the Questionnaire

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	33	100.0
	Excluded ^a	0	.0
	Total	33	100.0

(a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure)

Table 5. Reliability Statistics of the Questionnaire

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.802	26

3.5. Procedures of the Research

The researcher sent questionnaires to the students in two classes chosen. And their English teacher in class asked them to carefully finish the questionnaire within approximately 10 minutes. After that, the questionnaires were collected and then analyzed by Excel.

In this research, the undergraduates' English compositions were collected and utilized as the corpus for analysis. Firstly, the writing papers were handed out to students and the students needed to accomplish them under the teacher's strict requirements. Secondly, their English compositions were collected by their teacher. Thirdly, the errors produced by the negative transfer of mother tongue were marked and analyzed carefully. And then, the errors were classified into four types: substance errors, lexical errors, syntactical errors, and discourse errors. Next, the tables, radar charts and pie chart were made to show the information of errors. In the end, some corresponding strategies were put forward to minimize these errors.

Furthermore, five professional English teachers were invited into an empty classroom and the researcher asked them four questions mentioned above. During the interview, every teacher provided their own ideas in detailed. The whole interview lasted for 30 minutes and the researcher wrote down their main ideas and opinions on notebook. After the interview, the data were analyzed and summarized.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Results and Analysis of the Questionnaire

Because there are 65 students in the two classes in total, 65 questionnaires are collected and analyzed. In the questionnaire, different figures represent different choices: 1 = always, 2 = often, 3 = sometimes, 4 = seldom, 5 = never.

Table 6. Questionnaire Data Analysis in Substance Level (I1.1-I1.2)

Item	1	2	3	4	5
1.1 In English writing, I mix the Chinese and English punctuation or use punctuation incorrectly.	3%	11%	34%	32%	20%
1.2 In English writing, I have spelling or case errors.	3%	14%	48%	34%	1%

Table 6 shows the negative transfer of mother tongue in terms of substance. 99% of undergraduates could make spelling errors in their English writing and nearly 50% of them sometimes mix the Chinese and English punctuation or use punctuation incorrectly. This means that the negative transfer of mother tongue exerts significant influences on student's English writing in substance level.

Table 7. Questionnaire Data Analysis in Lexical Level (I1.3-I1.5)

Item	1	2	3	4	5
1.3 I think of the proper form of verbs when I write an English composition.	20%	51%	25%	4%	0%
1.4 I am aware of the influence of part of speech (nouns, verbs, etc.) on my English writing.	25%	41%	26%	8%	0%
1.5 In English writing, I take the differences between Chinese and English in lexical collocation into account?	12%	35%	39%	12%	2%

Table 7 indicates the negative transfer of mother tongue with regard to lexis. It can be seen that 71% of undergraduates often pay attention to their form of verbs when they write an English composition. And 92% of undergraduates realize the influence of part of speech. Besides, most

of the undergraduates will think about the differences between Chinese and English in lexical collocation. This suggests that undergraduates recognize the influences of negative transfer of mother tongue on English writing in lexical level.

Table 8. Questionnaire Data Analysis in Syntactic Level (I1.6-I1.9)

Item	1	2	3	4	5
1.6 In English writing, I prefer to use active sentences instead of passive sentences?	6%	34%	49%	11%	0%
1.7 I care about the subject in the sentence when I write an English composition.	28%	34%	23%	15%	0%
1.8 I prefer to use the simple sentences instead of the complex one in English writing.	8%	20%	52%	20%	0%
1.9 In English writing, I pay attention to whether there is a predicate verb in sentence.	31%	26%	28%	15%	0%

Table 8 illustrates the negative transfer of mother tongue in syntactic level. Most of undergraduates are more likely to use active sentences and simple sentences rather than passive sentences and complex sentences. Furthermore, 85% of them will put emphasis on subject and predicate while writing English composition. The results show that undergraduates will think over the negative transfer of mother tongue from the syntactic perspective. However, this phenomenon still happens in their writing.

Table 9. Questionnaire Data Analysis in Discourse Level (I1.10-I1.12)

Item	1	2	3	4	5
1.10 In English writing, I pay attention to the relevance between my propositions and the topic.	35%	49%	14%	2%	0%
1.11 In English writing, I consider whether the propositions in my composition are related with each other.	34%	43%	18%	5%	0%
1.12 In English writing, I lose points because of the lack of relevance among propositions in my compositions.	8%	15%	54%	21%	2%

Table 9 shows the negative transfer of mother tongue in discourse level. 84% of undergraduates often pay attention to the relevance between their propositions and the topic and 77% of them often consider whether the propositions in their compositions are related with each other. Nevertheless, 98% of them still could lose points due to the lack of relevance among propositions in their compositions. The results suggest that they still need to be more careful about their prepositions.

4.2. Results and Analysis of the English Composition Samples

4.2.1. Overall statistics of the English Composition Samples

There are 65 students in this research and their compositions in a mock test for College English Test Band 4 and a writing task in Integrated English class are collected. So there are 130 pieces of English compositions in total. After careful analysis, 404 errors caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue are found with the help of an experienced English teacher, which can be classified into four main types: substance error, lexical error, syntactic error and discourse error (Radar Figure 2 & Table 6).

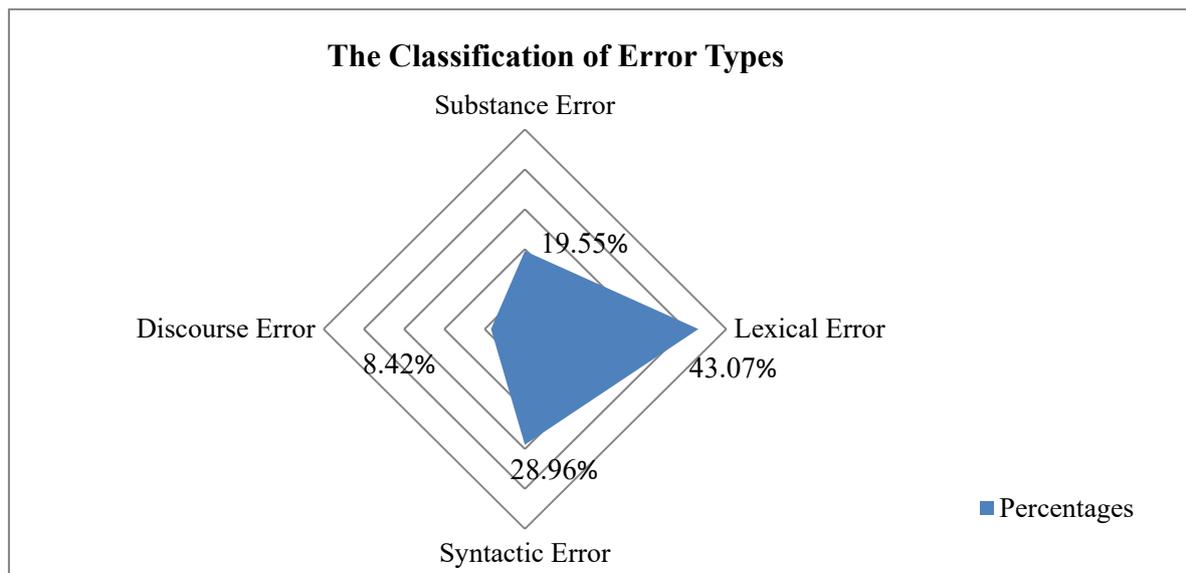


Figure 2. The Classification of Error Types

Table 10. Overall Statistics of the English Composition Samples

Error Types	Number	Percentages
Substance Error	79	19.55%
Lexical Error	174	43.07%
Syntactic Error	117	28.96%
Discourse Error	34	8.42%
Total	404	100%

According to the table 10, it is clear that the lexical error has the highest proportion, being responsible for 43.07% of total errors, which is followed by the syntactic error, making up 28.96%. This means that most of the errors in undergraduate’s English writing are in lexical and syntactic levels. The substance error ranks the third, accounting for 19.55%, which indicates that some basic errors still happens in their English writing. And the discourse error contributes just a small fraction of the total errors, at 8.42%. Then, the detailed analysis regarding specific types of error can be seen in the following part.

4.2.2. Substance Errors

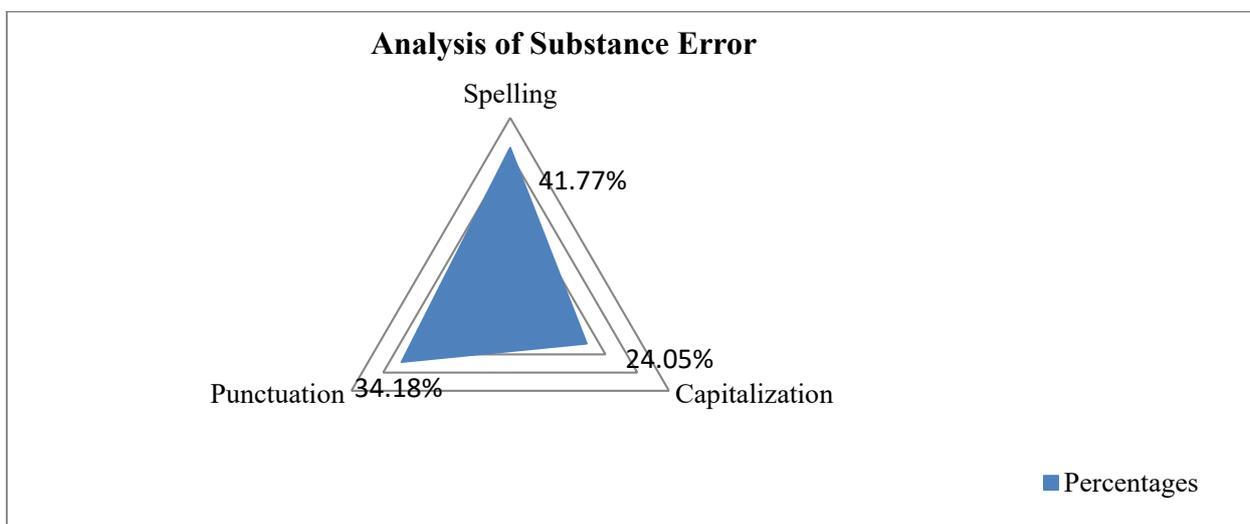


Figure 3. Analysis of Substance Error

Table 11. Statistics of Substance Error

Substance Error Types	Number	Percentages
Spelling	33	41.77%
Capitalization	19	24.05%
Punctuation	27	34.18%
Total	79	100%

From the table 11, it is noticeable that the spelling error occurs most frequently, at 41.77%, among the substance error. This suggests that although undergraduates have accumulated a certain number of vocabulary, many of them are not familiar the specific spelling of some English words. And the figure for punctuation errors is the second largest, at 34.18%. It shows that some undergraduate are less likely to distinguish between English punctuation and Chinese punctuation. Besides, capitalization takes up 24.05% of all the substance errors, which could be to some extent caused by their carelessness. For example:

(1) We can read a lot of things like news and nowels. (Wrong)

We can read a lot of things like news and novels. (Right)

(2) Nowadays, reading has become the most important skill in our daily life. (Wrong)

Nowadays, reading has become the most important skill in our daily life. (Right)

(3) In addition. I ever heard some sentences from our president's wife Peng Liyuan. (Wrong)

In addition, I ever heard some sentences from our president's wife, Peng Liyuan. (Right)

(4) The arrival of the "information Age" will undoubtedly have a profound influence on our lives. (Wrong)

The arrival of the "Information Age" will undoubtedly have a profound influence on our lives. (Right)

(5) We need to Practice regularly to successfully improve our reading ability. (Wrong)

We need to practice regularly to successfully improve our reading ability. (Right)

From the first two examples, it can be found that students even make spelling errors in some common words due to its confusing pronunciations. In the third example, two punctuation errors can be seen. The reason is that there are some differences in usage between English punctuation and Chinese punctuation. For instance, commas are usually placed around appositive in English, while there is no such component in Chinese. Therefore, Chinese students are likely to make punctuation errors in their English writing due to the negative transfer of mother tongue. In regard to capitalization error, this tends to arise since they do not put emphasis on this respect.

Table 12. Statistics of Lexical Error

Lexical Error Types	Number	Percentages
Noun	41	23.56%
Adjective & Adverb	33	18.97%
Verb	31	17.82%
Preposition	8	4.60%
Article	18	10.34%
Pronoun	14	8.05%
conjunction	29	16.67%
Total	174	100%

4.2.3. Lexical Errors

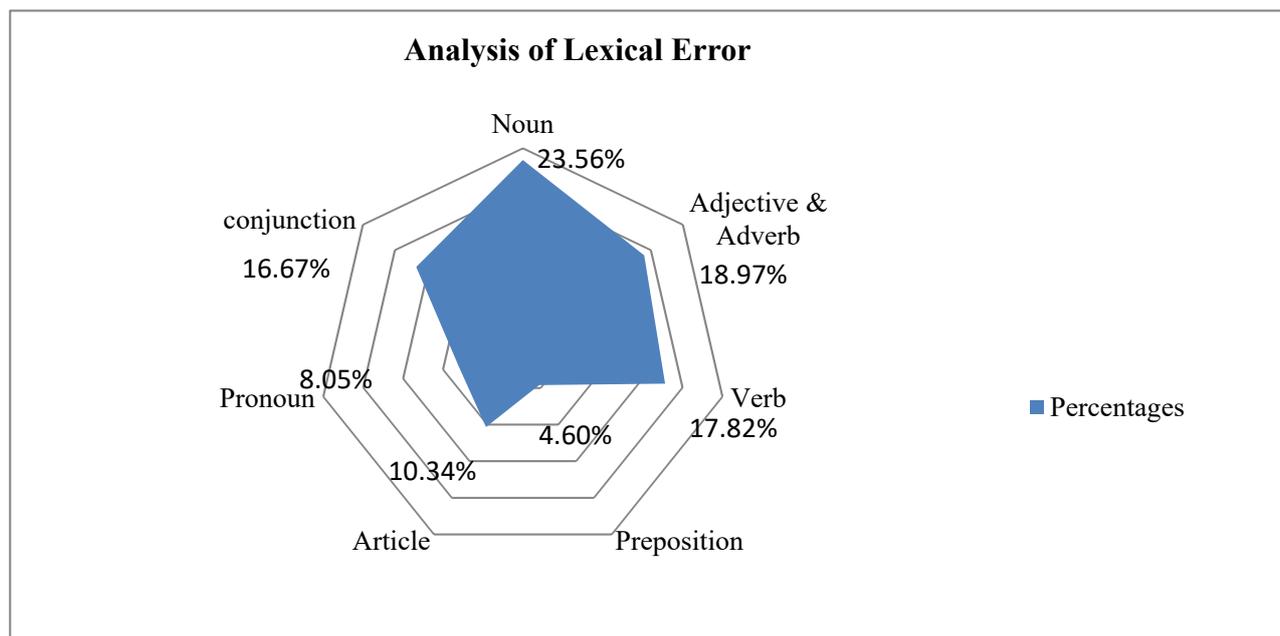


Figure 4. Analysis of Lexical Error

According to the table above, noun error contributes the maximum proportion of the total lexical errors, at 23.56%. Most of the noun error is related to the number of noun. This is because noun in English can be generally divided into countable and uncountable noun. And suffix like “s” or “es” can be put behind the noun in English to present the number of noun. In Chinese, however, people just write the specific character of number before noun. Then, this figure is followed by adjective & advert error and verb error, at 18.97% and 17.82% respectively. And conjunction error makes up 16.67%. The implication is that English is featured by hypotaxis, whereas Chinese is arranged by parataxis. Furthermore, article error accounts for 10.34% of all the lexical error. The lack of article in Chinese could produce this error. In English, The figures for pronoun error and preposition error are very small, at 8.05% and 4.60% respectively. For example,

- | | |
|--|---------|
| (1) You can learn various culture in many different country. | (Wrong) |
| You can learn various cultures in many different countries. | (Right) |
| (2) Reading is a essential part of our daily life. | (Wrong) |
| Reading is an essential part of our daily life. | (Right) |
| (3) We should form the habit of reading outloud. | (Wrong) |
| We should form the habit of reading out loud. | (Right) |
| (4) The duty of me is to introduce the food for customs. | (Wrong) |
| The duty of mine is to introduce the food for customs. | (Right) |
| (5) I will hard-working to realize my dream. | (Wrong) |
| I will work hard to realize my dream. | (Right) |
| (6) I will contribute my strength in educational career. | (Wrong) |
| I will contribute my strength to educational career. | (Right) |
| (7) Remember as you read is an effective way to understand knowledge. | (Wrong) |
| Remembering what you read is an effective way to understand knowledge. | (Right) |

In the first example, the countable noun modified by words like “different” or “various” need to become plural form. In sentence (2), the word “essential” begins with a vowel sound and thus

the article “an” should be added before this word. The correct expression of the third sentence should separate “out” and “loud” so as to avoid confusion. From the sentence (4), “me” should be replaced by “mine” as only nominal possessive pronoun has the function of referring to noun. As for the fifth sentence, “hard-working” is an adjective so it cannot serve as predicate. In the sixth example, the preposition “to” can be substituted for “in” because the common usage is “contribute something to something”. In the last sentence, the conjunction is misused,

4.2.4. Syntactic Errors

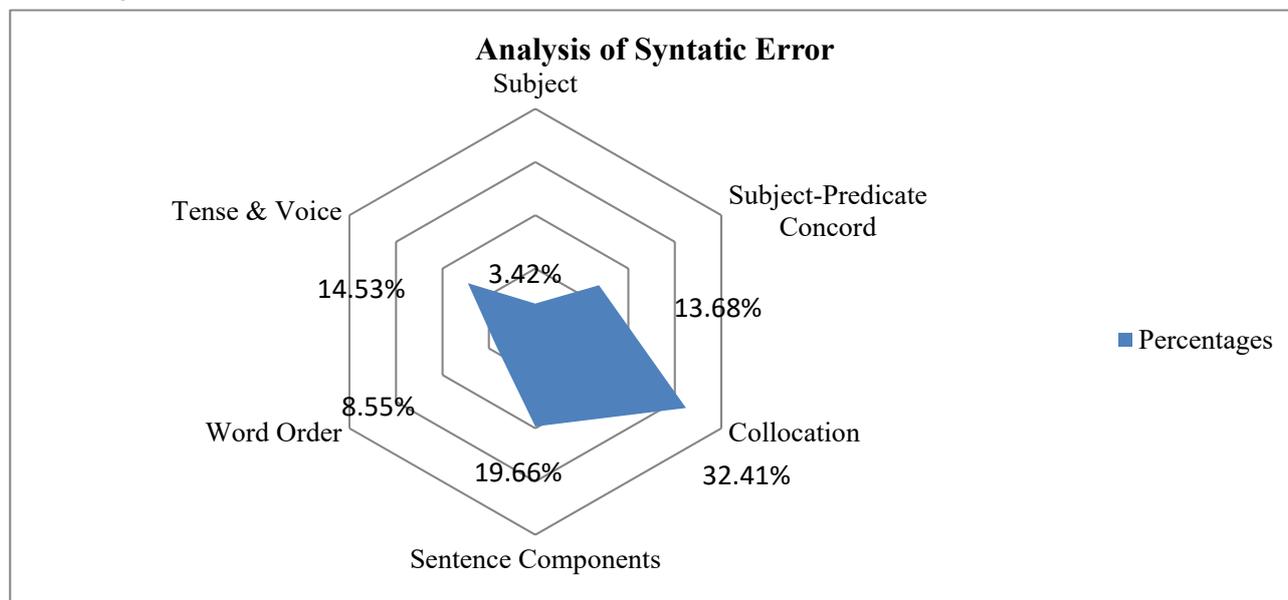


Figure 5. Analysis of Syntactic Error

Table 13. Statistics of Syntactic Error

Syntactic Error Types	Number	Percentages
Subject	4	3.42%
Subject-Predicate Concord	16	13.68%
Collocation	47	32.41%
Sentence Components	23	19.66%
Word Order	10	8.55%
Tense & Voice	17	14.53%
Total	117	100%

From the table 12, it can be seen that collocation error leads other errors in syntactic error (32.41%); sentence component, tense & voice and subject-predicate errors follow behind, 19.66%, 14.53% and 13.68% respectively. In fact, English and Chinese belong to different language families, so the two languages have many differences in collocations, sentence components and cultures. Besides, English has sixteen tenses and these tenses are shown by the different conjugations. But the temporal adverbial rather than the change of verb are used to represent different tenses in Chinese. Hence, Chinese students are prone to neglect the conjugation in English. And the subject-predicate concord error is also common in student's compositions since Chinese does not have such language feature. In addition, word order error is responsible for 8.55% of the whole syntactic error, which could be caused by the different thinking modes between English and Chinese. And subject error has the lowest proportion, at 3.42%. For example,

(1) Reading has become a major mainstream. (Wrong)

- Reading has become a mainstream. (Right)
- (2) I wonder which job would I take after 4 years. (Wrong)
- I wonder which job I would take after 4 years. (Right)
- (3) We had better identify the type of text you have. (Wrong)
- We would better identify the type of text you have. (Right)
- (4) China have developed better and better. (Wrong)
- China has developed better and better. (Right)
- (5) Someone has a good command of reading can benefit more from reading. (Wrong)
- Someone who has a good command of reading can benefit more from reading. (Right)
- (6) Choosing some books meet your own level is the basic point to improve your reading ability. (Wrong)
- Choosing some books that meet your own level is the basic point to improve your reading ability. (Right)
- (7) Develop a unique reading ability can help people use their time wisely. (Wrong)
- Developing a unique reading ability can help people use their time wisely. (Right)
- It it apparent that “mainstream” has already contained the meaning of “major”, so “major” should be deleted. In addition, “major mainstream” also can be seen as “Chinglish” caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue. In sentence (2), the word order is incorrect. The word order in the object clause should be declarative. So the object clause led by “which” in this example should use declarative sentence. In other words, the predicate “would take” should be put behind the subject “I”. Next, the whole composition is written in simple present tense, so it is illogical to use past perfect tense. In the fourth sentence, if the gerund performs as subject, the predicate need to become the third person singular form. Therefore, “have” should be corrected to “has”. In regard to the sentence (5) and (6), it can be seen that both sentences have two verbs. So conjunction “who” or “that” can be added to make the sentence become complex sentence without changing its original meaning. And the last sentence’s subject is incorrect. Considering that the original form of verb cannot serve as subject, it can be altered into gerund form. So “choose” should be changed to “choosing”.

4.2.5. Discourse Errors

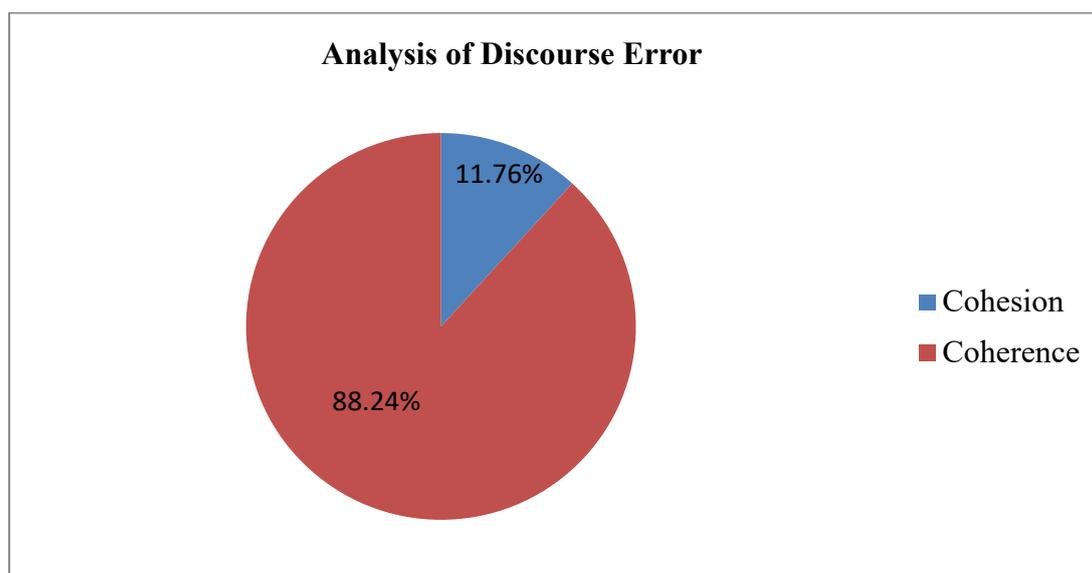


Figure 6. Analysis of Discourse Error

Table 14. Statistics of Discourse Error

Discourse Error Types	Number
Cohesion	4
Coherence	30
Total	34

According to the table 14, it is obvious that coherence errors are responsible for the majority of discourse error, at 88.24%, which is more than seven times that of cohesion errors, at only 11.76%. Therefore, coherence error is the leading error in terms of discourse error.

From the perspective of coherence, many students write some sentences or give some prepositions that do not have any direct relations regarding the writing topic. Here are two examples excerpted from the writing task one: (1) With the development of science and technology, people should learn new knowledge. (2) With the development of the networks, all kinds of amusements fill our life. It can be clearly recognized that these sentences do not have direct relations about the importance of reading ability or the way to improve it. So students should avoid writing such sentences in their compositions.

With regard to cohesion, some students might do not have the awareness to use conjunctions to logically organize their sentences or prepositions given that the information can be expressed in an underlying way in Chinese and, in contrast, the conjunctions are necessary and significant in English. For instance,

(1) I'm interested in ancient history about China, it can take me into a new world to enjoy ancient cultures. (Wrong)

I'm interested in ancient history about China, because it can take me into a new world to enjoy ancient cultures. (Right)

(2) "Practice makes perfect," you must read books every day and never give up. (Wrong)

"Practice makes perfect," so you must read books every day and never give up. (Right)

Causal relationship exists in the two sentences in both examples provided above, so conjunction "because" or "so" should be placed into the corresponding positions based on their real meanings.

4.3. Results and Analysis of the Interview

In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of errors in undergraduate's English writing and give specific strategies to minimize the errors, five professional English teachers are invited to participate in the semi-structured interview. The questions in this interview are as followed:

(1) What kinds of errors do your students make frequently in English writing?

(2) Why do you think they make these types of errors frequently in English writing?

(3) What methods do you use to help your students to reduce the errors in English writing?

(4) Do you find the measures you use effective?

As for the first question, most of the teachers agree with that spelling error, collocation error, subject-predicate disagreement, tense and voice, lack of own ideas and the improper use of words are made frequently.

For the second question, most of the teachers maintain that there are mainly four reasons for these mistakes. They are the negative transfer of mother tongue, insufficient reading, lack of writing practice and the inaccurate command of words. In terms of negative transfer of mother tongue, the undergraduate's first language would have negative influences on the process of second language learning, due to the differences between English and Chinese in many aspects like grammar, thinking mode and so forth. With regard to insufficient reading, there is a fact

that a host of undergraduates seldom read any extra English reading materials like magazines, news and novels with the exception of the reading materials assigned by their teachers. Therefore, they have only limited English reading. From the perspective of lack of writing practice, most English teachers put more emphasis on English listening and reading and thus most of the assignments are designed for improving these two parts rather than English writing. In this case, the students would not attach importance to writing practice correspondingly. As for the inaccurate command of words, many undergraduates merely memorize English words itself instead of learning the detailed English-English explanation and usages on the dictionary. About the third question, most of the teachers agree that they have taken some measures to mitigate the errors in undergraduate's English writing. First, all the teachers contend that they prefer to guide their students to read a wide range of extra reading materials such as news, fictions as well as magazines. Also, they usually assign some homework about English writing. Most importantly, they always emphasize the differences between English and Chinese in class so as to enable students to have a better understanding to these two languages. What is more, they tend to ask their students to consult the dictionary in order to acquire more detailed information about the words.

As for the last question, all of the teachers agree that the measures they have taken are effective to some extent. However, they are also convinced that the most important thing is that undergraduates should stick to practice with great perseverance. Only in this way can they achieve significant improvements in terms of English writing.

In summary, the results from the semi-structured interview support the results from the questionnaire and the undergraduate's compositions. And it can be concluded that the negative transfer of mother tongue have influences on undergraduate's English writing.

4.4. Strategies for Undergraduates' English Writing

4.4.1. Strengthening the Accuracy of Punctuation and Spelling of Words

Due to the negative transfer of mother tongue, undergraduates are prone to make some substance errors like spelling errors and punctuation errors in their English writing. Such errors could affect the expression of their prepositions and others' understanding to these ideas. The incorrect spelling could sometimes make the reader confused and even possibly let the reader misunderstand the writer's purposes and opinions. Besides, inappropriate punctuation could lead to inaccurate expression of thoughts and feelings. So it is important to be cautious about spelling and punctuation. On the one hand, teachers should teach their students the specific usage of some relatively difficult punctuation like semicolon as well as dash. At the same time, the function and importance of proper punctuation and correct spelling are also needed to be taught to their students. On the other hand, when students are writing English compositions, they need to have the awareness of checking the spelling of words and the usage of punctuation so as to avoid the substance errors. These measures will effectively relieve the negative transfer of mother tongue on undergraduate's writing in substance level.

4.4.2. Deepening the Understanding of Grammar and Usage of Words

Given the fact that most of the undergraduates do not acquire the systematic leaning of English grammar and the detailed usage of words in their previous learning experience like middle school and high school, they are likely to make some errors in lexical and syntactic levels on account of the negative transfer of mother tongue. In this case, it is of great importance for English teachers to instruct undergraduates in systematic knowledge of English grammar, among which the tense and voice, the part of speech, the singular and plural forms of nouns and attributive clause are needed to be put more emphases. And teachers also need to tell their students the detailed usage of words and its common collocation. Furthermore, when teachers are teaching English words, they could underscore the differences between Chinese and English

in many respects. Though some English words and Chinese characters seem to have the similar meaning literally, their true meanings have huge differences. As for students, they should gradually accumulate more usages of word in daily learning and when they encounter some problems in grammar, they should ask their teachers for help immediately. Under these circumstances, the negative transfer of mother tongue in lexical and syntactic levels can be mitigated to a large extent.

4.4.3. Increasing the Frequency of Extensive Reading and Writing Practice

There is a fact that most undergraduates seldom read extra English reading materials except for the materials given by their teachers. And some undergraduates are even unwilling to accomplish the necessary assignments. Besides, the majority of them never write any English essay unless they are under the requirement of English test. The implication of this phenomenon is that undergraduates underestimate or neglect the importance of extensive read and writing practice. However, considering that English and Chinese belong to different language families, it is exceedingly vital to spend a large amount of time to do more reading and writing practice to ease the negative transfer of mother tongue. Teachers should provide undergraduates with a reading list, which consists of some classical novels, magazines and other types of material. Besides, teachers should assign more tasks relevant to writing to their students. In addition, undergraduates should complete the assignments given by teachers in earnest and actively search for a variety of materials they are interested in to read. During this process of extensive reading and writing practice, the undergraduate's sense of language will be cultivated gradually. This is conducive to the improvement of their writing ability and will simultaneously ease the negative transfer of mother tongue.

4.4.4. Enhancing the Way of Expressing Ideas in English

As it is known, Chinese is a paratactic language, while English is a hypotactic language. Because of this reason, a large proportion of Chinese students do not accustomed to the way of organizing ideas and opinions in English, especially English writing. Some of them sometimes propose some prepositions that do not have any direct relations with the topic. And in some cases, they cannot effectively or appropriately use a wide range of cohesive devices to arrange their ideas. This could have negative implications affecting the expression of their ideas and opinions. Hence, teachers should help undergraduates to get used to the thinking mode in English. Teachers could offer some excellent composition samples with clear logic and useful cohesive devices to students. And teachers should teach students how to response the topic requirements with relevant and supported ideas and how to organize prepositions logically and coherently. Students should try their utmost to appropriately use some cohesive devices to express their ideas. Only in this way can they effectively and accurately present their ideas in English writing.

In conclusion, the influences of negative transfer of mother tongue on undergraduate's writing are necessary to be taken into consideration in both teaching and learning process. For one thing, teachers should take targeted methods according to the specific situations of students. For another, undergraduates should find out the causes of error they made behind them and try to overcome them. In this case, the negative transfer of mother tongue will be effectively minimized.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Major Findings of the Research

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are utilized in this research. By summarizing the results of questionnaires, writing samples and semi-structured interviews, the research objectives proposed in the third chapter of this paper can be answered as followed.

(1) What are the main types of errors made by the negative transfer of mother tongue in undergraduates' English writing?

The kinds of errors caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue in undergraduates' English writing are generally classified into four types: substance error, lexical error, syntactic error and discourse error. The researcher finds that most of the errors occur in lexical and syntactic levels, such as noun, adjective and adverb, verb, collocation, sentence components, to name but a few.

(2) What are the main reasons of errors caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue in undergraduates' English writing?

First, English and Chinese belong to different language families and therefore there are huge differences between Chinese and English in many aspects like collocation, sentence components, thinking mode and so on. Second, Chinese is a paratactic language, which means the sentences are linked without covert cohesive devices. In contrast, English is a hypotactic language, which depends upon the overt cohesion. Third, undergraduates have only limited writing and reading practice. In other words, both language input and language output are not enough. What is more, undergraduates are not familiar with the detailed usages of word because they only see the literal meaning on the vocabulary.

(3) What are the effective measures that can be taken to overcome such errors in undergraduates' English writing?

There are mainly four methods that can be harnessed to resolve the errors. First, undergraduates should be cautious about spelling and punctuation in English writing. Second, teachers should pay more attention to teaching grammar and usage of words. Furthermore, both teachers and undergraduates need to attach great importance to extensive reading and writing practice. In addition, teachers should help students to learning the way of expressing ideas in English.

5.2. Limitations of the Research and Future Research Prospects

This research is not an all-sided one, so there are some deficiencies as followed.

First of all, due to the limitation of time, undergraduates of only two classes from one school are chosen to this research and thus the results could be unable to accurately and fully illustrate the English writing competence of all undergraduates.

Secondly, in terms of the source of errors, language transfer can be categorized into interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer. And language transfer can be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer from the perspective of influences on second language acquisition. However, only the influences of negative transfer of mother tongue on undergraduate's writing are discussed in this paper.

For the research in future, more participants from different institutions should be utilized so as to make the results more comprehensive. Besides, influences on the undergraduate's English writing exerted by other three types of language transfer could be analyzed.

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