An Empirical Study of Translation Errors

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Abstract—This study is an empirical study based on the students' performance in one examination, analyzing the errors made by English majors in Chinese-to-English translation in one final examination for the course Intensive Reading. In this paper, the errors are listed, classified into several categories and then analyzed. The purpose of this study is to provide English teachers with a general picture of Chinese college students' mastery of English and most important of all to give some suggestions so as to help students master English better. Some of the author's own teaching experience is shared, especially how to cultivate students' learning autonomy and critical thinking.

Index Terms—error analysis, pedagogical implication, learning autonomy, critical thinking

I. INTRODUCTION

This is an empirical study of errors made in one final examination for Intensive Reading. The subjects of the study are English majors, to be exact, 29 freshmen at Inner Mongolia University. The exam was given in June, 2013 to evaluate students' performance in one school year's study after their enrollment in Inner Mongolia University. The examination is composed of eight parts: I word formation, II completing sentences by translating the word in brackets, III multiple choices, IV cloze, V reading comprehension, VI paraphrase, VII sentence translation from English to Chinese, and VIII sentence translation from Chinese to English. This study chose Part VIII to investigate students' mastery of English. As a kind of output practice, sentence translation from Chinese to English not only reflects students' mastery of vocabulary and grammar, but also shows students' writing ability and English thinking ability. So compared with others, this part can provide teachers with a comprehensive picture of students' English level.

II. ERROR ANALYSIS

Studying learners' errors is the main part of the study of learning process, for "correct items yield little information about the interlanguage of the learner" (Brown, 1987, p.169). Therefore errors deserve close study and "error analysis generally consists of three stages, namely, identification, description and explanation" (Yue, 1999, p.150). In identifying errors, it is necessary to distinguish between mistakes of performance and errors of competence. The former refer to the chance products such as slips of the tongue or of the pen. They are of no significance to the study of language learning for they are random and non-systematic. The latter reveal the learners' competence or the underlying knowledge of the target language and therefore deserve close study.

When errors are concerned, they can be classified into overt errors and covert errors. When it is ill-formed, an utterance or a sentence is ungrammatical and contains overt error. When it is superficially well-formed but makes no sense in the context, it is inappropriate or odd to the native speakers and it has covert errors (Yue, 1999). Overt errors are easy to be identified while covert errors are difficult for the learners to recognize and understand. They may even question why the grammatically correct sentences are not acceptable.

The ultimate goal of error analysis is to offer an explanation. In other words, to find the reason for the occurrence of the errors is of great significance. In fact, errors can be traced to various sources: linguistic, cognitive, affective and communicative (Yue, 1999). As far as this study of written test is concerned, almost no communicative or affective elements are involved, for it is a written exam and the students do not have to deal with problems caused by communication environment or by the interlocutors. As to cognitive factors, learners' personality and learning habits do play a role in their test performance, but individual differences are not the focus of this study. So the top concern is linguistic factors, mainly language transfer, which can be classified into interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer. The former refers to the interference of the first language, mainly in the form of mechanic application of grammatical rules, expressions, thinking patterns to the second language learning or using. The latter refers to the fact that in second language learning, learners tend to apply the rules they have learned to everything. Overgeneralization is the most common phenomenon of intralingual transfer. Errors caused by interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer are assumed to occur at the beginning stage of second language learning. It is true that the more one learns, the less frequently such kinds of errors occur. But it is undeniable that such kinds of errors do happen even in the advanced level of learning.

III. AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

Instead of making a study of the whole examination paper, this study is a small-scale investigation, focusing on VIII Sentence translation from Chinese to English which consists of four sentences:

① 我认为我们迟早会意识到这个错误，只不过是时间问题。

② 你们有没有把他的健康情况通知他的家人？

③ 讲话人在说话前清了清他的嗓子。

④ 她还在为两份工作的选择而犹豫。

The suggested translations of the four sentences are as following:

① I think we will sooner or later realize that it is a mistake. It's just a matter of time.

② Have you informed his family of his health condition?

③ The speaker cleared his throat before he started to talk.

④ She is still hesitating over the choice between the two jobs.

This study follows the instruction that "error analysis generally consists of three stages, namely, identification, description and explanation" (Yue, 1999, p.150). In the following sections, errors occurred in the test will be first presented and then analyzed.

A. Data Presentation and Classification

The errors occurred in the students' test papers can be classified into several categories: 1) tense; 2) word class; 3) grammar; 4) collocation; 5) others. The specific errors are listed under each category. All the wrong sentences and phrases are numbered. Sometimes one sentence contains different kinds of errors and therefore the sentence with the same number may appear in different categories. The errors are highlighted in red and bold according to the category. In other words, each time only errors corresponding to the category are marked in red and bold. In some cases, the error involves the whole sentence or most of it, which is presented with no words in red and bold. The number in the brackets at the end of some sentences or phrases shows the times of occurrence. The default is once; twice or even more are marked.

1) Tense errors

The specific sentences wrong in tense are listed as follows:

1. In my opinion, we will realized this problem at some time.
2. I think we would realized the mistake sooner or later.
3. Did you informed his families with his health condition? (2)
4. Have you inform his family his situation of health?
5. The speaker make his throat clear before he talk.
6. The speaker clear his throat before he speaking.
7. The speaker clean his throat before speaking.
8. The spokesman clear up his throat.
9. Speaker clear his voice before the speech.
10. The speaking man cleared his throat before he begin to talk.
11. That person who want to speech cleans his voice.
12. She still don't know the selection of two jobs.
13. She still hesitate for the choice of two kinds of jobs.
14. I think we recognized the mistake sooner or later, only the problem of time.
15. The person who is talking cleared his throat before he talked.

2) Word class errors

11. That person who want to speech cleans his voice.
16. She has still worried about the choice of two jobs.
17. It's just depend on time.
18. She is still hesitate for the job of the two/ for choosing the job of the two. (2)
19. She can't make a decision to choice which job.
20. She doesn't have a clearly idea to choose the two jobs.
21. The speaker clears his throat before speak.
22. She is still hesitated to the choose of the two jobs. (2)
23. She is still hesitated in the alter of two jobs.
24. She was hesitated to choose----.
25. She is still hesitating for the choose from the two jobs.

3) Grammar errors

26. Whether you tell his family members his physical situation or not?
27. She still hesitates that how to choose between two jobs.
28. She is still hesitating about which to choose these two jobs.
29. Are you keep his family informed of his health situation?

4) Collocation errors

Benson, Benson and Ilson (1997) classify collocation into grammatical collocation and lexical collocation. A grammatical collocation is a phrase consisting of a dominant word and a preposition or grammatical structure such as an infinitive or a clause, while lexical collocations are usual combinations of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs (ibid). Errors occurred in students' translation have been classified and identified as either overt or covert shown in the following table:

Collocation type		Correct expression	errors in translation	Type of error
Grammatical collocation	Noun + a prepositional phrase	a matter of time	30. **a problem with time** 31. **a question about time** 32. **the problem of time** (2) 33. **a problem of time** (2) 34. **a time problem** (4) 35. **time problems** 36. **a time question** 37. **a time issue** 38. **a point of time** (2)	covert error
			39. It's just **a problem that time is long or short**. 40. It's just about time.	covert error
			17. It**'s** just **depend on** time.	overt error
	Verb +noun + proposition +noun	to inform his family of his health condition	41. inform his families **with** (2) 42. inform his families **about** (7) 43. inform his health condition **to** his family? (3) 44. inform his family his situation of health?	covert error
	Verb + proposition	She is still hesitating over ---	45. hesitate **for** (5) 46. hesitate **choosing** 47. hesitate **of**	overt error
	Verb phrase + object	She has no idea which one to choose between the two jobs.	48. She has no idea **on** which one to choose between the two jobs. (overt error)	overt error
Lexical collocation	Adjective + adjective	sooner or later	49. **earlier or latter**	overt error
			50. **earlier or later** 51. **no sooner**	covert error
	Noun +noun	health condition	52. **health station** 53. **healthy position**	overt error
	verb +noun	The speaker cleared his throat-----	54. He **practice his sound with throat**----- 55. He **cleans his voice** (2) 56 He **cleaned his throat** (4) 57. The spokesman **clear up his throat**.	overt error
			58. The speaker **make his throat clear** before he talk.	covert error

5) Others
59. It's only nothing but the time problem. (overt error)
60. I think we will sooner or later realize that it is a fault. (covert error)
3. Did you informed his families with his health condition? (2) (covert error)
41. inform his families with (2) (covert error)
42. inform his families about (7) (covert error)

B. Error Analysis and Explanation

Errors in categories 1)-3) are overt errors. The sentences are ill-formed and ungrammatical. Errors in category 4) and category 5) may be overt or covert, which has been made clear in the table or in the brackets. Corresponding analysis of each category of errors listed in the above section comes in the following.

1. Tense errors and interlingual transfer

The verb form in English has to be changed with tense, number and person. Sentences 1-4 contain inflection errors mainly caused by tense. Sentences 5-13 are not correct in that the verb form does not agree with the person. In these sentences, the third person asks the verb to change either with person or tense. In sentences 14 and 15, the errors occur when the verb form does not agree with the other parts of the sentence. The phrase "sooner or later" and "I think" in Sentence 14 requires the word "recognize" take the form "will recognize". Sentence 15 describes something happened in the past and therefore "is talking" does not agree with the rest of the sentence. Such kinds of errors are caused by interlingual transfer. English is a synthetic-analytic language while Chinese is an analytic language (Lian, 1993). A synthetic language is "characterized by frequent and systematic use of inflected forms to express grammatical relationships" (quoted form Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary). An analytic language is "characterized by a relatively frequent use of function words, auxiliary verbs, and changes in word order to express syntactic relations, rather than of inflected forms (cited in *The Random House College Dictionary*). Unlike English, Chinese words do not

have to change with tense, number and person. So the Chinese learners are not accustomed to inflectional changes. When asked about the rules, the learners seem clear about them. But in actual use, some learners make mistakes now and then. Only some good learners can recognize and correct such mistakes. So these are errors of competence and they are not slips of pen at all.

2. Word class errors and interlingual transfer

To our surprise, such words as "speak" and "choose" and their corresponding noun form "speech" and "choice" should be easy and clear to even beginners, let alone intermediate learners and advanced learners like college students and English majors. But such kinds of errors do appear in the test. The words "worried" and "depend" are not new to college students at all, but still errors occur when they use them. The "hesitate" is not a new word to most of the students, but they just know the meaning of the word and are not sure about its derivational forms and their usage. Sentences 22-24 show that some students do not know the adjective form of "hesitate" is "hesitant" instead of "hesitated". Such kinds of errors are mainly caused by interlingual transfer. Besides inflectional changes caused by number, tense and person discussed in the previous section, English words have derivational changes. For example, the verb "hesitate" can be changed into its corresponding adjective form "hesitant". Both the form and word class have changed. But its Chinese equivalent "犹豫" does not have such kind of derivational change. In the case of "选择", the Chinese word can be used as a noun or as a verb. But the English has two different forms—"choose" as the verb and "choice" as the noun. The Chinese learners, influenced by their mother tongue, tend to make errors concerning word class.

3. Grammar errors and interlingual / intralingual transfer

Grammatically wrong sentences contain overt errors. By means of changes in word form and word order, English achieves the communication purpose of making a statement or asking a question. The Chinese language turns to tone and/ or auxiliary words to express a statement or a question. The word order remains almost the same. This difference provides an explanation to the error in Sentence 26. However, such interlingual errors are not frequent among English majors. Sentence 27 shows that some students do not know "how to choose between two jobs" is not a sentence. Influenced by their mother tongue, the Chinese students tend to make such kind of errors. In Sentence 28, preposition "between" should be put after "choose"; its absence causes the trouble in meaning making. Influenced by the Chinese version "选择工作", the learner commits the error. Sentence 29 shows the student knows the rule that an interrogative sentence begins with the appropriate form of "do" or "be" but he/she misuses the word and it is an intralingual error.

4. Collocation errors and interlingual / intralingual transfer

Phrases are fixed expressions in one language. Foreign learners have no other choice but to use them as native speakers do. The phrases in examples 30-38 and sentences 39, 40 and 17 related in meaning with "a matter of time" make sense even to the native speakers, but they are unnatural and inacceptable to native speakers. These errors are resulted from interlingual transfer, for the literal translation of "时间问题" is "time problem" or "time question". Phrases 41-44 about the verb "inform" are seemingly correct but inappropriate to native speakers. So are the phrases in 45-48 about "hesitate" and "idea". These are grammatical collocations. Phrases 49-53 and sentences 54-58 contain errors of lexical collocations, which reflects the learners' ability to put what they have learned into use and at the same time shows they are not familiar with some fixed or conventional usages of words. These are called intralingual or developmental errors (Richards, 2001), which reflect the learners' learning process and the stage they are in. Lewis (1997) argues that many students tend to produce grammatically acceptable sentences that are unidiomatic and odd to native speakers due to the ignorance of collocation in language learning. Collocation can help students to bridge the gap between words and grammar, and reach higher level of proficiency.

5. Other errors and interlingual / intralingual transfer

Sentence 59 has a problem of meaning redundancy caused by the co-occurrence of the word "only" and the phrase "nothing but". Sentence 60 is wrong in diction. The words "fault" and "mistake" are synonyms but their denotations are different. The two errors reveal the learning process of approaching to the correct and appropriate expressions and therefore are intralingual errors. Sentences 3, 41, 42 contain a common error. The plural form "families" used in these sentences shows the direct influence of the first language, for the Chinese version "家人" is usually plural. Altogether 11 students (38% of the subjects) commit such an error, which reveals the problem that some Chinese learners stick to the Chinese thinking pattern in using English.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING

Since this study focuses on sentence translation, syntax and lexicon are supposed to be the main concern. The list shows only two errors (in Sentences 26 and 27) are related with syntax and the rest are about tense and vocabulary, which gives some pedagogical implications to college English leaning and teaching.

First, the long list of tense errors shows that the Chinese college students still have a long way to go in the process of English learning. With the regular inflectional rules for tense and person, the problems are not supposed to be great. However, errors related with these rules are not rare among the Chinese learners. Due to the strong influence of the mother tongue, such kinds of errors are automatic in some sense. In other words, interlanguage transfer is hard to avoid. However, interlanguage transfer is not completely harmful. Positive transfer facilitates language acquisition while

negative transfer results in errors and thus hinders language learning process. Making comparison and thinking critically will help to solve the problem.

Forming a habit of checking or proofreading and cultivating a critical eye are effective ways to avoid the negative transfer, which are beneficial to the students in the long run. The usual practice of doing translations is to ask students to hand in their homework and the teacher then makes corrections. It is a heavy load on the teacher's part and on the other hand it is inefficient in helping the students make progress. Some students just have a look and then put them aside or even throw them away. In most cases, they may make the same mistakes next time. For the teacher, it is meaningless to correct the same mistakes again and again. In my class, I sometimes ask students to do the translations on the blackboard. It turns out to be effective. Instead of correcting the students' translations directly, I ask the students to make comments and do the peer correction. Some errors are common and can work as a reminder to other students. Since every student has the chance to go to the blackboard and no one feels hurt when being corrected. Instead they are eager to write their sentences on the blackboard. In this way, the students get more and more involved in the exercise and gradually form the habit of reading critically. It outweighs the traditional practice in efficiency in language teaching and learning, for it has effectively aroused students' interest and cultivated their critical thinking.

Second, errors related with words show that vocabulary learning involves a lot. Knowing a word means knowing its occurrence probability and the associated words, the constraints of function and situation on word choice, its syntactic behavior, the structural and grammatical properties of a word, its word-formation rules, the network of associations with other words, the semantic value and the associated meanings (Richards, 2001). Besides, Woolard (2000) argues that learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words—it is in most cases learning familiar words in new combination. In teaching, students should be reminded that just remembering its conceptual meaning is far from the real mastery of a word. The word class and derivations are necessary to enlarge one's vocabulary. Then the word usage is the core. Besides conceptual meaning, one should also be familiar with five associative meanings—connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning and collocative meaning (Leech, 1981), that is, how to use the word in a specific context. It is impossible on the part of the teacher to introduce all the usages when a new word appears and it is also impossible for students to remember them all at once. Practice is a must-do in language learning, in which errors and mistakes will happen and then get corrected. Gradually the correct language use will be internalized.

An effective way of teaching vocabulary is to implant the correct belief about vocabulary leaning in students and encourage them to read more and think more. In teaching, the teacher should work as an instructor and facilitator, demonstrating how to learn a word in sentences or passages, answering students' questions about the possible usage of the word, and helping students cultivate a learning habit which will be beneficial in the long run, for it is impossible for a teacher to tell everything to the students and language learning is autonomous. Helping students develop learning autonomy is more important than just imparting details of language use.

Third, to be native-like is the pinnacle of language learning. Making one's language correct is the basic requirement. Comparatively speaking, it is easier to recognize and avoid overt errors while covert errors can only recognized by advanced learners and native speakers. Languages learners have no other choice but to remember the fixed phrases and expressions, to appreciate and accept the conventional expressions and put them into their own practice. Observant and sensitive learners may find the hidden social and cultural treasures in the habitual language use, and learns more quickly. In other words, their language learning is accelerated.

Making one's language natural, idiomatic and native-like is demanding. The first step is to form the consciousness that the seemingly correct language may be not acceptable or suitable in the eyes of native speakers. The second is to become a careful language reader and user. Based on the correct understanding of a sentence or passage, learner should have a close study of the language and form a habit of thinking carefully. The third is to remember and imitate the correct, idiomatic and beautiful language, which can be internalized through repetitions. Ultimately, the frequent imitation and practice makes one' language correct and idiomatic.

V. CONCLUSION

This is a study of 29 English majors' performance in sentence translation from Chinese to English. Based on the analysis of the errors identified, the author puts forward some suggestion for teachers and students and emphasizes the importance of developing learners' autonomy and critical thinking. Small-scale as it is, the study is empirical and representative; to some extent it reflects the general picture of English teaching and learning in China. More important of all, it gives some practical and manageable guidance to English teaching and learning which are universally applicable. It is hoped that both teachers and students will benefit from this empirical study.

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