

# Analysis on Lexical Errors in Writings of Mongolian English Majors

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**Abstract**—The purpose of the study is to examine types of lexical errors committed by EFL Mongolian learners in their writing. A total of 525 errors in 62 English writings by Mongolian English majors were identified and analyzed. Supplementary information is also collected by means of questionnaire and interviews for more comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting the errors. Possible solutions are thus provided for the Mongolian learners to cope with particular difficulties in their writings in terms of lexical choice.

**Index Terms**—English writing, error analysis, lexical errors, Mongolian English majors

## I. INTRODUCTION

Errors are common in foreign language learning process, which embodies the development of learners' interlanguage (Selinker, 1972). Error analysis, proposed and practiced in the 1960s, was explained by Corder (1981) as theoretically and practically applicable for it not only can indicate language learning process of the learners, but also can serve as guidance for teachers to take effective measures in correcting errors made by the learners. So error analysis has proved to be an effective way of teaching (Gui, 2000).

According to *National English Teaching Curriculum of Higher Education* in China, listening, speaking, reading and writing ability are cardinal language competence for English majors, writing ability being the most comprehensive one and a reflection of the learners' overall language competence. Writing involves word choice, i.e., vocabulary, together with phonetics and grammar being three fundamental elements in a language, has proved to be crucial since words make communication possible (Hatch & Brown, 2001). Therefore, vocabulary, or word choice in writing is a major symbol representing the learner's language development and competence. Researches concerning vocabulary in writing by way of Error Analysis have long been widely conducted, which focus on collocation errors in Chinese learners' writings (Chen, 2002), comparative analysis among Chinese and Korea learners (Cui & Tae-Ja, 2013), etc. He (2009) and Luo (2010) conducted a corpus-based study on lexical errors made by Chinese non-English majors and English majors separately.

The present study attempts to make an error analysis on lexical errors committed by EFL Mongolian English majors in their writing.

As for the participants in the study, it is known that China is featured as a multi-nationality country of 56 nationalities, with Han Nationality being the most populous one and other 55 ethnic groups. Of the 55 ethnic groups in China, the Mongolian ethnic group is among the top ten in terms of population (about 5,813,900, according to the national population census in 2000), among which 32.7% of the population live in towns and cities and 67.3% in countryside. Mongolian learners of English (especially English majors) act as a special group of talents for the whole country and others such as Mongolia since they can speak Mongolian, Chinese and English (or Japanese), which enriches manpower resources in international trade and tourism in minority regions. So in terms of their living environment and important role in the population, their education, especially English teaching and learning deserve particular attention. As for English learning, compared with students of Han nationality, they have more difficulties and some special characteristics in English learning, as well as a somewhat complex learning process since their mother tongue--Mongolian, second language--Han Chinese, English, and another foreign language (Russian, Japanese or French as another compulsory course for English majors) accompany their English learning.

The focus of the study is to find out the lexical errors in the compositions written by Mongolian English majors. Through the analysis of the errors, the study aims to find out the linguistic features of their writing and provide some suggestions on curriculum and teaching methodology for Mongolian learners of English.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### A. Research Questions

1. What are major types of lexical errors in Mongolian EFL learners' writing?
2. What are particular difficulties that Mongolian EFL learners encounter in their writing in terms of lexical choice?
3. What are possible solutions to the difficulties?

### B. Participants

Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region holds majority of Mongolian ethnic population (about 4,170,000), so Mongolian English learners here form a group that can be representative in their English learning process. An intact class of 31 Mongolian English majors (29 females and 2 males) is the subjects of the present study who are now studying in Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities. They all speak Mongolian, and Chinese which is learned for communication from primary school, and are assigned as an intact Mongolian class in the university. It will take them 5 years to get BA degree as English majors (4 years for Han learners). One more year is required because of their poor English level in the entrance examination: they begin to learn English in the middle school with some do after entering the university, and the English score is just a reference in the entrance examination which results in little attention on English learning before they are enrolled in higher education; score of 60 is set as the entrance mark for ethnic English majors (100 for Han learners) in the remote areas (the full score is 150). So the former three years are considered as elementary with courses different from Han students, the other two years with same courses with Han counterparts.

### C. Instruments: Writing Assignments, Questionnaire and Interviews Are Involved in This Study

Samples of English writing used for error analysis were collected longitudinally from this intact class: for their second semester (one year consists of two semesters) of the third year (June, 2014), they took part in the final exam of the writing course, with the essay writing entitled “*Credit Cards on the Campus*” (word limit: 120-150), and six months later, for their first term of the fourth year (Dec, 2014), they took part in the final exam of the writing course, with the essay writing entitled “*Hunting Jobs on the Internet*” (Word limit: 150-200). The genre of the two writings chosen is argumentative with an aim to elicit more various expressions to express the learners’ ideas. Moreover, the present study in which the writings are collected from two consecutive semesters is expected to have a more comprehensive view at the learning process of the Mongolian English majors in terms of lexical choice.

A questionnaire concerning vocabulary learning strategies was conducted among this intact class in June, 2014.

An interview concerning word-choice in English writing with 6 random-selected students in the intact class was carried out in Dec, 2014. And another interview with 3 teachers of writing courses was also conducted for qualitative analysis on the lexical errors in Mongolian English majors’ writings.

### D. Data Collection and Data Analysis

Altogether 62 English writing papers were collected respectively after the exams. First, the researcher and two teachers of the writing course identified the errors from a macro level, which involves errors concerning spelling, grammar and semantics, in order to guarantee a comprehensive validity of the errors to be studied. The present study focuses on the errors from the lexical level, so for the second step, the researcher, together with the two teachers and another teacher of Mongolian nationality who is responsible for intensive reading course of the Mongolian class, worked together to identify and analyze the specific lexical errors in the writings. The dictionary *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* is taken as a reference in identifying the errors. The oral English teacher from America also provided constructive suggestions concerning proper word choice in the collected writings. The same error occurring in the same composition more than once is counted as one.

Classification of lexical errors is made according to James’ (2001) theory in Error Analysis, which includes formal errors and semantic errors. In semantic errors, collocation ones gain priority for analysis. And in the study it was found that Mongolian learners tended to commit some errors concerning part of speech. So mix-up of part of speech is taken into account and analyzed. So the errors for analysis in this study are as shown in table 1.

TABLE 1  
CLASSIFICATION OF ERRORS

Lexical errors	Formal errors	Formal misselection	But I *few a bit differently. (feel)
		misformation	In *spide (spite) of
		distortion	*unconvenient/inconvenient)
	Collocation errors	*high (advanced) technology; To *expose (leak or disclose) your private information	*habbit (habit); *restrant (restaurant)
Mix-up of part of speech	Why do we *choice (chose) to use the credit card? To pursue popular thing *blind (blindly)		

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study mainly covers lexical errors in terms of formal errors, collocation errors and mix-up of part of speech. A total of 525 errors in 62 English writings by Mongolian English majors were identified. The major types of lexical errors are listed in Table 1. As is shown in Table 1, formal error occurrence accounted for 51% (268), collocation errors 20% (105) and mix-up of part of speech 29% (152).

### A. Formal Errors

In this study, there are 268 formal errors including formal misselection (140), misformation (56) and distortion (72).

### Formal misselection:

Formal misselection refers to words mistakenly selected between word form and pronunciation close to the word. The followings are extracted from the writings by Mongolian English majors:

suffix type: emergence/emergency; favorable/favorite; electric/electrical

prefixing type: \*(un)appropriate/(in)appropriate; \*(un)loyal/(dis)loyal;

Vowel-based type: \*purchase /purchase; \*servey /survey); \*convinience /convenience; \*prevelant/prevalent; phenominon/phenomenon; secrit /secret; numourous/numerous;

Consonant-based type: \*fathion (fashion); \*conserned (concerned); In \*spide (spite) of

The suffix type of errors resulted from poor distinction of some synonyms. For example, in the sentence

*Students can use credit cards when in \*emergence.*

The student wanted to express that in some emergent occasions, people without enough cash at hand may use credit cards to help with an urgent need of money. But he failed to distinguish the slight spelling difference in *emergency* and *emergence* (which actually means emersion or growth).

As for the prefixing type of errors, it also can be attributed to the students' poor command of the negative prefixes. Some of them tended to overgeneralize the rules of adding negative prefixes to get antonyms. For example, words like *inaccurate*, *inexpensive*, *incorrect* are right, but the rule can not be applied to words like \**inhonorable*, \**infinished*, and so on. This kind of errors are also reflected in the course of lexicology. The researcher is responsible for this course in Mongolian classes, so in the classroom, students wrote down the rules about negative prefixes, and could remember very well examples presented by the teacher. However, in the exam paper, they committed similar errors as those in their writings in applying the rules. Moreover, there are only suffixes in Mongolian language, so prefixes as something new for Mongolian in learning a language press for more time and practice.

In terms of vowels, Mongolian and English have distinctive features. There are three aspects in the vowels of Mongolian language: (negative, positive, neutral), and form rather fixed combinations (negative vowels with negative phonetic symbols or neutral ones, positive with positive or neutral ones, etc.). While in English, various phonetic combinations with vowels may represent the same pronunciation or vice versa. Therefore, the flexibility and complexity of English phonetics may be one of the difficulties encountered by Mongolian learners. It can be proved in the interview, in which the Mongolian interviewees mentioned that they were familiar with the pronunciation of some words but failed to spell them correctly since it was easy to be at a loss when several letter combinations represented a single syllable.

Such is the case for consonants. There are 18 consonants in Mongolian language, which are characterized not by voiced or voiceless, but by aspirated or unaspirated. In this aspect, words like \**pursude*/*pursuit*, \**inspide*/*inspite* are typical examples appearing in Mongolian learners' writings. On the other hand, words like \**fathion* /*fashion*; \**conserned*/*concerned* may result from the students' carelessness. Moreover, according to Wu (2003), the most frequently used consonants exclusive to English embedded in the underlined letters like *five*, *very*, *zone*, *usually*, *thank*, *that* are the major difficulties for Mongolian students. Therefore, together with the difficulties and complexity of English phonetics, students tended to misspell words if they failed to pronounce the word correctly.

### Misformation:

Misformation refers to words that don't exist in the target language, which either are the results influenced by the mother tongue or are coined by the learners from the sources of the target language. In this study, 56 misformation errors are identified, including 1 borrowings, 23 coinages and 32 calques.

Borrowing: People with a lot of credit cards can be called \**cardMin*;

The example shows that lacking of proper noun may enable Mongolian learners to resort to Chinese colloquial expression “卡民” (which means a growing number of people tend to hold credit cards for their daily deals and business) , and create the word from the sources of the target language and L2, but not from their mother tongue. This example reflects a typical English learning way employed by Mongolian students. The word consists of two parts, *card* is an English word, and *Min* is Chinese pinyin meaning *people*. Mongolian learners are good at employing Chinese pinyin to help them in learning English. For instance, in the group discussion, they often speak Mongolian when they want to clarify their points, but as for written language, they hardly use their mother tongue. The researcher has noticed that some of the students write pinyin under a new word to remember the meaning of it if they can not remember the proper Chinese equivalent. So in the interview, the Mongolian students were asked about the impact of Mongolian and Chinese on their English learning. They mentioned that it would be easy and fast to solve some task problems if they speak Mongolian among classmates. On the other hand, they would speak Chinese when they communicate with their teachers since most of the teachers are of Han nationality. And some of them tend to remain silent or seldom communicate with teachers because of their poor Chinese and lack of confidence. For written English, they turn to Chinese pinyin if they can not figure out proper English word since they know there are many examples of Chinese pinyin accepted in English such as *lama*, *guanxi*, etc. So it would be a “safe” way to be accepted by the teacher. The students in the interview also mentioned that this way would save time for they do not need to experience complex language transfer: English--Mongolian--Chinese. It shows that Mongolian learners are somewhat skillful at utilizing their mother tongue and L2, which actually indicates a special superiority in language learning.

Coinage means that the new word is tailored to the structure of the target language. Words like \**popularation*; \**phenomenence*; \**conventinal*; \**visition*; \**convients*; \**;*; *subjection*; \**explem*; \**advancable* are some of the examples.

In the examples, there are some invented words that may result in confusion, such as \*sujection, \*explem, \*analyct. But for most of the cases, Mongolian learners tend to create some words which are not accepted in the target language according to some rules, such as suffixes (\*popularation; \*phenomenence; \*visition; \*advancable;). The above data shows that it is easy for Mongolian learners to master basic rules in English learning, but as for language application, they tend to overgeneralize the rules. According to the researcher's classroom observation, most of the Mongolian students were very active in taking down the rules or important language points and also they could recall the important information as required. But what they lack reflected from their writings is more practice based on the rules.

Calques are also called loan translation. The followings are instances extracted from the Mongolian learners' writings:

- secret number (password);
- auto-machine (ATM);
- finance mind (commercially-mind people);
- eat our words (break up one's promise);
- mental job (mental work or brain work);
- civil official exam (civil service examination);
- stretch their hands to the parents for the money (ask their parents for money);
- sweep card (to use credit cards);
- trust degree (credit);
- the newest and nearest messages (latest messages);
- A \*sudden condition (critical or emergent)

All the examples are literally translated from the sources of the Mongolian's L2--Chinese. In Chinese, we say “密码” (*password* in English), the Mongolian learner translated the word according to what he/she has learned from the target language: *secret* for “秘密的” and *number* for “码(数字)”. So *secret number* replaced the correct expression *password*. For another example, when we want to express that someone didn't do as he has promised, we say “食言”. Here “食” means “to eat” in Chinese. So the Mongolian learner wanted to express the same meaning, he/she failed to find the correct expression “break up one's promise” but translated the expression as “eat one's words” in Chinese way.

The examples indicate that Mongolian learners tend to make literal translation based on their L2-Chinese in English writings, from which we can see the great impact of Chinese on their English learning. Due to the conditions they meet: textbooks written in English and Chinese, teachers of Han nationality, test paper in English and Chinese and so on, they are exposed for most of the time to Chinese. Just as mentioned above, most of them try to remember the meaning of new words with Chinese explanation or pinyin. When it comes to expressing their ideas, they first search their mind for Chinese explanation or equivalent words, and then they try to figure out which English word can be close enough to express their intended meaning. This Chinese to English process is going through their writing.

#### **Distortion:**

Distortion refers to forms non-existent in the target language, which results from misapplication of one or more of the processing operations. Examples of them are:

- omission: rest(au)rant; disadvan(ta)ges; undou(b)tedly; alway(s); seriou(s)ly; effic(i)ent; opportun(i)ty;
- overinclusion: a \*numbers (number) of; a \*lots (lot) of; \*habbit (habit); for \*examples; in regulated \*times (time);
- detaily (in detail); choosen (chosen); effectivelly (effectively); furture (future); compellicated (complicated);
- misordering: \*recieve\receive; \*available/available; brust/burst; morden/modern; nervous/noverus;
- blending: \*troblem (trouble+problem)

Such kind of errors are very common in Mongolian learners' writings. Even they have experienced three years' intensive training as English majors, still their English level is not so optimistic. One of the reasons is that their English score was ranged from 60-80 (the full mark is 120) when they were enrolled in the university. According to the preferential policy for students from ethnic groups in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, they are allowed to be enrolled with a lower mark compared with Han students (60 vs. 100). They were educated as English beginners with textbooks and other learning materials of basic background. In the learning process, vocabulary is a major difficulty since they encounter a great burden of enlarging their vocabulary in the first three years since for the subsequent two years they will take the same courses with their Han counterparts. According to the teaching experience of the researcher, the Mongolia students perform well in exercises such as multiple choice, blank filling, etc, but have difficulties in oral work or writing tasks, which results from their poor lexical resources. According to the questionnaire concerning vocabulary learning strategies, Mongolian students hold the firm belief that rehearsal practice of words is monotonous and less useful and they seldom remember words by writing letter by letter. The above errors were probably influenced by their poor English level and vocabulary learning beliefs as well as strategy preference.

#### **B. Collocation Errors**

Collocation refers to two or more words that co-occur more often, which sound natural in the native language. Collocation on lexical level mainly involves word choice.

- Students have no \*origin of money (source of income).
- \*Take (withdraw cash) money from the auto-machine.
- \*Electrical products (electronic products)

To \*transport money (transfer of account).

A \*long time work (a stable work)

A \*dreamful job (a dream job)

The data indicates the trace of literal translation from Chinese, which also shows the great impact of Mongolian learners' L2--Chinese on their English learning. For most of the time, Mongolian learners tend to find equivalents in Chinese to express their ideas in English. Word equivalents among Chinese and English may have similar denotative meaning but differ in connotative meaning, which is realized in certain collocation and context. Because of Mongolian learners' limited English learning time, most of them still stay at the level of enlarging vocabulary, without too much practice on distinguishing the slight differences among synonyms. In the interview they also mentioned it was easy for them to feel confused on word choice when there are several words with the same meaning but apply for different collocation and contexts. The reason can be found in the questionnaire, which shows that they are aware of the importance of enlarging vocabulary and try their best to remember as more as possible. But strategies such as synonym/antonym association were seldom adopted. According to the teachers' experience, in the learning process, most of the Mongolian students are careful enough to take notes in vocabulary learning, such as explanation and usage. They also write down the synonyms or antonyms as the teacher explains or requires, but they seldom make self-initiative efforts in adding more information to a wider usage of the words, thus failing to produce native-like output.

On the other hand, this kind of errors may also be ascribed to the characteristic of both Chinese and Mongolian since in both of them, one word may have different meanings. For example, in English we say "to see a film, watch a movie, read a book, look at that boy", but we use one word "看" to fill in the collocations. So set phrases and collocations pose great difficulty for the Mongolian students in the process of English learning.

### C. *Mix-up of Part of Speech*

Mix-up of part of speech mainly refers to the lexical errors that occur when the learner substitutes one word or expression for another from the other word class. In terms of lexical meaning, the substitute sounds accepted; but in terms of the requirement of part of speech, it is not correct.

According to the data in this study, errors concerning confusion of part of speech accounts for 29% of the total errors. Here are some examples:

It brings us great \*comfortable (comfort) and convenience.

We use the credit card for its \*convenient (convenience) and safety.

Why do we \*choice (chose) to use the credit card?

Bank count (account)

To pursue popular thing \*blind (blindly).

All these errors can be regarded as intralingual errors, which are caused by factors related to the target language, such as learners' incomplete application of rules (comfort), false concepts hypothesized when the learners don't fully comprehend a distinction in the target language (count), ignorance of the rule restriction or poor command of the word usage (choice, blind). According to the investigation on their vocabulary learning strategies, they seldom make use of grammatical structures to remember words, and for them, meaning gains priority to forms in dealing with English input and output. And in the interview, some of them also mentioned that they were poor at grammatical rules because they didn't have a systematic training on grammar in their high schools. When they were enrolled as English majors, they only had one grammar course of 40 hours lasting one semester. The limited time and practice apparently is not sufficient enough to draw their attention to grammatical rules in language output.

## IV. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

To sum up, the most frequently committed errors by Mongolian English majors are formal errors (51%), with mix-up of part of speech (29%) running the second place and collocation errors accounted for 20%. These errors come down to misspelling, grammar and misuse of words. And from the error analysis, it can be concluded that the major difficulties Mongolian English majors encounter come from the impact both of their mother tongue and L2-Chinese.

As for the impact of their mother tongue, unlike English, Mongolian only has suffixes, so prefixes appear as new to the Mongolian students. Particularly the complexity of negative prefixes pose difficulties for them, which is reflected in the classroom teaching. And in the interview, three of the students said that they were aware of the importance of prefixes in word-formation as Mongolian suffixes help them learn their mother tongue. Most of the prefixes were easy to grasp in forming new words but negative ones challenged them a lot. They were quite confused when so many prefixes (such as dis, de, im, il, in, etc) denoting the same meaning but have to be added to different situations. So in the teaching process, teachers on one hand should emphasize the positive transfer of Mongolian, motivating students to learn prefixes well as they learn suffixes in their mother tongue. On the other hand, differences and difficulties such as negative prefixes should be drawn to great attention and consolidated by more writing practice.

Another impact from Mongolian concerns phonetics. Different from English, there are three aspects in the vowels of Mongolian language: negative, positive, neutral, and they form rather fixed combinations (negative vowels with negative phonetic symbols or neutral ones, positive with positive or neutral ones, etc.). So when a single syllable is realized by different combinations of vowels in English, Mongolian students fail to spell the words correctly, which

poses another difficulty in their English learning. Meanwhile, there are more consonants in English (28) than in Mongolian (18) which is characterized by aspirated or unaspirated. So mispronunciation may lead to misspelling. Therefore, in the teaching process, distinct features of English pronunciation should be clarified at the first stage, and reinforced by more written tasks.

As for the impact of Chinese, because of great exposure to Chinese from textbooks, teachers and Han counterparts, Mongolian students committed some errors by literal translation of Chinese into English (collocation errors and calques in formal errors). Synonyms are another difficulty for them since English has so many set phrases and fixed expressions. According to Krashen's input and output theory, much exposure to the target language and much practice in the target language may achieve the goal of language acquisition (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). So occasions of English exposure should be offered and much practice on English reading and writing should be enhanced for Mongolian learners to get used to the native-like expressions and thinking way. Meanwhile, detailed semantic explanation of words and application practice in certain collocations are needed to improve Mongolian students' English writing.

Still there are some errors such as coinage reflecting the impact of English, which results from the learners' false hypotheses about the target language. It is very common for learners to build up hypotheses about the target language from their limited experience of it, and they will modify the hypotheses as learning proceeds, so the errors caused by false hypotheses may disappear in a natural way (Richards, 1974). Tolerance from teachers are of great importance in helping Mongolian learners release from particular anxiety and toward higher stage of writing practice.

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