Corpus-based Study on EFL Passive Errors

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李 睿 著

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Preface

Error analysis is crucial for foreign language research and teaching. The present study focuses on the passive constructions errors in the interlanguage of Chinese EFL learners, specifically under-used passive error, over-used passive error and malformed passive error.

Unlike the previous researches which are primarily conducted by experimental method, the present study is a corpus-based study of the errors committed by Chinese EFL learners on English passive construction. Based on data obtained from Chinese Learners English Corpus (CLEC) by computer and on the manual data-analysis, the present study puts forward the following research questions:

1. What is the overall presentation of the three types of passive construction errors committed by Chinese EFL learners?

2. What are the typical patterns of errors in terms of under-used, over-used and malformed passives characterized by Chinese EFL learners from the description of three types of passive errors?

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3. What might be the causes for these different types of errors committed by Chinese EFL learners?

The book consists of six chapters: Chapter One is a brief introduction of the significance of the current study and the research orientation. Chapter Two gives a general literature review related to the present study, including Interlanguage (IL), Error Analysis (EA), SLA studies on English passive construction, and Corpus Linguistics. Chapter Three demonstrates the theoretical framework for the present study. In addition, three types of passive construction errors we are to investigate will be introduced and the specific research questions are advanced. Chapter Four is devoted to the introductions of the research methods for the present study, which includes subject selection, data selection, and data classification. Besides, by data observation and data analysis this chapter presents the results of the study, which covers general and specific findings of the three types of passive construction errors made by Chinese EFL learners. Chapter Five focuses on the discussion of the findings from the results in the present study, which aims to explore the possible causes for the occurrence of these passive construction errors characterized by Chinese EFL learners. Finally, in Chapter Six, we present a conclusion of the present study, and in addition, pedagogical implications and limitations of the current study are proposed.

The major findings on the results are: 1) Under-used

passive error is prominent in the three types of passive errors committed by Chinese EFL learners; 2) Chinese EFL learners often make over-used passive errors; 3) the error of the malformed passive just take a small proportion in the three types of passive errors. And the main causes for the emergence of these errors are :1) the error of under-used passive construction is attributed to incomplete knowledge of the English verbs and the negative transfer of the native language; 2) the error of over-used passive is closely related with the confusion between the unaccusative structure and the passive construction, insufficient knowledge of verb classifications, and the ignorance of the rules and constrains of active-passive transformation; 3) the error of malformed passive construction is due to the different morphological features of English and Chinese passive constructions.

The present study is significant in a number of ways. First, the learning patterns shown in this study are reliable because they are generalizations based on the data obtained from a large-scale learner corpus. Second, pedagogical remedies proposed in the light of the patterns shown in corpus analysis are more effective because they present a realistic picture of how an English construction is represented and develops in the Chinese-speaking learners. It is believed that the findings in this study are helpful to our understanding of the mechanisms underlying

passive construction learning and to the teaching of the construction under investigation.

Li Rui

List of Abbreviations

CLEC	Chinese Learners English Corpus
CLS	Cambridge Language Survey
COBUILD	Collins Birmingham University International Language Database
EA	Error Analysis
EFL	English as the Foreign Language
ESP	English for Special Purpose
FL	Foreign Language
GB	Government-binding Theory
IL	Interlanguage
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
ICE	International Corpus of English
MT	Mother Tongue
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TL	Target Language

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Errors are unsuccessful bits of language (James, 2001:1). As common phenomena of language acquisition and learning, language errors have aroused the great interest and attention of language researchers. Consequently, the study of errors has long been conducted in the field of the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) with a view to uncovering the process of learning and exploring the causes for making errors in the course of a second /foreign language (L2/FL).

The present study is a corpus-based study of the errors committed by Chinese EFL learners on English passive construction. More specifically, based on data obtained from the data of Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC), the research focuses on three types of passive construction errors: over-used passive construction, under-used passive construction and malformed passive construction. The study aims to reveal the developmental pattern of the interlanguage of Chinese EFL learners reflected in the typical patterns of passive construction errors in terms of over-generalization, under-generalization and omission

characterized by Chinese EFL learners. The results from this study will hopefully shed some light on English language teaching.

1.1 Significance of the Present Study

Since committing errors is an inevitable part of language learning, the analysis of learners' errors will be significant and meaningful in uncovering the development of L2 learning. Corder noted that errors could be significant in three ways: 1) they provided the teacher with information about how much the learner had learnt, 2) they provided the researcher with evidence of how language was learnt, and 3) they served as devices by which the learner discovered the rules of the target language (Ellis, 1999a:48).

Even though a large number of studies on errors have been conducted, there are still many types of errors that haven't been touched upon. In addition, in most studies of errors, experiments are conducted to analyze small-sample errors committed by L2 learners. This kind of approach is subject to a number of limitations:

Firstly, it's very difficult to find proper participants because not all second language learners are willing to participate in the experiments. If they are forced to get involved in the experiments, they may take resistant attitudes; if they are not interested in the tests, they may take inactive attitudes. All these negative factors will influence the performance of the experiments and the

related results.

Secondly, the research method may be subjective. All the tests are designed and arranged by the researchers themselves, and therefore, some subjective factors may be unavoidable.

Thirdly, undertaking experiments is very time-consuming. It may take the researchers a lot of time to design the experiments, conduct the specific procedures and collect the results.

It is because of the limitations of experimentation mentioned that corpus approach is adopted in the present study. As a new research method, corpus approach has many advantages over the traditional experimental studies:

1) It is empirical, analyzing the actual patterns of use in natural texts.

2) It utilizes a large and principled collection of natural texts, known as a "corpus", as the basis for analysis.

3) It makes extensive use of computers for analysis, using both automatic and interactive techniques.

4) It depends on both quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques.

(Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 2000:4)

The advantages of the corpus-based approach come from the use of computers. Computers make it possible to identify and analyze complex patterns of language use, allowing the

storage and analysis of a larger database of natural language than could be dealt with by hand. Furthermore, computers provide consistent, reliable analyses. Computers can also be used interactively, allowing the human analysis to make difficult linguistic judgments while the computer takes care of record-keeping. In particular, a corpus-based approach allows researchers to identify and analyze complex "association patterns": the systematic ways in which linguistic features are used in association with other linguistic and non-linguistic features (Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 2000: 5).

The advantages of corpus approach enable us to make a very detailed study of the three types of passive construction errors, specifically over-used passive construction, under-used passive construction and malformed passive construction, committed by Chinese EFL learners.

Moreover, the present study attempts to propose some feasible remedies in L2 teaching. By analyzing the typical patterns of passive construction errors characterized by Chinese EFL learners, the study tries to explore the causes for the emergence of these errors. And the study mainly attributes these errors to the first language (L1) transfer (negative transfer) and insufficient knowledge of target language (TL). We hope the findings in the study will be a great help for English language teaching.

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