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A Study on the Use of Locative Prepositions by Chinese English Majors in English Writing

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Abstract: This study aims to examine 40 Chinese English majors' use of locative prepositions in English writing. The students were randomly selected from the English department of a private university in Fujian, China. They were first informed of the purpose of the study, followed by being required to participate in an English writing activity. Through the analysis of the collected 40 writing samples, the researchers of the study discovered that the prepositions "on", "in" and "by" are the most frequently used in the participants' writing; the prepositions "above", "under" and "among" are the least frequently used. The locative preposition "in" has the highest frequency of use and also has the highest error frequency. Moreover, the error types that occur in the 40 Chinese college students' use of prepositions (including locative prepositions) in English writing mainly include preposition redundancy, preposition omission, and misuse of prepositions.

Keywords: *English writing; error types; locative; prepositions.*

1. Introduction

English prepositions are defined as auxiliary words or function words in traditional linguistics. Compared with notional words, the number of prepositions is relatively less. Most of the research on prepositions in academia focuses on collocation with notional words. However, with the rise of cognitive semantics, locative prepositions have attracted more and more attention from academic circles. The basic purpose of cognitive semantics is to explain the spatial basis formed by human concepts through language (Zhou, 2014). Therefore, locative prepositions, which are used to express the relationship between language and spatial concepts, have naturally become a hot research topic in cognitive semantics. The authors of this study find that Chinese college students use prepositions frequently in English writing, especially locative prepositions, and their usage is more complicated. Even for college students majoring in English, prepositions are also a difficult concept in learning English. The wrong use of prepositions in writing occurs from time to time. Prepositions, according to their functions, can be divided into time prepositions, locative prepositions, mode prepositions, reason prepositions, number prepositions and other prepositions. Due to the wide range of prepositions and their flexible usage, this paper, with English majors as the research participants, aims to only explore the use of locative prepositions in college English writing.

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Prepositions are words used to express the relationship between words and sentences. There are many types of prepositions such as time prepositions, mode prepositions, and locative prepositions. Prepositions in English generally begin with the concept of location, then the concept of time, and then various abstract concepts (He, 2010). Locative prepositions are a kind of intermediate grammar of English disciplines, which refer to the direction and position of things, such as “in”, “behind”, “down”, and so on. Some of the locative prepositions have similar meanings and are difficult to distinguish in usage. For example, “on”, “over”, and “above” all have similar meaning, but they have different implications. As long as we find a method that suits us to learn these prepositions, we can easily master the usage of these three prepositions, so that we can master the usage of all locative prepositions (Shen, 2016). Spatial prepositional phrases like in my soup, near a guest house, over the key slot, and behind the line can also be taken to correspond to regions in a conceptual space, physical space in this case (Zwarts & Gärdenfors, 2016). Therefore, this paper mainly focuses on common locative prepositions like the ones mentioned above.

In recent years, many scholars have conducted in-depth and comprehensive research on locative prepositions from various aspects and angles. Through reviewing the literature of past research studies on prepositions, the authors of this study found that most of these studies are primarily about various aspects of the functions of locative prepositions, as well as the research on the use of locative prepositions by middle and high school students. Few research conducted from the perspective of the use of locative prepositions by college students in English writing. From these studies on English locative prepositions in academia, many of the research results have guiding significance in the acquisition and use of locative prepositions.

Bian (2020) believes that the learning practice of orientation prepositions based on spatial continuum discourse strategy is an efficient and low-cost grammar learning activity. In the study and understanding of locative prepositions, application practice, transfer innovation, and the interpretation and construction of the spatial continuum of locative prepositions, students have formed systematic constructive grammatical knowledge and skills related to the target grammatical items of locative prepositions. He (2010) puts forward that the metaphorical meaning of locative prepositions should be emphasized in teaching, pointing out the prototype meaning behind these extended meanings, so as to help students establish the connection between metaphorical meaning and prototype meaning, so that they can have a complete and vivid understanding of the meaning of locative prepositions.

Since the end of the 1950s, many language researchers at home and abroad have shown a great interest in analyzing the mistakes made by students in the process of learning a second language. Among various research methods, it is generally believed that “Contrastive Analysis” and “Error Analysis” are more creative and practical in explaining students’ errors. The theory of “Contrastive Analysis” believes that language acquisition is a process of habit formation, that is, the chain of stimulus-reaction-reinforcement. The errors that students make in the process of learning a second language mainly come from the interference of their native language habits. In order to prevent errors from occurring, teachers must use systematic bilingual comparisons to enable students to have a clearer understanding of the differences between the native language and the target language, and select appropriate textbooks and adopt effective teaching methods to eliminate mother tongue interference as much as possible so that mistakes can be prevented (James, 1998). The theory of “Error Analysis” holds that errors are a natural phenomenon in the process of language learning, and we should not hate them because they can guide us to learn and to make progress. We should use the regular pattern of the error to guide English teaching and learning. Interlanguage theory has discovered the independence, dynamic and systematic characteristics of the target language system, which makes up for the shortcomings of error analysis theory and provides more information for language learners to make progress (Li, 2016). In addition, Richards (1971) has examined the mistakes made by learners of different backgrounds and gave examples of different types of mistakes related to locative prepositions and prepositional phrases.

In 2000, scholars Jarvis and Odlin investigated the linguistic structure of the mother tongue and the target language and the role of morphemes representing the locative relationship in the mother tongue on preposition learning. Their survey of 70 Swedish and 140 Finnish English learners showed that the morphemes that express the

locative relationship in their mother tongues do indeed migrate. In addition, the commonalities and differences in language structure and semantics between the mother tongue and the target language would lead to positive transfer and negative transfer respectively (Ma, 2007). It has been demonstrated that object-specific function effects play an important part in the construction of models. This is the case, not only with “in”, but also with other prepositions, as has been suggested with the case of “over” and “beside” (Coventry, Carmichael, & Carrod, 1994).

Based on these research studies, this paper makes an empirical study on the use of locative prepositions by English majors in China. This paper chooses English writing as a test approach, which can truly reflect students' comprehensive English learning ability. Through these compositions, it can be clearly known what locative prepositions the students use most and what common mistakes they usually make when using locative prepositions in English writing. On the basis of previous research of other scholars, this paper mainly studies the usage and problems of locative prepositions by Chinese English majors in their writings in the hope that the results can enrich the relevant theoretical research of (locative) prepositions and provide a reference for college English teachers' teaching.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The researchers of this study randomly selected 40 sophomores and juniors who majored in English in a private university in China as the research participants. Half of these (20) college students were from Class 5 of Grade 18, and the other half (20) were from Class 1 of Grade 19. They were all required to participate in an English writing activity. The selected participants had studied English in China for about 10 years and have basic English knowledge and writing skills. They had never studied abroad or had been raised in an English-speaking environment. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22.

2.2. Instrument

A writing assignment was each given to the 20 English majors of the two grades. The topic the Grade 18 students received was “Online Education”, and the one the Grade 19 students received was “My Hometown”. All the students were required to write no less than 200 English words. The time for them to complete the task was 1.5 hour. The writing activity was conducted on a class basis.

2.3. Procedure

The study proceeded in the following steps. First of all, the researchers of this study randomly selected 40 English majors from two grades (20 from Class 5 of Grade 18, and 20 from Class 1 of Grade 19) from the Department of English at a private university in Fujian, China. Then, the 40 participants were all informed of the purpose of the study. Next, on a class basis, different writing topics were given to the students of the two grades. Students from Class 5 of Grade 18 were asked to write an English composition on “Online Education”; students from Class 1 of Grade 19 were required to write on “My Hometown”. The time for the students to finish the writing activity was 1.5 hours. After all the students completed their writing, the researchers collected their works and made sure that a total of 40 writing samples were gathered. Finally, the researchers started to analyze the content of the 40 writings, mainly focusing on the participants' use of locative prepositions as well as the problems/errors they had/made when using the prepositions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The use of locative prepositions in college students' English writing

Through the research and analysis of the students' writing results, the following results can be obtained.

Usage frequency of locative prepositions

A total of 40 students from two randomly sampled classes use a large number of locative prepositions in their composition. Among these writings, the prepositions “on”, “in” and “by” are used the most frequently and almost all students use the preposition “in”. According to the statistics, among the 40 students, 38 students use the preposition “in”, 18 students use the preposition “on”, and 16 students use the preposition “by”. However, the prepositions “above”, “under” and “among” are the least frequently used. Only one of the 40 students uses the prepositions “above” and “under”, and two students use “among”. The other prepositions “at”, “between”, “behind” and “in front of” are also not frequently used, ranging from 3 to 6 times. It can be seen in Table 1.

As can be seen from Table 1, because the topic of their composition is “My hometown”, the usage frequency of locative prepositions of Grade 19 students is obviously higher than that of Grade 18 students whose writing topic is about “Online Education”. Therefore, when there are many words indicating location in the writing, the locative prepositions are used more frequently.

Table (1): Usage Frequency of Locative Prepositions by Students in Grade 18 and Grade 19

| Serial number | Locative prepositions | Usage frequency | | Example sentence |
|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------|----------|--|
| | | Grade 18 | Grade 19 | |
| 1 | in | 15 | 23 | Hainan is my hometown, which lies in the south of China. |
| 2 | on | 7 | 11 | Besides, you can drink coconuts while walking on the beach. |
| 3 | by | 9 | 7 | My hometown is Beihai, Guangxi, living by the sea. |
| 4 | at | 2 | 4 | You can see a fish at the bottom of the lake. |
| 5 | above | 0 | 1 | There is a bridge above the river. |
| 6 | between | 2 | 1 | Taichung is a big city between Taipei and Tainan. |
| 7 | under | 0 | 1 | Students in the classroom is under the supervision of the teacher, so it is easier to focus on learning. |
| 8 | behind | 0 | 3 | There are many trees behind my house. |
| 9 | among | 0 | 2 | My hometown lies among the mountains. |
| 10 | in front of | 2 | 3 | There's a bus stop in front of the house. |

Usage frequency and error frequency of locative prepositions

In these students' compositions, most of the uses of locative prepositions are correct. However, inevitably, there still exist some common mistakes in their writings. The error rate of the preposition “in” is as high as 34%, among which 13% are sophomores and 21% are juniors; the error rate of the preposition “on” is 28%, among which 11% are sophomores and 18% are juniors. The preposition “by” is used more frequently than other locative prepositions (like “at”, “above”, “between” etc.). The error rate of “by” is only 6%, but the error rate of other locative prepositions is almost zero (See Table 2).

It can be seen from Table 2 that the locative preposition “in” has the highest frequency of use and also has the highest error frequency. Students in Grade 19 have a higher error frequency than students in Grade 18 in the use of locative prepositions. In addition, the prepositions “above”, “between”, “among”, “under” and “behind” only appear 1 to 5 times, basically without error.

Table (2): Usage and Error Frequency of Locative Prepositions in Grade 18 and Grade 19

| Locative prepositions | | in | on | by | at | above | between | under | behind | among | in front of |
|-----------------------|----------|----|----|----|----|-------|---------|-------|--------|-------|-------------|
| Error times | Grade 18 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Grade 19 | 8 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total times | | 38 | 18 | 16 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Percentage (%) | Grade 18 | 13 | 11 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Grade 19 | 21 | 17 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 20 |

Error types of locative prepositions

The common mistakes made by the 40 Chinese English majors in the use of prepositions including locative prepositions in English writing mainly include the following situations:

1. Preposition redundancy

From the analysis of the 40 writing assignments, it can be found that the Chinese college students often use prepositions where they do not need to be used. For example,

- It takes much convenience that we can use laptop or phone to study in anywhere and anytime.
- It is lots of fun for practicing out in the playground with my classmates.

2. Preposition omission

Due to negligence or too long sentences, the participants often have the problem of missing prepositions. For example,

- It is said that online learning deprives students (of) some of the benefits of being in the classroom.
- Regardless of these concerns, online education has become an increasingly important part (of) tertiary education.

3. Misuse of a preposition

Due to the Chinese English learners' lack of sufficient knowledge of certain prepositions, there are also cases of misuse of prepositions. For example,

- Therefore, we have more time with after-school activities.
- After five years away in my hometown, I find that the neighborhood which I used to live in has changed a lot.

From the results of this study, it can be found that the English majors in the second and third years have not made significant progress in their overall level of use of locative prepositions. Although locative prepositions are used frequently in their writing, some common mistakes still appear. This reflects that the current Chinese college students' knowledge of locative prepositions is not thorough and comprehensive enough.

3.2. Factors affecting the use of locative prepositions

Nowadays, non-native English learners are facing great pressure to write. Those who write in English often meet difficulty in using prepositions, especially in using prepositions expressing time and location. There are many reasons behind this phenomenon (Saravanan, 2014). Many factors affect non-native English speakers' acquisition of locative prepositions, including teachers and teaching materials, interference and influence of mother tongue, the difficulty of learning tasks, students' intelligence and learning styles, and so on (Ruan, 1987). The errors exposed by students in the process of learning locative prepositions are various, and the reasons for the errors are also various, such as lack of motivation, improper learning style, poor cognitive ability, defective teaching materials, improper teaching methods, and so on. Through the analysis of the writing contents of 40 college students and the research of related past literature, the authors of this study found that three main factors might have affected the use of locative prepositions by the Chinese college students, that is, the interference of the mother tongue, the educational level of the students and the different themes of writing, and the learning styles of the students.

4. Conclusions

Through the analysis of the collected 40 writing assignments, the researchers of the study found that:

- The prepositions “on”, “in” and “by” are used the most frequently in the participants’ writing; the prepositions “above”, “under” and “among” are the least frequently used.
- The locative preposition “in” has the highest frequency of use and also has the highest error frequency.
- The error types that appear in the 40 Chinese college students’ use of prepositions (including locative prepositions) in English writing mainly include preposition redundancy, preposition omission, and misuse of prepositions.

The results of the research might not be generalized to students of other universities in the same province or other provinces. Therefore, it is suggested that follow-up research can include more students or a greater variety of universities in different areas/provinces to expand the scope to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings.

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