

# Analysis on the Improper Use of Word in English Writing--A Case Study of English Major Students

**Chaokun Lin, Yu Xu, Wanjun Zhang**

*School of Foreign Languages of Yuxi Normal University, Yuxi Yunnan 653100, China*

**ABSTRACT.** *English majors are prone to be in a dilemma of choosing proper words while writing essays. Taking 78 essays of English majors in Yuxi Normal University as research subjects, this study analyzed the problems of improper words choosing among these essays (the problems of improper use of word in these essays are analyzed) from four aspects: correctness, appropriacy, conciseness and diversity. Finally, four corresponding solutions were put forward accordingly.*

**KEYWORDS:** *English writing; Improper use of word; Solutions*

## 1. Research Background

With remarkable progress in international communications and cooperation, the need for cultivating good English competence rises steadily at the same time. English major students have always been favored by their good command of the language. However, many of them are not fully capable of coping with these challenges.

Since 2016, both TEM 4 and TEM8 (Test for English Majors) have undergone changes dramatically to meet the needs of the trend in future. In that case, English writing never fails to attract public attention. With an ever-increasing number of researchers investigate into students' writing, English writing serves as a crucial reflection on student's foreign language learning. One can easily accept the fact that writing is an indispensable element of language competence like listening, speaking and reading, but demands learners' all-round ability compared with other three skills. To be more specific, top-quality writing begins from careful choice of words. As Jonathon Swift (1720) put "Proper words in proper place make the true definition of style", which restates the significance of wise choice of word in any writing.

However, it is universally acknowledged that choosing a proper word is far from easy. A writer has to take a wide range of issues into account, such as grammar, collocation, the color of a word and the like. Compared with non-English majors, students specialized in English are expected to acquire a higher level of writing competence. To live up to the expectation and be more qualified, they need to foster

an acute awareness of applying more exact words in English writing.

To find out common problems existing in English writing of major students and put forward possible solutions, the research makes use of compositions entitled *Are We More Connected or More Alone* to carry out the analysis. The total number of students' writings adds up to 78, which were submitted by English major students during an online composition competition held in Yuxi Normal University in 2018. The next section contributes to the analysis of different types of improper use of words in those articles.

## **2. Analysis on Improper Use of Words**

### ***2.1 From the Perspective of Correctness***

In these compositions, a lot of common mistakes were discovered in the following aspects: spelling, part of speech, pronoun reference, agreement between subject and predicate.

Generally speaking non-English majors, instead of English majors, may probably make more spelling mistakes, but the fact is that there are a lot of spelling mistakes in their writing. For example *Weichat* (*WeChat*), *significent* (*significant*), *telivision* (*television*). These mistakes may result from the limited writing time, carelessness, and unawareness of the newly-coined words.

Mistakes in part of speech is the second type of mistakes. It seems the students can not distinguish the nouns, adjectives of the same root. In their composition, "self-aware" was used instead of "self-awareness"; "prevalent" should be replaced with "prevalence" in "As the prevalent of Wechat and QQ, ....".

The third common mistake is the misusing of pronouns. In English, "it" can be used as formal subject/object or something mentioned above. In their compositions, students were less likely to make mistakes when they used "it" to refer to specific things, but were more likely to make mistakes when "it" is used to refer to the previous content or as the formal subject/object. For example, they think significant than everything ( suggested: they think it significant than everything) or there is a plenty of time for us to reconsider how we use it(what "it" refers to is not mentioned previously).

The last kind of error involves subject-predicate agreement, which is a big difficulty in English learning for Chinese students. In the sentence "It also lead to the result of people being more alone.", "lead" should be "leads" according to the grammar. This kind of mistakes occur more often when the subject is the third person singular, because there is no similar grammatical requirement in Chinese.

### ***2.2 From the Perspective of Appropriacy***

The second type of misusing in students' compositions is improper word

selection, which is embodied in two aspects: collocation errors and word selection that do not conform to the context. Collocation errors are very common in the students' writing. For instance,

1-a. Parents text and do emails at breakfast or dinner.

1-b. Parents text and check emails at breakfast or dinner. (suggested)

2-a. In the past, people communicate with each other by means of writing letters, it takes a long time to receive an answer;

2-b. In the past, people communicate with each other by means of writing letters, it takes a long time to receive a reply. (suggested)

The above mistakes are mainly caused by insufficient vocabulary accumulation or the influence of Chinese expressions.

Most of the time, there are several synonyms in English for the same Chinese word. If students do not give due consideration to the context and choose words by their literal meanings, misunderstanding will occur. Examples are as follows,

3-a. We are smitten with technology. (be strongly attracted to someone or something, so it is commendatory)

3-b. We are addicted to technology. (suggested)

4-a. Remember when we were young, we didn't have cell phones. (the writer refers to old days without phones)

4-b. Remember when we were children/younger, we didn't have cell phones.(suggested)

### ***2.3 From the Perspective of Conciseness***

Chinese expressions are euphemistic and implicit, while English is relatively straightforward. In students' compositions, there are a lot of unnecessary repetition of synonyms and language redundancy, thus the expression is not concise enough. For example,

5-a. When considering perspectives of both sides, I am inclined to be in favor of the latter. (feel favorably disposed to someone or something)

5-b. When considering perspectives of both sides, I am inclined to/am in favor of the latter.(suggested)

6-a. As far as I am concerned, I reckon that we are more alone. (conclude after calculation)

6-b. As far as I am concerned /I reckon that we are more alone. (suggested)

7-a. We and our family often go to travel together. (a group of people related to one another by blood or marriage)

7-b. Family members often travel together. (suggested)

## ***2.4 From the Perspective of Diversity***

The same word or phrase rarely appears twice or more in the same sentence, which is one of the English word diversity principles, while students are not aware of this, they tend to only use the expressions they are familiar with. Have a look at the two examples:

8. On the surface, we become more and more connected. But in my opinion, we become more and more alone because we become more and more distant.

“More and more” appeared three times without any changes in form. When one proceeded to read other compositions, similar expressions appeared over and over again.

9. Today, with the development of the times, science and technology in the continuous progress, so that the distance between the worlds has become more and more close, but in some ways also make people become more and more distant.

10. Initially, the more connected we are, the more alone we are. Although we have all kinds of ways to connect with each other, we don't really connect any more.

Obviously, these repeated expressions don't add any rhetoric or aesthetic value to sentences. On the contrary, they make the sentences or passage less attractive and readable.

Confined by research subjects, the paper fails to exhaust all the possible problems of word choosing in English Writing. However, the examples listed above will give insights to future researchers in the field.

## **3. Solutions to Word Choosing Problems**

### ***3.1 Ways of Being Correct?***

Few would deny that correctness lays a solid foundation of great writing. Without correct wording, a writing work would be nothing but a mess of letters. According to the analysis above, problems like spelling, part of speech, pronoun reference, agreement are quite common among even English majors. Obviously, the causes lie in the inability of using grammatical rules. Before getting down to writing, one is obliged to get acquainted with basics of English grammar. Then it is equally crucial to beware of the differences between Chinese and English grammar, which basically enable writers to link words in a right way.

Due to the great advances in computer science, a wealth of online tools or smart phone applications are available for students to identify those headaches, such as the autonomous correction in **Microsoft Word**, the online tool **Grammarly** or **iWrite** (a corpus-based writing system), just to name few of them. In the long run, “Internet

+" method would be widely used in writing to save much time and effort.

### 3.2 *Ways of Being Proper?*

Meeting the demand of correctness, one is expected to use word idiomatically as well. Appropriacy mostly has little to do with grammar, but is more culture-bounded. When choosing a word, one has to put the word into real context. Specifically, the range of use, the color of word needed measuring, especially for such a language abounding with synonyms. For example, When talking about "death", "pass away", "go out of the world" "kick the bucket", or "go to hell" are all available, but some of those phrases carries commendatory but others express derogatory connotations.

Rome is not built in one day. In the same way, appropriateness is not achieved in the blink of an eye. For English majors, one of the biggest obstacle is short of language climate. To bridge the language gap, students are advisable to take advantage of authentic and accessible materials at hand and get substantial inputs step by step. At the beginning, simplified novels or fashion magazines can be used to stimulate their attention. Then some extracts or less important arguments train their way of thinking. Finally, the teacher feed them with academic paper, newspapers or classic novels. In this way, properness is attainable through training from various perspectives gradually.

### 3.3 *Ways of Being Concise?*

Scholars of stylistics would arrive at a general agreement that good writing is concise. Good writers use as few words as possible in their writings. A classic statement in the book entitled *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B White justifies the notion (1979):

*Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentence, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.*

It shows that every word should make sense, or be edited out. To the authors' dismay, almost every writing work selected in the research contains unnecessary words.

One effective way to avoid such problem is to distinguish the differences of expression between the two languages. In most cases, many words are plainly redundant because sense is already implied in some other elements of the sentence. Compare the following examples (Joan Pinkham, 1998):

A: to accelerate the pace of economic reform

B: to accelerate economic reform

[accelerate = increase the pace of ]

A: Living standards for the people in both urban and rural areas continue to rise.

B: Living standards in both urban and rural areas continue to rise.

[the notion of living standard applies only to people ]

From the examples above, we can get that the understanding of connotation of a word is necessary. If they don't add new meaning to the sentence, one can throw them away. This process is largely based on the comprehension of language differences.

### **3.4 Ways of Being Vivid?**

The utmost goal of writing is to make it an art, which is able to play upon the reader's heart-string. Take the description of Tess (Thomas Hardy, 2006) for example:

*Thus Tess walked on, a figure which is part of the landscape; a field woman pure and simple, in winter guise; a gray serge cape, a red woolen cravat, a stuff skirt covered by a whitey-brown rough wrapper, and buff-leather gloves. Every thread of that old attire has become faded and thin under the stroke of raindrops, the burn of sunbeams, and the streets of winds.*

Short as it is, the paragraph makes use of figurative language, color words and other polished expression to make the image of Tess clear and impressive in reader's mind. Some may say it is produced by a talented writer, how could our commoners achieve that?

Though it takes time and efforts to achieve even a bit, trying to polish words is rewarding. One suggested way for students is to follow the footprints of famous writers by the virtue of imitative writing or parody. With a due passage of time, students will awake to the beauty of wording and start to evolve personal style.

## **4. Conclusion**

The research groups four different types of improper word choosing in English writing based on 78 compositions of English major students, which are exemplified by excerpted sentences respectively. To overcome such barriers, corresponding solutions are put forward at the same time, which combine conventional as well as brand-new ones by taking the background of the time into consideration. Undoubtedly, it cannot cover all the problems concerning word choosing in English writing, but sheds some light on the exploration in near future in any case.

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