

# Error Analysis in the Use of Non-Finite Verbs in English Writing of High School Students

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## Abstract

Non-finite verbs, as a challenging aspect of grammar learning for English Foreign Learners, writing errors often happen in the English writing of Chinese high school students. By analyzing the English compositions of 48 first-year high school students from a school in Wuhan, this study explores the frequency of non-finite verb usage, types of errors, and their underlying causes. The finding reveals that non-finite verbs appear in all samples, with infinitives being the most frequently used (46.26%) and also the most accurately applied (76.47%). Gerunds follow (38.78%, 71.93%), while present participles are the least used (14.96%) and have the lowest accuracy rate (68.18%). The major error types include misuse of fixed collocations, inconsistent logical subjects, and errors in tense or voice. Analysis of the causes indicates that negative transfer from the native language, limitations of rote memorization, and differences between Chinese and English thinking are the main factors. Based on contrastive analysis and error analysis theories, recommendations are proposed for teaching, such as emphasizing differences between Chinese and English, providing rich comprehensible language input, and enhancing targeted practice to improve students' competence and performance. This research offers practical insights for the learning and teaching of non-finite verbs.

## Keywords

Non-finite verbs; Error analysis; Contrastive analysis; Language transfer

## 1. Introduction

In today's increasingly globalized world, English, as a global communication language, plays a significant role in international communication and telling China's stories. This is one of the key reasons why China emphasizes English education. As a result, research on English as a second language acquisition provides essential insights for teaching practices. For Chinese students, non-finite verbs represent a particularly challenging aspect of English grammar, often leading to errors in usage and comprehension. However, non-finite verbs are also a common grammatical phenomenon in English. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the types and causes of errors made by Chinese English learners in using non-finite verbs while they are writing, with the goal of offering guidance for teaching and learning.

In the process of foreign language teaching for Chinese students, writing can best reflect learners' comprehensive English competence. Especially in exam, students' writing performance can largely reveal their mastery of the language and areas for improvement. Thus, this study analyzes and marks errors related to non-finite verbs in the monthly exam compositions of 48 first-year high school students from a school in Wuhan. The study examines the usage and error patterns of non-finite verbs in their writing, discusses the causes of these errors, and provides guidance for learning and teaching non-finite verbs.

The main research questions are as follows:

1. What is the proportion of high school students actively and correctly using non-finite verbs in their writing ?
2. What are the main types of errors in the application of non-finite verbs by high school students ?
3. What are the primary reasons for these errors in the use of non-finite verbs by high school students ?

## 2. Literature Review

Non-finite verbs, as one of a key and challenging aspects of English learning, have long been a focus of research by many domestic scholars.

In high school English studies, scholars such as Wen Yingquan (1995), Chen Weilin (1996), Wu Xiaohuang (2001), Hu Yanxia (2002), Chen Kexin (2009), Shi Yixing (2020), and Wang Yun (2024) have conducted knowledge-based research on non-finite verbs, explaining their usage and characteristics. From teaching perspectives, Li Fumai (1995) designed an effective lesson plan for reviewing non-finite verb grammar in high school. Qiu Baoxia (1995) and Yu Benren (1996) summarized practical teaching experiences for non-finite verbs. Zhang Wenrong (2006), Yi Renrong (2009), Shi Jinghui (2009), Zhu Maihua and Wang Xiaohong (2009), Wang Xingyong (2010), Tang Wei (2013), Chen Yan (2018), and Zhong Yingfang (2018) creatively analyzed teaching methods for non-finite verbs, providing guidance for teaching practices.

Ding Li (2020) studied the causes and resolutions for errors in English grammar acquisition among high school students, identifying three types of verb errors: tense and voice errors, non-finite verb usage errors, and preposition selection errors. The study attributed these errors to negative transfer from the native language and proposed strategies such as analogical learning, creating authentic grammar usage contexts, and designing structured grammar exercises. Gu Huiling (2016) focused on high school students' English writing and proposed techniques to improve their writing skills.

High school students' compositions are important corpora for studying English learners' proficiency in second language acquisition. Many studies have used high school writing samples as research material. Guan Qiuyue (2024) analyzed verb er-

rors and their causes in high school English writing, categorizing verb errors into seven types, including tense errors, verb redundancy/omission, non-finite verb errors, and spelling errors, etc.. The study identified migration factors and other non-linguistic factors as causes of verb errors. Huo Limin (2024) also analyzed verb errors in writing, proposing teaching suggestions such as enhancing contrastive teaching between English and Chinese, reinforcing students' memory of English rules, and consistently evaluating error correction effectiveness. Wu Tong (2025) studied writing errors caused by negative transfer from the native language, categorizing them into lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels. They all mentioned non-finite verb errors, but their focus was not particularly on non-finite verbs.

In summary, most research on high school students' learning of non-finite verbs has focused on teaching methods and grammatical knowledge. Studies on high school writing examined language as a whole or the influence of native language transfer, while research that specifically analyzes non-finite verb errors in writing remains limited.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the English compositions of 48 students, examining the frequency of non-finite verb usage, the ability of learners to use them correctly, and common error types. The reasons of these errors are also analyzed to provide insights for teaching and learning this challenging grammatical skill.

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants are 48 first-year high school students from a school in Wuhan, whose monthly exam compositions are analyzed. These students have completed elementary and middle school English education, providing them with a basic understanding of English. All are native Chinese speakers aged around 16, with mature proficiency in Chinese. The class includes students of varying English proficiency levels (high, medium, and low), ensuring the representative samples. Since it is a relatively formal examination, the students complete the essay task with serious attitude. Consequently, most errors in their writing stem from insufficient mastery of the language and they themselves couldn't identify.

The writing prompt is as follow:

Assume you are Li Ming, and your friend Jenny asks you for advice on how to stay healthy. Please write her an email to offer some suggestions. The word count should be around 80 words, and you can add appropriate details to make the writing coherent. The main points are as follows: 1. Pay attention to a reasonable diet; 2. Pay attention to exercising; 3. Maintain sufficient sleep.

#### 3.2. Instruments

The research methods includes contrastive analysis and error analysis. The 48 samples are analyzed for non-finite verb usage and errors, followed by an exploration of causes and resolutions.

American linguist Robert Lado's *Linguistics Across Cultures: Applied Linguistics for Teachers* (1957) marked the formation of contrastive analysis theory. Lado proposed the contrastive analysis hypothesis, suggesting that second language learners unconsciously apply their native language's rules to the target language. Similarities between the native and target languages facilitate learning, causing positive transfer, while differences create difficulties, causing negative transfer. Contrastive analysis aims to identify these similarities and differences.

Corder (1967) pioneered error analysis theory, arguing that errors are inevitable in second language learning. He argued that it is necessary to analyze learners' errors. By doing so, teachers could understand learners' progress and learners are allowed to self-reflect as well, which made people see errors in a different way. Corder outlined four steps for error analysis:

Firstly, collect data and define the scope of analysis. When collecting data, researcher should define basic framework of study and information about participants including their age, learning background, native language, and research content;

Secondly, identify errors. Errors arise from incomplete mastery of the target language. Errors systematically reflect learners' language proficiency at a given stage and tend to occur without learners' awareness.

Thirdly, classify errors by comparing them with the target language. Researcher is supposed to categorize learners' errors in accordance with definition of that after analyzing and finding out those errors.

Fourthly, explain the causes of errors. This step aims to work out reasons why errors happened. Generally speaking, the reasons may include several aspects involving learning interest, strategies, over-generalization, and neglect of grammatical rules, etc..

Learners tend to develop a language system depending on their native language, called interlanguage system, which is a unique linguistic system distinct from both the native and target languages. Studying high school students' English writing essentially examines the interlanguage of English foreign learners.

Error analysis aims to identify and explain errors and their reasons in second language learning, guiding teachers and learners toward effective acquisition methods. Error analysis theory represents an enhancement of contrastive analysis theory, enabling us to examine learning errors from a developmental perspective and utilize these errors for progress.(Guan Qiuyue, 2024) Therefore, this study integrates both analytical approaches to investigate the frequency, patterns, and underlying causes of errors to explore effective methods and strategies for English learners and teachers.

### 3.3. Procedure

The study follows Corder's error analysis steps. First, the 48 compositions are collected, with the analysis focused on non-finite verb usage. Next, errors are identified, including their frequency and types. After that, the errors are classified, and their causes are analyzed. Finally, based on these findings, recommendations are provided for learners and teachers.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Statistical Analysis of Non-Finite Verb Errors

First, the frequency of non-finite verb usage in the 48 compositions is calculated. All samples contain non-finite verbs, indicating a 100% usage rate. It suggests that students consciously employ non-finite verbs to enrich their expressions, reflecting their ability to manipulate the language.

Example 1: You're supposed to pay attention to your eating habits.

This sentence contains two non-finite verbs: an infinitive (to pay) and a present participle (eating habits).

Next, each composition is analyzed for the types and frequency of non-finite verbs, which include infinitives, gerunds, and two types of participles (present and past). (You Jichang, Wang Wenzhi; 1988)

It needs to illustrate that passive voice (be+past participle) or tenses requiring participles (e.g., present progressive 'be doing') are excluded, as they function as finite verbs. Repeated instances of the same word's non-finite verb in identical contexts are counted as once.

Example 2:

Dear Jenny,  
I am very happy to receive your e-mail. As our say, "Healthy is our bodys main." So keeping healthy is very important.  
First, we should keep eating property. Either eating more or less, it is not good for our stomach. Just keep it formal. Second, we should focus on keeping practice. Practicing everyday can helps us not too fat or thin. And last, keep sleeping well every day. It can make us better on the second day.  
Hope my advices can really help you from keeping healthy!

This sample includes one infinitive (to receive), four gerunds (keeping healthy; eating; keeping; sleeping), two present participles (eating; practicing), and no past participle. The distribution is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Distribution of Non-Finite Verb Types in Example 2:

	infinitive	gerund	present participle	past participle	total
frequency	1	4	2	0	7
percentage	14.29%	57.14%	28.57%	0%	100%

The same method is applied to all the 48 samples, yielding the overall distribution (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Overall Distribution of Non-Finite Verb Types in All Samples

	infinitive	gerund	present participle	past participle	total
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frequency	68	57	22	0	147
percentage	46.26%	38.78%	14.96%	0%	100%

According to statistics, infinitives are the most frequently used (68 instances, 46.26%), followed by gerunds (57, 38.78%) and present participles (22, 14.96%). Past participles does not appear independently, as students primarily use them in passive constructions (13 instances), which are excluded from non-finite verb counts.

Next, the accuracy of non-finite verb usage is calculated (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Accuracy and Error Rates of Non-Finite Verb Usage

	infinitive		gerund		Present participle		total	
	accuracy	error	accuracy	error	accuracy	error	accuracy	error
frequency	52	16	41	16	15	7	108	39
proportion	76.47%	23.53%	71.93%	28.07%	68.18%	31.82%	73.74%	26.53%

From table 3, infinitives have the highest accuracy rate and the lowest error (76.47%; 3.53%), followed by gerunds (71.93%; 28.07%) and present participles (68.18%; 31.82%). This indicates students tend to use grammatical structures they have mastered more proficiently while avoiding potentially error-prone expressions. From another perspective, these errors objectively reflect the natural acquisition process, genuinely demonstrating students' actual command of non-finite verbs. The overall accuracy rate is 73.74%, with an error rate of 26.53%, indicating room for progress in students' mastery of non-finite verbs.

## 4.2. Classification of Non-Finite Verb Errors

The non-finite verbs identified in the samples are categorized into three types: infinitives, gerunds, and present participles. Subsequent analysis will systematically classify the error patterns, thereby providing a framework for investigating the underlying causes of these errors in later sections.

### 4.2.1. Misuse of Fixed Collocations

Using verb base forms or gerunds where infinitives are required, or vice versa. These errors often involve collocations requiring specific non-finite forms as objects, complements, or subjects.

Example 3: You need exercise every day to stay healthy.

Correct: You need to exercise every day to stay healthy.

Example 4: It's important for you have enough sleep.

Correct: It's important for you to have enough sleep.

Example 5: She suggested to go to bed early.

Correct: She suggested going to bed early.

Example 6: He is good at play basketball.

Correct: He is good at playing basketball.

### 4.2.2. Inconsistent Logical Subjects

It occurs when non-finite verbs function as adverbials but their implied subjects

mismatch the main clause subjects.

Example 7: To lose weight, vegetables should be eaten more.

Correct: To lose weight, we should eat more vegetables.

### 4.2.3. Tense or Voice Errors

Errors occur when students use non-finite verbs as adverbials due to misunderstanding of tense requirements, incorrect application of voice or improper morphological forms.

Example 8: Having eat breakfast, he went to school.

Correct: Having eaten breakfast, he went to school.

It is obvious that the student tried to employ the present perfect participle form to indicate an action preceding the finite verb. However, the performance of this grammatical structure proves insufficiently developed, resulting in error happens.

In conclusion, the errors about using non-finite verbs in writing of high school students are mainly reflected in three aspects: misuse of fixed collocations, inconsistent logical subjects and tense or voice errors.

## 4.3. Underlying Reasons of Non-Finite Verb Errors

Given above error categories, the following section conducts a comprehensive analysis of their underlying causes through multiple theoretical lenses.

### 4.3.1. Negative Transfer from Native Language

According to Clifford Prator (1967) and Rod Ellis (1985), non-finite verbs belong to the fifth contrastive level for Chinese learners, as Chinese has no corresponding verb inflections. This leads to over-generalization and learning difficulties.

First, the infinitive, gerund, past participle and present participle in non-finite verbs all represent verbal inflections. However, Chinese verbs make no distinction between finite and non-finite forms, nor do they convey morphological changes for different verb components. Consequently, when a linguistic feature in the target language has no corresponding equivalent in the native language, it falls into the fifth contrastive category.

This fifth contrastive level corresponds to the difficulty level of over generalization. When encountering English grammatical features absent in native language, learners tend to overgeneralize rules, resulting in negative transfer that impedes learning outcomes. This phenomenon aligns perfectly with the contrastive analysis hypothesis that linguistic differences create learning difficulties.

### 4.3.2. Lack of Targeted Practice

In English, non-finite verbs as object are typically taught and acquired as fixed collocations, while it does not exist in Chinese where object forms remain invariant regardless of predicate verbs. This difference creates significant learning challenges,

forcing learners to rely predominantly on rote memorization for mastery. The mechanistic approach reduces error frequency in controlled contexts, but also brings some setbacks as low memorization efficiency, rigid application patterns, and dependence on massive repetitive exercise for acquisition. As a result, insufficient targeted practice inevitably leads to errors in real language use.

### **4.3.3. Different Patterns Between Chinese and English Thinking**

In English, when non-finite verbs function as modifiers such as adverbial or attributive, learners must analyze the logical subject and action tense in context to select the appropriate form. When the logical subject has an active relationship with the action, the present participle is typically used; when the relationship is passive, the past participle is often employed. Furthermore, the present participle includes the perfect form that indicates actions preceding the finite verb, the passive form, and the perfect passive form. Similarly, the past participle has perfect form, while the infinitive also encompasses passive, perfect, and perfect passive forms. These inflectional transformations require learners to first understand different implied meanings of different forms accurately and master the ability to convert verbs into different forms. In practice, learners must not only finish these transformations correctly but also comprehend the contextual logical and voice relationships to select the appropriate form. It demands learners think and understand in accordance with English pattern of thinking, yet the cognitive differences between Chinese and English create obstacles in comprehension and application, finally leading to errors.

## **4.4. Strategies for Addressing Non-Finite Verb Errors**

The acquisition of English as a second language requires concerted efforts from both instructors and learners. Based on comprehensive analysis of high school students' composition samples and systematic examination of the causes underlying native language negative transfer, several pedagogical recommendations are proposed to address non-finite verb usage errors in EFL learners' writing:

### **4.4.1. Highlighting Chinese-English Differences**

In the instructional process, teachers should not only focus on teaching fundamental language knowledge but also prioritize the cultivation of students' cognitive abilities. By employing multi-media teaching methodologies and integrating innovative internet or AI technologies, educators can enhance students' English thinking patterns and deepen their comprehension of language difference. It is essential to guide students to systematically compare similarities and differences between Chinese and English expressions, with particular emphasis on contrastive analyses. This pedagogical approach also enables learners to develop awareness of the distinctions in expressive modes and thinking patterns between the two languages and minimize cognitive discrepancies in understanding English ultimately in order to maximize

positive transfer while minimizing negative transfer.

#### 4.4.2. Providing Rich Comprehensible Language Input

Language acquisition occurs through contextualized practice. Just as native language learners naturally acquire mother tongue through extensive exposure to authentic linguistic contexts and imitative practice, second language acquisition should similarly provide students with abundant, carefully-selected examples for their input and output. Through abundant examples, students enhance their understanding of various non-finite verb forms. And comprehensible input raises their awareness of Chinese-English differences in non-finite usage, thereby further developing English thinking patterns.

#### 4.4.3. Enhancing Targeted Practice

When learners acquire non-finite verbs, enhancing comprehensible input is important, while practical application and exercises based on comprehension also play an essential part. Only through targeted practice can students develop competence in using non-finite forms. Sustained productive output, combined with teachers' systematic analyzes of errors and focused instruction during the teaching process, enables learners to progress through continuous practice, ultimately achieving complete mastery of this grammatical pattern.

In summary, although non-infinite verbs is on the fifth contrastive level and difficult to master due to negative transfer, learners can gradually acquire it in means of highlighting Chinese-English differences, providing rich comprehensible language input, and enhancing targeted practice, ultimately enhance the acquisition of second language.

## 5. Conclusion

The study investigates error patterns in the application of non-finite verbs (infinitives, gerunds, and present participles) in English composition among Chinese high school students. Employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the research analyzes 48 compositions from first-year students at a Wuhan high school to examine the frequency distributions of non-finite verb usage, common classifications of errors, and underlying reasons. Grounded in Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis theories, it systematically evaluates non-finite verbs usage characteristics and proposes targeted pedagogical strategies for grammatical instruction.

The findings reveal that non-finite verbs appears 100% of the writing samples, with an overall accuracy rate of 73.74% and an error rate of 36.53%, indicating possible room for improvement in its application. Among these, infinitives show the highest usage frequency (46.26%) and accuracy rate (76.47%); gerunds rank second (38.78% usage, 71.93% accuracy); while present participles are the least used (14.96%) and least accurate (68.18%). No independent usage of past participles is observed. The

error patterns identified across the 48 compositions primarily includes collocation errors (e.g., using base verbs after "need"), logical subject inconsistencies (e.g., mismatched adverbial and subject relationships), and tense or voice errors (e.g., incorrect perfect participle forms). Three factors causes these errors: first, negative transfer from Chinese, where the absence of verb inflection creates comprehension difficulties; second, insufficient contextual practice, as rote memorization of fixed patterns hinders flexible application; third, different thinking patterns between Chinese and English, weak logical-relationship and tense-judgment abilities regarding non-finite structures. Corresponding pedagogical recommendations have been proposed, including emphasizing contrastive analysis, rich input, and targeted practice, offering practical guidance for teaching and learning non-finite verbs.

Limitations of the study include the small sample size and the absence of past participle analysis. First, constrained by objective conditions, the number of sample remains limited with only 48 participants selected from a high school. The restricted sample volume and geographical monotony may affect the generalization of its findings. Second, the analysis does not encompass errors involving past participles since the collected samples contain no examples of past participle usage or related errors, the research fails to include independent usage cases of past participles, consequently providing an incomplete representation of non-finite verb acquisition patterns.

Based on its limitations, future research should expand samples, conduct experimental research and use corpus for broader insights. Firstly, expanding the sample size to include students from different regions and varying English proficiency levels would strengthen the universality of conclusions. Secondly, designing targeted pedagogical experiments could empirically validate the strategies' efficacy. Thirdly, integrating corpus-based analytical tools would enable quantitative mapping of error distributions, thereby reducing subjectivity in classification. Additionally, involving past participles and other grammatical structures would present a comprehensive analysis of non-finite verb acquisition patterns.

In conclusion, this study explores the error patterns and underlying causes in high school students' usage of non-finite verbs in their writing, offering practical implications for second language pedagogical practice. Future research that employs broader sample volume and experimental designs could further refine instructional methodologies, thereby facilitating learners' mastery of the grammatical challenges.

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