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A Corpus-based Study of Word Errors in Senior High School Students' English Writing

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Abstract

Vocabulary serves as a cornerstone of English writing, yet word errors remain a prevalent and under-addressed issue in senior high school students' compositions. This study constructs a corpus from 242 student writings from a Sichuan high school. Employing CLEC error classification guidelines for analysis, it investigated the distribution and causes of word errors. In terms of frequency, these errors were ranked from highest to lowest as follows: ambiguity, substitution, absence, part-of-speech errors, redundancy, repetition, and word order errors. Key contributing factors included mother tongue interference, insufficient language knowledge, and limited exposure to authentic English. Based on these insights, the study proposed targeted teaching suggestions aimed at reducing word errors and enhancing overall writing proficiency among high school students.

Keywords

Word Errors; High School Students; English Writing; Vocabulary Instruction

1. Introduction

English writing ability is a key goal in high school English teaching. The New English Curriculum Standards (2025 Revised) require students to "accurately employ vocabulary and grammar in written expression." However, research (Gu, 2006; Jia, 2017) shows that students' actual performance falls far short. In practice, senior high school students frequently make word errors-such as ambiguity, substitution, absence, and part-of-speech errors-which have become a major bottleneck in improving writing ability.

Traditional word error research relies on manual correction or small-sample analysis, which suffers from strong subjectivity, narrow coverage, and low efficiency. The rise of corpus linguistics offers a methodological innovation. Corpus-based error analysis can integrate large-scale real data, combine quantitative and qualitative methods, and reveal systematic patterns of learners' errors. It also provides an objective basis for understanding Chinese students' English learning

and helps teachers identify typical errors (Wen, Wang & Liang, 2005). Therefore, this study uses a corpus to investigate word errors in high school English writing.

This study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the types and causes of word errors and to offer suggestions for vocabulary instruction. Theoretically, it is based on Corder's (1967) error analysis theory, which holds that errors are systematic. Practically, it helps teachers develop effective strategies and helps students recognize and reduce word errors in their writing.

2. Literature Review

This section is organized into three parts: the definition and classification of word errors, the theoretical bases, and a review of previous studies on error types and their contributing factors.

2.1. Interpretation of Related Concepts

Multiple researchers have defined word errors from different perspectives. Corder (1967) defined errors as deviations resulting from learners' incomplete mastery of language rules. James (2001) proposed that word errors stem from inadequate vocabulary knowledge, leading to deviations from the target language. Agustin Llach (2011) further elaborated that these errors manifest as systematic deviations in lexical selection or use. Additionally, word errors are an integral part of interlanguage development, influenced by both negative transfer from the mother tongue and insufficient input (Wen, 2005). In this study, word errors refer to the misuse of target language rules due to native language interference or lack of knowledge during writing.

As for classification, this study adopts the CLEC framework (Gui & Yang, 2003), which categorizes word errors into seven types: word order errors (wd1), part-of-speech errors (wd2), substitution (wd3), absence (wd4), redundancy (wd5), repetition (wd6), and ambiguity (wd7). Each type is defined with examples, providing a clear coding system for corpus analysis.

2.2. Theoretical Bases

This section introduces three foundational theories in second language acquisition: Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA), and Interlanguage (IL).

2.2.1 Contrastive Analysis

Lado (1957) proposed that by comparing learners' native language (L1) with the target language (L2), teachers can better anticipate learning difficulties. Contrastive Analysis involves systematically describing the linguistic features of both languages, identifying similarities and differences, and predicting potential errors based on differences. A strong version of CA claims that all L2 errors can be predicted through cross-linguistic comparison, while a weak version uses comparison to explain observed errors (Lado, 1957). According to Dai & Su (1994), similarities between L1

and L2 tend to facilitate learning, whereas differences increase the likelihood of errors, with the degree of difficulty correlating with the degree of difference.

2.2.2 Error Analysis

Corder (1967) argued that learners' errors are not failures but systematic indicators of their developing language knowledge. Error Analysis (EA) provides a structured method: collecting language samples, identifying errors (distinguishing them from lapses), classifying error types, explaining their psycholinguistic causes, and evaluating their severity. Unlike lapses caused by temporary factors like fatigue, errors reflect incomplete mastery of L2 rules and recur frequently, often unnoticed by learners themselves. EA thus helps teachers adjust instruction and understand the learning process.

2.2.3 Interlanguage

Selinker (1972) introduced interlanguage as the dynamic, transitional linguistic system that L2 learners construct between their L1 and the target language. This system is independent, rule-governed, and constantly evolving. Ellis (1985) identified three key characteristics: permeability (influence from both L1 and L2), dynamism (gradual approximation to L2 norms), and systematicity (internal phonological, lexical, and grammatical regularities). As learning progresses, learnersinterlanguage becomes increasingly complex.

2.3. A Review of the Classification and Affecting Factors of Word Errors.

2.3.1 Classification of Word Errors

Researchers have proposed various typologies of word errors. At a broad level, word errors can be divided into lexical formal errors and lexical semantic errors (James, 2001), or into lexico-grammatical errors and pure word errors (Granger, 1994). More fine-grained classifications include formal errors (spelling, word formation), semantic errors (wrong meaning), collocation errors, part-of-speech errors, L1 transfer errors, and redundancy errors (Zhu, 2013; Huo, 2014). Specifically, Huo (2014) analyzed CET-4 writing and identified form-based, meaning-based, part-of-speech, and usage errors, while Liu (2015) focused on spelling errors in college English writing, noting their negative impact on writing quality. Gui and Yang (2003), based on the CLEC corpus, divided language errors into seven categories, a framework that guides the present study. Chen (2021) found that part of speech and word choice were the two major sources of errors in Chinese college students' English writing, suggesting that word errors are not random but cluster around specific linguistic features.

2.3.2 Factors Affecting Word Errors

Multiple factors have been found to influence the frequency and types of word errors in L2 writing. A primary factor is the learner's L2 proficiency level: inappropriate word use is closely linked to insufficient vocabulary knowledge (Jiang, 2021; Engber, 1995). Vocabulary richness and the ability to use words appropriately

are core elements of writing quality (Wu, 2016; Wang, 2012).

Learning time also plays a role, as vocabulary use ability tends to improve with extended exposure and practice (Wang, 2012). Instructional factors matter as well: effective classroom teaching enhances vocabulary use and reduces errors (Yan, 2018), and clear error feedback helps learners improve accuracy (Geng, 2014). In addition to classroom instruction, the quality of instructional materials also matters. Wang (2026) argued that effective language input is a prerequisite for vocabulary acquisition, yet textbooks often present simplified content with insufficient collocational information, making it difficult for students to develop an accurate intuition for word use.

In addition to feedback and general instruction, the design of vocabulary teaching itself plays a crucial role. Chen (2025) argued that effective vocabulary instruction should present words with attention to both thematic relevance and pragmatic use, ensuring that learners not only grasp the core meaning of lexical items but also understand their appropriate usage across different topics and contexts. Furthermore, Zheng (2026) found that vocabulary use frequency is an integral aspect of learners' lexical competence and influences teaching sequencing—high-frequency items tend to be taught earlier.

Cognitive factors, such as the representation and retrieval of lexical knowledge, also affect error patterns (Gong, 2007). Specifically, Gui (2004) proposed that lexical errors can be traced to the perceptual level, where failures are related to memory, such as forgetting or misremembering a word and these errors can be identified at the single-word level. Moreover, vocabulary learning strategies have been linked to word errors; studies show that students who employ effective strategies produce fewer errors (Li, 2005; Wu & Wang, 1998).

2.3.3 Impacts of Word Errors on Writing Quality

The overall impact of word errors is substantial: research indicates that word errors account for over 70% of all language errors in college English writing (Li, 2003; Wen, 2005). Finally, multiple linear regression models have been applied to measure how word errors affect writing quality (Wang, 2017).

2.4. Summary

In summary, a substantial body of research has been conducted on the factors contributing to word errors in college students' writing. Many scholars have utilized self-constructed corpora to explore these errors and have made effective discoveries. However, research on the causes for word errors in high school students' English writing remains limited, with insufficient evidence regarding word errors in this context. Previous studies have primarily focused on college students majoring in English, highlighting professional errors in English writing. Therefore, this study aims to construct a small-scale corpus to investigate word errors in high-school-level writing. In conclusion, this study will analyze the common types of

word errors and explore their related causes to fill these research gaps and enhance students' writing skills.

3. Methodology

This part deals with the specific information about the research methodology in and of itself. To flesh out, it includes research questions, research materials, research instruments and research procedures.

3.1. Research Questions

This study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to achieve the following objectives. First, it aims to identify the distribution of common word errors in students' English writing. Next, it explores the causes of word errors. To achieve these goals, the research questions can be outlined as follows:

1)What is the distribution of word errors in senior high school students' English writing?

2)What are the possible causes of word errors in senior high school students' English writing?

3.2. Research Materials

A corpus of 242 written compositions was compiled from a high school in Chengdu. All participants were third-year students. The writing task was timed and based on a uniform theme: "Suppose you are Mr Li, and your British pen pal Dick is facing pressure from his study schedule. Please share your study arrangement for a day and suggest how to reduce study load (about 150 words)." These samples were selected because they represent authentic, comparable student writing.

3.3. Research Instruments

Three instruments were used. First, AntConc 3.5.2 was employed for quantitative analysis, including concordance and cluster analysis, to calculate error frequencies and distribution patterns. Second, Microsoft Excel 2019 and SPSS 27 were used for data organization, descriptive statistics, and frequency analysis, as well as for creating data visualization charts. Third, the CLEC error annotation system (Gui & Yang, 2003) served as the coding framework for identifying and classifying word errors.

3.4. Research Procedures

The research procedures in this study are divided into three stages.

The first stage is data collection. From a recent examination at the target school, 260 English writings were randomly selected. After excluding 18 samples lacking research significance, 242 valid compositions were retained. All writings were based on the same theme and completed within a limited time

The second stage is corpus establishment and error coding. The 242 compositions were transcribed into plain text (.txt) files. Following the CLEC annotation rules (Gui & Yang, 2003), word errors were manually identified and coded into seven types: wd1 (word order), wd2 (part-of-speech), wd3 (substitution), wd4 (absence), wd5 (redundancy), wd6 (repetition), and wd7 (ambiguity). Each error was marked with brackets and a code (e.g., [wd2 0-]).

The third stage is data analysis. The software AntConc 3.5.2 was used to retrieve and count error frequencies. SPSS 27 was employed for descriptive statistics to obtain the distribution of each error type.

4. Results and Discussion

This chapter adopts Gui Shichun and Yang Huizhong's lexical error classification framework, using AntConc 3.5.2 to analyze senior high students' English writing corpus. It quantifies seven types of word errors, analyzes typical error cases, and summarizes three major causes of lexical mistakes.

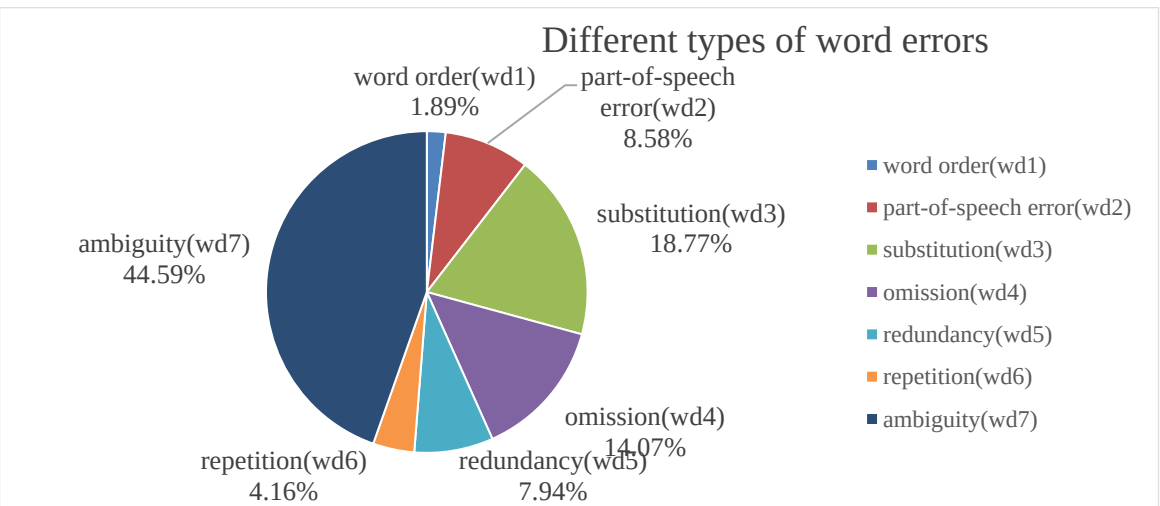
4.1. The Distribution and Analysis of Word Errors

The corpus contains 1,108 word errors, taking up 63.02% of all linguistic errors, which proves lexical errors are the primary obstacle in senior high English writing. Based on CLEC standards, word errors fall into seven categories.

Table 1. Distribution of word errors in Students' Writing.

	Type	Frequency	Percent	Ranking
Wd1	Word Order Error	21	1.89%	7
Wd2	Part-of speech Error	95	8.58%	4
Wd3	Substitution	208	18.77%	2
Wd4	Absence	156	14.07%	3
Wd5	Redundancy	88	7.94%	5
Wd6	Repetition	46	4.16%	6
Wd7	Ambiguity	494	44.59%	1

Figure 1. Different types of word errors.



Data shows ambiguity errors (Wd7) rank first (494 cases, 44.59%), followed by

substitution errors (Wd3, 208 cases, 18.77%). Omission errors (Wd4, 156 cases,14.07%) and part-of-speech errors (Wd2,95 cases,8.58%) come next. Redundancy, repetition and word order errors are least frequent. Word order and repetition errors are briefly explained, while other five types are illustrated with student sentences.

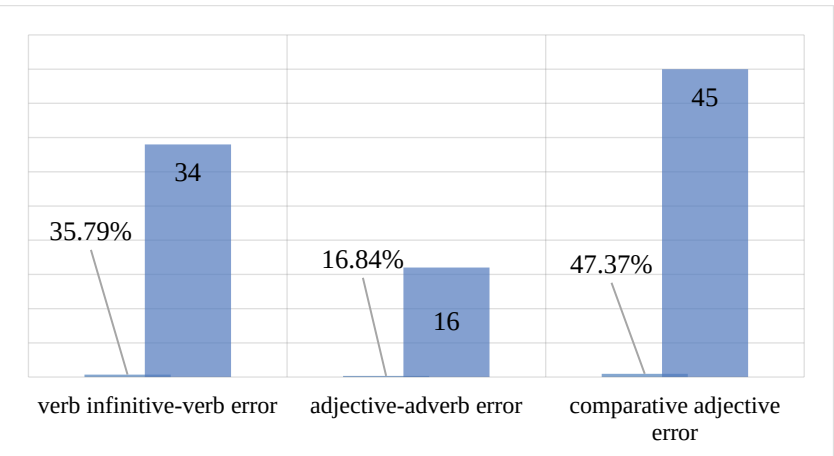
4.1.1 Word Order Errors

Word order errors refer to misplaced sentence components except adverbs, caused by the discrepancy between Chinese and English word order plus mother tongue transfer. Typical mistakes include misplacing articles before adjectives, adverbs after modal verbs and comparative adjectives. Students directly apply Chinese sentence logic to English, disrupting sentence structure.

4.1.2 Part-of-speech Error

This error means using correct word roots but wrong word classes, divided into three subcategories.

Table 2. Distribution of part-of-speech errors in Students' Writing.



Comparative adjective errors account for 47.37% (45 cases), verb infinitive errors 35.79% (34 cases), adjective-adverb confusion 16.84% (16 cases). Common violations include misusing verb forms after modals, confusing adjectives and adverbs, and neglecting comparative forms after "than".

4.1.3 Substitution

Substitution is improper word choice within the same word class. Influenced by Chinese semantic equivalence, students mix up near-synonyms like look and read, and misuse fixed collocations such as at instead of until. Traditional vocabulary teaching only emphasizes Chinese definitions, ignoring collocation and contextual differences, leading to inappropriate word selection.

4.1.4 Absence

Omission refers to missing essential words. Chinese lacks articles and allows adjectives to act as predicates alone, so students frequently omit a/an/the and linking verbs. Careless checking during writing also causes accidental loss of

grammatical components.

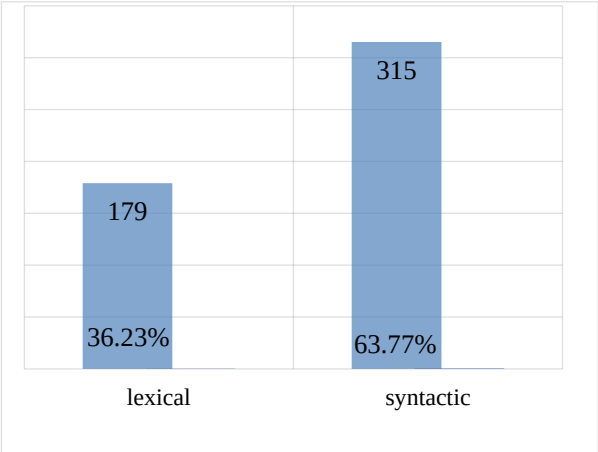
4.1.5 Redundancy & 4.1.6 Repetition

Redundancy means adding unnecessary words, such as redundant "be" before main verbs and extra "to" after modal verbs. Repetition is meaningless duplicate words to express the same meaning. Both errors stem from incomplete grammar mastery and weak expression simplification ability.

4.1.7 Ambiguity

Ambiguity is the most serious error type, split into lexical and syntactic ambiguity.

Table 3. Distribution of ambiguities in Students' Writing.



Among 494 ambiguity errors, syntactic ambiguity occupies 63.77% (315 cases), lexical ambiguity 36.23% (179 cases). Lexical ambiguity arises from polysemous words (spring, duck, fall) without context limits; syntactic ambiguity results from unclear modifier attachment, bringing multiple interpretations to one sentence. As Llach (2011) noted, ambiguous words severely hinder information transmission.

Compared with previous studies, the 63.02% proportion of word errors aligns with He (2009) and Li (2003), confirming lexical errors as a core writing problem. The different error ranking (ambiguity top in this study vs substitution top in He's research) results from different research subjects and writing tasks.

4.2. Possible Causes of Word Errors

Consistent with classic second language acquisition theories, lexical errors mainly arise from three factors.

4.2.1 Mother Tongue Interference

Chinese and English belong to different language families. L1 transfer leads to article omission, wrong verb tense forms and word-for-word translation. Students rely on Chinese thinking in English writing, forming fixed error-prone expression habits.

4.2.2 Insufficient Language Knowledge Reserve

High school vocabulary expands sharply, yet most students only memorize spellings and Chinese meanings, lacking command of collocations, polysemy and word

transformations. Confusing pairs like affect/effect and make/do appear frequently due to shallow vocabulary learning.

4.2.3 Limited Exposure to Authentic English Materials

Shortage of original English reading and audio resources prevents students from mastering authentic collocations. Without adequate native language input, learners produce unnatural matching errors such as make a research, reducing writing clarity and accuracy.

5. Conclusion

This part is mainly composed of the following three aspects, namely, the major findings of this study, the pedagogical implications for English writing teaching, the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

5.1. Major Findings

Students exhibit seven categories of word errors in their English writing, with the frequency from highest to lowest being: ambiguity, substitution, absence, part-of-speech errors, redundancy, repetition, and order errors. Vocabulary is an important aspect of language application. The analyses in this study show that word errors are related to students' writing include mother language's interference, students' insufficient language knowledge reserve and limited exposure to authentic English materials.

5.2. Pedagogical Implications

Schmitt and McCarthy (2002) proposed that vocabulary plays a central role in language acquisition and use. They emphasized the importance of understanding how vocabulary is acquired and how it can be effectively taught. Despite the inevitability of word errors in English writing, teachers and students should maintain an optimistic attitude. Based on the analysis of word errors mentioned above, this study aims to illustrate insights from the perspectives of English teachers and students. On one hand, teaching suggestions provide practical writing guidance for teachers. On the other hand, these insights can also motivate students to grasp key vocabulary points, gradually reducing word error in their writing.

For teachers, first, instruction should be differentiated by error type. For ambiguity and absence errors, teachers should emphasize sentence components and require students to imitate clear sentence structures. For substitution, redundancy, and repetition errors, teachers should focus on distinguishing synonyms and easily confused words. For part-of-speech and word order errors, teachers can design contextual practice activities such as error correction exercises. Following Zheng' s (2026) recommendation, teachers at the senior high school level should place particular emphasis on lexical discrimination and synonym substitution exercises to expand students' vocabulary range and reduce the overuse of general-purpose

words.

Second, corpus-based teaching tools should be integrated into vocabulary instruction. Teachers can incorporate corpus-based activities to enhance students' lexical awareness. Chen (2022) suggested that teachers may use corpus tools to design gamified learning tasks, such as fill-in-the-blank competitions, to stimulate students' interest and help them accurately grasp the nuances of word meaning and usage. Similarly, Song (2026) found that corpora provide authentic collocation examples, helping students establish correct "word-collocation" associations and avoid interference from Chinese thinking patterns. Xu (2025) also confirmed that corpus-based instruction offers rich language samples that expand students' vocabulary and enhance their understanding of contextualized word use. Such diversified teaching methods not only make vocabulary learning more engaging but also provide repeated exposure to authentic language use, which may gradually reduce word errors in students' writing.

For Students, students should take an active role in their vocabulary development. First, they should increase comprehensible input by reading English articles and watching English movies to develop English thinking. Second, they need to consolidate foundational knowledge by memorizing word meanings and parts of speech. Third, they should engage in peer evaluation to gradually reduce word errors. Fourth, they should develop cross-linguistic awareness by recognizing the differences between English and Chinese thinking patterns, thereby minimizing the impact of negative language transfer (Jiang, 2025).

5.3. Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the research scope is limited, as all samples came from a single examination at one school, involving only third-year students taught by the same teacher. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to all high school students. For future research, it is recommended to expand the sample scope to include multiple schools and grades, thereby enhancing the representativeness and generalizability of the results.

Second, manual error identification inevitably involves subjectivity, which may affect the accuracy of the data. Future research should involve multiple independent reviewers to cross-check the error coding and reduce potential bias.

Third, the research method relies solely on text analysis. Future research could adopt additional methods like classroom observation or student interviews to triangulate the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of word errors.

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