

# 在英文研究論文中台灣學生常犯的文法錯誤之探究

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## 摘要

本研究之目的乃在探討台灣學生在寫英文研究報告時常犯的文法錯誤之種類，在本研究中，受試者是 16 名台灣到美國東南方某大學修研究所英文的學生。研究者分析受試者修習「寫作與研究 II」的課堂作業，先確認學生所犯的錯，然後加以歸類並分析其可能原因，研究發現受試者的文法錯誤有四大類：(1)用錯字與順序錯置，(2)冠詞的誤用，(3)動詞型態的誤用，與(4)造句拙劣。而造成這些錯誤的原因是來自於三種來源：(1)學生原先母語的干擾，(2)文法知識不足，與(3)練習不夠。

根據上述之研究結果，爲了能避免這些錯誤，研究者建議學生必須中英文之間的差異，持續練習寫作，與持續大量閱讀已出版的研究論文，以增進學術寫作的技能。本研究盼能使學生認知到常犯的文法錯誤，並提供國外大學教師有用的參考，來增進台灣留學生以英文寫研究報告的品質。

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**關鍵字：**文法錯誤、英文研究論文、台灣學生

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## INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Too many misunderstandings will often occur to a person who doesn't know grammar well. Wilkins (1976) claimed that acquiring the grammatical system of the target language (TL) is of central importance because an inadequate knowledge of grammar would severely constrain linguistic creativity and limit the capacity for communication. Obviously, grammatical patterns are as important as lexical usage in language learning.

It is important to use language as accurately as possible. The more inaccurate the language, the greater the risk for miscommunication is between or among people in a communication event. Without correct grammar, many embarrassing situations will often be caused. "Linguistic accuracy acts as an insurance policy. It assures that the largest number of us shall always have the best opportunity to understand one another" (Mado, 2006, p.2). Accurate language helps us avoid miscommunication.

In English writing, a slight mistake can make readers laugh, but a serious error may cause some significant troubles. The importance of grammar in language learners' writing cannot be ignored. In the academic world, research papers are taken as the most important tool of communication. Researchers show their findings, claim their point of views, and present their arguments mainly through research paper writing. It is essential for researchers to write more accurately in order to enhance their research quality.

Although grammar plays such an important role in language learning, most Taiwanese students view it as the most difficult part of learning English. Even though most Taiwanese graduate students have spent more than ten years learning English, they still make many grammatical errors when writing up research in English. They struggle with connecting thinking with their writing while they are reporting research findings. For some research advisors, they are more concerned with the product rather than the process of writing the research, and they just take grammatical error-checking as errands; they rarely try to understand how and why students make these errors in their research paper.

However, errors carry some valuable and important information. Some errors occur more frequently than others in a specific group of language learners' writing. From each error, one can infer these writers' process of learning and the influence of their first language. Therefore, in order to observe and detect the weakness in language learning of these students, the researcher must investigate and analyze common grammatical errors Taiwanese students often make in English research based on previous studies.

## PREVIOUS STUDIES

In recent years, many studies have been conducted examining common errors in English

writing, the effect of checking grammatical errors in English writing, and the attitudes toward treating grammatical errors.

Kalkavage (1998) claimed that teachers need to stress the connection between students' writing and thinking. He found that disharmony between these two processes can lead to grammatical errors, such as run-on sentences. Anderson (2006) found many students in his English classroom struggled with some aspects of writing or grammar and are fearful of making mistakes whenever they take up writing. He advocated valuing students' deeper messages and helping them learn from their errors. Zamel (1985) examined ESL teachers' responses to student writing and found that ESL teachers make similar types of comments and tend to be more concerned with language-specific errors and problems. She claimed that teachers need to change their responding behavior and develop more appropriate responses to help students become good writers. Kroll and Schafer (1978) examined the connection between error analysis and found some possible sources of errors in ESL writers and shows how an understanding of the source of an error can be applied to help the writer move toward the correct form.

Some common errors in students' English writing have been reported. Shaughnessy (1977) found that at least four grammatical concepts underlie most of students' misunderstandings about forms: 1. the sentence; 2. inflection; 3. tense; and 4. agreement(pp.131-136). Davis (1988) reported the five most common errors made in his classroom of Troy High School, USA were as follows: 1. basic errors in spelling; 2. comma missing between independent clauses; 3. misspelling of homographs (to/too/ two, there/their/they' re, and so on); 4. punctuation of possessives; and 5. comma splice.

Several studies have analyzed the common errors in Chinese students' English writing. Pan and Wang (2005) examined the errors of non-English major' s Chinese students' writing and found that the common grammatical errors in those students' writings were misuse of parts of speech, verb tenses and voices, misspelling, and disagreement. Zhang (2003) showed particular errors are frequently committed by the college students in her study, e.g. lexical verb, article, misspelling, pronoun, idiom, and word choice. Zhang (2003) also noted second language (L2) learners commit errors largely because of the paucity of their knowledge of the TL. She found that language learners usually draw on adaptive and redeeming strategies, such as simplification, reduction, overgeneralization, transfer, formulaic language, omissions, substitutions, and restructuring in their interlanguage forms in order to fill the gap between inadequate proficiency and requirement of a task.

A number of research studies have been devoted to some specific errors Taiwanese students often make in English composition. Chen (2002) identified the characteristics and problems of university EFL writing in Taiwan. Chen found the most frequent errors the participants made were: (1) errors in word usage, (2) errors in tense, (3) errors in definite article usage, i.e., "the" , (4) errors in prepositions, (5) errors in verbs, (6) errors in number, singular or plural, (7) errors in relative clauses, (8) redundant usage. Yin (1996) analyzed English composition errors found in

an article filling test taken by Taiwanese high school students. Yin determined possible causes of article errors can be attributed to interference from Chinese, lack of linguistic knowledge of English, and hypercorrection. Bunton (1989) found Taiwanese students often use wrong words because of first language interference. Mandarin speakers are often confused by these words: “watch” , “look” , and “see” ; “voice” , “sound” , and “noise” ; “lend” and “borrow” . Li (2004) conducted a case study at Mei-Ho Institute of Technology in Taiwan, and she found the problems in English writing included interference of the mother tongue (Chinese), unclear grammatical concepts, inadequate vocabulary, etc. Huang (1994) probed the common errors in tense that Taiwanese students often make. Huang found that the most difficult tense form for students is the future perfect construction, and students make fewer errors on the simple future construction. Students are often confused by the changing of verb forms, such as, do-did-done-have done-had done.

However, there is little related research devoted to the common grammatical errors Taiwanese students often make in English research. The purpose of this study is to uncover the types of common grammatical errors Taiwanese students often make in English research, then classify and analyze them. It is hoped that a review of students’ errors will raise Taiwanese students’ awareness of their weaknesses and help them write more accurately and fluently in research paper. In addition, this study can also be valuable for ESL instructors as they may learn how to treat students’ grammatical errors in their research paper writing and help students become better writers.

## METHOD

A total of sixty-one writing samples were obtained from sixteen graduate students enrolled in a graduate TESL program in a college in the southeastern United States. Three of the students are male and the others are female. All of these students are from Taiwan and have studied English for more than ten years. These students’ native language is Chinese, which is also known as Mandarin. Each of these sixteen students was asked to write a literature review, method, result, and discussion as assignments for the Writing and Research II class.

An Associate Professor in the TESL program in this college was contacted and asked to assist with collecting his students’ writing samples. Written consent forms were distributed to the sixteen students in the Writing and Research II class requesting their consent to participate in this study. One hundred percent of the students agreed to provide their writing assignments.

The drafts of these sixteen students’ writing projects were checked by the professor first and then analyzed by the researcher. The frequency and percentage of each type of grammatical error was categorized to identify the common grammatical errors Taiwanese students often make in English writing.

## RESULT

Categories	Frequency	Percentage of total errors made	Percentages of students who committed the errors
1 Faulty Word Choice and Misuse of collocation	123	21.9%	94%
2 Misuse of Articles	118	21.0%	81%
3 Misuse of Verb forms	91	16.2%	67%
4. Awkward sentences	88	15.7%	50%
5. Misuse of Preposition	46	8.2 %	37%
6 Singular/plural	44	7.8 %	31%
7 Misuse of Punctuation	25	4.5%	31%
8. Misspelling	15	2.7%	31%
9. unclassified errors	11	2.0%	20%
Total	561	100%	

### Breakdown of Errors

Table 1 shows the eight common error categories, the frequency and the percentage of each type of error. 561 grammatical errors were detected in the sixty-one writing samples. Four outstanding categories were identified as the most common errors: 1. faulty word choice and misuse of collocation; 2. misuse of articles; 3. misuse of verb forms; and 4. awkward sentences. The frequency and percentage of these four categories are much higher than the other categories' in the table. It seems that most students have trouble using articles, using participles, choosing proper words, and using collocations in their writing. Also, they make sentences awkwardly; that is, they are sometimes unable to make explicit and correct sentences to express their ideas. Each of these four categories is exemplified with typical errors, which are diagnosed briefly below.

### Faulty word choices

The error of faulty word choices and the misuse of collocation is the first major type of error in students' writing found in this research. A total of 123 errors of misuse of articles were found and made up 21.9% of the total errors. 94 % of students made this kind of error. It seems that most students have difficulty in choosing the appropriate words to express their ideas. Followings are some examples quoted from these students' writing.

*E1: One hundred percent of students agreed to offer their writing projects. (x)*

*One hundred percent of students agreed to provide their writing assignments. (o)*

*E2: an excessive amount of students (x)*

*an excessive number of students (o)*

*E3: 75 teachers returned the surveys. (x)*

75 teachers returned the questionnaires (o)

E4: The members were all from different high schools. (x)

The participants were all from different high schools. (o)

E5: It was designed to analysis these children' s learning process. (x)

It was designed to analyze these children' s learning process.(o)

Take E1 for example: “offer” and “provide” are near synonyms which are more confusing to Taiwanese students. Though “offer” and “provide” can both be translated as “提供 tiguān”, they have differences in meaning in English. “Provide” means making something that someone needs or wants available for them to use after they ask you. But “offer” means asking somebody if he/she would like to have or use something that you can give. It usually has the meaning of dedication or volunteering.

In E2, the student had obviously intended to translate the Chinese noun “數量 sulian” in this sentence. What made the selection process more complicated is that the Chinese word “數量 sulian” has different English equivalents, e.g., number, amount, sum, quantity, etc., among which the student needed to make a choice. “The word ‘amount’ is used to denote quantity; the word ‘number’ is used when the objects involved can be counted” (Berry, 1961, p.4). The student chose the word “amount” which is used to denote quantity. Nevertheless, the object involved in this sentence “students” can be counted, so he should use the word “number” instead.

The misuse of “survey” in E3 was also directly influenced by the Chinese word “問卷 wenzhuan.” There are two English words corresponding to the Chinese word “問卷 wenzhuan” listed in the Chinese-English dictionary: survey and questionnaire. The student chose the wrong word without checking the words’ precise meaning. A survey is an investigation of the behavior, opinions, etc of a group of people; a questionnaire is a written or printed list of questions to be answered by a number of people. A survey can be carried out by giving questionnaires to a group of people, and the people who were surveyed should return the questionnaires, not the surveys.

In E4, the student used the improper word “member” to indicate the people who participated in his research. In academic research, the people participating in the study are called participants not members. Apparently, the student’ s limited vocabulary prevented him from writing accurately.

Likewise, the misuse of “analysis” in E5 resulted from the student’ s inadequate vocabulary. Although “analysis” and “analyze” can both be translated as “分析 fenci” in Chinese, they are different speech parts in English: “analysis” is a noun; “analyze” is a verb. It can be seen that the student was not aware of the difference of these different speech parts.

Another reason for making faculty word choices could be attributed to the lack of a good knowledge of English collocation. Some students are not familiar with the arrangement and juxtaposition of words or other elements, especially those that commonly co-occur and made errors

such as E6 and E7.

*E6: up to this(x)*

*according to this (o)*

*E7: to evaluate teachers satisfaction of using the material... (x)*

*... to evaluate teachers satisfaction with using the material... (o)*

### The articles

The misuse of articles is the second major type of error in students' writing found in this research. A total of 118 errors of misuse of articles were found and made up 21% of the total errors. 81 % of students made this kind of errors. This shows that the use of articles is very confusing for these students.

Take E1 and E2 for example:

*E 1: in elementary school (x)*

*in an elementary school (o)*

*E2: Students were asked to write literature review. (x)*

*Students were asked to write a literature review. (o).*

The students' omission of the indefinite article "an" and "a" might be due to language interference. In Chinese, it is not necessary to use indefinite articles before singular and countable nouns.

"The" typically appears 6 to 7 times for each 100 English words, and it is the most commonly used English article. However, the usage of the definite article is more complicated than any other grammar rule. Generally speaking, the definite article "the" signals the reader that the noun is specific, not arbitrary, and not new to the reader, and the noun followed by "a" or "an" refers to something new with which the readers are not familiar. Some students have trouble distinguishing between old and new information. Following is an example:

*E3: The problems identified by 150 Taiwanese high school English teachers are listed in Table 3. (x)*

*Problems identified by 150 Taiwanese high school English teachers are listed in Table 3. (o)*

E3 is the first sentence quoted from a student's result section of his Writing and Research II assignment. He did not mention anything about the noun "problems" in the previous passage, so he should not put the definite article "the" in front of the word "problems."

The findings also show that students are often confused with whether to use "the" or not. Some possible reasons for the students' errors are listed below and examples are given to illustrate.

The usage of the definite article may be too detailed and too difficult for Taiwanese students to memorize. "The" should be used when referring to specific proper nouns. In E4, the student made an error of omitting "the" before "Taiwanese government." In E5, the student made an error of omitting "the" before "Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS)." Both "Taiwanese government" and "Statistical Package for Social Science" are proper nouns.

*E 4: It' s essential for Taiwanese government to... (x)*

*It' s essential for the Taiwanese government to... (o)*

*E5 ...by using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS)... (x)*

*...by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS)... (o)*

When referring to direction, students should put “the” immediately before the adjective. E 6 is an example of omitting the definite article.

*E 6: in south of Taiwan (x)*

*in the south of Taiwan (o)*

“The” should be added when using the phrase “Noun + of” , and E7 is an example of omitting the definite article.

*E 7: the meaning of text... (x)*

*the meaning of the text (o)*

Sometimes students overuse “the” in their writings because of overgeneralization. As illustrated in E8, the student should not use “the” in this phrase because he did not refer to any specific period of time and the period of time “recent years” was not mentioned in the previous passages in his writing.

*E 8: in the recent years (x)*

*in recent years (o)*

Apparently the student did not pay close attention to usage rules governing whether an article is necessary with a particular noun or noun phrase and, if so, whether the required articles should be definite or indefinite. Another reason for omitting the infinite article is that these students are not familiar with the idioms or phrases with “a” , such as “a number of” , “a total of” , and “a range of” . Usually idioms do not follow ordinary usage rules but include the presence or absence of an article as part of their forms. E9 to E11 are examples.

*E 9: dealing with range of English proficiency levels... (x)*

*...dealing with a range of English proficiency levels... (o)*

*E10: total of 150 teachers... (x)*

*a total of 150 teachers... (o)*

*E11...with the percentage of 71... (x)*

*...with a percentage of 71... (o)*

### **The verb form**

The misuse of verb forms is the third major type of error in students’ writing found in this research. A total of 91 errors of misuse of verb forms were found and representing 16.2% of the total number of errors. 67 % of students made this kind of error.

Judging from the contexts, the marked words demonstrate a striking deviance from the correct word usages. Students were not familiar with the five forms that every verb has, including simple present, simple past, past participle, present participle, and infinitive. Students are especially confused with the two varieties of participles: past and present. They have trouble using

participles as adjectives in sentences. In these writing samples, many errors of adding “ed” and “ing” after verbs were detected. The reason may be that students do not have the sense of active and passive voice. As shown in the examples which follow, students may not be able to distinguish whether the action is done to the subject described by the phrase or the action in the participle phrase is one which the subject actively performs in sentences.

*E1...the most common material \*using to teach culture... (x)*

*the most common material used to teach culture... (o)*

*E2...and high-proficient learners will use top-down strategies \*emanate from the learners' background or real-world knowledge. (x)*

*...and high-proficient learners will use top-down strategies emanating from the learners' background or real-world knowledge. (o)*

*E3 Culture is an integrated pattern of human behavior \*contained everything in the society. (x)*

*Culture is an integrated pattern of human behavior containing everything in the society. (o)*

*E4 The thirty young children were \*dividing into two groups. (x)*

*The thirty young children were divided into two groups. (o)*

#### **Awkward sentences**

The fourth major error in students' English research writing was categorized as unclear and awkward sentences. A total of 88 errors were labeled as awkward sentences and made up 15.7% of the total number of errors. 50 % of students made this kind of error. Some students combined two or more segments in a confusing or inaccurate manner. Some sentences were so awkwardly written that the professor could not correct them and simply put a question mark or wrote “awkward sentence” next to a sentence or phrase. The following examples reflect this problem.

*E1. The purpose of this research is to investigate present elementary ESL teachers should teach what kind of effective reading skills for students to face future academic learning in Taiwan.*

In E1, the construction is so deeply flawed as to require a complete rewriting. Obviously, the student arranged the word order according to Chinese syntax.

*E2. The research was designed to expose learners to the full range of stimuli to assist the construction of obtaining English capability.*

E2 does not make any sense. The professor did not know what meaning the student was attempting to convey.

*E3. There were 30 percent of ESL teachers from 5 universities in the south part of Taiwan had been chosen randomly. (Wrong)*

*Thirty percent of ESL teachers from 5 universities in the south part of Taiwan were randomly surveyed. (Improved)*

E3 is a sentence with a mixed construction and the modifying adverb was also misplaced.

*E4. There were two groups of students who are in the same level had studied English for two years and they were chosen to ... (Wrong)*

*Two groups of students at the same level who had studied English for two years were chosen to ... (Improved)*

E4 is also a sentence with a mixed construction, and the student did not maintain consistency in his use of tense.

*E5. There were 750 elementary school teachers who were teaching a second language were selected... (Wrong)*

*The population of the study included 750 elementary school teachers who were teaching a second language... (Improved)*

E5 is another sentence with a mixed construction. The student failed to convey the meaning concisely and correctly. There are many awkward sentences similar to E4 and E5 in these writing samples. It appears that many students are incapable of making relative sentences correctly.

Another reason for these awkward sentences may be the writers' carelessness. The researcher found some students made errors in one sentence, such as incomplete sentences and redundant phrases, but wrote correctly in other passages requiring the same grammatical rules.

## DISCUSSION

The major findings of this research mostly coincide with the findings and claims of previous studies on the common grammatical errors in Chinese /Taiwanese students' English compositions. These findings provide evidence that the three common grammatical errors can be attributed to (1) interference from first language, (2) lack of grammar knowledge, and (3) lack of practice.

The most common grammatical errors in Taiwanese students' English research writing resulted from the L1 interference. Many students translated words or sentence patterns directly from Chinese without checking the words' precise meanings and following the grammatical rules. In order to eliminate these errors and enhance learners' writing ability, we should urge learners to think in English while they are writing English. In research paper writing, some conventions and principles of pragmatics should be memorized. Learners should read more and learn more phrases and expressions, as well as academic collocations from other English research papers. From abundant reading, students will learn how to express their ideas with correct word selection and sentence patterns.

Some grammar rules could be too detailed to be memorized, such as the use of the definite article "the." One way to eliminate this kind of error could also be abundant reading. Another reason for students' committing these grammatical errors is the lack of practice. As Pan and Wang (2005) have noted, "the problem of lack of practice may be traced to the over-reliance on multiple-choice questions to educate and test secondary school students and college students' (p.59). Students are quite accustomed to multiple choice questions but lack practice of writing on their own. In addition, as Ene & Vickers (2006) indicated, it is helpful to provide chances for

students to compare their own use of grammatical form in their own written output to the use of grammatical form as used in a text written by a native speaker. Such a comparison task is beneficial in allowing learners to make gains in grammatical accuracy.

Moreover, “overgeneralization” should be also concerned as one reason of students’ grammatical errors. Some students’ grammatical errors could be attributed to overuse some grammatical rules they have acquired. Thus, understanding students’ interlanguage process may be helpful for probing students’ writing problems.

Actually, research paper writing requires writers’ conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing idea (Myles, 2002). Students need more practice in independent writing in order to become skilled writers. Writing often helps students become more familiar with grammar rules and write more accurately. Also, careful proofreading is necessary as some incomplete sentences, redundant phrases and misspellings result from the writer’s carelessness.

In previous studies, researchers have found that students make many errors in spelling. However, misspelling is not one of the major error types found in this study. One possible reason might be students’ use of computers while completing their assignments. The word processor checks students’ spelling, thus many errors of misspelling can be avoided.

The small scale of this study is one limitation of this research. This study focused on sixteen graduate students enrolled in the same program. The research approach outlined in this study should be replicated in other areas, as well as with more students studying in different fields, in order to gain a wider and deeper understanding of the types and causes of the grammatical errors Taiwanese students commit when writing up research in English.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

For EFL learners, the process of writing in an academic environment is very challenging (Myles, 2002). Some suggested ways to improve research writing are drawing students’ attention to the difference between Chinese and English, continual writing practice, and abundant reading of myriad published research reports. This should help students eventually acquire the fundamentals of academic discourse.

The error analysis of frequent grammatical errors in Taiwanese student writing in this report revealed some features of these students’ composing process. Additional research may help to explain more about their learning strategies, the role of translation, and the transfer of skills.

Although this research is limited, there is still a direct application for ESL students and instructors based on these results. These results may be used as reminders for writers to avoid making similar errors while they are writing English research. When combined with related error analysis, this research should be proved very useful to instructors in making more informed decisions when treating students’ errors. Having this reminder in mind, we teachers can see

through flawed language and understand exactly how each student needs help on each count (Chen, 2000).

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# The common grammatical errors Taiwanese students often make in

## English research

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### Abstract

This study attempted to uncover the types of grammatical errors Taiwanese students often make in writing up research in English. It aimed to identify the errors students make, then classify them and analyze their causes. This study focused on analyzing students' grammatical errors in their Writing and Research II class assignments. The subjects were 16 Taiwanese students in a graduate TESL program in a college in the southeastern United States. The subjects' grammatical errors fell into four major types: (1) faulty word choice and misuse of collocation, (2) misuse of articles, (3) misuse of verb forms, and (4) awkward sentences. The causes of these errors can be attributed to three sources: (1) interference of L1, (2) lack of grammar knowledge, and (3) lack of practice.

The researcher suggests that to prevent these errors, students must draw their attention to the differences between Chinese and English, and then keep writing and keep reading myriad published research articles to improve their academic writing skills. It is hoped that this research can raise students' awareness of common grammatical errors and offer instructors some valuable information for enhancing the quality of Taiwanese students' English research.



**Keywords:** grammatical error, English research, Taiwanese student