# Chapter Six

## THE GRAMMATICAL ERRORS OF THE STUDENTS LEARNING THE CHINESE LANGAUGE AT NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA

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**Abstract**

*Learning a second language is difficult and error making is inevitable. At first sight, it may seem rather odd to focus on what learners get wrong rather than on what they get right. However, there are good reasons for focusing on errors. First, errors are conspicuous features of learner language; second, they are useful for teachers; third, paradoxically, it is possible that making errors may actually help learners to learn when they self-correct the errors they make. This study examines the errors students make in the learning of Chinese Language at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria. In order to find out the errors committed by the students, students' past examination scripts in pinyin and character writing and essay writing were the data used. The scripts were randomly selected and analysed. Findings from the analysis, it showed that the students commit grammatical errors and other errors. Mother tongue interference and inadequate exposure to the Chinese language environment were discovered to be the likely causes of the errors. At the end of the study, conclusion was drawn.*

## Introduction

The Chinese language is one of the oldest languages in the world with its earliest written records going as far back as more than 3,000 years ago (Peihui 9). What is usually referred to as Chinese language is in fact the language of China's largest nationality, the *Hans. Hanyu* or *Mandarin* is China's official language. Modern Chinese is spoken not only by people of the *Han* ethnic group, but also by all ethnic groups of the Chinese nation as the common vehicle of communication.

The Chinese language belongs to a separate branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. It is a contour tone language. It has many dialect groups. They include *Mandarin, Wu, Min, Cantonese, Hsiang*, *Hakka*. In their spoken form most of the so-called dialects are mutually unintelligible (Peihui 56).

The study of the Chinese language started many centuries ago by the Westerners. Today, millions of people from America, Europe, Asia and Africa study the Chinese language. Because of the demand in learning the Chinese language, the Chinese Government established an institute for Chinese language studies called "*Confucius Institute*" in 2006. Today, there are hundreds of these institutes all over the world especially in the United States

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of America and in the Asian continent. In Africa, there are about ten Confucius Institutes. Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka is the first in Nigeria. The researcher happened to be one of the directors of the Confucius Institute. He is also a Chinese language lecturer at both the Confucius Institute and Department of African and Asian studies of the university. The researcher has been teaching Chinese language for about two years now at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

## Error and Error Analysis

### Concept of Error

Many linguists, scholars and analysts have given various definitions to "errors", particularly errors in the target language. Errors generally arise from learner's difficulties.

Errors according to Headbloom (30) are goofs or deviant productions. They are the systematic deviation from the target language by a non-native speaker. Myles (5) defines error as a derailment in the speech or writing of a second language learner by the use of inappropriate words or language structures. He sees errors as something that must happen from time to time until the second language learner internalizes the language entirely. He argues that the second language teacher can only assess the learner's ability from the range or type of errors they make.

To Corder (260), errors breach the code of a language. They are deviant structures or unacceptable utterances which are signs of imperfect knowledge of the linguistic code. He sees errors as being quite distinct from mistakes. From his analysis, errors are mostly committed by those not proficient in the language structures while mistakes are just minor slips or lapses that may result from fatigue, restlessness and inattentiveness.

In Ellis (32), errors are seen as deviations from the target language by a non-native speaker. These errors, he further explains are committed out of sociolinguistic and socio-cultural factors. To support Ellis' view, Taylor (52) states that errors are unacceptable deviation by the majority of speakers of the major dialect of any language. In the same line of reasoning, Krashen (64) accepts that errors are deviations from the norms of a language. He argues that there may be no firm agreement about a language norm owing to the fact that languages have different varieties and dialects with rules that differ from the standard ones.

Anasiudu (113), defines error as "any deviance in linguistic performance that is systematic". Ubahakwe (32) also advocates that errors are remarkably systematic and uniform regardless of the first language involved. He went further to say that errors are systematic and should be seen as an important source of information to students and teachers. Beeves (135) maintain that errors are by nature systematic infringement of the normal rules of language.

Errors have been classified by Corder (52) as a distinction made between errors of competence and errors of performance. According to Corder (52):

> Errors of competence are the result of application of rules by the $L_2$ learner which do not (yet) correspond to the $L_2$ norm. Errors of performance are the result of mistakes in language use and manifest themselves as repeats, false start, corrections or slip of the tongue.

**Error Analysis**

Error analysis is an important development in language teaching and learning. It is a process by which second language learner's difficulties are diagnosed and categorized for effective learning. Error analysis developed out of the belief that errors indicate the learner's stage of language learning and development. The learner is seen as an active participant in the development of hypothesis regarding rules of the target language.

Hartman and Stock (121), define error analysis in language teaching and testing as the technique of measuring progress, by recording and classifying the mistakes made by individuals or groups of students. Error analysis can also be defined as a branch of applied linguistics which is concerned with a systematic process of identifying and exploring $L_1$ (Mother tongue) and $L_2$ (second Language) learner errors which are re-occasioned by both inter-language ($L_1$) interference and intra-language (developmental) problem.

Error analysis involves the identification and interpretation of errors based on vigorous analysis, that is, errors that are hidden or not easily identifiable and those that are obvious, inter-lingua and training transfer as well as errors, due to communication and methods of learning.

The most significant contribution of error analysis lies in its success in elevating the status of error from undesirability to that of a guide to the inner workings of the language learning process. Error analysis is a procedure used by both researchers and teachers. It involves collecting samples of learner's language, identifying the errors in the sample, describing those errors, classifying them according to their hypothesized courses and evaluating their seriousness. Error analysis helps to determine and measure the relative strength of deviant expressions in relation to the correct forms in the target language.

**Grammatical Errors in Chinese Language Studies**

Grammatically, Chinese language seems simple. The sentence order is generally subject-verb-object, just as it is in English, and adjectives come before nouns, just as they do in English. But, in Chinese, there are no plurals, no articles, and no verb conjugations. Other key features of Chinese grammar include the following. This is based on Chenge (107):

i.    The subject of sentences is generally not expressed when it is obvious from the context.

ii.     Possession is shown by using the word 'de' between the pronoun and noun.
iii.    A "measure word" is always used between the number and noun when referring to a number of quantity of people or things. There are different measure words for various types of people and things.
iv.     The Chinese language does not have precise words for "yes" and "no". Although there are terms that have similar meanings, the Chinese generally use the negative or positive of the appropriate verb or adjective to express these concepts.

Although Chinese grammar is not very difficult yet students learning the Chinese language commit many grammatical errors. Here, we shall limit our study to errors in the use of pronouns, use of 'de', use of 'shì', use of measure words. In each of these, we shall use five examples:

**Errors in the Use of Pronoun**
For the purpose of this study, we shall look into the personal pronouns in the Chinese language. These pronouns shall be listed along side with their English counterparts. They are as follows:

|     | **Chinese Pronoun** | **English Pronoun** |
|-----|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1.  | nǐ你                | you (singular)      |
| 2.  | nín您               | you (sing., use for elders) |
| 3.  | nǐmen你 ˙           | you (plural)        |
| 4.  | nínmen您 ˙          | you (plural for elders) |
| 5.  | wǒ我                | I/me                |
| 6.  | wǒmen我 ˙           | we                  |
| 7.  | tā他                | he/him              |
| 8.  | tā她                | she/her             |
| 9.  | tā它                | it                  |
| 10. | tāmen他 ˙           | they (for male)     |
| 11. | tāmen她 ˙           | they (for female)   |
| 12. | tāmen它 ˙           | they (for inanimate) |

**Table:** Chinese and English personal pronouns

Below are the explanations of some examples of the errors students make in the use of pronouns. From the past examination script, students were asked to fill the blank with the correct pronoun. The question, students' answer/error and the correct form shall be given in each of the example.

(1.) a. Míngtiān, wǒmen qù yóuyǒng.
'We will go swimming tomorrow.'
b.Nǐmen ne? 'What about you'

c._____ bù xiǎng qù.

d. *Nǐmen* bù xiǎng qù. 'You don't want to go.'(error)

e. *Wǒmen* bù xiǎng qù. 'we don't want to go' (correct form)

Here, the students' error is a wrong choice of pronoun. The plural pronoun of 'you' (nǐmen) was used instead of plural pronoun of 'we' (wǒmen).

(2.) a.Wǒ yǒu yi ge nü péngyou. 'I have a female friend'

b._____ shì zhōnguórén ma?

c. Tā(他) shì zhōngguórén.(student's error)

d. Tā(她) shì zhōngguórén.'He is a chinese'(correct form)

Here, the student was not able to differentiate between male pronoun 'tā'(他)' and female pronoun 'tā'(她)'. They are same in pronunciation and pinyin spelling but different in character.

(3.) a.Tā shì wǒmen de lǎoshī. 'He is our teacher.'

    b. Lǎoshi,____ hǎo!

    c. Lǎoshī, nǐ hǎo! (student's error)

   d. Lǎoshī, nín hǎo! 'Teacher, how are you'(correct form)

Here, the student's error was using 'nǐ'(你) for the teacher instead of 'nín'(您). 'Nín' is used for elders, seniors in age and rank. It shows respect and politeness.

(4.)a. Zhè shì Wǎng lǎoshī,Wǔ lǎoshī hē Zhāo lǎoshī

'This is teacher Wang, teacher Wu and teacher Zhao'

    b. _____ hǎo.

    c. Nǐmen hǎo. (student's error)

    d. Nínmen hǎo. 'Hi everybody' (correct form)

'Nǐmen' and 'nínmen' mean 'you'(plural) but the latter is used for senior more than one or more teachers together, he should say, 'nínmen hǎo'.

(5.)a. Ta(它) shì shēnme? 'What is it?

    b._____ shì gǒu.

    c. Tā(他) shì gǒu. (student's error)

    d. Tā(它) shì gǒu. (correct form)

Here, the student's error was wrong choice of pronoun. 'tā'(他)'(he) was used instead of 'tā'(它)'(it). The latter is used only for animate and inanimate things.

Generally, pronouns in Chinese language are not very difficult yet students commit errors in the use of these pronouns. It is caused by students' low level of proficiency in Chinese language, and lack of exposure to the Chinese language environment. These students learn

the Chinese language only in a classroom without having opportunity to practice their spoken Chinese.

**Errors in the Use of 'De' (Possession)**

In Chinese grammar, 'de' is used to show possession. It is placed immediately after the pronoun or noun that serves as subject of a sentence, before an object of possession. When the subject is relating to the subject the family members and country, 'de' can be used or omitted. For example, one can say, "wǒ bàba" or "wǒ de bàba" (my father); "wǒmen guójiā" or "wǒmen de guójiā" (our country). But one cannot say, "wǒ chē" rather "wǒ de chē" (my car). Below are some examples of students' errors in the use of 'de' as they were written in their past examination scripts. The assignment was, '*put 'de' at the right position*'.

(6.)a. Wǒ __ shū__ méiyǒu__ le__ . (question)

    b. Wǒ shū *de* měiyǒu le.          (error)

    c.Wǒ *de* shū měiyǒu le. 'My book is lost'(correct form)

      Here, the student's error was wrong placement of 'de'. It should be placed in between 'wǒ' (I) and 'shū' (book) instead of 'shū' (book) and 'méiyǒu' (have not).

(7.) a. Wǒmen__ guójiā__ shíjiān__.                    (question)

    b. Wǒmen *de* guójiā shíjiān.          (error)

c. Wǒmen guójiā *de* shíjiān. 'our country time' (correct form)

Here, the student's error was the wrong placement of 'de'. 'de' should be placed in between 'guójiā' (country) and 'shíjiān' (time), like this 'guójiā de shíjiān' (country's time). Note that 'de' can be used or omitted in between 'wǒmen' and 'guójiā'.

(8.) a. Wǎng ___ chē___ hǎokàn___.                    (question)

b. Wǎng chē *de* hǎokan.                 (error)

c. Wǎng *de* chē hǎokan. 'Wang's car is fine'(correct form).

      Here, the error was wrong placement of 'de' in between 'chē' (car) and 'hǎokàn' (fine), instead of in between 'Wǎng' (name) and 'chē' (car).

(9.)a. Tāmen__lǎoshī__hěn__hǎo__.        (question)

b. Tāmen lǎoshi hěn *de* hǎo.                  (error)

c. Tāmen *de* lǎoshi hěn hǎo.'Their teacher is good.'(cf)

Here, the error was wrong placement of 'de' in between 'hěn' (very) and 'hǎo' (good). It should be placed in between 'tāmen' (they) and 'lǎoshī' (teacher) which shows possession as in 'tāmen de lǎoshī' (their teacher).

(10.)a. Wǒ __bú__yào__tā__.                    (question)

    b. Wǒ bú yào *de* tā.                    (error)

    c. Wǒ bú yào tā *de*. 'I don't want his.'    (correct form).

Here, the error was wrong placement of 'de'. It was placed before 'tā' (he/she) instead of after 'tā' (he/she). 'tā de' means 'his/her'.

**Errors in the Use of 'Shi' (Verb To Be)**
In Chinese grammar, 'shi' (verb to be) can serve as '*am, is, was, are, were*' as in English language. There is no verb conjugation in the Chinese language. Therefore, 'shì' remains unchanged in tense, gender, and case. But 'shì' can be omitted in certain sentences. Below are some examples of errors students make in the use of 'shì' as they were identified from their past examination scripts of essay writing.

(11.)  Hànyǔ *shì* hěn nán.                    (error)
 Hànyǔ hěn nán. '*Chinese is very difficult*' (correct form)
 'Shì' is not needed in this kind of sentence. Students commit this error because of L2 interference (English language). "Hànyǔ hěn hǎo" looks like phrase because it contains no verb but it is a complete sentence. This is also applicable to other similar examples below.

(12.)  Wǒ *shì* hěn gāoxìng.                    (error)
    Wǒ hěn gāoxìng. '*I am very happy*'        (correct form)
    'shì' is not needed in this kind of sentence.

(13.) Wǒ nírìlìyà rén.                    (error)
     Wǒ shì nírìlìyà rén.  '*I am a Nigerian*'    (correct form)
     Here, the error is that 'shì' was omitted. Sentences starting with the phrase '*I am…*' in Chinese language require verb "shì". For example, "wǒ shì …" (I'm…), "tā shì" (he/she is…), "nín shì…" (You are), etc

(14.) Wǒ *shì* chī fàn.            (error)
    Wǒ chì fàn. 'I am eating'        (correct form) 'shì' is not needed in this kind of sentence.

(15.) Zhōngguó *shì* hěn yuán.            (error)
     Zhōngguó hěn yuán. 'China is very far'    (correct form)
     'shì' is not needed in this kind of sentence.

**Errors in the Use of Measure Words**
In Chinese grammar, the use of measure words is of paramount importance. One of the difficulties in learning Chinese language is the mastery of the measure words. Measure words

are quantifiers. They are used in between number and noun, and every noun has its own measure word. For example, the measure word for trouser is different from the measure word for shirt. This is unlike English and Igbo language which are the languages the researcher's students speak. Below are some of the examples of errors in the use of measure words committed by students. The following are the past examination questions.

*Questions*: fill the blank with the correct measure word.

        (i) sān___ shū.

        (ii) wǒ yǒu yī ___ chē.

        (iii) tā de jiā yǒu wǔ___ rén.


        (iv) bā___ bàozhǐ.

        (v) wǒmen yǒu sì____ lǎoshī.


Below are the students' answers/errors and their explanations.

(16.)    sān *zhāng* shū                          (error)

          sān *běn* shū                        (correct form) *'three books'*

                (glossary)

Here, the error was the wrong choice of the measure word for book. The student wrote 'zhāng' (measure word for level objects like picture, floor, and paper) instead of 'běn' (measure word for books, newspapers not included).


(17.)    Wǒ yǒu yī *gē* chē.             (error)

          Wǒ yǒu yí *liàng* chē.         (correct form)

          *'I have a car'*               (glossary)


Here, the error was the wrong choice of the measure word. 'liàng' is the right measure word for car.


(18.)    Tā de jiā yǒu wǔ *ge* rén.        (error)

          Tā de jiā yǒu wǔ *kǒu* rén      (correct form)

          *'His family consists of five persons'*   (glossary)


Here, the error was the wrong choice of the measure word. 'kǒu' is the measure word for numbering members of family.

(19.)    sān *běn* bàozhǐ                    (error)

          sān *zhāng* bàozhǐ              (correct form)

          *'Three newspapers'*            (glossary)


Here, the error was the wrong choice of the measure word. 'zhāng' is the measure word for newspaper not 'běn'. 'běn' is the measure word for books.

(20.)    Wǒmen yǒu sì *ge* lǎoshi         (error)

Wǒmen yǒu sì *wèi* lǎoshi.            (correct form)
'*We have four teachers*'            (        glossary)

Here, the error was the omission of the measure word for teacher 'wèi'. 'ge' is the measure word for 'rén' (person).

Measure word is a difficult feature of the Chinese language. There is no formula for knowing which particular measure word to use. The secret is learning and mastering their usages one by one. 'ge' is seen to serve as the universal measure word. It can be used in place of other measure words when the right one is not known in the spoken Chinese.
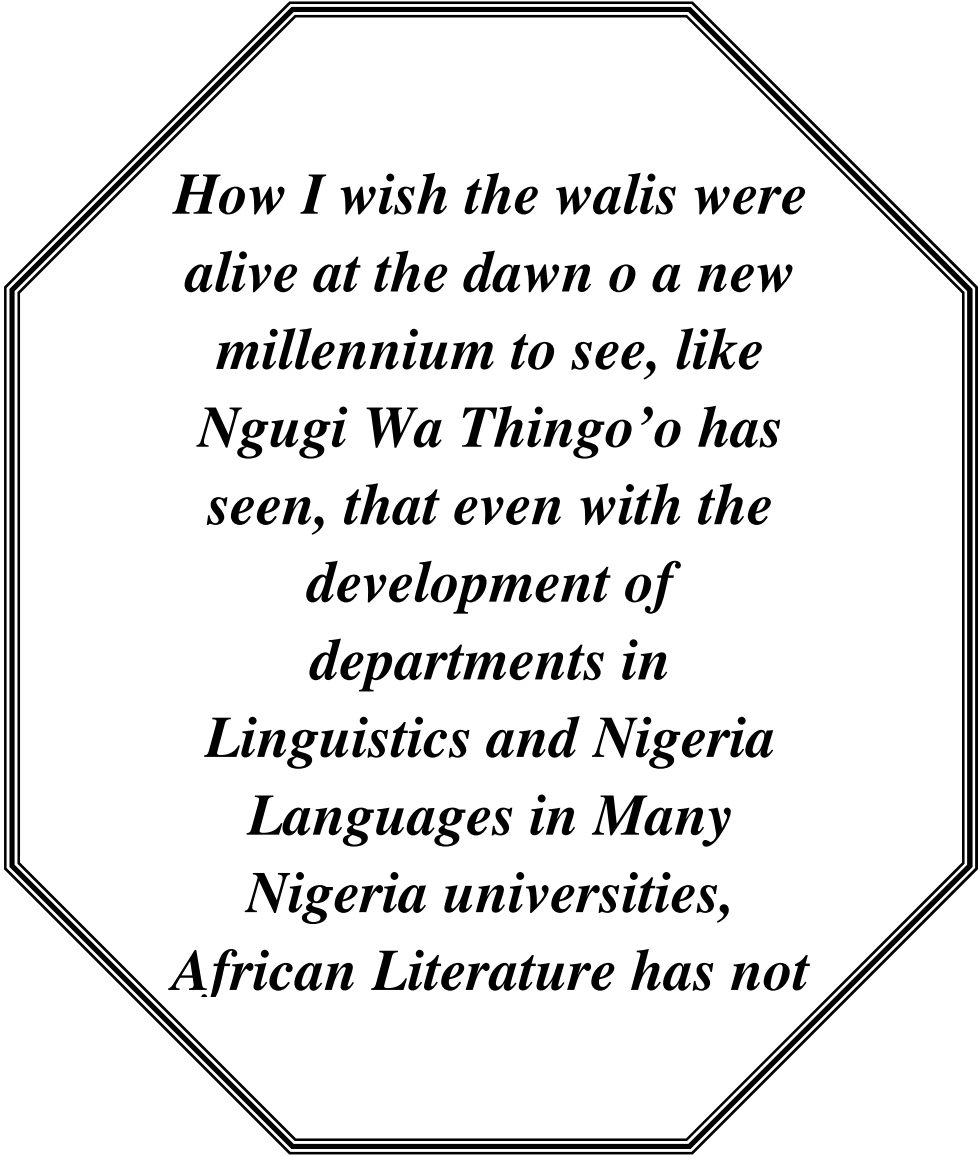
**Conclusion**
Errors are conspicuous features of learner language. They are also useful to the teachers. It is possible that making errors may actually help learners to learn when they self-correct the errors they make. Grammatical errors seem to be the most difficult errors students commit in learning a foreign language. Although Chinese grammar is not that difficult, yet the students commit grammatical errors ranging from the use of pronouns, use of 'de', use of 'shì', and use of measure words.

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*How I wish the walis were
alive at the dawn o a new
millennium to see, like
Ngugi Wa Thingo'o has
seen, that even with the
development of
departments in
Linguistics and Nigeria
Languages in Many
Nigeria universities,
African Literature has not*