A Corpus-Based Analysis of *although* Errors in Chinese EFL Learners' Written Output

Jingwen Chen[1*]

[1] School of International Studies, Sun Yat-sen University, Zhuhai, China

[*] Jingwen Chen, E-mail: evechansis@126.com

Abstract

The subordinating conjunction "although" is frequently used in English and is considered easy for students to master by many Chinese English teachers. However, errors are often found in Chinese EFL learners' "although" output during pedagogical practice. This paper aims to explore and analyze common errors of "although" in Chinese EFL learners' writing. The study is a corpus-based analysis launched under the computer-aided error analysis framework which is a new practice developed from the error analysis hypothesis. Errors of "although" found in texts from the Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC) are extracted and analyzed. Qualitative and quantitative analyses are conducted in the study. According to the findings, there are four major types of "although" errors found in Chinese EFL learners' writing—but/yet addition, punctuation errors, "although" misuse, and omissions and blends. Factors such as interlingual difference between English and Mandarin Chinese, intralingual interference within the English language system, pedagogical neglect in English classrooms and different cognitive styles are potential causes of Chinese EFL learners' "although" errors.

Keywords

corpus-based study, "although" errors, computer-aided error analysis, Chinese EFL learners

1. Introduction

Although is a common English conjunction. In *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (6th ed.), there are only two meanings or usages of *although*, namely 1) used for introducing a statement that makes the main statement in a sentence seem surprising, such as *Although small, the kitchen is well designed*; and 2) used to mean "but" or "however" when you are commenting on a statement, such as *I felt he was wrong, although I didn't say so at the time* (2004, p. 48). In Chinese EFL classrooms, *although* is usually taught at the early stage of learning soon after students' acquisition of *but* and *though*. Many English teachers in China assume that it is easy for Chinese EFL learners to

master *although*. However, despite the easy-to-acquire assumption, problems and errors of *although* often appear in Chinese EFL learners' output.

With the development of corpus linguistics, corpus-based studies have been conducted to examine and explain language phenomena. The construction of English learner corpora has made quantitative investigation in errors of certain English lexical items or grammatical constructions more convenient. The present study will analyze Chinese EFL learners' *although* errors using data from the Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC) under the analytical framework of computer-aided error analysis. As *although* is mostly used in written English, only the Chinese EFL learners' written output is examined in the present study.

Based on the goal of the study, research questions are proposed as follows.

1) What major errors are there in Chinese EFL Learners' *although* employment?

2) What are the potential causes of the found *although* errors?

2. An Overview of *although*

According to Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan (1999/2000, p. 85), *although* belongs to the category of subordinators or subordinating conjunctions in structural English grammar. "Subordinators are words which introduce (mainly finite) dependent clauses. Grammatically, subordinators have a purely syntactic role, and this distinguishes them from other clause initiators" (ibid). Specifically, *although* is one of the subordinators which introduce adverbial clauses of concession, also known as concessive clauses. As explained in *Collins COBUILD English Grammar*, people will utter a concessive clause when they "want to make two statements, one of which contrasts with the other or makes it seem surprising" (1990, p. 264). Despite Biber et al.'s argument of subordinators introducing mainly finite dependent clauses, *although* can be used in non-finite concessive clauses. For example, people can say *although liking coffee, I never drank too much* as well as *although I like coffee, I never drank too much* (c.f. *Collins COBUILD English Grammar*, 1990, p. 265). Moreover, *although* can be followed by noun groups, adjective groups and adjuncts. All the following sentences are correct:

Although fond of Gregory, she did not love him.

It was an unequal marriage, although a stable and long-lasting one.

They agreed to his proposal, although with many reservations (ibid).

Other than the concessiveness of *although*, Iten (2000) indicates that *although* has an "adversative" meaning. For example, in *He has long legs although he is a bit short of breath*, the dependent *although* clause possesses a negation of the implication of the main clause. In addition, Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985) point out that *although* and *though* can connect two clauses with similar situations such as in *Although Sam had told the children a bedtime story, June told them one too (anyway)* (1985, p. 1099).

Carbonell-Olivares (2009) applies the Theme theory of systemic functional grammar to clarify the discourse function of *although*. When *although* is at the initial placement of a concessive clause, it

430

introduces known/given information in the thematic position, and when *although* appears at the medial placement, it introduces new information in the rhematic position.

3. Theoretical Foundation and Analytical Framework

3.1 Error Analysis Hypothesis (EAH)

Error Analysis (EA) has a long history and tradition. Before the early 1970s, as pointed out by Ellis (1985/1999, p. 51), the goals of traditional EA were mainly pedagogic and the process of EA lacked proper theoretical framework to explain errors' role in second language acquisition. Moreover, the definition of "error" was unclear. The attention drawn to EA declined as the behaviorist learning theory prospered and contrastive analysis caught researchers' attention. It was not until the late 1960s that EA stimulated a revival of interest. Researchers such as Corder and Richards took advantage of the resurgence and provided new direction for EA.

Error in EAH was first defined by Corder who made a clear distinction between "mistake" and "error". Mistakes are random and unsystematic slips of tongue or pen that "due to memory lapses, physical states such as tiredness and psychological conditions such as strong emotion" (Corder, 1967). L2 learners are able to recognize their mistakes immediately and "correct them with more or less complete assurance" (ibid). Errors refer to the systematic errors of the learners from which the L2 knowledge of the learners or their "transitional competence" as Corder puts it, can be observed and reconstructed. According to Corder, "mistakes are of no significance to the process of language learning… a learner's errors, then, provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using at a particular point in the course" (1967).

The definition of "error" is unanimous in EAH while the classification of error is diverse and complicated. For example, Corder (1971) classifies errors as "error of competence" and "error of performance" and further divides the former into "intralingual error" and "interlingual error", while Richards (1975) proposes a third type of errors which he calls "developmental errors". The present study adopts a diagnosis-based classification for the sake of research convenience in which errors are classified into: 1) interlingual error; 2) intralingual error; 3) induced error; and 4) cognitive error.

Errors in EA are regarded as "inevitable and indeed necessary part of the learning process" (Corder, 1971). Hence, it is significant to analyze L2 learners' errors. Corder (1981, pp. 10-11) believes that EA is significant in three aspects: 1) Teachers are able to gain understanding of what stage a learner is at on learning the L2; 2) Learners' errors can provide researchers with evidence to study how language is acquired or learned and what strategies learners employ during the learning process; 3) Errors can aid learners themselves to test their hypotheses about the L2 rules and progress through continuously testing and refining their L2 knowledge. As for the development of EFL acquisition in China, EA also plays a key role. Yang and Zhang (2007, pp. 253-254) reckon that EA can help Chinese EFL researchers clarify the characteristics and weaknesses of Chinese EFL learners so that Chinese-EFL-learner-targeted teaching approaches and syllabuses can be properly built.

431

3.2 Computer-Aided Error Analysis (CEA)

The computer-aided error analysis framework, a new practice of error analysis, is the analytical framework of the present study. CEA was initiated at the late 1990s when the construction of learner corpora was at its height and researchers of second language acquisition started to combine corpus-based methods in their research. The CEA framework complements the traditional EA approach by taking advantage of computer learner corpora and contrastive interlanguage analysis techniques.

Weaknesses and limitations of EA have long been criticized since the 1970s. Forceful criticisms towards EA include: 1) EA puts "exclusive focus on overt errors" (Dagneaux, Denness, & Granger 1998), which pays no attention to covert errors, avoidance, and non-nativeness; 2) EA is restricted to analyzing learner's incorrect use of the target language while their correct and successful attempts at using the target language are neglected; and 3) EA has an over-static view on second language acquisition with which the actual dynamic process of L2 learning is not fully captured.

The CEA framework can contribute to remedying the above EA deficiencies. The CEA framework is developed by assigning a hierarchical error tagging system in the learner corpora in which learner errors are coded and classified into certain categories. By conducting a concordance process of the target item, researchers can clearly observe the proportion of each error category and draw a complete picture of what learners successfully manage and what is considered difficult and therefore requires more attention in teaching. By combining the contrastive interlanguage analysis process such as comparable frequencies investigation, CEA can spot the overuse or underuse features of learner language in which case problems such as avoidance, non-nativeness and lexical infelicities can be further discussed. Moreover, CEA can investigate separately into learner data of different proficiency levels if learner corpora contain sub-corpora representing various proficiency stages. This process enables researchers to build a more dynamic perspective on learner's L2 development.

In the present study, texts from CLEC will be examined under the CEA framework. CLEC is a partially error tagged learner corpus, *although* errors can be detected semi-manually combining concordance process based on error codes and observation by the present author. The five sub-corpora of CLEC divided according to five different proficiency levels will also be investigated to provide more details for Chinese EFL learners' *although* acquisition.

4. Data Source and Research Procedures

The present study is conducted based on corpus data from CLEC. CLEC is a Chinese English learner corpus constructed by Gui and Yang (2003) with 1,207,879 word tokens. Texts in CLEC are collected from daily writing assignments and writing examinations completed by Chinese senior high school students and university students who are considered as advanced learners of English. Texts data are further divided into five sub-corpora—ST2, ST3, ST4, ST5 and ST6 in accordance with five proficiency levels. Each sub-corpus consists of about 20 million word tokens. ST2 contains writing of senior high school students; ST3 includes writing of first-and-second-year non-English majors; ST4

432

embodies writing of third-and-fourth-year non-English majors; writing of first-and-second-year English majors is involved in ST5 while ST6 is made up of writing of third-and-fourth-year English majors. CLEC can represent Chinese EFL advanced learners' interlanguage standard with its text volume and proficiency scale and is also partially error-tagged to fulfill the requirement of CEA.

In accordance with one of the basic characteristics of corpus-based studies, the present study conducts both quantitative analyses and qualitative analyses. The AntConc concordance program will be used to assist data extraction and management. The research procedures of the study include:

1)   Identify *although* errors in CLEC with the Concordance and File View functions of the AntCont program and through manual sorting.

2)   Calculate respective *although* error rates in the sub-corpora of CLEC.

3)   Classify and summarize major *although* error types.

4)   Evaluate and analyze *although* errors.

5)   Discuss potential causes of *although* errors.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Learner errors can provide valuable knowledge on interlanguage and learner L2 proficiency. It is rewarding to identify and analyze learner errors if researchers wish to draw a clear picture of how language learners acquire and apply certain language subject. There are 336 *although* employment cases in CLEC among which 48 are erroneous. Although it is not sufficient to draw a very exhaustive and complete conclusion of Chinese EFL learners' errors on *although* employment with 48 errors, a basic understanding of possible errors on *although* employment can be built and some light can be shed on the overall status of Chinese EFL learners' *although* application in English writing. In the following analysis, *although* errors in the CLEC texts are collected and CEA is conducted to evaluate the errors and discussion is developed to explore the causes of these errors.

5.1 Error Identification and Categorization

Errors of *although* in CLEC are identified with the aid of the Concordance and File View functions of the AntConc program as well as manually. The errors are categorized into four major types according to their forms of manifestation, which are 1) *but/yet* addition; 2) punctuation error; 3) *although* misuse; and 4) omissions and blends. Meanwhile, the *although* misuse errors are further divided into four sub-categories: a) semantic/syntactic misuse; b) *but/however* overrepresentation; c) *even though* overrepresentation; and d) *in spite of* overrepresentation. Table 1 displays the error status of *although* employment in CLEC and the five sub-corpora in details.

Table 1. Error Status of *although* Employment in CLEC and Its Five Sub-Corpora

	ST2	ST3	ST4	ST5	ST6	CLEC
although frequency	29	31	38	94	144	336
but/yet addition	5	2	3	2	7	19
punctuation error	2	6	0	2	6	16
although misuse	3	1	4	0	2	10
omissions and blends	0	0	0	3	0	3
Total errors	10	9	7	7	15	48
Error rate	34.48%	25.87%	18.42%	7.45%	10.42%	14.29%
***although* misuse**	**ST2**	**ST3**	**ST4**	**ST5**	**ST6**	**CLEC**
semantic/syntactic misuse	1	0	2	0	0	3
but/however overrepresentation	1	1	1	0	1	4
even though overrepresentation	1	0	1	0	0	2
in spite of overrepresentation	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total	3	1	4	0	2	10

Generally, 48 errors exist in 336 *although* employment cases in CLEC with a 14.29% error rate which can be considered relatively high. Looking closer, error rates in five sub-corpora present a descending trend from 34.48% in ST2 to 7.45% in ST5 while a small rebound appears in ST6 touching 10.42%. Among all the errors, *but/yet* addition shows a distinct dominant existence (19/48) surprisingly followed by punctuation errors (16/48). 10 *although* misuse errors exist in *although* cases from CLEC and so do occasional omissions and blends errors (3/48). The figures illustrate in general that *although* errors mostly exist in outputs of lower level learners and learners generate fewer errors as they reach higher proficiency levels. However, as they become more confident in applying *although* clauses in their writing, a slightly increasing number of *although* errors may appear as *although* clauses frequency ascends. *But/ye*t addition to *although* clauses may be the most popular error type in *although* output produced by Chinese EFL learners, and punctuation errors are also common in their *although* clauses. The following passages evaluate each error type in details and factors that cause these errors are discussed.

5.2 Error Evaluation and Discussion of Error Causes

5.2.1 *But/yet* Addition

The *but/yet* addition is the most distinct error type in *although* clauses from CLEC. It is the only type of error that exists in all five sub-corpora of CLEC. Some examples of *but/yet* addition error are shown below.

1)   *Although it's morning, **but** some people like to swim in this time.* (ST2)

2)   *Although I was the hardest, **but** I never complained but worked hard.* (ST3)

3)   *Although it brings wealth and many other things, **but** perhaps we can't have a happy and comfortable life.* (ST4)

4)   *Although the war broke out in 1918 at last, **yet** Hannay's great work should be remembered and praised, for he had *ever tried his best to protect the peace.* (ST5)

5)   *Although the idea hasn't been established in legal system, **yet** people pay more and more attention *on it.* (ST6)

In the above sentences, learners try to add *but* or *yet* to connect two clauses together with *although*. However, in English grammar, *although* cannot introduce clauses together with *but* and *yet*. *Although* belongs to the category of subordinating conjunctions that connect an independent clause and a dependent clause while *but* and *yet* are coordinators which are conjunctions that connect two language items with equal syntactic importance.

Interlingual interference or more specifically, L1 negative transfer can be one of the causes of this error. In Mandarin Chinese, conjunctions usually function in pairs. The counterpart of *although* in Chinese is *suiran* which usually connects clauses together with another conjunction *danshi* while *danshi* is exactly the Chinese counterpart of *but/yet*. Following are two examples of *suiran…danshi…* clauses in Chinese with literal and semantic English translations.

1) **Suiran** *ta bushi zui congming de xuesheng,* **danshi** *laoshi xihuan ta.*

Literally: **Although** *he is not the smartest student,* **but** *the teacher likes him.*

Semantically: *Although he is not the smartest student, the teacher likes him.*

2) **Suiran** *ta hen qiong,* **danshi** *ta hen kuaile.*

Literally: **Although** *he very poor,* **yet** *he very happy.*

Semantically: *Although he is very poor, he is very happy.*

As shown in the examples, if these two sentences are translated literally, *but* or *yet* will appear in the translation. As *although* and *but* are respective counterparts of the Chinese conjunction pair *suiran* and *danshi*, and *suiran…danshi…* clauses are highly uttered clauses in Mandarin Chinese, Chinese EFL learners tend to transfer their L1 usage of *suiran* and *danshi* naturally into English when they need to produce concessive clause introduced by *although*.

Despite the possibility of interlingual error, it is also possible that the existence of *but/yet* addition error is ascribed partially to pedagogically induced interference. Stockwell, Bowen and Martin (1965, p. 307) propose a hierarchy of difficulty to classify different levels of learning difficulty in second language acquisition by comparing L1 and L2 (c.f. Ellis, 1985/1999, p. 26; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991, pp. 53-54). The hierarchy of difficulty table divides L2 learning difficulties into five descending levels from split, new, absent, coalesced to correspondence. The comparison of English *although* clause (L2) and its Chinese counterpart *suiran…danshi…* clause (L1) indicates that it should belong to the hierarchy of split, which means one item or form in L1 becomes two or more items or forms in L2. The commonly produced *suiran…danshi…* clause in Chinese splits into *although* concessive clause and *but* coordinating clause in English. In other words, *although* is supposed to be highly difficult to acquire in

435

English acquisition. However, as shown in major English textbooks (see Net.1 & Net.2), *although* is usually taught at the eighth or ninth grade of junior high school in China where English learners are at the elementary or early intermediate level of English learning and usually not many grammar and structure drillings are provided in the language classroom. Therefore, it is possible that learners have difficulty to acquire and internalize *although* knowledge at such an early stage of English learning which leads to constant occurrence of *but/yet* addition error in their *although* clause output.

5.2.2 Punctuation Error

A number of errors concerning the misuse of punctuation marks exist in the *although* clauses extracted from CLEC. Some examples of punctuation misuse are presented as follows.

1)   *I was very happy(.) although I *felted very tired.* (ST2)

2)   *Although(,) the selling in the school had its profits, we must make it clear in our mind that the activity must be controlled by the school.* (ST3)

3)   *Although it is not a boarding school(.) the leaders are very much concerned with students' appearance and behavior.* (ST5)

4)   *Although(,) there is still a long way to go for perfection of the related laws and regulations, and for the wide acceptance of it throughout China, we hold a firm belief in the inevitability of the adoption and legalization of euthanasia.* (ST6)

5)   *Although(,) when the bus started, it seemed it had more room and the air was *more fresh(.) it was still very cloudy and noisy.* (ST6)

In subordinating clauses connected by *although*, comma is placed between the independent clause and the dependent clause to separate the two clauses. Usually this is the only position a comma is put excluding the cases of parenthesis. In the case of punctuation misuses, it is possible that some of them are due to slips of pen such as 1) and 3) of the above examples. Nevertheless, with a high occurrence rate of punctuation misuse and misused forms like 2), 4) and 5) reoccurring in the texts, it is reasonable to assume that comma addition after the conjunction *although* is a type of learner error.

Interlingual interference might be an explanation for why Chinese EFL learners tend to put a comma after the conjunction *although*. In Mandarin Chinese, it is common to put a comma after conjunction pairs that conjoin the clauses to form a short pause and put stress on the clause content. For example, it is both acceptable to say "*Suiran ta hen qiong, danshi ta hen kuaile*" and "*suiran, ta hen qiong, danshi, ta hen kuaile*" (Although he is poor, he is happy). Therefore, it is probable that Chinese EFL learners transfer the habit of comma placement after conjunction into the corresponding *although* clauses in English especially when they are trying to emphasize the content after *although*.

Moreover, Punctuation errors are usually considered as "minor mistakes" by language teachers, hence not much attention is paid to locate and correct the errors when they occur in learner output. Interlingual interference and pedagogical neglect result in a high occurrence of punctuation errors in Chinese EFL learners' writing, and as the case in the present study, in Chinese EFL learners' *although* clauses employment.

5.2.3 *Although* Misuse

10 *although* misuse cases are detected from 336 instances of *although* employment in CLEC. The misuse cases of *although* from CLEC mainly manifest as semantically or syntactically ill constructed *although* clauses and overrepresentations of *although* as other conjunctions or conjunction groups that are functionally or semantically similar to *although*.

(a) Semantic or Syntactic Misuse

Following are the cases that presented as semantic or syntactical misuse of *although* in CLEC texts.

1)   *Although it's *difficult to eat* (meaning "the medicine tasted bitter" according to the context of the original discourse), *the sky turned blue and the sun appeared.* (ST2)

2)   *It brings his family many difficulties. Although these, some people usually change his job.* (ST4)

3)   **Level of their knowledge about infant increased, they looked after their baby more *scientific. Although this, the life span still *lowers the life expectancy...* (ST4)

Cognitive interference might be a factor that accounts for the occurrence of semantic or syntactic misuse of *although*. Case 1) is an erroneous sentence from the ST2 corpus. The *although* clause here is structurally correct while cognitively and semantically ill produced. The semantic implicature of *although* clause "*although* P, Q", according to Iten (1998), is that "normally, if P then not Q (but surprisingly Q happens)" and cognitively, the procedure encoded in "*although* P, Q" is "What follows P contradicts, but does not eliminate X, X is an aspect of the interpretation of Q" (ibid). Therefore, the two clauses connected by *although* should be tightly cognitively related and the contradiction of P should be a subordinating condition of the truth of Q or its interpretation X. While in Mandarin Chinese, although P and Q possess similar relation with each other in clause "*suiran* P *danshi* Q", the connection between P and Q can be much looser. For example, to interpret case 1) coordinating the learner's cognitive process, the semantic encoding of the sentence would be "it (the medicine) tasted bitter ('*difficult to eat'), but I felt better after taking it hence it seemed to me that the sky turned blue and the sun appeared". It is acceptable to form a *suiran…danshi…* clause with the two relatively loosely connected propositions "the medicine tasted bitter" and "the sky turned blue and the sun appeared" with some additional information: "*Suiran yao hen ku, danshi (chi le yao yihou) tiankong (sihu) bian lan le, taiyang ye chulai le* (literal translation: Although the medicine very bitter, but <took medicine afterwards> sky <seemed> turned blue, sun also came out)". And with proper context, it is possible to omit the bracketed information of the above sentence without affecting its semantic meaning and the recipient's understanding. However, the utterance still seems cognitively unacceptable for English native speakers even if case 1) is modified as "*although the medicine tasted bitter, after I taking it the sky turned blue and the sun appeared". If learners fail to identify the different cognitive patterns between Chinese and English when producing clauses, errors like case 1) will appear.

As to case 2) and 3), cognitive interference as well as L1 negative transfer can be the possible explanations for the errors. As reviewed in section 2, *although* clauses can be produced in the form of "*although* + noun group". For example,

437

A)   *Although not a primary source, a conjectural reconstruction of the interior of the Globe shows the Hell under the stage being covered by a hanging.*

B)   *The judge, although simply a clog in this great machine, could also play the role of a more heavenly arbitrator…*

C)   *Although only a minor character in terms of space in the novel, the Jew is critical…*(extracted from the British Academic Written English Corpus) (Note 1).

If observed closely, the noun groups after *although* are components of the complete dependent clauses, and the "*although* + noun group" clause can be expanded into the type of "*although* + finite clause" by adding other omitted components to form the complete dependent clauses. The dependent clauses of the above examples can be modified into the follows:

A')   *Although a conjectural reconstruction of the interior of the Globe is not a primary source…*

B')   *Although the judge is simply a clog in this great machine…*

C')   *Although the Jew is only a minor character…*

However, in case 2) and 3), learners place "these" and "this" which in fact refer to and replace the whole dependent clause after *although*, and "*although* these" and "*although* this" cannot be transformed into the complete dependent clauses with "these" and "this" as the component. Therefore, it is not acceptable to use pronouns to replace the whole dependent clause in *although* clause production. But in Mandarin Chinese, some pronouns can replace the whole clause after *suiran* to form a more concise sentence such as "*suiran ruci…* (literal translation: although like this…)" and "*suiran zheyang…* (literal translation: although this…)". Therefore, if learners fail to cognitively recognize the connotation of "*although* + noun group" construction and the difference between the English *although* clauses and the Chinese *suiran* clauses, errors like case 2) and 3) may occur.

(b) *Although* Overrepresentation

Overrepresentation is another type of *although* misuse error reflected in CLEC. Learners erroneously apply *although* where other conjunctions or conjunction groups are supposed to be used. 7 *although* overrepresentation cases are detected in CLEC.

1)   *For example, Hong Kong's students are learning the practical English, such as the letters for job, reports, and so on. Although we have never learned these.* (ST2)

2)   *It is necessary for our college students to get to know the world outside the campus. In the campus, we can learn knowledge from books. Although, in the society, we can learn much what we can't in the campus.* (ST3)

3)   *There *was 200 deaths per 1,000 births in 1960. Although in 1990, it cuts down to 100 deaths per 1,000 births.* (ST4)

4)   *I am growing up in a happy environment. Although, I learnt many things about the old society from my parents.* (ST6)

5)   *Especially in the morning and the afternoon when the people have to go for work or come back from work, although you stand near the subway station, a lot of people walk quickly towards you and leave you in no time…* (ST2)

6)   *A car cannot move, although you very *worried, because it *have little oil.* (ST4)

7)   *Up to now, although the high-speed development in our country, many areas cannot shake off poverty yet.* (ST6)

In case 1) to 4), *although* over-represents *but* or *however*; in case 5) and 6), *even though* is more appropriate than *although*; while in case 7), *although* over-represents *in spite of*. Intralingual interference might be one of the reasons why the phenomena of overrepresentation happen. Conjunctions and conjunction groups like *although*, *even though*, *but*, *however*, and *in spite of* share semantic or functional similarities with one another. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, *although* can be used to mean "but" or "however" when commenting on a statement (see 2004, p. 48). Both *although* and *even though* share similar grammatical functions but *even though* expresses more emphatic attitude. While *although* and *in spite of* share similar semantic connotations but syntactically, *in spite of* can only be followed by nouns or pronouns while *although* is followed by finite/non-finite clauses or nominal components of finite/non-finite clauses when in the "*although* + noun group" pattern. Due to the similarities of these conjunctions or conjunction groups, if learners cannot recognize the differences among them, they may produce erroneous output very easily.

5.2.4 Omissions and Blends

Apart from the major errors discussed above, occasional omissions and blends occur when learners attempt to produce *although* clauses.

1)   *Nowadays, in China—although they are respectable—( ) tend to live *a harder.* (ST5)

2)   *Although I couldn't come back to my house, ( ) always missed my family and my lovely dog.* (ST5)

3)   *Although *as the open policy the reforming policy are carrying out, which *have created many more jobs in many cities, the situation has little improvement…* (ST5)

Subjects of the independent clauses are missing from case 1) and 2) while an *although* clause and an *as* clause blend together in case 3). These might be occasional slips of pen but if more learner outputs are analyzed and they turn out to be learner errors, intralingual interference, pedagogical neglect and cognitive factor can provide some explanations.

As a subordinating conjunction or subordinator, *although* introduces one dependent clause and one independent clause to form a clause complex. In the pattern of "*although* + finite clause", both the dependent and independent clauses are complete sentences themselves with their respective subject and predicate. The two clauses are placed semantically differently but remain syntactically and structurally unchanged when connected by *although* to form a clause complex even when they share the same subjects. However, some coordinating conjunctions or coordinators, such as *but* and *and* can connect clause components that share the same syntactical importance as well as two complete clauses, for

439

example: *She looks like her father but has her mother's eyes*. As different conjunctions connect language items following different grammatical principle, learners are easily confused if teachers or textbooks do not provide clear explanations and learners do not receive enough practice and drilling.

Moreover, it is possible that sometimes a clause complex is nested into another clause complex to serve as one of the clause components. For instance, in the clause "*Although his fortune grew as the business prospered, he was not happy*", an *as* clause is nested into an *although* clause as the dependent part of the *although* clause complex. In the case of this example, the syntactic structure of a nesting clause complex should be "*although* + (*as* clause), independent clause". It is the complete *as* clause complex rather than the dependent part of it that serves as the dependent part of the *although* clause complex. Clear cognitive process is needed for learners to recognize the complicate syntactical pattern and deconstruct the inner nesting structure of these clause complexes to produce correct output and avoid blends errors.

6. Conclusions

Learner errors of *although* employment collected from CLEC are classified and analyzed exhaustively in the present study. Some features of Chinese EFL learners' *although* errors can be summarized. Meanwhile, possible assumptions of the causes of these errors are also drawn based on a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the errors.

Errors of *although* exist in learner written output of all proficiency levels overall. More errors occur in the lower levels and the error rates decrease progressively as learners reach higher levels of proficiency. However, a slight resurge of errors occurrence may be observed in the advanced level learner output as advanced learners feel more confident and comfortable to produce *although* clauses and the frequency of *although* employment ascends.

But/yet addition can be one of the most prominent *although* errors in Chinese EFL learners' output because Chinese clause "*suiran…danshi…*" which shares similar semantic function as the *although* clause but with different syntactical structure is commonly applied in Mandarin Chinese and Chinese EFL learners can easily develop the habit of placing *but*, the counterpart of *danshi* in Chinese, after *although*, the counterpart of *suiran*. Punctuation errors might be a major error type in Chinese EFL learners' *although* employment which can be due to the pedagogical neglect of providing correct punctuation usages instruction in Chinese English classroom. In addition, *although* errors such as overrepresentations, semantic or syntactic misuse, omissions and clause blends may occur because learners might fail to cognitively recognize the intralingual difference among English clause structures and similar conjunctions.

The findings of the present study can shed light on the teaching practice in the English classrooms in China. Firstly, interlingual difference should be emphasized when L2 language items that have similar but slightly different counterpart in learners' L1 are taught. For example, difference between *although* in English and *suiran* in Chinese should be explained when *although* is taught to the learners. Teachers'

440

emphasis and explanations on interlingual difference is helpful for learners to acquire and apply L2 knowledge correctly and errors due to interlingual interference can be largely avoided. Secondly, language learning and application is a continuous and circulating process. Language items should not be taught and drilled in isolation. It is better a new language item is acquired, compared and practiced with other known items to help learners build a comprehensive understanding of the language system. For example, if *although* is an already taught word when learners are learning *even though*, teachers can design exercises including both *although* and *even though* in which case, the knowledge of *although* can be reviewed and learners can gain a better understanding of the difference between *although* and *even though*, so that errors of these two words can be reduced.

References

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. (1999/2000). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Carbonell-Olivares, M. (2009). A corpus-based analysis of the meaning and function of *although*. *International Journal of English Studies*, *9*(3), 191-208.

Collins COBUILD English Grammar. (1990). London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd.

Corder, S. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. In J. Richards (Ed.) (1974), *Error analysis: Perspectives on second language acquisition* (pp. 19-27). London: Longman Group Limited.

Corder, S. (1971). Idiosyncratic dialects and error analysis. In J. Richards (Ed.) (1974), *Error analysis: Perspectives on second language acquisition* (pp. 158-171). London: Longman Group Limited.

Corder, S. (1981). *Error analysis and interlanguage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dagneaux, E., Denness, S., & Granger, S. (1998). Computer-aided error analysis. *System*, *26*, 163-174. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X(98)00001-3

Ellis, R. (1985/1999). *Understanding second language acquisition*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Gui, S. C., & Yang, H. Z. (2003). *Chinese learner English corpus*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Iten, C. (1998). The meaning of although: A relevance theoretic account. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, *10*, 81-108.

Iten, C. (2000). Although revisited. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, *12*, 65-95.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). *Grammar dimension: Form, meaning and use*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (6th ed.). (2004). Hong Kong: The Commercial Press.

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman Group Limited.

Richards, J. (Ed.). (1974). *Error analysis: Perspectives on second language acquisition*. London: Longman Group Limited.

Richards, J. (1975, March). *The context for error analysis*. Paper presented at the Annual TESOL Convention, Los Angeles. Retrieved from https://www.eric.ed.gov/?id=ED105750

Yang, L. R., & Zhang, D. L. (2007). *Second language acquisition and foreign language teaching in China*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Middle School English Vocabulary List (People's Education Press Version): 8th Grade-I. (2017). Retrieved May 22, 2017, from http://www.xuexila.com/xuexifangfa/banianjiyingyu/2938178.html

Oxford Middle School English Vocabulary List: Grade 9A. (2017). Retrieved May 22, 2017, from https://www.wenku.baidu.com/view/922f734ed0d233d4b04e6987.html

Note

Note 1. BAWEC is a written corpus with in total 6,506,995 tokens. It is the research achievement of a project entitled *An Investigation of Genres of Assessed Writing in British Higher Education* conducted by the universities of Warwick, Reading and Oxford Brookes. It contains 2897 English academic writing composed by university students who are native English speakers.

442