Word Choice Errors in Chinese Students' English Writing and How Online Writing Center Tutors Respond to Them

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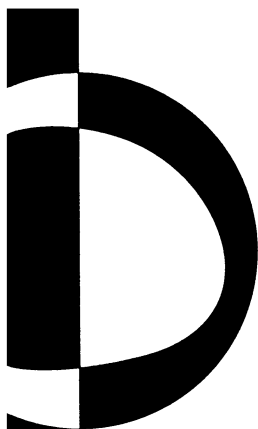Shih-Ni Prim

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Abstract

Examining 200 word choice errors from Chinese students' drafts submitted to a writing center's online asynchronous tutoring program, the present study demonstrates that second language writers need help with word choice. Word choice problems, a natural part of second language learning, can negatively affect rhetorical effectiveness and readers' comprehension and evaluation. The study showed that 11% of online tutors' marginal comments related to word choice problems, among which 18% were due to translation. (Other error types were Wrong Context, Synform, Idiomaticity, Precision, and Register.) Direct corrections were the most common type of tutor comments—35%. (Other comment types were Explanation, Options, and Questions.) These numbers show that word choice errors are indeed critical, that even experienced writers rely on their first language, and tutors need more knowledge about word choice issues and how to provide instruction and feedback on them.

Introduction: Why Word Choice?

According to composition research and writing center practice, the first step in improving one's writing is to use a recursive process of inventing, planning, drafting, revising, and editing while staying aware of one's purpose in relation to the needs of the audience (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2009). Yet for many second language writers,[1] the writing process may be less effective, less recursive, and more laborious because their preoccupations with choosing the right words to fit their purpose and audience slow them down (Williams, 2005). Second language writers have themselves indicated that vocabulary or lack thereof is one of their primary concerns (Leki & Carson, 1994; Murphy & Roca de Larios, 2010), and vocabulary errors were the second most common problem among the errors noted in a study by Dana Ferris (2006). Problematic and erroneous word choices result in meaning distortion and therefore lack of comprehension and lower evaluations by readers (Engber, 1995). The quality of word choice can make a difference between an ineffective, less-than-comprehensible piece of writing and an effective, articulate one.

But word choice errors, like all errors, are part of the natural process of second language learning (Rafoth, 2015). Also called lexical errors, word choice errors provide tutors and researchers with windows into what Larry Selinker (1972) has called the inter-language states of second language learning processes. Word choice errors can reveal how two languages express the same idea and therefore reveal the complexities of moving from the first to the second language to create meaning. That is why Xiao-Ming Yang & Huaxin Xu (2001) call word choice errors "errors of creativity."

Writing center professionals should be interested in knowing more about word choice issues for reasons that include word choice error frequency and the negative effects on readers; the importance of word choice in the language learning process; and the sometimes painful writing process that stems from writers' concerns with word choice. If, according to the CCCC Statement on Second Language Writers (2009), all writing teachers are also teachers of second language writing, and

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1   Here we will use the term "second language writers" rather than ESL writers, English Language Learners, or Multilingual Writers because the 40 students in our sample had completed any ESL courses required of them. At the time of the study, they were writing for credit-bearing college courses across the curriculum and would identify themselves as second language writers more than English language learners or ESL. In addition, the field of second language writing, a foundation for our study, uses the term "second language writers."

if, as Jessica Williams (2005) has claimed, all second language writing teachers are also teachers of second language, then it would follow that all writing center tutors are tutors not only of second language writing, but also of English as second language (Severino & Deifell, 2011; Rafoth, 2015).

Word choice is also important because of the larger numbers of second language writers entering U.S. universities. These writers are changing the proportion of writing center work to include less focus on writing process and rhetorical issues and more focus on language, vocabulary, and grammar (Hall, 2013). Writing tutors increasingly have to explain rule-governed grammar errors (e.g., agreement problems such as *he sleep* or tense problems such as *yesterday we go*). Explaining such grammatical features is not particularly difficult; the rules are easily grasped by both tutors and students, and many resources and handbooks with examples are available for consultation. However, even when writers and tutors use multiple dictionaries, vocabulary errors can be more of a challenge for tutors to explain—especially semantically-based errors of word choice. For example, there are subtle connotative differences between *unkempt* and *sloppy* or between *neat* and *tidy*; when to use *consist of* and when to use *constitute*; or the reason we say *to make it a priority* or *to set priorities* rather than *to make priorities*. The tendencies of second language writers to make word choice errors and the tutors' challenges in explaining them are exacerbated by the enormous vocabulary and number of near synonyms and sound- and look-alike words in English (e.g., *ambiguous/ambivalent*, *considerable/considerate*, *wake/weak*, *manor/ manner*).

Yet as Sarah Nakamaru (2010) has pointed out, writing center professionals often dichotomize written discourse into rhetoric vs. grammar, categories which map onto higher order vs. lower order concerns (McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001), thus ignoring or neglecting the middle discourse level of vocabulary. Nakamaru asserts that tutors need to know more about vocabulary issues and how to respond to them: "If tutors had more information about the ways lexical strengths and needs affect students' writing, and how to contend with these during sessions, they would feel more empowered to talk about lexical issues and would do so more effectively" (p. 109). Such tutor empowerment through knowledge about word choice errors is the goal of the present study.

The first question that tutors may have is about the nature of word choice errors. What are their causes and sources? Which features of English cause problems? How much of a role does mental translation from the first language and culture play in causing these errors? To what

extent do higher proficiency second language writers still rely on their first language?

Translation from the first language has been a topic of much research in second language writing ever since Billy Woodall (2002) noted in his composing-aloud language-switching study that second language writing differs from first language writing because the former involves two languages. Invariably, second language writers use their first languages in their second language writing processes both as a resource and a crutch. Sometimes the results of employing the first language to write in a second are positive because of a "match" between the words and ideas in the two languages. But when there is a first-language to second-language linguistic and possibly cultural mismatch, stemming from how different languages organize the world in different ways, errors and reader confusion can result (Yang & Xu, 2001; Woodall, 2002).

So how do and how should tutors respond to the word choice errors they encounter? What are their most frequent responses to these types of errors and how are their responses influenced by their writing center education? Do most tutors follow the advice of Ferris (2006) and Susan Blau & John Hall (2002) to correct these vocabulary errors because they are often "untreatable"? That is, students would probably not be able to come up with a correction on their own because words and expressions are generally not patterned or rule-governed features like grammatical features. Instead, such words and expressions exemplify more of what is called "item learning" as opposed to "system learning" (Williams, 2005). Do tutors' responses to word choice errors promote both short- and long-term language learning, or should they be responding differently? And how can tutors help second language writers avoid making word choice errors in the first place? Investigating the answers to these kinds of questions will help both second language writers and their writing tutors.

For this study we used an asynchronous online writing center database to identify the drafts of Chinese writers in order to investigate word choice errors and tutors' responses to them. We selected this data set because the largest group of international students at our university, like at many other U.S. universities (Porter & Belkin, 2013), are speakers of Chinese, and because every year more Chinese speakers use our asynchronous online tutoring program in addition to, or instead of, our face-to-face programs. Of our word choice data set, we asked the following questions:

1. How often in their marginal or in-text comments on students' drafts submitted to our online writing center do tutors respond

to word choice errors as opposed to other problems (e.g., argument, organization, grammar, mechanics)?

2. What kinds of word choice errors do Chinese second language writers make in their drafts? For example, which are more Chinese-based and which are more English-based?

3. What are the ways in which online writing center tutors respond to word choice errors?

Methodology

Arriving At a Sample of Word Choice Errors

In order to answer these research questions, we obtained a sample of the word choice errors of the Chinese writers who submitted their English drafts to the writing center's online tutoring service. First, we looked in the "All Papers" section of the asynchronous online tutoring platform specifically for Chinese writers' drafts that had already been responded to by tutors and retrieved by those writers during the 2011–2012 academic year. We identified writers who seemed to have Chinese names[2] and then looked them up in the university's public online directory to verify that they were from China or Taiwan.

Next we eliminated drafts from writers who had not given the writing center permission to use their drafts for research purposes when they filled out the online submission form.[3] Almost half of the Chinese students answered "yes" to the permission question when they submitted their drafts.

We confirmed that the drafts indeed exhibited the features of Chinese writing in English described in the literature (Swan & Smith, 2001; Yang & Xu, 2001; Tian, 2005): grammatical, syntactic, and lexical features, which we also recognized from our collective total of 40 years of experience working with Chinese writers' English. Next, we looked at the tutors' marginal or in-text comments to determine if tutors had given feedback on language issues. If the student was not following the classroom teacher's assignment (which the student has described or

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2 One of the authors, Shih-Ni Prim, from Taiwan, speaks Chinese as her first language. She is therefore knowledgeable about Chinese names and the Chinese language and could determine which word choice errors were from the direct influence of Chinese.

3 We did not use the drafts of students who did not give their written permission. Our university did not require us to obtain IRB approval for this study because no names are attached to the language examples, nor can students be identified through them.

duplicated on the online submission form), tutors often explained this global problem in a cover letter or note to the student and did not provide language feedback on the draft. Those drafts with only global or assignment fulfillment feedback but not language feedback were not examined.

Once the drafts of Chinese writers had been identified, we jointly examined and discussed each of the tutors' marginal comments in response to word choice error—that is, semantically-based or content-based rather than form-based lexical errors (Augustín Llach, 2011). For example, if the tutor determined that what the student meant was *insist*, but they had used *persist* instead, that instance was counted as a word choice error; these words have different meanings. But if the student had used *insisted* or *insisting* instead of *insist*, when the correct form was the latter, it was not counted since those words are both forms of the root word *insist*. Unlike in the writing center case study by Carol Severino & Elizabeth Deifell (2011), lexico-grammatical errors (Nation, 2001) such as *we insisting* vs. *we insist* or *religion heritage* vs. *religious heritage* were not counted in order to focus on content-based errors rather than form-based lexical errors. We estimate that such lexico-grammatical errors combined with strictly grammatical errors, such as agreement and verb tense, outnumbered word choice errors by about 8 to 1. Despite the frequency of lexico-grammatical errors, we were more interested (in this particular study) in semantically-based or content-based word choice errors. These semantically- or content-based word choice errors usually do not result from forgetting to apply a rule (for example, that *-ion* is a noun ending; *-ious* is an adjective ending), but from not knowing an appropriate word for a particular intended meaning and context. Word choice errors can reveal more about the specific difficulties of transitioning from Chinese language and culture to English language and American culture, a challenge faced by thousands of Chinese writers at our and other U.S. universities.

We did not check to see if there were word choice errors that tutors had missed, as our purpose was only to collect a useful sample of our Chinese students' word choice errors, not a representative one. Our tutors are educated to prioritize their error feedback in ways that will not overwhelm students with comments. However, tutors are also encouraged to ask questions and to correct "untreatable" syntactic and word choice problems that second language writers would have difficulty recognizing and correcting on their own. It is possible that tutors either purposely did not respond to some word choice errors or that they had overlooked them.

The final sample consists of 200 word choice errors in 40 drafts written by 40 different Chinese students (35 undergraduates and 5 graduates) representing 20 fields across the humanities, social sciences, and hard sciences.[4] All 40 writers were enrolled in degree programs at the university and could thus be classified as writers at higher levels of proficiency than students still enrolled in ESL courses. It should be noted that we, a native speaker of English and a native speaker of Chinese, individually responded to half or 20 of the drafts in order to familiarize ourselves with the assignments, contexts, contents, and language of the papers, a common practice in what Sarah Liggett, Kerri Jordan, & Steve Price (2011) call practitioner research and what Severino & Deifell refer to as "writing center tutor research" (2011, p. 31). Both authors are online tutors who for years have regularly responded to online drafts an average of eight hours a week. The other 20 drafts were responded to by 12 of the graduate student tutors on staff.

Error Classification
Working together, we used those 40 drafts to first identify and then classify word choice errors indicated by the tutors' marginal and in-text comments. In order to arrive at an appropriate classification scheme, we examined other researchers' lexical error taxonomies (Zughoul, 1991; James, 1998; Gu & Leung, 2002; Ma, 2009; Augustín Llach, 2011) and followed their advice to devise a taxonomy suitable for our particular data set, in this case, the word choice errors in Chinese students' English writing across the curriculum. Because of the variation in data sets and purposes for vocabulary research, it appears that no two vocabulary studies use the same taxonomy (Augustín Llach, 2011). To answer our second research question, we classified each of the 200 errors according to whether it was:

1. Translation from Chinese (Jiang, 2004): Errors resulting from expressions that exist in Chinese but not in English; e.g., a *full-time wife*.

2. Wrong Context: Errors resulting from lack of vocabulary or incomplete knowledge of appropriate contexts (Nation, 2013); e.g., *they expelled her out* (of the home) when *expelled* is usually used in the context of being banned from an educational institution.

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4   We determined that 200 errors from 40 writers' drafts provided a sufficient number of examples for us to categorize and analyze, based on the small numbers of word choice error categories generated in previous studies.

3. Synform (Laufer, 1991): Errors resulting from sound-alike or look-alike confusion; e.g., *context* vs. *content*.

4. Idiomaticity: Errors resulting from not knowing the entire collocation—or how the word fits with other words in a set phrase; e.g., management needs to stand in the customers' *feet* (vs. *shoes*).

5. Precision: Using a word that is either too general or too specific for the occasion; e.g., a culture that *has* sculpture, rather than one that makes or creates it.

6. Register: Using words from conversational discourse in academic prose; e.g., *stuff* for things or phenomena. (See Table 1 for a chart of the error taxonomy.)

If we perceived that an error seemed to fit into two or more of the categories, a common occurrence in lexical error research (Augustín Llach, 2011), we chose the category that seemed the better or the best fit. Exceptions were 16 errors from Translation, which is a psycholinguistic, cause-based category of error; those 16 errors seemed equally to fit the solely linguistic, effect-based categories such as Wrong Context or (lack of) Idiomaticity. Translation vs. lack of translation, or first language- vs. second language-based errors, constituted an important concern, as we were interested in how large a part Chinese still plays in the English writing of higher proficiency second language writers. We wanted to see to what extent our data would confirm what Woodall (2002), Lurong Wang (2003), and Liz Murphy & Julio Roca de Larios (2010) say about how even advanced second language writers are still using their first languages as resources to generate content. Although all classifying processes were performed jointly by both researchers, only Shih-Ni, the Chinese-speaking bilingual researcher, could determine which errors stemmed from translation.

L1- or L2-based*	Error Type	Example
L1	Translation	*a full-time wife*
L2	Wrong Context	*They expelled her out* (of the home)
	Synform	*context* vs. *content*
	Idiomaticity	Management needs to stand in the customers' *feet* (vs. *shoes*)
	Precision	a culture that *has* sculpture
	Register	*stuff* vs. *phenomena* (in written discourse)

Table 1: Types of Lexical Error *L1=first language; L2=second language

Tutor Response Classification

The next step was to examine the tutors' feedback on these word choice errors to see, first of all, if the tutor had corrected these "untreatable," less rule-based types of errors. That is, we examined whether in the MS-Word commenting box, the tutor had only identified the type of error, writing "Word Choice" or "Word Choice Error," or whether the tutor had typed a correction, for example, "Do you mean [alternative word/correction]?" (See Figure 1).

We then classified each of the tutor's responses to each error, using Searle's (1969) concept of "speech acts" to determine whether the response contained any of the following speech acts:

1. Correction: The wrong word, for example, *told*, is highlighted, and in the margin, the tutor types the correction *said*.

2. Question: The tutor uses a word or expression with a question mark, asking for clarification of meaning. For example, in response to the error, *symbolizations of unity*, the tutor types "*Symbols?*" (Also classified as Correction.)

3. Options: The tutor responds to the error by offering alternative words or expressions that make more sense in the context of what the student is writing. For example, in response to the error "It is not a good way to *examine* the new medical treatment," the tutor types "*Test? Assess?*" (Also classified as Correction.)

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4. Explanation: The tutor presents an explanation for the error, such as a way to distinguish between the erroneous word and the correct one. For example, in responding to the error, "in order *to explicit my points,*" a tutor types: "Explicit is an adjective; explain is a verb. You can say '*in order to explain my points*' or '*in order to make my points explicit.*'" (Also classified as Option and Correction.)

5. Error Indication: The tutor makes a response such as "Word Choice Error" that indicates only that the writer has made a mistake, but the tutor does not attempt to repair it.

Table 2 below highlights the types of tutor responses or speech acts involved in the comments.

Tutor response	Brief definition
Correction	The tutor highlights the wrong word in the text and corrects it in the margin.
Question	The tutor notes a word or expression with a question mark.
Options	The tutor offers alternative words or expressions.
Explanation	The tutor presents an explanation for the error.
Error Indication	The tutor only indicates that the writer has made a mistake.

Table 2: Types of Tutor Response (adapted from Searle's concept of speech acts)

Figure 1 below shows an example of a paragraph from a writer's draft (from a Classics course) on the importance of the theme of hospitality in *The Odyssey*. On the online submission form, the student asked for help with grammar, word choice, and connectors such as conjunctions. Note that comments 9–14 and 17–19 are related to issues of syntax, grammar, mechanics, and theme. However, 15 and 16 are classified as word choice errors. In 15, the meaning of *manner* in *with manner* is unclear. In the tentative correction "Do you mean good manners?," the tutor guesses the student's meaning from context—that Cyclops eating the guests did not show good manners. In 16, *command* (as in *eating four command*) seems to be the wrong word because it usually means *responsibility* or *charge* when used as a noun (as in *under my command*). The student

seems to mean *soldiers.* The tentative correction—"Do you mean he ate four soldiers under O's command?"—involves rephrasing the passage.

In *Odyssey*, people also please the gods by showing hospitality to strangers. In Book 9, before Odyssey and his crew **went** to visit Cyclops' cave, he **took** gold and sweet wines as gifts from Maron, he wanted to exchange gifts with Cyclops, he said to Cyclops ' Now we are here, suppliants at your knee. . . Zeus, god of strangers, who walks at their side.' We could tell from this, gods are the protector of strangers, hosts have to respect gods by showing hospitality to strangers. So after Odysseus escaped from Cyclops whom did not treat the guests with manner by eating four command of Odysseus instead, Odyssey called out to Cyclops ' . . . You have the gall to eat the guests in your own house, and Zeus made you pay for it.' Moreover, gods will sometimes appear among people in different forms, such as Athena in Book 1, showed up in front of Telemachus as a man named Mentes. As well as in Book 13, Athena appears as the form of a young man in front of Odysseus. So as a host showing hospitality to strangers also consider as respect to gods whom as the witnesses.

Tutor 5/22/2015 11:13 AM
Comment [1]: COMMENT 9: Present again

Tutor 5/22/2015 11:15 AM
Comment [2]: COMMENT 10: Isn't he called the Cyclops?

Tutor 5/22/2015 11:14 AM
Comment [3]: COMMENT 11: You need some sort of connector here— otherwise you have a run-on sentence: because he wants to exchange gifts with C. He says to C, "Now… [somewhere you need end punctuation, too, also to avoid a run on sentence]

Tutor 5/22/2015 11:18 AM
Comment [4]: COMMENT 12: We can tell from this declaration that gods are the protectors

Tutor 5/22/2015 11:19 AM
Comment [5]: COMMENT 13: You need a connector—of strangers, and hosts

Tutor 5/22/2015 11:20 AM
Comment [6]: COMMENT 14: who

Tutor 5/22/2015 11:20 AM
Comment [7]: COMMENT 15: Do you mean with good manners?

Tutor 5/22/2015 11:26 AM
Comment [8]: COMMENT 16: Do you mean he ate four soldiers under O's command?

Tutor 5/22/2015 11:38 AM
Comment [9]: COMMENT 17: Again you need end punctuation (a period and a capital letter) or else you'll have a run-on.

Tutor 5/22/2015 11:44 AM
Comment [10]: COMMENT 18: Can you connect these appearances to your theme of hospitality. Otherwise, leave it out. Do Athena and Mentes and the young man witness hospitality?

Tutor 5/22/2015 11:47 AM
Comment [11]: COMMENT 19: Syntax problem: So when hosts show hospitality to strangers, they are also showing respect to the gods who witness it.

Figure 1: A Sample of Comments on a Chinese Writer's Draft[5]

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5   As explained to the student in the tutor's cover note, which is not shown here, comment 18 is boldfaced because theme is a global concern. For readability, this graphic was re-created. The date/time stamp is not representative of the date/time of the research.

Results and Discussion

Word Choice Error Results

In answer to the first research question about how frequently tutors re-spond to word choice errors, we found that 11% of the tutors' in-text or marginal comments related to word choice errors—almost exactly the same as the 11.5% word choice errors in Ferris' 2006 study. The other 89% of marginal comments were devoted to problems at other levels of discourse. In answer to the second research question, almost one fifth or 18% of the word choice errors in the sample were first language-based, resulting from writers' translation from Chinese, and 82% were second language-based, resulting from writers' difficulty with semantic features of English. The proportions above are in line with the results of other vocabulary research that has shown that higher proficiency second language writers have a smaller percentage of first language-based or translation errors and a larger percentage of second language-based errors, since they are relying more on their second language than on their first (Yang & Xu, 2001; Augustín Llach, 2011). Also, complex, cognitively challenging writing tasks related to content learned in the second language are more likely to elicit second language-based than first language-based errors (Olsen, 1999). Importantly, the 40 students in our sample were responding to assignments that demanded higher order thinking and problem-solving in their subject areas.

Of the 82% second language-based errors, the largest group—37% of the total errors—were due to writers using words in the wrong context, which Carl James (1998) notes is due to a kind of "double ignorance"—incomplete knowledge of both the chosen word and of the intended or target word.

Synform, Precision, and Idiomaticity occurred with similar fre-quency to one another: Synforms—sound-alikes and look-alikes that are confused—accounted for 14% of the error sample. Precision, when a word or expression either over- or under-generalizes a target word or concept, was 13% of the total. Idiomaticity, errors based on idioms, "prefabricated language," or words that belong together such as *taking a shower*, represented 12% of the sample.

Register errors—using a word from conversational discourse instead of written discourse—were 6% of the total. (See Figure 2 for a graph of this breakdown of error types.) Additional explanations and examples, the kinds of which many tutors of Chinese students will readily recognize, are presented below.
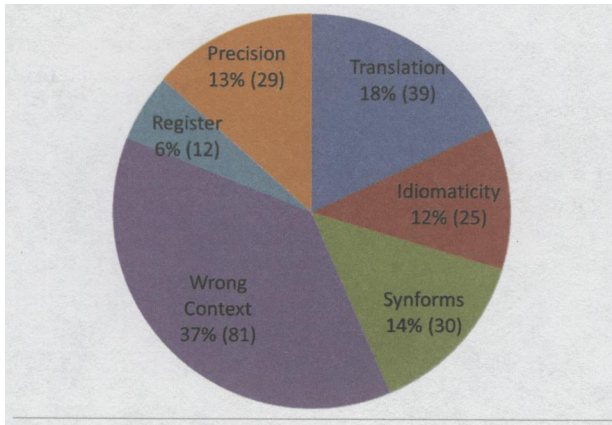
Figure 2: Types of Errors (n=216)

Chinese-Based or Translation-Based Errors

The errors that are influenced by direct translation (18% of the sample) reveal the linguistic and sometimes cultural distance between Chinese and English, resulting in problematic phrases that might be nonsensical, awkward, or redundant. Consider the following errors:

1. *casting bombs* to the enemy

2. the daughter *married outside*

3. being attacked at the *dead point*, she surrendered immediately

4. the teachers gave the students a *home assignment*

5. the wife currently is a *full-time wife* and takes care of the house-work

6. *changes always faster than plans,* thus we should be more open to changes

In 1, the verb *bombing* could correctly replace *casting bombs*. For Chinese speakers, *bomb* 炸彈 (jha–dan) can only be a noun in Chinese and needs a verb to complete the action; whereas 丟擲 (diou–jhih), translated into *cast*, is the appropriate verb for *bombs* for Chinese speakers. It is perhaps difficult for a Chinese writer to switch from a verb and a noun (casting bombs) to a verb (bombing) because of this structural difference between the two languages.

In 2, *married outside*, which does not make sense in English, is probably directly translated from 嫁到外地 (jia-dao-wai-di); 嫁 (jia) is the verb for a bride's getting married, and 外地 (wai-di) means a town away from home. The Chinese counterpart describes that a bride moves away from her hometown, probably to her husband's town. In English the phrase requires more information than *outside*; for example, it would be clearer to say *married and moved out of town*.

Example 3 reveals the cultural distance between the two languages. *Dead point* (死穴, sih-syue), in which 死 (sih) means dead and 穴 (syue) means an acupuncture point, is often used in kung fu novels to describe the deadly spot on a body at which one could kill their enemy immediately. 死穴 is comparable to the Achilles heel, but it might be difficult for non-Chinese speakers to associate the term *Achilles heel* with a *dead point*.

In 6, 計劃總是趕不上改變, (ji-hua-zong-shih-gan-bu-shang-gai-bian) is a common phrase that means *plans are always behind changes*. Thus the writer used *changes always faster than plans* to describe how a plan cannot account for unpredictable situations. Nevertheless, the phrase is nonsensical, because changes and plans cannot be compared in terms of speed in English. These first four errors might be incomprehensible to non-native speakers of Chinese because of the strong interference of the Chinese language.

On the other hand, *home assignment* (4) is redundant and *full-time wife* (5) is awkward. In Chinese 家庭 (jia-ting) means *home* and 作業 (zuo-ye) means *assignment*. 家庭作業 (jia-ting-zuo-ye), literally translated into *home assignment*, refers to the assignment for students to finish at home as opposed to the assignment to be completed in school. Therefore Chinese speakers might use *home assignment* to mean homework, resulting in redundancy because the English word assignment suggests it should be done at home. *Full-time wife* comes from the phrase 全職(家庭)主婦, (cyuan-jhih-[jia-ting]-jhu-fu), or *full-time (house)wife*, which is a common term for a stay-at-home mom or a housewife. The translated term *full-time wife* is, however, awkward because the English term *wife*—different from housewife or stay-at-home mom—is a role and we associate the phrase *full-time* with a job.

Translation errors also occur when multiple English words correspond to the same Chinese counterpart or when the Chinese translations of two English words share a character (Ma, 2009). For instance, *both* and *all* are both translated into 都 (dou) in Chinese and therefore might be used interchangeably. Similarly, Chinese speakers might have difficulties distinguishing *the number of* from *the amount of*, because the difference between count and non-count nouns does not exist in Chinese. *Thought*

and *considered*, both translated into 認為 (ren-wei) or 視為 (shih-wei), differ syntactically: *thought of as* vs. *considered as*. Several English terms that correspond to the Chinese term 看見 (kan-jian)—such as *looking at*, *watching*, and *seeing*—are common errors. Similarly, 問題 (wun-ti), or question, could mean a specific question or a broader issue. Other examples in this category include *cost* and *fee* (費用, fei-yong), *bring* and *take* (帶, dai), *alarm* and *warn* (警告, jing-gao), *eat* and *take pills* (吃藥, chih-yao), and *tell* and *say* (說, shuo). The Chinese translations of some English words share one character and create confusion for Chinese speakers (Ma, 2009), such as *accurate* (正確, jheng-cyue) and *specific* (精確, jing-cyue), *survive* (生存, sheng-cun) and *exist* (存在, cun-zai), and *examine* (調查, diao-cha) and *test* (檢查, jian-cha).

Second Language or English-Based Errors

Wrong Context. Wrong Context (37% of the sample) is the first category of the second-language based errors to be discussed. Vocabulary researchers point out that as proficiency improves and second language learners become familiar with more words, the chances of confusing those words increase (Augustín Llach, 2011). With exposure to a variety of disciplinary discourses, more semantic networks develop and are enlarged, again increasing the chances of choosing a wrong but semantically related word from the same network. For example, consider the errors:

1. His action was *guilty*.

2. [Food shopping] almost *runs out* my budget.

3. He *betrayed* the marital fidelity.

4. I had to *accommodate* my time.

5. He had less time to *company* with his family.

In each, the chosen word is semantically related to or in the same network as the potential target expressions, but the chosen word does not fit the context. These writers are approximating a conventional English expression, but are getting tripped up by related words and ideas. In 1, a person who commits an illegal action—rather than the action itself—is guilty. In 2, when the writer shops for food, he runs out of money but does not run out his budget. In 3, the writer probably means that the character in the movie betrayed his wife by not practicing marital fidelity. In 4, the writer had to *apportion* (the target or correct word) their time or *accommodate* a demanding schedule. In 5, they had less time to

spend with their family or more awkwardly, to *be in their company.* Note that 1–3 involve rephrasing the passage in order to make more sense in English, which can be a challenge to explain when tutoring online.

    Synforms. English is filled with words that sound and/or look alike, especially to second language writers. Examples of errors from word confusion (14% of the sample) are:

1. to *mesmerize* their victory in history vs. to *memorialize* their victory

2. it gave people a new *decent forum* vs. *forum for dissent*

3. I want to *explicit* my point vs. *explain* my point

4. it is a controversial and *ambivalent* issue vs. *ambiguous* issue

5. an eagle appeared and held him in its *mouse* vs. *mouth*

As in 5, writers may be misremembering the word from their reading or listening, or representing the word the way they hear it or say it according to their L1 phonological system. Note that 3 and 4 could also be Wrong Context but were classified as Synform because both words share the first few letters and sounds: *expl* in 3 and *ambi* in 4. Confusion may be compounded because both of these word pairs are in the same network of meta-discourse or language about ideas and positions. Corrections of such errors need only involve the replacement of the wrong expression with a correct one rather than having to rewrite and reformulate the passage, which is not as difficult in online tutoring sessions as addressing wrong context errors.

    Precision. Writers make precision errors when they choose words that over- or under-generalize their intended meaning (13% of the sample). Both the mistaken word and the target word have similar meanings. In the case of over-generalizing, the usage sounds vague, as in 1–3 below; in the case of under-generalizing, as in 4 and 5 below, the chosen word seems too specific or narrow. Corrections involve replacing the wrong word with an alternative rather than re-constructing the phrase or sentence.

1. People present their culture through the sculpture they *have* vs. *create.*

2. Humans *made* language to exchange ideas vs. *developed.*

3. A follow-up discussion will be *formed* vs. *arranged.*

4. The author *announced* that the reason vs. *argued*.

5. Their *ownership* of power vs. *possession*.

Idiomaticity. Idiomatic errors (12% of the sample) are mistakes in fixed expressions that must be stored as one lexical unit in memory. These errors might result when the idiomatic expression has not yet been completely internalized. Types of examples from the sample are:

1. Expressions that involve common verbs such as *make, take, get,* or *have*:
   * To *make* vs. *set* priorities
   * To *give* vs. *make* a phone call
   * *Taking* vs. *getting* treatment
   * To *take consideration about* vs. to *take into consideration*
   * *Having* vs. *taking* a shower

2. Less frequent expressions:
   * They knocked the building down to *move the room* for a western style building vs. to *make room for*.
   * The management tries to stand in the customer's *feet* vs. *shoes*.
   * Migration from China is a *worthy studied one* vs. a *subject worth studying*.

Register Errors. Register errors, the lowest percentage (6%) of the sample, are caused by confusing oral and written styles of English, resulting perhaps from this student population's increased exposure to English conversational discourse through globalization and the internet. Examples are:

1. It happened *couple* times vs. *several*

2. The character's experience was *scary* vs. *frightening*

3. They saw *a bunch of* people vs. a *group*.

Several errors were of students using British English, which in the U.S. constitutes using too lofty a register, at least for 4 and 5.

4. *Whilst* they were waiting vs. *while*

5. He talked to a *monger* vs. *peddler*

6. She lived with her *mum* vs. *mother*

Tutor Response Results

Our third research question (What are the ways in which online writing center tutors respond to word choice errors?) can be answered by the percentages of various speech acts used in tutors' comments. Each comment used one or more of the five speech acts: corrections, explanations, error indications, options, and questions. As shown by Figure 3 below, corrections contributed to 48% of all speech acts in the comments. 25% of the speech acts were questions. A question could indicate the tutor's desire to let the writer decide what they mean.[6] Because in asynchronous online tutoring the student is not available to converse about his intended meaning, some of those questions contained tentative options—a feature of 10% of the total speech acts—from which writers could choose the alternative closer or closest to their intended meaning. At other times, however, tutors simply had no idea what the writers meant, so they were unable to provide a correction and instead responded "I don't understand what you mean here"—or perhaps that was why they used the shorthand "word choice" in order to indicate an error, which accounted for 5% of the speech acts. 12% of the total speech acts involved explanations of why the writer's word was inappropriate and/or why the tutor's recommendation was more appropriate.

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6   Because each comment could use more than one speech act, the 200 comments contained a total of 346 speech acts. We also counted each of the 200 comments as one unit and calculated the percentages of comments with one speech act. The numbers carried similar meanings to those in Figure 3; for example, 35% of the comments contained only corrections, indicating the tutors' tendency to provide direct corrections.
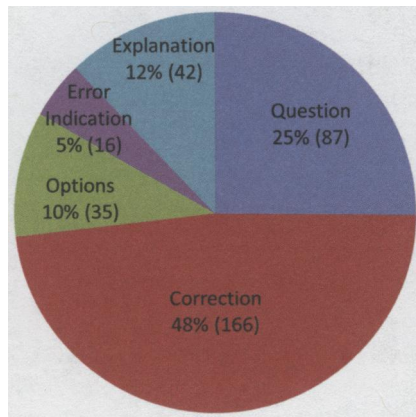
Figure 3: Types of Speech Acts in Tutor Responses to Word Choice Error (n=346)[7]

Many responses combined these speech acts (Searle, 1969). Examples of combinations, the types of which asynchronous online tutors will recognize, are below:

1. The student writes: [The homeless shelter] will offer *persistent* services.

   The tutor responds: Wrong word—do you mean *ongoing*? (Question/Correction)

2. The student writes: A lot of female infants were *abandoned* before or after they were born.

   The tutor responds: Do you mean aborted? If their lives are terminated before birth, they are aborted. When you say abandoned after birth, what do you mean? Were they left by the side of the road? Given up for adoption? Killed? (Question/Explanation/Correction/Options)

3. The student writes: The US fought against Germany *in various combats*.

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7   Chi-squared tests showed no significant correlations between the speech acts in tutors' responses and particular categories of word choice errors.

The tutor responds: *On various fronts? In various battles? In various types of combat?* (Question/Options)

Implications for Tutors and Tutor Educators

1. *Based on the Tutor-Response results—a higher percentage (35%) of "Correction only" and lower percentages of responses that involved Explanation (12%), Options (10%), and Questions (25%)—tutors should make more use of the speech acts of Explanations, Options, and Questions for responding to word choice errors.*

Writing center professionals may be inclined to think that "Correction only" (35% of the response sample) is always an insufficient response to word choice errors because it seems like a temporary fix. Yet tutors are evaluating drafts holistically and in relation to the students' writing assignments. As Lynn Goldstein (2004) argues, formulating written commentary that is helpful for revision and learning is a complex process with multiple interacting variables. A draft may contain more egregious problems on more global rhetorical levels and online tutors are taught not to overwhelm writers with copious feedback and long explanations. After all, second language writers are also second language readers, and having to decipher such feedback adds to the arduous work of completing their assignments. No explanation at all might be better than a long, confusing one. On the other hand, if writers can understand a clear explanation, they are less likely to make the error in the future.

However, the relatively low 12% Explanation figure for tutor responses does suggest that native English-speaking writing tutors, many of whom are unaccustomed to analyzing their own English lexicon, might not be sure why one word may be an error and another would be more appropriate. Therefore, tutors might simply make the correction. Correcting is more like editing, but explaining is teaching—which may result in learning. An explanation accompanying direct error correction has been found in some studies to produce long-term gains in grammatical accuracy (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Therefore, Explanations together with Corrections (a combination that only represents 9% of the sample) may increase lexical accuracy as well. Writing center professionals are realizing more and more that one of the tutor's most important roles in working with second language writers is that of explaining and instructing students about language features (Thonus, 2010).

Questions and Options can also be effective online tutor responses because they potentially offer the writer more agency and choice—unless the error is an obvious Synform (e.g., women's *statue/status*; a luxury *module/model*), in which case a correction with a short explanation of the error and the target word would suffice. More challenging, both linguistically and ethically, than replacing the wrong word with the right one is responding to Wrong Context errors, for which entire passages must be rephrased.

> 2. *Based on the study's finding that approximately one of every nine online marginal comments (or 11%) relates to word choice, tutors should help second language writers use input from reading and listening to reduce the number of word choice errors.*

Word choice errors, especially those from Translation and Wrong Context, are more difficult for second language writers to recognize and correct than grammar errors. Yet tutors can point out to writers that these errors can be gradually reduced through intensive reading. For example, reading can help writers notice expressions with common verbs of Anglo-Saxon origin such as *make*, *have*, *get*, and *take*. Additionally, some Chinese writers in this study made errors in language about ideas: for example, *question* vs. *problem* (a Translation error since both are the same word in Chinese); and the Synforms *intension* vs. *tension* between the east and the west and the author *contributed* vs. *attributed* the problem. Such errors can be reduced by conscious reading-for-writing processes in which tutors instruct writers to notice the features of language about ideas (Schmidt, 1990), thus fostering input (Krashen, 1982). A good source of input for academic writing is public discourse found in venues such as *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, NPR, CNN, and BBC News. News sources like CNN and NPR can promote second language learning because news and discussions repeat in a loop, as it is often difficult to capture everything the first time it is heard. Accurate usage can then be practiced through writing that is modeled both rhetorically and lexically by the transcripts (Williams, 2005) or broadcasts. Intensive reading for writing is more effectively done in programs where writers work once or twice a week with the same tutor.

> 3. *Based on the examples of Translation and Wrong Context errors that render passages less comprehensible, tutors should help second language writers use resources to reduce the number of word choice errors.*

Tutors should also model the use of resources that students can consult on their own to discover whether an expression is used in error: e.g., the *Longman Chinese-English Online Dictionary*, Dictionary.com, Wordreference.com, and the *Collins Co-Build Dictionary*. They can also recommend strategies to employ especially during the revising and editing stages of composing, such as "Googling" the expression to confirm its correct usage.

> 4. *Based on the findings that almost 20% of the errors resulted from Translation, writing centers should employ more Chinese-English and other bilingual tutors.*

It is obvious that high proficiency second language writers still rely on their first language, which is now considered a natural and inevitable resource for second language writing and speaking, even among seasoned bilinguals (Jiang, 2004). However, tutors cannot understand or help correct errors that may result from translation if they do not know the first language. Because of the influx of Chinese students in the U.S., writing centers will need to employ more Chinese-speaking bilingual writing tutors to address these errors. In addition, even bilingual tutors from other first language backgrounds are more likely to be aware of the challenges and complexities of acquiring an English vocabulary than monolingual native-English speaking tutors.

Limitations of the Study

The 200 word choice errors in 40 drafts represent a range of word choice problems of Chinese-speaking writers who use our writing center; the data are both linguistically and culturally rich. The study does, however, have a number of limitations. Replications of this study that improve its design could include:

1. A larger error sample, so that each error category, especially Register, Idiomaticity, and Precision, would have a greater number of examples and could derive more meaningful statistics. Also, it is possible that the largest category, Wrong Context (37% of the errors), can be broken down into sub-categories.

2. A more diverse sample of writers to enable language-background comparisons that examine, for example, word choice errors of Spanish and Portuguese vs. Chinese and Korean speakers. How would word choice errors of speakers of lan-

guages that are cognate with English such as Spanish and Portuguese differ from those of speakers of languages that are non-cognate such as Chinese and Korean?

3. Controlling for the type of writing and the particular course and level, for example, by looking at word choice errors identified by tutors only in first-year writing courses rather than examining writing from multiple different disciplines and various course levels. It is possible that second language writers facing new disciplines at advanced levels will encounter greater subject matter complexity that increases the number of word choice errors.

4. Examining entire drafts to classify errors and problems rather than relying only on those that tutors identified.

Future Research

Another limitation of studies such as this one that categorize lexical errors when the writers are not available for consultation is that researchers must sometimes guess at the processes by which writers arrived at many of the errors in order to categorize them (Augustín Llach, 2011). To counteract this problem, another study design—composing-aloud studies such as those of Woodall (2002), Wang (2003), and Murphy & Roca de Larios (2010)—could focus on writers' word choice decision-making processes.

Further research on the writers' reasons for particular word choices could involve other designs and methodologies, for example interview-based case studies to better understand their psycholinguistic and linguistic processes. We could also explore what types of online feedback student writers find helpful for correcting word choice errors in the short-term and for improving vocabulary in the long-term. We could examine revised essays and ask writers about their decisions not to use certain feedback from tutors. Also recommended are longitudinal studies of second language writers throughout their college years to trace how their word choice errors change in number and type. Does the percentage of errors from translation gradually decrease over the years, as Augustín Llach (2011) has suggested? Such studies could also include lexico-grammatical errors to determine how the proportion of content-based lexical errors changes in relation to form-based lexical errors over time. Another option is to assess the severity of word choice and grammar errors according to "error density" and "error gravity" (Rifkin & Roberts, 1995; James, 1998; Severino, Cogie, Prim, & Vu,

2013)—that is, how difficult are these errors for tutors to process and for students to repair.

To address some of these limitations, we have embarked on a longitudinal, interview- and text-based writing development case study of a Chinese writer who frequently used online tutoring for more than two years. We have conducted draft-to-revision analyses, tracking the student's uptake of tutors' feedback to see if errors and higher-level problems were addressed. Additionally, the study includes analyses of the sentence level complexity and accuracy (considered to be measures of second language writing development; see Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, & Kim, 1998) of her drafts and revisions to see if and how these features changed from draft to revision and from paper to paper over the two years. The study also includes the subject's own self-assessment and our analysis of both her language development (11 features, e.g., control of word choice and tenses) and general writing development (9 features, e.g., the ability to sustain an argument and awareness of audience). An additional purpose of the new study is to evaluate the helpfulness of various types and styles of writing center feedback to the subject's long-term growth in order to pilot a form of writing center assessment.

To conclude, the present study of 200 word choice errors indicates that second language writers need help with word choice both in generating and revising drafts. In order to provide this help, tutors need more knowledge about word choice issues and how to provide instruction and feedback on word choices. Tutor educators can teach tutors the causes and types of word choice errors and the different types of speech acts and combinations available to address them, stressing Explanation, Options, and Questions. The ultimate goal is for tutors to learn to choose the most appropriate responses for particular word choice errors in the context of other concerns—both rhetorical and linguistic—to promote students' writing and language development.

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