

A Comparative Study on the Avoidance in College English Writing

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It is quite common that College students' writings are often loaded of ordinary words and monotonous sentence patterns because they often deliberately avoid some language structures and conjunctions. This kind of sketchy and hollow writings may hinder the improvement of English writing skill. This paper first researches this avoidance phenomenon from three aspects: lexis, syntax, and discourse, then explores the reasons behind it, and finally puts forth some instructive suggestions for improving this condition.

Keywords: avoidance, college English writing, comparative analysis

Introduction

In English learning, there are five basic English skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating. Among which, as a synthetic linguistic practice, writing forms a connecting link, for it helps students practice and go over what they have been taught through listening and reading (i.e., writing forms tacit knowledge via promoting internalization of new knowledge), so it is the output-oriented mode in language learning process. Raimes (1983) claimed that the intimate kinship between writing and thinking makes writing a treasure part of any language course. She also proved in her studies that proper language, punctuation mechanics, and logical content are the necessary factors for producing a clear, fluent, and effective piece of writing.

According to the teaching requirements issued by the Education Committee, high school students shall be possessed of at least about 5,000 English words before graduation. However, as a university English teacher, the author found an interesting and common phenomenon that college students' writings are load of simplest and most ordinary words and declarative sentences, which is far from commensurate with the vocabulary size of university students. Aside from being related to students' English level and practical ability, one of the most important reasons is that they adopt avoidance strategy deliberately or indulgently. That is to say, they choose to use relatively simple and familiar words and grammatical structure in order to avoid taking the risks of making mistakes. Why do students reject to use new linguistic knowledge and activating the challenge to using difficult language structure? This paper aims at exploring the results of and the reasons for this phenomenon in language learning and tries to provide some possible ways to improve this situation.

Studies on Avoidance

Speaking of language avoidance, it actually fits into two types: One is the “expression difficulty” and the other is the “language transfer”. This paper mainly deals with the first phenomenon, because in spite of the merits of simple expressing way in writing, frequent employment of this method will surely hinder students’ language competence at a particularly low level which is unfavorable for long-term language learning.

The term “avoidance behavior” was first put forward by Schachter. She made a study based on error analysis and found that if a student finds a particular construction in the target language difficult to comprehend, it is very likely that he will try to avoid producing it (Schachter, 1974). Laufer and Eliasson (1993) explained this phenomenon as a cognitive strategy that L2 learners turn to in order to surmount a communicative difficulty. What is employed instead is an expression that they find in some sense simpler and that conveys more or less the same content as the expression initially envisaged. It presumes awareness, however faint, of a given target language feature, and it always involves a conscious or subconscious choice to replace that feature by something else.

Many scholars in different periods have studied this phenomenon and tried to give proper and possible explanations. Cohen (2000), from the theory of contrastive analysis, pointed out that avoidance phenomenon results from the great impact of the first language. That is to say, a learner’s first language “interferes” with his/her acquisition of a second language and that it consequently causes the major obstacle to successful mastery of a new language. Therefore, in writing practice, learners might simply avoid certain linguistic structures on which they would be likely to make errors. Krashen (1982) studied avoidance from the theory of monitor hypothesis and pointed out that learning cannot become acquisition. During the learning process, learners usually take advantage of grammar rules of mother tongue to meet the communication needs of second language. Under this circumstance, the two language differences always lead some mistakes and conscious monitoring cannot amend such mistakes all the time. Provided that amendment is over-complicated and hard to complete within a short time, it is possible for learners to adopt simple expression methods instead of using complex one. Tarone (1980) examined this phenomenon from the theory of communication strategy and drew the conclusion that the objective of communication is to make the communicative channel become smooth, in which avoidance is the common strategy. Learners avoid talking about the concept or objects which they are not able to express, including topic avoidance, syntax avoidance, lexical avoidance, phonetic avoidance, and the like.

Studies on avoidance phenomenon in China started relatively late. Su Dingfang and Zhuang Zhixiang (1996) made a preliminary introduction on an avoidance phenomenon in theory and claimed that avoidance phenomenon is one practical feature of communication strategy. Zhou Rong and Li Zhiming (1996) pointed out that production of avoidance phenomenon is responsible for poverty in language competence. Lin Ruchang (1995) held that language interference, in other words, negative transfer of mother tongue is the leading reason for avoidance phenomenon.

Research

Objectives

This research is a comparative study about college students’ avoidance phenomenon in two English writings. The purposes of the research are as the follows:

1. Do students consciously have avoidance in their writing?
2. Is avoidance phenomenon common among students' writings?
3. Which aspect or aspects do college students have avoidance in?
4. What are the causes of this phenomenon?

Subjects

The subjects are 30 non-English-major sophomores in University of Shanghai for Science and Technology (USST). Since they have all passed college entrance exam and spent one more year in learning College English in USST, their English can be evaluated as the intermediate level. The reason why it is significantly important to take the students' English level into consideration for this research is that students at beginner level shall take "avoidance" as a kind of communication strategy to achieve communicative efficiency because of their limited language resources. But if students at intermediate level cannot lower the frequency of avoidance tendency, it will be possible to exert negative influence on English writing skills.

Instruments

Altogether 60 writing papers were collected from 30 students and each of them has two writings with the same topic. One is an in-class writing assignment which is required to be finished within 30 minutes and the other is a homework writing assignment which can be polished many times. The criteria for grading the writings are in accordance with the College English Test Band-6. The requirements for the two writings are as the follows:

Write an essay on the given topic: E-shopping. Try to imagine what will happen when more and more people purchase things online instead of going to the store. The writing contains no less than 150 but no more than 200 words. Grades will be awarded for content, organization, grammar and appropriateness. Failure to follow the instructions may result in a loss of grades.

Data Analysis

According to the collected papers, the avoidance phenomenon mainly demonstrates in the following three types: lexis, syntax, and discourse. Table-1 is the detailed description of the two writings.

Table 1

The Comparison of the Avoidance in the Two Writings

Types of avoidance	Manifestation of avoidance phenomenon	Writing 1		Writing 2	
		Number	Frequency	Number	Frequency
Lexis	Hyponymy	20	21	6	8
	Antonym	18	22	5	6
	Paraphrase	26	27	7	8
Syntax	Complex sentence	23	26	5	6
	Passive voice	15	18	7	7
	Inverted order	16	20	5	6
Discourse	Cohesion & coherence	23	25	7	8
	Rhetoric & idiom	16	19	5	6
	Formal sentence	12	10	6	6

From Table 1, it can be seen the avoidance phenomenon can be found in many aspects. Due to the limitation of the paper, the paper just chooses one aspect from each type to do the detailed analysis.

Analysis of Lexical Avoidance

In lexical type, the avoidance phenomenon is mainly displayed in three aspects: hyponymy, antonym, and paraphrase. Hyponymy is a relationship between two words, in which the meaning of one word includes the meaning of the other. The specific term is called a hyponym and the general term is called superordinate. Students are inclined to use superordinate to replace subordinate. Same as the hyponymy, paraphrase is also one of the favorite methods employed by students when they meet the difficulty in expressing some ideas. For example,

E-shopping places no geographical restrains on students who can find a comfortable spot in any location with moveable computers.

The word computer is a general word and it can be subdivided into desk-top computer and laptop computer. Here, students actually refer to laptop computer, but fearing of committing mistakes they choose the superordinate word with some explanation. Even though to some extent this method can help deliver the communication messages and reduce the chance of making mistakes, it will definitely lead to improper and incorrect expression.

Analysis of Syntactical Avoidance

English and Chinese are two different types of languages. Chinese sentences look quite simple and short in structure and they are loosely organized, whereas English sentences are famous for well-organized structure. Influenced by their mother language, students are used to writing simple sentences and compound sentences in order to avoid some complex ones. This is especially obvious in Writing 1, which makes the compositions look monotonous, disconnected, and repetitive. By comparison, Writing 2 contains five to six sentences more than Writing 1, even though the total numbers of words of the two writings are almost the same. The following examples are cited from one students' two writings respectively:

E-learning can help people a lot in balancing their studies and life. It can help them make a study plan according to their life. In this way, people's life will not be interfered by learning (Writing 1).

With E-learning, the participant can build a study schedule around his or her particular life situation, rather than other way around (Writing 2).

By comparing the two examples, we can see clearly the structure in Writing 1 is loose and monotonous whereas it is much more tight-knit and compact in Writing 2.

Analysis of Discourse Avoidance

Chinese, featured as parataxis is totally different from English characterized as hypotaxis. Influenced by Chinese, students' writings commonly lack semantic coherence and logic. Normally the coverage rate of conjunction in English writing is 10% (i.e., eight to 10 conjunctions shall be used in an article with 80 to 120 words (Wang, 1990). However, to the disappointment, it is found that fewer conjunctions appear in students' Writing 1. For example,

E-learning offers a different way of learning to people. It has become one of the fastest growing markets in the world. It will continue to be so in the future, and it will never replace the traditional way of learning.

This paragraph is the first part of the Writing 1 which generally describes the background of e-learning. The short passage consists of several short sentences, which dilute the cohesive effect. In Writing 2, the polished paragraph seems much better,

E-learning has become one of the fastest growing markets in the world and shows no signs of slowing down. Although it will never supplant traditional university education, e-learning offers an attractive alternative to many people.

Causes of and Suggestions for the Avoidance

Causes of the Avoidance

Based on the previous research data, it can be seen clearly that there exist obvious differences in students' two writings. What are the causes of this phenomenon? By interviewing the students later, the author found there are two leading factors that account for this phenomenon.

The first one attributes to the psychological factor—motivation. In language learning, motivation, which is a goal-driven behavior, plays an important role in determining the learners' attitudes. According to Brown (2000), motivation may be rooted in the basic need to minimize physical pain and maximize pleasure and can be subdivided into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Research has found that students are likely to be intrinsically motivated if they attribute their educational results to internal factors that they can control or believe they can be effective agents in reaching desired goal. Writing 1 is an in-class writing assignment in which students have time limitation and lack reference strategy. What they can do is to turn to other strategies for help within their control and trying to make less or no mistakes is their ideal goal. So, in general, Writing 1 consists of more simple and monotonous sentences and lack shining and creative points.

The second is the linguistic factor—language proficiency. The lack of vocabulary and shortage of grammar are the two main reasons for the hollow writings and avoidance phenomenon. For Writing 1, due to the insufficient linguistic knowledge of vocabulary, time limitation, and no reference to other language tool, students choose to give up many good thoughts in depth and write in simple words and contents so as to break the barrier of language application and achieve full and partial communicative purposes.

Suggestions for Improving the Avoidance

Avoiding committing mistakes is the general character for any learners in the process of language learning. In other words, avoidance phenomenon has its inevitability. So language teachers should take careful attitude towards this phenomenon and encourage students to minimize this phenomenon by doing the following two things.

Firstly, developing psychological factor and minimizing the blocks in affective disorder. Krashen (1982) claimed that motivation, which is closely related to learning purpose and study attitude, is an important affective factor to the hindrance of foreign language study. Some college students have no clear motivation and objectives to foreign language study and what they want to do is just to get the passing score in the required exams. It is well recognized the higher motivation students have, the more knowledge they would like to absorb. The more confidence, the more risk they want to take. Therefore, teachers shall take various kinds of ways to help students build up students' motivation and confidence, leading them to take a tolerant attitude towards their mistakes and encouraging them to overcome difficulty in more brave way through positively receiving input, thus making great progress in foreign language study.

Secondly, magnifying the input and enhancing the output of linguistic knowledge. According to Krashen (1982), the condition for language acquisition to occur is that the acquirer understands input language that contains the structures a bit beyond his or her current level of competence (i.e. $i + 1$ input). So, teachers shall provide students with a large quantity of input knowledge at a bit higher level by taking advantage of the multi-media equipments and modern facilities. At the same time, more output exercises, such as rewriting,

retelling, or cooperative writing, shall be conducted to reinforce the acquired knowledge. In so doing, students' interest for longer passage can be aroused and their writing competence can be improved.

Conclusion

In language learning, it is necessary for both teachers and students to be fully aware of the avoidance phenomenon in writing, especially for some specific performance of language avoidance with high frequency. From the research, it can be seen students do consciously have avoidance in their writing and this phenomenon is quite common. To improve this condition, teachers may encourage students to take positive attitudes towards English writing and guide them to overcome some difficulties, so that the purpose of language learning is to master a kind of language tool for the communication not just for the examination.

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