

Research Article

On the Chinese Students' Production of English Existential Construction

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the English existential construction for Chinese students. It is always difficult for the students to obtain the existential construction in English learning. Some studies have discussed this issue however few solutions have been proposed to deal with this problem. This study has carried on empirical analysis on the production of existential construction for EFL learners in China. This study chooses three groups of students as subjects. It suggests that students like to turn to there-be simple structures to simplify some complicated expressions. They also tend to use there-be simple structures as clauses. As to those complex subtypes, students are inclined to employ there + present participle and there + attributive clause. Students seldom choose to use there absolute structures. The errors students make are categorized as: Pseudo-relative clause, inappropriate V + ing, disagreement, comma splice.

Keywords: English learning, existential construction, subtypes, transfer

INTRODUCTION

Many researchers have studied English existential construction using various approaches, (Richards, 2000; Tang, 2001; Frezz, 1992; Gu, 1997; Huang, 1987; Breivik, 1983; Quirk *et al.*, 1985) and problems still remains unsettled. Therefore, for the sake of this study, a working definition is proposed in this study: structurally, an existential structure has an unstressed there occupying the subject position. The perform there is followed by a form of the verb be or existential verbs with the notion of existence or emergence. After the existential verb follows an existential noun phrase, which is known as the notional or real subject distinguished from the formal subject there. At the end of the sentence is usually a locative or temporal phrase. Thus, the typical representation of the English existential construction is as follows: There + V+ NP (+ locative/temporal phrase).

Since few solutions have been proposed to deal with the problem of English existential construction, this study studies on the production of existential construction for EFL learners in China and proposed relative suggestions to improve the English existential fro them. Empirical analysis has been implemented to support the conclusions in this study.

SENTENCE PATTERN DIVISION

Quirk *et al.* (1985) classified the construction into five major types. However, according to the focus of previous studies, five major points can be concluded: the agreement, verb types, passive voice, the attributive elements modified the NP, the indefinite forms. Accordingly, 16 subtypes can be classified as follows:

- There + is + NP (singular form or uncountable noun)
- There + are + NP (plural form)
- There + is + NP NPs (the proximity principle)
- There + V (indicating occurrence, like arise, arrive, develop, emerge, appear)
- There + V (indicating existence or location, like exist, remain, live, stand and lie)
- There + V (indicating movement or direction, such as come, go, walk, run, .fly and enter)
- There + passive voice
- There + V + NP + to do
- There + V + NP + doing
- There + V + NP + done
- There + V + NP + attributive clause
- There + to + do as subject
- There + to + do as object of verbs
- There + being as subject
- There + being as object of prepositions
- There + being as adverbial

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

Research questions: This study aims to study on the acquisition and use of there-E construction for Chinese students. Thus, it proposes the following questions:

- What patterns they tend to use?
- What errors may they make in their production of there-construction?

Subjects: This study chooses three groups of students as subjects. The first and second groups are English

majors in the English department of Yulin College: 41 senior students as advanced learners, 55 freshmen in second group. The third group consists of 50 high school students who are from Class 14, Grade 2, Yulin Middle school. They represent the high, middle and low proficiency level respectively due to the length of time they have spent on English learning.

Instrument: This study employs a structured translation. There are 16 items in the test and each item corresponds to a specific subtype of there-E construction. 16 Chinese sentences are prepared for students to translate into English. Each Chinese sentence is designed to meet one subtype of there-E construction. Students will be asked to complete the translation exercise with there in each of sentences. Just as we can see, students may use various types of EE to translate the same sentence. Thus, their preference may be revealed.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSLATION PRODUCTION

Omission of action verbs: Such simplification can be subcategorized as omission of action verbs, like appear, stand and fly. Students tend to write sentences like: There is another problem. However, they show reluctance in adding a verb in this structure like There appears another question.

Simple sentence split tendency: Students tend to separate a complex sentence into two simple sentences instead of rather complicated ones as there-absolute structure. Students just separate the sentences at the point of comma. The following are examples quoted from the study of students:

- There is so much time wasted. We feel angry at it.
- There was no car. We had to go home on foot.

Subordinate clause tendency: Students are inclined to translate there-be construction into subordinate sentences. For example, students make these sentences as the following:

- It is said that there will be a war between the two countries. (Subjective clause)
- It is unusual that there is no question. (Subjective clause)
- That there is rain this afternoon is good news. (Subjective clause)
- Students expect that there will be a wonderful match. (Objective clause)

ERRORS IN THEIR TRANSLATION

They made mistakes in using the two sentence patterns: there + V + NP + doing, there + V + NP + attributive clause.

Misuse of present participles: In their translation, students make errors in using the present participles:

- There is another problem appearing/happening.
- There are many students liking learning English in this school.

The verbs in English can be divided into stative verbs and dynamic verbs. The stative verbs and discontinuous verbs are usually not used in progressive aspect. Students seem to be confused with the semantic implication of stative verbs and discontinuous verbs.

Another explanation to such errors is overgeneration. Students learned to use V + ing as attributive or complement and they also know there is only one predicate in a sentence, the other verbs have to be used in their non-finite verb forms. So when under such cases, they turn easily to V + ing.

Pseudo-relative clause: In the applying the subtype there + V + NP + relative clause, students tend to ignore the relative pronoun before the relative clause. Students, for example, wrote such sentences:

- There are many kids are playing football at the playground.
- There are many students like learning English. Chinese existential sentences appear in the form of the pivotal structure (Huang, 1987):

(NP 1) V 1 NP2 (XP)

For example:

- There are many people (at this school) who like grammar.

This sentence has the sequence: (NP) v NP v NP, with the second NP serving as the 'pivot' linking two verbs. It also fits the description of the broader serial verb structure since there are two verb phrases in its row. Chinese YOU structure makes negative transfer in the learning of there-E construction.

Comma splice: Obviously, students separate the sentence from the comma into two sentences and link them with a comma, for example, *There is no bus, we have to go home on foot.

The usage of comma is different in Chinese and English (Hao, 1996). In Chinese, the comma links two sentences, while it is not the case in English. Secondly, the comma in English cannot separate a subject-predicate structure, while it is the case in Chinese. Students transfer the usage of the comma into their second language.

CONCLUSION

To the simple structures with one verb, students choose there-be simple subtypes naturally. Students use the verb is much more than other existential verbs.

To the complex structures with more than one verb, the highest frequency of structures found in the study are subtypes 9 and 11: there + V + ing, there + n + attributive clause. Then, it follows there-be as subordinate clauses, there simple structures. Students tend to apply the above two structures to meet the complex expressions.

The other strategy is simplification. In this study, it is found that there are many simple there-be structures used as subordinate clauses and coordinate clauses. Or students even separate a complex expression into two or more simple independent sentences. Students turn to compound clause instead of absolute structures or nonfinite verbs. Part of students can use their + being as adverbial, but they seldom use other absolute structures.

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