

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE PREPOSITIONAL ERRORS OF TIME, PLACE AND
DIRECTION AMONG CHINESE SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**

CHONG KIM FOO

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UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS**

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this dissertation is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

Date:

Signature:

Name: Chong Kim Foo

Registration No: M20021000474

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ABSTRAK

Penggunaan sendinama Bahasa Inggeris merupakan satu masalah yang rumit bagi pelajar-pelajar Cina yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua di sekolah. Walaupun begitu, kurang penyelidikan dijalankan ke atas penggunaan sendinama masa, tempat dan arah di kalangan pelajar-pelajar ini. Kajian ini menyelidiki betapa meluasnya kesilapan dan kecenderungan kesilapan pelajar-pelajar Cina di dalam penggunaan sendinama-sendinama ini. Kajian ini juga cuba menerangkan punca-punca kesilapan yang dilakukan. Sejumlah 38 pelajar di sebuah sekolah menengah jenis kebangsaan Cina terlibat di dalam usaha menterjemahkan teks bahasa Cina yang mengandungi sendinama masa, tempat dan arah ke dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Subjek-subjek didapati melakukan kesilapan yang terbanyak sekali dalam penggunaan sendinama masa (39.5%) jika dibandingkan dengan sendinama arah (34.6%) dan sendinama tempat (25.9%). Antara ketiga-tiga kecenderungan kesilapan, salah pilih sendinama adalah yang paling menonjol (64.7%). Ini menunjukkan bahawa pelajar-pelajar Cina menghadapi kemusykilan memilih sendinama yang betul di dalam terjemahan mereka. Penyebab utama kesilapan penggunaan sendinama masa, tempat dan arah lebih menuju kepada aspek perkembangan bahasa pelajar-pelajar ini seperti 'overgeneralization', 'false concept hypothesis', 'omission' dan 'ignorance of rules restriction'. Hanya 28% daripada kesilapan-kesilapan ini disebabkan oleh pemindahan bahasa pertama atau bahasa ibunda mereka. Kekurangan pengetahuan, pendedahan serta pengalaman yang terhad dalam penggunaan sendinama-sendinama ini menyumbangkan kepada insiden kekerapan melakukan kesilapan-kesilapan ini.

ABSTRACT

English prepositions have always been a perceived problem for Chinese ESL learners. However, scant studies have been conducted with a specific focus on the use of prepositions of time, place and direction among Chinese ESL learners. This study examined the extent of errors and the error tendencies of these students in their written assignments with regard to these prepositions. This study also attempted to explain the causes of errors made. A total of 38 students in a Chinese national-type secondary school were involved in translating Chinese texts laced with prepositions of time, place and direction into English. Subjects made most errors in using the preposition of time (39.5%) compared to preposition of direction (34.6%) and preposition of place (25.9%). Among the three error tendencies, wrong selection of prepositions was the most prominent (64.7%). This indicated the uncertainty and ambiguity of Chinese students in selecting the correct prepositions in their translation. The major cause of errors in these three classes of prepositions tended towards developmental aspects of overgeneralization, false concept hypothesis, omission and ignorance of rules restriction. Only 28% of the errors were a result of first language transfer. The lack of knowledge, exposure and limited experience of using these prepositions contributed to the frequency of errors.

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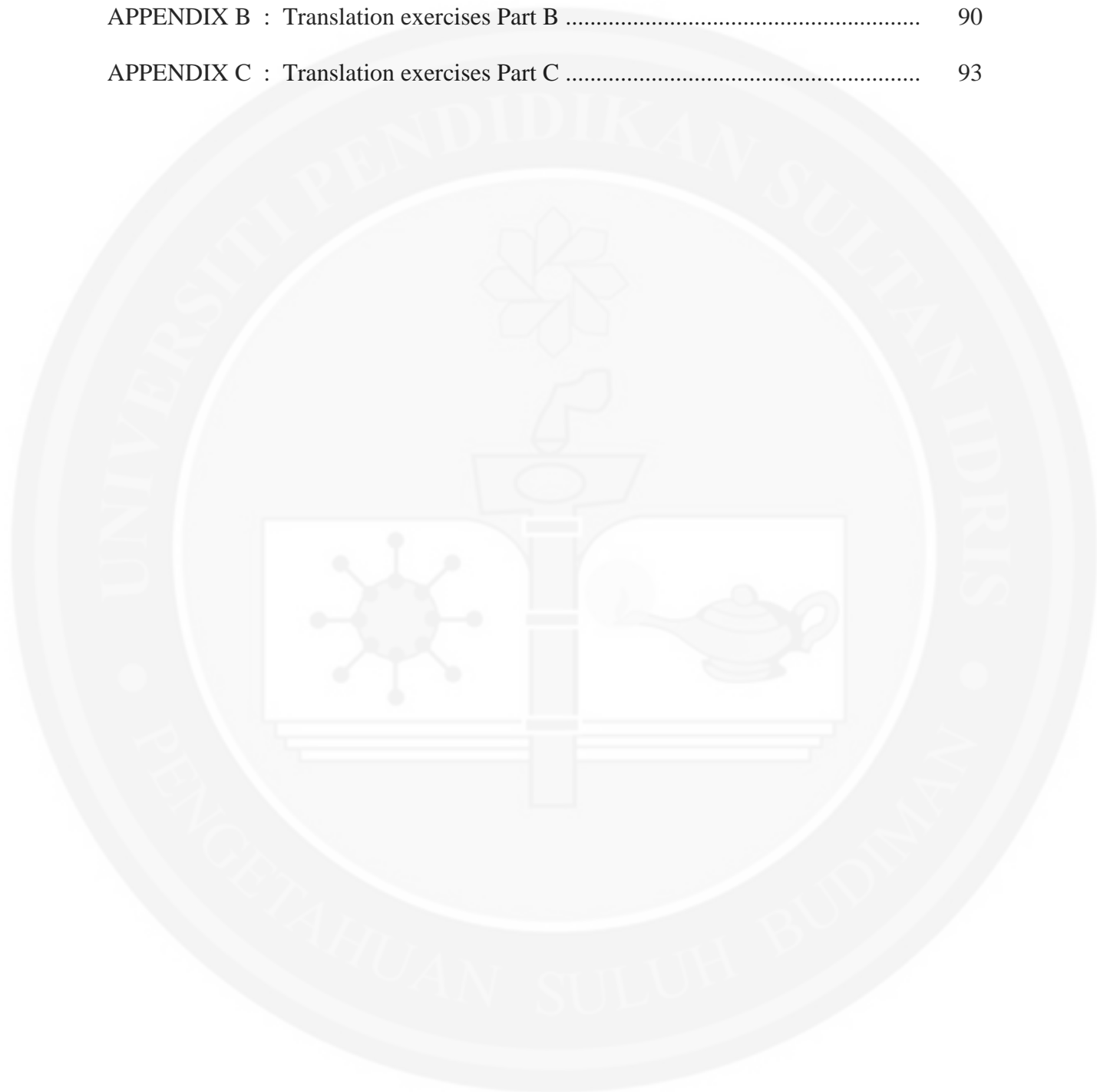
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

English in Malaysia is regarded as a second language in the sense that it is second in importance to the National language, which is Bahasa Malaysia. The Ministry of Education has often stressed the importance and urgency of not only acquiring but also mastering the language as it is the language that is seen to contribute immensely to the nation's growth. Proficiency in English would guarantee the nation's continued meaningful participation in international trade and commerce. As such, many leaders have also sounded the clarion call from time to time that English must be mastered lest Malaysians forget or are not realistically aware of their deficiency in the command of the language. The current President of The Malaysian Youth Council, Dr. Mohammad Khir Toyo, in his address commented:

'If we were to catalogue the great inventions of the past century we will have realized that many that have changed the way we live, work and play had come from the English speaking nations. This is also true for other types of important knowledge in various fields. Today, if we want to learn about computers, hardware, software or programming mastering English is a must. Therefore in order for us to master and use new knowledge and new technology we need to master the language in which it is elaborated. Indeed our future survival as a modern, wealthy and progressive nation depends on this act.'

(*The Star*, Dec 9 2002)

With the advent of globalization and the rapid growth in information and communications technology (ICT), the world is literally ‘wired’. There is great increase in international exchanges in every sphere of life. Dr. Mahathir (the former Prime Minister) succinctly stated :

‘To compete on equal terms with the world’s most advanced countries, Malaysians – as well as most other Asian nationalities – still have some way to go. There are skills that must be learned and values that may yet have to change We do not become Europeans simply because we wear a coat and a tie, speak English and practise democracy instead of feudalism. We have to learn the language of telecommunications, of computers, of the Internet.’

(Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, 1999)

However, according to a recent edition of *The New Straits Times* dated 24 September 2006, a reputable survey of unemployed graduates revealed that the poor command of English was the biggest issue with many hiring managers. Employment agency, Jobstreet, a recruiting company, was quoted to have estimated that 55.8 percent of the hiring managers were not happy with the graduates' command of the language. Many could not express themselves and were only capable of answering standard questions posed to them. Many graduates produced resumes with glaring grammatical and spelling errors. This reflects the present deficient state of the language. As such, it is imperative and urgent that proactive and continuous measures be taken to address the problem.

The emasculation of the English language has its inception since the implementation of the Education Enactment Bill in 1971. This Bill resulted in the abolition of English as the medium of instruction in schools. This change affected the status of the language. The subsequent infrequent use of the language, both in and out of

the schooling environment, inevitably gave rise to the decline in its strength and proficiency in almost all the language skills in English. This lack in the proficiency of the language is very noticeable in our students at all levels, be it in primary, secondary or tertiary education. The recent survey quoted above serves a good barometric indication and confirmation. It is no exaggeration to state that any English teacher would invariably complain of the widespread errors and mistakes both in the oral and written work of our students.

While students may be able to use the language yet the employment of the language would be terribly marred by grammatical ineptness. Grammatical accuracy seemed to have been marginalized with the communicative approach syllabus which hitherto been given greater preponderance in the teaching of English in the Malaysian schools. Language, lacking in grammar would be truncated, odd and could very well be misunderstood. These ESL students manifest multifarious and wide range of grammatical errors in their interlanguage.

One of the most likely occurrences of errors is in the use of prepositions. This is not surprising as prepositions comprise a significant portion of the words contained in a complete English language sentence. It was observed that most of the English language sentences produced contained at least one preposition and that three out of ten most frequent words of the English language are prepositions (Collins 1991). The researcher has had the experience of witnessing the difficulties among his students in attempting to use the correct prepositions especially those dealing with time, place and direction in their written assignments. It is the intention of the researcher to discover the causes

behind the difficulties experienced by these students in employing acceptable prepositions of time, place and direction.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study will focus on the difficulties experienced by the Chinese ESL students in employing prepositions in their written work. The subjects selected for this study comprise only Form three students in a Chinese secondary school. Research on the errors made by ESL students revealed that the functions and the usage of English prepositions represent one of the prominent trouble spots for most students irrespective of their state of proficiency in the English language (Collins, 1991). Collins also explicitly reiterated that one of the most common errors that people learning English make is to use the wrong prepositions. Prepositions have a reputation for difficulty and unpredictability. Prepositions are also notoriously difficult to learn. Long after ESL/EFL students have achieved a high level of proficiency in English, they still struggle with prepositions. (Celce-Murcia & Larsen Freeman, 1999)

Many of the Chinese ESL learners have difficulty in employing English prepositions when they write in the target language. Consequently, they are not able to employ them in a correct manner or without ambiguity so as to satisfy the rules ascribed to their use. This is further compounded by the fact that English prepositions are polysemous in meaning i.e. they hold multiple meanings under different circumstances and contexts. In other words, prepositions could cause problems in understanding because of the variety of literal and metaphorical meanings they portray. For example, it was found that the

preposition 'at' projected seven different meanings under different instances (Hudson, 1979). Dirven (1993) shows how the preposition 'at' extends from an orientation point in space to one in time, and then beyond into state, area, manner, circumstances and cause:

- as place: at the station
- time : at six o'clock
- state : at work
- area : good at guessing
- manner: at full speed
- circumstance: at these words (he left)
- cause: laugh at, irritation at

Another reason that could be attributed to this malaise in their use is that the meanings of many English prepositions defy first language translation. The functions of many English prepositions are dissimilar when compared to the functions of prepositions in the learners' mother tongue or that of the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. Moreover, the existing prepositions found in both the Chinese language and Bahasa Malaysia lack the many forms, functions and meanings expressed by English prepositions. We must take cognizance of the fact that these students possessed prior schemata of the prepositional rules in the mentioned languages which they are more familiar with before they started learning English. This made the learning of prepositions even more problematic especially for those students who through the lack of proficiency in English would inevitably lean on their first language for guidance and reference. Where similarities are present between these languages, positive transfer takes place which facilitates learning but when differences exist, negative transfer takes place which leads

to errors. This leads to interference and as a result the prepositions employed by these students are tinged with elements of both the first language and that of the Malay language.

Three distinct error tendencies with regard to the employment of prepositions could be observed (Hughes & Heah, 1990). Among them are wrong selection of prepositions, omission of prepositions and unnecessary insertion of prepositions. Some illustrations of these prepositional errors are as follows:

A) Wrong Selection of Prepositions

- a) He is poor in* English. (at)
- b) She walk at* the school corridor. (along)
- c) He returned home on* the year 2004. (in)
- d) When we grow old, our children will take care about* us. (of)
- e) Don't worry for* your exam results. (about)

B) Omission of Prepositions

- a) Can you please provide me ^ the course programme? (with)
- b) What are these problems that you are worried ^ ? (about)
- c) The documents pertaining ^ your claim are at our central office in K.L. (to)
- d) Please supply us ^ two Model VD-06 computers. (with)
- e) I go ^ school early in the morning.(to)

C) Unnecessary Insertion of Prepositions

- a) Kamal requested for* an extra day's holiday, but his director refused.(for X)
- b) He was raised up* by his grandfather. (up X)
- c) Young people should respect to* their elders. (to X)
- d) That is all I can tell to* you about my school. (to X)
- e) You can discuss about* this matter with you superior. (about X)

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following objectives:

1. to investigate the extent of errors and the three distinct error tendencies in the employment of the preposition of time, place and direction in the written exercise of Form 3 students.
2. to identify some common prepositional errors of time, place and direction in the written exercise of these students.
3. to explain the possible causes of the prepositional errors in these domains.

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions in this study are as follows:

1. Which concept of prepositional relations among the three poses the most problem for the Chinese students?
2. What is the frequency of errors for the three distinct error tendencies for each of

the concept of prepositional relation investigated?

3. What are the plausible causes of the errors?

1.5 Limitation of Study.

This study is limited in scope as it is carried out to investigate the errors made in the employment of the preposition of time, place and direction among Chinese ESL students in their written exercise. As such, this study is not exhaustive as only the common prepositions in these three prepositional relations are involved. The subject of preposition usage is complex and covers a wide area (Collins, 1991). A comprehensive study of prepositions would include such sub-elements as prepositional adjectives, prepositional adverb and prepositional verb. Preposition also overlap with other word classes such as adverbs and conjunctions. To consider all these would be beyond the scope of this research. .

The corpus of the study is limited too as the study is confined to a class of 38 Form Three students from a Chinese national-type secondary school. The researcher feels that the study would be more objective and reflective of the problems investigated. A more focused and in depth study is thus preferred. The majority of the remaining students in Form Three are either too weak in their command of the English language or they knew too little of the language to be considered as subjects in the study then. These students will only be required to translate Chinese sentences laced with the prepositions of time, place and directions into grammatically correct and acceptable English sentences. Students were not asked to write related essays or other written work to which would be

assessed in the investigation of their prepositional usage. The rationale is that translation exercises are direct and objective in eliciting students' mastery or weakness in the area to be studied. Moreover, the presence of the first language influence is easily detected and determined in translational exercises.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Scant research or interest has been generated in the subject of preposition, more so with the preposition of time, place and direction. The reasons for this are probably twofold. The fact that these prepositions are polysemous in meaning is sufficient to deter concerted effort in analyzing them. Secondly, there seems to be a dearth of previous research which would sift the matter to the bottom and give a complete analysis of detail upon which latter researchers may model their effort.

Having said this, the researcher reckons that the ubiquitous presence of prepositional errors in the learners' written work especially those dealing with time, place and direction which he himself has encountered, merits a separate and specialized investigation. By concentrating on this particular aspect of the target language, the researcher hopes to gain a deeper understanding and insight of the specific problems regarding the use of these prepositions encountered by Chinese ESL learners. This specialized study would be instrumental in helping me as the English teacher to be more effective and thus more successful in my lessons especially with this particular group of students.

The result of this study will provide better feedback for other ESL teachers in the same situation to deal with the 'problematic prepositions' with regard to time, place and

direction. It will also reveal the degree of difficulty for the different concepts of prepositional use. This study could assist a teacher in deciding where his priorities should be channeled to i.e. which prepositions are relatively difficult to learn, needed more emphasis, explanation and practice. By being aware of the possible causes of prepositional errors in these students, the English teacher would be in a much better position to adopt suitable teaching techniques and strategies to curb the transfer-effect of the mother tongue or the dominant language and to overcome the difficulties inherent in the target language itself. It is hoped that this awareness could help these students more able to cope with the difficulties experienced with these prepositions.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Whenever a language is learned or acquired one is faced with the problem of errors inevitably. Errors are the flawed side of a learner's speech or writing. They are those portions of conversation or composition that deviate from selected norm or standard language performance. One cannot possibly learn a new language without first systematically committing errors. As such, errors are an inevitable characteristic feature of language learning.

According to Dulay, Burt & Krashen (1982) analyzing learners' errors serves two major purposes. Firstly it furnishes data from which influences about the nature of the language learning process can be made or inferred. Secondly, it serves as an indication to teachers and curriculum developers which part or parts of the target language students have difficulty producing correctly and which error types detract most from a learner's ability to learn effectively.

Furthermore, analyses of students' errors could assist teachers infer how much their students have learnt or otherwise. They also serve as indications whether they are ready to imbibe what their teacher want to impart in the course of learning a language. Being cognizant and mindfully aware, teachers could construct a fairly good understanding of the features of the language which causes the learning difficulties. Once these difficulties are understood in the proper perspective, remedial measures could then be enforced.

2.2 Errors and Mistakes

For the purpose of this study, it is necessary to distinguish errors from mistakes. Errors are systematic, likely to have repeated occurrences and are typically produced by language learners. An error takes place when the deviation arises as a result of lack of knowledge. It represents a lack of competence i.e. the learner's underlying deficient knowledge of the target language linguistic system. Ellis (1997) refers to errors as gaps in the learner's knowledge.

Conversely, mistakes are unsystematic, occasional and occur typically at random. A mistake occurs when learners fail to perform their competence (Corder, 1967). A mistake is a result of processing problems that prevent learners from accessing their knowledge of a target language rule and causes them to fall back on alternative, non-standard rule which they find easier to access. Mistakes are thus performance phenomena and are regular features of native-speaker speech. They reflect processing failures that arise as a result of factors such as memory lapses, emotional strains, carelessness and lack of automaticity.

Rod Ellis (1997) in his book, *Second Language Acquisition*, recommended a determinant method to distinguish errors from mistakes, i.e. by directing learners to correct their own deviant language structure. Where they are incapable to do so, the deviations can be categorized as errors and where they are successful, they are unerringly categorized as mistakes.

Mistakes hold no pedagogical relevance in error analysis. Error analysis should be restricted to the study of errors, exclusive of mistakes (Corder, 1967). Errors produced by second language or foreign language learners have long attracted attention of applied linguists, researchers, teachers and course designers. Studies have been carried out to investigate the sources and problems faced by non-native language learners. Three significant approaches have been extensively employed in this respect to account for learners' difficulties. They are Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), Error Analysis Hypothesis (EAH) and Interlanguage Hypothesis.

2.3 Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis is a comparative analysis of two languages including their similarities and their differences was considered by many in 1940, 50s and 60s to be a useful predictor of linguistic difficulties of second or foreign language learners. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis claims that if certain elements of a second language differ greatly from a students' native language, the student would likely encounter difficulties with these elements. It is based on the premise that a learner's first language 'interferes' with his or her acquisition of a second language and as such constitutes the major culprit in obstructing successful mastery of the new language. Weinreich (1953) defines interference as:

“Those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language, i.e. as a result of languages in contact (p. 1)

The first language has therefore invariably been considered the villain in second language learning.

The basic concept underlying CAH is the notion of language transfer (Gass & Selinker, 1994, O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Lado (1957), in his influential book, *Linguistic Across Cultures* claims that,

‘.....we can predict and describe the pattern that will cause difficulty in learning and those that will not cause difficulty by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student’ (p. 7)

However, researches working with actual errors produced by learners discovered that many errors predicted by CAH did not turn out to be genuine problems for the learners. The linguistic differences between the L1 and L2 did not always explain L2 difficulties. Findings by researchers such as Richards (1974), Selinker (1972) and Corder (1967), revealed that a substantial amount of L2 errors were not traceable to L1 but were the result of complexities within the L2 itself as well as general linguistic strategies employed in second language learning. Wardhaugh (1970) concluded that ‘contrastive analysis can be of little help or no help at all in the learning task’ All these findings lowered the expectations of CAH as a predictor of language error.

CAH, however still finds relevance, especially among language teachers and researchers employed in foreign countries. In recent years, for instance, Schackne (2002) argued that contrastive analysis between English and Mandarin Chinese is still pertinent. He illustrated some pattern sentences that are structurally sound but systematically