

# การวิเคราะห์ข้อผิดพลาดในการใช้คำบุพบทในงานเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาชาวจีน

## An Analysis of Prepositional Errors in English Writing Made by Chinese EFL Students

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### บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อตรวจสอบข้อผิดพลาดในการใช้คำบุพบทในงานเขียนภาษาอังกฤษและสาเหตุของข้อผิดพลาดในการใช้คำบุพบทในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาชาวจีน กลุ่มตัวอย่างในการวิจัยนี้ คือ นักศึกษาชาวจีนชั้นปีที่ 3 สาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษศึกษา มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏเชียงใหม่ จำนวน 37 คน ที่คัดเลือกโดยการสุ่มแบบเจาะจง เครื่องมือในการวิจัย ได้แก่ แบบทดสอบการเขียนเรียงความเชิงเล่าเรื่อง แบบทดสอบการเขียนบรรยาย และแบบทดสอบการเขียนแบบโต้แย้ง จากนั้นทำการวิเคราะห์งานเขียนของกลุ่มตัวอย่างโดยจำแนกตามโครงสร้างอนุกรมวิธาน (Surface Structure Taxonomy) ของ Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982 : 154-162) ได้แก่ การขาดหาย (Omission) การเพิ่มเติมเข้ามา (Addition) การผิดโครงสร้าง (Misformation) และการผิดตำแหน่ง (Misordering) ผลการวิจัยพบว่า

1. มีการใช้คำผิดตามโครงสร้างอนุกรมวิธาน จำนวน 207 คำ ค่าเฉลี่ยของการผิดโครงสร้างคำสูงที่สุด คิดเป็นร้อยละ 49.27 รองลงมา คือ การขาดหาย คิดเป็นร้อยละ 32.37 การเพิ่มเติมเข้ามา คิดเป็นร้อยละ 17.39 และการผิดตำแหน่ง คิดเป็นร้อยละ 0.96

2. ข้อผิดพลาดของคำบุพบทในการเขียนแบบบรรยายมีจำนวนสูงที่สุด คิดเป็นร้อยละ 35.00 ข้อผิดพลาดของคำบุพบทในการเขียนเชิงเล่าเรื่อง คิดเป็นร้อยละ 34.00 และในการเขียนโต้แย้ง คิดเป็นร้อยละ 31.00 นอกจากนี้ยังมีการเขียนผิดโครงสร้างในการเขียนเล่าเรื่องสูงสุด คิดเป็น ร้อยละ 17.39 และการเขียนผิดตำแหน่งในการเขียนเล่าเรื่องและการเขียนพรรณนา มีค่าต่ำสุดคิดเป็นร้อยละ 0.48

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3. สาเหตุของข้อผิดพลาดของคำบุพบทในงานเขียน พบว่า เกิดจากการแทรกแซงของภาษาแม่ ข้อผิดพลาดที่เกิดจากอันตรกิริยา และข้อมูลป้อนเข้าของภาษาเป้าหมายที่ไม่เพียงพอ

**คำสำคัญ:** ข้อผิดพลาดในการใช้คำบุพบท การวิเคราะห์ข้อผิดพลาด การเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ นักศึกษาชาวจีนที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

## Abstract

This study was aimed to investigate the prepositional errors in writing of Chinese students. It also aimed to explore the causes of prepositional errors in students' essays. The participants in study were 37 third-year Chinese students majoring in English Studies. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. The research instruments of the study were a narrative writing test, descriptive writing test, and argumentative writing test. After finishing the identification, the prepositional errors of the participants were analyzed and classified based on the Surface Structure Taxonomy by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982 : 154-162) including: omission, addition, misformation and misordering.

The research findings revealed that

1. There were a total of 207 prepositional errors based on surface strategy taxonomy. The frequency of misformation was the highest which accounts for 49.27%, followed by omission which accounts for 32.37%, addition errors 17.39%, and the lowest percentage was misordering (0.96%).

2. Prepositional errors in description were the highest (up to 35%), and the prepositional errors in narration and argumentation rank second (70 errors; 34%) and third (65 errors; 31%) respectively. Besides, the percentage of misformation in narration (36 errors; 17.39%) was highest, while the lowest occurrence was the frequency of misordering in narrative and descriptive (1 error; 0.48%).

3. The causes of prepositional errors were found to be interlingual interference, intralingual interference, and insufficient input of the target language.

**Keywords:** Prepositional errors, Error analysis, English writing, Chinese EFL Students

## Introduction

Writing skills are important to students, especially university students since it is a tool for acquiring knowledge. Besides, English writing skills also improve the students' job

opportunities. According to the National Association of Colleges (2018 : 11), strong written skills are at the top of employers' wish lists. Because in a modern workplace workers are required to use this skill in sending emails, writing reports, presenting results, interacting with clients, and writing sales material, etc. Writing, regarded as an important target of testing students' overall proficiency, plays an essential role in interacting with listening, speaking and reading. It shows not only the students' intake ability but also their output of target language (Chen, 2002 : 200). Writing is the comprehensive competence sign of language and reflects students' ability in cognition, thinking and the use of language (Williams, 2004 : 108).

Moreover, it is found in many previous studies that writing is one of the major difficulties that English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) students encounter. Particularly, for college students in China, writing accounts for a considerable proportion in their examination with 15% in CET4/CET6 (College English Test - Grade Four and Six) and 20% in TEM4/TEM8 (Test English Major - Grade Four and Eight). All these examinations examine students' ability to master multiple grammar rules and their ability to use language (Gui and Yang, 2003 : 67). However, Li (2001 : 55) pointed out that "English writing in China is still regarded as unsatisfactory and problematic." Therefore, how to improve students' English writing ability becomes a vital task for teachers and researchers.

Writing is a difficult task because it is a combination of form and content. In addition, Gui and Yang (2003 : 8) had gradually realized that Chinese students' writing ability was far from proficient and one of the main reasons was that a majority of Chinese students had not mastered simple morphemes like prepositions, although they encountered using prepositions in the initial stages of instructional programs. The use of prepositions, prepositional phrases and collocations with particular prepositions constituted one of the most difficult areas of English for Chinese learners (Ma, 2015 : 18). Some learners only know the basic meanings and the simple phrases of prepositions and use them wrongly in their writing. Many Chinese students, even advanced students, sometimes are not aware of what particular preposition is needed. Thus, this results in their erroneous use. This circumstance is inevitable because even young native speakers take years to master prepositions (Durkin, 1978 : 2-6).

It is through contrasting the similarities and differences between students' mother tongue (MT) and the target language (TL) that we can predict the errors that

happen during the second language learning process (Chen, 2008 : 67). English is a language belonging to the Indo-European languages and English prepositions are characterized by polysemy, multi-function, and high frequency. On the other hand, Chinese is a language belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language, and a number of prepositions are fewer than English, and the usage is easier to catch (Huang and Bai, 2006 : 6). Alexander (1998 : 15) pointed out that prepositions in Chinese were easy to catch, more flexible, and have more meanings than English. For example, the meaning of “duiyu” in Chinese can be expressed by using “for”, “against”, “towards”, “with”, and “on” in English. Due to the great differences between Chinese and English, Chinese learners are easily influenced by their mother tongue (MT) and are likely to make prepositional errors during the process of English writing.

According to Gui and Yang (2003 : 67-69), although those Chinese students majoring in English have achieved an advanced level of English proficiency, they also made various types of errors associated with prepositions in their essay writing. Their writing sometimes omitted an important preposition or added an unnecessary preposition, or wrote other types of prepositional errors. Moreover, they were likely to use one single meaning and usage of a preposition or one single prepositional phrase and collocation many times. Many prepositions have more than one meaning and they can be used to show different meanings according to different contexts, but some students just know the preposition “at” serving as a preposition of “place” for example. These problems could affect the meanings of English expressions and English proficiency.

Studies have shown that prepositions are one of the most problematic categories that learners encounter during the process of learning (Richards, 2001 : 202). In addition, prepositional errors can affect the quality of students’ written products and it could lead directly to misunderstandings of the intended message. However, it is found that most researchers mainly chose junior or senior high school students or non-English major students as research subjects. Some other researchers focused on all errors made by Chinese students majoring English, but they did not pay special attention to a specific category of error, named prepositional error. Therefore, it is beneficial for the present study to select Chinese students majoring in English at a university as the subject. This study explores the errors of prepositions made by Chinese students majoring in English. The results of this research have significant implications for the English teaching and learning of prepositions.

## The Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the prepositional errors of Chinese students majoring in English in writing according to the surface structure taxonomy in three types of essays: narrative, descriptive, and argumentative.
2. To explore the causes of prepositional errors in students' essays.

## Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the types of prepositional errors in three types of essays of the Chinese students majoring in English?
2. What are the causes of prepositional errors in students' essays?

## Literature Review

### Error Analysis

It is unavoidable for EFL/ESL students to make errors in second Language (L2) learning. According to Ellis (1994 : 49), "an error can be defined as a deviation from the norms of the target language". Error is natural for the EFL students in learning a foreign language. Since these EFL learners have not yet to mastered and internalized the language system and rules.

Corder (1967 : 163-164) stated that an error occurs when the deviation arises due to the lack of knowledge. The learner does not know the right form or is unable to use language correctly. A mistake takes place as a result of lack of competence. The student has already mastered the knowledge or skill but simply fails to work properly due to lack of attention, slip of the tongue or other factors. Some researchers identify these as "mistakes", but not "errors". The former can be corrected by learners themselves, while the latter cannot be (Edge, 1994 : 71). Therefore, the "error" in this study refers to the improper use of the target language. In addition, prepositional errors in writing are identified as errors, as students do not realize and correct them by themselves.

Corder (1967 : 167) pointed out the errors have significance in the following three ways: 1) making errors is essential to the learner themselves and it is a better way to test

learners' hypotheses about the nature of the language they are learning, 2) learner's errors provide the researchers with evidence of how language is learn and mastered, 3) from the analysis of the student's errors, teachers can understand some information about how much the learner had learn and discover what he or she still has to learn.

This research applied four steps suggested by Corder (1967 : 169):

1. Error collection: deciding what samples of learners' language to use for analysis and how to collect these samples.
2. Identification of error: identifying errors in the texts collected.
3. Description of errors: describing and categorizing error into different types.
4. Interpretation of errors: explaining the sources of errors and reasons for errors.

### **Causes of Errors Made by Second Language (L2) learners**

According to Richards (1974 : 56-60), there were two possible causes of errors' made by second language learners:

1. Interlingual errors

The beginning stages of learning a foreign language are characterized by a large amount of interlingual transfer (Brown, 2000 : 54) or interference which is caused by differences between the student's mother-tongue and the target language.

2. Intralingual errors

It happened because of the faulty or partial learning of the TL.

According to Richards (1971 : 69), there are four major types or causes of intralingual errors as follows:

1. Overgeneralization errors: when the students has limited knowledge and experience is inadequate, they are likely to overgeneralize the rules and create deviant structures.
2. Ignorance of rule restrictions: the student exerts rules in the context of a sentence where they are actually inappropriate. The reason is that they do not aware of rules and restrictions of a particular structure.
3. Incomplete application of rules: the student fails to grasp a fully developed structure. It means that students do not fully master a certain structure required to make correct sentences.
4. False concepts hypothesized: the student does not comprehend a distinction in the target language because of limited experience about target language.

## 5. Ambiguous errors

It should be noted that it is hard to distinguish interlingual and intralingual errors, and even more difficult to identify the various types or causes of intralingual errors. Sometimes, intralingual and interlingual errors are ambiguous.

### Surface Strategy Taxonomy

Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982 : 154-162) conclude that Surface Strategy Taxonomy can operate with four of their categories:

**Omission:** the absence of an item that must emerge in a well-performed utterance. For example: I agree her. (I agree with her).

**Addition:** addition errors which are the contrary of omission, the presence of an item which must not appear in a well-formed utterance. For example: She married with a young businessman. (She married a young businessman)

**Misformation:** The use of wrong form of the morpheme or structure. For example: Your mother is good for you. (Your mother is good to you)

**Misordering:** The incorrect placement of a morpheme or group of morphemes in a well formed-utterance. For example: I with my classmate go to school. (I go to school with my classmate).

Therefore, this Surface Strategy Taxonomy concept contributed by Dulay et al., (1982 : 154-162) was used as an analytical framework of this study.

### Comparison between English and Chinese Prepositions

Ma (2015 : 20) and Xi (2013 : 48) from Shanghai International Studies University compared the usage of English and Chinese prepositions from the following aspects:

1. Most of English prepositions are conventional and fixed, when it comes to a certain meaning, English and Chinese show different tendencies in what kind of structures to choose. English may choose a prepositional phrase while the Chinese may not. For example:

(1)	ta	dale	wode	gebo
	他	打了	我的	胳膊
	He	hit-le	my	arm. (direct translation)
	He hit me in the arm. (correct translation)			

In (1), in Chinese, one says ta dale wode gebo, while the correspondent English expression 'He hit me in the arm' uses a prepositional phrase.

2. In Chinese, prepositions and verbs are very similar. Sometimes it can be difficult to discriminate them. Most Chinese prepositions are evolved from verbs. In addition, these Chinese prepositions still share the features of verbs. That is to say, sometimes they are verbs, sometimes they play a role in prepositions. In this case, prepositions contain verbal meanings. For example:

(2) jinwan you shenme dianshijiemu  
今晚 有 什么 电视节目?

tonight have what television? (direct translation)

What's on the television tonight? (correct translation)

In the examples above, the English preposition “on” could be translated to the Chinese verb “有you” (have).

3. Regarding the position of prepositions in the two languages: the English prepositions are located before some nouns, but their positions are relatively fixed, while the positions of Chinese prepositions are relatively flexible. Prepositional phrases in English are normally placed behind the verbs modified. In contrast, most Chinese prepositions take the positions in front of verbs.

4. The usage of the English prepositions is compulsory and the English prepositions are usually not eclipsed in sentences, while in Chinese prepositions are often omitted in sentences. When a Chinese preposition plays the part of adverbial modifier, it can be eclipsed.

5. Prepositions in English prevail over those in Chinese. The high frequency and flexibility enables English to be called the “language of prepositions” (Quan, 2009 : 67).

6. Most prepositions in English have flexible meanings, one preposition usually contains several meanings and usages, while Chinese is a verbal language which lacks prepositions. For example, the meaning of Chinese word “对于(duiyu)” can be expressed by “for”, “against”, “towards”, “with” and “on” in English.

## Methodology

### Participants

The subjects of this research were 37 junior English major students from Chiang Rai Rajabhat University in Thailand. Each student wrote three different types of essay (narrative, argumentative and descriptive writing), 78 English written products were



collected. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. All of them were native speakers of Chinese. There were three reasons to choose Chinese students majoring in English. First, students majoring in English showed that they had comparatively high language proficiency, which meant that they had mastered basic English writing and the knowledge of English prepositions. Second, previous related studies mainly chosen junior high school students, senior high school students, and non-English majors rather than students majoring in English as their research subjects. Third, there were some differences in number and usage of prepositions between English and Chinese, so Chinese students had different degrees of difficulty in learning English prepositions even though they had been learning English for more than 10 years.

### **Instruments**

The research instruments of the study were a narrative writing test, descriptive writing test, and argumentative writing test. The three writing tasks were chosen to explore the types, frequency, and causes of prepositional errors. The reason why the author choose narrative, descriptive, and argumentative essay as the writing genre was that they were not only the common genres in people's daily life, work, and study, but also the genres appearing frequently on undergraduates' exams, for example CET4, CET6, TEM 4, and TEM8 in the national exams and IELTS, TOEFL, and GMAT in the international tests.

### **Data Collection**

1. For the narrative writing test, the researcher asked for the lecturer's permission for the last 45 minutes of class to run the writing tasks. All of the instructions were given in Chinese in order to make sure that all students could fully understand the tasks. After the instructions, the researcher distributed a writing task titled "Unforgettable Moment in Life" to all participants in the class to write a narrative essay. In this test, 27 pieces of narrative writing were collected.

2. A week later, the Chinese students were required to complete the descriptive writing test titled "The Dorm Room". The requirements and procedures were the same as the narrative writing test. In the end, 25 pieces of descriptive writing were collected.

3. Two weeks later, the participants were asked to complete the argumentative writing test. The writing topic was "Government Should Focus More on Protecting the Environment Rather Than Developing the Economy". The requirements and procedures were the same as the first two tests. Finally, 26 pieces of argumentative writing were collected.

## Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the data obtained as follows:

1. The tests in each type of essay were given numbers in order that the researchers could keep a record of the data which made them easy to analyze.

2. The next step was to identify each preposition in each composition and attempted to find the deviant ones. For any prepositions of which usage and meanings were unidentifiable whether they were errors or not, the British National Corpus was used for consultation. If no example was found in the corpus consulted, the Google web search engine was used to attempt to locate related prepositional usage from native speakers' compositions. If the web search did not find positive outcomes, the suspicious prepositional usage was considered as a prepositional error.

To ensure the accuracy of the data, the author and the research assistant repeatedly checked them, and then wrote down prepositional errors in the data collection chart. Next, the analysis chart was submitted to a native English teacher who taught at the university level to check and correct this chart.

3. This study was analyzed and classified prepositional errors based on the Surface Structure Taxonomy by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982 : 154-162).

4. The next step was made to count the identified errors of each type found in each category of essay and put into rank according to their frequency of occurrence.

5. The cause of these prepositional errors in each type of essay were discussed. The theories of interlingual and intralingual transfer were used to analyze the causes of these errors.

## Results and Discussion

Through the identification of prepositional errors in students' English composition, errors were identified and classified according to Surface Strategy Taxonomy of Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982 : 154-162). The types and frequency of prepositional errors are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Types and frequency of prepositional errors found in Chinese students' English writing tasks

Types of prepositional errors	Frequency	%
Omission	67	32.37
Addition	36	17.39
Misformation	102	49.27
Misordering	2	0.96
<b>Total</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>100</b>

As indicated in Table 1, there were a total of 207 prepositional errors in the participants' writings (omission, addition, misformation and misordering). The frequency of misformation was the highest which accounted for 49.27%, followed by omission which accounted for 32.37%, addition errors (17.39%), and the lowest percentage was misordering (0.96%). It could be seen that most prepositional errors occurred in misformation and errors of misordering were the least frequent.

Regarding the highest frequency of misformation, there were two possible reasons as follow: First, It was the absence of equivalent prepositions in mother language. Secondly, the Chinese students had a vague impression of the proper meanings of set phrases. This may be because they just mechanically remembered them but had no idea how to use them (Xing, 2008 : 53).

For the lowest frequency of misordering, it can be seen that there was a similarity between the position of English and Chinese prepositions in sentences. This result echoes the work of Ma (2015 : 20) who pointed out that the positions of English and Chinese prepositions were mostly placed in front of a noun.

The types of prepositional errors in this study were exemplified as follows:

**Misinformation:**

Example 1:

Error Type	Sample Sentence with Prepositional error	Correct English Preposition	Chinese Preposition that causes the errors
Misinformation	My dorm room <u>is located in</u> the third floor of the No.6 dormitory building.	<u>is located on</u>	“在” (zai) means ‘in’ and ‘on’

According to the Example 1, the incorrect phrase “is located in” was common in student’s descriptive writing. The error above demonstrated that the students are often confused when using “in”, and “on” to convey both spatial and temporal relations. Secondly, by translating most of English sentences into Chinese, it should be noted that the equivalent for “in” and “on” in Chinese is “在” (zai). Therefore, selecting the correct preposition was a big challenge for English learners during the second language learning process (Ma, 2015 : 22).

Example 2:

Error Type	Sample Sentence with Prepositional error	Correct English Preposition	Chinese Preposition that causes the errors
Misinformation	My dorm room <u>is located in</u> the third floor of the No.6 dormitory building.	<u>is located on</u>	“在” (zai) means ‘in’ and ‘on’

According to Example 2, the Chinese students might have had the Chinese preposition “对于” (duiyu) which means ‘to’ and ‘for’ in mind when they wrote the

sentence. Then they translated word by word, from Chinese to English. The Chinese preposition “对于” (duiyu) might have English equivalents “to” and “for”. Besides, students are always confused with similar expressions. These phrases were usually constructed as “be bad for + N” and “be bad to +V”. Chinese Students had a vague impression of the proper meanings of these prepositional phrases because they just mechanically remembered them but did not learn how to use them. This was probably why prepositional errors of misformation were at the highest rate among Chinese EFL learners (Chen, 2008 : 23).

**Omission**

Example 3:

Error Type	Sample Sentence with Prepositional error	Correct Form	Chinese grammar that causes the errors
Omission	I <i>read*</i> the primary school.	I read <i>in</i> the primary school	Wo du xiaoxue 我 读 小学 (no preposition)

When expressing place in English, the preposition “in” should be added in front of the place. This kind of error was due to word by word translation of a Chinese expression. The details were as follows:

wo du xiaoxue  
我 读 小学

I read the primary school. (direct translation from Chinese to English)

I read in the primary school. (correct form of preposition in English)

As stated above, prepositions in Chinese were often omitted, especially the prepositions used to describe locations (Xi, 2013 : 55).

Example 4:

Error Type	Sample Sentence with Prepositional error	Correct Form	The causes of prepositional errors in L2 writing
Omission	<i>We haven't known each other <u>very long</u>.</i>	<i><u>for very long</u></i>	insufficient input of the target language

In example 4, “for very long” was a prepositional phrase, meaning a long period of time. This sentence implied the two subjects had not known each other for a long period of time. We could say “for a long time” or “for very long” as well, but the preposition “for” must be included. This error may be due to insufficient input of the target language. The students had not clearly grasped the structure of the sentence, so they omitted a necessary word in the sentence (Shen, 2015 : 12).

**Addition**

Example 5:

Error Type	Sample Sentence with Prepositional error	Correct Form	Chinese grammar that causes the errors
Addition	<i>I used my money to <u>buy</u> <u>to him a book</u>.</i>	<i>I used my money to <u>buy him a book</u>.</i>	verb + <b>to</b> + indirect object + direct object

For the additional preposition “to” in the example sentence, the Chinese EFL learners seemed to disregard the fact that this kind of verbs in English were usually constructed as verb + indirect object + direct object, and that they did not require the preposition “to” before the indirect object. Contrary to English sentence structure, the verbs in Chinese were constructed using the preposition “...给 (gei)” which meant “to” before indirect objects. Therefore, it seemed that L1 interference might be a possible cause of addition (Guan, 2013 : 228).

## Example 6:

Error Type	Sample Sentence with Prepositional error	Correct form	The causes of prepositional errors in L2 writing
Addition	<i><u>Because of</u> everyone in our room is kind and friendly.</i>	<i><u>Because</u> everyone in our room is kind and friendly,</i>	insufficient input of the target language

According to Example 6, the Chinese EFL learners made a prepositional error that is “Because of” followed a sentence. However, in English, “because of” connected with noun phrases, while “because” functions as a conjunction connected with clauses. One possible explanation for this error of additional preposition might be that Chinese students ignored basic grammatical rules of English language (Guan, 2013 : 226). The students might not know basic grammar rules. In addition, these students might be confused with the similar expressions and cannot tell the differences between the uses of conjunction “because” and prepositional phrase “because of”. As we can see, the students’ learning process was not yet complete. This kind of error was a developmental error (Spratt, Pulverness and Williams, 2005 : 96).

## Misordering

## Example 7:

Error Type	Sample Sentence with Prepositional error	Correct form	Chinese grammar that causes the errors
Misordering	<i>When <u>I with my sister</u> go shopping.</i>	<i>When I go shopping <u>with my sister.</u></i>	Prepositional phrases in Chinese could be either in front of the verbs or after the verbs.
	<i>I <u>at restaurant</u> ate lunch.</i>	<i>I ate lunch <u>at a restaurant.</u></i>	

In Example 7, the Chinese EFL learners wrote the prepositional phrases “with my sister” and “at a restaurant” before the verb phrase. Grammatically, prepositional phrases in English are normally placed behind the verbs, while prepositions in Chinese takes positions in front of the verbs. This kind of error made by the Chinese EFL learners mainly reflected the different position of prepositions in two languages. That is to say, the positions in English were relatively fixed while the positions of prepositions in Chinese were relatively flexible. It meant that prepositional phrases in Chinese could be either in front of the verbs or after the verbs (Ma, 2015 : 23).

### Types of Prepositional Errors in Different Types of Essays

Table 2 shows essay types, frequency, percentage, and rank of the prepositional errors.

**Table 2** Total Frequency of Prepositional Errors in Each Type of Essays

Essay Types	Frequency	%
Narrative	70	34
Descriptive	71	35
Argumentative	65	31
<b>Total</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>100</b>

As shown in Table 2, prepositional errors in descriptive essay were the highest, up to 35%, and the prepositional errors in narrative and argumentative essay ranked second (70 errors, 34%) and third (65 errors, 31%) respectively. In this research, error frequency in descriptive essay showed the highest percentage due to the focus on specific description of descriptive writing. For the descriptive writing task, the students were required to write an essay entitled “The Dorm Room”. Therefore, there were many prepositions that were used to indicate places and positions. As a result, it was obvious that different genres do affect preposition errors as different text types required different descriptive features (Roselind, 2009 : 237).



The frequency and percentage of prepositional error in each type of essays were identified and presented in Table 3.

**Table 3** Frequency and Percentage of Prepositional Error Types in Each Type of Essays

Essay Types	Omission		Addition		Misformation		Misordering	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Narrative	22	10.62	11	5.31	36	17.39	1	0.48
Descriptive	22	10.62	16	7.72	33	15.94	1	0.48
Argumentative	23	11.11	9	4.38	33	15.94	0	0
<b>Total</b>	207							

Table 3 demonstrates that the frequency and percentage of misformation in narrative essay was the highest (36 errors, 17.39%), followed by misformation in descriptive and argumentative essays which had the same number and percentage (33 errors, 15.94%). The frequency of additional preposition in descriptive essay was highest (16 errors, 7.72%), and the highest number of omission errors was in argumentative essay (23 errors, 11.11%). The lowest occurrence was the frequency of misordering in narrative and descriptive essay writing which accounted for 0.48% (1 errors). There was no misordering made by the Chinese students in the argumentative writing tasks.

To conclude, misformation was the type of error which occurred the most in all types of essays. There were two possible causes for misformation of preposition. First, the EFL students were constantly confused with similar prepositions used in their first language (L1) and in a second language (L2). Second, absence of prepositions in the mother language (L1) also led to misformation in L2 writing. This kind of prepositional errors might be related to Chinese prepositions which cannot be fully correspondent to English prepositions (Guan, 2013 : 223).

## The Causes of Prepositional Errors in L2 Writing

According to the results of this study, the causes of prepositional errors in the L2 writing were shown as follows:

### 1. Errors caused by Interlingual Interference

According to the results of writing tasks, interlingual interference had the greatest influence on the prepositional use. Interlingual interference, also called native language interference, mainly originated from language transfer (Brown, 2000 : 13). Language transfer could be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer (Richards, 1971 : 56). In this study, the Chinese students used inappropriate preposition in English as a result of their L1 influence, consequently negative transfer occurred in their L2 writing. There were two possible causes of making interlingual errors in this study as follows:

#### 1.1 Absence of equivalent prepositions in mother language (L1)

The absence of prepositions in L1 referred to the situation that a Chinese preposition might correspond to several English equivalents. Many Chinese students had great difficulties in selecting the correct preposition particularly when all the alternatives in English corresponded to a Chinese equivalent (Ma, 2015 : 19). For example, several students were confused that English prepositions “in”, “on” and “at” correspond to the same Chinese preposition “在 (zai)”. Moreover, these EFL students were often confused and did not know which appropriate preposition to choose.

#### 1.2 The interference (or negative transfer) of the mother tongue (L1)

When Chinese students tried to express their complex thoughts, they often unconsciously thought in the mother tongue which was more familiar to them. According to Brown (2000 : 95), for language learners, before the system of the second language became familiar, the native language was the only reliable linguistics system upon which they could use for reference in the early stage of learning a foreign language. In the meantime, the learners’ thoughts in the mother tongue would inevitably led to ungrammatical English sentences with the same word order and same structure as Chinese; For instance, “in everywhere” (在到处) and “buy to him a book” (买本书给他) were examples of this L1 interference. EFL students tended to translate word by word before they formed English sentence. In other words, EFL students translated English into Chinese and Chinese back into English, word by word, thereby leading to errors in L2 writing; That was why prepositional errors in each type of essays were in a high proportion.

## 2. Errors Caused by Intralingual Interference

By summarizing the results of the writing tests, intralingual interference had a great influence on students' prepositional usage. According to Ellis (2015 : 45) the errors were caused by the influence of the target language during the language learning process. Additionally, Saville-Troike (2006 : 190) claimed that intralingual errors in L2 are not due to interference from L1. These errors are also sometimes termed developmental errors, meaning that they represent incomplete learning of L2 rules or overgeneralization of them. There were two possible causes of making intralingual errors in this study as follows:

### 2.1 Overgeneralization in L2 Writing

After acquiring and mastering some language usage, students processed new language data in their mind and created deviant structures based on students' past experience and evidence (Richards, 1971 : 209). When the EFL students have limited knowledge and experience of using second language, they were likely to overgeneralize the rules and produced deviant structures in L2 writing. For instance, "I have two lessons at the afternoon", students learnt a phrase such as "at noon", which gave them an impression "at the afternoon". The right form of this prepositional phrase of time should be "in the afternoon". The correct sentence should be "I have two lessons in the afternoon" (Odlin, 1989 : 23).

### 2.2 Confusion of similar expressions between L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English)

Some phrases had very similar structure but their meanings were quite different from each other. Misuse of these expressions can cause sentence ambiguity and made it difficult for reader to grasp the main idea of sentence. For instance, some of Chinese students could not tell the difference between "result from" and "result in", "be bad to" and "be bad for". These Chinese students had a vague impression of the proper meanings of these set phrases because they just mechanically remembered them but had no idea how to use these set phrases. That was probably why prepositional errors in misformation were at the highest rate (Chai, 2009 : 14).

## 3. Insufficient input of the target language (TL)

Insufficient input of target language (English) was another factor causing students to make prepositional errors. This is because both the quantity and quality of input were important in the acquisition of prepositions. In this study, many Chinese students tended to use one single expression and meaning of a preposition or one single prepositional

phrase many times. Many prepositions had more than one meaning and they could be used to show different meanings according to different contexts. However, some students just knew the preposition “at” serving as a preposition of “place”, for example (Shen, 2015 : 12). Since their input of English was not enough, and the EFL students just knew parts or even a little of the whole usage. Thereby, these problems could affect the meanings of English expressions and English proficiency (Chai, 2009 : 12).

### Implications for English Teaching and Learning

In the following part, this study put forward implications of error analysis as well as some suggestion about English teaching and learning.

First, the influence of the mother tongue is the main influencing factor of prepositional errors. Therefore, it would be beneficial to help EFL students reduce interlingual interference; for instance, teaching English prepositions in comparison to their usage in Chinese, and avoiding translating English phrases into Chinese. Through comparing English prepositions to their usage in Chinese, students can remember the explicit definitions of specific words and grammatical forms. Moreover, schools should create an environment for English learning in order to form a foreign language sense. Additionally, teachers should avoid just translating English phrases into Chinese for the convenience of students’ memorization, since many English phrases cannot find their equivalents in Chinese.

Second, for prepositional errors caused by intralingual interference, students made this kind of errors due to the faulty or partial learning of the target language. As a consequence, students tended to generalize the rules when they use English prepositions. Teachers can explain (error-prone) prepositions in depth. Teachers can also strengthen basic language training for learners. Language-based training is a prerequisite for the development of language skills and communicative competence.

Third, during the process of English teaching, EFL students’ attitudes and learning strategies should be taken into consideration. EFL students should increase their reading capacity and strive to enrich their knowledge reserves. Besides, EFL students should often sum up some of the imperfect rules of English expression, which are generally wrong because learners are fail to fully grasp grammar rules. This can be one way for EFL students to avoid making prepositional errors. In normal practice, students and teachers should pay attention to the correction of preposition errors.

## Limitations of Study

This present research had several limitations as follows:

1. The number of research subjects was not enough. Only 37 students were recruited as subjects and all of them came from only one university. It was not sure that these subjects could represent the learning situations of all Chinese students majoring in English even though these subjects came from different learning backgrounds. Therefore, the results were only preliminary and model. The selected samples may not be representative. If the students were selected from different universities, the study would be more representative in the future. This paper only selected junior English major students from a university. If the subjects were chosen from other grades to do longitudinal research and comparison, the data obtained will be more meaningful.

2. This study did not involve specific teaching or interviewing teachers and students. More effective data collecting techniques and qualitative instruments should be considered for analyzing writing errors of Chinese students. Teaching methods for second language and semi-structured interview of teachers and students should be used to discover the causes of errors, thereby to gain more accurately analyze the causes in the future.

## Suggestions for Further Research

The current research produced some recommendations as follows:

1. The sample size should be broadened as it might provide a bigger picture of error making. The subjects can be selected from different universities and chosen from different grades.

2. The present study focuses on students' written English, so future studies should investigate prepositional errors which occurred in spoken English of Chinese students.

3. Apart from error analysis categorized based on surface strategy taxonomy, other types of taxonomies such as comparative taxonomy, linguistic category taxonomy, and communicative effect taxonomy also can be applied.

4. Future studies should compare prepositional errors between undergraduate students and graduate students in order to examine the development of their English writing skills.

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