A Corpus-based Research on Foreign Students' Chinese Interrogative Pronoun Errors

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Abstract Taking the interrogative pronouns "什么 shén me (what)", "怎么 zěn me (how)", "谁 shuí(who)" and "哪 nǎ(where)" as examples and selecting language materials of foreign students' errors from the HSK corpora, this paper summarizes the error types, analyzes the error causes, and puts forward relevant teaching suggestions to help learners to clarify their usage, learn well the use of interrogative pronouns as soon as possible, and improve the accuracy in using interrogative pronouns.

Keywords: interrogative pronouns, error types, error causes, teaching suggestions

1. Research Background

In the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language, interrogative pronouns remain a difficulty for foreign students. How to make students grasp the non-interrogative usage of interrogative pronouns and avoid or reduce their errors is a problem that needs to be solved in the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language.

Huang Borong and Liao Xudong pointed out in "Modern Chinese" that pronouns can be divided into interrogative pronouns, personal pronouns and demonstrative pronouns, and that there are two kinds of non-interrogative extended usages of interrogative pronouns, namely, arbitrary reference and phantom reference. Shao Jingmin made more detailed classifications for the flexible usages of the interrogative pronouns in the "General Theory of Modern Chinese", such as arbitrary reference, anaphoric reference, cataphoric reference and phantom reference. Liu Yuehua also referred to the non-interrogative usages of interrogative pronouns, such as arbitrary reference and phantom reference as the flexible usages of interrogative pronouns (*Practical Modern Chinese Grammar*, 1983).

With the deepening of research on and classification of interrogative pronouns, research on the usage errors of the interrogative pronouns has gradually increased. Zhou Xiaobing pointed out in the "Study of the Difficulty in Grammatical Point Learning" that due to the misuse of "这么 zhè me(so)" and "怎么 zěn me (how)", the errors of mistaken reference were summarized. Li Yan mentioned in "The Acquisition Sequence of the Four Types of Interrogative Sentences in Chinese as a Foreign Language" that the errors of interrogative pronouns are mainly the misuse and misplacement of interrogative pronouns. These different theoretical results reflect that interrogative pronouns have become a topic of great importance and interest in the study of teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

The foreign students' texts used in this paper come from the HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus, which avoids the subjectivity of this research. The Corpus collects the compositions of some foreign candidates from 1992 to 2005, with the texts totaling 11,569 and the Chinese characters 4.24 million. The Corpus is divided into marked corpus and original corpus. Each written text in the Corpus is provided with relevant information of the foreign candidate, such as nationality, gender and graded certificate. Searching by words, the writer collects for this paper a total of 223 items about the usage errors of "哪 nǎ(where)" (32), "谁 shuí(who)" (30), "什么 shén me (what)" (73) and "怎么 zěn me (how)"(86).

Taking these four interrogative pronouns for the research, this paper firstly summarizes and analyzes the usage of the four words by means of description and explanation with specific examples. Then, it analyzes the error type of high frequency with explanation in combination with the data analysis method. In the end, it determines the relevant causes for the errors of foreign students, and puts forward relevant teaching suggestions accordingly.

2. Error Types

According to the HSK Dynamic Composition Corpus, the type and frequency of errors of interrogative pronouns are shown in the following table:

Table 1. Statistical Analysis of Proportions of Error Types of Different Interrogative Pronouns

Interrogative Pronouns	Error Types				
	Redundancy	Mistaken Reference	Missing	Word Order	Others
谁 shuí(who)	27.8 %	61.1%	11.1%	0	0
哪 nǎ(where)	23.5%	47.0%	17.7 %	11.8%	0
什么 shén me (what)	26.7%	46.6%	11.6%	10.5%	4.6%
怎么 zěn me (how)	6.8%	80.8%	8.3%	4.1%	0

Ranked by frequency of occurrence, the error type of mistaken reference is followed by redundancy, missing, misplacement and others successively from high to low in the collected error data. It can be seen that mistaken reference ranks top among the error data of the four interrogative pronouns of "什么 shén me (what)", "谁 shuí(who)", "怎么 zěn me (how)" and "哪 nǎ(where)". Therefore, more emphasis should be put on the basic referential objects of each interrogative pronoun and their functions in the teaching, and more comparison and contrast should be conducted in the use after the acquisition of these interrogative pronouns.

Below we will illustrate various kinds of errors with examples.

2.1. Mistaken Reference

A*另外，他虽是老板，但在待人方面, 不论是任何人,甚至包括下属, 他都和气相待，亲切诚恳。

In addition, although he is the boss, he is very kind and sincere in treating others, no matter who he is, even his subordinates.

B*我很喜欢活动，所以我的假期就是一直打工也不到某个地方去玩儿，除了父母和关系特别好的朋友以外哪都不见，就是打工。

I like activities very much, so I always work in my vacation and don't go somewhere for fun. I just work and don't see anybody else except my parents and close friends.

C*我能克服什么困难，及孤独感。

I can overcome any difficulties, and loneliness.

In the sentence A, "任何人 rèn hé rén (anyone)" is mistakenly used to refer to "谁 shuí (who)". The meaning will become more clear when the interrogative pronoun of " 谁 shuí (who) " is used. In the sentence B, the interrogative pronoun of "哪 nǎ(where)" obviously should be replaced by "谁 shuí (who)" to refer to people clearly. In the sentence C, the interrogative pronoun of "什么 shén me (what)" should be replaced by the word "任何 rèn hé (any)" because the meaning that the sentence is used to convey is all not an enumeration and the interrogative of "什么 shén me (what)" cannot be used to refer to all.

2.2. Redundancy

A*一二三四……念到十，盖眼的就开始找躲藏的，第一个被发现者，谁就得盖住眼。

One, two, three, four ... read aloud to ten, and then the one with his eyes covered began to look for those hiding, the first to be found would cover his eyes.

In the sentence A, the component before the interrogative pronoun of "谁 shuí (who)" can act as the subject, causing the error of redundancy (reference overlap). This is due to unfamiliarity with the presentation of the statement object of the subject.

2.3. Missing

A* 我觉得对这个问题，政府要增卫生洞因为有一些人想吐掉也没看到洞。或在街上贴一些纸条，如谁吐口香糖就罚。

For this issue, I think the government needs to increase trash bins because some people want to spit out but cannot find trash bins, or paste some paper on the street, (with such words on it as) anyone who spits out chewing gum will be punished.

In this sentence, the word of "谁 shuí (who)" should appear after the word "punish" at the end of the sentence, thus forming anaphoric reference with the interrogative pronoun of "谁 shuí (who)" in the front of the sentence. In the use of anaphoric reference, attention should be paid to the correspondence between the beginning and the end to avoid the error of "having a beginning but no end". However, the user in this sentence ignores this point, resulting in incomplete expression of the sentence.

2.4. Misplacement (Wrong Word Order)

A*你这件事情怎么知道呢？ (wrong)
A你怎么知道这件事情呢? (correct)
How do you know this thing?

The correct order of the Sentence A* should be that of Sentence A, namely, the subject - predicate - object instead of the subject - object -predict order, which obviously does not conform to the Chinese practice. The subject - object - predict order usually appear in the early stage of Chinese learning, especially for students from South Korea and Japan due to the influence of their mother tongue. Because students haven't fully understood the rules of the Chinese language, they often make errors in using interrogative pronouns.

2.5. Other Errors

A*我也还真不知道怎么办的方法是最好的。
I really don't know how to do it is the best way.

In this sentence, one can use the word of "什么 shén me (what)" to express the meaning succinctly. However, the student used "怎么办的 zěn me bàn de (how to do)" to express the meaning euphemistically, indicating that he is not familiar with the usage context of "什么 shén me (what)". His error falls into the category of pre-systematic errors.

3. Causes of Errors

The acquisition of a second language is a complex process. There are many sources of the learner's errors, which are caused by many factors.

3.1. Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue

Due to unfamiliarity with the target language system, foreign students will rely on their mother tongue and apply the rules of the first language to the second language rigidly. Therefore, students with the same mother tongue background will make errors of the same nature, such as:

*多少个苹果他买了？ *How many apples did he buy*?

*什么时候他会来？ *When will he come*?

From the position of these interrogative pronouns in the sentence, it can be seen that students are influenced by the position of interrogative pronouns in English interrogative sentences. Such errors have obvious regularities. Learners are prone to making mistakes in the early stage of learning, that is, when they are first introduced to such sentences. Because they do not have a clear understanding of the Chinese word order, they will depend on their own mother tongue involuntarily to form a negative transfer of their mother tongue.

3.2. Influence of Complex Sentence Structure

In the analysis of the language materials obtained, it is found that the error of missing occurs mostly in long sentences or complex sentences. When expressing more complicated meanings, due to the foregoing complicated statements, the students will forget to use interrogative pronouns in the statement that comes at the end. For example:

*我觉得对这个问题，政府要增加卫生洞，因为有一些人想吐掉也没看到洞。或在街上贴一些纸条如谁吐口香糖就罚

For this issue, I think the government needs to increase trash bins because some people want to spit out but cannot find trash bins, or paste some paper on the street, (with such words on it as) anyone who spits out chewing gum will be punished.

In this complex sentence, there are such relations as explanation, cause and effect, and coordination among the clauses. The student's awareness of using the interrogative pronoun in the last clause has become relatively weak in this series of statements, thus missing the pronoun "谁 huí(who)" after the verb "罚 fá (punish)" and causing incomplete expression of the sentence.

Another example: *他被打倒了好几次, 但他还是不泄气, 终于就成功了, 如果他是一个软弱的人, 不知该怎么处理困难, 去把挫折变成动力?

He was knocked down several times, but he did not lose heart. At last he succeeded. If he is a weak person, and does not know how to deal with the difficulties, how can he turn the frustration into impetus?

In this complex sentence, it is still the complicated relations among the clauses that cause trouble for student to write sentences correctly. Such relations as cause and effect, progression, and hypothesis can really test students' ability in sentence organization. At this time, the occurrence of missing is "excusable".

3.3. Influence of Similar Pronouns and Similar Usage

Mistaken reference is the type of error ranking top in terms of the frequency of occurrence as shown in Table 1. Therefore, it can be seen that similar pronouns have a great influence on learners' choice of interrogative pronouns. Here are some commonly used pairs of pronouns which should be differentiated in usage, such as "什么shén me (what)" and "怎么zěn me (how)"; "怎么zěn me (how)"and "为什么wèi shén me (why)"; "什么shén me (what)" and "任何rèn hé (any/whatever)"; "哪 nǎ(where)" and "那nà (that)"; and "多么duō me (how)" and "怎么zěn me (how)".

3.4. Influence of the Complex Special Reference Functions of Interrogative Pronouns

The grammatical functions of pronouns and the language units that pronouns refer to are roughly the same. In other words, pronouns can function as the constituent that the words substituted for by the pronouns do in a sentence. This flexible usage of pronouns surely will cause interference when students are choosing the right pronouns. Whether the chosen interrogative pronoun can successfully perform the function of reference depends on whether students have a solid grasp of Chinese grammar. However, it is a long-term process to build up solid grammatical knowledge of Chinese, so the errors of interrogative pronouns will inevitably run through different stages of Chinese learning. In addition to the basic usage of questioning, the interrogative pronouns also have flexible non-interrogative usages, namely, cataphoric reference, anaphoric reference, phantom reference, and arbitrary reference mentioned above. Different usages correspond to different contexts. Therefore, acquisition of the interrogative pronouns is made more difficult by their special usages that "deviate from" their basic functions.

4. Interrogative Pronoun Related Teaching Suggestions

4.1. Proper Arrangement of Pronoun Acquisition Order, from Easy to Difficult

Although the overall difficulty of interrogative pronoun acquisition is greater than that of other parts of speech, there are some interrogative pronouns relatively easier to acquire. Teaching interrogative pronouns and the related knowledge should be conducted in a systematic manner according to the law of teaching. Such teaching should appear in every related grammar point instruction and practice. Grammar points that have been instructed should be summarized regularly. Summing up the same usage can gradually enrich the learning structure and level of the whole block of interrogative pronouns in the transition from cognition of simple interrogative pronouns to relatively complex ones.

4.2. Teaching Instructions Focusing on the Overall Structure

After students are exposed to interrogative pronouns, teachers should help students build up the awareness of

grasping the usage of interrogative pronouns as a whole. Usage of interrogative pronouns should be listed in detail with examples and memory formulas to facilitate student memory. Taking "什么 shén me (what)" for instance, teachers can present its usage as follows: "什么(what)+名词(noun)+都(all)" means arbitrary reference; "什么shén me (what)" in the middle of detachable words indicates a strong negative tone, such as "看什么书kàn shén me shū (what book to read)"; "什么(what)+名词1(noun 1)+名词2(noun 2)" and "什么(what)+的(de)" indicate enumeration, etc. This regular grammar point summary can make it easier for students to make correct judgments and choices when they use interrogative pronouns.

4.3. Conscious Contrast Analysis and Organization of Targeted Exercises with the Deepening of Learning,

With the deepening of learning and introduction of more interrogative pronouns, students will mix up the similar words. Teachers can design targeted contrast exercises based on what students have learned. In addition, teachers can design some targeted test questions based on the errors with high frequency of occurrence, such as blank cloze and sentence modification. In terms of blank cloze, similar pronouns can be selected as alternative options, which can make students consciously compare and contrast the options and then deepen their familiarity with the selected word usage. In terms of sentence modification, wrong sentences in the students' exercise books can be selected and integrated into the test to help students build up awareness of correctly using grammar and sense of language.

4.4. Increase the Input Frequency, Decrease Difficulty Subtly

Acquisition of a second language should be the result of a combination of regular teaching and long-term continuous effective input. Therefore, after the teaching of interrogative pronouns, continuous increase of input will also improve the accuracy of student use. For example, teachers can often use interrogative pronouns (such as 哪 nǎ(where) and 什么shén me (what)) to ask questions in the classroom. Such questions can help strengthen the students' understanding of the basic functions of interrogative pronouns. Teachers can also make more examples showing the non-interrogative usage of the interrogative pronouns in combination with the classroom environment. In classroom teaching, teachers can design some dialogues related to the curriculum to make students speak the target language and practice the interrogative pronouns they have learned in the warm-up step. Some games can also be designed to make students acquire these pronouns naturally in fun-filled games. For example, make cards for students to practice dialogues in pairs. There are such information as time, place, people, and things to do on the cards. One student should use interrogative questions to get all the information on the card held by the other student. In this drill, the interrogative pronouns and other pronouns will appear in the dialogue, which can increase the frequency of student use to make them know the context in which each pronoun occurs and the meanings of such pronouns clearly. Such situational dialogues can help students to realize what words they cannot use skillfully. In addition, it is also helpful for teachers to make and give timely comments and feedback after the drill, thus making it easier for teachers to find and solve the most frequently occurring errors earlier. Such repeated occurrence and continuous close-to-life input will definitely help students to understand and master the flexible usage of interrogative pronouns in real life.

5. Conclusions

The interrogative pronouns, as a key and difficult point in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, will exist for a long time and run throughout the teaching. It is important to help students distinguish between the basic question usage and the non-question usage of the interrogative pronouns, which can increase their awareness of the particularities of Chinese interrogative pronouns and improve their flexibility in the usage of the interrogative pronouns. It is also very important to make effective input and organize compare & contrast exercises based on the students' errors.

Acknowledgements

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