

Case Usage Errors Among Foreign Students

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Abstract: The correct use of grammatical case remains one of the most challenging aspects of second language acquisition for foreign students. This study investigates common case usage errors produced by foreign learners and identifies their linguistic causes and pedagogical implications. Using an error-analysis approach, students' written texts and spoken samples were examined to classify types of case-related errors and determine patterns influenced by first-language transfer, overgeneralization, and incomplete rule acquisition. The findings reveal that case substitution, omission, and overextension represent the most frequent error categories. The study highlights the importance of targeted corrective feedback and contrastive teaching strategies to reduce case-related errors in foreign language classrooms.

Keywords: Case marking, foreign students, error analysis, second language acquisition, interlanguage, grammatical errors, language transfer, morphology, syntax, language teaching.

Introduction: In the field of second language acquisition, grammatical accuracy plays a crucial role in learners' communicative competence and academic success. Among various grammatical categories, the use of cases is particularly challenging for foreign students studying languages with rich morphological systems. Grammatical case refers to the formal marking of nouns, pronouns, and adjectives to indicate their syntactic and semantic functions within a sentence, such as subject, object, possession, direction, or instrument. For learners whose native languages lack extensive case systems or rely mainly on word order and prepositions, mastering case endings and their contextual meanings becomes a complex and often problematic process.

Foreign students frequently encounter difficulties in selecting appropriate case forms because case usage requires the simultaneous understanding of morphology, syntax, and semantics. Incorrect case selection may lead not only to grammatical inaccuracies but also to misunderstandings in communication, since case marking often determines relationships between sentence elements. These difficulties are intensified by the presence of multiple

case forms, irregular paradigms, and context-dependent rules that may not have direct equivalents in learners' first languages. Consequently, case usage errors appear consistently in both spoken and written language production among second language learners.

From a theoretical perspective, learner errors are not merely signs of failure but reflect developmental stages in language acquisition. The concept of interlanguage explains that learners construct a transitional linguistic system influenced by their native language, partial knowledge of the target language, and ongoing hypothesis testing. Within this framework, case usage errors can reveal important information about learners' cognitive strategies, including transfer from the first language, overgeneralization of grammatical rules, simplification, and avoidance. Therefore, analyzing such errors provides valuable insight into how foreign students internalize grammatical structures and gradually approach target language norms.

Previous research in error analysis and applied linguistics has shown that morphological errors, especially those related to case marking, remain persistent even at intermediate and advanced

proficiency levels. Studies suggest that learners often rely on default case forms, omit required markers, or apply one case form across multiple contexts. These patterns indicate that traditional grammar instruction may not always address the cognitive and functional aspects of case usage effectively. As a result, researchers and educators emphasize the need for empirical investigations that identify recurring error types and their underlying causes to improve teaching methodologies.

The significance of studying case usage errors extends beyond theoretical linguistics. In multilingual educational environments, foreign students are increasingly required to perform academic tasks that demand high grammatical precision, such as essay writing, presentations, and professional communication. Persistent case errors may negatively influence academic performance and learners' confidence. Understanding the nature and frequency of these errors allows instructors to design targeted pedagogical interventions, including contrastive analysis activities, contextualized grammar exercises, and focused corrective feedback that address learners' specific needs.

This study aims to examine the most common case usage errors produced by foreign students and to analyze the linguistic and pedagogical factors contributing to these errors. By applying an error-analysis approach, the research seeks to classify error types, explore their possible causes, and discuss implications for effective language teaching. Ultimately, the study contributes to a better understanding of the role of grammatical case in second language development and offers practical recommendations for improving instruction in foreign language classrooms.

METHOD

The main part of this study focuses on the analysis of case usage errors produced by foreign students and the linguistic mechanisms underlying these mistakes. In languages with developed case systems, grammatical meaning is often expressed through morphological endings rather than strict word order. Consequently, learners must simultaneously process syntactic functions, semantic relations, and morphological patterns, which creates multiple sources of difficulty

during language production. The analysis of learner data reveals that case-related errors are systematic and reflect predictable stages of interlanguage development rather than random inaccuracies.

One of the most frequently observed problems is case substitution, where learners use an incorrect case form instead of the required one. This type of error often occurs when students rely on the nominative case as a default structure, especially in situations where the grammatical role of a noun is less obvious. For instance, learners may use nominative forms in object positions or after prepositions that require specific cases. Such substitutions suggest that students prioritize semantic meaning over grammatical form, focusing on lexical choice while overlooking morphological agreement. This phenomenon is closely connected to language transfer, particularly among learners whose native languages do not employ case endings to indicate syntactic relations.

Another common category is case omission, which involves the absence of necessary case markers or inflectional endings. Omission frequently appears in spontaneous speech and informal writing, where learners prioritize fluency over accuracy. This tendency can be explained by cognitive load theory, according to which learners simplify grammatical structures when processing demands exceed their available linguistic resources. Case omission also indicates incomplete automatization of grammatical rules; learners may know the rules theoretically but fail to apply them in real-time communication. Additionally, omission errors are often influenced by instructional practices that emphasize vocabulary and communicative competence without sufficient focus on morphological precision.

The analysis also highlights overgeneralization, a process in which learners apply one grammatical rule or case ending across multiple contexts. For example, students may extend a familiar case pattern to nouns or constructions that require different forms. Overgeneralization reflects an important developmental strategy: learners attempt to reduce complexity by creating simplified internal rules. While this strategy facilitates early communication, it can lead to persistent errors if not corrected through targeted instruction. Overgeneralization demonstrates that learners actively construct hypotheses about grammar,

confirming the interlanguage perspective that language acquisition involves experimentation and gradual refinement.

A significant factor influencing case usage errors is first-language interference. Learners tend to interpret target language grammar through the structural lens of their native language, transferring familiar patterns into new linguistic contexts. Students whose first languages rely primarily on fixed word order or prepositions often struggle to understand why case endings are necessary, leading to inconsistent usage. Conversely, learners whose native languages contain similar case systems may still experience difficulties due to differences in case functions or distribution. These cross-linguistic influences show that similarity between languages does not always guarantee easier acquisition, as subtle structural differences can create confusion.

In addition to linguistic factors, instructional and contextual influences play a crucial role in error formation. Traditional grammar teaching frequently emphasizes memorization of declension tables rather than functional understanding of case meanings. As a result, learners may know formal rules but fail to apply them appropriately in authentic communication. Classroom observations suggest that students benefit more from contextualized practice, where case forms are presented within meaningful discourse rather than isolated exercises. Error frequency also varies depending on task type: controlled grammar exercises generally show fewer mistakes than free writing or spontaneous speaking, indicating that accuracy decreases when learners focus on content generation.

Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that complex sentence structures increase the likelihood of case errors. When sentences contain subordinate clauses, multiple noun phrases, or abstract vocabulary, learners must manage several grammatical relationships simultaneously, which increases cognitive complexity. In such contexts, learners often prioritize conveying meaning and consequently neglect morphological accuracy. This finding supports the view that grammatical development progresses gradually from simple to complex structures.

The results underscore that case usage errors are dynamic indicators of language development. Rather

than being permanent deficiencies, they represent stages in learners' progression toward target language proficiency. Understanding these patterns allows educators to design more effective instructional strategies, such as contrastive analysis between native and target languages, focused feedback on recurring errors, and communicative tasks that reinforce morphological awareness. By analyzing the nature and causes of case usage errors, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how foreign students acquire complex grammatical systems and how teaching methods can better support this process.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of case usage errors among foreign students demonstrates that difficulties with grammatical case are a consistent and predictable part of second language acquisition. The study reveals that the most frequent errors include case substitution, omission, and overgeneralization, each reflecting specific cognitive and linguistic processes involved in learner language development. These errors are not random but systematic, indicating that learners actively construct an interlanguage system influenced by their native language structures, limited exposure to complex grammatical patterns, and ongoing attempts to simplify linguistic rules.

The findings highlight that first-language transfer plays a significant role in shaping error patterns, particularly for learners whose native languages lack comparable case systems or apply grammatical relations differently. At the same time, instructional factors such as rule-based teaching approaches and insufficient contextual practice contribute to the persistence of case-related mistakes. The occurrence of errors in more complex sentence structures further confirms that cognitive load and processing demands influence grammatical accuracy during communication.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study emphasizes the importance of viewing case usage errors as developmental indicators rather than simple failures. Effective teaching should therefore move beyond memorization of declension paradigms and focus on functional, context-based practice that links form with meaning. Contrastive analysis activities, consistent corrective feedback, and communicative exercises designed to reinforce case awareness can significantly

improve learners' accuracy and confidence. Teachers should also encourage gradual progression from controlled practice to spontaneous language use to support automatization of grammatical forms.

Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges foreign students face when acquiring case-marking systems and provides practical implications for language instruction. By identifying recurring error patterns and their underlying causes, educators can develop more targeted and learner-centered teaching strategies. Future studies may expand the scope by comparing learners from different linguistic backgrounds or investigating longitudinal development to better understand how case competence evolves over time. Ultimately, improving awareness of case usage errors can enhance both grammatical proficiency and communicative effectiveness in foreign language learning.

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