



Error Analysis of Word Order in Mandarin Sentences by Beginner Learners: A Case Study of First-Year Students at The State University of Makassar

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Keywords

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the types and frequency of word order errors in Mandarin sentences made by beginner learners. The data were obtained from written tests completed by 17 first-year students of the Mandarin Language Education Study Program at the State University of Makassar. The test consisted of 10 questions in two formats: (1) arranging scrambled words into grammatically correct sentences, and (2) translating Indonesian sentences into Mandarin. The results indicate that word order errors primarily occurred in five aspects, namely: (1) the placement of temporal adverbs, frequency adverbs, and interrogative words; (2) the position of resultative/aspectual complements; (3) the order of serial verbs; (4) the use of degree adverbs; and (5) the structure of numerals with classifiers. These errors were attributed to interference from the more flexible word order of the Indonesian language, as well as the students' insufficient understanding of Mandarin syntactic rules. These findings highlight the need for a systematic emphasis on learning sentence structures. The implications of this research are expected to serve as a foundation for formulating more effective teaching strategies for Mandarin sentence patterns for beginner learners.

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INTRODUCTION

Mandarin Chinese has become one of the increasingly important foreign languages to master in this era of globalization, not only for economic and diplomatic purposes but also for cultural and educational exchange. In Indonesia, interest in learning Mandarin has seen a significant increase, marked by the growing number of course institutions and universities offering Mandarin study programs or courses, including at State University of Makassar (UNM).

However, in the process of foreign language learning, especially for beginner learners, language errors are an unavoidable phenomenon. One of the biggest challenges faced by Indonesian learners in learning Mandarin is the fundamental difference in linguistic structure between Indonesian and Mandarin, particularly in the aspect of forming grammatical sentences. Indonesian generally follows a Subject-Verb-Object-Adverbial (SVO-A) sentence pattern, whereas Mandarin generally follows a Subject-Adverbial-Verb-Object (S-AV-O) pattern.

Mandarin has a relatively rigid syntactic structure, especially regarding the placement of sentence elements such as subject-verb-object (S-V-O), time/place adverbials, position of question words, use of complements/aspect markers, and the obligatory use of classifiers (量词). These differences pose challenges for learners whose native language is Indonesian, as Indonesian tends to be more flexible in word order. Negative transfer from the first language (L1) is considered one of the main factors causing word order errors in Mandarin learners (Chaer, 2012; Tarigan, 2011).

Language errors are a natural and unavoidable phenomenon in the process of foreign language learning (Ellis, 2008). However, in Mandarin, word order errors or *cíxù* (词序) occupy a crucial position because Mandarin is a language that heavily relies on word order to determine grammatical meaning, unlike Indonesian which is more flexible. Errors in placing elements such as Subject/Verb/Object, auxiliary words, placement of time and place adverbials, as well as complex sentence structures, can lead to fatal ambiguity or misunderstanding (Jin, 2021).

Several previous studies have revealed various errors in Mandarin learning. For example, research by Chen & Wu (2020) focused on errors in Hanyu Pinyin and tones, and a study by Li (2019) analyzed lexical errors among learners in Thailand. Meanwhile, in the Indonesian context, research such as that conducted by Suryaningrum (2022) identified various types of syntactic interference from Indonesian to Mandarin. However, these studies tend to discuss syntactic errors in general or in different contexts, and have not yet highlighted in depth and systematically the specific errors in word order that lie at the root of syntactic problems for Indonesian beginner learners.

The linguistic characteristics of Indonesian learners, who are familiar with Austronesian language structures, create unique points of vulnerability for interference. Prepositional phrase structure, adverbial order, and modality usage in Indonesian are often inappropriately transferred into Mandarin

sentence structures (Wang & Lee, 2023). For example, the tendency to place time adverbials at the end of a sentence as in Indonesian ("I went to the market yesterday") would become a fatal error if applied in Mandarin, which requires time adverbials before the verb.

Several previous studies have extensively investigated Mandarin language errors made by foreign learners, including those in Indonesia. These studies generally focus on errors encompassing various linguistic aspects, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar broadly (Chen, 2020; Wang & Zhang, 2021). However, deeper and more specific analysis specializing in word order errors at the sentence level by Indonesian beginner learners is still limited. Research by Liu (2019), for instance, discusses grammatical interference more generally without exploring the typology of word order errors in detail. Meanwhile, existing case studies are often located in Java and have not yet extensively covered learning contexts in eastern Indonesia, such as Makassar, which has unique sociolinguistic characteristics and learning dynamics.

Therefore, this research takes a case study of beginner-level students at Universitas Negeri Makassar. The selection of these subjects is based on the fact that they are in the critical phase of building their language foundation. Uncorrected word order errors at this phase have the potential to become fossilized and more difficult to correct at advanced levels (Lightbown & Spada, 2019). By comprehensively analyzing their errors, the most dominant error patterns and their causes—whether due to first language (L1) interference, intralingual factors, or teaching methods—can be identified.

Based on the description above, the research entitled "Error Analysis of Word Order in Mandarin Sentences by Beginner Learners: A Case Study of Beginner-Level Students at Universitas Negeri Makassar" is considered important and urgent to carry out. The objectives of this research are to: (1) identify the types of word order errors in Mandarin sentences made by beginner students, and (2) analyze the causal factors behind these errors. The findings of this research are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of contrastive linguistics and second language acquisition, as well as practical contributions for teachers in designing more effective and targeted materials and learning strategies for Mandarin grammar, especially word order, for beginner learners in Indonesia.

Articles must be written in English. Writing in MS Word, the font type used for the article is Calisto MT, size 10 pt, 1.5 spacing. The introduction is presented in the form of paragraphs of approximately 1000 words, with top, bottom, left and right margins 3.0 cm. The article uses justified alignment with no first-line indentation. Each page should be given a page number placed at the bottom center.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach using error analysis method. This approach was chosen because it aligns with the research objective to identify, describe, and explain in depth the various types of word order errors produced by beginner learners. The research subjects are 17

beginner-level students at UNM. The selection of these subjects was based on the criterion that they are formal beginner learners who have completed one year of study, which includes an introduction to basic Mandarin grammar, including simple sentence patterns and the use of basic adverbs. These characteristics are considered representative for observing the most fundamental and systematic word order errors before more complex learning interventions. The instrument used was a final semester examination paper, with two types of questions selected for analysis: (1) Arranging random words into sentences (5 questions), and (2) Translating Indonesian sentences into Mandarin (5 questions). Data analysis was conducted through the following stages: (1) identifying word order errors in students' answers, (2) classifying the types of errors, (3) calculating their frequency, and (4) interpreting their causes, including the influence of first language transfer.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the Random Word Arrangement Test

In this type of question, students were asked to arrange random words into correct Mandarin sentences. Below are the five random word questions given:

a.	hē 喝	hái shì 还是	nǐ 你	kā fēi 咖啡	chá 茶
b.	diǎn 点	shàng kè 上课	nǐ 你	jǐ 几	yì bān 一般
c.	shì 是	tóng wú 同屋	wǒ 我	zhōng guó rén 中国人	de 的
d.	qù 去	míng tiān 明天	ba 吧	wǒ men 我们	pá shān 爬山
e.	shū 书	yí xià 一下	kàn 看	nǐ de 你的	wǒ 我

Figure 1. Random word question

Student answers for the five questions above are as follows:

Table 1. Students Answer for Random Word Question

No. Soal	Kalimat Target yang Benar	Jumlah yang Benar	Jumlah Yang salah
1	你喝茶还是咖啡？ 你喝咖啡还是茶？	17	0
2	你一般几点上课。	7	10
3	我的同屋是中国人。	17	0
4	我们明天去爬山吧。 明天我们去爬山吧。	17	0
5	我看一下你的书。	7	10

- First sentence :All 17 students arranged the sentence correctly.
- Second sentence :7 students arranged the sentence correctly, 10 students arranged the sentence incorrectly.
- Third sentence :All 17 students arranged the sentence correctly.
- Fourth sentence :All 17 students arranged the sentence correctly.
- Fifth sentence :7 students arranged the sentence correctly, 10 students arranged the sentence incorrectly.

Based on the test result data above, it can be seen that word order errors were found in the second and fifth sentences.

a. Errors in the second sentence (Time Adverbial and Question Word)

The correct answer for the second sentence is: 你一般几点上课。Below are the incorrect answers from the student test results:

1) 你几点一般上课

Error : Incorrect position of the frequency adverb 一般 (yībān, usually).

In Mandarin, frequency adverbs must be placed after the subject and before the predicate, not sandwiched by the time adverbial.

2) 几点你一般上课

Error :The question word 几点 (jǐ diǎn, what time) precedes the subject.

In Mandarin, question words still follow the S-V-O pattern, unlike Indonesian/English which place the question word at the beginning.

3) 你一般上课几点

Error :Incorrect position of the time adverbial at the end of the sentence.

The word 几点 cannot be treated as the object of the verb 上课 (shàngkè) because it is not a transitive verb.

This error shows the influence of transfer from the first language (L1), namely Indonesian, which allows time adverbials to be placed flexibly at either the beginning or end of a sentence. Students tend to apply the L1 pattern to Mandarin, even though Mandarin word order is more rigid.

b. Errors in the fifth sentence (Complement 一下)

The correct answer for the fifth sentence is: 我看一下你的书。Below are the incorrect answers from the student test results:

4) 我看你的书一下

Error : Incorrect position of 一下 (yíxià).

一下 must follow the verb, not be placed after the object.

5) 我一下看你的书

Error : 一下 precedes the verb.

In Mandarin rules, 一下 cannot be placed before the predicate.

6) 你的我一下看

Error : Incomplete object (你的 without 书), plus incorrect position of 一下.

This error reflects students' weak understanding of the positional rules for resultative complements or aspect markers in Mandarin. Students tend to place 一下 freely, even before the predicate, due to the influence of the more flexible L1.

- **Results of the Indonesian-to-Mandarin Sentence Translation Test**

In this type of question, students were asked to translate five Indonesian sentences into Mandarin.

Below are the five translation questions given:

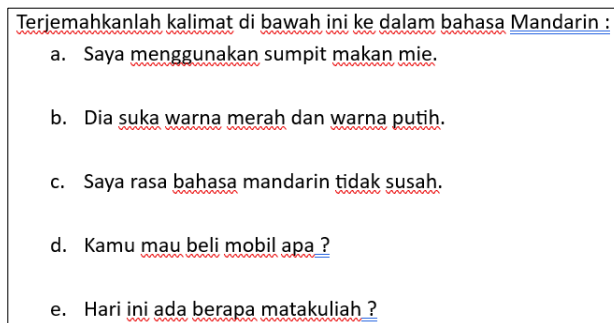


Figure 2. Translation Test

Student answers for the five questions above are as follows:

Table 2. Students Answer for Translation Test

No. Soal	Kalimat Target yang Benar	Jumlah yang Benar	Jumlah Yang salah	Tidak jawab /kurang lengkap
1	我用筷子吃面条。	10	3	4
2	他喜欢红色和白色。 她喜欢红色和白色。	16	0	1
3	我觉得汉语不难。	13	3	1
4	你想买什么车/汽车？ 你要买什么车/汽车？	10	7	0
5	今天有几门课？	9	6	2

- First sentence :10 students arranged the sentence correctly, 3 students arranged the sentence incorrectly, and 4 students did not answer / gave incomplete answers.
- Second sentence :16 students arranged the sentence correctly, and 1 student did not answer / gave an incomplete answer.
- Third sentence :13 students arranged the sentence correctly, 3 students arranged the

sentence incorrectly (with the addition of the word 很), and 1 student did not answer / gave an incomplete answer.

- Fourth sentence :10 students arranged the sentence correctly, and 7 students arranged the sentence incorrectly.
- Fifth sentence :9 students arranged the sentence correctly, 6 students arranged the sentence incorrectly, and 2 students did not answer / gave incomplete answers.

Based on the test result data above, it can be seen that word order errors were found in four sentences with the following patterns:

a. Errors in the first sentence (use of 用)

The correct answer for the first sentence is: 我用筷子吃面条. Below are the incorrect answers from the student test results:

- 我用吃面条筷子
- 我吃用面条筷子

The error arises because students mixed up the order of the two verbs (用 and 吃). Students placed 用 before 吃 or directly combined 吃用, forming an ungrammatical phrase. This error indicates interference from Indonesian, because in Indonesian, the phrase "pakai sumpit makan mi" or "dengan sumpit makan mi" is still understandable.

b. Errors in the third sentence (use of 不很)

The correct answer for the third sentence is: 我觉得汉语不难. Below is the incorrect answer from the student test results:

- 我觉得汉语不很难

This error is not purely a word order issue, but rather an error in the selection of the degree adverb. In Mandarin, the form "不很 + adjective" is rarely used. Students answered this way because of the suggestion that when using adjectives, they must be followed by a degree adverb. This error illustrates a weak understanding of adverb collocations in Mandarin.

c. Errors in the fourth sentence (Question word 什么)

The correct answer for the fourth sentence is: 你想买什么汽车? Below are the incorrect answers from the student test results:

- 你想买汽车什么
- 你想买汽车吗

Question words in Mandarin occupy the position of the element they replace, rather than being moved to the end of the sentence as in Indonesian. For example: "Kamu ingin membeli mobil apa?" → students translated it as 你想买汽车什么, placing 什么 at the end. This structure is influenced by the Indonesian/English pattern. Additionally, some students used the particle 吗, turning the question into a yes/no question rather than an open-ended

question. This shows negative transfer from L1 and a lack of understanding of Mandarin interrogative sentence rules.

d. Errors in the fifth sentence (Question word 几 and Classifiers)

The correct answer for the fifth sentence is: 今天有几门课. Below are the incorrect answers from the student test results:

- 今天有几课
- 今天几有门课
- 今天几有课

The main error lies in the order of numerals with classifiers. In Mandarin, the structure must be: 几 + Classifier + Noun. Students wrote "几课" without a classifier or placed 几 before the verb 有, making the sentence ungrammatical. This pattern is clearly influenced by Indonesian, where the question word "berapa" can directly attach to a noun without an additional particle. This error shows students' weak understanding of the concept of classifiers (量词), which is a distinctive feature of Mandarin.

From the analysis above, it can be seen that student errors are still heavily influenced by Indonesian structure, which is more flexible in the placement of adverbs, question words, and numerals.

CONCLUSION

This research found that word order errors in Mandarin sentences among beginner-level students primarily appear in five aspects: (1) placement of time adverbials, frequency adverbs, and question words; (2) position of resultative/aspect complements; (3) order of double verbs; (4) use of degree adverbs; and (5) numeral-classifier structures. These errors are mainly caused by interference from Indonesian, which is more flexible in word order, as well as a lack of understanding of the rigid syntactic rules of Mandarin. These findings indicate the need for learning strategies that compare Indonesian and Mandarin structures, which can help students become more aware of syntactic differences, thereby reducing L1 interference. Teaching materials should be enriched with real examples of student errors as material for reflection, along with intensive exercises in sentence construction and translation that focus on word order. This research is limited in terms of the number of participants and the specific types of questions used. Therefore, future research could be expanded to include oral skills or more free writing production to obtain a more comprehensive picture of word order errors in Mandarin by Indonesian learners.

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