

# International Journal of Social Science and Education Research



ISSN Print: 2664-9845  
ISSN Online: 2664-9853  
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00  
IJSSER 2023; 5(2): 43-49  
[www.socialsciencejournals.net](http://www.socialsciencejournals.net)  
Received: 25-05-2023  
Accepted: 30-06-2023

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## A case study of English writing error analysis for non-English majors in China

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/26649845.2023.v5.i2a.61>

### Abstract

The Syllabus of Chinese College English Teaching emphasizes the cultivation of students' comprehensive language use ability, but students still have big problems in actual writing. Based on the theory of English-Chinese comparison, this paper collects several English compositions of non-English-speaking students, summarizes and analyzes the main types of errors they make in English writing, and discusses the main reasons for the errors as well as the implications for foreign language teaching.

**Keywords:** English composition, non-english majors, error analysis, english-chinese comparison

### Introduction

English, as a global language, has been carried out in our country's elementary school stage, and for college students, they have spent a lot of energy and have been learning English for more than ten years, but from the point of view of the results of learning, it has not achieved the expected results, and the students' ability to use English is also uneven. Since China has practiced exam-oriented education, what students learn is largely to cope with exams and get high scores, for example, in English writing, what they have learned is more of a routine and pattern, so when they come to the university, which is a relatively low level of exam-oriented stage, students have more opportunities to improve their English ability, so that they can use English well in their future work and life. Of the four English skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, writing is the most difficult to master. Writing is the most difficult of the four English skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, because it is not only a reflection of the input and output skills of the English learner, but also a comprehensive reflection of the learner's thinking, expression, and language skills. Writing is not only a learning tool, but also a form of knowledge. As an important way of language output, writing not only reflects the basic ability of language learners to use language, but also reflects the writer's emotional attitude and quality of thinking (Wang Duqin, 2002) <sup>[8]</sup>.

There is a phenomenon today: although English language learners have a lot of basic grammar and vocabulary, they still have a hard time writing competent compositions. On the one hand, they often list multiple sentences in their writing without paying much attention to the correlation between the content of the sentences and the purpose of the communication, so that they fail to form a complete logic within, between, and even throughout the entire chapter. On the other hand, learners usually complete their writing through a combination of vocabulary and grammar when doing passage writing, which even contains many complex sentences. However, the lack of logic makes it difficult to understand and accept. English learners usually do not have a written awareness of words, especially in terms of articulation and coherence, so we cannot ignore the errors that occur in English writing by second language learners (Xueding Li, 2020) <sup>[5]</sup>. Nowadays, English major have been particularly settled in universities to refine the study of English, but for non-English majors, they will be united to learn college English as a course, so it is more difficult for non-English majors to achieve improvement in English writing through a unified English course.

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Based on the comparative analysis of English and Chinese, this paper analyzes the main types of errors in English writing and the causes of errors in English writing by taking the errors of non-English majors in English writing as the starting point, so as to enable English teachers and English learners to understand the root causes of the errors and to get some insights.

## Research design

### Research objects and questions

Using seven randomly selected compositions of non-English majors, this study adopts a case study approach and expects to address the following questions based on a comparative analysis of English and Chinese languages: (1) What are the common types of errors in the English writing of non-English majors? (2) What are the causes of errors in non-English majors' English compositions?

### Data collection

The author collected seven English essays from three non-English majors from the Internet volunteers, which were the coursework of the three non-English majors, and the data of the essays are more authentic and reliable.

## Results and discussion

### Error type analysis

When categorizing errors, the results often vary greatly due to different criteria such as the way of categorization, the object of research, the direction of research, etc. Corder firstly made a distinction between cognitive error and mistake in 1967, and then, in 1971, he classified errors into two categories, namely, error of competence and error of performance, and subdivided intralingual and interlingual errors. After that, in 1971, he divided errors into two categories: errors of competence and errors of performance, and divided errors of competence into intralingual and interlingual, thus establishing the basic theoretical framework of error analysis (Cai Longquan and Dai Weidong, 2001) <sup>[2]</sup>. Subsequently, scholars have successively categorized language acquisition errors, and Jack Richards (1971) <sup>[1]</sup> proposed the classification of developmental errors while accepting intralingual and interlingual errors. Interlanguage errors occur because learners' mother tongue habits and mother tongue culture are different from those of the target language, which will be affected to different degrees during learning; intralingual errors and developmental errors share the same point of being caused by the differences between the language structure of the mother tongue and that of the target language, and by the learners' misunderstandings or mix-ups during the process of using the mother tongue, which is a general characteristic of language learning; the difference of the two lies in the fact that intralingual errors are inevitable rules in language learning. The difference between the two is that intralingual errors are unavoidable in language learning, while developmental errors are caused by learners' assumptions about the target language when they are not clear about how to express themselves.

In this paper, the classification proposed by Richards (1971) <sup>[1]</sup> is used to categorize learners' errors into interlanguage, intralinguistic, and developmental errors, as this categorization more completely covers all possible errors within the three types. With this method of classification, the researchers were able to have a holistic and

comprehensive view of the errors. By analyzing the collected essays and combining Richards' classification of errors, the author mainly summarizes and discusses two types of errors: interlingual and intralingual ones.

### Intralingual errors

#### Omission or redundancy of articles

Because articles usually have no real meaning and are used in more complex ways, ELLs are prone to errors of omission and redundancy in their writing.

**Example (1):** behavior suggests that the child who is raised in an environment where the many (remove "the") stimuli which develop his or her capacity for appropriate responses will experience greater reactive evolution.

**Example (2):** a host of youth have some psychological issues. (add "the" before youth)

In example (1), "many" is a qualifier and cannot be preceded by the definite article "the"; in example (2), "youth" is a general term for young people and young people, and the definite article "the" is needed to indicate all young people. In example (2), "youth" is a general term for young people, preceded by the definite article "the" to indicate all young people.

#### Inconsistency of sex numbers

**Example (1):** Any mistakes I made means failure. ("means" should be changed to "mean")

**Example (2):** I also shouldered some obligations which actually do not belong to me. ("belong" should be replaced by "belongs".)

In both examples (1) and (2), the singular and plural of the subject are ignored, resulting in subject-verb disagreement with the verb that follows it.

#### Misuse of verbs

**Example (1):** When I finished speaking, they applauded me. (correct as "applaud for me")

**Example (2):** citizens commence to realize nothing can rival happy people for the time being. (correct as "commence realizing")

Although applaud in example (1) is a transitive verb, it should be followed by a specific thing directly, not a person. The use of commence in example (2) is commence doing something.

#### Lexical mix-ups

**Example (1):** I didn't hear others' lecture only because of my nervous. ("nervous" to nervousness)

**Example (2):** When I was trapped in the feeling about self-abased, ("self-abased" to "self-abasement")

Both nervous and self-abased in examples (1) and (2) are adjectives that cannot be used alone at the end of a sentence, so they need to be changed to nouns.

#### Spelling errors

**Example (1):** The rick of the environmental pollution will be greatly reduced. ("risk" is misspelled)

**Example (2):** I will rehearse speaking once in front of him before next class. (“rehearse” is misspelled)

The spelling mistakes in both examples (1) and (2) are more common occurrences, mainly because the words are not memorized, and there is another kind of spelling mistake that learners are more likely to make, namely, the distortion of words.

### Tense errors

**Example (1):** I laugh when I was speaking. (“laugh” should be used as past tense)

**Example (2):** They listening while I was saying, they waiting while I was thinking. (“listening” and “waiting” should be preceded by were)

Examples (1) and (2) are both confusing and inconsistent in their use of tenses, so they need to be standardized.

### Other errors

**Example (1):** But the teachers thought I did that on purpose, then criticized me. (“then” should be preceded by “and”)

**Example (2):** Not only the matter get failure, but also I'm a failure. (“get” should be changed into “become”)

In example (1), “then” is an adverb, which cannot be used to connect two sentences, so “and” needs to be added. In example (2), “get failure” is an improper collocation, which needs to be readjusted.

### Interlingual errors

#### Missing components

**Example (1):** You should divide the big goal into small ones or you will not be able to get accomplished. Then, make sure that enormous amount of your time is devoted to do things rather than imagine things. (There is a missing subject before “make sure”)

Chinese does not have strict requirements for sentence components, while English requires a complete sentence to have a subject, a predicate and an object. By ignoring this point, Chinese learners often have problems with missing components when writing English sentences.

#### Meaningless phrases

**Example (1):** First of all, in terms of travelling, I used to need my ID card, mobile phone, keys and other things, however, I need to carry a mask in my bag whenever and wherever.

Chinese is an ideographic language, which is not bound by form; English is a morphosyntactic language, which focuses on the use of form to show meaning, and the logical relationship between sentence components is often directly labeled by means of connectives and other means. Since connectives are less frequently used in Chinese, Chinese students also use fewer of them when writing in English, resulting in illogical sentences that become run-on sentences.

### Chinglish

**Example (1):** But there is one problem that always surrounds me.

When Chinese students write essays, they tend to translate Chinese into English directly without considering the sentence transformation and pragmatic situation of English,

which results in the Chinese English in example (1), in which there is appears to be a very cumbersome sentence.

### Error Cause Analysis

In the field of psychology, the early behaviorists believed that there is a phenomenon of “transfer” in foreign language learning, in which the acquisition of new knowledge is built on the basis of old knowledge, and the completion of the former learning task affects the performance of the latter (Tian, 2013) [7]. Some scholars define “transfer” as an effect caused by the commonalities and differences between the target language and any other acquired (or not fully acquired) language. Therefore, Language Transfer is a cross-linguistic influence, which is mainly reflected in the influence of the native language on the target language (Lei Shengyan, 2017) [3]. When the rules of the native language and the target language are the same, Positive Transfer is produced; when the rules of the native language and the target language are different, Negative Transfer, or Interference, is produced. The degree of difference is closely related to the degree of difficulty in the learning process. The more similar the mother tongue and the target language are, the easier it is for the learner to learn: the greater the difference between the mother tongue and the target language is, the more difficult it is for the learner to learn. In China, negative language transfer is mainly reflected in the interference of Chinese language in the use of English, and this interference leads to a large number of Chinglish in students' English compositions, thus affecting the improvement of students' English writing ability. Contrastive analysis is to compare and analyze the similarities and differences between English and Chinese, focusing on finding out the differences between the two, helping learners to overcome the negative transfer caused by their mother tongue, and achieving the purpose of learning the target language better. Based on the English-Chinese comparative analysis, the author will attribute writing errors at three levels: vocabulary, syntax and chapter.

### Lexical level

English has rich affixes and zigzag changes, the plural of nouns, tense changes, lexical changes are reflected by affixes or changes in word forms, while Chinese is often to add other words to reflect these aspects, the original word does not change. There are also rules for verbs in English, where the verb that follows needs to change its form. For example, if you want to follow a verb after commence, it needs to be followed by a gerund, which changes to the form of “ing”. This creates problems for students in memorizing and applying these lexical rules, and they often make mistakes in writing due to negligence. Moreover, influenced by their mother tongue, Chinese students often use their mother tongue thinking to translate Chinese words directly into English words, which leads to negative transfer of Chinese, for example, “think things” is directly translated into “imagine things”. In addition, the word collocations between English and Chinese are different, and English word collocations are the most tricky place for Chinese students to learn English, because certain words in Chinese have different expressions in English in different contexts, and these expressions are conventional, so if we don't pay attention to the differences between English and Chinese, we will make mistakes if we are not careful (Kuan-Ping Liu, Ye-Fang Zhou, 2004) [6]. For example, “failure” is expressed

as "get failure", but in English, get and failure are not used together, the correct expression should be "become a failure".

### Syntactic level

Due to the difference between the thinking styles of the English and Chinese nationalities, which emphasize rationality and logical thinking, and the Chinese nationalities, which emphasize enlightenment and dialectical thinking, English is a more formalized language compared with Chinese. One of its main manifestations is that English pays attention to the form of the sentence, the structure of the complete, using a variety of connecting means such as relational pronouns, relational adverbs, connecting pronouns, connecting adverbs, prepositions and other connecting words. There are especially many words that play a connecting role in English, and the frequency of such words is quite high. It can be seen that English pays attention to the form of connection, is a kind of heavy form of language; on the contrary, the Chinese language pays attention to the inner idea, not subject to the constraints of form, the Chinese sentence is often as long as the meaning. Chinese meaning without the use of lexical and grammatical means of articulation, relying only on the logical connection of the meaning of words and sentences or relying on a variety of contexts and pragmatic factors, can constitute a coherent discourse. Although there are a certain number of connectives in Chinese, people often show a natural tendency to use fewer or no connectives in their expressions (Li Songtao, 2005) [4]. For example, "First of all, in terms of traveling, I used to need my ID card, mobile phone, keys and other things, however, I need to carry a mask in my bag whenever and wherever." This is obviously a running sentence and the sentences do not flow well enough.

In addition, every sentence in English has to have a complete subject-predicate structure, and connectives are needed between the clauses to reflect the logical relationship between them; whereas Chinese sentences are comparatively much looser, and connectives indicating logical relationships are often omitted as long as the listener understands the speaker's meaning. After students get used to the syntactic habits of Chinese, they will transfer them to English sentences. For example, "You should divide the big goal into small ones or you will not be able to get accomplished. Then, make sure that enormous amount of your time is devoted to do things rather than imagine things". In this sentence, there is a lack of subject before make sure, and because Chinese sentences are loose and do not strictly require a subject, this causes negative transfer in Chinese.

### Chapter level

Westerners are polarized in their thinking due to a truncated dichotomous religious-philosophical outlook. The development of discourse is linear and backward. English writing requires a clear point of view, logic and unity at the beginning and end. They like to open the door and put the most important content at the forefront of the article, and then speak of other content in order of decreasing importance. And the center of Chinese mediocrity is to cultivate people to understand reasoning and not to go to extremes. Influenced by it, the development of Chinese discourse is in the trend of "S" shape development, and its argumentation process follows the pattern of "turn". Before

getting to the point, they like to make some preliminaries, explain the background information and other objective conditions, and then gradually introduce the topic, and the layout of the essay seems to be more implicit (Wang Ping, Liu Wenjie, 2001) [9]. Therefore, Chinese students are influenced by the Chinese way of thinking in the layout of their essays, and the essays they write may not have any grammatical errors, but they are not authentic English essays.

### Countermeasures and pedagogical insights

According to the above analysis, in teaching, teachers can adopt the following specific measures: 1) strengthen students' learning of the basic rules of English, and through the method of English-Chinese comparison, improve students' grammatical awareness of the correct use of English and get rid of the interference of Chinese. For example, some rules are unique to English, like various affix constructions, changes in person and number, and the use of articles, which need to be emphasized. For example, there is a difference between English and Chinese in the use of words, English uses more nouns and prepositions, while Chinese uses more verbs. 2) Guide students to familiarize themselves with the syntactic rules of English and to compare and analyze the chapter structure of English and Chinese texts. After students have some vocabulary and grammar knowledge, they still have problems in writing essays, for example, the theme is not prominent enough in the beginning of the essay, and there is no coherence between paragraphs, etc. This is related to the difference between English and Chinese thinking patterns. This is closely related to the difference between English and Chinese thinking patterns. Teachers should do a comparative analysis of English-Chinese texts in writing teaching, and can put English-Chinese texts on the same topic together for comparative analysis, so as to let students experience the influence of different thinking styles on the structural arrangement of chapters in an intuitive way. 3) Cultivate students' habits of thinking in English. The most direct and effective way is to let students read a lot of English articles, novels and so on, so as to cultivate students' sense of language. In addition, students can watch English movies and TV dramas, which can also help them to have effective language input.

### Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the collected data materials, the author answered the two research questions raised earlier. 1) from the collected essays of the non-English majors college students, there are mainly two types of writing, i.e., intralingual errors and interlingual errors. The intralingual errors that occur are mainly the omission or absence of articles, inconsistency in gender and number, incorrect use of verbs, misspelling of words, and so on. Interlingual errors are the lack of constituents in sentences, the use of run-on sentences or Chinese-style English, etc. (2) According to the comparative analysis between English and Chinese, it can be concluded that Chinese language has caused negative transfer to students' English writing at three levels: vocabulary, syntax and chapter. Based on the above conclusions, the author gives the corresponding teaching suggestions, which are mainly to strengthen students' learning of basic rules, compare the chapter structure

between English and Chinese, familiarize with syntactic rules and cultivate students' English thinking habits.

English writing ability is related to the assessment of the quality of university English teaching as well as affecting the non-English students' own academic and professional development. Therefore, university English teachers should use effective teaching methods, be good at summarizing, and improve for students' problems in order to help students to reflect on the changes. In addition, students have to make changes to write good English essays. On the one hand, they should find the most suitable English learning method for themselves to reduce the basic mistakes they are prone to make in writing; on the other hand, they should understand the English culture, cultivate the English thinking, and learn to use the English thinking to organize the materials and develop the exposition or description.

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## Appendix

The author collected English compositions of three non-English majors, A, B and C, from the Internet, of which A has four, B has two and C has one. See as follow.

### A (1)

With the rapid development of society, environmental dilemma has been paid mounting number of attention by human beings. I am greatly convinced that garbage

classification can not only make the most use of garbage. but protect the environment

First and foremost, there is no doubt that a host of waste is detrimental to the environment in a day. It goes without saying that the garbage gives rise to the environment. Since some of waste is recyclable. some is unrecyclable, if all the citizens could voluntarily differentiate recyclable rubbish from unrecyclable rubbish, the rick of the environmental pollution will be greatly reduced. Based on a most recent survey, it is revealed that a majority of successful social elites admitted that they preferred to spare no effort to create a nice environment for the next generation and take delight in protecting the environment. That's the reason why we start to set up the concept of garbage classification for the time being. Whereas, no one can disclaim that it is a key period that we cope with garbage. Last but not least, I'd appreciate it if we make the most use of garbage may as well.

In a nutshell, a case in point though holding some garbage classification knowledge competitions, we encourage everyone to actively participate in and really attach importance to it, so that people can fully understand the methods and significance of garbage classification. I am looking forward to seeing a stained environment in my lifetime.

### A (2)

With the rapid development of time, a host of youth have some psychological issues. When it comes to psychological problems of college students, we are looking forward to solving this issue by offering psychological courses.

First and foremost, there is no doubt that it improves students' ability to cope with psychological problems through the class. It goes without saying that psychological lesson is essential. Based on a most recent survey, it is revealed that a majority of successful social elites admitted that they preferred sparing no effort to keep a healthy mindset through psychological guidance. What's more. it is obvious that it is beneficial for the youngsters to establish the right concept. That's the reason why we are going to get higher education. In school we should make the most use of educational resources and live up to undergraduate status. Whereas. no one can deny the necessity of psychological health education.

In a nutshell, as undergraduates, we need some psychology course on the ground that current society has serious issues.

### A (3)

With the rapid development of the times, citizens commence to realize nothing can rival happy people for the time being. When it comes to happiness, the ways people feel happiness variety from person to person. Nevertheless happiness is not the absence of issue. but the ability to figure out them.

First and foremost, in recent survey shows, behavior suggests that the child who is raised in an environment where the many stimuli which develop his or her capacity for appropriate responses will experience greater reactive evolution. So we need spare no effort to try to develop our troubles solving skills in order to chase happiness. Merely in this way, can we make the most use of our talent to be happy. Whereas how do we develop this ability? When confronted with difficulties, we should strain every nerve to cope with and not put ourselves at a disadvantage. There is no doubt that when you succeed in this, and you will be

ahead of a host of your peers. By and large, being able to solve some life's problems is not only a skill, but also a kind of happiness.

In a nutshell, it goes without saying that we take delight in pursuing happiness.

#### A (4)

With the rapid development of education, currently youngsters begin to reflect on whether some proverbs are true or not. A host of people regard as the citizens never give up like the old saying may as well. Whereas others hold the opposite view, they deem giving up is also a variety of life wisdom. Personally, I go for the latter.

In the first instance, there is no doubt that the significance of never giving up. Based on a most recent survey, it is revealed that a majority of successful social elites admitted that never giving up is the reason why they cope with hardship. What's more, it is obvious that never giving up is not only a positive attitude towards life, but also a key factor of individual success. Last but not least, merely in determining never to give up can we look forward to success.

In a nutshell, I am greatly convinced that never giving up is the secret of success.

#### B (1)

Change from self-abased

Are you a self-abased person? Do you think you are a low-value person? Well, I used to be exactly like this. So I'd like to have a simple analysis about them.

When I was trapped in the feeling about self-abased, everything can make me scared. For example, when I was walking on the street, I would have an illusion that others was focused on me, even if actually their eyes were not on me. They were like fierce monsters in my eyes. Sometimes I even clung to inside edge of the road when I was walking. I was afraid to do anything, in my opinion, any mistakes I made means failure. Not only the matter get failure, but also I'm a failure. I have reproached myself a lot.

The underlying reason is that I just live in fantasy, I think I must be an almighty girl and I can't accept the reality that I can't avoid making mistakes. I also shouldered some obligations which actually not belongs to me. Another reason is I don't have my own goal. I incline to cater to others but ignore what I want to do and my own feelings. Sometimes I fill my void by catering to others and do things for others.

After realizing that, I decided to change. Some people decide to give up changing, they think that is too painful. But I think why they can't insist is that they can't get positive psychological reinforcement. They exactly set a goal, but that goal is too big to reach. At the beginning of the change maybe people still call themselves as self-abased people and use it as an excuse. But remember, if you can't break with this label, you can't get real change.

You should divide the big goal into small ones or you will not be able to get accomplished. Then, make sure that enormous amount of your time is devoted to do things rather than imagine things. You should accept that you can't succeed at the first try. But you must have a firm belief that you can do well and reach your goal eventually.

The process of change may be painful, but as long as you make it, the world will be brand new for you.

#### B (2)

My breakout showing

As an ambitious girl, I always try my best to do all the things. In my opinion, people may tend to have sympathy for the underdog, but we can't live off other 's sympathy. So I was strict to myself. I want to be strong.

But there is one problem that always surrounds me. I was bound to laughed as long as I showed myself in front of everyone. I didn't mean to laugh, that 's because I felt too nervous, then I couldn't control myself. But the teachers thought I did that on purpose, then criticized me. I had no way to explain for myself, so I became more and more nervous before showing everything. Initially, I forged to keep calm before I got on the stage. But I still failed. I fell into a vicious circle.

One day, I needed to teach my classmates an artical, so I prepared seriously. I was sure that I could finish it in this class. I was afraid of making mistakes and being criticized, so I have been repeating what I have to say and I haven 't listened to other 's explanations. I was stuck in the fear during the class. But it wasn't my turn until the class was over, that means I still can't get rid of my overwhelming fear. I cried loudly. I blamed myself that I didn't hear others lecture only because of my nervous.

My English teacher came to comfort me. I couldn't help telling him about my experiences related to speak in public.

"I laugh when I was speaking." "I said.

"That's ok. I will not criticize you. Everyone gets nervous when you are speaking in public, so do I. ""I'm afraid to make mistakes. If they have some question about the artical, I must be panic without any sentences."

"I will help you." "He said.

Then we made a commitment that I will rehearse speaking once in front of him before next class. During the rehearsal, he shared his method about teaching. He also shared how he mark the key point. We made a discuss to modify my teaching plan until it became viable.

It's finally time for my teaching. I stood in front of my classmates, did what I did in rehearsal.

I laughed again. I subconsciously looked at my teacher and classmates. No one was criticizing me, no one was laughing at me. That significantly mitigated my stress. They listening while I was saying, they waiting while I was thinking. When I finished speaking, they applauded me.

It must be my breakout showing. My English teacher 's help covered my bad memories. Maybe I am one step closer of being cut out for speaking in public.

#### C (1)

When I think about how the COVID-19 does impact my life, I can't help comparing my living conditions before the outbreak with after. Before the outbreak, the fresh air is free to take in while it must be purified by masks to enter our lungs. The omnidirectional and multi-level changes have taken place in my life.

First of all, in terms of travelling, I used to need my ID card, mobile phone, keys and other things, however, I need to carry a mask in my bag whenever and wherever. And the normalization of nucleic acid testing sometimes makes me trapped outside the places I need to enter.

Moreover, as far as custom is concerned, people use "have you eaten?" as an everyday greeting to "have you been tested? ", which may sound like a sign of happiness in the midst of hardship. As well as the puppy raised after the

pandemic, when you call out his name, he doesn't understand, but when you call out: "it's time for a nucleic acid test!" He will run fast to you.

Last but not least, at the cognitive level, some people don't take COVID-19 very seriously, as someone avoid people who have suffered it. I'm afraid of the latter situation: it seems that some people regard COVID-19 as disease like AIDS, but we all know that AIDS could be private, however, the COVID-19 could not.

In summary, the enormity of the new coronavirus has really had an irreversible impact on my life, so I want this catastrophe to end as soon as possible.