Learning English for Academic Purposes: Why Chinese EFL Learners find EAP so difficult to master

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Abstract

Greater China has the largest number of learners of English in the world, with English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as the target variety. Most of them have difficulty mastering EAP. This may be partly explained by tremendous typological/linguistic differences between English and Chinese, which belong to different language families and have hardly any features in common. Very little of Chinese learners' knowledge of their first language has any reference value in the process of learning English, the most important foreign language. This paper discusses some of the most salient typological differences and a few lexico-grammatical errors commonly found in Chinese EAP learners' language output.

Keywords: EAP, language typology, Chinese learners, common errors

Introduction

English has emerged as an international lingua franca (Jenkins 2007; Kirkpatrick 2007; Seidlhofer 2004). It has accrued so much linguistic capital that young people growing up with little or no knowledge of Standard English tend to be disadvantaged relative to the goal of developing upward and outward mobility (Li 2007). This is why English figures so prominently in the curricula of ESL/EFL countries. 'Greater China', comprising mainland China, the two Special Administrative Regions Hong Kong and Macao, and Taiwan, has the largest number of learners of English in the world. According to one recent conference paper (Chen 2008), there are about 112,463,000 primary school children in China. Based on this estimate, there should be no less than 300 million Chinese learners learning English at different levels of the education hierarchy today. Given the utility and perceived significance of English worldwide, there is understandably increasing pressure for local non-English-L1 governments to introduce English to learners at a younger age. In mainland China, for example, since 2001 English is a compulsory subject from Grade 3 (around age 8-9; Graddol 2006: 95), while in Hong Kong SAR, a former British colony, children start learning their ABC in kindergartens or playgroups (around age 4-5, see Li 1999; Miller and Li 2007).

For reasons that hopefully will be made clear below, most Chinese learners of English find it very difficult to learn English up to a high level. At every stage of the learning process, their English output is full of non-standard features or deviations from Standard English, at both phonological (see e.g. Hung 2000) and lexico-grammatical levels (see e.g. Li and Chan 1999, 2001). In this paper, we will discuss the main linguistic factors related to various acquisitional problems encountered by Chinese EFL learners, especially

those who have relatively little home support for extending their English input learned in class. We will use a contrastive approach to elucidate the enormous typological and linguistic differences between the two most widely spoken languages in the world: Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua and Cantonese, among other Chinese varieties) and English (different varieties of English, including English for Academic Purposes, or EAP in short). Owing to space constraints, we will limit ourselves to the following features, in that order:

- Some salient typological differences between English (Indo-European) and Chinese (Sino-Tibetan)
- Deviation from EAP 1: Using an independent clause as the subject of a longer clause
- Deviation from EAP 2: Pseudo-tough movement (*I am difficult to learn English*)
- Deviation from EAP 3: Non-standard Q-A sequence involving 'negative yes-no questions'
- Subject-prominence (English) vs. topic-prominence (Chinese)
- Writing systems: alphabetic (English) vs. logographic (Chinese)

Apart from typological and linguistic factors, a lack of a conducive English-learning environment is another important factor behind various acquisitional problems. Being essentially a foreign language in Greater China, English is seldom used among Chinese speakers for intraethnic communication, unlike Chinese Singaporeans in this regard (for more details, see Li, in press).

Some salient typological differences between English (Indo-European) and Chinese (Sino-Tibetan)

Typologically speaking, English and Chinese belong to two completely unrelated language families (see e.g. Gordon 2005; http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/distribution.asp?by=family), which is why linguistically the two languages have very little in common. English is a Germanic language within the Indo-European family, alongside other 'family members' such as Dutch, German, and Scandinavian languages like Norwegian, Danish and Swedish. Learners of English from a language in the Romance family – notably French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian – may also benefit from a large number of cognates in their respective first language. Thus French learners of English will quickly realize that most of the English words ending in *-tion* are also recognizable French words (e.g. *civilisation, formation, function, nation,* etc.). Despite a minor concern called 'false cognates' (also 'false friends'; cf. French: *faux amis*; German: *falsche Freunde*), the presence of a large number of similar-sounding words in English is a great help in the process of acquiring vocabulary in English. Such a benefit, however, is unknown to Chinese EFL learners for, except a small subset of lexical borrowings originated from English, little of what they know about their own mother tongue is of any reference value in the process of acquiring Standard English / EAP. At the level of grammar, the two branches of Indo-European, Germanic and Romance, share many linguistic features in common. For example, they all have an alphabet, a tense system, and they all distinguish between singular nouns and plural nouns – the grammatical category called 'Number'. None of these features are shared by Chinese, which is typologically a Sino-Tibetan language. Other Sino-Tibetan languages include Burmese, Tibetan and Thai.

For Chinese learners, many of the EFL learning difficulties may be accounted for by the great 'typological distance' between Chinese and English. In principle, the more linguistic features shared by the two languages in question, the easier it would be for native speakers of either language to learn the other language. For instance, French learners of English will find in the tense system of French a convenient frame of reference when they try to make sense of various tenses in English. Very much the same advantage is also enjoyed by English-speaking learners of French. Such an advantage is however not available to learners whose first language is Chinese. Except for the basic word order SVO, as semiotic meaning-making systems the two languages Chinese (in particular the national language Putonghua/Mandarin and other 'dialects' such as Cantonese, the lingua franca of Hong Kong and Macao, and Southern Min, its counterpart in Taiwan) and English (native or non-native varieties, including Standard English or EAP) have practically no other linguistic features in common. Table 1 shows some of the most salient examples of mismatch in the grammatical subsystems of the two languages, and the learning difficulties and typical non-standard EFL features associated with them.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

One inevitable consequence is that native speakers of either language who want to learn the other language tend to experience enormous cognitive difficulties. This helps explain why, for example, the English tense system (e.g. subject-verb agreement; the functional difference between the past tense and present perfect) is among the thorniest problems for Chinese learners of English. In a similar vein, many Westerners have tremendous difficulties mastering the tone system in Mandarin (Putonghua) or, worse still, Cantonese, mainly because tonal distinctions or tonemes (four in Mandarin, six in Cantonese) as an integrated part of lexis for differentiating word meanings are alien to speakers of most of the Indo-European languages.

At the level of phonology, Chinese EFL learners tend to have difficulties articulating words containing one or more consonant clusters (e.g. *strengths*: [stre˩˥s]), partly because such a feature is uncommon in Chinese (not found in Mandarin or Cantonese). Unstressed, word-final syllables may be omitted (e.g. *complica_ted_* or *upda_ted_*), while syllable-final plosives may be unreleased (e.g. *ta_p_*, *pe_t_* and *loo_k_*), largely because unlike syllable-final plosives in English, their Cantonese counterparts are not released (e.g. /t/ in faat^{33}daat^{22}, 發達 'get rich'). Further, the phonemic distinction between syllable-initial /n/ and /l/ in English is often undifferentiated by Cantonese-L1 (but less typically Mandarin-L1) learners of English, with /n/ being pronounced as /l/. Consequently, minimal pairs like *line – nine* and *knife – life* are indistinguishable and tend to be pronounced with /l/. This may be explained by the fact that, in Cantonese, /n/ and /l/ are treated as variants with no risk of miscommunication (e.g. the 2sg personal pronoun 你 is variously pronounced as nei^{23} or lei^{23}). Finally, another well-known phonological feature among Chinese learners' speech output is 'syllable-timed' rhythm which is so characteristic of Cantonese phonology. For instance, in a polysyllabic word like *international*, each of the syllables is typically

given the same amount of stress, viz. in-ter-na-tion-al, rather than a sequence of five syllables with stress falling on the third syllable only (see Hung 2000 for more details).

In the rest of this paper, we will discuss and illustrate three of the high-frequency non-standard lexico-grammatical features in Chinese learners' EAP outputs (more written than spoken). All of these features are arguably due, at least in part, to cross-linguistic influence from the learner's mother tongue, which in the case of Hong Kong and the adjacent Guangdong province refers to spoken Cantonese (the vernacular) and (standard) written Chinese. Statistically, however, there are far more Chinese EFL learners whose mother tongue is Putonghua (Mandarin), the national language. Cantonese and Mandarin represent two of the seven major 'dialect' groups in Greater China (Li 2006). In this paper we will draw on both of these Chinese varieties for illustration. All Chinese examples will be cited in an appropriate transliteration system as well as in Chinese characters. Cantonese examples will be transcribed using the JyutPing system pioneered by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (LSHK). The tone contour of a Cantonese morpho-syllable is indicated by two numbers in superscript. Mandarin examples will be transcribed using Pinyin.

Deviation from EAP 1: Using an independent clause as the subject of a longer clause

The verb group in an English clause may be simple (e.g. *We like it*) or complex (e.g. *He could have arrived earlier; I would like to make some changes*). When there is more than one verb in the same clause, the first verb will appear in finite form (marked for tense and, if present tense, number and person as well), while the other verbs should appear in non-finite form (e.g. infinitive: *I can help distribute this questionnaire for you*; past participle or present participle: *I have been doing this for years*). This is why in examples (1) – (4) below, all the verbs (*applied, objected*) and adjectives (*eager, willing*) have to be converted to nouns (1a – 4a) or gerunds (5 – 7) when they themselves function as the subject of a longer sentence. Compare:

(1)   Jack applied for this job.
(2)   Jim objected to your plan.
(3)   Mary was eager to quit.
(4)   John was willing to stay.

(1a) Jack's application for this job   was successful.
(2a) Jim's objection / objecting to your plan   was totally ungrounded.
(3a) Mary's eagerness to quit   embarrassed her boss.
(4a) John's willingness to stay   surprised us all.

(5)   Thank you for coming…
(6)   Jim apologized for being late…

(7)   Ann's <u>handling</u> of the complaint is very reasonable…

When a finite, independent clause itself becomes the subject or object of a longer sentence, it is necessary to head this clause with the subordinator *that* (cf. *que* in French; *dass* in German). The resultant dependent '*that* clause' may similarly function as the subject of a longer clause (1b – 4b)**:

(1b) *That Jack applied for this job*   was successful.
(2b) *That Jim objected to your plan*   was totally ungrounded.
(3b) *That Mary was eager to quit*   embarrassed her boss.
(4b) *That John was willing to stay*   surprised us all.

Failing to mark the finite-clause subject as a dependent '*that* clause' using the subordinator *that* as in (1b) – (4b) will result in non-standard sentences, as in (1c) – (4c) (Chan, Kwan and Li 2003):

(1c) **Jack applied for this job*   was successful.
(2c) **Jim objected to your plan*   was totally ungrounded.
(3c) **Mary was eager to quit*   embarrassed her boss.
(4c) **John was willing to stay*   surprised us all.

The syntactic requirement or constraint for using an independent clause as the subject of a longer clause is often overlooked by even advanced Chinese EFL learners. This is partly because there is little *formal* restriction when Chinese verbs are chained together to express a sequence of processes. Such a feature is generally known as 'serial-verb construction'. In other words, the chaining of verbs in Chinese is much freer in that no inflectional change is required (cf. finite vs. non-finite verb forms in English). The following utterance in Cantonese (8), involving no less than a sequence of eight verbs (highlighted), is commonplace in everyday communication in any Chinese variety:

(8)   ngo^{23} **soeng^{35} lok^{22}**gaai^{55} **maai^{35}**coi^{33} **faan^{55}lai^{21} zyu^{35}**faan^{22} bei^{35} nei^{23} **sik^{22}**jyun^{21}
zi^{33} **heoi^{33} faan^{55}gung^{55}** [我想落街買菜返黎煮飯俾你食完至去返工]
1sg want go-down-street buy-food come-back cook-meal give you eat-finish then go-to-work
[Literally] 'I want to go (down the street to) buy food and come back to cook the meal for you to eat till [you] finish then [you] go to work.'
[More idiomatically] 'I want to go and buy some food now. When I come back, I'll fix the meal for you. Don't go until you have finished eating.'

Notice that the more idiomatic-sounding English rendition of (8) would have the verb processes expressed in separate clauses rather than in one serial verb construction as in Chinese. This

Cantonese utterance, which contains a serial verb construction, sounds not at all unnatural. Notice how the verbs in Chinese are sequenced together freely without inflection (compare: *to*-infinitive, *-ing* forms, *-ed* forms, etc. in English). Due to cross-linguistic influence, it is conceivable that Chinese EFL learners are tempted to sequence English verbs together, paying no attention to inflectional changes when putting verbs together in a sequence. This helps explain the misuse of an independent clause as the subject of a sentence (e.g. 1c – 4c; Chan, Kwan and Li 2003). Such a trend is even more apparent in elementary Chinese learners' EFL output, where the common feature of verb-chaining is often mapped directly onto English verbs, showing little or no awareness of the normative non-finite English verb forms, as in the following:

*They <u>want</u> me <u>go</u>.   *We <u>like play</u> football.   *She <u>enjoy watch</u> Twins.*

Deviation from EAP 2: Pseudo-tough movement (*I am difficult to learn English*)

There are a number of sentence structures in English which are difficult for Chinese EFL learners to master. 'Postponed carrier' is one of them (see Lock 1995). This term is used to characterize a sentence pattern headed by the anticipatory 'it' such as the following:

(9)   It is difficult   for us to go to Tibet by bus.
(10) It is not convenient   for us to tell you the names of our clients.

From the point of view of syntactic function, the 'real' subject in these sentences is 'postponed' in accordance with a general trend in modern English, namely, to defer lengthy preverbal subjects to the post-verbal position, usually toward the end of the sentence. Then, in place of the 'real' subject, a 'dummy subject' – the pronoun *it* – is used instead in the subject position. It is of course possible to package the same message using the real subject, but the resultant structure, as shown in (9a) and (10a), would sound less idiomatic:

(9a) For us to go to Tibet by bus   is difficult.
(10a) For us to tell you the name of our guest   is not convenient.

Typical adjectives involved in this sentence pattern are those expressing a degree of facility or potentiality such as *easy, difficult, necessary, common, convenient, possible, probable, impossible*, etc. (see *Collins CoBuild English Grammar*, 1990). In addition to the complexity of the 'postponed carrier' structure, another source of learning difficulty is probably due to the fact that, to express the same meaning in Chinese, the sentence would typically start with a human subject. For example:

(9b) wǒmén hǎn nán zuò bāsi daò Xīzàng qù (我們很難坐巴士到西藏去)

    1pl very difficult take bus to Tibet go

    'It is very difficult for us to go to Tibet by bus.'

(10b) wǒmén bù fāngbiàn bǎ kèrénde míngzi gàosu nǐ (我們不方便把客人的名字告訴你)

    1pl not convenient BA guest's name tell you

    'It is inconvenient for us to tell you the name of our guest.'

The Cantonese counterparts in (9b) and (10b) would look very similar. Consequently, elementary Chinese EFL learners tend to produce erroneous sentences which mirror the normative, correct structure of the Chinese sentence, viz.:

(9c)   *We are difficult to go to Tibet by bus.

(10c) *We are not convenient to tell you the name of our guest.

Such a structure has been characterized as 'pseudo-tough movement' (Yip 1995; cf. Li and Chan 2001). In addition, the student may have been misled by grammatical English sentences such as (11) and (12), which carry a very similar surface structure as that of the ungrammatical sentences in (9c) and (10c):

(11) Jim is not easy to convince [...].

(12) Madeleine is difficult to find [...].

Chinese EFL learners who get confused fail to realize that in such grammatical sentences, the subject noun (e.g. *Jim* and *Madeleine*) is at the same time the underlying object of the main verb, that is, in response to the questions: to convince whom? (Jim); to find whom? (Madeleine). It takes very keen learners to observe the transformational relationship that exists between these grammatical sentences which begin with a human subject, as in (11) and (12), and those headed by the anticipatory 'dummy *it*', as in (11a) and (12a):

(11a) It is not easy to convince Jim.

(12a) It is difficult to find Madeleine.

Notice, however, that no such transformational relationship exists in (9) and (9a) involving the intransitive verb *go*, nor in (10) and (10a) involving the ditransitive verb *tell*. Based on the above contrastive analysis, it may be argued that the erroneous 'pseudo-tough movement' structure (Yip 1995), as exemplified in (9c) and (10c), is jointly attributable to a combination of cross-linguistic influence from the students' mother tongue, Chinese, and the structural complexity of the

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'postponed carrier' structure in the target language, English (Li and Chan 2001; see also http://personal.cityu.edu.hk/~encrproj/).

Deviation from EAP 3: Non-standard Q-A sequence involving 'negative yes-no questions'

In the middle of an English test, I saw one student asking his buddy seated in front of him to pick up a pen that he had dropped accidentally. I went over to that student and asked jokingly: "You're not cheating, are you?" I was expecting the simple answer 'No', but to my surprise, that student responded 'Yes', which made me unsure for a moment whether he was in fact cheating. According to the grammar of Standard English or EAP, that student's response amounted to admitting to cheating ("Yes, I am cheating."). But other contextual cues, including the student's facial expression, suggested that somehow this was not what he was trying to say. This little incident epitomizes one interesting problem concerning the proper way of responding to a 'negative yes-no question' in English. A negative yes-no question is one that anticipates a 'yes' or 'no' response, and which contains an element of negation, typically 'no' or 'not' in the main clause before the question tag, as in the example, "You're <u>not</u> cheating, are you?"

The Q-A sequence is among the most common conversational features in any language. The preferred patterns of responses to negative yes-no questions, however, differ considerably in Chinese and English. To understand how the two systems differ, consider the following contrastive examples in Standard English and Mandarin/Putonghua:

(13) A – You don't drive, do you? / right?
　　　Bi – No(, I don't).
　　　Bii – Yes(, I do).

(14) A – nǐ shì bù kāi chē de, duì ma? [你是不開車的，對嗎?]
　　　　　2sg BE not drive car, right?
　　　　　'You don't drive, do you?'
　　　Bi – shì / duì (wǒ shì bù kāi chē de). [是/對 (我是不開車的)。]
　　　　　'Yes (you are right; I don't drive).'
　　　Bii – bùshi / bùduì (wǒ shì kāi chē de) [(不是/不對，我是開車的)。]
　　　　　'No (you are wrong; I do drive).'

As shown in (13) and (14), in response to a negative yes-no question, English requires the respondent to attend to the proposition (here: 'I drive'), and affirm it with 'yes', and deny it with 'no'. In the Mandarin response to a negative yes-no question, however, the choice between positive and negative polarity hinges upon whether the questioner's supposition is agreeable to the

respondent. If it is agreeable, the respondent should say 'yes' (shì/duì), with the implicit meaning 'you are right'; if the supposition is invalid, then the respondent should say 'no' (bùshi/bùduì), suggesting implicitly 'you are wrong'. Given that the meanings assigned to responses to negative yes-no questions in Mandarin and English are diametrically opposed to each other, it is not difficult to understand why Chinese EFL learners find it so difficult to adjust to the pattern of Q-A sequence in English, and that ambiguous responses from fluent Chinese EFL users such as (15) and (16) are not at all rare:

(15) A – You're not cheating, are you?
Bi – Yes(, I'm not cheating).
Bii – No(, I'm cheating).

(16) A – You don't smoke, do you?
Bi – Yes(, I don't).
Bii – No(, I do).

To avoid misunderstanding, it is advisable for native-speakers of English who are unaccustomed to the Q-A sequence involving negative yes-no questions in Chinese to be vigilant about the possibility of their Chinese interlocutors operating with the Chinese Q-A sequence subsystem. Where the Standard English Q-A subsystem governing responses to negative yes-no questions is upheld to be the norm (e.g. in high-stake gate-keeping encounters such as oral exams and job interviews), it is not difficult to understand why 'inappropriate' responses to negative yes-no questions are among the most common features or 'errors' in Chinese EFL users' English outputs, including those whose proficiency level is quite high.

Subject-prominence vs. topic-prominence

There is general consensus among Chinese grammarians that the important concept in English grammar – the subject – is not so useful when analyzing the syntactic functions of constituents in a Chinese sentence (Li and Thompson 1981). There are two main types of evidence for this. First, the subject is not a salient grammatical category in Chinese, as shown in many 'subjectless' sentences such as *xiayu le*! [下雨了!] or *lok^{22} jyu^{23} laa^{33}*! [落雨啦!] ('it rains / it is raining'). Second, in plenty of sentences it is inappropriate to analyze the sentence-initial constituent as the subject, even though a subject may be identified elsewhere in the sentence. For example:

(17)   ze kuài tián zhòng mǐ zuìhǎo [這塊田種米最好]
        this field grow rice the best
        'This field is best for growing rice.'

(18)   gaa^{33}fe^{55} ngo^{23} zung^{55}ji^{33} baa^{55}sai^{55} ge^{33} [咖啡我鍾意巴西嘅!]

coffee 1sg like Brazil NOM

'As for coffee, I like Brazilian (coffee)!'

(19)   san^{55}cing^{35} zoeng^{55}hok^{22}gam^{55} gam^{55}jat^{22} zit^{22}zi^{23} laa^{33} [申請獎學金今日截止啦!]

apply scholarship today deadline FP

[Literally] Applying for scholarships, today is the deadline!

[More idiomatically] 'Today is the deadline for scholarship applications!'

What (17), (18) and (19) have in common is that each of the sentence-initial constituents (i.e. 'this field', 'coffee', 'apply for scholarship') provides the frame of reference (cf. theme) for interpreting the meanings of the constituents in the rest of the sentence (cf. rheme). To account for the semantic role of such sentence-initial constituents in Chinese, some grammarians coined the term 'topic'. This is the background against which Chinese is often referred to as a 'topic-prominent language' (Li and Thompson 1981), as opposed to 'subject-prominent languages' such as English, French and German, where the subject has been grammaticalized (i.e. the preverbal subject position <u>must</u> be filled by a 'dummy subject' if there is no naturally occurring subject, as in <u>*it* is raining / *il* pleut / *es* regnet</u>). To sum up, unlike the 'subject – predicate' (S-P) syntactic analysis in English, it is believed that 'topic – comment' (T-C) is a more productive analytical apparatus for a language like Chinese. Such a significant typological difference between English and Chinese – subject-prominence vs. topic-prominence – helps explain why elementary Chinese EFL learners tend to produce non-standard or unidiomatic sentences such as the following:

(17a) * This field, grow rice is best!

(18a) ?? Coffee, I like Brazilian coffee!

(19a) ?? Applying scholarship, today is deadline!

Writing systems: alphabetic (English) vs. logographic (Chinese)

In EFL settings, the bulk of the learning of English takes place through reading. English is an alphabetic language; the phonetically based spelling system, while imperfect, makes it possible for English speakers to pronounce a given English word regardless of its length, including vocabulary words that learners have never encountered before. Thus the meaning of a long English word such as *anti-establishmentarianism* may be unfamiliar to the reader, but based on his or her knowledge of English pronunciation rules, the reader will probably have little difficulty spelling and pronouncing it correctly.

In contrast, Chinese adopts a logographic writing system. The basic unit of writing is known as a 'character' (fāngkuàizi, 方塊字), or written graph. While experienced readers of Chinese will be able to infer how an unfamiliar Chinese character is likely to be pronounced – thanks to the dominant character formation principle called 'phonetic compound' (xíngshēngzi, 形聲字) – the Chinese character, being logographic rather than alphabetic, offers no clue as to how it is actually pronounced for, unlike the English letter, the

phonetic property of the Chinese character is not based on phonemic sound values. Rather, the pronunciation has to be learnt and memorized along with its written form and meaning(s). One consequence of this indirect sound-graph relationship is that when a Chinese character is not used for a long time, it tends to become cognitively obscure, and the speaker may have difficulties recalling its actual written form (Li 2006).

Of interest here is the fact that knowledge of the Chinese writing system is of little help or relevance in EFL learners' struggle to make sense of the complex sound-spelling relationships in English. Quite the contrary, in the absence of training and practice in phonics in English lessons, Chinese EFL learners tend to commit long English words to memory through rote learning, in the same way that they are encouraged to memorize the written forms of Chinese characters through practice. This was also my experience when I was in Primary (Grade) 5 or 6; I still remember reciting 't-e-r-r-i-t-o-r-y, ter-ri-to-ry' on my way home from school, being anxious of the dictation of an English passage related to 'New Territories' (the northern part of Hong Kong) the following day. A lack of 'alphabetic awareness' is thus one important reason why advocates of phonics feel so strongly that it should be introduced as early as possible into the EFL curricula.

Conclusion

Owing to tremendous typological and linguistic differences between Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua, among other Chinese 'dialects') and English (notably Standard English or EAP), Chinese EFL learners tend to find it difficult to learn English up to a high proficiency level. Acquisitional problems occur at practically all linguistic levels: phonological, lexico-grammatical and discourse-pragmatic. In this paper, we have discussed and illustrated several salient learning difficulties at the lexico-grammatical level, including the misuse of an independent clause as the subject of a longer clause (e.g. *Snoopy is leaving makes me happy*), 'pseudo-tough movement' (e.g. *I am difficult to learn English*), and 'non-standard Q-A sequence involving 'negative yes-no questions' (e.g. ??*Yes, I don't smoke*). We also saw that under the influence of topic-prominence in their first language, Chinese EFL learners tend to find it difficult to acquire the typical subject-predicate structure in English, as shown in the omission of the 'dummy subject *it*', or unidiomatic sentences bearing a topic-prominent structure in their English output (e.g. *This field, grow rice is best!*). Finally, we have seen how the logographic writing system in the learners' first language, Chinese, is of little reference value in the process of developing literacy in English, which is written with an alphabetic script. All this helps explain why, for the majority of Chinese EFL learners who have little home support and few opportunities to practice using the target language, mastering English (Standard English or EAP) up to a high level is such a daunting task despite years of hard work.

Notes

**Notice that the same '*that* clause' may also function as the object of a longer clause. For example:

(20) I know (*that*) *Jack applied for this job.*

(21) I was told *that Jim objected to your plan.*

(22) I was surprised   *that Mary was eager to quit.*
(23) I was relieved to hear   *that John was willing to stay.*

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Table 1. Salient examples of mismatch in English and Chinese grammatical subsystems

Grammatical subsystem	Standard English (EAP): forms and functions	Chinese (Mandarin): forms and functions	EFL learning difficulties / non-standard EFL features
Word class: Nouns	Grammatical category 'Number': singular / plural	No such distinction	Omitting the plural marker –s
Word class: Verbs	Grammatical category 'Tense' ● past tenses / present tenses ● S-V agreement	No such distinction	● Omitting the '3rd person singular' –s ● Omitting S-V agreement
Word class: Adjectives	-ing vs. -ed adjectives	No such systematic distinction	Confusion between meanings of -ing and -ed adjectives
Articles	a, an, the: expressing generic / definite / indefinite reference	No such grammatical category	Difficulty acquiring the functions of articles
Relative clauses	Post-modifying, appearing after an NP; giving additional info about the Head	Pre-modifying clause before an NP; giving additional info about the Head	Underuse of relative clauses and other post-modifying elements of the Head noun
Typical sentence structure	Subject-prominent (S-P; see below)	Topic-prominent (T-C; see below)	Using the T-C structure to package info, e.g. *This field, grow rice is best.*
Conditional statements	Three conditionals: ● If I have time, I'll come. ● If I had time, I'd come ● If I'd had time, I'd have come.	No such grammatical distinction (disambiguation through contextual cues): ● (Ruguo) you sijian wo (jiao) hui lai [(如果)有時間我(就)會來]	● Difficulty acquiring the 3rd / 'counterfactual' conditional ● Difficulty distinguishing the 1st and 2nd conditional
Usage of the adverb / intensifier *too*	The structure 'too Adj to V', e.g. ● *This is too good to be true.* (= so good that it ca<u>not</u> be true) ● You are too young to get married. (= so young that you should <u>not</u> get married)	The corresponding adverb / intensifier tai / taai[33] (太) has no implicit negative meaning as in *too* in the 'too Adj to V' structure	● ?*Your shoes are too good for me.* (meaning '…so good…') ● ?*I'm too excited to meet your parents.* (meaning '…so excited…')

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Paper submitted to the monograph

Communicating Science: ESP Studies at the Outset of the 21st Century

Co-edited by

Dr. Pedro Martin and Dr. Isabel Leon

University of La Laguna

Tenerife, Spain

[last updated]
20 May 2009