

Upholding standards of academic writing of Chinese students in China English

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While the emergence of the plural form of English widely acknowledges the sociolinguistic realities in many countries and regions, it might also have an equally profound impact on English teaching and learning in those areas. The trend is for pedagogical models to no longer privilege so-called Standard English based on native varieties but will be built on the localised model. However, for English to continue to function as a 'lingua franca', this article argues that certain standards should be imposed on language use by Chinese students in their academic writing, so that the variant forms will not digress too much from the standard forms and so not result in unintelligibility or misunderstanding. Focusing on selected written data produced by advanced Chinese students, a distinction can be made between interlanguage and variant forms that mark the Chineseness in China English where both features can be situated on a continuum.

Keywords: China English, academic writing, interlanguage, variant forms

Introduction

In recent years, as English increasingly gains ground throughout the world, attention has started to focus on the new varieties of English that are emerging. First among them is understandably the English of China where more than one variety can be found (Bolton, 2003). Linguists discuss the differences between Chinese Pidgin, New Chinese Pidgin, Chinglish, Chinese English and China English. The last of these has been elevated to the highest rank although there still remains considerable divergence

of opinion on how it should be defined (Wei & Fei, 2003). The emergence of new Englishes, not only in China but also elsewhere, has generated heated discussion as to how this phenomenon can affect English language teaching and learning. While a number of researchers (Kirkpatrick, 2007, Hu, 2004) have advocated a pedagogical model based on the local variety, it remains unclear what standards should be held to distinguish between those variant forms that are accepted and those that are not accepted.

China English and Standard English

There is clearly a will on the part of many linguists, mainly Chinese but not exclusively so, to set aside the standard British and American models and set up one with Chinese characteristics with one or both of these standard varieties as the core. Three main reasons are advanced in support of this. In the first place, the standard models are beyond the mastery of most Chinese learners in the light of the difficult teaching conditions, the lack of an English-speaking environment, the shortage of teachers, the low level of proficiency of many teachers and the considerable language distance. One might well ask, if the teachers cannot attain native-like proficiency, how their charges can be expected to do so. There is also the traditional teaching method which lends itself very much to the now discredited Grammar-Translation method and which many teachers still cling on to. Furthermore, the national examination system tends to promote rote memorization and the learning of rules rather than actual language use. Secondly, given the language needs of Chinese

learners of English, it seems pointless for them to strive to attain a goal that is beyond their reach. Very few of them, and then presumably almost exclusively English majors, will ever need to attain a native-like level although they may aspire to do so. Teachers testify to the fact that many non-English majors, and even some English majors, seem to want no more than a reading and working level of English at a practical spoken level. Many others do not see the point in learning English at all and are solely concerned with passing the obligatory Band 4 examination. Some teachers question the wisdom of forcing every university student to learn English as it is likely that some students will never need to, want to or be able to use it. The third reason why Chinese and even non-Chinese linguists are currently advocating a non-native model for the teaching of English is because they see it as a vehicle for transmitting Chinese culture through the translation or transliteration of different terms (He & Li, 2009). The readiness with which English has always absorbed words from other languages, with already more than three thousand from Chinese (Cui, 2006), means that this does not pose a problem; it is in fact inevitable. Unlike French, or Chinese for that matter, no official organ has ever been set up to protect the language from so-called 'contamination'.

Currently most linguists are advocating China English, i.e. a form of English that bears Chinese characteristics but has standard English, be it British or American, as its core. He and Li (2009, p. 28), following their critique of other definitions and a discussion of some of its salient features, define China English as:

A performance variety of English which has the standard Englishes as its core but is colored with characteristic features of Chinese phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse pragmatics, and which is particularly suited for expressing content ideas specific to Chinese culture through such means as transliteration and loan translation.

It is our intention to examine some of the salient problems that Chinese students encounter solely in respect of formal written English and endeavour to decide in what instances the standard model should be adhered to and where not, in the light of the above definition. The absence of any mention of grammar indicates that it must constitute a substantial part of the core to which He and Li refer. As for standard English, we might define it as that unambiguous form of English with which we can communicate with educated native speakers and non-native speakers of different cultures in accordance with the generally accepted conventions pertaining to spelling, grammar, syntax, punctuation, etc. The fact that there are two varieties, British and American, that are officially accepted worldwide increases the difficulty of the task, with the result that even very advanced learners will mix the two and miscommunication may even occur. The problem is compounded by the fact that native speakers may adhere to their own national variety, which is not one of the two, when communicating internationally!

In the great debate regarding China English and developing an alternative model to the standard ones, there is a danger that the latter will be eroded to the point that there is no standard, which would mean that English would cease to be a lingua franca. In addition to China English and the standard forms, there is what we may call

general interlanguage where the errors made are not solely a feature of the Chinese variety but are shared by learners of English of other mother tongues. In order to see more clearly the differences between these three varieties of English (we are for the moment considering British and American English as one), we shall take a small sample of very frequent errors from our own students' written work, discuss them with regard to their degree of acceptability and decide where lines need to be drawn, however arbitrary they may appear. The examples we discuss will be relatively few in number but will illustrate some of the most frequently recurring problems.

First, however, we need to establish our criteria for acceptability or rejection. The first is obviously comprehensibility. In this respect we need to be very careful. Some might argue that it does not really matter if one writes 'it determinates the meaning' instead of 'it determines the meaning' as the reader is bound to understand. This is not necessarily so as 'determinate' only exists as an adjective, has a very different meaning and is a word not known to many native speakers. The reader may think some other meaning is intended or that they themselves are ignorant of its use if they are not a native speaker. A point that is sometimes overlooked when, whether in speech or in writing, a form does not conform to standard English, e.g. 'there are different context', is that it is tiring, and may even be irritating, for the listener or reader to be constantly correcting mismatches with the model they have in their brain, regardless of whether they are native or non-native users of English. There is no reason to suspect that constantly having to make this mental adjustment would not have the same effect with regard to English and on non-native listeners or readers who

have attained a high level of proficiency. Thirdly, experience and research tell us that linguists, teachers and laymen would be more tolerant of deviant forms in oral language but less so for written language. It is the written language that is the major vehicle for transmitting knowledge in the educational system. Acceptance of widely divergent forms, even though they may be fully intelligible, may lead on to the acceptance of other forms and eventually to lack of intelligibility, particularly if there is a multiplicity of them. This is already taking place at the spoken level. If it takes place at the written level, in a very real sense we will have a series of mutually unintelligible Englishes. The new Englishes would start to replace the many existing languages that are dying out and, as stated earlier, English would cease to function as a lingua franca.

Recurrent variant forms in advanced Chinese students' writing

The following types of error are selected at random from essays written by Chinese postgraduates taking a linguistic or literature-related degree. They are all taken from the writing of postgraduate English majors and are therefore errors that persist at an advanced level on the Chinese mainland. Each of them has been discussed with a British native speaker, a specialist in linguistics and language teaching and who has been exposed to China English for many years.

Non-existent words

- i) They seemed to be not *concentrative on what their teachers imparted. (Intended word: concentrating)
- ii) This is the real *confliction ...in the internal world. (Intended meaning: conflict)

Although there is little chance of misunderstanding the meaning, errors of this kind can give rise to a superior smile on the part of the reader in much the same way as Chinglish often does. A similar reaction may be experienced by teachers of Chinese when their students add or remove a stroke in writing a Chinese character. Tolerance of such errors will progressively undermine the written basis of the language and so need to be corrected.

Confusion with words of similar form

- iii) They find themselves in a difficult *station.
- iv) In addition, ‘pregnant’ is replaced with ‘with child, accepting*.’

These are very similar although perhaps more serious in the sense that comprehension is not fully guaranteed in either case. Context should resolve the first case, removing, for example, such an interpretation as ‘station in life’. In the second case, however, the writer is using ‘with child’ and ‘accepting’ as synonyms of ‘pregnant’. Given the inverted commas, the reader might be tempted to think the writer is associating the state of pregnancy with acceptance of the situation whereas in fact the writer has committed an error common to many Chinese writers of confusing two similar-sounding words: accepting and expecting!

Failure to distinguish between words with different endings

- v) I was very *boring. (Intended meaning: bored)
- vi) Working in this school is very *tired. (Intended meaning: tiring)

This must clearly be classified as an error that needs to be corrected. Although in most cases the reader will perceive the intended meaning, it is sometimes the opposite of what is intended. Also, if, for example, the writer puts down *I am very impressive*

(impressed), *she is forgettable (forgetful)* , this may give rise to misunderstanding, puzzlement or possibly embarrassment on the part of the reader. Errors of this kind are extremely common and, like so many others, reveal the failure to attend to the endings of words, no doubt because endings of words vary so little in Chinese.

Pluralising uncountable words

Chinese students frequently pluralise uncountable nouns, e.g. ‘equipments’, ‘feedbacks’, ‘evidences’, ‘advices’. Here we step into a less serious zone of errors and ones which one might be inclined to overlook. As they are common to learners of English other than Chinese, they belong to the realm of interlanguage. Forms such as these are changing in standard English. While none of those given above would today be acceptable, several decades ago the plural of ‘evidence’ could be found in works of literature and the noun ‘research’ is increasingly being used in the plural following perhaps the lead of Colin Baker, the Welsh-English linguist, who was employing it at least twenty years ago. We need to remember too that ‘behaviour’ and ‘motivation’ were only accepted in the singular a few years ago but now the plural form is just as common. While our reflex is to correct ‘informations’ and ‘advices’ in the sense of counsel, it is quite likely that these words will be standard English in a few years time, not simply under the influence of non-native speakers using English but also because their conceptualization is changing. As it is scarcely the role of the language learner to introduce neologisms into the target language, the attention of the learner must be drawn to the fact that they do not exist (yet).

Confusion of nouns and verbs

- ix) What would you *advice?
- x) We have to *emphasise on this.
- xi) They are *lacking of money.

In the first example, confusing nouns and verbs which are differentiated by only one letter is less of a problem at the written level than at the spoken level when often there is a difference of pronunciation. Regarding the other two examples, where in one case the noun and verb retain the same form (cf *stress, impact, effect*), the grammatical constraints are very different. As argued earlier, these instances of grammatical interlanguage need to be corrected.

Leaving a relative clause to stand on its own

- xii) While the other author has a different view.
- xiii) Provided there is enough time.

Such sentences are often to be found in the transcription of speech and in a certain style of writing. Given the breaking down of the gap between written and spoken language in American English (see McWhorter, 2001) and the disappearance of formal English in contrast to British English, such an error can no longer be categorized as serious. As long, however, as a distinction is made between different kinds of English, the student does need to have their attention drawn to its colloquial flavour.

Wrong preposition

- xiv) We discussed *about this.
- xv) They pay attention *on this.

The use of the wrong preposition is extremely common with Chinese learners. Given

the virtual absence of rules, this is understandable. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that native speakers may disagree or they themselves are uncertain and that there is often more than one possibility, sometimes with a slight change of nuance, e.g. *integrate with/into; associate with/to; compare with/to*. If the intended meaning is unambiguous, teachers would do well to pass over such questionable errors. As we shall see later, to a considerable degree this problem can be overcome through the learning of language chunks and multiword lexical items, a feature that is often lacking in Chinese learning where the focus is very much on learning one-word equivalents. This is important, as the following category exemplifies.

Changing the meaning by employing the wrong preposition

- xvi) to find (out)
- xvii) to be concerned with/about

These two instances illustrate the way a preposition can affect the meaning of the word with which it is used. Another example would be the confusion that might arise between *to put up* and *to put up with*. Here we are stepping into the realm of phrasal verbs which cause considerable difficulty to learners who do not have an equivalent feature in their own language. The importance of tackling this problem cannot be questioned.

Long and involved sentences

- xviii) *With the economic development of the world and globalization, the communication between countries comes to essential, lots of research on bilingual education appeared in the world, since the 1960s, more and more researcher began to focus on the advantages of bilingual education, although the negative point of bilingual education can not be neglect, more and more bilingual education has achieved great success with different education method, especially in those development countries such as United State,*

Canada, France.

This cheerful disregard for sentence boundaries, punctuation, word endings is the expression of a Chinese mind giving a picture of the situation without establishing clear logical relationships between the different statements made. Anne Cheng (1997) calls it the spiral approach. The Belgian sinologist, Simon Leys (1991), whom she quotes, sees it as the furthest point among all civilizations from Western thinking. With careful and thoughtful reading, the writer can be understood though it is not always clear where he or she is going. In the interests of Western readers, regardless of their mother tongue, breaks in the form of punctuation need to be made. That said, the picture-building cumulative approach of the Chinese mind should not be totally discarded. There needs to be a compromise between the two thinking patterns. Each side must learn something from the other and adjust to some degree to the other.

Wrong verb form:

xix) He has *digged deep into the question

While no-one will dispute the fact that past participle forms need to be learned, errors in respect of certain irregular past forms are understandable as native speakers sometimes hesitate and there are some salient differences between American and British English (e.g. *got/gotten; dived, dove*). Ask native speakers if ‘*stridden*’ (from *to stride*) exists and they may well hesitate, as our informant did. The problem is further compounded by the fact that two forms may exist in one variety, e.g. *learned/learnt* in British English and *thrived/thriven* in American English. Despite all this, errors with common verbs, as in the example, need to be corrected.

Tautology

xx) Also he did this *too.

This is a very common feature of Chinese writing and will strike speakers of other languages as odd and unnecessary repetition. It can be argued that it should be discouraged, if only on the grounds of verbosity, but might be tolerated as a feature of China English.

Confusion of adverbs and adjectives

xxi) It was *ready understood.

xxii) It was *wide used throughout China.

The absence of any distinction between these two parts of speech in Chinese is a problem for Chinese learners. However, as they constitute a serious divergence from standard speech, this is an obstacle that needs to be overcome.

Unidiomatic English

xxiii) As a result of his different moods of being an officer and hermit or a person who meditates, the landscapes of mountains and water in Wang Wei's writing are colorful and various.

This sentence is grammatical and conveys a clear meaning but in words and expressions and language patterns that are unlikely to be used by native speakers. The meaning of *moods* and *various* is not altogether apparent and one wonders if they correspond exactly to what the writer is trying to say. There is no reason whatsoever why the non-native speaker's English should conform to idiomatic standard English. In fact, one might argue that great writers of English whose first language was not English have contributed greatly to the richness of the English language precisely

because they broke away from the confines of idiomaticity. Joseph Conrad is an obvious case that comes to mind.

Neglect of anaphora

- xxiv) They wanted to help the students with the *students' learning of English.
- xxv) Children can master their first language in five years. The fact is that *children naturally do so.

Here the use of '*their*' would be more standard in place of the underlined word in the first instance and by '*they*' in the second example. Again, as with tautology, the writing is heavy and weighed down by too much verbiage.

Wrong use or omission of the article

- xxvi) ...in classroom
- xxvii) ...in 1970s
- xxviii) ...he found answer to this

The absence of the article in many languages, not simply Chinese, causes considerable difficulties with this aspect of grammar. In some languages, such as French, the rules are very different with the consequence that in this respect too many errors are made. Despite the difficulty in knowing when to do so, the problem does need to be tackled as the absence of an article can lead to ambiguity, e.g. *he gave book* – *a book* or *books*?

Conclusion

From this discussion of a small number of representative errors of advanced Chinese learners' writing, it can be seen that we draw a line between Standard English, China English and general interlanguage. They are situated on a continuum, some being of

greater importance than others. That said, a line has to be drawn and then the established conventions respected.

The sociolinguistic realities (see Hu & Jiang, 2011) of China English would make it an unattainable goal for the majority of its users to achieve a native-like competence if they do not have a prolonged sojourn in an English-speaking country. China English is unavoidably heavily influenced by the L1, Chinese, at lexical, syntactic and discourse levels. Some of the variant forms revealing the Chineseness may be regarded as interlanguage containing linguistic errors. However, it is the Chineseness that, as argued by some sociolinguists (e.g. He & Li, 2009; Li, 1993), made China English a potential new variety of English. Given that meaning can often be negotiated through interaction, variant forms might be more or less allowed or tolerated in oral language, but it is suggested that stricter standards should be applied to written language which is of paramount importance in education. Deterioration in the written language would imply a lower standard in education, which is the scene that many educated people try not to envisage.

It is hoped that the variant written forms discussed in this paper can provide some guidance when deciding how acceptable they are in terms of written communication. It might also suggest to teachers how to tackle error correction. However, the discussion of the data is mainly based on a highly educated native speaker's views. Future studies should include perspectives from proficient English speakers of different L1-backgrounds and more participants should be invited to share their views.

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