Briefing Note

COMMON PROBLEMS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE USAGE

Common areas of difficulty in the use of English grammar in writing:

Chinese students have a thorough, theoretical knowledge of English grammar - the 'law' of the language (Wen & Clement, 2003). Research into second language acquisition tells us, however, that knowing grammar in theory does not translate into accurate use in practice. Neither Chinese students nor academics (both Chinese and Australian) necessarily appreciate this and as a result there can be frustrations for all concerned.

- Chinese students don't want to be taught more grammar in EAP or other courses as they have been taught grammar for many years.
- Chinese students can feel immense frustration with the fact that they know the grammar but in their extended English writing they make many errors that they have difficulty eradicating.
- Australian academics can be frustrated by errors that appear consistently in the writing of Chinese students.

Given this situation it is useful to know where many of the problems will be and that very often there is little that can be done about them. The message to all is not to get too stressed by this situation.

Common features of the English language that have no equivalence in Chinese and that will be common errors in written expression:

- *Articles* (**a, an, the)** are used interchangeably or left out all together. They are later acquired (or never really acquired) when learning English.
- *Auxiliaries* (**be, have, do**) will be used inappropriately.
- *Modal verbs* (**will, can, may, shall, would, could, might**). There will be frequent

errors in the use of these.

- *Prepositions* (**at, in, on** etc). Most Chinese structures require zero preposition use.

Other common errors:

- *Tense* – particularly past tense as the Chinese tense system is simple and straightforward with regard to the concept of time.
- *Singular* and *plural* (**is**, **are**) and plural **s** or **es** are often omitted.
- *Pronouns* are often omitted.
- *Verbs* - use of infinitives. Chinese often just use the base words.
- *Nouns* with 'ment' on the end e.g. requirement

Other areas where Chinese impacts English language use:

- Chinese is a topic-prominent language whereas English is a subject-prominent language. This can affect word order.
- Chinese written discourse style features run-on sentences (i.e. a sentence in which two or more independent clauses are joined without appropriate punctuation or use of conjunctions). Chinese students are taught to use colons / semi-colons to punctuate in English and this gives rise to their overuse when they write in English.
- The linear fashion of subject – predicate sentence structure required in English can be difficult for Chinese students to produce. Chinese students tend to say the same thing repeatedly when they write as a reflection of more recursive thought patterns.
- Chinese writing is often flowery and ornate and features many adjectives. Clichés and proverbs are also overused. This is because in written Chinese these features are the hallmarks of quality writing.
- There is often very little by way of 'shades of grey' in Chinese writing. Things are 'right or wrong', 'good or bad' and the ideal is for things to be expressed as 'perfect'.
- The metaphor of 'growth' is commonly used.
- Certain terms are overused e.g.:
  - highly
  - famous
  - grand
  - cultivate / cultivated / cultivating
  - diligent
  - satisfying (used instead of 'good' or 'acceptable')
  - golden
  - shining
- In Chinese spoken language, the use of gender-specific pronouns is not

required so it is common for **he** and **she** to be used interchangeably in conversations. (It is interesting to note that there was no word for **she** in Chinese until the 1920s).

It should be noted, however, that Chinese grammar is elegant and for the most part logical. English grammar is neither of these things.

Reference list

Wen, W.P. and Clement, R. (2003). A Chinese Conceptualisation of Willingness to Communicate in ESL. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 16:1, 18-38. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07908310308666654

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Additional materials and resources are available from
http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au

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