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The Effectiveness of Chinese NNESTs in Teaching English Syntax

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Proceedings of the CATESOL State Conference, 2007

Abstract

This paper evaluates the effect of Chinese non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) on Chinese ESL students' struggles with English syntax. The paper first classifies Chinese learners' syntactic errors into 10 common types. It demonstrates how each type of error results from an internal attempt to translate a common Chinese construction into English. Using a corpus of Chinese-speaking English learners' essays, it first measures the frequency of these errors to establish their relative ordering. By dividing errors into two types – those caused by Chinese-based L1 interference and those not – it finds that roughly half of Chinese-speaking learners' errors result from L1 interference. In light of this, it concludes that Chinese-speaking NNESTs should play an important role in helping Chinese L1 students grasp English syntax.

The Effectiveness of Chinese NNESTs in Teaching English Syntax

A foremost challenge for Chinese-speaking English learners is syntax. English syntax is only loosely rule-based, and many structures are rooted in idiom and tradition. In Taiwan, where English is the most important foreign language, most parents believe their children will grasp English best when taught by a native speaker. This notion, which Phillipson (1992) calls the “Native Speaker Fallacy,” has been questioned from a variety of perspectives; a good outline of criticisms from linguistic and economic standpoints can be found in Canagarajah (1996).

We aim to demonstrate the Native Speaker Fallacy in the case of syntactic acquisition of English, focusing on Chinese-speaking learners. The author’s perspective roots to Taiwan, where Taiwanese students in cram schools often fail to improve their command of English syntax through classes taught by native English speakers, both in public elementary schools and in private, high-cost “cram schools.” One reason for this is that points of discord between English and Chinese grammar often cannot be reconciled satisfactorily by a non-speaker of Chinese. Where a native speaker of English may fail to understand students’ difficulties, a Chinese-speaking English teacher can provide extra grammatical context that helps students overcome their misconceptions. This is especially important for Chinese-speaking learners because Chinese and English do not share a linguistic heritage. Perhaps students of English can gain a better appreciation of English syntactic principles from a non-native English speaker whose first language is Chinese.

This paper aims to provide evidence for the efficacy of non-native-English-speaking teachers of English for Chinese-speaking learners. Specifically, we attempt to estimate the percentage Chinese-speaking learners’ grammatical errors resulting directly from L1 interference. To this end, we first present 10 examples of English syntax that in the authors’ experience are commonly misinterpreted by Chinese learners, all of which have specific Chinese linguistic roots. We then present a corpus of submitted essays from Chinese-speaking students in intermediate to advanced ESL classes at Azusa Pacific University, from which we measure the observed frequency of the listed L1-interfering errors. In our tally we distinguish these errors, which are specific to the learners’ Chinese L1, from errors common to all English learners. We find that Chinese-linked errors make up the majority of students’ syntactic mistakes. We argue on these grounds that Chinese NNESTs are best equipped to handle the potentially numerous variants of Chinese speakers’ errors, while NESTs may lack the context to address them properly. Finally, as empirical evidence for our conclusions, we present the results of a survey of current Chinese-speaking teachers of English.

Syntactic Errors

Syntactic errors in speaking and writing most commonly result from an internal attempt to translate to and from the native tongue. Braid (1999) writes that students’ attempts to “transfer L1 parameters” to L2 grammar is a common source of L1 interference in grammar education (p. 169). This is particularly relevant for Chinese, where common grammatical structures often translate poorly into English. This is the source of many parts of the well-known “Chinglish” dialect of English common among immigrant families in the United States and discussed in detail by Tseng and Fuligni (2000). In the authors’ experience, the most common errors specific to Chinese-speaking learners fall into 10 major categories. For each we describe its basis in Chinese and outline why NESTs may be ill-equipped to help students overcome it.

1. *Articles*: Asian-language learners’ troubles with determiners, particularly articles, is well-documented. A study by Toshihiko Kobayashi (1992) comparing native and non-

native English speakers' corrections to ESL compositions found that non-native speakers of Asian-language backgrounds overwhelmingly failed to correct errors involving articles and quantifiers. The Chinese language does not have articles or anything as comparably widespread as the English "a" and "the." Choosing when and which article to use is a challenge for Chinese speakers. Moreover, there is a nuanced variety of English articles—definite, indefinite, partitive and zero articles—with a complicated set of rules governing their use. Most native English speakers don't commit the precise rules to memory because they've internalized them. This presents a pedagogical barrier for NESTs, who typically have trouble articulating the grammatical circumstances requiring determiners. Conversely, a Chinese NNEST who has struggled with and mastered their use is better equipped to help students.

2. *Conjunctions*: Conjunction usage is often distinct between Chinese and English. An example of a misconception that can lead to errors is apparent in the conjunctions "because" and "so." Translated directly as 因为 (*yinwei*) and 所以 (*suoyi*) in Chinese, the two are usually used in concert within the same sentence, before each coordinate clause. An example of their typical Chinese use is illustrated by the sentence: "Because I just ate popcorn, so I am thirsty." This is distinct from English usage, which calls for only one or the other and where using both would be awkward. A similar case is that of "although" (虽然; *suiran*) and "but" (但是; *danshi*).
3. *"Do"*: In Chinese as well as Japanese and Korean, the verb "do" (做; *zuo*) serves a catch-all purpose in creating verbs. Followed by a noun, 做 turns the noun into an action verb, as in *zuo fan* or "do meal." The English "do" rarely serves this purpose. Speakers must instead identify a verb, usually intransitive, associated with the given "do" noun (for the case of "meal," the proper choice is "cook"). In light of this, the Chinese *zuo* provides an elegant simplicity to verb construction that is not found in English. Identifying proper verbs in lieu of "do" is often an obstacle for learners.
4. *Questions*: The English interrogative form usually requires a reordering of subject and verb, as in "When did he go?" instead of "When he go?" In Chinese questions are formulated more straightforwardly by appending 吗 (*ma*) to the end of statement. It is a common occurrence for Chinese-speaking students to transfer this practice directly to English, as in "How to do it?" or "When to go?"
5. *Negative questions*: Negative questions call for differing responses in Chinese and English. In Chinese negative questions are interpreted literally and answered likewise; "Isn't it tasty?" invites a response of "No" instead of the conventional English "Yes."
6. *Plurality*: Singular and plural forms are a constant difficulty. Unlike English nouns, Chinese nouns lack plural forms. Plurality of Chinese nouns is implied by a determiner or other noun modifier, as in 两隻猫 (*liang zhi mao*) or "two cats" and 很多狗 (*hen duo gou*) or "many dogs." Taking these structures directly to English leads to the erroneous noun phrases "two cat" and "many dog."
7. *Quantifiers*: Quantifiers, or counting words, in English carry nuances unfamiliar to Chinese learners. In Chinese any noun can be grouped with any quantifier. English is not so straightforward. An example of an awkward construction is "I ate some fruits"; the preferred English formulation is "some fruit." Many such rules are easily internalized by native speakers while Chinese speakers must learn this intuition. Other examples include "small" and "little," "most of" and "many" and "fewer" and "less."

8. *Pronouns*: English pronouns are gendered, a feature not shared by their Chinese counterparts. Although there are separate written words for “he” and “she” in Chinese, the spoken word is the same, and the female variant in practice is often discarded. This can lead to considerable confusion as Chinese-speaking students struggle to pick the proper English gendered terms in frequent pronoun use.
9. *Participles*: Participles can be confusing to Chinese-speaking learners, particularly in reference to verbal adjectives. The well-known Chinglish “I am confusing” is an illuminating example, in which the speaker is unaware that “confusing,” an emotive verb, is in this case a predicative adjective. The intended sentence, “I am confused,” unambiguously uses the passive form of the verb. In English there is a much greater diversity of verb types with varying conjugation patterns, making participle formulation a game of knowledge and memory. Again, many native speakers internalize these rules and lack the grammatical command to communicate the underlying principles to English learners. In Chinese the adjectival and verbal forms of verbs are easily distinguished, so Chinese learners must grow to understand these principles through a complex set of rules. These rules would be more easily communicated by a native Chinese speaker who can highlight the differences from familiar Chinese sentence patterns.
10. *Prepositions*: There is a one-to-many mapping of prepositions from Chinese to English. Chinese has a few ubiquitous prepositions, such as 在 (*zai*), meaning “at.” In English the concept of location has gradations of specificity, as in “behind,” “above,” etc.. In Chinese, when these specificities are formulated as noun phrases (e.g., “the behind of the desk”) and 在 rather than as pure prepositions.

Frequency analysis

In this section we attempt to measure the relative frequencies of syntactic errors specific to Chinese and errors common to all English learners, both native and non-native. The 10 errors listed above are prime examples of Chinese-linked errors, while typical non-Chinese errors are things such as run-on sentences, incomplete sentences or shifting tense. Our analysis proceeds by careful and exhaustive listing of syntactic errors in a corpus of essays written by Chinese-speaking English learners. Classifying the hundreds of errors so found into these two categories (and several subcategories) we measure their relative frequencies and test for statistical significance. Finally, we present a detailed breakdown of the tabulated errors as a profile of the Chinese-speaking ESL students’ syntactic obstacles.

Data

Our data come from a corpus of essays representing over 30,000 words submitted as assignments for an intermediate-to-advanced ESL class at Azusa Pacific University. Students were graduate students from master’s degree programs in business and the humanities. To hone our results, we limited our analysis to 27 essays all taking the form of reactions to an assigned piece of literature, either an English-language news article or a chapter from a general-interest book. Literature reviews were selected rather than other types of assignments, such as stories and profiles, because we believe that the comparatively academic nature of literature reviews presents a greater diversity of sentence patterns attempted by students. Additionally, in line with our research, although students of all linguistic backgrounds were present in the ESL class, only essays written by Chinese-speaking students were included in this corpus. The majority of these students were Taiwanese. Nevertheless, because the major distinctions between Taiwanese and mainland

Chinese lie in the spoken language, we suspect that our analysis, which includes only written work, is generalizable to all nationalities of Chinese learners. Lastly, the assignments all come from the same month of classwork, so we expect little time variation in the data.

Methodology

Meticulous care was taken in reviewing the 27 essays and forming an exhaustive list of errors. We found 411 errors in all, an average of just under 15 per essay. We attempted to classify them in one of the 19 categories shown in the results in Table 1 below. Nine of the 18 categories were selected from the 10 points listed above; only negative question errors were excluded because they were not found in the text. We added the other nine categories as we observed errors we hadn't yet classified. We suspect that our 18 categories form a near-exhaustive list, though we account for the probability of unseen errors in our analysis below.

In practice the errors were rarely homogeneous in a single category. Thus, in classifying them, we took pains to assess the intended meaning of the writer. A good example of a gray area is the ambiguity between pluralization errors and number disagreement errors. Strictly speaking, the two are indistinguishable; a pluralization error can alternately be interpreted as a number disagreement error and vice versa. To settle this, we made an honest effort to assess whether the underlying problem was the writer's lack of knowledge of the plural (examples: "the great rich of Christ"; "I go to church service every week") or a failure to construct the sentence in a number-agreeing way (example: "the most important person in her life is her parents").

Finally, we were not overly stringent in our judgments of errors. We did not treat such constructions as split infinitives ("to happily go"), sentence-ending prepositions ("church I went to") or use of "which" in a non-restrictive clause ("food which is spicy") as errors, because there is considerable debate as to whether these should be considered errors at all. We included only indisputable syntactic errors about which there would likely be little disagreement among grammarians.

Results

The results are shown in Table 1 below, along with illustrative examples of each error type. The first four columns show the error and its frequency in the corpus. The last, labelled "Due to Interference?", indicates our assessment of whether the error occurred due to Chinese-related L1 interference, given the 10 points above. Overall, we find that just over half – 55% – Chinese-speaking students' syntax errors are L1-related. Most significantly, the top three errors, conjunctions, articles and prepositions – which are all L1-linked – are all more frequent than any other type of error. Applying the Bonferroni test for multiple comparisons, this relative relationship holds with a *p*-value of 2.4%. We can thus accept it as a valid statistical conclusion that Chinese learners' top three syntactic errors are related to their L1. Moreover, it is noteworthy that our list of 10 points above is by no means an *exhaustive* list of L1-linked grammatical errors for Chinese. Consequently, the 55% figure reached is if anything an underestimate of the true level of L1 interference.

Error category	Description; example	Raw freq.	Rel. freq.	Due to interference?
Conjunction	Omitted, unnecessary or incorrect conjunction; "although God is good, but God is jealous..."	54	13.1%	Yes
Article	Omitted, unnecessary or incorrect article; "a best evidence for God's existence"	47	11.4%	Yes
Preposition	Omitted, unnecessary or incorrect preposition; "many of people in China"	46	11.2%	Yes
General verb	Incorrect verb choice (<i>excluding</i> conjugation and participles); "God talks to people that he is"	36	8.8%	No
Number	Number disagreement; "these ways is called"	24	5.8%	No
Pluralization	Use of a singular in the place of a plural or vice versa; "I had some problem with the book"	23	5.6%	Yes
Word choice	A nonexistent or clearly unintended word; "the disaster was wreckful"	23	5.6%	No
Tense	Inconsistent tense within a single or consecutive sentences; "I saw it and I know it was true"	22	5.4%	No
Run-on sentence	Two consecutive sentences without proper punctuation; "I prayed, God was with me"	21	5.1%	No
Conjugation	A mis-conjugated noun, verb or adjective (<i>excluding</i> pluralization); "this kind of believe is called atheist"	20	4.9%	Yes
Pronoun	Problems relating to the selection or omission of a pronoun; "Buddha won't show as a mortal"	15	3.6%	Yes
Participle	Verb conjugation problems specific to participles; "the truth was showed to him"	14	3.4%	Yes
Misc. adverb, adjective	Misuse of an adverb in an adjectival context or vice versa; "sounds differently"	7	1.7%	No
Incomplete sentence	A sentence fragment punctuated as a sentence; "While the other belief said many Gods."	6	1.5%	No
Misc. punctuation	Miscellaneous punctuation errors, possibly typos; "Although, this was written many years ago"	6	1.5%	No
Interrogative	Mis-phrased questions; "Why God created the world?"	5	1.2%	Yes
Misc. possessive	Miscellaneous malformed possessives; "than other countries goods"	2	0.5%	No
Miscellaneous word order	Miscellaneous word mis-orderings; "we can everything in the world not see"	2	0.5%	No

Table 1. Frequencies of error types in the corpus. The last column, labelled "Due to Interference?", indicates our assessment of whether the error occurred due to Chinese-related L1 interference, given the syntactic errors listed previously.

Conclusion

Our examination has shown conclusively that Chinese ESL learners' grammatical problems lie mostly in L1 interference. That said, our subsequent claim of the value of Chinese NNESTs rests on the assumption that their familiarity with Chinese language helps them better tackle Chinese learners' L1-linked obstacles. To some extent this claim is natural because Chinese speaking teachers have the same backgrounds as students, allowing them to understand learning difficulties. Supporting literature is also plentiful in this regard. After surveying TESOL students' evaluations of NNEST and NEST teachers, Tang (1997) concluded, "In the pedagogical realm of TESOL, some advantages to being NNESTs are related to their source language and their status as L2 learners. The respondents found the shared mother tongue a useful in situational tool in teacher-student interaction" (p. 578). In non-immersion classrooms, beginning students could even ask NNEST teachers questions in L1. Medgyes (1983) points out that "more than any native speaker, he [an NNEST] is aware of the difficulties his students are likely to encounter and the possible errors they are likely to make" (p. 6). Even in non-immersion classrooms, Chinese-speaking teachers are generally able to identify L1-linked errors quickly.

There are several common criticisms of NNESTs, most of which have been addressed at length in TESOL literature. Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) surveyed ESL students' perceptions of NEST and NNEST teachers for comparison. They found that while NESTs drew fewer credibility concerns from students, that students generally came to regard NNESTs as the more effective teachers, both in exam preparation and classroom discipline. In a separate study of students' evaluations of NEST and NNEST teachers, Medgyes (1996) found equal chance of success for the two types of teachers. NNEST teachers hold several other advantages outside the U.S., especially numbers and a shared culture. In Japan, for instance, Oda (1996) estimated that 45% of members in the Japanese TESOL affiliate are NNESTs, putting them in a prime position to carry the teaching load. The cultural link shared by students and NNEST teachers is examined by Canagarajah (1996) with similar results.

It is the authors' belief that this advantage is especially acute for lower-level ESL students, who often say they wish teachers could speak their languages because they cannot explain their problems well in English. In this respect NNEST teachers are especially useful in providing a "runway" for beginning students. This is a suitable alternative for early students' frequent consultations of a dictionary. NNESTs are also better positioned than NESTs to employ a deductive approach to syntax in the classroom. According to Thornbury (1999), "A deductive approach starts with the presentation of a rule and is followed by examples, in which the rule is applied" (p. 29). There is support for this approach; Thornbury claims that the deductive approach is direct and to the point, saving time and making learning more efficient (hence our claim of "efficacy").

Survey

As an empirical first test of our conclusions, we carried out an unscientific survey of 32 Taiwanese ESL learners who have college or master degrees and have been studying English between six and 18 years. The surveys were open-response, asking the students to relate personal experiences with NNESTs. The consensus observations of NNESTs were in line with our conclusions:

1. NNESTs can communicate with students more easily, especially at the beginning level.

2. NNESTs can explain in Chinese if students do not understand.
3. NNESTs can predict potential problems and find effective ways to help students overcome these problems.
4. NNESTs typically grew up in similar cultural backgrounds.
5. NNESTs share similar learning experiences, so they can understand students' difficulties.
6. NNESTs were more systematic in their treatment of English grammar.

Overall, 97% of respondents had “positive” feelings toward NNESTs and about 94% agreed that learning grammar is important. This is in line with Medgyes' 1996 result.

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