

Chinese Speakers: An ESL Tip Sheet¹

For students who learn English as a second language (ESL), certain surface errors arise because of translation issues and because some features of English do not exist in their language (and vice versa). Mandarin is the dialect that forms the basis of the standard written language, uniting the many dialects of spoken Chinese, which can be as different from each other as French and Italian. The examples in this handout refer to Mandarin.

Some general surface errors occur in the writing of Chinese speakers because **Mandarin uses compact ideographs, not an alphabetic script, so spelling can be difficult. Prepositions also pose particular difficulties**, as they do for most ESL learners.

Other pattern “errors” common to Chinese speakers who are writing in English are as follows:

Sentences

The subject or the verb can be omitted: “Is raining.” vs. “It is raining.” OR “We too much food” vs. “We eat too much food.”

Parts of speech can occur in incorrect locations (i.e., a noun can appear in the place of an adverb): “I like the tie red.” vs. “I like the red tie.”

The subject and verb are seldom inverted: “She is leaving and so I am.” vs. “She is leaving, and so am I.”

Conjunctions occur in pairs: “Although she is rich, but she wears simple clothes.” vs. “She is rich, but she wears simple clothes.”

Verbs

Because most verbs in Chinese are represented in one way, often as just one syllable, Chinese does not have verbs that indicate singular and plural, tense, or verb form. Thus, English verbs are problematic: “The singer have a big band.” (singular and plural) vs. “The singer has a big band.” OR “The house was painting last month.” (tense) vs. “The house was painted last month.” OR “I was very confusing.” (verb form) vs. “I was very confused.”

No equivalent of the auxiliary verbs “be” or “have” exist, so these words are sometimes added incorrectly: “I am be able” vs. “I am able.”

An adjective can include the sense of the verb “be,” so the form of “be” is frequently omitted when an adjective is used: “She always cheerful.” vs. “She is always cheerful.”

Nouns and pronouns

Nouns do not have plural forms: “He has three sister.” vs. “He has three sisters.”

No distinction is made between subject and object pronoun forms: “I gave the forms to she.” vs. “I gave the forms to her.”

¹ Adapted from Ann Raimés and Susan Miller-Cochran, *Keys for Writers*, 7th ed. (Mason, Ohio: Cengage Learning, 2013).

Possessive pronouns can be dropped: “Charnae likes boyfriend.” vs. “Charnae likes her boyfriend.”

Adjectives and adverbs

Adjectives such as “easy,” “hard,” and “difficult” apply to how a person feels, not only to the nature of the task: “I am easy to program a computer.” vs. “I find it easy to program a computer.”

An adjective phrase precedes the noun it modifies: “He gave me a too difficult for me book.” vs. “He gave me a book too difficult for me.”

Articles

There are no articles (“a,” “an,” and “the”): “I bought book.” vs. “I bought the book.”