If You Comes* to Guangzhou: Pedagogical Implications of Typical Errors Committed by Students with Mainland Chinese Background as Revealed on an e-learning Platform

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Abstract. This article aims at revealing the inadequacy of an e-learning platform by examining a number of language errors found among a batch of freshmen (the participants) studying in a self-financing higher education institute in Hong Kong. The participants were selected since they share a common Mainland Chinese background. Meta-linguistic analysis of the errors compiled indicates that the students have both inter-language and intra-language errors, i.e. having difficulties in shaking off the interference from L1 as well as being unable to acquire a number of grammatical rules pertaining to forming syntactically legitimate sentences in L2. Given the dramatic increase of students with such background over the last few years within the tertiary realm, this article may help shed light on how future pedagogical preparations for more effective teaching can be enhanced with regards to such a platform. This article advocates that, it should better be equipped with the capability to issue automatic responses for students to engage themselves in self-studying.

Keywords: E-learning platform, students with Mainland Chinese background, L1 interference, automatic electronic responses.

1 Introduction

Tertiary education in many respects is a paradigmatic shift from secondary and primary education for students. One of its salient features is that students are no longer pampered throughout their learning process with teachers escorting them each step of the way. It is natural therefore that students have to be capable of studying on their own. And as a matter of fact, this is the manner in which education is conducted across the entire spectrum at this level. Language, among others, holds the key to such mode of independent learning. As the majority of learning resources accessible to students both in the forms of traditional printed materials and electronically across the Internet is written in English, it follows that being able to master this language is a necessary condition for students to be successful in their studies. As English is not the mother tongue of most students here in Hong Kong, anyone who commands a high

proficiency of it would definitely have a comparative advantage over those who do not. For the less competent, they would probably become the unprivileged struggling their way with double efforts.

For one to be an effective leaner of English, grammar plays a role so vital that few other factors can compare with. Yet, it is precisely in this area that many studies have yielded a pessimistic picture. Many students in Hong Kong, even at the level of tertiary education, are at the relentless mercy of grammar and syntax, backbones and framework out of which a legitimate English sentence is constructed. The predicament becomes even more serious when what is at center of the issue concerns students having a Mainland background (henceforward, SMBs) where English is not even a second tongue and their exposure to it has been kept to a minimum. Most students brought up in the Mainland have little chance to learn the 26 alphabets before they reach Primary Four, as they claimed, and even after they have started receiving English education, their pace in learning the language is still painstakingly slow. As a result, with the exception of a few, most of these students are badly in need of a platform for learning on which they can endeavor to rectify and redress the discrepancy. This article reports the implementation of such platform for SMBs as employed at Caritas Institute of Higher Education, a self-financing higher education institute in Hong Kong which offers both degree and sub-degree programmes.

Background

This article focuses on a group of SMBs with respect to their English competency. As such, it is perhaps in place to give an account of why there is this group of students in the first place.

Currently there are more than 60 students with such background enrolled in degree programmes and it is expected to be numbered at 100 next years. CIHE is certainly not alone in admitting SMBs. In an article, dated 11 Nov, 2013, on the South China Morning Post, it was reported that 'places on graduate programmes at universities in Hong Kong are increasingly being filled by mainlanders, who are flooding popular courses with applications.'[1] With local enrollment being on a decline, more and more SMBs are taking courses that to some extent they can safely claim their own; for instance, 99% of students taking the Master of Science in Finance programme at the Chinese University of Hong Kong are SMBs.

Like graduate programmes, those at the undergraduate levels are also filled up with SMBs. A similar report on a local Chinese newspaper had a cover story for two consecutive years which claimed that the trend of SMB intake has sped up recently [2][3]. The following figures are taken from these coverage:

Table 1. Number of intake of students with Mainland background at UGC-funded universities; * undergraduates and postgraduates inclusive

Academic years	Numbers of SMBs
2008 - 2009	4,348
2009-2010	4,562
2010-2011	4,638
2011-2012	4,583
2012-2013	6,315
2013-2014	11,374*

From the table, it is clear that there has been an upward trend of SMBs coming to study at local tertiary institutes and the speed seems to be accelerating with 6,315 in the 2012-13 academic year, a rise by 38% over the previous year. This trend continues to rocket by a great leap forward to a total of 11,374, undergraduates and postgraduates inclusive.

While this has raised some eyebrows among the legislators and commentators, it represents a very clear wake-up call for tertiary educators. What concerns them primarily is certainly administrative. But equally pressing is how to provide adequate support for this group of students who have specific needs in their studies, especially that which is concerned with their English competency.

Methodology

The Electronic Writing Platform
Funded by Quality Education Grant Scheme (QEGS), Education Bureau of the SAR Government, the e-platform under review (fig 1) operates under a system known as OASISS 2.0, itself also funded by QEGS, with a purpose to cater for the specific needs of all SMBs as regards their English competency.

Participants
15 undergraduates from Mainland China at CIHE participated in this study. All of them had their secondary education in Mainland, in which Chinese was the medium of instruction. English was taught as an additional subject in the curriculum.

Context and Data Collection
All participants in this study took a non-credit bearing course in the first semester in the academic year 13-14 for 3 hours each week. During meetings with the instructor, they were given a 90 minute lecture on a great variety of topics, including among others:

- cities they have traveled,
- movies they liked,
- personal hobbies,
- formal letter & email writing,
- describing architectural sites,
- describing your life,
- holiday pastimes,
- student life,
- studying habit,
- life aspiration.

Immediately following the lecture was writing practice in a computer laboratory, taking another 90 minutes, in which they were required to produce write-ups on a corresponding topic related to the lecture that day and post their writings on the e-platform. The data gathered for analysis in this study was collected from this platform written by the participants.
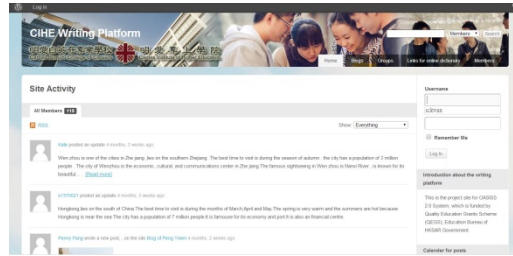
Fig. 1. the electronic writing platform for students with Mainland Chinese background at CIHE

Research Question

This article is guided by three questions:
1. What are the typical errors recurrent in the writings of the SMBs?
2. How far is the set of errors a product of L1 transfers?
3. What areas are there in the platform that needs enhancement?

Literature Review

The Value of Error Analysis

The pedagogical value for the study of error analysis (EA) has been widely documented in the literature. Errors made by students in their compositions and assignments can be useful indicators of the effectiveness of teaching [4], which provide teachers with valuable evidence to determine which level of language proficiency the language learner has reached [5], which areas of focus should be reinforced in lessons that follow (Richards 1971), whether the scope and difficulty levels of the learning materials need to be further modified and what kind of remedial learning support should be provided to individual students [6]. In other words, student errors, if studied systematically, can be used for dual purposes, both diagnostic and prognostic [4]. It is diagnostic because EA is a valuable device to help identify learning problems and difficulties encountered by students; and it is prognostic in in the sense that EA can provide teachers with not only guided insights on how to modify their teaching and learning materials, but also how to design a remedial teaching plan for students with specific learning problems [4][5][6][7].

Sources of Errors

As regards the source of ESL errors, three types of writing errors were identified in the extant literature, namely, Inter-language errors, Intra-language errors and Developmental errors.

Errors that are caused by the interference from L1 are called "inter-language errors", a term introduced by Selinker [8] deriving from the interlanguage hypothesis she proposed referring to a linguistic system that has structurally intermediate status between the learner's L1 and Target language. It is also interchangeable with the concept of *Approximate System* proposed by Nemser [9] and the terms such as *Idiosyncratic Dialect* and *Transitional Competence* employed by Corder [4]. There is a general agreement among the researchers mentioned above that errors produced by L2 learners are closely related to the transfer effects of their L1 system. Such transfer

effects can be either positive or negative, depending on the level of similarity between the two language systems in terms of phonological, lexical and structural patterns.

Intra-language errors specifically refer to those errors produced by learners mainly due to their misunderstanding of the grammatical rules of the target language. According to Richards (1971), these errors are caused by "faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions for rule application, the learner attempting to build up hypothesis about English from his limited experience of it in the classroom or textbook". Past researches reported that L2 learners were more likely to make inter-lingual errors at the early stages of second language acquisition but they would have a larger tendency to produce more intra-lingual errors once they have got more familiar with the new language system. Unlike inter-language and intra-language errors, developmental errors occur as a result of a learner's less than satisfactory language competence at a particular stage compared with the learning pace of their peers (Richards 1971). It has nothing to do with any transfer effect from another language system.

Related Hong Kong Literature on Error Analysis involving Chinese ESL Writers

There have been a number of empirical studies on common ESL errors made by Chinese writers in the past decades. In these studies, different syntactic, lexical and structural patterns were under investigation, ranging from the use of transitive verb and the passive construction, through spelling and choice of words, to the acquisition of subject-predicate structures and topicalization. Below are some examples:

In a study conducted by Bunton [10] on a comparison of English errors made by Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking students and those made by non-native learners of English internationally, it was found that a group of Hong Kong errors were not in the international sample that can probably be attributed to LI transfer. These include pluralisation of uncountable nouns *(e.g. 'a camping' and 'transports')*, use of double connectives (*e.g. although/but and because/so are used together*), incorrect choice of lexical items *(e.g busy time from 繁忙時間 (faan mong si gann) for rush hour), use of wrong word class (e.g. *China is a communism country) and inappropriate use of voice (e.g. *A strange person was appeared and That company situates in Hong Hom).*

Webster and Lam (1991) in another study of similar nature found that a considerable proportion of English errors Hong Kong Chinese students made in their essays were due to their first language interference. Several types of recurring writing errors were identified. For example, some Hong Kong students were used to putting an unnecessary *'to'* after a number of verbs which are followed by infinitive without 'to' *(e.g. 'suggest', 'see', 'hear', 'feel', 'watch' and 'notice').* It is also evident that they demonstrated difficulty in the use of causative 'have" as such expression does not appear in Cantonese. This seems to lead to few common errors such as '*I cut my hair at the barber's shop*' and *'*I made my clothes at the tailor's*' in which simple verbs were incorrectly selected by students. In addition, the problem of redundancy in English expression seemed to be influenced by transfer from L1 Cantonese: *'according to my opinion', 'the reason is because…'.* The use of intrusive preposition *'*I went <u>to</u> shopping' and '*we need to discuss <u>about</u> our future plan'* also can be seen as first-language induced errors produced by local Chinese students in English writing.

Chan was interested in examining the effect of mother tongue Chinese on English writing of Hong Kong students, particularly those erroneous sentences involving transitive verbs and passive construction [11].   Form six students from five secondary schools in Hong Kong were invited to take part in her study and 156 compositions were collected.   In terms of the transitive verbs, it was shown that students failed to use them with an appropriate object or even forgot to put any object after some transitive verbs in a complete sentence.   One of the examples Chan cited was: '*There are many facilities, but people don't use', where in English 'them' is required after use, but in spoken Cantonese, the pronoun for facilities is omitted.   Apart from demonstrating confusion in verb transitivity, students in Chan's study also encountered difficulty in the use of the English passive sentences.   Negative transfer from L1 Chinese was ascribed to some of the errors made.   Two types of common errors arising from language transfer impact with regard to the concept of passivity were identified.   They included 'inappropriate use of the passive' (e.g. *some problems are not happened), and 'failure to use the passive where appropriate' (e.g *The problem cannot solve). The latter error type was called as "pseudo passives" or "putative passives" in the previous literature (Li 1976; Schacher and Rutherford 1979, cited in Chan (1991), pp. 49).

In a study based on data collected from 710 Hong Kong Chinese ESL learners at different proficiency levels, Chan reported that the surface structure of many English sentences produced by participating students, whether collected through translation task or grammaticality judgment test, were largely similar to the normative sentence structures of Cantonese (that is, their first language) [12].   The influence of syntactic transfer is remarkably apparent among learners of lower proficiency levels particularly when they dealt with complex target structures. Evidence of error types relating to syntactic transfer generated from this study include: (1). Omission of English copula in sentences with modal verbs (e.g.*If I fail the examination, my mother will very angry); (2).   Placement of the intensifying adverb before a verb (e.g. * he very like dancing); (3). Use of 'there have' instead of 'there be' in existential constructions (e.g. * There have many Japanese tourists on the ship); (4).   Confusion in the transitivity patterns of high-frequency verbs listen and care (e.g. *we should care the old people); (5). Inability to use relative clause (e.g. she is the person which came to see me yesterday).

Data Analysis and Discussion
The study started with collecting written works by a group of SMBs from the writing platform for text analysis. Bunton pointed out that "there are many different ways errors can be categorized and some errors could come under two or more categories" [10]. Error types customized by Bunton were adapted in this study and causation should still be open to any interpretation and not restricted by the categorization.

Example of errors from students' works under seven categories are presented in the following table:

Table 2. Samples of Common Language Errors

Error Categorization	Identification of Errors	Correct Sentences
1. Noun Countability (Singular / Plural)	1. The soup inside **make** it tasted good. 2. The winter **are** cold and the summer **are** hot.	1. The soup inside **makes** it taste good. 2. The winter **is** cold and the summer **is** hot.
2. Verb- Tense Simple present instead of simple past	1. I **do** the economic assignment at the weekend.	1. I **did** the economic assignment at the weekend.
Missing of verb after model	1. Today I **would to** introduce my classmate, Hei.	1. Today I **would like to** introduce my classmate, Hei.
Simple present instead of infinitive/ misuse of infinitive	1. Today I would **like introduce** my classmate Stephanie. 2. She likes **to goes** the library to study alone. 3. She likes **to makes** some notes. 4. Who can teach me how **to sent** photos?	1. Today I would **like to introduce** my classmate Stephanie. 2. She likes to **go** the library to study alone. 3. She likes to **make** some notes. 4. Who can teach me how **to send** photos?
3. Verb- Active/passive	1. The dish 'fishskin' **can make** after we dry the fishskin under the sun.	1. The dish of 'fshskin' **can be made** after we dry them under the sun.
4. Verb- Subject-verb Agreement (wrong combination of subject and verb)	1. If you **comes** to Guangzhou,… 2. Sometimes she **study** in the school library. 3. She **come** from Zhong Shan. 4. She **study** hard, I should learn from her.	1. If you **come** to Guangzhou…. 2. Sometimes she **studies** in the school library. 3. She **comes** from Zhong Shan. 4. She **studies** hard, I should learn from her.
5. Lexical Choice	1. I **am very like to eat** this porridge. 2. At the beginning of **every** week she makes a study plan.	1. I **like to eat** this porridge **very much**. 2. At the beginning of **each** week she makes a study plan.

Table 2. (*Continued*)

6. **Word Class**	1. The assignment is very **difficulty** for me. 2. In my city, football is **the more important** culture than others.	1. The assignment is very **difficult** for me. 2. In my city, football is **the most important** culture.
7. **Preposition** (a preposition is misused, omitted or added)	1. She likes to study **in** home by herself. 2. We shared our experience how to solve our problems **from** our life. 3. He is the member **in** International Practical Shooting Confederation.	1. She likes to study **at** home by herself. 2. We shared our experience how to solve our problems **in** our life. 3. He is the member **of** International Practical Shooting Confederation.

Noun Countability (Singular / Plural)

One of the most common errors found in participants' writings is 'Noun countability'. Students failed to recognize that there are plural and singular forms for English nouns or they were not sure when they should apply the plural form. When the subject was in the singular form they applied the plural form to the noun as shown in the examples below. A possible reason for the failure to use plural noun forms can probably be accounted for by the absence of plural markers for a noun in Chinese.

> Example 1: **The soup** inside **make** it tasted good.
> Example 2: **The winter are** cold and the summer **are** hot.

Verbs -Tense

Errors in verb tense is another type of common errors found in students' writings. For instance, in example 3 below, the simple present tense was used instead of the simple past when the student was talking about something in the past. This result is not surprising and it is very likely affected by L1. English notion of tense is confusing to participants, a group of L2 learner, since Chinese verb itself does not indicate time while tenses, as expressions of time, is predominant in English.

> Example 3: I **do** the economic assignment at the weekend.

In addition, some students did not seem to fully understand or master the rules of verb. For example, errors were found in students' writings on the use of verb after modals and the use of the infinitive. These types of errors are illustrated by examples 4-8 below:

> Example 4: Today I **would to** introduce my classmate, Hei.
> Example 5: Today I would **like introduce** my classmate Stephanie.
> Example 6: She likes **to goes** the library to study alone.
> Example 7: She likes **to makes** some notes.
> Example 8: Who can teach me how **to sent** photos?

Verbs – Active/Passive

Another common error found in participants' writing is that of verbs in use of 'active /passive' form. For instance, example 9 below shows that the student put the active form of verb 'can make' for the subject 'the dish', in which a passive form of verb 'can be made' should be used in the sentence.

>   Example 9: The dish 'fishskin' **can make** after we dry the fishskin under the

sun.

Verb- Subject-verb Agreement (wrong combination of subject and verb)

Errors in Subject-verb Agreement can be seen in students' writings in the study. Participants failed to apply appropriate verb form to the noun in a sentence. This can be a result from the absence of agreement between subjects and verbs in L1 as there is no change on verb according to the subjects in Chinese.   Examples in this category are shown below:-

>   Example 10: If **you comes** to Guangzhou,…
>   Example 11: Sometimes **she study** in the school library.
>   Example 12: **She come** from Zhong Shan.
>   Example 13: **She study** hard, I should learn from her.

Lexical Choice

Students had problem with correct choice of word in their writings. Some samples of errors seem to be a direct translation of Chinese expression. For instance, in example 14, the student wrote 'I am very like' to express the idea of 'I like ....very much'. L1 transfer can be seen from this example as the sentence pattern in example 14 is indeed a common sentence pattern used in Chinese '我是很愛吃…'.

>   Example 14: I **am very like to eat** this porridge.
>   Example 15: At the beginning of **every** week she makes a study plan.

Word Class

Errors on 'Word class' are also commonly found in data gathered in this study. Example 16 below shows the wrong word class of the word 'difficulty' was used instead of putting an adjective form of word 'difficult' in the sentence. Example 17 is another sample error on word class, in which 'each' should be used instead of 'every' in the sentence.

>   Example 16: The assignment is very **difficulty** for me.
>   Example 17: At the beginning of **every** week she makes a study plan.

Bunton explained the presence of this type of error because 'Chinese characters do not change' [10]. Particles may be used before or after the Chinese characters, but if a Chinese word is to be used as a noun instead of a verb, it will not change its form.

Preposition

Most of the prepositional errors found in the study included omissions, additions and wrong selection. The cause of prepositional errors is interference from students' L1, i.e. Chinese.   Darus pointed out that 'some of the Chinese prepositions are similar in meanings and functions with the English prepositions' [13]. Darus also mentioned that sometimes, a single Chinese preposition can be translated into various English

prepositions. For instance, Chinese preposition '在' and '的' can refer to English prepositions 'in', 'at' and 'on' for '在', and 'of' and 'in' for '的'. Therefore, students were incapable of choosing the appropriate prepositions when more than one English preposition corresponds to a single Chinese preposition and created errors as the following in examples 18-20-

    Example 18: She likes to study **in** home by herself.

    Example 19: We shared our experience how to solve our problems **<u>from</u>** our life.

    Example 20: He is the member **in** International Practical Shooting Confederation.

Conclusion: Limitations and Recommendations

Students' writings on the platform are continuously being recorded and errors traced for evaluative purposes. However, given the fact that the platform has only been running for two semesters and that admittedly the total student population contributing their works for the present research may not be considered large enough, it may be premature at this stage for the present research to be taken to have reached, both qualitatively and quantitatively, a high level of significance. Apparently more researches at an empirical level have to be conducted in future so that the tentative conclusions that this paper has reached can be verified, revised or, if necessary, falsified. That said, at this stage, we have already observed that some lights have been shed on the routine operation of the platform that can presumably guide us in modifying and redesigning it in such a way as to provide more substantial support for students in their learning. In what follows, we would like to sketch out some lines of thought along which the platform can be further developed.

As mentioned, whenever the students commit any mistakes, it is the duty of the instructor to point them out and discuss them with the students concerned. This job can be very tedious if we take into account the following facts:

1. It is very difficult sometimes to explain to students the mistakes they make in terms that they can understand and to such an extent that they know how to avoid committing it again on the one hand and to form grammatically correct sentences on the other. This is partly due to the complexity of the mistakes involved and partly to the limited grammatical knowledge database that students have. And do not forget that most mistakes they commit are of the interlanguage type, i.e. those that clearly are the results of the interference of L1 negative transfers, in which cases it is doubly difficult to make them see it by inviting them to migrate to a linguistic paradigm with different sets of rules.

2. Workload would become increasingly heavy if the number of intake of mainland students keeps growing in future. And 'fortunate' enough, this seems to be the trend. In view of the ongoing demand on the part of the instructor, something must be done to alleviate her burden.

But on top of it, there is a third consideration as well. Many language teachers have the experience (frustrating at times) that despite repeated explanations of the same grammatical point, students keep coming back with it. That can partly be accounted for in terms of the fact that we learn not by being taught in the sense in which one is bombarded with a set of knowledge previously alien to him but by experiencing what

is right on our own. In other words, we learn by mistakes; but this has to be done with sufficient awareness of such needs. Being lectured seems to accomplish little in this. Thus, if the students are exposed to a setting in which they are encouraged to study their mistakes on their own, the pedagogical outcome should presumably be more fruitful.

It is with this in mind that we are proposing here that an I.T. assisted automatic error-checker be installed onto the platform, which is precisely what is lacking currently. This checker will be automatic in two senses. First, once an error is committed by any student writing on the platform, it will be detected instantly. To facilitate this, the system will have to be constantly on guard against any grammatical and/or syntactical errors, which in turn demands that installed in it is a vast reservoir of grammatical rules that forms a huge database (let us call this D1) against which every sentence students make is checked. Second, not only will a student making mistakes be alerted, but he or she will also be directed to another database (let us call this D2) that has pooled up all the teaching resources and materials that all faculty responsible for language courses have compiled during their lectures. And if D2 proves to be insufficient in anticipating the great variety of the mistakes to be made, materials capable of being found on the Internet can be provided as well in the form of hyperlinks.

Such features can serve dual purposes. One, the burden the instructor is currently shouldering up will be much reduced, which in turn keeps her less inclined to make mistakes herself when supervising students. Two, and more significantly, students would be given immediate responses as to what mistakes they are supposed to be making, thus keeping them in a state of constant alert of the important consideration of grammaticality. And by prompting them to D1 and D2, they will be directed to a big repertoire of resources from which they can tap as much as needed for self-study purposes. As we have observed through interacting with students on the platform, we believe that they will find these enhanced features effective and efficient in their studies.

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