

Guide for Multilingual Student Writing
Common English- Mandarin Errors
Ching Ching Tan
Department of Communication Studies

Introduction

This guide categorizes and explains ten of the most common errors that Mandarin speakers when writing in English. Most examples are based on patterns from students' work. One important piece of research came from Philip Guo, an Assistant Professor of Cognitive Science at UCSD and his 2008 article "Common English Mistakes Made by Native Chinese Speakers."

This guide is for instructors to help their Mandarin speaking students with their composition English. With this tool, instructors can offer more specialized assistance. This reference assumes that instructors have no knowledge of Mandarin and that students are native Mandarin speakers (referred to in this document as the "speakers"). An asterisk (*) before a word or a sentence indicates an error.

Table of Contents and Summary

Section	Example	Error
1. Plurals	There are many dogs and a lot of furniture in this house	There are many *dog and *many furnitures in this house.
2. SubjectVerb Agreement	He likes books.	He *like books.
3. Verb Tense	She ran yesterday.	She *run yesterday.
4. Gender and Pronoun Use	I met a new friend today. Her name is Mary.	I met a new friend today. *His name is Mary.
5. Articles	I am in the supermarket. She's a good teacher.	I am in * supermarket. She's * good teacher.
6. Prepositions	Alice is on the bus.	Alice is *in the bus.
7. Questions	Do you mind if I sit here? No, please do.	Do you mind if I sit here? *Yes, please do.
8. Dangling Participle	Walking up the hill, I see flowers blooming.	Walking up the hill, *the flowers are blooming.
9. Homonyms	I turn on the light.	I *open the light.
10. Conjunctions	Although he's not feeling well, he insists on going to work.	Although he's not feeling well, *but he insists on going to work.

2. Subject -Verb Agreement

Type	Example	Error
SubjectVerb Agreement	He likes books.	He *like books.

1.1. One possible reason that Mandarin speakers often confuse subject-verb agreement is that there is no subject-verb agreement that needs to be attended to in Chinese grammar. For example, “like” in Chinese is 喜欢. In a sentence that contains “I like...,” “we like,” or “we like...,” the verb 喜欢 does not change.

Chinese Phrases	„i 喜欢	他喜欢	„i 喜欢
Pronunciation	wo xi huan	ta xi huan	wo men xi huan
Translation	I like	He likes	We like

1.2. This explains why the following mistake happens quite frequently in Mandarin speakers’ English writing.

Example: He likes swimming.
 Error: He *like swimming.

6. Prepositions

Type	Example	Error
Prepositions	Alice is on the bus.	Alice is *in the bus.

1.10. When a Mandarin speaker wants to describe an object that is on the surface of another object, the Chinese character “上, 上” is used. “下” is used to describe an object that is under the other object, “下” or “下” are location indicators in the Mandarin language. If a preposition is used only as a location indicator, a Mandarin speaker may find it acceptable.

Example: The phone is on the table.
 电话 (the phone) 在 (on) 桌子上 (on the table).

Example: He falls down.
 他 (he) 摔 (falls) 倒了 (falls).

With this thinking, Mandarin speakers often find it difficult to process why Alice is “on” the bus but not “in” the bus.

Example: Alice is on the bus.
 Error: Alice is *in the bus.

The Chinese translation is

Alice 在 公交车 里面
 Alice zai gong gong qi che li
 Alice bus inside. (The translation is that Alice is inside a bus.)

Clearly, in a Mandarin speaker’s mind, Alice cannot possibly be on top of the bus, so the preposition “on” does not make sense.

1.11. When a preposition is used not to describe location but to indicate a relationship between words, Mandarin speakers find it challenging to choose the correct preposition.

Example: He found a job at Google.
 Error: He found a job *in Google.

他 直接 找到 了一份 Google 的工作
 ta zhao dao yi fen Google de gong zuo
 A direct translation of this is “He found a Google job.”

8. Dangling Participles

Type	Example	Error
Dangling Participles	Walking up the hill, I see flowers blooming.	Walking up the hill, *the flowers are blooming.

1.14. In English, participles are adjectives that are formed from verbs and end with “ing” or “-ed.” When they are used to modify a subject, Mandarin speakers either omit them or modify the object instead. This issue leaves the participles dangling. (This error is also often referred to as a dangling modifier.)

1.15. According to Mandarin sentence structure, the meaning is still clear when it is without a subject in some sentences. This explains why this kind of error is common among Mandarin speakers.

Chinese Sentence	,ÿ ”” •^	•*	•^
Pronunciations	shang shan le	hua	kai le
Direct Translation	Walking up the hill	flowers	blooms
Sentence Meaning	Walking up the hill, (I see) flowers blooming.		

This is one of the situations when Mandarin speakers find it acceptable that a subject is missing in a sentence. “Walking up the hill” is the action of a person, but the subject can be omitted and the meaning is still clear.

9. Homonyms

Type	Example	Error
Homonyms	I turn on the light.	I *open the light.

1.16. Homonym means different words with the same pronunciation. The homonyms discussed here have the same pronunciation in Mandarin—not in English. In Mandarin, two mistakes often occur due to the homonym confusion.

1.17. “open” and “turn on”

—开 (kai deng) means turning on the light; 开 (kai men) means opening the door. Two different verbs are used in English; “turn on” and “open” have two completely different meanings. In Mandarin, the translation goes back to only one word, which is 开 (kai). This creates a homonym issue because both verbs “turn on” and “open” are the same in a Mandarin speaker’s mind, and it could explain the type of mistake shown in the following example.

Example: I turn on the light.
Error: I *open the light.

1.18. “take” and “carry/bring”

带 (dai ren qu yi ge di fang) means “taking someone to a place”; 带 (dai shang yi ge bei bao) means “carrying a bag”; 带 (dai yi fen li wu gei ni) means “bringing you a gift.” When they translate into Mandarin, only one verb is used for all three sentences, which is 带 (dai). This also creates a homonym issue because the three verbs “take,” “carry,” and “bring” are the same in Mandarin translation which could explain the type of mistake shown in the following example.

Example: I’ll take you to the beach.
Error: I’ll *carry / bring you to the beach.

10. Conjunctions

Type	Example	Error
Conjunctions	Although he's not feeling well, he insists on going to work.	Although he's not feeling well, *but he insists to go to work.
	Because he's too tired, he will skip the party tonight.	Because he's too tired, *so he skips the party tonight.

Some conjunctions in English do not have ~~the~~ related pairs. When words like “because” and “although” are translated into Mandarin, Mandarin speakers sometimes naturally pair them with words like “so” and “but” in a sentence as if the sentences were incomplete.

10.1. In English, e (i g)10 ()-3to812 re 20 >>BDC -1.5 -1.32 Td (10.1(i)-6 (n)-1 re Wt-5 (en)-4 l)-2 ((i)-1 -1.32 Td ()Tj EMC 21 re W n /C2_ID T 60 (n 4(i)-<3CAD>1.3/C2_ID T 6<85478B357B1A>1.3/C2_ID T 6<3

Copyright © 2018
By
Ching Ching Tan

Download Available at:
<http://www.sjsu.edu/wac/pages/common-error-guides/index.html>