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ABSTRACT

Articles contained in this special issue on language usage in Hong Kong, particularly in the context of elementary and secondary education, include: "A Comparison of English Errors Made by Hong Kong Students and Those Made by Non-Native Learners of English Internationally" (David Bunton); "Errors in Guides to English Usage for Hong Kong Students" (Mark Newbrook); "Further Notes on the Influence of Cantonese on the English of Hong Kong Students" (Michael Webster, William Lam Ching-Po); "A Study of Errors Made by F6 Students in Their Written English with Special Reference to Structures Involving the Transitive Verb and the Passive Construction" (Barbara Chan); "Typological Transfer: A Factor in the Learner Language of Hong Kong Students?" (Sung Wai Mui, Dilys); "Teachers, Text-books, and Errors" (Henry Hepburn); and "Teacher Perceptions of the Relative Gravity of Errors in Written English" (Christopher F. Green). (MSE)

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Special Issue No. 2

ENGLISH USAGE IN HONG KONG

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Special Issue No. 2

ENGLISH USAGE IN HONG KONG

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The articles in this Journal record the personal views of the contributors and should not be taken as expressing the official views of the Education Department, Hong Kong.

本學報各篇文章內容，僅代表作者個人見解，並不代表香港教育署的意見。

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FOREWORD

Special issues of the ILE Journal focus on a single topic. The first, in 1989, was on Computers in Language Education.

This second special issue brings together a number of articles on English Usage in Hong Kong.

We hesitate to use the term 'Hong Kong English'. While there are clearly discernable features of English usage in Hong Kong, it is doubtful whether it has wide enough currency to be considered a variety of English.

So far, it has little value in international communication, although this may change as more Hong Kong people emigrate - mainly to Canada, the United States, Australia and Britain, all English-speaking countries.

English is not required to any large extent as a lingua franca between elements of the majority Chinese population of Hong Kong. Approximately 90% are native speakers of Cantonese and the other 7-8% are as likely to use another variety of Chinese as English in communicating with the Chinese population. (One exception is business letters between Chinese speakers where an English typewriter/wordprocessor can more easily be used than a Chinese one.)

'Hong Kong English' is mainly an intra-national medium of communication spoken (and written) by Cantonese speakers to non-Cantonese-speaking expatriates. It is also used for study purposes (mainly written), the above-mentioned business letters and for a number of 'official' purposes, e.g. with government.

The non-Cantonese-speaking expatriate in Hong Kong responds, of course, in his/her own variety of English (one of the British or American varieties, Indian or Filipino etc.) rather than in 'Hong Kong English' although after a long period of continuous exposure to Hong Kong English usage, there may be some accommodation or convergence by the expatriate. Some tend after a time here to speak a more international variety of English and many pick up some of the lexical forms (possibly grammatical and phonological as well) used in Hong Kong. These include borrowings from Cantonese, like *gwai lo* and *dim sum*, terms which date from the British Empire, like the Anglo-Indian *shroff* and the Anglo-Malay *go-down*, and local coinings from standard English words, like *Kowloon side*.

The purpose of this journal issue is to raise awareness of the contrasts between an internationally negotiable type of English usage and the often fossilized intra-national usage found locally. This is achieved by the various contributors enquiring into relevant areas of Hong Kong English usage.

David Bunton's comparison of the most frequently occurring local errors in English with those recorded in an international survey (Heaton and Turton, 1987) indicates that, whatever their origins, errors distinct to Hong Kong do exist, and are likely to constitute a major concern for local teachers of English.

Mark Newbrook provides in-depth reviews and analyses of locally-produced guides to correct English usage for the student and non-native teacher of English. The analyses, rigorous and challenging, are followed by recommendations as to which guides present reliable information.

Michael Webster and **William Lam Ching-po** examine some of the possible crosslinguistic influences of Cantonese on the English production of local Chinese learners. This present account is part of a larger project, contrasting salient lexicogrammatical differences between Cantonese and English, the first part of which was reported in the *Institute of Language in Education Journal* Vol. 3 (1987).

Barbara Chan then focusses sharply on locally-produced morpho-syntactic errors in the English verb phrase, specifically passive and transitive constructions. She proposes that such errors arise from a complex melding of inter- and intralingual factors.

In some contrast to this, **Dilys Sung** presents experimental evidence for the existence of typological transfer from Cantonese to English. Although the parameters of this phenomenon are essentially syntactic, the findings do have broader implications for the analysis of local students' written English discourse.

Henry Hepburn's paper is concerned with instruction-induced error, and demonstrates how easily teachers and textbooks can confuse the language learner if core features of English lexicogrammar are not deeply understood and clearly presented.

Finally, **Christopher Green** compares native and non-native English teachers' reactions to a number of frequently-occurring local errors in written English. A case is established for the existence of differing internal hierarchies of error gravity for the two groups. Pedagogical implications are then drawn from the findings and practical suggestions are offered to guide non-native teachers in their assessment of student's written production.

The Editors of this Special Issue would like to thank all the contributors for their articles, Desmond Allison for his most helpful comments and insights as Consultant Editor, and Madeleine Lau for her advice and help as current English Editor of the ILEJ.

A COMPARISON OF ENGLISH ERRORS MADE BY HONG KONG STUDENTS AND THOSE MADE BY NON-NATIVE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH INTERNATIONALLY.

David Bunton
Institute of Language in Education

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine similarities and differences between a sample of errors in the English writing of Hong Kong students and a sample of writing errors of non-native learners of English from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds internationally.

A secondary purpose is to consider possible causes of differences and any implications this has for teaching.

The Samples

The two samples are:

(a) **Hong Kong sample**

The 404 errors identified in Bunton (1989) from the composition writing of Hong Kong Secondary 6 and 7 students preparing for the Hong Kong Higher Level and Hong Kong Advanced Level examinations.

(b) **'International' sample**

The approximately 1 700 errors identified in Heaton and Turton (1987), mostly from the composition scripts of candidates sitting the Cambridge First Certificate in English examination.

The Hong Kong sample was collated after three years of teaching Form 6 and 7 students in an Anglo-Chinese school. The number of students involved over the three years was 415. All but 5 or 6 of them were Chinese and the vast majority of these had Cantonese as their mother tongue. Extensive notes were made each week of errors that frequently occurred in their composition writing. Each student wrote an average of 7.8 compositions a year, ranging in length from 350 to 400 words, so approximately 1 200 000 words were read in the marking process.

The 'international' sample was drawn from the composition scripts of candidates for an examination that is taken in Britain and worldwide by people learning English as a second or foreign language. It is safe to assume that it represents errors made by people from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. There would undoubtedly be Cantonese speakers amongst them, but only as a minority, just as there would be people from

Africa, the Middle East, South America and other parts of Asia. If there is any bias in the sample, it would probably be towards European languages, from the numbers of Europeans who go to Britain for language courses and take the Cambridge First Certificate.

Limitations

1. The Hong Kong sample were collected from the notes of a working teacher, meeting the normal deadlines of the job. Without the help of computers, there is no way every error could have been recorded. The choice of which errors to record depended on the teacher's view of their importance and so an element of subjectivity was undoubtedly present. The choice was also influenced, though, by the almost intuitive feel a teacher has for which errors are common after a number of years' experience in teaching and, in this case, 20 years of residence in Hong Kong.

It is not known what criteria or processes were used in selecting the errors for the international sample.

2. In both samples, the dictionary format of the books in which they are published imposes certain limitations. Errors are recorded under headwords, and so errors which can not be related to a particular key word cannot be included. The most obvious categories of error that will not be fully represented in such a format are tense/aspect ones, subject-verb agreement and those at discourse level. But some of these do relate, for example, to a particular adverbial or determiner, and are included under a headword in that way.

This limitation applies equally to the two samples.

3. Newbrook (1989), referring to the Hong Kong sample, suggests that "given this fairly major constraint" (in 2 above) "the actual selection of errors seems very reasonable" but points out a number of omissions he feels are important. Most of his suggestions are very familiar to this writer: some would probably have occurred in the corpus of compositions and should certainly have been in this sample; others have been encountered elsewhere - in speech, amongst people older than secondary students, etc., but would probably not have occurred in the S6-S7 compositions. Newbrook's own experience in Hong Kong was at the tertiary level and that is significant. This could be seen as an argument for a much bigger sample of Hong Kong errors from a wider range of sources. This writer has certainly encountered a greater variety in his experience with adults since the years he had in secondary schools.¹
4. An overall categorisation of errors in the international sample has not been attempted because it is so much bigger than the Hong Kong sample. It would require a Hong Kong sample of similar size to the 1 700 from Cambridge First Certificate exams in order to make any useful comparison. For example, errors present in the international

sample of 1 700 might well be present in a Hong Kong sample of, say, over 1 000.

5. As noted, both samples are taken from written English and so are not necessarily representative of spoken English.

The Findings

The first point of interest was to see how many of the Hong Kong sample appeared in the international sample. The fact that the international sample is much larger than the Hong Kong sample (approximately 1 700 compared with 404) makes it all the more noteworthy when an error from the smaller sample does not appear in the larger one.

The result is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Overlap between Hong Kong Sample and International Sample

Hong Kong errors that do appear in the international sample:	108	26.7%
Hong Kong errors that do not appear in the international sample:	296	73.3%
Total:	404	100.0%

This seems to show a very marked difference between the writing errors made by Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking students and those made by learners of English who have other languages as their mother tongue. If the samples are reliable, it invites investigation into what the differences are and possible reasons for them.

Although many of the Hong Kong errors not in the international sample appear to be influenced by Cantonese structures, word usage and world-views (more on this later), it does not automatically follow that transfer from Cantonese is responsible for the difference.

There are Hong Kong errors not in the international sample which it would be very difficult to ascribe to transfer from Cantonese, for example, writing **everytime* as one word instead of two.

And Hong Kong errors in the international sample may still be influenced by Cantonese. For example, one of the errors Hong Kong students frequently make is to write **red colour* (as noun or adjective) when only *red* is needed. This would appear to be influenced by the Cantonese 紅色 (*hung sik*), where 色 (*sik*) is repeated after each particular colour – but this same error appears in the international sample. So although the mother tongue may be affecting Cantonese speakers, there must be other factors, (including transfer from other languages which act like Cantonese in this respect) which influence international learners of English.

When, later in this paper, reference is made to the possibility of transfer from Cantonese for specific errors, it is just that – one possibility among several possible causes of the errors. The errors may also be intralingual, developmental ones.

The purpose of this paper is not to argue for a predictive form of contrastive analysis. However, when there is such a difference between the Hong Kong sample and the international sample, there must be some distinctly Hong Kong factors at work and it seems likely that Cantonese L1 has some role.

Marton (1980) suggested that while “interference need not be a major factor in naturalistic second language acquisition . . . where learners have the chance of extensive and intensive contacts with the target language, . . . it will always be present in classroom or foreign language learning . . . (where) learners will always use their L1 between classes” (paraphrased in Ellis 1985), and this does correspond closely to the Hong Kong secondary school situation where English is largely confined to the classroom and few students use it outside.

Another way of looking at it comes from Corder (1973), that “a learner when faced with the need to communicate will have recourse to whatever linguistic knowledge he has which will increase the likelihood of successful communication,” and (1981), “If he lacks the requisite knowledge of L2 to achieve successful communication then he will have recourse to the L1”. This view avoids the inevitability of the strong form of contrastive analysis but grants the possibility of L1 transfer under certain circumstances.

Error Types

The second point of interest was to discover what types of error the Hong Kong students were making and which of these error types were well represented in the international sample and which were not.

There are many different ways errors can be categorised and some errors could come under two or more categories. Indeed, Wong (1988) points out the danger of error counts categorising each error once only “as if there could only be one explanation for each problem . . . the importance of multiple causation in interlanguage formation cannot be overemphasised.”

Nonetheless, for the sole purpose of comparison of the two samples, each error has been allocated to one of the following categories only and areas of overlap are referred to in the notes to the table. Causation should still be open to any interpretation and not restricted by the categorisation

Table 2: Error Categories and Distribution

Error Type		Errors in Hong Kong Sample only	Errors in Hong Kong & International Sample	Total Hong Kong Error Sample	
Lexical choice	.	64	14	78	19.3%
Semantic mismatch	.	40	9	49	12.1%
Collocation	.	27	6	33	8.2%
Word Class		38	5	43	10.6%
Determiners	≡	7	5	12	3.0%
Positive - Negative	≡	4	2	6	1.5%
Definite - Indefinite		4	---	4	1.0%
Singular - Plural	≡	10	5	15	3.7%
Noun Countability		6	21	27	6.7%
Prepositions	s	3	3	6	1.5%
Adjective forms		3	1	4	1.0%
-ed/-ing Adjectives		2	3	5	1.2%
VERBS (total)	†	49	11	60	14.9%
Direct-Indirect Objects		26	6	32	7.9%
Complement structure \bar{a}		7	2	9	2.2%
Active Passive		6	---	6	1.5%
Form/Tense/Aspect		7	2	9	2.2%
Reflexive - Nonreflexive		1	1	2	0.5%
Phrasal		2	---	2	0.5%
Comparison		2	1	3	0.7%
Emphasis		1	2	3	0.7%
Time Expressions	%	3	7	10	2.5%
Contr. ctives		7	5	12	3.0%
Introductory "It/There"		6	---	6	1.5%
Referen		2	---	2	0.5%
Word Order		3	2	5	1.2%
Redundancy	%	10	2	12	3.0%
Spelling		4	1	5	1.2%
One word/Two words		2	2	4	1.0%
Total		297	107	404	100.0%

Notes to Table

* There is some overlap between these three categories. Errors classified as 'Lexical choice' are those where the meaning of the word has been misunderstood and another one should have been chosen, e.g. *'I had nothing to do, so I was very dull, when bored is the correct choice*

Those classified as 'Semantic mismatch' are those where a certain combination of words cannot be used for semantic reasons, for example, *'Her name is called Jane* when it has to be *Her name is Jane* or *She is called Jane*

Those classified as 'Collocation' are those which do not collocate for reasons that are more conventional than semantic, for example *'Cantonese is my mother language* where it needs to be either *mother tongue* or *native language*

≠ I have generally considered a concept like 'Singular-Plural' or 'Positive-Negative' to be more important than word class. Thus, an error like '*All of them was safe*' comes under 'Singular-Plural' and '*All of us did not want her to leave*' comes under 'Positive-Negative' although both could have come under 'Determiners' for their headword *all*.

§ Most of the errors made with prepositions come under the categories for 'Direct-Indirect Objects' of verbs, e.g. '*She emphasised on the importance of planning*'.

† The sub-categories within the dotted lines are all included in this total number of verb errors

α This is mostly the use of the infinitive, gerund or a 'that-clause' after a verb.

¶ Six of the errors that have been categorised as 'Time expressions' could have been included under 'Redundancy'.

In some studies, errors that are simply lexical choice have been omitted so that a clearer picture of the syntactical problems can emerge. However, the Heaton and Turton sample does contain errors of lexical choice and these appear to account for about 15% of the sample. This is only a little less than the 19% in the Hong Kong sample.

Considering that in overall terms, the Hong Kong errors **not** in the international sample (297) outnumber those in the international sample (107) by nearly three to one, it is interesting to look at any group of errors where the proportion is significantly different in either direction.

Categories of error where the Hong Kong sample is strongly present in the international sample.

Noun Countability

One of the categories where Hong Kong learners of English share a problem that learners of English around the world have is 'Noun Countability' -- where Hong Kong errors in the international sample outnumber those **not** in it by 21 to 5 -- a complete reversal of the proportions for the sample as a whole. Words that people of other linguistic backgrounds along with Hong Kong people have trouble in regarding as uncountable in their most common meanings include *advice, behaviour, equipment, evidence, furniture, health, homework, information, knowledge, luck, news, work, police* and *staff*.

The distinctively Hong Kong problems lie with words like *camping* ('*Next weekend we shall have a camping*'), *language* ('*He spoke foul languages*'), *vocabulary* ('*I learnt some new vocabularies today*') and *transport* ('*There are many transports in Hong Kong*').

Newbrook (1989) suggests *alphabets* and *audiences* which are certainly familiar problems in Hong Kong but are not in the international sample.

In the case of *vocabulary*, there seems to be clear influence from the Cantonese 'l' j' (*saang ji*) which is more properly translated by the countable term *new word(s)* but is often used as a written heading in textbooks that use Chinese, or orally as a translation for the uncountable 'Vocabulary' in an English language textbook. (Of course, *vocabulary* is countable when referring to the different vocabularies of different languages or registers, but these are not often referred to by secondary students!)

Time Expressions

This is another category where the majority of the Hong Kong errors were in the international sample (8 to 2). Those in the international sample included the use of *before* instead of *ago* and a few involving redundancy: **seven o'clock a.m.*, **that day morning*, **on last Sunday* and **I have lived here for six years ti.ne.*

This redundant use of *time* may well be an intralingual problem of English, being confused by learners of many backgrounds with presence of *time* in the expression *in six year's time* – the meaning of which is certainly misunderstood in Hong Kong as evidenced by the HKCE exam composition topic a few years ago "Myself -- in ten year's time" which was widely taken by candidates to mean "What's going to happen to me over the next ten years" instead of "What I will be like ten years from now" and provoked some controversy in the press as to what it really meant.

The errors **only** in the Hong Kong sample included yet another problem involving *for* and *time*: **I have been to China for several times*. The problem here may also be intralingual as there is no apparent problem from the Cantonese 我去過中國好多次 (*Ngoh hui gwoh jung kwok ho doh chi*. (Literally *I have gone China many occasions*). English, confusingly, uses the same word *time* for the two Cantonese terms 時間 (*si gaan*) and 次 (*chi*). Although the latter can be rendered *occasions* in English, it is not nearly as common as *times*.

The other error **only** in the Hong Kong sample does seem to show L1 transfer: **This is my first time to travel by plane*. The Cantonese uses 我第一次 (*ngoh dai yat chi*), literally **I first time*, whereas English depersonalises *first time* by using *the*: *the first time I have ...*

'-ed/-ing' Adjectives

Although too few in number to be of great significance, most of the Hong Kong errors with *'-ed/-ing'* adjectives (3 to 1) were in the international sample: the difference between *excited/exciting*, *frightened/frightening*, and *bored/boring* are problems in places other than Hong Kong (although Cantonese may be affecting the local learner – 悶 (*moon*) means both *bored* and *boring*). But *surprised/surprising* was only in the Hong Kong sample.

Finally, there are two categories, 'Connectives' and 'Determiners', where half or nearly half the Hong Kong errors were in the international sample (5 to 7 and 5 to 5 respectively) a much greater proportion than for the remaining categories.

Connectives

Here, the use of *or* instead of *and* when the sense is negative (e.g. **I don't speak Cantonese and Mandarin*) is an international problem. But also in the international sample are a few errors with connectives which are very similar to Cantonese usage:

- (a) **Although it was raining but we went on the picnic.*
 In Cantonese, 雖然 (*sui yin*) and 但係 (*daan hai*) are used together - as are the equivalent conjunctions in some other languages.
- (b) **Even they had tickets they couldn't get in.*
 The Cantonese 連 (*lin*) can be used alone as a subordinating conjunction or as an adverb, so only the latter function is equivalent to the English adverb *even* while the former function should be ascribed to the combination of *even* with the subordinating conjunctions *though*, *if* or sometimes *when*.
- (c) **No matter you are young or old, you'll enjoy this film.*
 **No matter he is important, he still has to wait his turn.*
 Transfer is likely here, with Cantonese only needing the two characters 無論 (*mo lun*) in each example, while the English needs an extra word like *whether* in the first or a different construction like *It doesn't matter if he's important* or *No matter how important he is* in the second.

So while transfer from Cantonese is likely here, there may also be developmental or intralingual factors as these errors are made internationally.

The errors only found in the Hong Kong sample include another set of double connectives (e.g. **Because it was cold, so she was wearing a sweater*) with a likely Cantonese source - the use of 因為 (*yan wai*) and 所以 (*soh yi*) together. The same error also manifests itself in various combinations of *as/since... so/therefore...*

A final set of connective errors only in the Hong Kong sample concern the use of *for example*, *for instance* and *such as* to begin a 'sentence' which consists only of a list of items: **I play many sports. For example, basketball, soccer and tennis.* This possibly has an intralingual influence from the way *for example* and *for instance* can begin a sentence when they precede a main clause (while *such as* cannot).

Determiners

Errors Hong Kong students made in common with international learners of English included the confusion of *few* and *a few*, the seemingly universal problem of when to use and when not to use *the*, and using *most of* + *noun* instead of dropping *of* or adding a determiner like *the* or *my* in front of the noun.

Hong Kong errors **not** in the international sample include a very similar problem with *many of* + *noun* instead of *many* + *noun* or *many of* + *determiner* + *noun*. There is also a rather unusual *many and many* + *noun*, e.g. **Many and many people go to China for Lunar New Year*, which looks like an intralingual comparison with *more and more*. There is also a confusion of the individual/group focuses of *each* and *every*: **Almost each family has television now.*

Categories of error where the Hong Kong sample is very poorly represented in the international sample.

The two biggest categories in the Hong Kong sample are semantic in nature, 'Lexical choice' and 'Semantic mismatch', and the errors in them are not in

the international sample by a ratio of more than four to one (64 to 14, and 40 to 9, respectively).

It is probably to be expected that lexical items would present idiosyncratic problems for one particular language group as the effect of mother tongue transfer is fully felt, while the mother tongue transfer of any one language group would be diluted by others in any international sample.

Lexical Choice

There certainly are a number of lexical errors not in the international sample, which appear to be direct translations of Cantonese expressions: **busy time* from 繁忙時間 (*faan mong si gaan*) for *rush hour*; **golden time* from 黃金時間 (*wong kam si gaan*) for *prime time* on television; **traffic tool* from 交通工具 (*gaau tung gung gui*) for *means/form of transport*; **sit on a bus* from 坐巴士 (*choh ba si* for *go by bus*); **I represent the school to thank you* from 我代表學校感謝你 (*ngoh doi biu hok haau gam dze nei*) instead of *On behalf of the school I want to thank you*. But there are not as many as one might expect.

More are cases where the semantic scope of a word in Cantonese is different from that of an English word that covers some, but not all, of its meanings. For example, 小心 (*siu sam*) can mean *beware* in *beware of pickpockets*, so *beware* is wrongly used for 小心 (*siu sam*) in *take care of your wallet*. Likewise, 交通 (*gaau tung*) has a wide semantic scope, taking in narrower English meanings of *communications*, *traffic* and *transport*, leading to errors like **Traffic in this area is very convenient* and **Communications are very difficult in rush hours*. 公司 (*kung si*) means a trading company and that can extend to *shop* – although there are other words like 鋪頭 (*po tau*) leading to errors like **I bought a drink from a company*. The error in **I wear my clothes at 7 a.m.* probably comes from 着 (*jeuk*) covering both the English words *put on* and *wear*.

However there are quite a number of items only in the Hong Kong sample that do not seem to owe anything to Cantonese transfer, for example, the differences between *facilitate* and *serve*, *car park* and *parking space*, *favourable* and *favourite*, *pedestrian* and *pavement*, *scene* and *occurrence*, *standard of living* and *cost of living*, *worthy* and *worthwhile*.

There is a very interesting group of lexical errors only in the Hong Kong sample, where *actor* is used for *character* (**The actor dies at the end of the film*), the general term *drama* is used for the particular form of it, *play* (**I went to see a drama last night*), and *fiction* and *story book* are used for *novel* (**I borrowed a fiction from the library*, and adults are said to be reading story books). These may well be caused by the widespread lack of literary appreciation in English language courses in Hong Kong. The shortening and simplification of great novels into 'Readers' for lower secondary forms may help account for the almost total ignorance of the word *novel* amongst the present writer's upper secondary students.

The relatively few Hong Kong lexical choice errors that do appear in the international sample include *cooker* for *cook*, *chair* for *seat*, *economical* for *economic*, *floor* for *ground* - both would be covered by 地 (*dei*) - *mark* for *brand*, *nervous* for *tense*, *officer* for *office worker* and *wish* for *hope* - 希望 (*hei mong*) can cover both

Semantic Mismatch

This group also includes a good number of Hong Kong errors not in the international sample that can probably be attributed to L1 transfer. A few could be said to reflect different world-views in Cantonese and English cultures. For example, 同學 (*tung hok*) and (to a lesser extent) 同班 (*tung baan*) are used by Cantonese teachers or principals in addressing students, while the English 'equivalents', *schoolmates* and *classmates* could not be used by a non-student in addressing students although they can be used by non-students in referring to a student's *classmates* or *schoolmates*.

The use of *return to school/work* for the morning - as in 返學 (*faan hok*) and 返工 (*faan gung*) - seems to show a stronger identification of the student/employee with the school/workplace than in English where one *goes to school/work* in the morning but *returns home* (or *goes home*) in the evening. In the Cantonese world-view there are perhaps similar degrees of identification with home and school/workplace as one does 返屋企 (*faan uk kei*) as well, while in English the identification with home may be stronger than that with the school/workplace. On the other hand, it could be argued that as one can *return to work* after lunch, it is more a matter of the relative time-scales involved: in English for daily activities one can only return to a place one has already been the same day, while in Cantonese the overnight gap is still an acceptable time-scale; and with longer time-scales, one can in English *return to school/work* after a period of holiday or sickness.

However the majority of the 'Semantic Mismatch' errors that do not appear in the international sample do not have an obvious influence from Cantonese, for example, **the problem was improved* for *the problem was solved* or *the situation improved*; **due to this reason* instead of *for this reason*; **in my opinion I think* for *In my opinion* or *I think*; and **the MTR facilitates people* for *the MTR facilitates travel* or *the MTR makes life easier for people*.

A couple of particularly interesting examples are the Hong Kong use of *modernised* and *updated* for things which are new anyway and deserve the terms *modern* and *up-to-date*; and the use of *so-called* to introduce a perfectly legitimate name which is not in any way being called into question. These do not appear in the international sample.

The Hong Kong errors that do appear there include **according to my opinion*, *at last* for the sequential *finally*, **I am painful*, and **the children slept at 9 o'clock* which is probably influenced by 瞓瞓 (*fan gaau*) covering both *going to sleep* and *sleeping*.

Collocation

The few Hong Kong collocation errors in the international sample include **in the radio/television* where *on* is required, **as a conclusion* for *in conclusion*, **have a lunch* for *have lunch*, **put off clothes* for *take off* and **open the light/TV/radio* for *turn on*. This last could well be transfer from the Cantonese 開電視 (*hoi din si*) etc but there are other languages that use a similar word.

Many of the Hong Kong errors not in the international sample seem to be developmental problems with English rather than negative transfer. It is surprising that some are not in the international sample: **get on/off a taxi* for *get in/out of*, travelling **on feet* for *on foot* and **play bowling* for *go bowling*.

Others are very likely to be transfer: **mother language* for *mother tongue* or *native language* is a direct translation of 母語 (*mo yue*).

Word Class

Probably the most interesting category is 'Word Class' in that the Hong Kong errors are not in the international sample by a ratio of over seven to one (38 to 5). There is a far greater tendency in Hong Kong to use a word of the wrong class than there is internationally, e.g. **China is a communism country* and **I want to choice engineering as my course*.

This could in a very general way be influenced by the fact that Chinese characters do not change – they may have particles before or after them, but if a Chinese word is to be used as a noun, say, instead of a verb, it will not change its form. Thus the many ways English words change their form for different functions are probably difficult for the Cantonese learner.

The most commonly confused classes are nouns and adjectives, with the tendency being to use a noun for the adjective, e.g. **This chair is not very comfort*, **That is a democracy country*, and **It is more advantage to you*.

In the confusion of nouns and verbs, the tendency is again to use the noun: **I want to entry university*, **She was succeeded in the exam* and **We must analysis the problem*. Perhaps the noun is the first form learnt and perhaps there is a feeling that the noun is the most basic form and most worth remembering. It is often shorter than verb or adjective, but not always. and even when not, there can still be mistakes: **America is a freedom country*.

There are also the past-participle adjectives, e.g. **That is a complicate problem* and **This is a very advance computer*. These could well be influenced by the tendency of Cantonese speakers not to pronounce fully a final 'd' – because the final plosives in Cantonese, /p/, /t/ and /k/, are formed but not exploded.

Finally, there are adjectives used like verbs when an auxiliary verb or modal is present but the verb *to be* is missing: **You cannot sure* and **I had never late for school before*. The presence of the auxiliary or modal probably disguises the lack of a main verb and the way Cantonese can use *subject + adjective* without the verb *to be* probably adds to this tendency

Verbs -- Direct/Indirect Objects

Another general area of distinctively Hong Kong errors is that of verbs -- not in the international sample by 49 to 11 -- and in particular 'Direct/Indirect Objects' (26 to 6) and 'Active/Passive' (6 to 0).

Hong Kong errors in the international sample include four verbs that need an indirect object: *agree* ('*I agree what he said*'), *listen* ('*I like listening pop music*'), *wait* ('*She was waiting the bus to come*) and *arrive* ('*He arrived my place*) and two that need direct objects: *discuss* ('*They discussed about the problem*) and *marry* ('*Cathy will soon marry with Paul*).

Those not in the international sample are fairly evenly divided into two groups:

- (a) verbs given direct objects when they should be indirect, e.g. '*I want to apply a job*. This could be mainly the intralingual difficulty of knowing which verbs take indirect objects and then which preposition a particular verb takes. But an interlingual factor could be the relative infrequency of indirect objects in Cantonese.
- (b) verbs given indirect objects when they should be direct, e.g. '*She emphasised on the importance of planning*. In some cases there could well be an intralingual cause, as learners overgeneralise from related nouns that do take a preposition, e.g. '*She put a lot of emphasis on good planning*, or from English verbs with similar meanings that do take indirect objects, e.g. '*I shall accompany with my father* by analogy with '*I shall go with my father*. The same interlingual factor mentioned in (a) above could be another element in the causation as Cantonese learners overcompensate for the difference between Cantonese and English.

There is one other group of six verbs wrongly used with *out* when the equivalent Cantonese expression includes the character 出 (*chut*): for example, '*This form lists out the entry requirements*, which appears to be from 列出 (*lit chut*).

Verbs Active/Passive

The six Hong Kong tokens, as mentioned above, do not appear in the international sample. Three are intransitive verbs wrongly used in the passive, e.g. '*A strange person was appeared*, while two others are verbs that should be passive used actively, e.g. '*That company situates in Hung Hom*.

Introductory It/There

This is another category of interest as none of the six errors were in the international sample. Most of these seem to be influenced by transfer from Cantonese:

- '*Have many people in Central* probably comes from the Cantonese 有 (*yau* literally *have*) being used in the way *there is/are* is used in English;
- '*Here/there is very crowded* seems to parallel the way 呢處 (*ni shue*) / 呢度 (*ni do*) and 嗰處 (*goh shue*) / 嗰度 (*goh do*) are used like nouns in Cantonese while English requires them to be adverbials following *It is* + adjective.

And **He was very hard to find a job* follows the Cantonese word order in 佢好難搵工. (*kui ho nan wan gung*) while the English requires *It was + adjective + for + noun/pronoun + to + verb*.

Spelling

There are not a lot of spelling errors in the Hong Kong sample. (A number of common ones were put in a separate checklist, as in the Heaton and Turton sample.) But two are of particular interest, as they seem to reflect pronunciation traits of Cantonese speakers:

- * *In the country we can breathe the flesh air* may come from interchangeable pronunciation of the liquids /l/ and /r/; and
- * *Prizes are very high these days* may come from a lack of distinction between the unvoiced /s/ of *price* and the voiced /z/ in *prize*.

Conclusions

One can conclude, then, that Hong Kong students do make their own distinctive errors, substantially different from those made by international learners of English. Causation must be open to various interpretations. While there is a case for transfer from Cantonese accounting for a lot of this difference, it does not explain it all - intralingual and developmental factors are undoubtedly present, as well as other causes. But negative transfer is also a possible explanation in a good number of the errors that Hong Kong students make in common with international learners of English.

This is not to say, though, that a direct comparison of the languages is the best way to teach. Warning students that something may be difficult because the English structure or usage is different from Cantonese may draw undue attention to it and become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is probably important in the first instance that the teacher is aware of probable areas of difficulty - particularly those that are distinctively 'Hong Kong' and may not be adequately covered in overseas texts and materials. The teacher can thus plan the presentation of these linguistic items to students in ways that will reduce the chances of confusion without necessarily going into a contrast of the languages and signalling problems in an unhelpful way.

Further areas of work

Time and space have not permitted more than a general overview of the correlation between the Hong Kong sample and the international sample and a preliminary look at error types and some possible causes. Particular attention has been paid to the possibilities of transfer from Cantonese being at least partially responsible for the high degree of non-correlation. Not enough attention has been given to developmental and intralingual causes, to strategies of communication or learning (e.g. avoidance) or transfer of training. There is a need also for a larger Hong Kong sample, as mentioned earlier, taken from a wider range of sources - at least tertiary and upper

secondary - and selected by a variety of people working in the field, (Newbrook (1990) has pointed out the very different selections that can be made by different scholars working with the same student population). With a larger sample, a direct comparison of error distribution could be made with the Heaton and Turton sample.

Acknowledgement

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NOTE

- ¹ To respond to two points made by Newbrook (1989) and again in this issue. He correctly points out that I did not mention *This is because* ... as an alternative when discouraging *'It is because ...'* It was considered but decided against as there was a danger that students would replace an incorrect formula (*'It is because'*) with another formula (*This is because*) which although correct would have become extremely tiresome if used in answer to every 'Why' question a student ever got. I felt it more important to show that a simple sentence without any *because* is a perfectly acceptable (and easy) answer. He also suggests that the construction *'I used my finger to point at ...'* and *'He used a gun to point at me'* would have come better under *use* instead of *point*. to show the construction *use X to Y*. However, I have not found the normal *use X to Y* construction to be a particular problem for students. It is the clumsy use of that construction in these two specific cases with *point* that I wanted to discourage in favour of the simple *I pointed at* and the very different *He pointed a gun at me!*

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ERRORS IN GUIDES TO ENGLISH USAGE FOR HONG KONG STUDENTS

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Hong Kong students, who are users of English as an important second or auxiliary language, find available to them many books - mostly locally produced - which claim to provide accurate and reliable information about the details of English usage; or, at least, most students assume that the information provided is accurate and reliable. In fact, however, the information provided is of very mixed quality: some such works are very well researched and very largely accurate, others are accurate in places but unreliable (and thus should be used, if at all, with caution), others again are misleading in so many respects that they should probably be avoided altogether.

Naturally, students themselves are seldom if ever able to discriminate between the 'good' books and the 'bad'; if they were, they would scarcely need such works. They lack native-speaker (or, in most cases, even native-like) intuitions about the standardness or non-standardness of the examples presented and the validity or otherwise of the rules and principles given. More seriously, since the authors of such books are themselves often from Hong Kong, many of the non-standard patterns presented are likely to coincide with non-standardisms which already exist in the students' own English, and these non-standardisms will thus be reinforced. Students are most unlikely to suspect that the author is wrong just at the points where the usage presented as standard is the same as their own.

In these circumstances, a well-informed teacher, able to identify errors of this nature in these books, would be of great value to students. Such a teacher could point students firmly in the direction of those books which she knew to be more accurate. Ideally, the teacher could also indicate those few points in respect of which even the most accurate book might be in error, or could even replace the book altogether in the role of authoritative source of information on English.

However, most Hong Kong secondary school teachers (of English or of other subjects taught largely through the medium of English) are, of course, themselves Hong Kong Chinese, not native speakers of English. While their command of the language is, naturally, much stronger than that of their students, most of them - understandably given the lack of opportunity to use English in normal interaction amongst Hong Kong Chinese - still lack native-like intuitions about the language. Their own usage may well exemplify some of the more persistent local errors, perhaps fossilised by long use and in some cases never actually known to be non-standard in the first place (because many of the most widespread localisms have been

'institutionalised', and because few teachers have experienced enough serious contact with native speakers who were sufficiently articulate and sufficiently motivated to correct their errors).

Most such teachers, then, need help if they are to be able to identify books on English usage as accurate or inaccurate, reliable or unreliable, and so forth. More generally, they need help in giving their students advice on how they can improve their English and avoid errors. The most obvious way in which this help can be provided is in the form of authoritative works written by native speakers of English. It is most important that such authors be familiar with the specific characteristics of Hong Kong students' English rather than merely with more general patterns of learner error across a wide range of student backgrounds (linguistic and cultural); since, as Bunton (1989: preface) points out, most of the more common Hong Kong errors do not occur in other countries where English is learned. It is also useful if such authors are, at least to some degree, familiar with Chinese, so that their comments can include, where this is relevant, discussion of the role of the influence of first-language structures in the creation of local errors; although this sort of information could also be provided in the classroom by many teachers, once the nature of the error had been made clear to them.

Depending upon the level at which such books were written, they could in fact be adopted as classroom texts, or recommended to students, in preference to less accurate works produced by local writers. If, on the other hand, they were considered too difficult for students to use directly, they could form the basis for lower-level and/or more selective courses designed and conducted by local teachers who were themselves familiar with their contents.

Such books are in fact becoming available, notably Bunton (1989) and Newbrook (forthcoming). I discuss the Bunton book below. As an interim and/or additional measure, scholars such as Bunton and myself can also comment on those locally produced works which do seem to be in general circulation at present amongst students (whether they have been recommended by teachers or simply bought independently by the students). Teachers may thus be able to decide which books to recommend, and how strongly.

One point that must be made at this stage is the following. It is not unknown for Hong Kong people who have acquired English to a level markedly higher than that prevailing in the community at large to resist further correction of their remaining localisms on the part of native speakers or others with a still more secure command of English. This attitude is sometimes found even amongst students, notably at tertiary level; students may simply refuse to believe that forms which they have been using since the early stages of learning English, and which their teachers have taught and endorsed, are non-standard or heard only in Hong Kong. They may also regard genuine standard forms as unfamiliar and indeed as 'wrong'. For instance, I was once accused of inadvertently teaching non-standard usage, presumably typical of my home town in England, as if it were standard,

because the students in question were so much more familiar with local non-standardisms than with the equivalent standard English constructions that they were unable to believe that the latter really represented mainstream usage or that the former were confined to Hong Kong and deemed 'incorrect' elsewhere.

If either teachers or students adopt such attitudes – and, of course, it is not necessarily to be expected that the majority will – it will be of little use to have access to more reliable and authoritative sources. Both students and teachers must be prepared to learn that some forms which they have always assumed to be standard are not, and in some cases that forms which they have considered non-standard are in fact fully acceptable.

This said, I turn now to a survey of the frequency and type of errors found in the various types of books of this kind. I deal first with the books produced by local authors. In these books, the text is usually in Chinese; the authors are themselves ethnic Chinese, and presumably believe – reasonably – that their student readers will find discussion of linguistic matters more readily comprehensible in their first language.

The range of topics covered by these books is wide; some of them deal with idioms (always a problem for learners); others with prepositions, phrasal verbs and other aspects of grammar; others with vocabulary. A number of them simply list a large number of English expressions (often organised alphabetically), furnish one or more Chinese equivalents for each, and give one or two English sentences, with Chinese translations, as examples. In a further section, this may be repeated, commencing with common Chinese expressions and indicating how to translate them into English.

The authors sometimes give prominence to their own qualifications on the covers and title pages of their books (a good example is Chiu 1983). Students in this region are in most cases already unduly impressed by paper qualifications, and are often too ready to believe that anything said by a teacher must be true; and this surely encourages them to assume that all the information given must be correct and reliable.

Of course, if the information given by these books were very largely accurate, students' reliance upon them would not be alarming. Neither would there be a problem if the information related openly, not to the international exonormative standard variety, but to a genuine emerging local Hong Kong standard with its own viability; in this latter event, disparities between what the books recommended and the corresponding international standard forms would not matter much, if at all. The information provided would presumably be largely (though perhaps not entirely) accurate as far as the local standard was concerned.

Unfortunately, neither of these situations obtains. As noted above, in many such books a substantial minority of the English sentences given are deviant (with respect to international standard English). Sometimes the error is minor and there is no problem with respect to the intelligibility of the sentence (though even in these cases the negative impression given as to

the level of the writer's English might be very damaging, especially cumulatively). In other cases there is a global error, often interfering with intelligibility to the extent that the sentence might be materially misunderstood or else not understood. There are also cases where the English and the Chinese do not appear to be genuinely equivalent.

In addition, it seems unrealistic to suppose that Hong Kong can develop a local standard English of its own. As I have argued elsewhere (Newbrook 1988, 1989a, 1990, etc), the value of English as far as Hong Kong is concerned relates largely to the contact which it provides with the non-Chinese world. Its internal functions within local society are strictly limited. There is thus very little to be gained, and much to be lost, by allowing or encouraging a local standard (or an uncodified or semi-codified pseudo-standard) to develop, especially given that most of the salient features of local English usage differentiate it from ALL of the mainstream standard varieties of the language (which are themselves becoming increasingly similar to each other). At worst, the stabilisation of 'Hong Kong English' could make the task of students who needed or wished to acquire standard English almost impossible, owing to the fossilising of local forms learned at an early age in the mistaken belief that they were standard (this already happens to a certain extent). English is never likely to be used internally to anything like the right extent, nor is it known generally to a high enough standard of fluency and general competence, for a local standard to obtain a firm basis for development. Furthermore, many of the specifically local features of Hong Kong English create intelligibility problems for speakers of English from other countries: in some cases the forms used are likely to be misunderstood (one very obvious example is furnished by expressions such as *two days later*, which are used with completely different meanings in Hong Kong and elsewhere), in others not to be understood at all. In face of these considerations, it seems clear that deviations from the international standard must be regarded simply as errors in a Hong Kong context.

I am not, of course, suggesting that only error-free English is acceptable or to be anticipated in Hong Kong. Few students will ever achieve this, especially given the lack of support for the use of English outside the classroom. However, the international standard – not a local pseudo-standard – is surely the only reasonable *target* variety.

The books discussed here can be divided into a number of types on the basis of selection and treatment of subject matter and general approach.

(1) Some books by local authors, for instance Chiu (1983), actually discuss and analyse what the authors believe to be characteristic local errors. Chiu's book is widely available in Hong Kong bookshops and has been reprinted yearly since it first appeared. It is aimed at those students who are about to take the Hong Kong Certificate examination in English, and covers 860 errors or groups of associated errors, in each case exemplifying and briefly explaining the nature of what Chiu considers a common local error.

Unfortunately, the book is not at all reliable. There are very many errors in the English sentences presented. Some of these are merely typographical in origin, which suggests that the work was not proof-read effectively. This impression is reinforced by the high level of frequency of what one would describe as 'careless' errors if they occurred in student writing (e.g., omission - or even hypercorrect insertion - of plural or third-person -s). While errors of both these types are essentially rather trivial, they do indicate lack of attention to detail, which is surely most unfortunate in a teaching book. Furthermore, the proliferation of careless errors very probably reinforces the belief of many students - often expressed openly at tertiary level - that accuracy in respect of such matters is not important or cannot reasonably be expected. It may also encourage students to assume that -s and other inflexions are unnecessary in many specific constructions where they in fact are required; or it may simply confuse them even further.

In addition, there are many 'non-careless' errors, involving localisms of an institutionalised nature. Some of these involve vocabulary: e.g., the repeated non-standard use of *miss* to mean 'leave out' on pp. 93ff. Others are grammatical: e.g., repeated errors in respect of 'tense' selection, in many cases involving the non-standard use of the simple present instead of other tense-aspect combinations, but in some other cases involving other 'tenses', for instance the present perfect (as in entry 6 on p. 1). More common still are cases where Chiu describes forms which are in fact standard as 'incorrect', etc. e.g., *as if he has* in entry 1 on p. 6, *to teach English* in entry 25 on p. 26, *refrain* in entry 3 on p. 112, *little'small* in entry 128 on p. 144, etc.

In this respect there is a tendency to declare standard American usage, in particular, to be 'incorrect' (e.g., *write her* in entry 32 on p. 43, *than* in entry 23 on p. 56, etc). Although it is true that the exonormative standard for Hong Kong is British (or English) English rather than American (in so far as the two standard varieties differ), it seems unrealistic, given the predominance in the media of material of American origin, to insist on British usage only where there is an established American standard equivalent.

Furthermore, the English of Chiu's own text contains a fairly large number of errors; the model he provides through his own usage is thus itself defective. Examples include *hundreds of audience* in entry 27 on p. 68, ellipsis of the verb after the subordinator *whereas* in entry 128 on p. 144, and several non-standardisms in his foreword, including omitted commas, redundant/misleading *the* in *the candidates*, an apparently idiosyncratic use of *should*, and problems with preposition selection.

The upshot of all this is that Chiu (1983) should certainly not be used as a text in this area, except by teachers who are themselves very familiar indeed with the details of English usage and hence able to correct Chiu where this is necessary. I would anticipate that few teachers would be able to do this reliably. This is not to say that Chiu's book is useless. In many other cases the information provided is accurate and helpful, but, as students cannot assume with any confidence that this is so in any particular entry, reliance on the book is dangerous.

(2) Occasionally one comes across a book of this kind, dealing explicitly with errors, which has been produced by a local scholar of much higher proficiency in English (and/or linguistics), and is thus much more accurate and reliable. Elsewhere (Newbrook 1989b, 1990) I have analysed one such book (Tse (1988)), and have compared it with one of the few works of this nature prepared by a native speaker of English (Newbrook (forthcoming); but see also below). Tse's book is a small, slim volume aimed at late-secondary school students, covering 90 carefully selected errors in ten broad linguistic categories and explaining how to avoid them. Since publication it has sold very successfully, both to secondary and to tertiary students seeking help with the details of their English. Tse himself (a lecturer at the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong) is unusually well versed in English by Hong Kong standards, and the focus of my papers is upon the extent to which he and I agree or disagree in respect of the relative *salience* of forms which we both identify as errors. Tse very occasionally identifies what appears to be standard usage as non-standard: e.g., use of the object forms of pronouns after *than*, which is nowadays probably to be seen as standard, though informal (entry IV.3 on p. 45); but in no case does he recommend or cite as standard any form which is in fact non-standard, except perhaps in the confusing entry II.3 on p. 19, where one suspects a printer's error (example 1 is almost non-sensical at it stands and the 'correct' answer given in respect of the blank requiring to be filled is clearly wrong). The level of error is so low that the book can be recommended without reservation to teachers and students. This is not to say that it covers all of the most important errors; as I indicate in my two papers on the book, there are at least nine local non-standardisms which in my view are so common and so damaging in their effect that they must be included in any work of this nature, however brief, but which are not included in Tse's book. But the errors which it does cover are accurately (and clearly) described.

Tse's book is one of a series of eight, covering various aspects of English usage, idiom, etc. and produced to a standardised format. It must be appreciated that not all of these are by any means as accurate as Tse (1988). For instance, Tse, T. W. (1988; author is *not* Tse, A. as in Tse (1988) discussed above) comprises 130 entries (145 pages), each dealing with an English idiom (metaphor, etc) or a group of related idioms. In this work there are around 50 errors in the English sentences presented, involving the idiom in question or other features of the sentences. These errors vary from quite basic errors involving omission of articles and such to more subtle and at times confusing errors; in places a sentence used to illustrate an idiom suggests that Tse has misunderstood the idiom or equated it too closely with a Chinese near-equivalent, and as a result the usage given is unnatural and in some cases would mislead or would be misconstrued in reading, etc. Given this error frequency (one every three pages), Tse, T. W. (1988) cannot be considered reliable.

(3) The majority of books used in this context by Hong Kong students are, however, of a more basic (and less reliable) nature, seldom discussing errors

explicitly and simply offering advice in the form of suggested translations and writing strategies. A typical work of this nature is Fang (1988; first edition 1951). In this book the text itself is minimal; there are no explanations at all of the principles behind the examples given. Furthermore, as intimated, there is no actual discussion of local errors; the English expressions given are simply rendered into Chinese, with examples (usually two, occasionally one, or three or more, per entry), and *vice versa*. Fang's book is openly aimed at translators, as he announces in his introduction and as the title suggests; and it is widely used by students up to and including tertiary level, for instance by students of Translation and Interpretation at the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong. The work has gone through nineteen print runs and, crucially, has been revised significantly on two occasions. It has sold approximately 51 000 copies altogether.

Elsewhere (Newbrook 1989a) I have analysed this work and in particular the first section (English-Chinese); and I refer readers to my extended comments in that paper. In summary, although this section and indeed the book as a whole are, naturally, by no means useless, it must be said that the work, like many others of its kind, has serious faults, the implication of which is that it should certainly not be used except by students working with a teacher who is able to correct it where necessary. In particular: some entries recommend highly informal usage in what appears to be a formal context; in some cases, the English expression listed appears not to exist, or at least to be very unusual (e.g., entry 100 deals with *during good behaviour*, which strikes most native speakers as very unfamiliar); some entries are misleading, for instance, entry 1 on *a, a-*, etc; in some cases, a Chinese expression which corresponds with two or more English expressions is given in translation of these English expressions, without any indication that the English expressions, while having some words in common, are not synonymous (e.g., entry 605, dealing with *used to*; Fang appears not to realise that the difference between *used to* (always past; followed by stem form) and *be used to* (any tense; followed by *-ing* form) is important in English (as it certainly is), or even that they are not synonymous); and, most seriously of all, there are very many errors in the English examples, some relevant to the point at issue and some involving another, irrelevant feature of the sentence given. Some of these errors are simply careless (no plural *-s*, etc), again suggesting that little or no proof-reading has been done. Others involve repeated errors with the use of articles and verb 'tenses' (especially the simple present used in place of the present perfect or the present progressive); and also more complex and specified grammatical and lexical errors of the types often found locally (*alphabet for letter* in entry 284; *may be* for *maybe* in entry 300; *take* for *eat* in entry 306; redundant *in the world* in entry 546; positive *ever* in entry 496; *go* for *come* in entry 505, etc). Many if not most of the errors exemplified are not idiosyncratic, but are characteristic local errors found in the work of a large number of Hong Kong students. It is difficult to give a precise figure for the number of errors; but there appear to be over 150 sheer errors of the types listed above, and

around 60 cases of strange, clumsy or unintentionally ambiguous usage (some of which might count as errors on a less generous appraisal). This works out to one error/piece of poor usage per 3 entries; around one per 6 sentences given; and over one per page of text. There is no evidence that this work is particularly 'bad' in this respect; this is perhaps the typical level of error in books of this kind.

(4) More reliable, of course, are the few books of this nature produced by native speakers. So far the best known of these has been Bunton (1989). Bunton is a long-term Hong Kong resident, an experienced teacher and examiner, and a Cantonese speaker. His work deals with over 300 common local errors, arranged alphabetically under key-words. There are also exercises with keys (much more extensive than those in Tse (1988)), checklists of common instances of various types of error, and a glossary. Bunton provides brief discussions of the nature of the errors and frequently offers explanations of their origins. Where first-language interference appears to be involved, he refers helpfully to the equivalent Cantonese expressions. Bunton states that his book is not aimed at any particular type of student, noting correctly that many of the errors persist in the usage of highly educated adult users of English in Hong Kong. However, his selection reflects a special (but not exclusive) concern with those errors which are more characteristic of students at lower educational levels (mid-secondary, etc).

Bunton's format excludes certain kinds of specifically grammatical error which cannot readily be listed under key-words, though he does in fact succeed in finding key-words for some grammatical errors. Within this constraint, however, the actual selection of errors is very reasonable. There are not very many obvious omissions or strange inclusions, and the degree of overlap with the relevant sections of Newbrook (forthcoming) is high (the latter work is wider in scope, including as it does purely grammatical errors and also phonological errors, both specific and general).

Items which seem to be important but which are omitted, in some cases surprisingly, include *actually*, *alphabet* ('letter'), *already*, *audience* ('member of the audience'), *besides* ('moreover'), *bias/discriminate towards* ('... against'), *catch up* ('keep up'), *Christian* ('Protestant'), *consist of/in* ('include'), *dropljop down* ('jot down'), *exist*, *foreigner* ('non-Chinese', 'westerner'), *gain/get* ('have'), *interested/interesting* (as in *I am ...*), *like to* ('tend to'), *master or can master* ('command'), *neglect* ('ignore'), *never mind* ('it's OK', etc), *nevertheless/yet* ('but'), *on the contrary* ('in contrast'), *on the other hand* ('moreover'), *replace/substitute* (and *replace a role*, etc), *runner-up*, *saying* ('statement'), *starting from ... to* ('from ... to'), *surely* ('certainly'), *totally* ('in all'), *used to/be used to*, *youth* (countable), and perhaps also *ambiguous*, *aspect*, *fact*, *kind/sort/type*, *subjective*, etc. On the other hand, Bunton includes a number of errors which are not found in Newbrook (forthcoming) (or in any other relevant work known to me) but which are clearly worth including.

As one would expect, Bunton makes no genuine errors with respect to usage; there is no endorsement of local non-standardisms, and there are no

cases where a form which is in fact standard is rejected. There are, however, a few cases where Bunton seems not to have noticed the existence of a convenient standard variant which could usefully be recommended. For instance, he fails to mention *this is because* when discouraging *it is because* (under *because*). Occasionally an item is listed under an unhelpful key-word, as where the construction *use X to Y* is listed under *point* rather than *use*, merely because *point* is one of the very many verbs which can occur in the 'Y' position in this structure.

The cumulative effect of all these minor blemishes is itself, however, minor, and the book can be recommended in strong terms to all teacher and secondary/tertiary students of English in Hong Kong.

As I said earlier, it is obvious that by far the most reliable books of this kind are produced by native speakers of English, or by local scholars such as Tse whose own English is of an exceptionally high standard. However, if other local writers continue to produce books of this nature – and there seems no prospect of their ceasing to do so – many students are likely to continue to use such books, particularly those in which the text is in Chinese. If the authors of such books are not to mislead further generations of students, they must be urged to submit their texts and in particular their examples to competent (i.e., native- or near-native-speaker) proof-readers; and to accept the modifications which these proof readers suggest. There is no shame in such a procedure; all second- and foreign-language learners, at whatever level, and indeed native speakers too, may require help from time to time with details of usage, especially in respect of formal written usage or the usage characteristic of other styles with which they are less familiar. This is especially the case for learners and users of English in Hong Kong, where the model provided locally by other Chinese is both infrequently heard (because Cantonese is so dominant) and itself already highly deviant. There is evidence that few Hong Kong Chinese (even those whose own English is largely error-free) are able to spot errors in others' work at all reliably. Tse is quite out of the ordinary in this respect.

Whatever texts they use, teachers and students should bear in mind one or two points about the distribution of errors and problems which is typical of Hong Kong student English. Students themselves are often completely wrong in their beliefs on this front. For instance, the vast majority of the individual errors made by students (and by the writers of the books discussed above, both in their texts and in their examples) involve grammar. Although many students seem to feel that they have a reasonable grasp of English grammar, the general frequency level of grammatical error in their writing (even at tertiary level) is in fact around 2 per line/short sentence. There is an associated belief amongst students that their most major problems in fact involve shortage of vocabulary; but this is much less striking as a source of error. In so far as vocabulary is centrally relevant to the overall level of students' English, the main area of difficulty is not so much shortage of words but the non-standard and often confusing use of the words which the students already know (as discussed by Bunton). This is particularly

obvious in writing, but to a lesser extent the same is probably true of students' spoken English.

A second misconception involves a measure of complacency amongst students as to their written English in general as opposed to their speech. Tertiary students in particular tend to assume that their written English is more impressive than their spoken. This may have been the case during their secondary school years, when they were understandably apprehensive and hesitant in speaking the language and much more accustomed to writing it. By the time they are in tertiary education, however, it is most unlikely that this is still the case, except for students whose English is especially weak. In speech, where simpler constructions predominate and where errors are less salient for the listener, students' fluency - and to some degree their accuracy - will have improved a good deal by this stage; but many of the un-noticed grammatical errors which will have pervaded their writing at secondary level will not have been corrected and will thus persist. The result of this is that students who have given a very good impression in respect of spoken English may suddenly find that their English is evaluated much less favourably by an expatriate teacher who has just seen their written work for the first time.

These two points suggest that the focus of emphasis in the teaching of English at late secondary level is perhaps wrong. Certainly much more work needs to be done on grammar and on written expression generally. Students should be encouraged to see both areas as requiring urgent attention, and to invest in books which deal with grammatical errors - and word usage errors - as well as providing new vocabulary.

In criticism of the above, it may be said that many students, whose motives for learning English are mainly 'instrumental' rather than 'integrative', are not particularly interested in reducing their frequency of errors, especially given that very many of them seriously underestimate the extent to which their English is deviant. Most English-learning goes on in classrooms where the teacher and other students are all Chinese, and, as a consequence, errors in usage, unless very blatant or directly relevant to what is being taught, pass un-noticed or at any rate are not singled out for comment. Some other learners are in a similar position, in as much as they have been using English mainly in application letters for jobs, and also in office memos and other such establishment-internal documents; again, the readers of such material are mostly Chinese. It is a sociolinguistic commonplace (see, e.g., Trudgill 1983:200) that people will not in general be sufficiently motivated to learn new language varieties, including new dialects of languages which they already know (or think they know), unless they can see that they are likely to succeed in learning these varieties and that material benefits are likely to accrue to them as a result. If this is not the case the effort involved is typically too great, especially when the new variety and the one which the speakers in question already command are similar and differ only in subtle ways which generate interference and confusion. We may add that this effect will be re-inforced in cases such as

that of Hong Kong, where many of the features of English which are specifically local relate to the structure of the students' first and dominant language, and thus make it easier for them to acquire and use this variety than to learn a standard variety with a structure which is more alien and awkward for them.

What strikes Hong Kong learners of English as really important, practically speaking, is probably simply acquiring the ability to express themselves in 'English' - no internal complexity is imagined - adequately for the internal functions outlined above (i.e., so that another Hong Kong Chinese can understand them). If there is any idea of impressing a reader with their accuracy or with 'good English' more generally, the imagined reader is almost certainly a fellow Chinese, more proficient in English but still a member of their own ethnic and linguistic group. Impressing such people will usually suffice for obtaining the rewards associated with knowledge of English. The statement 'but it's acceptable HERE' is sometimes heard in this context when a piece of English is criticised. Higher standards of accuracy are not perceived as necessary and the effort involved is thus not perceived as worthwhile.

I want to stress that I am not criticising students for adopting this sort of (partly subconscious) attitude. For many of them it may well be that their perception of the situation and its requirements is correct, and that there really is no need for them to attain a higher level of accuracy in English. I would, however, point out that some students, especially those intending to further their education overseas, *will* need to acquire English of a higher standard, and more specifically to reduce their error rate with a view to avoiding communication difficulties and stigmatisation.

If students do adopt the attitude outlined above, however, they cannot expect to obtain the benefits associated with an improved command of English. In particular, it will be very difficult for them to impress (or even to satisfy) educated native speakers with whom they come in contact; and any who pursue studies in English-speaking countries or apply for jobs involving heavy contact with native speakers will find that they have to revise their attitude and upgrade their English, perhaps at rather short notice and at a relatively advanced age where such adjustment is not easy. It is students of this kind who should, in my view, be urged most strongly to use reliable sources of information in working on improving their English, and to use these sources diligently. Of course, it is not always clear to teachers, especially in the relatively early stages of students' education, which students are likely to be in this position. Perhaps a clearer assessment of students' likely goals (both by teachers and by the students themselves) would help students and educators to come to reasonable decisions as to the level of accuracy to be sought, given each student's goals and expectations.

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FURTHER NOTES ON THE INFLUENCE OF CANTONESE ON THE ENGLISH OF HONG KONG STUDENTS

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These notes are supplementary to Webster, Ward and Craig 1987 (referred to in the text as ILEJ 3. 63-81). While no major change has taken place in the first author's attitudes towards and understanding of interference from Cantonese, a number of areas have been clarified and extended.

1. Spelling

Chinese children apparently learn spelling in much the same way as they learn Chinese characters; in other words, they learn the shape of the character.

Dialects such as Cantonese do use characters to express sounds, but even then there is no consistent link between a specific sound and a character. Other Asian languages have cognate but different problems; for example, Japanese can only spell in syllables, and therefore cannot represent two consonants placed next to each other.

There are two types of evidence for this, one specific and one general.

- 1.1. A teacher in Hong Kong a few years ago wrote a 'new' word on the blackboard . . . the word was *bit* . . . and asked a student to read it out. The student's reply was very interesting; he said, "But you haven't taught us how to say it yet." Now the word was about as simple as it could be, yet the student was unable to make the connection between the letters and the appropriate sound; he took the word *bit* as a 'character' in the Chinese sense.
- 1.2. The more general evidence is found in the types of mistakes Chinese students make. Of course there are many words which they simply get wrong, as an English child would, though in most ways Chinese students spell extremely well.

A large proportion of the mistakes are of a very distinct kind. Here are four very common ones: '*from* (for *form*), '*ture* (for *true*), '*bady* (for *baby*), and '*clam* (for *calm*). Either two letters have been transposed (as in '*ture*) or a letter has been reproduced back-to-front (as in '*bady*).

The students who misspelled these words made no connection between the letters and the sounds; they reproduced characters just the same way as they reproduce Chinese characters. The omission or misplacing of a stroke is a common mistake in Chinese writing.

Longer and more complicated words are misspelt in even more bizarre and illogical ways . . . at least, they are bizarre and illogical to anyone who sees any system in English spelling. We have for example the familiar **finanical* and **commerical* (possibly commoner than the correct versions).

Some years ago the first author extracted misspellings of this type from a batch of Form 7 essays; there were 70 essays, and at least fifty such errors, several of them repeated many times. The list which follows is a small selection taken from this one batch of essays only; instances of similar mistakes could be multiplied many times over.

* <i>expamle</i> (<i>example</i>)	* <i>plociy</i> (<i>policy</i>)
* <i>distrub</i> (<i>disturb</i>)	* <i>condifence</i> (<i>confidence</i>)
* <i>excatly</i> (<i>exactly</i>)	* <i>solider</i> (<i>soldier</i>)
* <i>secruity</i> (<i>security</i>)	* <i>Americia</i> (<i>America</i>)
* <i>destory</i> (<i>destroy</i>)	* <i>knid</i> (<i>kind</i>)
* <i>potilical</i> (<i>political</i>)	* <i>forigen</i> (<i>foreign</i>)
* <i>unsatisfcation</i> (error for <i>dissatisfaction</i>)	

2. Degrees of certainty

This is an area in which there are many pitfalls for the learner of any language! A lot of them are questions of culture; for example, in English, polite requests are usually phrased as questions (*Would you pass me the salt, please?*) when what is meant is an imperative (*Pass me the salt!*). Most greetings fall into the same category, where what is said is not necessarily what is meant.

An example of lack of precision over degrees of certainty is the use of the words *when* and *if* (in Chinese 當 *dòng* and 如果 *yùhgwó*), as used to refer to future time. These may seem very different, but even in English there are ambiguities.

When is used to refer to a time at which something will happen (there is no doubt that it will happen) e.g. *You may leave the classroom when the bell rings*. It is also used to refer to unlikely or impossible events, e.g. *I will give you a million dollars when you pass your exam* (This, unkindly, means that you have virtually no chance of passing your exam). Perhaps this is best described as a sarcastic use of a structure to mean exactly the opposite to its literal meaning.

If is used to talk about events about the likelihood of which the speaker does not intend to express any opinion, or which the speaker believes are unlikely to happen, e.g. *If he comes, offer him a cup of tea*. (This does not express any opinion on the likelihood of him coming, but merely offers it as a possibility.)

If he came, we would have to give him dinner (but I don't think he will come).

This leads up to an example which is almost universal in Hong Kong. *When there is a fire, do not use the lift* This represents the Cantonese (Chinese) words:

Dòng faatsāng fógíng sīh, chǐng maht síyuhng dihntài
當 發生 火警 時·請 勿 使用 電梯

When happen fire time, please don't use lift

In English, this means that a fire, or more likely several fires, will occur some time; the time is not identified, but the certainty of the fire's occurrence is! This is not the second usage of *when* indicated above, because notices cannot be sarcastic; they certainly cannot say the opposite of what they mean.

The fact that native speakers accept this without demur indicates that it is sufficiently close to what is correct to be passed (cf. the confusion between *less* and *fewer*). The distinction between *when* and *if* is actually not as clear as we have suggested above.

We can describe the words like this:—

如果 yùhgwó = if; 等陣 dǎngjahn and 一陣 yātjahn are used when something is likely to happen in the near future, and 當 dòng is used when it is in the more distant future. They do not seem to be as positive as the English word *when*.

While we were preparing this paper, this area caused a great deal of discussion, and it was difficult to define exactly what the differences were. However, it seems that Cantonese is less definite when talking about the future than the English use of *when*, and that the difference is more cultural than linguistic.

Here are examples of the use of 等陣 dǎngjahn, 一陣 yātjahn, and 當 dòng:—

(i) Dǎngjahn dihñwá héung, néih heui tètng lā.

等陣 電話 响 你 去 聽 啦

When the phone rings, go and answer it.

(ii) Yātjahn séui gwán, néih jauh heui chùnglèuhng

一陣 水 滾· 你 就 去 沖涼

When the water boils, you should go and have a bath.

(iii) Dòng ngóh yáuh jūkgau chín, ngóh wúih heui wàahnyàuh saigaa

當 我 有 足夠 錢· 我 會 去 環遊 世界

When I have enough money, I will travel round the world.

The first two mean that something is going to happen very soon, while the last one means that it will happen in the more distant future. It could be argued that *when* = 當 dòng here is very close in meaning to *if*.

3. Suggestions

Hong Kong speakers of English, even at relatively advanced levels, follow the verb *suggest* with an infinitive. The following are examples of how this error is used:—

*She suggested me to buy a new car.

*I suggested to go to (see) a movie.

The correct sentences would be:—

She suggested (that) I bought a new car.

I suggested going to (see) a movie.

(Other possible structures with *suggest* are

She suggested that I buy a new car (subjunctive)

She suggested I should buy a new car.)

In Cantonese they would be:—

Kéuih tàiyih ngòh máaih ga sàh chè

佢 提議 我 買 架 新 車

She suggest I buy new car

Ngòh tàiyih heui táihei

我 提議 去 睇 戲

I suggest go see movie

There are two ways here in which Cantonese differs from English.

- (i) The unmarked form of the verb is used (買 máaih, 去 heui) and this is exactly the same form which is shown by dictionaries as the equivalent of the English infinitive (in other words, the problem lies with the complexity of the English verb system rather than the simplicity of the Cantonese).
- (ii) The Cantonese verb 去 heui is used almost like a preposition, in the same way as 俾 béi is. In Cantonese usage the verb 提議 tàiyih - *suggest* is frequently followed by 去 heui even when there is no particular idea of 'going somewhere'.

e.g. Ngòh tàiyih heui sikh faahn

我 提議 去 食 飯

I suggest we have dinner (literally, go and eat rice)

An additional factor leading to the mistaken usage identified above is that large numbers of English verbs are followed by an infinitive in just such sentences, even verbs of similar meaning: e.g. *I recommend you to see a doctor*

This probably accounts for the fact that this error, unlike most of those we have discussed, is not restricted to speakers of Chinese and related languages; it is equally common among European learners of English.

Another way of making a suggestion in English is by saying *Let's (go swimming)* or *How about (going swimming)?*

Cantonese omits the *let's* or the *how about* and merely says

heui yàuhséui lo

去 游泳 咯

Go swimming?

or heuim'heui yàuh'séui a
去唔去 游水 呀?
Go-not-go swimming?

Because Cantonese does not normally use the same structures as English, one further mistake is commonly made, and that is to put an unnecessary *to* after *let's*, e.g. **Let's to go swimming*.

A similar mistake occurs with a number of verbs which are followed by the infinitive without *to* e.g. **He made me to copy out my homework again*. (Correct English:—*He made me copy out my homework again*) The same infinitive without *to* is used after *see, hear, feel, watch, notice, help* (usually).

4. *Help, change, and send*

These three words are examples of the way in which the difference in approach between the two languages causes learners to make errors. In all three cases, it is clearly demonstrable that Cantonese and English thought-patterns view the concepts differently

4.1. *Help*. In English the concept is giving assistance by doing something with somebody e.g. *I'll help you lift this table; you take one end and I'll take the other*. It can also be used in a more generalised sense, as *Jack helps his father by cleaning the car for him*. Here the concept is not that John and his father together clean the car, but that John's action in cleaning the car provides a kind of generalised assistance to his father.

In Cantonese the concept is giving assistance by doing something *with or for* somebody. e.g. **The maid helps us to cook the dinner*. (This is wrong in English, as the maid does the cooking by herself, not together with 'us').

Gógo néuhgungyáhn wúih bòng ngohdeih jyú máahnfaahn
個女主人 會幫我哋煮晚飯

Correct English would be *The maid helps us BY cooking the dinner* (i.e. the secondary meaning of *help* = generalised assistance).

4.2. *Change*. In this case the focus is different. In English the speaker focuses on the old object; in Cantonese the speaker focuses on the new object. Suppose a light bulb is broken. English could use the following three sentences:-

The bulb is broken; I'll change it for a new one

The bulb is broken; I'll exchange it for a new one.

The bulb is broken, I'll replace it with a new one

In all three *it* refers to the old, broken bulb

Cantonese says *I'll change a new one* (for it)

Ngóh wúih wuhn go sán-ge dangdám

我會換個新燈泡

I will change that new bulb

The action being described is the same; it's just that English and Cantonese have different ways of looking at it

- 4.3. *Send*. The third example of differences of semantic spread is in the word *send*. In English a distinction is made between whether the 'sender' accompanies the person or object or not; Cantonese does not make this distinction. So in English we send a letter or a message . . . but the only people that we send are those who go away and leave us (a messenger, a delegate, a representative).

A common error is **When you leave, I will send you to the airport*. In English this implies that the person addressed is a parcel or a letter or something of little importance. But the Chinese speaker is intending to be very polite by going with his guest to the airport and saying farewell to him! The reason for this misunderstanding lies in the Cantonese word 送 *sung*, which can be used both for the unaccompanied letter and for the accompanied important guest. Thus:

Ngóh wúih sung néih heui gèichèuhng

我 會 送 你 去 機 場

I will go with you to the airport.

It looks as though the fundamental difference underlying the three superficially different problems is that Cantonese is more inward-looking while English is more outward-looking. Cantonese relates everything to the subject of the sentence rather than looking away from the subject (by subject here we mean the thing being talked about, not necessarily the grammatical subject of the sentence).

Perhaps this is the explanation for the common Hong Kong expression,

He's not back yet

Kéuih juhng meih faanlaih

佢 仲 未 番 嚟

(used by a secretary of her boss who has not yet arrived at the office). The concept is that the office (i.e. where the speaker is) is the centre of the world where he, the boss, belongs. Correct English would be, *He's not in yet*, allowing the boss to decide where the centre of his world is, home or office.

5. Causative *Have*

Causative *have*, to have something done, does not occur in Cantonese, so the simple verb is incorrectly used instead:

**I cut my hair at the barber's shop*

**I made my clothes at the tailor's*

6. Redundancy

- 6.1. The concept *return* seems to cause a great number of problems. The basic sentence structure in Cantonese is as follows.

He went back home

Kéuih fāanjo ngūkkéi

佢 番咗 屋企

This gives rise to two common errors:—

**He backed (to) home*. This error reflects the confusion between parts of speech which we have mentioned several times in this series; *back* is an adverb in English, not a verb, in this sense at least.

**He returned back home*. This seems to be over-compensation for the fact that the Cantonese original has the word 番 fāan = *back* but does not appear to have a verb; *back* is retained, but a verb is inserted which also contains the idea 'back'.

6.2. **According to my opinion, I think he is right*.

Gāngeui ngóhge yigin, ngóh yihngwaih kéuih haih ngāamge

根據 我嘅 意見 我 認為 佢 係 啱嘅

According my opinion I believe he is right

(Correct English is *In my opinion, he is right*. Cantonese uses a redundant expression; English does not.)

6.3. **The reason is because . . .* reflects Cantonese:

yùhnyán haih yànwaih

原因 係 因為

Correct English would say *the reason is that*.

7. The intrusive preposition

7.1. Where one language uses a preposition but the other does not (ILEJ 3.77):

e.g. verbs of movement take a direct object in Cantonese

Kéuih tīngyaht dou Bákging

佢 聽日 到 北京

He arrives IN Beijing tomorrow

This seems to lead to the very common error **I went TO shopping*, which is a kind of over-compensation by students who learn to put a preposition in English after verbs of movement.

There seems to be a clear tendency for English to use more prepositions and Cantonese to use less.

7.2. **We need to discuss about our future plans*, reflecting

ngohdeih sèuyiu tóuleuhn gwàanyù ngóhdeih jèunglòih ge gaiwaahk

我哋 需要 討論 關於 我哋 將來 嘅 計劃

8. Deictic Conjunctions

There are several conjunctions in Chinese which perform this deictic function (see ILEJ 3.74). The three commonest seem to be:

yìhché 而且

lihng yāt fōngmihn 另一方面

chíngoih 此外

For 而且 yìhché the dictionary says *moreover, in addition*, for 另一方面 lihng yat fōngmihn it says *on the other hand, besides*; and for 此外 chíngoih it says *furthermore, besides*.

This is misleading; it would be truer to say that these words have no equivalent in English, but are used merely as markers indicating the beginning of a new sentence or paragraph. They should not be translated, nor should their dictionary equivalents be used in English anywhere near as frequently as they are in Chinese.

Conclusion

The exact relationship between L1 and L2 can never be accurately defined, but it is possible to identify certain sources of error both in the first language and in the target language, and to speculate with some confidence on how mistakes occur. This and the previous article are attempts to collect together clear instances of first language interference to act as a guide to the classroom teacher, who may be aware of the problem, but has rarely had the opportunity to rationalise it. Remedial teaching should concentrate not only on remedying the error but also on showing the student why he is making that error.

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Webster, M. A., Ward, Dr. A., and Craig, Dr. K. 1987. 'Language errors due to first language interference (Cantonese) produced by Hong Kong students of English.' *ILEJ* 3: 63-81

A STUDY OF ERRORS MADE BY F6 STUDENTS IN THEIR WRITTEN ENGLISH WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO STRUCTURES INVOLVING THE TRANSITIVE VERB AND THE PASSIVE CONSTRUCTION

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Introduction

This article is an attempt to examine some errors made by F6 students in Hong Kong in their written English in structures involving the transitive verb and the passive construction.

Errors made by F6 students were chosen to be the subject of this study because errors made by students at upper secondary levels have always been a source of worry and concern for educationists. These students have completed more than ten years of English learning, and persistence of major errors would seem to imply that there are inadequacies in the teaching programme or that learning has not been properly effected. A look at some reports made by examiners in the Use of English Examination paper will show the types of errors made by students seeking degree and diploma studies.

The usual errors of spelling, grammar and vocabulary were present and according to all the markers -- more frequently present than ever before. The grammatical errors were so numerous it is difficult to isolate and enumerate them. Glaring mistakes included lack of concord, misuse of tenses, indeed even genders of pronouns, wrong parts of speech, intrusive or missing articles and inappropriate singular/plural forms (1987 Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination Annual Report: 187).

Apart from the usual grammatical mistakes such as mistakes in the use of articles, prepositions, absence of concord and misuse of words ... There were many instances of complete ignorance of English structures (1988 Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination Annual Report: 172).

Candidates of average ability tended to produce many of the standard errors with which most teachers will be familiar. The most obvious of these included errors of concord between subject and verb, errors related to the use of the definite and indefinite articles, errors in the use of plural markers, errors in the use of verb forms and verb patterns, errors in the choice of prepositions, and spelling errors (1989 Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination Annual Report: 183).

These reports bring home, all too clearly, that there are some items or areas in English which present problems for the majority of Hong Kong learners. It

is difficult to say where these problems lie or what has been missing from the teaching programme or what lacks reinforcement, but it seems obvious that to tackle the errors at their roots so that appropriate remedies and follow-up work can be sought, it is paramount that the sources of the errors be identified. It is only through a systematic working out of the causes of the errors the students make can we hope to begin to think of some ways to improve teaching and learning.

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore every type of error made. Structures involving the transitive verb and the passive construction were chosen for this study on account of the amount of difficulty these structures present to the students, as evident in their written work, and the amount of interest the sources of these errors present to educationists from a pedagogic point of view. In the case of the transitive verb, the interest lies in the sort of first-language induced errors many students have a tendency to make; in the case of the passive, the degree of the difficulty of the construction faced by the students as reflected in their written work presents an area that is worth investigating. It is of course by no means asserted that the panacea for poor language learning lies in an analysis of the errors committed. Other factors such as students' motivation, their attitude towards English, aptitude, quality of instruction, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic factors clearly play a large part in accounting for students' inability to learn. Nonetheless, it is hoped that teachers of English can consider the observations made in this study in their attempt in drawing up a framework for corrective treatment to help their students to overcome at least some of the linguistic difficulties they encounter in the course of learning English as a second language in Hong Kong.

Method

The erroneous sentences that appear in this article are drawn from the written compositions of F6 students from five secondary schools in Hong Kong. Of these five schools selected, one was a government school founded five years ago, and the rest were aided schools. Among the aided schools, one was what was previously called a 'Grant School'; as for the other three aided schools, one was founded about 85 years ago, one about 23 years ago, and one two years ago. The five schools were located on Hong Kong Island, in Kowloon and in the New Territories. It is hoped that this attempt at diversification can produce a microscopic picture of the standard of English of lower-sixth form students in Hong Kong. To gather samples of errors, one free composition from each of the students of one F6 class at each of the five schools was examined. All together, 156 compositions were collected. In trying to establish a deviant form as an 'error' rather than a 'mistake' (Corder 1981: 10), the deviant form was first identified. If the learner was found to be consistent in using the deviant form, the form was considered an 'error'. If not, the form was considered a 'mistake' and was not included in the study. If there was only a single occurrence of a deviant form, the form was also

considered an 'error'. When there were cases when the learner seemed to be indeterminate in his choice between a correct form and a deviant form, the form concerned was also regarded as an 'error'. Errors involving the transitive verb and the passive construction were then categorized and explained from a grammatical point of view. Because the errors do not submit themselves to easy classification, the explanations for the errors so identified may be subjective. All the students involved had a common linguistic background in that they were all Cantonese speaking. Students with a knowledge of any third language were left out of the study. Whenever it is necessary to translate students' sentences into Cantonese, free translations or literal translations into English are given. For the benefit of those readers who do not have a working knowledge of written Chinese, the Chinese characters that accompany the English sentences have been romanized.

The Transitive Verb

Transitive verbs have always posed problems to Cantonese students who fail to appreciate that some verbs, under certain conditions, may have to take an object or object complement to form a complete sentence. The difficulty, however, does not seem to be a conceptual one for transitive verbs do not belong to a special category that is unique in the English language. Indeed, both transitive and intransitive verbs exist in the grammar of Cantonese. Helen Kwok defines the Cantonese transitive verb and lists four types of objects with which a transitive verb can be collocated. "A transitive verb is defined in this study as one which collocates with one of these objects. The four types of objects shall be known as the goal, the causative object, the instrumental object and the locative object" (Kwok 1971:19). Some examples illustrating the four types of objects taken from Kwok's book are:

sīk jó fān mēi āa
食 咗 飯 未 呀?

Have you eaten (your) rice yet? (goal)

gīn dóu jōng che
見 倒 撞 車

Saw cars colliding. (causative)

něi gám sái duńg séui
你 敢 洗 凍 水?

You dare to wash with cold water? (instrumental)

fān deī hāa ge jaā
瞓 地 下 嗎?

(You) only sleep on the floor. (locative)
(Kwok, 1971:19)

Negative Transfer

Transitive verbs are thus present in Cantonese. If, as mentioned, one of the problems Cantonese students have with transitive verbs is their failure to use them with appropriate objects or with any object at all, then translating some Chinese sentences into English may produce perfectly grammatical sentences. Consider the following sentences,

ngǒ tái dīn sì
我 睇 電 視

I watch television.

keuīh dei m sik ngǒ
我 哋 唔 識 我

They do not know me.

However, although the first language may produce a "rather rich and specific set of hypotheses" (Corder 1978:79) which second language learners can apply to their learning of the target language, in some cases direct translation from the first language may lead to errors. The following sentences are illustrative of this point:

**There are many facilities, but the people don't use.*

有 好 多 設 施 但 係 嗰 人 唔 用
yǎu hóu do tsít si, dànǎn hāi di yàn m yǔng
Have very many facilities, but those people not use

**I threw the stick out, and let him pick up for me.*

我 拋 支 棍 出 去 等 佢 執 返 俾 我
ngǒ paaui ji gwān cheut hēui, daǎng keuīh jap faan béi ngǒ
I throw (classifier) stick out go, let he pick back give I

The above erroneous English sentences reflect the syntactical structure of the Cantonese sentences where the objects 設施 tsít si (*facilities*) and 棍 gwān (*stick*) occur only in the first clause of the sentences and are not repeated after the verbs 用 yǔng (*use*) and 執 jap (*pick*), which is obligatory in the case of English. The error can be attributed to negative transfer. Chao Yuen Ren, commenting on the use of the transitive verb in Chinese, writes, "In general, an object to a transitive verb is omitted if it has occurred in a near context, whether or not as object to the verb in question". The example Chao gives is 我看完了報·你要看嗎? *I have finished reading the newspaper. Do you want to read it?* (Chao 1968:312), where in English *it* is required after *read*, but in idiomatic written Chinese and spoken Cantonese, the pronoun for *newspaper* is omitted.

The students who wrote the two erroneous sentences had omitted the objects to *use* and *pick*, probably because of an interference problem.

The corpus of compositions examined provides evidence to suggest that while F6 students do not have much difficulty with simple structures

involving transitive verbs, they do have problems with compound sentences involving more complicated structures as in the examples cited above. They encounter even greater difficulty with the English passive with transformational rules totally different from Chinese passive transformational rules and usage much less restricted.

The Passive

Like the transitive verb, the concept of passivity is not unfamiliar to Chinese students. In Chinese, the passive is indicated by the word 被 (bèi) or 將 (jeung). The transformational rules for the Chinese passive involve the grammatical subject preceding the passive marked (PM) bèi or jeung, which is followed by the agent of the action and then the main verb. In a passive construction, Kwok says, "the grammatical subject is placed before the passive marker, which is in turn followed by the other nominal denoting the agent and the predicate" (Kwok 1971:57). Hence, a Cantonese passive sentence will have as its components *N1 be'i N2 V* or *N1 jeung N2 V*. Some examples are

佢 被 上司 辭退
He PM (his) boss dismiss
He is dismissed by his boss.

我 將 佢 罰
I PM he punish
He is punished by me.

The passive, however, occurs only rarely in Cantonese. Kwok, quoting Wang Li, says, "When we speak, and are narrating events or actions, we use the active voice more often than the passive" which is mostly used to "express things which are not pleasant or not desired, such as those producing harmful results, or being involved in accidents, being deceived, being hurt and so on" (Kwok 1971:57). Some writers try to explain this infrequent occurrence of the passive construction in Chinese in terms of its being rare in topic-prominent (Tp) languages such as Chinese, as compared to subject-prominent (Sp) languages of which English is one. Li and Thompson have this to say about the Chinese passive construction:

The relative insignificance of the passive in Tp languages can be explained as follows: in Sp languages, the notion of subject is such a basic one that if a noun other than the one which a given verb designates as its subject becomes the subject, the verb must be marked to signal this 'non-normal' subject choice In Tp languages, it is the topic, not the subject, that plays a more significant role in sentence construction. Any noun phrase can be the topic of a sentence without registering anything on the verb. It is, therefore, natural that the passive construction is not as widespread in Tp languages as it is in Sp languages (Li 1976:467).

The notion of topic prominence is dealt with in greater detail in another article in this journal. For our purpose here, suffice it to say that the Chinese passive construction has rather restricted usage. This creates a problem of transfer in students and may account for some of the gross errors in English passive constructions.

An analysis of the errors made with the passive construction suggests that their sources can be categorized under three headings: inappropriate use of the passive, failure to use the passive where appropriate, and errors made in the formation of passive sentences.

1. Inappropriate use of the passive

Some of the sentences made by the students were:

**All countries are belonged to one big family.*

**Some problems are not happened.*

The above sentences suggest two possibilities why the errors have been made.

1.1 Ignorance of rule restrictions

The problem faced by the students who wrote the above two sentences seems to be a failure to observe the restrictions imposed on any active sentence undergoing the passive transformation, i.e., the active sentence to be so transformed must contain two noun phrases – a subject noun phrase and an object noun phrase, and that the verb in the active sentence has to be an 'action' transitive verb that takes objects. Breaking such restriction rules would result in erroneous sentence such as those that we find here.

1.2 Negative transfer

Interference from L1 appears to be another possible explanation for the errors committed. It is difficult to say whether those sentences were ever intended to be passive sentences. The sentences 'resemble' passive sentences because of the verb *be* and *be* might have been inserted into the sentences because of a direct translation from Cantonese.

係 *hâi* in Cantonese is often translated into *be* as in a sentence like

keu^h *hâi* yat gō yī sāng

佢 係 個 醫生

He is a doctor.

He *be* one (classifier) doctor

A translation of the erroneous sentences into Cantonese suggests the workings of Cantonese producing *be* in the sentences:

**All countries are belonged to one big family.*

所有國家係屬於個大家庭

só yǎu gwok gaa *hâi* sūk yu yāt gō dāi gaa ting

All country *be* belong one (classifier) big family

*Some problems are not happened.

有 啲 問 題 係 冇 發 生 到

yǎu di mǎn tài hài mǒu fāat sang dōu

Some problem be not happen (aspect marker completion)

II. Failure to use the passive where appropriate

There are quite a number of cases in the compositions examined where the students had failed to use the passive when such a construction was called for:

*Trade between Hong Kong and other countries will affect.

*The prisoner will release.

*Solar energy can save in the house.

*The problem cannot solve.

*Babies can take to the orphanage.

The above sentences resemble what have sometimes been described as 'pseudo passives' (Li 1976) or 'putative passives' (Schachter and Rutherford 1979). If explained from a grammatical/syntactical point of view, there are two possibilities why the errors have been made.

II.1 Chinese and English passive constructions operate on different rules

Chinese students rarely have difficulty in formulating Chinese passive sentences. This stems from the obvious fact that they have vast exposure to the construction and that Chinese passive transformational rules are less complex than English passive transformational rules. (Transformational-generative grammarians for example, assert that three rules are required to turn English active sentences into passive sentences: NP Switch Rule, *by* insertion rule, and *be-EN* insr'tion rule (Lester 1971)). The lack of exposure to the use of the English passive and the complications involved in its formulation might have been responsible for the students' failure to write acceptable English passive sentences. It is worth pointing out that the Cantonese versions of the first two sentences are themselves passive sentences. In other words, even though positive transfer might have taken place with regard to concept, the difficulty remained, and this was one of unfamiliarity with English passive transformational rules and their operation.

II.2 Negative Transfer

Again, negative transfer may account for some of the errors made. The last three sentences appear to have evolved from a direct translation from Cantonese, in which case the passive voice, though it may be implied, does not manifest itself in a 'recognizable form'.

*Solar energy can save in the house.

太 陽 能 可 以 儲 存 喺 屋 企

taai yeung nang hó yi ch'yu ch'yun hái uk kái

Solar energy can save in home

*The problem cannot solve.
問 題 唔 可 以 解 決
mân tài m̄ hó yǐ gáai kyūt
Problem not can solve

*Babies can take to the orphanage.
啤 啤 可 以 送 去 孤 兒 院
bi bi hó yǐ sung heui gwù yi yûn
Babies can take to orphanage

III. Errors in the passive construction

Some such examples are:

- *The T.V. companies will also be affect.
- *Many special doctors will be invite.
- *Campaigns are launch frequently.
- *Many buildings have been constructing in Shatin.
- *It has been arguing that examination will put too much pressure on the students.

An analysis of the errors made suggests that the errors might have been due to two sources.

III.1 Incomplete appliclotion of rules

The failure to inflect the main verb for past participle in the first three sentences is a reflection of an incomplete application of transformational rules. It has been mentioned that if we explain the derivation of passive sentences in the context of transformational-generative grammar, three rules need to be applied to the active sentence. Without going too deeply into transformational-generative grammar, we can remark that the students who wrote the first three sentences had failed to apply the *be-EN* insertion rule in its entirety. While the *be* part was applied, giving *be* in the sentences, the *EN* part which manifests itself as the past participle of the main verb was not. While it may not be realistic to introduce transformational-generative grammar to secondary school students, the errors committed do point to the need of reinforcing in students the various steps involved in changing active sentences into passive sentences in English.

III.2 Mixing up of forms

The last two sentences illustrate the students' confusion of the passive with the perfect progressive reflecting, yet again, their shaky mastery of the structure of the English passive.

Conclusion

The errors in this study were made by F6 students who have at least received instruction in English for more than eleven years. It is difficult to say whether the errors made have already been 'fossilized' and learning has stopped. A very carefully designed teaching programme to be implemented over a considerable period of time may be needed to eradicate these errors, but great effort on the part of the teacher and the learner himself may be needed to eradicate errors that are too deeply ingrained. Yet, for any programme to be successful, consideration will have to be given to including activities/tasks that directly address the root of the problem. It cannot, of course, be claimed that this article can answer all the problems encountered by students in their written English involving the transitive verb and the passive construction. We have seen, in an earlier part of this study, that there is not one, but many factors that constitute students' inability to learn. Still it is hoped that the observations made in this article can be of some help to teachers of English in designing appropriate remedial work for their students. Working with a knowledge of the causes of the errors students produce can make language teaching a less taxing task and language learning for our students a less painful process.

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TYPOLOGICAL TRANSFER: A FACTOR IN THE LEARNER LANGUAGE OF HONG KONG STUDENTS?

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Abstract

In this study, we investigate the role of language typology and its relationship to language transfer in Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking learners of English following the method developed by Rutherford (1983). Thirty Cantonese-speaking F.2 students were first tested in elicited production of complex sentences on a pre-defined topic. In the next test, fifty Cantonese-speaking Chinese students ranging from F.1 to F.5 were tested for elicited production of complex sentences on the same topic. The test results are used to argue that first language (L1) topic-prominence serves to produce topic-comment structures in the early stages of second language acquisition (SLA).

Introduction

Language transfer in early studies was considered solely as the carry-over of surface forms from the native language (NL) to a second language (L2) context. For example, if a Hong Kong Chinese speaker learning English says, '*The rain very big!*', one could argue that this utterance represents surface Cantonese structure (㗎雨好大呀!). Corder (1983) opposed this narrow view and called for the abolition of the term 'transfer'. He adopted the term 'mother tongue influence', whereas some scholars used other terms like 'cross-linguistic influence' and 'cross-linguistic generalization'.

Recently language transfer has been implicitly and explicitly redefined. For most researchers, language transfer involves the use of native language information in the acquisition of a second language (Gass 1988). Depending on the author consulted, factors like transfer of typological organization, different paths of acquisition, avoidance and over-production of certain elements may be included in the definition.

Research focus

William E. Rutherford (1983) presents evidence suggesting the existence of two interlanguage tendencies: (1) that all learners, irrespective of mother tongue or target tongue, will choose routes of acquisition that have something in common, and (2) that these same acquisition routes will reveal differences that are traceable to influences from the native language. The

data he collected suggests a developmental sequence moving from topic-comment to subject-predicate in the acquisition of sentential subjects and existentials. Rutherford's research included, amongst others, Mandarin but no Cantonese native-speaker subjects. It is thus important to discover if these tendencies exist in Cantonese learners of English as a second or foreign language; this is the research focus of this paper.

Like Greenberg (1966), Li and Thompson (1976) and Thompson (1978), Rutherford considers Mandarin a SVO language which is topic-prominent with pragmatic word order (it is fairly free of grammatical restrictions and the subject-verb-object (SVO) order is not rigid). English, by contrast, is a SVO language which is subject-prominent with grammatical word order (i.e. a fairly rigid SVO order). Flynn and Espinal (1985) state as fact that Chinese (Mandarin) unlike English, but like Japanese, is substantively head-final. That is, modifiers of the noun, the verb, and the adjective precede their heads. This property can be shown in the following sentence:

Nà-ge zhèn zài chī fàn de xiǎo hái zì zài kū.
That is eating rice (rel.) little child is crying.

modifiers
head

Topic
Comment

Basically Chinese matches English in its SVO order, even though Chinese is head-final, as are SOV languages. This means that Chinese is syntactically flexible. Thus we can say the two languages, Chinese and English, are very different in the above three aspects. In this case, as Kellerman (1983) argues, transfer may not be so likely to take place.

Rutherford tries to reconcile his results with the framework proposed by Kellerman by suggesting that learners may perceive discourse-related information as less marked, or more universal, than syntax-related information and hence more available for transfer. Rutherford finds evidence of transfer in the overproduction of dummy subjects by Japanese and Korean speakers, based on the typological organization of the native language.

Cantonese and Topic-Prominence

In studying the language typology of Cantonese, we argue that it is topic-prominent since Cantonese syntax basically follows the features of topic-comment sentences defined by Charles N. Li (1976) as listed below. The phenomenon can be represented by the following Cantonese examples.

1. *Surface coding*: the topic is always in initial position.

香 港 樣 樣 都 好 過 大 陸
Hong Kong everything is better than Mainland China.

2. *The passive construction*: passivization does not occur at all, or appears as a marginal construction.
3. *'Dummy subjects'* such as *there is* and *it is* may be found in subject-predicate(Sp) languages but not in topic-prominent (Tp) languages.

落雨喇！

Raining!

4. *Double subject*: Tp languages are characterised by the pervasive so-called 'double subject' construction.

大陸上面 啲人 好 窮

Mainland China people very poor.

5. *Controlling co-reference*: In a Tp language, the topic, and not the subject, typically controls co-referential constituent deletion.

佢 煮 啲餸 好 差，所以我 無 食 到。

She cooked food very badly so I didn't eat. (any deleted).

6. *V-final languages*: Tp languages tend to be verb-final languages. Chinese is in the process of becoming one (Li & Thompson 1974a & 1974b)

你 敢 出 去？

You dare out go?

7. *Constraints on topic constituent*: While certain Sp languages only allow the two-subject constituent and the genitive of the surface subject constituent to be the subject, other (Tp) languages place no grammatical constraint on the constituent selected as topic.

Present Research Purposes

This study aims (1) to test the hypothesis that Cantonese learners of English would actually produce topic-prominent structures in their written English -- just as Rutherford's Mandarin subjects did; (2) to discover evidence for a SLA developmental sequence moving from topic-comment structures to subject predicate (Subject-Verb-Object) structures at the various proficiency levels examined. In other words, it was hoped to find out how, on the interlanguage scale, learners progress from L1-like structures to L2-like ones.

Hypothesis

For this study we hypothesized that if in a test of writing samples similar to those used in the original studies by Rutherford (1983), results for the Cantonese-speaking Chinese were comparable to those for the Mandarin-speaking Chinese, then this would provide strong empirical support for the role of the topic-comment feature of the mother tongue in shaping the

acquisition of English. We would also expect to find the same developmental sequence from topic-comment structures to subject-predicate structures by comparing performance at different proficiency levels ranging from F.1 to F.5. Such a hypothesis may be proposed since the language typologies of Mandarin and Cantonese are considered to be basically the same.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted the following experiment with Cantonese-speaking Chinese students learning English as a second language.

Procedure

In order to ensure comparability with the previous study, the design and methodology of this study matched those of Rutherford. The first test aimed at finding traces of the presence of topic prominent features so as to test our hypothesis that Cantonese-speaking learners of English would produce sentences attributable to L1 typological transfer. We examined 30 Cantonese-speaking F.2 secondary school learners of English. They were assigned to write a composition on a pre-defined topic and content, "Hong Kong is a better place than China", in a limited time span of 10 minutes. Attention was paid to the three prominent features of topic-comment typology outlined by Rutherford: (1) 'putative passive'; (2) 'serial verbs' with existential; and (3) unextraposed sentential subjects with internal complete SVO structure.

If the results of Test 1 matched Rutherford's, we would then proceed to Test 2 which aimed at verifying whether the developmental sequence of topic-comment sentences to subject-predicate, as found in Mandarin speakers, matched that of our Cantonese speakers. A total of 50 learners ranging from F.1 to F.5, with 10 from each form, were randomly selected to write an essay on the topic used in Test 1. If the rate of Tp structures occurred in descending order while Sp structures occurred in ascending order from F.1 to F.5, then this would lend support to our hypothesis. Therefore, the collected samples were classified according to a mixed version of Rutherford's classifications of the sentences produced by Mandarin speakers, and that of production of existentials by Japanese native speakers. This provided us with a more elaborate system of analysis.

Thus our revised system of classification was as follows:

1. Topic and subject coincide
2. Subject distinct from topic
3. Existentials as topic-introducer, topic and subject merge
4. Existentials with predicate in infinitive form
5. Existentials with relative clause
6. Indefinite noun phrases in initial position without existentials
 - 6.1 Noun phrases with relative pronouns or conjunctions
 - 6.1.1 Locative as topic and subject
 - 6.1.2 Locative as topic and predicate
 - 6.1.3 Full existentials, subject in initial position and topic in the final.

The following examples taken from our subjects may help to explain our classification*:

1. $\overbrace{\text{The money out and in}}^{\text{T}} \overbrace{\text{isn't clear.}}^{\text{C}}$
 $\underbrace{\hspace{10em}}_{\text{S}} \underbrace{\hspace{5em}}_{\text{P}}$

2. $\overbrace{\text{But in Hong Kong,}}^{\text{T}} \overbrace{\text{it is a good place for shopping.}}^{\text{C}}$
 $\underbrace{\hspace{10em}}_{\text{S}} \underbrace{\hspace{5em}}_{\text{P}}$

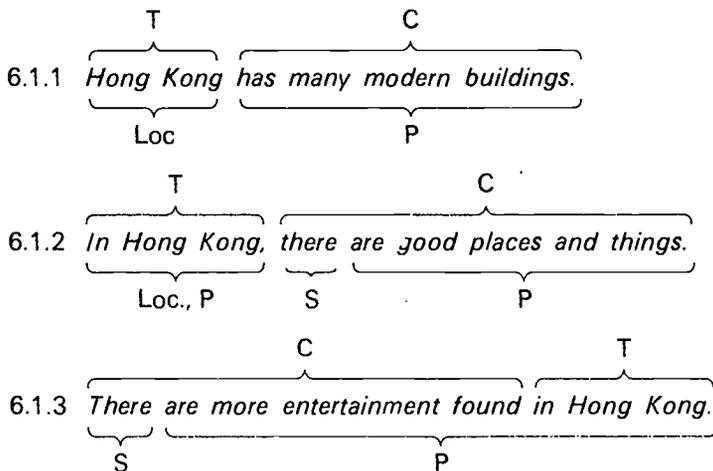
3. $\overbrace{\text{There were many people}}^{\text{T}} \overbrace{\text{left Hong Kong.}}^{\text{C}}$
 $\underbrace{\hspace{10em}}_{\text{S}} \underbrace{\hspace{5em}}_{\text{P}}$

4. $\overbrace{\text{There is many new machines and machines}}^{\text{T}} \overbrace{\text{to use.}}^{\text{C}}$
 $\underbrace{\hspace{10em}}_{\text{S}} \underbrace{\hspace{5em}}_{\text{P}}$

5. $\overbrace{\text{There's one saying inside the China inland}}^{\text{T}} \overbrace{\text{that the people ...}}^{\text{C}}$
 $\underbrace{\hspace{10em}}_{\text{S}} \underbrace{\hspace{5em}}_{\text{P}}$

6. $\overbrace{\text{Hong Kong people}}^{\text{T}} \overbrace{\text{have more freedom of speech.}}^{\text{C}}$
 $\underbrace{\hspace{10em}}_{\text{S}} \underbrace{\hspace{5em}}_{\text{P}}$

6.1 $\overbrace{\text{We must be careful of what we speak and do.}}^{\text{C}}$
 $\underbrace{\hspace{10em}}_{\text{S}} \underbrace{\hspace{5em}}_{\text{P}}$



- *T: Topic
- S: Subject
- C: Comment
- P: Predicate
- L: Locative

Analysis of Data and Results

In Test 1, there existed the so-called 'heavy subject' in the written English production of Cantonese-speakers. 43% of the subjects produced unextraposed sentential subjects:

The things which they sold are very cheap.

{ The things which they sold }
unextrp. sent. subj.

Among the thirty students, 5.3% of them produced serial verbs with existentials:

There are many people in China wanted to emigrate to H. K.

Ex.
serial verbs

In Test 2, there was clear evidence of the same developmental sequence from topic-comment to subject-predicate as in Rutherford's subjects.

The rate of producing subject-predicate sentences ranged from 59.9% in F.1 to 86.9% in F.5 (Table 1). A feature worth noting is that the learners were able to produce Sp sentences with the inclusion of relative pronouns or conjunctions, showing that they had reached quite a high level of proficiency. The following tables illustrate our findings.

Table 1: Production of Subject-Predicate Constructions

	Number produced	(Total possible)	Percentage
F.1	66	(112)	59.9
F.2	91	(129)	70.5
F.3	62	(97)	63.9
F.4	65	(84)	77.3
F.5	73	(84)	86.9

Table 2: Production of Topic-Comment Constructions

	Number produced	(Total possible)	Percentage
F.1	30	(112)	26.7
F.2	37	(129)	20.9
F.3	22	(97)	22.6
F.4	15	(84)	17.8
F.5	9	(84)	10.7

Table 3: Production of Existential Constructions

	Number produced	(Total possible)	Percentage
F.1	18	(112)	16.1
F.2	24	(129)	18.6
F.3	18	(97)	18.6
F.4	14	(84)	16.6
F.5	8	(84)	9.2

Table 4: Production of "Dummy" Subjects

	Number produced	(Total possible)	Percentage
F.1	17	(112)	15.2
F.2	12	(129)	9.3
F.3	14	(97)	14.4
F.4	8	(84)	9.5
F.5	4	(84)	4.8

Discussion of Results

The absence of putative passives shows that the subjects in this study had already reached a certain level of proficiency although they made some mistakes in agreement.

It is significant that the Cantonese English learners in this study produced a lot of dummy subjects in their sentences with an average of 11% (Table 4). English is an example par excellence of a grammatical word-order language and Cantonese learners may be sensitive to this aspect of English typological organization and feel the need to insert non-meaning-bearing syntactic place-holders like *it* and *there* (Table 3) to preserve the canonical word order (SVO).

The production of topic-prominent structures by our subjects tends to confirm the hypothesis that language transfer of typological features from Cantonese to L2 (English) does occur. The results also show that at lower levels of proficiency, learners tend to produce more topic-comment sentences and, at higher levels of proficiency, more subject-predicate sentences. This provides additional support for the view that there is a developmental sequence moving from topic-comment to subject-predicate in Cantonese speakers learning English as a second language.

The drop in the rate of producing subject-predicate constructions (Table 1) and the increase in the rate of producing topic-comment constructions (Table 2) in F.3 students could be related to their low proficiency since the subjects in the study were from F.1A (A indicates top English stream), F.2A, F.3D (D indicates the bottom English stream), F.4B (science class) and F.5D (general class).

Zobl (1986) suggests that the acquisition of a subject-prominent typology (like English) by speakers of a topic-prominent language (like Chinese) reveals itself as the least attainable feature. In topic-prominent languages, topic and subject are not closely related. Zobl considers that the pragmatic type of topic construction can only be expunged through the acquisition of discourse devices. His research suggests a scale of attainability: HEAD-INITIAL > -NULL SUBJECT > VP PREDICATION. Further studies on the acquisition of discourse devices and the relationship between the attainability scale and typological features may shed more light on our present study.

Pedagogical Implications

The low number of participating subjects (50 in 5 groups of 10) means that any implications drawn from this research are necessarily tentative. The more so since it was not feasible to test such low numbers for statistical significance. However, Cantonese, a Tp language, is very different from English, an Sp language, and since transfer does seem to take place, should the learners be apprised of such a difference so that they can adjust their learning strategies which in turn might accelerate the rate of language acquisition? Sharwood Smith (1981) puts forward an idea that the deliberate

attempt to draw the learner's attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language may play an indirect role in SLA, that is SLA at the level of syntactic competence. Further research needs to be conducted to test whether or not consciousness-raising in classroom settings (in the forms of formal instruction and motivation) plays an important role in accelerating the rate of SLA.

Conclusion

We will now conclude by summarizing the major points made thus far concerning language transfer of typological features. The data that have been analyzed offer support for the existence of a gradual syntacticization process in Cantonese speakers learning English in Hong Kong:—

1. Interlanguage progression from topic-comment to subject-predicate in the acquisition of sentential subjects
2. The acquisition of existentials
3. The extra-heavy topic-comment influence from Cantonese.

This study has attempted to present evidence that the inter-language of Cantonese learners whose mother tongue contrasts typologically with the target language will manifest unique characteristics that are traceable to influences of the native language. There is also good reason to suppose that Cantonese learners of English will tend to take a common route in the acquisition of subject-predicate structures. However, the present research is just a very limited attempt to study the role of one aspect of transfer in SLA. Longitudinal studies are needed to provide more support for our hypothesis. The conclusions presented here are tentative, but will, it is hoped, lead to further interest and research in this fascinating but complex area.

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TEACHERS, TEXT-BOOKS AND ERRORS

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For the purposes of this article 'errors' will be defined as being 'unwanted' language forms; those forms which are not considered to be in accordance with generally accepted custom and use. For example, in the statement **His parents has a nice house* the word *has* would be the unwanted form, because it does not agree with the subject, *His parents*.

It is generally assumed that such unwanted forms are due to interference of some kind or other. In the studies into interference in language learning it seemed that the most obvious cause of error was mother-tongue or L1 interference. It was this belief that gave rise to Contrastive Analysis (C.A.) which tried to predict where errors were likely to occur and hence to suggest areas on which teaching should be focused. It was thought that the greater the differences between the languages, the greater the difficulties would be. Contrastive Analysis (C.A.) was found to work reasonably well at the phonological level but its powers of prediction proved to be limited as errors occurred where C.A. indicated there would be no difficulties because of the similarity between the languages. Furthermore, errors often did not occur where big differences between the languages existed.

The failure of C.A. to predict errors more widely led to the growth of Error Analysis (E.A.) which starts with the errors and tries to find their causes. Within E.A. there is a body of opinion which considers interference as being synonymous with mother-tongue interference, especially at the beginning stages of learning. Yet a brief examination of errors made in widely differing parts of the world would suggest a different reason.

The error sample below is taken from examples collected from many countries, such as Burma, China, India, Japan, Malta, the Philippines and Tanzania. They were made by learners in the early stages of learning English. The selection was random. The errors were collected by those who considered them to be peculiar to their own regions, and to be due directly to cross-association and interference from the local language(s) i.e. the L1. However, an examination of these errors does not bear out this assumption.

1. *By which road did you came?*
2. *I forgot to set homework yesterday, didn't I? Yes you didn't.*
3. *I haven't some.*
4. *I have been in this school since two years.*
5. *He knows you, isn't it?*
6. *At door.*
7. *Is it in the box? It is in. Then give me the another one.*
8. *My father is clerk.*
9. *He took my only one book.*
10. *He is a best boy in our class.*

The above list is only a small sample of the many common errors met with in places thousands of miles apart. What is being suggested is that if errors are due to cross-association between the L1 and L2, then the errors in English would be language-specific i.e. errors made by speakers of one language would be different from the errors made by speakers of a different language. However, the following examples would suggest otherwise.

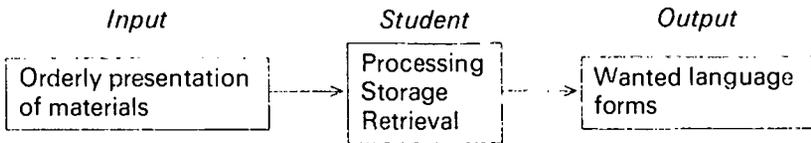
- (i) If errors are due to mother-tongue interference then the Japanese form of error would be quite different from the Bantu or Chinese form. Yet both groups of speakers say *'yes, you didn't.*
- (ii) If putting English words into vernacular patterns is the real cause of error, then a Maltese student whose language has ancient Semetic connections should produce errors different from those of a Malay student. Yet both say *'By which road did you came?*
- (iii) For native speakers of Chinese, Arabic, Malay and certain other languages, the deletion of the copula in English can in part be explained by the structural difference between English and their L1. However, native speakers of Spanish also produce this error and Spanish displays no structural differences with English in that area.

What is being suggested here is that interference from the students' own language is not necessarily the main cause of mistakes. The fact that similar mistakes occur throughout the world wherever English is taught would suggest that the main reason may be found elsewhere e.g. in the methods and techniques commonly used to teach English.

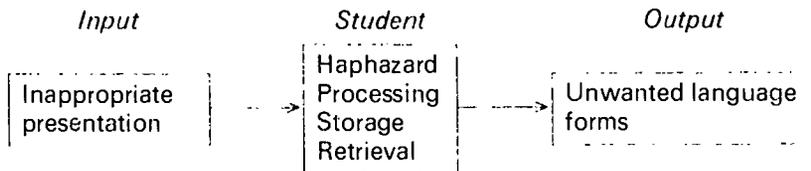
Teachers would like, as far as possible, to see a student's output match the input (s)he has received as shown below:

Input ———> Student ———> Output

If the input is presented in an appropriate and orderly manner, it allows the student the chance to process, store and retrieve these input materials in a systematic way, thus enabling him to produce an output containing as few unwanted forms as possible. This point may be illustrated below as follows:



If, however, the materials are presented in a way that makes processing and storage difficult, then retrieval will be haphazard and the subsequent student output is likely to contain a large proportion of unwanted language forms as shown below:



If the above is true, then teachers, if they are to minimize error production, will have to be particularly watchful of the way language items are presented to the students. They also have to be aware that certain presentation techniques prescribed by the syllabus, teacher's book or some other guide may well encourage error production rather than minimize it.

The rest of this article will be taken up with an examination of some of the presentation techniques advocated by textbooks used in Primary Schools in Hong Kong. The textbooks will not be identified; suffice to state that they are widely used in Hong Kong Primary Schools.

Misrepresentation of the ordinary use of English

One of the books referred to above deals with the present continuous form by telling the teacher to ask students to perform a series of actions and to describe what the students are doing. The teacher is told that "The actions must still be in progress while the words are spoken" Sentences of the following type are produced:

He is walking.

He is sitting down.

They are standing up.

From the learner's point of view, events concurrent with movement are described by using the continuous form. Hence errors of the following kind are encountered:

**I am having four brothers.*

**I am seeing the bus is coming.*

Accordingly, the following points are made.

- (i) We do not describe what we are doing to people who see us doing it, unless we are demonstrating some process in which case the simple present or imperative is used.

This reflects the essential unnaturalness of the common procedure for teaching the use of the progressive form in English, whereby a teacher performs an action and describes it at the same time: *I am opening the door* etc. In fact a person is unlikely ever to do this . . . precisely because it conveys nothing that the hearer cannot see for himself. (Wilkins 1974:85)

- (ii) Verb form counts at the Central Institute of English in Hyderabad (1963) show that when the reference is 'now', the simple present is used on 95% of occasions and the present progressive on only 5% of occasions.

In other words the language forms used do not represent the ordinary use of English. What is wrong here is not the form but the situation.

The classroom unfortunately creates a situation (that of demonstration) in which the progressive would not normally be used, and, therefore cannot be taught naturally . . . in this case the difference in the forms used in the pretended situation and those likely to be used in the actual situation (in the classroom) can only create confusion. (Palmer 1974:62)

For example, in a cookery demonstration, the demonstrator will say something like this:

First, put the potatoes on the board and then slice them into flat pieces. Now sprinkle the grated cheese over them etc. etc.

He does not say **First, you are putting the potatoes . . . and then, slicing them . . . etc.*

Or again, someone demonstrating the virtues of a certain wash-powder might say, for example:

I now place the dirty cloth into the mixture. I stir the mixture for a short while. I lift out the cloth, rinse it and as as you can see, it is as clean as new etc. etc.

Again, he does not say **I am now placing the dirty cloth . . . I am stirring . . . etc.* because the basic use of the continuous form is to describe events or conditions that are incomplete, changing or temporary and that is what classroom presentation and practice should aim to establish e.g. *It is raining; The sun is shining; He is eating quickly etc.*

One way is to make use of postcards e.g. *I am writing this post-card on the beach. I am enjoying myself. The sun is shining. etc. etc.*

Order of teaching language items

Often the teaching of items in a certain order tends to undermine the learning of previous items. The -s in the 3rd person singular causes a lot of difficulty as students need to associate it not only with *he, she* and *it* but also with names and singular nouns. The teacher is often instructed to elicit statements in the simple present by asking questions e.g. *Where does John live?* Consider then the following sequence taken from another text-book used in Hong Kong.

Practise . . . involving the use of the 3rd person singular e.g. *he/she*.

T —*Where does John live?*

S —*He lives in Aberdeen.*

Repeat this asking questions which call for a negative answer.

T —*Does John live in Kennedy Town?*

S —*No, he does not. He does not live in Kennedy Town. He lives in Aberdeen.*

The book adds "A great deal of practice will be needed . . . until the pupils are able to change from *I live* to *he lives* . . . without difficulty".

If it is difficult to establish *John lives*, a too early introduction of questions and negative statements provides opportunities for potential 'unteaching' in that in sentences such as *He does not live . . . or Does John live . . . ?* the pupil experiences **he live* rather than *he lives*. As a result many will (and do) perceive the -s as being redundant. Redundancy can result in the reduction of several forms to one form. Items which are not in the learner's mother tongue (inflections, articles, multiple question tags) tend to be seen as redundant because the learner is unable to attach any meaning to these forms as he can to lexical items which have a dictionary meaning.

The following example from Chinese illustrates this point.

(a) 他去了 小鎮。

He go past (to) town. (literal translation)

(b) 他 現在 前去 小鎮。

He now go to town. (literal translation)

The difference lies in the placing and use of a tense marker. When applied to English, the learner tends to produce. **He go to town* because he considers the other forms of the verb (*went* or *goes*) as redundant.

Furthermore, the use of question forms in such contexts is a mis-use of the function of the question form which should be used to elicit information and not as a technique in a transformation exercise to elicit statements. Questions in English are usually asked to elicit information which the questioner does not have but which he thinks the other person can provide. Classroom practice as illustrated above, is the reversal of this, with the teacher who has the answers, asking questions. It is not surprising therefore that the question form in English is often thought by learners to serve no useful function in the world outside the classroom.

The principle to be derived is that learning is more likely to be facilitated if formal features associated with different forms and functions are presented and practised in separate, distinctive and authentic contexts. i.e. questions to be used to obtain wanted information and descriptive statements to be contextualized in descriptions e.g. *John lives in Aberdeen. He likes fish.* etc.

Contrast

Frequently two items are presented together as a teaching device. Grammarians have noted the similarities and have taught them in conventional pairs. However, the learner is expected to learn not only that item but another one which is similar; and the difference between the two. This is what is demanded of students when items are taught by contrasting them. It is contended that such a technique makes learning harder and not easier as can be demonstrated by the following examples taken from two books widely used in Hong Kong Primary Schools.

Change the sentence like the example

I ate the apple.

I've eaten the apple.

A probable result is:

Input

I ate the apple

I've eaten the apple

> { student }

Output

> *I ate the apple*

> *I've eaten the apple*

> **I've ate the apple*

> **I eaten the apple*

Consider also the following:

Input		Output
<i>The children didn't go to school</i>	→ student	→ <i>The children didn't go to school</i>
<i>The children went to the circus</i>	→	→ <i>The children went to the circus</i>
		→ <i>*The children didn't went to the circus</i>

In addition, if the teacher has been trying to establish *to the zoo, to the bank, to the park*, the introduction of *to school* will also introduce **to circus, *to zoo* as shown below:

Input		Output
<i>to school</i>	→ student	→ <i>to school</i>
<i>to the circus</i>	→	→ <i>to the circus</i>
		→ <i>*to circus</i>

Again in the following item the contrast between some and any is advocated by the following sequence.

1. *Can I have some more?*
2. *I'm sorry, there isn't any more.*

Apart from the wanted forms, this process can also produce **Can I have any more?* or **There isn't some more.* Is this a possible cause for error 3 listed at the beginning of this article? The reader might wish to consider the errors that could arise from the following type of exercise. "Fill in the blanks (in the sentences below) with *since* or *for*".

It is suggested, therefore, that only one item should be presented and that should be the most frequent one. The teacher can always return to the second item when the first one is established.

The language needs of the learner

In another text book, the teacher is advised to teach vocabulary items in the following way. The teacher is instructed to hold up a single item saying *This is a* This action of singling out one definite item could give the learner the idea that *a* means 'one definite item' when the usual meaning of *a* is 'one of many'. If early lessons illustrate the concept of 'one definite' object, later acceptance of *a* as 'one of many' will be difficult, especially:

- (i) If the teacher or textbook names objects of which there is only one example in the classroom with *This is a* The distinction between individualising *a* and unique *the* will be lost for the later stages of teaching.
- (ii) If vocabulary and reading are also taught by referring to labelled items in the classroom or textbook e.g. desk, door, blackboard etc.

Consider possible reasons for errors 7, 8, 9, 10.

The situation is further compounded if learners are required to produce *This is a book* after the teacher has said it several times. For most Chinese learners the sounds /ʒ/, /z/ and final /k/ are unfamiliar as are *is* and in many cases *this*. The oral impression received links up with the familiar to produce /dʒis bu?/.

For each teaching item we can make a list of likely interference and by using appropriate strategies minimize the effect of that interference. Thus we could practise the pronunciation of sounds likely to be replaced by L1 sounds before we expect the production of words and sentences which includes sounds such as *This is a book*.

One way is to put several examples or pictures of the required vocabulary items on the board. Students are then asked to identify the appropriate items in the following way:

Touch a _____.

This technique can be expanded to include *Point to a* _____ and *Show me* _____.

From an examination of some of the techniques used in the classroom it is clear that we should give special attention to the context of an item of English which is likely to be unnoticed or misunderstood either because it has no counterpart in the L1 or because an analogy with the L1 is misleading. If not, we encourage errors!

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TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE RELATIVE GRAVITY OF ERRORS IN WRITTEN ENGLISH

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Introduction

The teacher's task in assessing written work may be broken down into a sequence of five steps: identifying or recognising the existence of an error, interpreting where required the intended meaning (often difficult since students are rarely present during the assessment process), supplying a signal of some kind indicating the location and nature of the error, deciding how to penalise errors according to degree of seriousness and, finally, awarding an overall mark or grade. Since this process concerns teachers deeply and virtually every day of their professional lives, research into it may be of direct pedagogical value complementing, as it does, the more theoretical information available on the inter- and intra-lingual origins of error.

In this brief paper, I am concerned with steps four and five of the sequence, focussing on an experimental comparison of native and non-native English teachers' assessments of a representative sample of locally-produced errors in written English. I then go on to draw out the pedagogical implications of the findings, and to make practical suggestions for dealing with errors in written production.

Areas of Enquiry

Specifically, I was interested in enquiring into the following areas:

1. What exactly are the reactions of native-speaker and non-native teachers of English to the error types most frequently encountered in the written work of Hong Kong students?
2. Do the two groups appear to refer, with some consistency, to internal hierarchies in making judgements about the relative gravity of these errors?
3. By extension of 2, to what extent are these hierarchies similar or different for the two groups?
4. Does the non-native teacher have anything useful to gain from knowing how native-speaker teachers assess the various types of error?

Local Errors?

A brief word is in order about the description of the errors as 'local'. I want to make it clear that, in this context, 'local' simply means that the errors were taken from a locally-derived corpus of written work. That said, the error

types I have identified, and their relative frequencies, are similar to those presented by Bunton (1989). Bunton's samples are taken from the writing of Hong Kong students alone and do not correlate closely with those offered by Heaton and Turton (1987) in their international survey of common errors in English. It is possible to make a limited claim, therefore, that it is likely that local teachers of English will most frequently encounter the error types I present in this paper when assessing students' written work.

The Written Corpus

This consisted of 120 similarly-titled but unguided compositions produced by local Cantonese native-speaker students aged between sixteen and seventeen studying full-time at a local secondary-school. All students were following the same examination course and could be classified broadly as lower-intermediate in terms of international standards of proficiency in English. The data derived then from a relatively homogenous source.

The Errors

The overwhelming majority of errors located in the corpus fell into eight categories. Table 1 gives the error types and their approximate distributions.

Table 1

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Distribution Percentage of Total Errors</i>
1. Incorrect Tense Marking of Verb	19
2. Lack of Subject-Verb Agreement	13
3. Incorrect Inclusion/Omission of Definite Article	12
4. Wrong Preposition	10
5. Incorrect Choice of Lexical Item	7
6. Pluralisation of Uncountable Nouns	5
7. Voice (False Passivisation)	3
8. Spelling	3

There were, of course, additional lexical and grammatical errors and a number of grammatically-sound but topic-prominent constructions in the writing of the lower proficiency students. Interestingly, errors attributable to direct transfer from Cantonese, such as locative adverbial subject (**There is very crowded in Mong Kok*) and double intra-sentential connectives (**Although he was rich, but he was not happy*) did not occur. This, I

presume, indicates that the students, as a body, had already passed through and beyond the interlanguage stage at which L2 production tends to be marked by a heavy element of more or less direct translation from L1, although manifestations of typological transfer were, as stated, clearly in evidence.

The Assessors

Practical constraints meant that there were only 20 assessors in each of the non-native teacher and native-speaker teacher groups. However, as subjects, the groups were relatively homogenous in composition. The native-speaker participants were all graduates with at least a specialist Diploma in Teaching English as a Foreign or Second Language. All had at least ten years relevant teaching experience and were employed locally at the time of taking part in the experiment. Twelve worked in tertiary institutions and eight in upper secondary schools. It is worth noting that fourteen of the assessors were British English speakers, four were American English speakers and two were Australian. Ideally, of course, a more balanced composition is desirable to avoid a particular variety of English dominating the judgements. Practical constraints also precluded the use of a third category of assessor; native-speaker teachers with relatively little exposure to 'Hong Kong English'. It would have been interesting to compare their tolerance levels with those of the Hong Kong-based native-speaker group.

The non-native group was composed of Cantonese native-speaker graduates with postgraduate qualifications in teaching English and, like the native-speaker group, all had at least ten years relevant teaching experience. Most had lived or studied abroad, and all were in posts offering some opportunity for exposure to, and interaction with, native-speaker of English.

Procedure

I produced a questionnaire containing twenty sentences (Appendix) with one error present in each sentence. In order to reflect, however crudely, the distribution of errors from the corpus, I presented ten sentences containing errors from the first three categories and ten sentences to represent categories four to eight. Following Sheorey's (1986) procedure, I did not use authentic (student-produced) sentences if these contained multiple errors. Instead, I stripped away the other errors and was fortunate in being able to retain meaning without the need for radical reformulation or plausible reconstruction.

The question of whether or not to expose assessors to supporting context above and below the sentences in question is an extremely difficult problem to resolve in a principled way, since context can, in some cases, clarify intended meaning. However, there is always the danger of introducing an element of indeterminacy to the assessment process. With this latter point in mind, I decided to comply with James's (1977) stricture and exclude context completely.

The sentences were presented in randomised order with covering instructions to the assessors. They were asked first to identify an error by underlining it or arrowing an omission, then indicate the seriousness of the error by utilising a 0-5 continuum scale on which 5 indicates an error so serious that it blocks comprehension or sets up serious ambiguity, 0 means that no error has been committed, while grades 2-4 represent intermediate degrees of gravity. Finally, assessors were asked to supply a comment to add a qualitative and illuminating dimension to the rather crude statistical instrument used. Assessors were presented with the following choice of comments (of course they could use their own if preferred): Unintelligible, Ambiguous, Jarring, Irritating, Odd, Amusing, Acceptable, and Negligible.

Results and Discussion of Results

A clear answer emerged to my first research question: the non-native teacher group marked significantly more harshly than the native-speakers over the whole range of errors presented. I arrived at this conclusion by simply calculating the overall total scores out of one hundred (20 error samples \times 5 maximum possible penalty score) for both groups of assessors.

The non-native group marked within a narrow band 61-72; giving an overall penalty score range of 65. The native-speaker group scored between 37-66; a much wider band giving a range of 53.5. The difference of 11.5 between the two groups is statistically significant ($P < .01$ t-test). This finding was not at all surprising. Research by Richards (1971) Hughes and Lascaratou (1982) James, and Sheorey (op. cit.) has been remarkably consistent in identifying non-native teachers as the harshest assessors of error. It is interesting to speculate how this might change as teachers become more confident and competent in terms of their own proficiency. Of passing interest too is Hughes and Lascaratou's finding (op. cit.) that native-speaker laymen are the most lenient of all assessors, focussing on overall intelligibility rather than the accuracy of linguistic parts.

Internal Hierarchies of Error Gravity

My second question concerned the possibility of teachers referring to an internal hierarchy of error seriousness in their grading to sort out which errors matter most, which are rather less grave and so on. My findings do seem to bear out the existence of internal hierarchies. Verb-related errors were judged as most serious by both groups, although the mean penalty scores awarded to the categories of tense, agreement and voice by the native speakers were higher than those given by the non-native assessors. This confirms Richards's belief that native-speakers are particularly finely attuned to the grammatical operations of the verb phrase and react more negatively when its forms are violated than to any other error type. Table 2 displays mean scores and rankings for the two groups of assessors.

Table 2

Categories	Native-Speaker Teachers		Non-Native Speaker Teachers	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Tense	3.52	2	3.52	3
Agreement	3.26	3	3.67	2
Definite Article	2.05	7	2.34	8
Preposition	2.32	6	2.68	6
Lexis	2.65	5	3.25*	4
Pluralisation	2.85	4	2.53	7
Voice	3.58	1	3.71	1
Spelling	1.75	8	2.98*	5

* Significant differences ($p < .01$ t-test)

Apart from penalising gross errors of verb form most heavily, the two groups also gave the same ranking for preposition errors and comparatively close rankings for those in the definite article category. However, results in the remaining three categories were of considerable interest. Despite the close rankings for the lexis category, the scores indicated significant differences between the groups, as did the mean scores in the spelling category. Pluralisation of uncountable nouns, while not registering significant differences, received very different rankings.

In the lexis category, my findings supported those of James rather than Hughes and Lascaratou and Sheorey, in that native-speaker teachers appeared to be more tolerant of lexical errors than the non-native group. This tolerance might well centre around the fact that the two lexical errors on the questionnaire represent frequently-encountered confusions of usage (*rob* vs. *steal* and *refuse* vs. *reject*). Resigned familiarity could be responsible for the high degree of leniency displayed here.

The results in the spelling category presented few surprises and are similar to Sheorey's findings. Despite their leniency, however, none of the native-speaker group felt that misspellings were acceptable. Most commented that, while these errors did not generate negative feelings, they could not be left untreated. This is an interesting reaction, especially since sentence five contains a particularly gross spelling error which led most of the non-native group to penalise it very harshly indeed.

It is perhaps even more surprising that the native-speaker group dealt so leniently with incorrect omissions and inclusions of the definite article. One would have expected the native-speakers to be particularly aware of violations to such a delicate system. One possible answer to this is that at sentence level the definite article does not usually bear a heavy burden of meaning. This is not, of course, the case at discourse level where it carries out an important role in referential cohesion. Interestingly however, it does seem that a wrongly included definite article is far more offensive to native

speakers than a wrongly omitted one; reactions to sentence four (inclusion) were much harsher than those to sentence twelve (omission).

Contrasting Native-Speaker and Non-Native Speaker Hierarchies

From this brief discussion of results, an answer emerges to my third question which relates to the need to identify similarities and differences in the internal hierarchies of error gravity of the two groups of assessors. The present study indicates that the hierarchies are substantially similar at the upper levels, but much less so in the middle range and at the lower levels.

But the main differences lie not so much in where the error categories are ranked on the hierarchies, but rather in the degrees of differentiation between the categories. The evidence indicates convincingly that native speakers differentiate far more than non-native speakers; the hierarchical nodes on the non-native scale are clustered closely together, while those on the native speaker scale are spaced much further apart.

Pedagogical Implications

Any implications drawn from research limited to relatively few error samples, small numbers of assessors and crude statistical analyses must necessarily be very tentative. However, my findings substantially match those of earlier researchers working with many more error samples and assessors; this association could be taken to add to the validity and reliability of the present findings.

At this point an additional note of warning needs to be sounded; native speaker reaction to error does not necessarily constitute a perfectly sound set of criteria for guiding the non-native teacher through the assessment process. There is evidence to suggest that native speaker teachers are overtolerant of errors in lexis, for example. Clearly, all teachers might beneficially spend more time focussing on items commonly confused in usage, and in helping students to distinguish between related members of particular word classes.

Downplaying such a rich area in English as lexical (and modal) nuance might limit the potential semantic range of learners by denying them the means to express the delicate meaning distinctions demanded by fluent English. Native-speaker judgements of the intelligence and attitude of a writer exhibiting a relatively low level of fossilisation in this area could well be unjustly adverse.

That said, perhaps the clearest and most beneficial way in which non-native teachers could be guided in the assessment process (an answer to the fourth and final question) is by reference to the intervals on the native-speaker teacher's internal scale of error gravity. In this way, non-native teachers might be encouraged to use the red pen in a more discriminating way by differentiating rather more between error types and the penalties consequently awarded.

Practical Suggestions

It follows from these observations that focussed marking of student work could be effective in obtaining better results. In return for students attending

in greater detail to errors identified as serious, teachers could indicate (say in green) less grave errors but deduct no, or fewer, marks than for the serious errors indicated in red. If this procedure defaces student work in two colours rather than one as before, then clearly it would be more sensible to indicate, in red, targeted serious errors only.

Above all, students will need to know which major form(s) the teacher is focussing on in a particular piece of written work so that they can self and/or peer correct their work purposefully. It might be sensible too for teachers to prevent an excessively narrow focus on formal accuracy by awarding one mark for overall quality of content and global intelligibility (including organisation) and a separate one for lexicogrammatical accuracy. The mark actually entered in the mark book could then be an averaged one. To encourage poorer individuals or classes, teachers might like to consider, as a general principle, giving content a greater weighting than accuracy.

Also of practical value is James's suggestion that the teacher supply full and clear plausible reconstructions of grave errors in broad, pre-ruled margins on the right of each page. This would allow students to focus on the repaired forms far more successfully than the use of necessarily cramped superscript or possibly ambiguous marking code systems.

Setting shorter writing tasks will be beneficial too in helping teachers and students to focus on important errors. The error-laden, full-length composition is naturally harder to deal with purposefully. Shorter pieces of work also lend themselves more easily to the multiple-drafting and editing processes. If a certain number of words has to be produced, teachers could set a number of short, related pieces giving the required total until the particular students are ready and able to control the L2 encodification and textualisation processes over lengthy stretches of written production.

The benefits obtainable then from focussed, differentiated-values assessment could be substantial. These, together with the other suggestions presented, should help to make the writing and assessing processes less frustrating and rather more rewarding for students and teachers.

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APPENDIX

SENTENCES USED ON THE RELATIVE GRAVITY OF ERROR QUESTIONNAIRE

1. He was caught the bus to work.
2. She waited in Swatow for her husband since 1972.
3. The waitresses at that cafe is very slow.
4. I think the Kowloon Park is the most attractive one in Hong Kong.
5. Although I am young, I am not stupid.
6. This factor had already been discussed in the last chapter, so I do not intend to raise it again.
7. If I was fitter, I would enjoy swimming.
8. Family conversation used to be important, but advent of personal computers changed all this radically.
9. My father emphasised on that point very strongly.
10. I arrived back safely at Kowloon station with all my luggages.
11. When I was not looking, he robbed my calculator from my desk.
12. Oil shares have recently declined following general market trend.
13. She rejected to accept my offer, so I left the shop.
14. Every day my father go to the same place to work.
15. Terrorists are difficult to defeat, since they are willing to die of their beliefs.
16. Have you ever visited Disney Land? I've gone there in 1985.
17. She is very excited because tonight she will going to a party.
18. They were lived in that North Kowloon estate for many years.
19. People who live in Hong Kong has a tendency to work very hard.
20. My uncle always brings many gift on his visits to Hong Kong.

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