

CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOKS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS
General Editor: Michael Swan

This is a series of practical guides for teachers of English and other languages. Illustrative examples are usually drawn from the field of English as a foreign or second language, but the ideas and techniques described can equally well be used in the teaching of any language.

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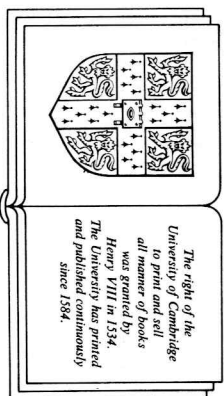
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Learner English

A teacher's guide to
interference and other problems

*Michael Swan and
Bernard Smith*



Cambridge University Press
Cambridge
New York Port Chester
Melbourne Sydney

1987

Chinese speakers

Jung Chang

Distribution

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, TAIWAN, HONG KONG, MACAO, SINGAPORE, MALAYSIA; there are also large communities of Chinese speakers throughout southeast Asia, Oceania and North and South America. About one fifth of the world's population are native speakers of Chinese.

Introduction

The Chinese language, or the Han language, as the Chinese call it, is a collection of numerous dialects which may be classified into eight dialect groups (sometimes referred to as different languages): Northern Chinese (also known as Mandarin), Wu, Hsiang, Kan, Hakka, Northern Min, Southern Min, and Yueh (i.e. Cantonese). While the last four dialects are the mother tongues of most Chinese speakers outside China, Northern Chinese is the native dialect of over 70 per cent of the Chinese population at large, and is the basis of modern Standard Chinese, which is the accepted written language for all Chinese, and has been promoted as the national language.

The Chinese dialects share not only a written language but also important basic features at all structural levels. The problems discussed in this chapter are by and large common to speakers of all dialects.

Chinese and English belong to two different language families (Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European), and have many structural differences. Difficulties in various areas at all stages of English language learning may be expected.

Phonology

General

The phonological system of Chinese is very different from that of English. Some English phonemes do not have Chinese counterparts and are hard to learn. Others resemble Chinese phonemes but are not identical to them

in pronunciation, and thus cause confusion. Stress, intonation and juncture are all areas of difficulty. In general, Chinese speakers find English hard to pronounce, and have trouble learning to understand the spoken language.

Vowels

1. There are more vowel contrasts in English than in Chinese, so English vowels are closer to each other in terms of position of articulation than Chinese vowels. This means that more effort is required to distinguish them.
2. The contrast between /i:/ and /ɪ/ has no equivalent in Chinese. Learners confuse pairs such as *eat* and *it*, *bean* and *bin*.
3. The same applies to /u:/ and /ʊ/, leading to confusion, for instance, between *fool* and *full*, *Luke* and *look*.
4. /æ/ does not occur in Chinese. Learners tend to nasalise it. It may also be confused with /ɑ:/, /ʌ/ or /e/, so that a word such as *cap* might be pronounced /kæp/, *carp*, *cup* or 'kep'.
5. /ɒ/ has no equivalent in Chinese. Learners sometimes make it sound like /ɔ:/, /aʊ/, /ʊ/ or a front vowel. So for instance *shot* might be pronounced *short*, *shout* or /ʃʊt/.
6. /ʌ/ is sometimes replaced by /a/, which is a close approximation to a Chinese phoneme.
7. Chinese diphthongs are usually pronounced with quicker and smaller tongue and lip movements than their English counterparts. Learners therefore make these sounds too short, with not enough distinction between the two component vowels.

Consonants

1. In the three pairs of stops /p/ and /b/, /t/ and /d/, /k/ and /g/, the unaspirated group /b/, /d/ and /g/ are voiced in English but are on the whole voiceless in Chinese. Chinese students tend to lose the voiced feature in speaking English.
2. /v/ is absent from most Chinese dialects. As a result, it is sometimes treated like /w/ or /f/: *invite* may be pronounced 'invite'; *live* pronounced 'lif'.
3. Many Chinese dialects do not have /n/. Learners speaking these dialects find it difficult to distinguish, for instance, *night* from *light*.
4. /θ/ and /ð/ do not occur in Chinese. /θ/ is likely to be replaced by /t/, /f/ or /s/, and /ð/ by /d/ or /z/. So for example *thin* may be pronounced *tin*, *fn* or *sin*; *this* may be pronounced 'dis' or 'zis'.
5. /h/ tends to be pronounced as a heavily aspirated velar fricative (as in Scottish *loch*), which approximates to a Chinese consonant.

6. Most Chinese dialects do not have /z/. The usual error is to substitute /s/: *rise* may be pronounced *rice*.
7. /dʒ/, /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ are distantly similar to a group of three different Chinese consonants. Many learners' pronunciation of these is therefore heavily coloured and sounds foreign.
8. Some southern Chinese find /l/ and /r/ difficult to distinguish, leading to the kind of mistake caricatured in jokes about 'flied lice', etc.
9. Final consonants in general cause a serious problem. As there are few final consonants in Chinese, learners tend either to add an extra vowel at the end, or to drop the consonant and produce a slight glottal or unreleased stop: *duck*, for instance, may be pronounced /dʌkə/ or /dʌʔ/; *wife* may be pronounced /waifu:/ or /waɪʔ/.
10. /l/ in final position is particularly difficult: it may be replaced by /r/, or followed by /ə/, or simply dropped: *bill*, for instance, may be pronounced *beer*, /bɪlə/ or /bɪʔ/.

Consonant clusters

1. Initial consonant clusters are lacking in Chinese, and cause problems. The common error is to insert a slight vowel sound between the consonants, pronouncing *spoon*, for instance, as 'sipoon'.
2. Final clusters are even more troublesome. Learners are likely to make additional syllables, or to simplify the cluster (for instance, by dropping the last consonant). So *dogs* may be pronounced /dɒgzə/ or /dɒg/; *crisps* may be pronounced /krisi:pʌsi:/ or /krisi:pʌ:/.

Rhythm and stress

Reduced syllables are far less frequent in Chinese than in English. Moreover, these syllables in Chinese are usually pronounced more prominently than in English, and undergo fewer phonetic changes. Thus learners tend to stress too many English syllables, and to give the weak syllables a full rather than reduced pronunciation:

'fɪʃ 'ænd 'tʃɪps (with *and* stressed and pronounced /ænd/)
'The 'kæpɪtəl 'ɒf 'brɪtən 'ɪs 'lʌndən. (with both *the* and *of* emphasised)

When students try to reduce the accent on the English weak forms, they sometimes find them so hard to pronounce that they omit them: 'fɪʃ 'tʃɪps.

Intonation

Pitch changes in Chinese are mainly used to distinguish meanings of individual characters (the 'tones'); sentence intonation shows little

variation. The English use of intonation patterns to affect the meaning of a whole utterance is therefore difficult for Chinese to grasp. Unfamiliar with these patterns, Chinese learners tend to find them strange and funny. Some add a tonic value (often a high falling tone) to individual syllables. Thus their speech may sound flat, jerky or 'sing-song' to English ears.

Juncture

The monosyllabicity of basic Chinese units leads to learners' separating English words rather than joining them smoothly into a 'stream of speech'. This contributes to the staccato effect of a Chinese accent. Learners need considerable practice in this area.

Orthography; reading and writing

Spelling

The writing system of Chinese is non-alphabetic. Chinese learners therefore have great difficulty in learning English spelling patterns, and are prone to all sorts of errors. Common mistakes include:

1. Failure to apply standard spelling conventions:
dinner spelt * *diner* *eliminate* spelt * *eliminat*
2. Problems arising from the lack of hard and fast spelling rules in English:
* *docter* * *patten* * *liv* * *Wenesday* * *anser*
3. Mistakes resulting from learners' incorrect pronunciation:
campus spelt * *compus* *swollen* spelt * *swallen*
around spelt * *aroud* *sincerely* spelt * *secerly*
4. Omission of syllables:
* *unfortually* * *determing* * *studing*

Reading and writing

Alphabetic scripts present Chinese learners with quite new problems of visual decoding. The way the information is 'spread out' in each word seems cumbersome for a reader used to the compact ideograms of Chinese. Individual words may take a relatively long time to identify, and (since words take up more space than in Chinese) the eye cannot take in so much text at a time. Chinese learners therefore tend initially to have slow reading speeds in English relative to their overall level of proficiency.

Alphabetic handwriting, on the other hand, presents no serious problems for Chinese learners.