

Guide for Multilingual Student Writing

Common English-Mandarin Errors

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Introduction

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

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

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1. Plurals

Type	Example	Error
Plurals	There are many dogs and a lot of furniture in this house.	There are many *dog and *many furnitures in this house.

1.1. Forgetting to add “s” or changing forms for plural nouns

When indicating plurals in Mandarin, either a number or an added suffix are specified in the sentence. There is no change in the noun itself.

Examples: 一只狗 (one dog)
两只狗 (two dogs)

狗 is dog in Chinese. Both singular and plural are the same. To specify a plural, a number, for example, two 两 (只) is added so the meaning is clear. This could explain why Chinese speakers often omit an “s” when forming plural nouns.

Example: two dogs
Error: two *dog

1.2. Forgetting to omit “s” for plural nouns

When English learners of Chinese acquire the concept that adding “s” is to indicate a plural form, speakers tend to simplify the rule and forget that there are irregular mass nouns, e.g., furniture (not furnitures), luggage (not luggages), sheep (not sheeps), etc.

Example: There are so many pieces of furniture in the room.
Error: There are so many *furnitures in the room.

2. Subject-Verb Agreement

Type	Example	Error
Subject-Verb Agreement	He likes books.	He *like books.

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

Chinese Phrases	我 喜 欢	他喜欢	我 们 喜 欢
Pronunciation	wo xi huan	ta xi huan	wo men xi huan
Translation	I like	He likes	We like

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

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

3. Verb Tense

Type	Example	Error
Verb Tense	She ran yesterday.	She *run yesterday.

1.3. Similar to subject-verb agreement, Mandarin speakers often find verb tense challenging.

Example: He liked swimming.

Error: He *like swimming.

This sentence translates into Chinese as

他	喜欢	游泳。
ta (he)	xihuan (like)	youyong (swimming).

No past tense is being attended to in this Mandarin sentence.

1.4. Sometimes, Chinese sentences indicate “past tense” by adding a specific time or period in the past, but the verb form does not change.

Example: She ran yesterday.

Error: She *run yesterday.

This sentence translates into Chinese as

她	昨天	去	跑步	了。
ta (she)	zuotian (yesterday)	qu (went)	paobu (run)	le

(The final word in the above example indicates an action is finished.)

4. Gender and Pronoun Use

Type	Example	Error
Gender and Pronoun Use	I met a new friend today. Her name is Mary.	I met a new friend today. *His name is Mary.

1.5. In Mandarin, third-person gender difference exists but only in the written form.

Examples:

他 是 一个 警察。

ta shi yi ge jing cha

He is a police officer.

她 是 一个 警察。

ta shi yi ge jing cha

She is a police officer.

1.6. Note that the pronunciation is the same between “she” and “he” in Mandarin, so Chinese speakers often mix up pronouns during sentence construction.

Example: I met a new friend today. Her name is Mary.

Error: I met a new friend today. *His name is Mary.

5. Articles

Type	Example	Error
Articles	I am in the supermarket. She's a good teacher.	I am in * supermarket. She's * good teacher.

1.7. The concept of articles does not exist in Mandarin. In Mandarin grammar, the closest concept to articles is quantity words.

Example:

我 有 一 只 笔

wo you yi zhi bi

I have one pen. (I have a pen)

In the sentence “I have a pen,” “a” is an article as well as an indication of quantity. However, in Mandarin grammar, no article is needed unless to specify a number. In the example, 一只 (one) specifies the number.

1.8. Omitting articles

The rules outlined above could explain why Mandarin speakers often omit articles in their sentences.

Example: I am in the supermarket.

Error: I am in * supermarket.

Example: She's a good teacher.

Error: She's * good teacher.

1.9. Using incorrect articles

The indefinite article “a/an” indicates that the noun is not already known to the speaker; the definite article “the” indicates what is known (something specific). Since there is no article concept in Mandarin grammar, native speakers often confuse “a/an” and “the.”

Example: I would like to buy a phone. Which one should I pick, iPhone or Android?

Error: I would like to buy *the phone. Which one should I pick, iPhone or Android?

6. Prepositions

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

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

Example: The phone is on the table.
手机 (the phone) 在桌子上 (on the table).

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

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

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

The Chinese translation is

Alice 在公共汽车里
Alice zai gong gong qi che li
Alice bus inside. (The translation is that Alice is inside a bus.)

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

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

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

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

7. Questions

Type	Example	Error
Questions	Do you mind if I sit here? No, please do.	Do you mind if I sit here? *Yes, please do.

- 1.12. Mandarin speakers often respond to the “do you mind if...” question quickly with “yes” because Mandarin speakers usually do not ask whether other people “mind” a request. Mandarin speakers most commonly ask a question politely by using the following question structure:

请 问 我 坐 这 里 可 以 吗 ？

qing wen wo zuo zhe li ke yi ma?

Please ask (may I ask) I sit here OK? (The translation is “May I sit here please?”)

This habit leads to the quick positive answer of “yes” because Mandarin speakers think, “Of course you can sit here.” However, “yes” confuses speakers who ask the “do you mind if...” question.

- 1.13. Another similar situation is the tag question.

Examples:

你不喜欢他，是不是？

ni bu xi huan ta, shi bu shi?

You don't like him, yes or no?

是的，我不喜欢他

shi de, wo bu xi huan ta

Yes, I don't like him.

“Yes” here means “yes, I agree with you,” which explains why Mandarin speakers tend to respond to this kind of question depending on whether they agree or not.

Example: You don't like him, do you? No, I don't.

Error: You don't like him, do you? *Yes, I don't.

8. Dangling Participles

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

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

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

Chinese Sentence	上 山 了	花	开了
Pronunciations	shang shan le	hua	kai le
Direct Translation	Walking up the hill	flowers	blooms
Sentence Meaning	Walking up the hill, (I see) flowers blooming.		

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

9. Homonyms

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

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

1.17. “open” and “turn on”

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

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

1.18. “take” and “carry/bring”

带人去一个地方 (dai ren qu yi ge di fang) means “taking someone to a place”; 带一个背包 (dai shang yi ge bei bao) means “carrying a bag”; 带一份礼物给你 (dai yi fen li wu gei ni) means “bringing you a gift.” When they translate into Mandarin, only one verb is used for all three sentences, which is 带 (dai). This also creates a homonym issue because the three verbs “take,” “carry,” and “bring” are the same in Mandarin translation, which could explain the type of mistake shown in the following example.

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

10. Conjunctions

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

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

10.1. In English, “although” is a subordinating conjunction (a word that makes a clause dependent). No additional conjunctions need to be added to the second half of the sentence to complete the meaning.

虽然他感觉不舒服，但是他还是去上班了
 sui ran ta gan jue bu shu fu, dan shi ta hai shi qu shang ban le
 Although he feels not well, but he still goes to work.

This explains why Mandarin speakers often pair the word “but” with “although.”

Example: Although he's not feeling well, he insists on going to work.
 Error: Although he's not feeling well, *but he insists on going to work.

10.2. In English, “because” is also a subordinating conjunction, and Mandarin speakers often pair it with “so.”

因为他太累了所以今晚他不去派对了
 yin wei ta tai lei le suo yi jin wan ta bu qu pai dui le.
 Because he too tired, so tonight he does not go to the party. (Because he's too tired, he will skip the party tonight.)

This explains why the following sentence might appear in a Mandarin speaker's writing:

Example: Because he's too tired, he will skip the party tonight.
 Error: Because he's too tired, *so he will skip the party tonight.

Reference

Guo, P. (2008, December). Common English mistakes made by native Chinese speakers.

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