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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.

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

## 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 sìh, chíng 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 dángjahn 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 dángjahn, 一陣 yātjahn, and 當 dòng:—

(i) Dángjahn dihnwá héung, néih heui tèng 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 saigaai
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 tàiyíh ngóh máaih ga sàn chè
佢　　提議 我　買　　架 新　車。
*She suggest I buy new car*

Ngóh tàiyíh 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 tàiyíh = *suggest* is frequently followed by 去 heui even when there is no particular idea of 'going somewhere'.

e.g. Ngóh tàiyíh heui sihk 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　游水　　咯
*Go swimming?*

or heuimḥeui yàuhséui 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 néuihgùngyàhn wúih bòng ngohdeih jyú máahnfaahn
嗰個 女工人 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 sàn-ge dāngdáam
我 會 換 個 新嘅 燈胆。
*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 faanlàih
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.*

Gàngeui 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 tìngyaht dou Bákgìng
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 sèuiyiu 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 fòngmihn 另一方面
chíngoih 此外

For 而且 yìhché the dictionary says *moreover, in addition*; for 另一方面 lihng yat fongmihn it says *on the other hand, besides*; and for 此外 chingoih 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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# 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 ennumerate 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:

sîk jó faân meî āa
食 咗 飯 未 呀？
*Have you eaten (your) rice yet?* (goal)

gín dóu jông che
見 倒 撞 車
*Saw cars colliding.* (causative)

něi gám sái dūng séui
你 敢 洗 凍 水？
*You dare to wash with cold water?* (instrumental)

fān deî háa ge jaā
瞓 地 下 嘅 咋
(*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 dîn sî
我 睇 電 視
*I watch television.*

keuíh deî m̀ 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 啲 人 唔 用
yǎu hóu do tsīt si, dànn hâi di yàn m̀ yûng
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 paau ji gwān cheut hēui, dańg keuíh 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 tsīt si (*facilities*) and 棍 gwān (*stick*) occur only in the first clause of the sentences and are not repeated after the verbs 用 yûng (*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 occured 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 (béi) or 將 (jeung). The transformational rules for the Chinese passive involve the grammatical subject preceding the passive marked (PM) béi 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.

## *I. 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.

### *I.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.

### *I.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

keuíh hâi yat gō yi sāng
佢 係 一 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 於一 個大 家 庭
só yǎu gwok gaa hâi sûk yu yāt gō dâai 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 mân tài hâi mǒu faāt 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* insertion 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
taāi yeùng nâng hó yǐ chȳu chỳun hái uk kéi
Solar energy can save in home

**The problem cannot solve.*
問 題 唔 可 以 解 決
mân tài m̀ 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 appliclation 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 tests 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 (啲雨好大呀！). 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 xíao hái zǐ 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. *The money out and in isn't clear.*
   T: *The money out and in* — S
   C: *isn't clear.* — P

2. *But in Hong Kong, it is a good place for shopping.*
   T: *But in Hong Kong,* — S
   C: *it is a good place for shopping.* — P

3. *There were many people left Hong Kong.*
   T: *There were many people* — S
   C: *left Hong Kong.* — P

4. *There is many new machines and machines to use.*
   T: *There is many new machines and machines* — S
   C: *to use.* — P

5. *There's one saying inside the China inland that the people . . .*
   T: *There's one saying inside the China inland* — S
   C: *that the people . . .* — P

6. *Hong Kong people have more freedom of speech.*
   T: *Hong Kong people* — S
   C: *have more freedom of speech.* — P

6.1 *We must be careful of what we speak and do.*
   T: *We* — S
   C: *must be careful of what we speak and do.* — P

6.1.1 *Hong Kong* (T) *has many modern buildings.* (C)
*Hong Kong* (Loc) *has many modern buildings.* (P)

6.1.2 *In Hong Kong,* (T) *there are good places and things.* (C)
*In Hong Kong,* (Loc., P) *there* (S) *are good places and things.* (P)

6.1.3 *There are more entertainment found* (C) *in Hong Kong.* (T)
*There are more entertainment found* (S) *in Hong Kong.* (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.

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 syntatic 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.

## Acknowledgements

I would particularly like to thank Christopher Green of the ILE for sharing his knowledge of the subject with me. My thanks too to the editors and to Saki Tsoi for his initial participation in the research.

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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?*

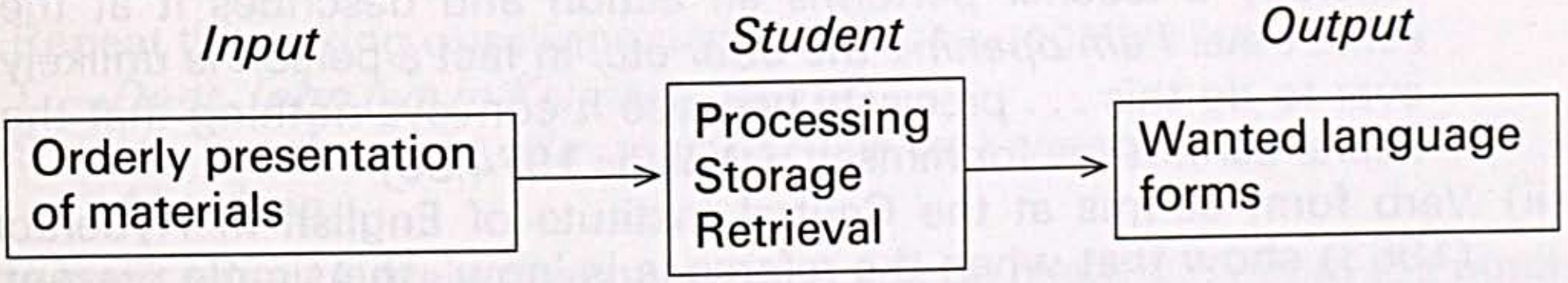
(iii) For native speakers of Chinese, Arabic, Malay and certain other languages, the deletion of the copula in English can in part be explained by the structural difference between English and their L1. However, native speakers of Spanish also produce this error and Spanish displays no structural differences 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.

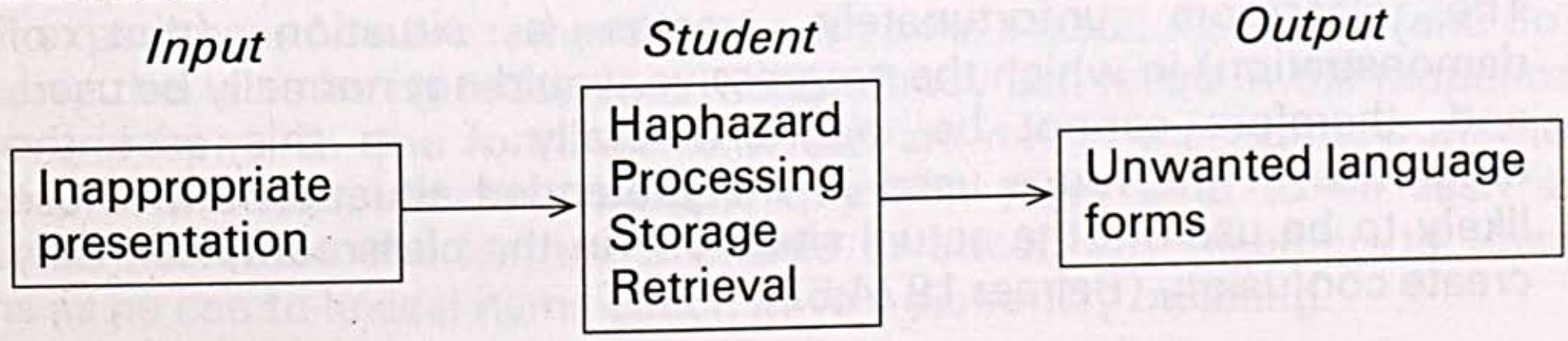
Teachers would like, as far as possible, to see a student's output match the input (s)he has received as shown below:

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 texbooks 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.

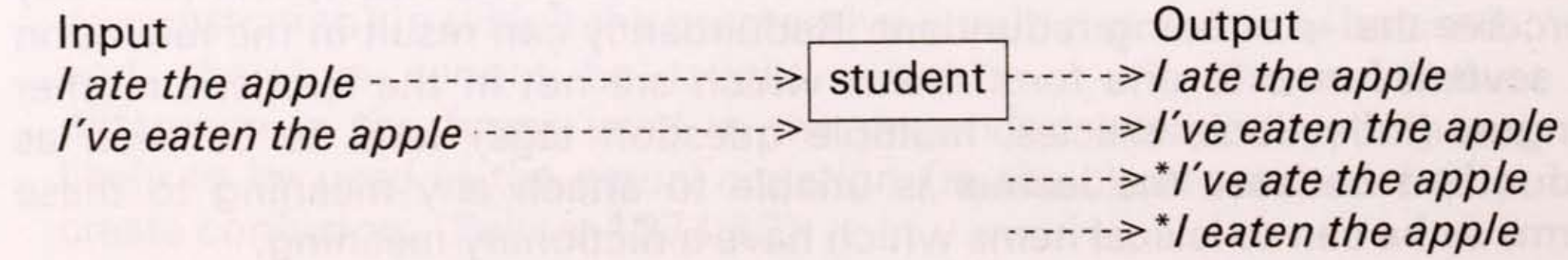
## Contrast

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.

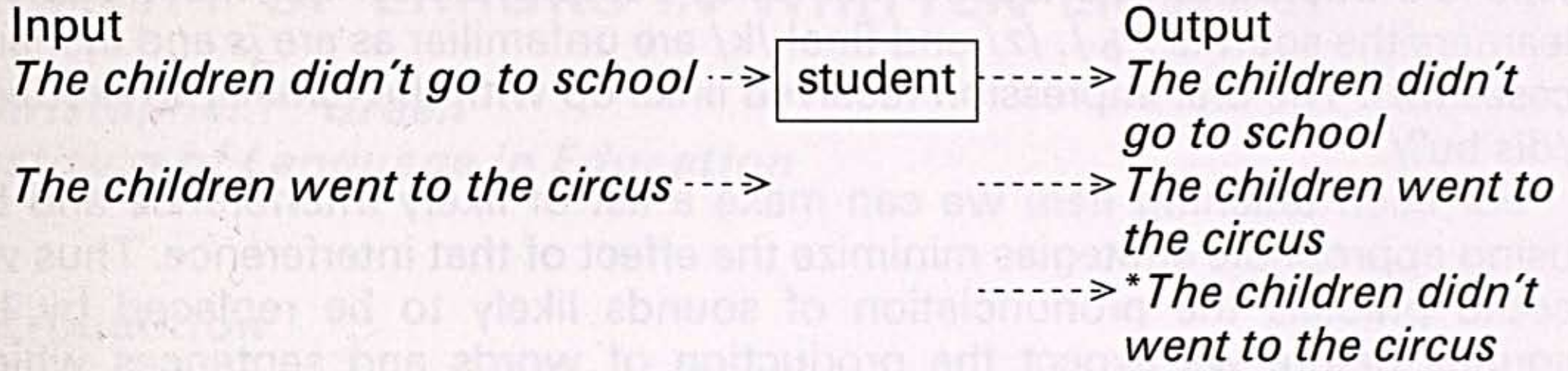
*Change the sentence like the example*

*I ate the apple.*
*I've eaten the apple.*

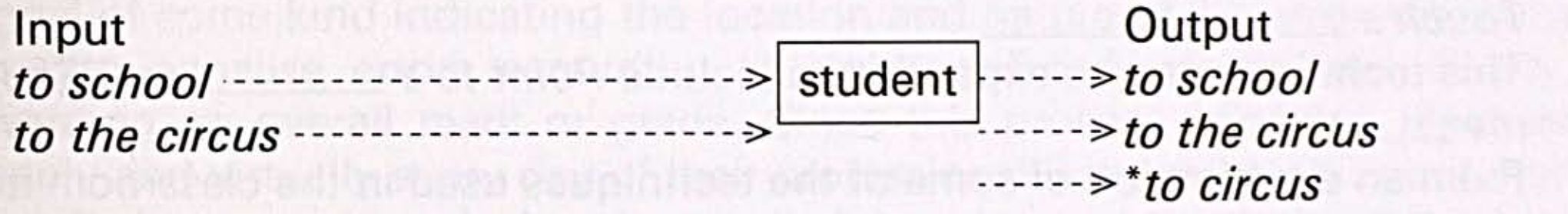
A probable result is:



Consider also the following:




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:




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 /ð/, /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 /dís 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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