

Thinking in Chinese, Writing in English

By Trevor Wadlow

A familiar situation in a Lower Intermediate class at a Chinese university might follow this pattern. The students have spent the last three weeks working on the structure of the expository text. Their first attempt at writing one has been marked and graded. All texts are structurally sound. Many paragraphs contain a topic sentence and a concluding sentence. Some have attempted to write compound and complex sentences, but most have not. Some even resemble high school essays, replete with simple sentences. Worse, many sentences are direct translations from the Chinese. Numerous causes can be cited for this problem. To name just two: fossilisation (in which the student somehow ‘freezes’ at a certain stage of learning the L2) and fear of failure or ‘loss of face’. A number of surveys have shown that the majority of syntactical errors made by Chinese learners (especially lower level students) derive from L1 interference. One report (Chou & Bartz, 2007) even suggests that, given the vast linguistic difference between English and Chinese, the solution to the problem lies in the deployment of non-native English speaking teachers as only someone familiar with the difference can really address it.

Any or all of these potential causes may be at play in the above situation and some teachers despair at this point. However, there may be a single solution to this multi-faceted

problem. During a discussion about Chinese culture, a Chinese teacher pointed out that Chinese students had a tendency to compartmentalise things. When practising reading skills they did not automatically associate the exercise with speaking or writing. In other words, when reading they were engrossed totally in meaning rather than communication. It did not occur to them that the text might be the kind of writing to which they could aspire. Another possible reason for this compartmentalisation is ‘cultural interference’. It is well known that the Chinese education system sets great store on relentless testing. This can breed a strictly utilitarian approach to any exercise placed before them, from real tests to simple gap-fill exercises. This is evident in the way that many students fail to go beyond controlled exercises to full-blown production. For example, most students understand the conditional form and can easily complete an exercise in it, but in my five years as a teacher and an examiner I have rarely heard it spoken or seen it written.

This discussion was still fresh in my mind when I took my Lower Intermediate class. I had assembled a short text about studying abroad in Australia and created a few questions. The gist reading and skim and scan went as smoothly as always, which is not necessarily a good thing. Again, it occurred to me that students complete such exercises with the

same unreflective approach as they would a crossword: to be done quickly and efficiently, and then promptly forgotten about. I was just about to set them to searching for specific information when something occurred to me. As a large section of the lesson was to be taken up by checking their research notes for a forthcoming presentation, I knew there was time for me to implement a change, try something different. I started with a question, one that was certainly unexpected for them.

“What do you think of this piece of writing?”

The entire class looked back at me blankly, though this did not surprise me. I then followed with, “OK, do you think you are capable of writing to this standard?”

They seemed now totally unsure how to respond. I smiled. “I think you are. At least, I think you should aim for this standard.”

I looked down at the text and quickly scanned the first paragraph.

Australia is one of the Earth's unique places. Although it gets very little rainfall, its vegetation and resources have sustained one of the oldest existing peoples, the Aborigines, for over 50,000 years.

I then issued the following instructions: change the subject to a Chinese city. Then change everything else accordingly – noun, verb, adverb, adjective. Change everything except the sentence structure. I assigned it as a group task and initially allowed them twenty minutes. This turned to thirty minutes as I wandered around the class to monitor their efforts. The first sentence was transformed easily, which I am sure inspired their confidence.

Shanghai is one of the Earth's unique places.

Of course, everywhere is unique to some extent so a mere word change was unlikely to give them problems. The second sentence was more problematic until I pointed out that they did not have to find some kind of equivalent to ‘oldest existing people’, that the aim was to come up with a significant piece of information about Shanghai. After careful monitoring and discussion one group finally produced the

following:

Although it is not as famous as London or New York, its rapid development has made it one of the most important and exciting cities in the world.

I watched as they paged through dictionaries and discussed possibilities with each other, actively hunting down the lexis they needed. Instead of treating it as just another exercise (to be completed like a jigsaw then quickly discarded) they took it seriously. They were forced to engage with each sentence and by changing the subject they were fully focussed on the structure, meaning and function. This paragraph:

The first stop will probably be Sydney, which is a busy city offering a wide range of artistic, historical, culinary, and sporting opportunities. Located on a magnificent natural harbour on Australia's Gold Coast, Sydney is home to the famous Harbour Bridge and the towering Opera House. The Gold Coast is known for its beautiful beaches and sub-tropical attractions. It offers a wonderful climate, with mild winters and warm, sunny summers.

was transformed to:

The first stop will probably be the Bund, which is a busy avenue offering beautiful scenery and numerous examples of world architecture. Located on the embankment of the Huangpu river, the Bund is home to over twenty magnificent buildings, including the famous Peace Hotel. The Bund is known for its wonderful views and excellent restaurants.

The final sentence stumped most of the students, until one came up with:

It offers tourists the chance to enjoy a wonderful, relaxing day out.

Though this did not entirely follow the sentence structure I let it pass. What mattered was that they owned the language and were gradually becoming more confident

about complex and compound sentences. I noted how they underlined each new sentence as they studied it, absorbing its meaning before putting it to their own use. By this time the lesson was almost over. I quickly checked their research notes for their Presentation and set the remaining two paragraphs of the text for homework.

Later in the week I reviewed this exercise and was told that students liked it because it made it impossible for them to think in Chinese. It also made them feel that quality writing, complete with compound and complex sentences, was well within their grasp. This was encouraging but I also noticed how much it exercised them in other ways: passive forms, new lexis, relative clauses, collocation – a wide range of strategies, in fact.

In the weeks that followed I saw a distinct improvement in their writing. Many textbooks teach new structures in a decontextualized manner, and then encourage students to use them. This can involve a good deal of error correction. My approach, on the other hand, placed new structures in context but also allowed the students to move towards production at a much earlier stage. This does not mean that there was no need for monitoring or error correction (verb/noun problems still persisted, for example) but it did allow the students to feel more in control. Subsequently, instead of finding easy and familiar ways to communicate they were more likely to take a risk and try one of the more complex structures they had learned. Occasionally they would lapse. When this happened I would take the exercise a step further by instructing them to buy a copy of Shanghai Daily, find an article that interested them and change the subject in order to transform it into an article on a different subject. Of course, allowing them to choose what to transform had even more effect on their motivation. I concluded that for this kind of class – low level, lacking in confidence, fearful of losing face before their more proficient friends in other classes, and constantly taking the easy route via L1 – this kind of exercise is a possible way forward. Following this simple experiment I am now considering structuring all lessons around a central text and integrating comprehension and writing more closely.

References

Chou, C. H., & Bartz, K. (2007). The effectiveness of Chinese NNESTs in teaching English syntax. Paper presented at the CATESOL State Conference. Retrieved from <http://www.catesol.org/07Chou.pdf>



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