

Non-Native Writer (NNW) English Texts versus Native Writer (NW) English Texts: Differences in Intelligibility among Chinese Students

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Abstract. With the increasing number of English learners in China, the question of which English they should be learning has begun to occupy the minds of many scholars as well as policy makers. The present study aims to ascertain whether a text written in NNW English for use in an executive education session is intelligible to its users and, hence, whether ‘China English’ and / or English with English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) linguistic features can be used as a model for Chinese students in China rather than a Standard English model. The preliminary results of the study found that an authentic NNW text was as intelligible as a NW text.

摘要: 随着中国英语学习者人数的日益增加, 关于他们应该学习什么样的英语的问题已经开始为许多学者和政策制定者深度思考。本研究旨在探知“非英语本族语者作者”所写, 供企业高管教育培训项目使用的一篇英文文本是否为其使用者所理解, 并由此推断“中国英语”和/或具有“英语作为通用语”语言特点的英语, 而非“标准英语模式”是否可以在中国用作中国学生学习的模型。初步研究结果表明, “非英语本族语者作者”所写的真实英文文本和“英语本族语者作者”的文本具有同样的可理解性。

Background

According to Wei and Su (2013), there were around 390 million learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in mainland China in 2006, based on China’s first national survey of foreign language learning carried out in the early 2000s. With such, still increasing numbers, some scholars (He & Li, 2009, Jenkins, 2009, Kachru, 2011, Cook, 2011, Perrin, 2014a) question whether Chinese learners of English should be learning English to a Standard British or American English model or whether eventually China English and/or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) will become the accepted standard in China.

ELF is usually defined as English used between non-native speakers (NNSs) for communication purposes. It is the use of English “underpinned by the notion of mutual intelligibility” (Clark, 2013, p. 52), rather than the notions of native speaker (NS) fluency and accuracy, i.e., as long as a spoken utterance or written text is comprehensible then this should be regarded as effective communication.

ELF forms include incorrect subject-verb agreement, plural forms of uncountable nouns and also omissions of articles and prepositions, as can be seen in the case study below.

China English (or ‘Chinese English’) may be defined as a variety of English that contains many ELF forms, although it also contains linguistic features of its own (see He & Li, 2009, pp. 72-74; Xu, 2010; McKay, 2011, p. 126) in lexis, discourse and syntax. Wang (1994, p. 7) in Kirkpatrick (2014, p. 4) defines Chinese English as, “the English used by the Chinese people in China, being based on standard English and having Chinese characteristics.” Xu (2010) extends this definition to say that it is:

a developing variety of English, which is subject to ongoing codification and normalization processes.... It is characterized by the transfer of Chinese linguistic and cultural norms at varying levels of language, and it is used primarily by Chinese for intra- and international communication (p. 1).

For many decades, the traditional way of teaching and learning English in Chinese schools has been via textbooks published by the People's Education Press (PEP). These textbooks contain standard linguistic forms of American/British English, which "powerfully shape[s]" learners' perceptions of the language they are learning and are in line with national policy (Orton, 2009, pp. 137-138).

Students are also tested according to NS English models. Their end of high school exam, the *gaokao*, includes a compulsory English component, which is a requirement to pass to gain admission to university. Another testing system is the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). 300,000 Chinese candidates take the IELTS exam every year (Li, 2013). This test uses level descriptors to measure students' ability in standard British English. At the higher education level, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is used at some transnational institutions in China to describe levels of achievement by learners. According to Cook (2011, p. 147), the CEFR also concentrates on NS use as the goal of language teaching.

These reasons may account for the fact that many Chinese learners aspire to be like NSs of the English language, i.e. to "submit to the dictates of its form" (Widdowson, 1994, p. 384) rather than "bend" the language to their will. Equally, however, many Chinese students and also their NNS academics at transnational English-medium universities in China and elsewhere successfully use spoken and written ELF along with linguistic features of China English for communication (Perrin, 2014b).

Instead of emphasizing a NS model, Jenkins (2009) argues that, when teaching English as an international language, common linguistic features, such as omission of the 3rd person singular "s", which would normally be considered as "errors" by English EAP teachers, should not be marked as such provided they do not impede understanding. McKay (2002) points out that the English learnt should depend upon the goals and circumstances of the learners:

To the extent that academic success in western contexts depends on the acquisition of western patterns of rhetorical development, bilingual users of English may want to acquire these. On the other hand, when written texts are designed primarily for a bilingual community within a country, the use of local rhetorical

patterns is clearly appropriate. (p. 128)

This statement supports the "think global, act local" mantra (see also Kirkpatrick and Xu, 2012). At the 7th International Conference on English Language Teaching in China, Cheng (2014) questioned a panel on "current trends and issues in ELT" as to how much English Chinese students actually need and on which standards the English curriculum should be based. Discussions like these appear to be on the increase. Furthermore, Gao (2014) at the same conference informed delegates that the policy in China from 2016 is for a reduction in the scores needed for the English section and an increase in the scores for Chinese in school and university entrance exams in order to emphasise that mastery of Chinese is more important than mastery of English. This policy may represent a change in view of the importance of English.

In view of the above, the present study seeks to determine if written China English is as intelligible as written Standard English. This study is part of a larger research project conducted by the authors investigating attitudes towards and intelligibility of China English/ELF. Although some studies have been carried out into attitudes towards spoken China English (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002, Evans, 2010, He & Li, 2009) and into the intelligibility of spoken English varieties (Kirkpatrick, Deterding & Wong 2008), few studies have been conducted into attitudes towards or intelligibility of *written* China English.

This paper relays the results of the first part of the study which aimed to investigate whether there are significant differences in intelligibility between written Standard English and written China English/ELF. The main research question of this study was:

- Do Chinese students understand written China English/ELF as well as or better than written Standard British English?

Methodology

One of the researchers had encountered an authentic China English text, a case study written by a Chinese executive with an MBA, during a training exercise involving Chinese businesspeople. Throughout the two-hour discussion of this case study, there appeared to be no difficulty understanding the issues in the

case with no mention of 'errors'. Because of this successful use, this authentic text became the stimulus for this research.

In the pre-study, 71 Year 1 Business students at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) read the China English text while 34 students read the control text, the same text which the researchers had rewritten in Standard British English. They were asked to identify the vocabulary and grammar errors. This part of the study was conducted to determine if the text met a threshold level for the students in terms of awareness of errors. It was also used to identify problematic areas of the Standard British English translation which might need to be modified for the main study.

The following is an excerpt from the original case study. The numbers (highlighted in red) represent omissions which the authors believe are common to English learners in China (and elsewhere). Also highlighted are incorrect word forms, verb tense issues and Chinese rhetorical style features or syntactic constructions.

Let us examine the problem faced by Mr. Zhang, Quality Manager of a manufacturing plant. Mr. Zhang is responsible (1) overall quality assurance for (2) Shanghai manufacturing plant which build (3) and ship (3) over 20 million plus products worldwide every year. While working on (4) assurance of quality by design, component and process quality control, he needs to deal with quality deviations (5) unfortunately happened every day.

One day morning when he opened (6) email box, a DMR from US DC showed a safety guard screw on a popular product was found broken in (7) box during (8) normal DC sampling audit. This is a safety potential failure, so the information reached out to global stakeholders right away. Both production and shipment were held accordingly with quality procedure. As (9) suspected screw (10) widely used, so many products and production lines are affected, but a big FOB order will be picked up two weeks later scheduled, if we can't production and ship on schedule (11) plant will face a huge penalty. (12) All related functions come to you for decision if can we resume production?

Key:

- 1 missing preposition and article
- 2 missing article
- 3 incorrect subject-verb agreement
- 4 omission of article
- 5 missing relative pronoun
- 6 and 7 missing possessives
- 8 and 9 missing articles
- 10 missing verb
- 11 missing article
- 12 missing question verb

The highlighted areas could reflect Chinese discourse features and tenses due to transfer from Chinese e.g. "one day morning" and rhetorical style, e.g. "As (9) suspected screw (10) widely used, so many products and production lines are affected..." Kirkpatrick and Xu (2012, p. 111) would refer to this second case as a "cause-effect complex sentence", which in Chinese would be written as 因为 (*yinwei*) (as/because) ... 所以 (*suoyi*) (so/therefore).

The text below is the case study rewritten by the researchers into Standard British English:

Let us examine the problem faced by Mr. Zhang, Quality Manager of a manufacturing plant. Mr. Zhang is responsible for the overall quality assurance of a Shanghai manufacturing plant which builds and ships over 20 million products worldwide every year. His remit includes quality assurance of the design and process of manufacturing components. He deals with quality control issues which unfortunately occur on a daily basis.

One morning when he opened his email, he read that a safety guard screw on a popular product had been found broken in its box during a normal US DC sampling audit. This could potentially cause an equipment failure and have implications for safety. Thus, the information was immediately sent out to global stakeholders. Both production and shipments were suspended in line with quality procedures. As this safety guard screw is widely used, many products and production lines would be affected.

The problem is that a big FOB order has been scheduled to be delivered in two weeks. If the plant were unable to produce and ship on schedule, it would face a huge penalty. What should the decision be as to when the plant could resume production?

The main study used the same texts as stimuli. Survey Monkey software was used with Years 2, 3, and 4 Business students at XJTLU to randomly expose subjects to either the China English or the British English version. This time, the participants were not asked to find “errors” but to answer comprehension questions based on the text. The authors modified the standard text (shown above) to remove the difficult constructions, e.g. the subjunctive, that had been shown to be problematic for NNSs (see below).

Here are the multiple-choice comprehension questions (answers have been left out for brevity):

1. In general, how frequently do problems with product quality occur at this plant?

2. What does the manufacturing plant do?
3. The problem with the screw is
4. How did Mr. Zhang learn about the problem with the screw?
5. What factor makes the situation more complicated?
6. How long will it take to fix the problem with the process?
7. If the plant was unable to produce and ship on schedule, what would happen?
8. What is Mr. Zhang's job at the manufacturing plant?
9. Mr. Zhang has
10. Mr. Zhang is proud of

Results and discussion

The pre-study confirmed our understanding that the case study did meet the threshold level for salience of errors as the students were able to identify many common ELF “errors”. From the 71 students who received the authentic text, the following number of students identified these errors and omissions:

<u>Errors/omissions</u>	<u>Number of students</u>
1) missing preposition	30
2) subject-verb agreement	41
3) missing articles	39
4) missing relative pronouns	8
5) missing possessives	4
6) missing verbs	34
7) missing subjects of sentence	18
8) Chinese discourse features	0
9) wrong word forms	42
10) wrong tenses	28
11) sing. vs plural	1
12) run-ons (commas)	8
14) missing subjects of sentences	18
14) missing plural	1
15) missing ‘than’	9
16) missing infinitive	6

Not one of the Year 1 students highlighted what native writers would see as Chinese discourse features, e.g. “one day morning.” From this, it can be surmised that, as this style is naturalised, they would not recognise these as “errors” in standard English.

The control group of students reading the standard British English text also identified

features of grammar and lexis which would not be considered as “errors” by native writers. For example, the subjunctive was thought to be an error, as were unfamiliar lexical items and constructions:

if the plant **were** unable to produce...’

What should the decision be **as to** when the plant could resume production?’

‘...were suspended **in line with**’

‘Quality control issues which unfortunately **occur**’

‘**on a daily basis**’

Based on this unexpected finding, the wording was changed for the intelligibility part of the study. However, the main point regarding the pre-study is that students did not identify the same quantity of “errors” in the standard English text as they had found in the China English text. Thus, even year 1 students were aware of standard grammar and lexis probably due to learning these forms at school.

The results of the main study, in which students answered comprehension questions about the texts, revealed that there were *no differences in intelligibility* between the two text versions. Using a G-index factor analysis, questions were rotated with one factor emerging containing Questions 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and only Questions 1, 4 and 10 being excluded from it. This factor was then entered into a Generalised Linear Model/ANOVA, which determined that there was no difference in intelligibility between the two versions of the text.

Conclusion

This research suggests that accuracy in writing to a native writer standard is not necessary for effective communication to take place. The author of this case study was an effective *user* of English, rather than an accurate writer according to a Standard English model, but his readers understood the meaning intended. Thus, as Hu (2004, as cited in Jenkins, 2009, p. 217) points out, English users in some Asian countries may find that China English is more useful than British or American English “as it reflects more accurately their needs, both culturally and in business.”

This study should have implications for teaching English in China or indeed at transnational English-medium institutions worldwide. The researchers believe that greater emphasis should be placed on the quality of students’ academic subject work, provided it is intelligible, rather than its adherence to Standard English.

However, the study does raise important questions. Many English teachers, to whom the authors presented this research orally, thought that the China English text constituted very low quality English and thus did not deserve the status of ‘China English’, instead deeming it “learner language.” The question of where to draw the distinction between China English and interlanguage is problematic. The issue of the overlap in terms of ELF and China English features is also troublesome. The main point is, however, that the Chinese businessperson who wrote this case study did not require NW English to achieve his goal, which was to produce an intelligible English text for his work peers in a local context, which reinforces McKay’s (2002, p. 128) point (above).

The next stage of this study will be carried out with international students to investigate whether these users of English find the text as intelligible as the Chinese students. It will also be carried out with Language Centre tutors teaching ESAP in the Business stream and Business faculty. Additionally, international students’ attitudes towards the writer of the two texts will be gauged to determine if one variety is considered more prestigious.

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