Recent Experiments in Blended Teaching and Learning: English Language in the School of Business, Macao Polytechnic Institute (MPI)

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English (language) is compulsory at all levels of higher diploma and degree studies in the School of Business at Macao Polytechnic Institute. Since 2005, in the first, third and fourth years of study, I have introduced new forms of online testing to complement more traditional classroom teaching techniques. Unlike many other forms of blended teaching and learning, this online testing has used readily-available commercial software (Excel spreadsheets and WebCT) licensed to MPI. It does not require customised delivery techniques, and is therefore a low-cost option for cash-strapped institutions.

This paper reviews two major experiments, the second of which now has an established place in all 3rd- and 4th-year English classrooms: word formation exercises and student-accessed quizzes using textbook and textbank materials.

Introduction

MPI offers night and day courses taught in English or Cantonese, and in the School of Business, English language classes are compulsory for all students throughout their studies. Students are mainly local Cantonese and a few Portuguese native speakers but, as a result of the ongoing demographic transition, the proportion of local students is falling steadily (from nearly 85% in 2002-3 to 77.3% in 2005-6 in MPI’s School of Business). With very few exceptions (from Taiwan, and exchange students from the USA and UK), ‘foreign’ students come from the Chinese mainland and in the past have not been required to sit in MPI’s entrance examination. Their English listening and speaking skills are usually better-developed than those of locals, yet, as Table 1 shows, most of them choose ‘Chinese’ as their Language of Instruction (LoI) at MPI, whereas English is already the LoI of choice among the majority of local students.

Table 1. Proportions of local and foreign students choosing English as their Language of Instruction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Local %</th>
<th>Foreign %</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002-3</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-4</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-5</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>47.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-6</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>50.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Local students are selected on the basis of MPI’s entry tests. Basic competence in English and Math is tested by computer-marked multiple-choice papers. Results are averaged to offer admission to those who pass, resulting in a very large range of proficiency in both subjects. The results of English entry testing are as of yet not used to place students according to their proficiency, either in the appropriate LoI, or at an
appropriate level of English, or even in classes of comparable ability at the same level of teaching. Instead, we routinely have to teach technical as well as language classes of hugely mixed proficiency in all four English skills: a differential of 50+ percentage points between best and worst results is fairly standard.

Language classes are relatively large: 20 is supposedly the norm, but I have often taught 30+ students of extremely mixed English ability a fixed syllabus in the same classroom at the same time, and have faced this problem wearing two hats: not only as a teacher of the English language but also as a social scientist teaching technical subjects in English, trying to communicate specialist theoretical concepts in Sociology and Communication that assume a good starting knowledge of everyday English. However, here I speak mainly as a teacher of English.

In this situation, and given MPI’s excellent computing facilities and user support, archiving PowerPoint summaries of lectures and supplementary teaching materials online allows all students to revisit lecture material and access additional advice. For English classes, these online learning aids include remedial, colour-coded PowerPoints dealing with basic problems which the weaker students can revisit individually in areas they need to improve (for example, sentence structure) as well as more detailed advice on topics that are not covered in the formal syllabus (such as conjunctions and how to avoid losing marks to plagiarism).

My own use of ‘blended’ teaching and learning thus owes less to pedagogical philosophy than to practical necessity. It has been an attempt to resolve three problems among my students: their attitude to learning (in) English; their learning strategies; and their skill deficits.

Attitudes to Learning (in) English

Macao, which was a Portuguese colony until 1999, has nearly completed its extremely rapid transformation from a manufacturing to a high-growth service economy based on tourism, gambling and related services. By the end of 2005, 49.5% of job vacancies in the gaming industry already required English and this figure continues to rise.

Less than three years ago, most local students used to regard English as a necessary evil for very limited and specific ends, for which only the bare minimum of passive rote-learning was required. Having studied it for so many years, most also regarded their English as “good”, despite its incomprehensibility to native speakers. My attempt to deal with this attitude problem was to introduce an element of experimental play, for coursemark rewards, into their learning environment.

First used in 2005, my word formation exercises aimed to increase students’ self-confidence through a new form of actively investigating and playing with word structure, as well as preparing vocabulary for classes - and in that respect fitted in well at least with the mainlanders’ but not locals’ existing expectation of advance preparation (Cortazzi and Jin 1996: 66-7, 74). English textbooks soon began arriving in class already covered in Chinese characters (rather than acquiring these embellishments during class) which enabled their owners both to concentrate and to work much faster on the lesson content.

My objective was to give students a lot of practice in identifying and creating different forms of single words, to help them order these different forms mentally and to recognise the patterned regularities that they themselves were making. They met ‘word
families’, apparently for the first time, and seemed quite happy to regard bare infinitives (glossed as verb ‘stems’) as founding family ancestors. In addition, I routinely ask students to ‘deconstruct’ each new vocabulary item encountered (e.g. in new reading texts), by identifying the grammatical form of a word, discounting its prefixes and suffixes, and tracking back to its (usually verb) origin, before trying to guess its meaning. These exercises forced students to abandon temporarily the e-translators on which they still depend on so heavily. They couldn’t find on an e-translator the words they didn’t know, and had to first create or find the words in English. So they began to explore Advanced English Learner dictionaries — whose very layout shows word families - to find new and intriguing words, including gender-differentiated forms they had hitherto been only vaguely aware of. That students had used English dictionaries was more clearly evidenced in their wrong than in their correct selections of newly-met nouns. Some even began using hardcopy English dictionaries in class, despite their polite but shocked disbelief when I had first suggested such a time-inefficient, low-tech method! Now, they are even happier to use dictionary search engines on WebCT (e.g. Cambridge Advanced Learners), which bring up long lists of hyper-linked related words, idioms and phrasal verbs.

Students’ Learning Strategies

The local approach to teaching seems to have encouraged passivity in the classroom and rote learning. Neither is conducive to learning a language - any language - to become a competent user in all four skills, especially listening and speaking. Practical problem #1 in teaching English is, therefore, to persuade students to engage actively in ‘learning by doing’, rather than twiddling pencils for as long as it takes for the teacher to deliver the correct answers to any exercise and then rote learning those specific examples, hopefully for exact reproduction in examinations.

Forcing students to do computer-marked word formation exercises and quizzes online was my main solution to this problem. Actually forming words for themselves, or having to identify the correct match from answers which are randomly re-sorted for every access, or from a multiple-choice range, is a much more active form of learning than merely learning regular rules and memorising irregular exceptions to the rules, which in the past has been our students’ characteristic method of studying. These exercises also encouraged students to develop greater accuracy in their spelling and word processing. British English spelling had to be exact, or Excel/WebCT marked the entry as wrong.

Initially, six online quizzes used suitably ‘closed’ (mainly vocabulary and grammar) items from the textbook (Cotton et al 2005). Extra manipulations to check students’ understanding of usage were occasionally added.

Qualitative changes in learning behaviour suggest a positive impact on students’ attitudes to and use of English as a language that they could have some fun with. The very novelty of these exercises and the new online teaching technology may have been the biggest attraction to learners keen to explore hi-technology in an instrumental approach to a compulsory subject that they have had to study for most of their young lives, but for which they then had only occasional, limited and specific use.
Students' Language Skills Deficits

Now that Macao’s linguistic environment is changing, it is also important that our students learn to use English more accurately. Very few local students have ever been taught English by native-speakers, unless they have at some stage been schooled in Canada, Australia, the USA or, very infrequently, the UK. Hence local listening and speaking skills are more problematic than reading and writing. Until very recently, Macao provided few easily-accessible resources for listening to and speaking English, although more English-language programmes are now being screened on the local Portuguese-language TV channel and there are now two English-language daily newspapers.

Currently it does not seem fashionable to attribute too high a proportion of Chinese learners’ errors to mother-tongue interference in their acquisition of English: developmental errors are preferred as an explanation (e.g. by Wang Chundi 2003, Xu and Song 2004). Moreover, how we as teachers understand ‘errors’ and their origins has very fundamental implications for teaching Chinese-speakers how, and using what technology, to overcome grammatical problems that have been interpreted as having become embedded in Chinglish as an interlanguage.\textsuperscript{viii}

I agree with Chen Youping (2003) that the teaching of English grammar needs revision, especially in China and its Hong Kong and Macao Special Administrative Regions. My reason is simple. If indeed, as Xu and Song (2004: 57) found, intralingual errors form the smallest proportion and the fight for dominance is between mother-tongue interference and developmental errors, then finding a way around interference errors will yield a significant improvement in learners’ accuracy in putting over their meaning, especially in writing but also in speech. When they are reading for a degree in the medium of English, such improvement is critical to their success overall, not merely in compulsory English courses. My word formation experiment described above was based on my assessment that rectifying a major interference problem would have a significant impact on my students’ error rates.

Identifying the Problems: Error Analysis

I routinely do a complete error location on all my English students’ writing, with coded feedback to the students for self-correction. The vast majority of my students’ errors do not require meaning to be construed: they are simple inaccuracies. Their meaning is almost always quite clear, and executed in (a variety of) easily-correctable ways. My own marking philosophy is to respect the student’s style and intentions with respect to meaning and to suggest minimalist corrections, based as often on deleting as inserting words (or letters). The major areas requiring correction are word forms – hence word formation exercises as my starting-point - and articles.

There is, of course, considerable argument among professionals about how errors are to be identified and corrected. Different ‘Englishes’ (British, American, Australian, etc) also have different attitudes to different types of ‘error’. Not surprisingly, therefore, error analysts have massive disputes about the reliability of the results of their own endeavours.
Results of error analysis research depend very heavily on how errors are initially defined and classified: as Wong (1998: 5) notes, ‘classification ... is an integral part of the analysis itself’. Later, in research processes, classification will also affect how and with what degree of accuracy errors are identified and collected. Occasionally, too, a publication format may exclude major categories of structural error, such as relative pronoun omission, tense errors and noun-verb concordance (e.g. Brunton 1989: preface; Brunton et al 1992: preface).

Finally, assuming errors have been correctly quantified and related to one another, there remains massive dispute over their possible origins, both as interference and as developmental errors among Chinese learning English. On the interference side, does direct word-for-word translation cause any given syntactical error? Is the error a result of using directly a specific construction in, say, Cantonese? Or does it result, more broadly, from the allegedly topic-specific nature of Chinese compared to the allegedly subject-specific nature of English (Green 1991)? On the developmental side, is the use of ‘the’ rather than ‘a’ an article error, rather than an error of countability (Mohamed et al 2004), or specificity (Ionin et al 2003), or one linked to a later-placed quantifier? Is omitting ‘to’ from an infinitive an error of verb form, or of conjunction, or of preposition use? And if there are multiple options to explain the origin of an error, should it be counted once (and if so, under which heading) or as many times as it counts as different errors (Wong 1988:5)?

Such uncertainties in error analysis results are reflected in conflicting figures from Chinese researchers for different frequencies of different errors in English acquisition, as well as the proportion of all errors that should be attributed to Chinese mother-tongue interference in the learning of English (e.g. Chuang no date; Wang ChunDi 2003; Xu et al 2004).

**Chinese vs. English**

Practical problem #1 is the fundamental structural differences between the Chinese and English languages which affect learning and should - but rarely do - inform teaching by non-Chinese English teachers. Wong (1988: 1) notes that, although there are large phonological differences between standard Chinese (Putonghua) and its dialectical variants (such as Cantonese), their syntactical differences are less significant than the major divergence of written Chinese from English grammatical structures. Whatever variant of ‘Chinese’ they speak, Chinese-speaking learners have the same major difficulties with English syntax and grammar, reflected in the errors they make especially in word forms (of which tense verbs are perhaps the largest single example), and with articles (which I consider briefly at the end of this paper).

Wong (1998: 3) suggests that some of these difficulties (e.g. in noun plurals and verb past tense endings) may arise from the interaction between phonology and morphology, but this intriguing relationship is not one I shall pursue here, partly because it will differ with the dialectical form of spoken ‘Chinese’. Nor will I explore Green’s (1991) issue of topic- vs. subject-prominence as one possible explanation for syntactical errors. Instead, against received wisdom, here I argue that a large group of interrelated problems - English word form variations - arises from a very fundamental difference between the written Chinese and English languages.
I am in wholehearted agreement with Wong (1988) that we should approach this problem from the learner’s perspective. As she notes, such an approach may require us to transcend ‘the very boundaries between traditional areas of linguistic study like morphology, syntax, lexis and so on’ (Wong 1988: 4) in order to understand the different ‘transfer processes operating simultaneously’ on our students. Yet I have not been able to identify any more recent research that has responded to Wong’s (1988: 5) plea of nearly 20 years ago for ‘[a]n adequate profile of difficulties peculiar to Chinese speakers [which] cannot be constructed until more is known about how they compare with other users of English’.

The ‘Characters-vs-Words’ Problem: 1

Simply put, the first half of the ‘Chinese vs. English’ problem is that Chinese characters are fixed while English words have variable forms usually derived from a verb stem (despite a minority of verbs being backformed from other grammatical structures). For example, the basic meaning of all of the following English words relates to working for another person for payment:

employ -> employing - employed -> employer -> employee -> employment -> employable -> employability

In contrast, if a Chinese character is modified in any way, it changes both its identity and its meaning. When Chinese characters evolve into different characters, for example by adding extra strokes or a (different) radical, they add different meanings to the lexicon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>人</th>
<th>大</th>
<th>天</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ren</td>
<td>da</td>
<td>tian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>person</td>
<td>large</td>
<td>heaven</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So there is no simple way to explain, to Chinese students learning English at a basic level, that in English many different forms of the same stem word have basically the same meaning, and their different forms reflect different functions. The usual starting point is to ignore this conceptual difficulty and simply start teaching the different parts of English grammar (verbs, tenses, adverbs, nouns, adjectives, prepositions, articles, etc) as separate, arbitrary rules - with almost as many exceptions to as there are examples of these rules.

The ‘Characters-vs-Words’ Problem: 2

The second half of the ‘Chinese vs. English’ problem is that, despite having a fixed form, characters do function differently depending on Chinese syntax. One character, without changing its form, may act as the equivalent of an English noun, verb, adjective or adverb in different structural or syntactical contexts. This is doubly confusing for Chinese students learning English.
In striking contrast to multi-functional Chinese characters, then, English possesses word families, with basic stem forms to which may be added both prefixes and suffixes.

While English prefixes do change word meanings, usually by repetition or reversal, basic suffixes yield different forms of the same word primarily to indicate and mark different grammatical functions, although suffixes which are themselves (derived from) verbs, such as -able and -ability, also add meaning. Moreover, prefixed derivative words may also use at least some of the same functional suffixes. Once formed, new words may add further suffixes to construct still more complex forms. Two simple examples, including the one used above, may suffice, although computing specialists are rapidly evolving very complex new word forms.

(a) employ -> employing - employed -> employer -> employee -> employment -> employable -> employability; cf re-employ -> re-employed -> re-employment unemployed -> unemployment -> unemployable underemployed -> underemployment
(b) satisfy -> satisfying -> satisfied -> satisfaction -> satisfactory -> satisfactorily -> satisfiable -> satisfiability; cf dissatisfied -> dissatisfaction unsatisfying -> unsatisfied -> unsatisfactory -> unsatisfactorily -> unsatisfiable -> unsatisfiability

Thus English words evolve their forms to function appropriately in particular grammatical contexts, with only slight variations on or additions to their basic meanings; whereas Chinese characters do not change their form without also changing their meaning, but do function differently without changing their form. For a person highly literate in Chinese who learns English, this fundamental difference between fixed characters with flexible functions and flexible words for fixed functions, creates not just one, but many problems. These are usually identified, from the English grammatical teaching perspective rather than that of the Chinese learner, as discrete rather than inter-related:

1. Noun problems:
   1.1. singular as opposed to plural forms (-s / es)
   1.2. state-nouns (-ability, -age, -al, -ance, -ancy, -ation, -ence, -ency, -ery, -ety, -hood, -ility, -ion, -ism, -ity, -ment, -ness, -sion,)
   1.3. process-nouns (gerunds) (-ing)
   1.4. actor-nouns (-ant, -ar, -eer, -ent, -er, -ian, -or)
      1.4.1. gender-differentiated forms (-er / -or vs -ess / -ress)

2. Verb problems:
   2.1. distinguishing between base verb / bare infinitive and word stem where they do not coincide
      2.1.1. main verbs after modals
   2.2. tenses
2.2.1. third person singular, simple present and simple past tenses (be / have) (-s, es)
2.3. participles
   2.3.1. present (continuous verbs / adjectives / gerunds) (-ing)
   2.3.2. past (perfect verbs / passive forms / adjectives) (-d, -ed, -t)
   2.3.2.1. past participle as opposed to past simple in irregular verbs (-n, -en, -t)

3. Qualifiers:
   3.1. Adjectives (-able / -ible, -al, -an, -ant, -ar, -ary, -ate, -ent, -eous, -esque, -free, -ful, -ian, -ic, -ical, -ious, -ish, -ist, -ive, -less, -like, -ory, -ous, -some)
   3.2. Adverbs (adjectival form + -ly)
   3.3. Indefinite articles (a / an / any)

One result of regarding the above differences as discrete English problems, to be taught separately and never related back to one another, is that the concept of word families is not introduced until relatively late - if, indeed, ever - and Chinese native-speakers often remain residually confused about the differences among the different forms even when they can use English reasonably competently. Chen Youping (2003:8) has complained specifically about the ineffectiveness of word formation exercises in textbooks used on the Chinese mainland.

Yet students may be quite fascinated (not least by an unusual approach) when asked, first, to make as many words as they can from a verb (e.g. employ); then to use as many of these new words as possible in one sentence; and finally to put their original sentence (if appropriately constructed) into the passive voice. Eyes sparkled amid much laughter as all my Upper Intermediate students, even the less competent, engaged with this new form of play that allowed them to clarify for themselves why English has these different word forms and how to use them competently. In less than five minutes, the best of my students came up with:
‘Employers employ employable employees and this reduces unemployment’. One passive equivalent could be: ‘unemployment is reduced by employable employees being employed by employers’.

Word Formation Exercises

Unfortunately, this open-ended fun in flexible classroom use is difficult to replicate in the online teaching possibilities currently available and heavy teaching loads at MPI mean there is insufficient time to mark and give feedback on traditionally-written practice learning exercises. So I experimented with asking students to fill in different grammatical forms of base verbs - present and past participles, state and actor nouns, adjectives and adverbs - into auto-marked Excel spreadsheets, using WebCT as a delivery vehicle for down- and up-loading. As will be seen, these exercises did not ask for the formation of all possibilities: simple past (as opposed to past participle), third person singular simple past and simple present, and noun plurals were omitted.

WebCT and Excel together gave these exercises instant online accessibility, not simply on MPI’s intranet in the student computer laboratories, but also from their home
(or office!) computers. Perhaps because of its novelty, as well as accessibility and usability, the experiment was readily accepted by most students in the one Upper Intermediate and three Pre-Intermediate English classes which I taught from September 2005 to January 2006, despite the extra burden of work they caused. However, I stopped using them at mid-term with the third-year class because, after 11 exercises, the collaboration / cheating rate had already voided their individual pedagogical value. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning, as evidence of differing student perceptions of the value of these exercises, that the best student in this all-local class expressed grave disappointment when I withdrew them, and privately negotiated with me to continue doing them in the second half of the semester, because he found them extremely useful.

Specifics

For the three Pre-Intermediate classes, 20 separate exercises (one per lesson) required words formed from verb stems to be entered into individual cells in Excel spreadsheets. Every verb used by the textbook in any given lesson was included the first time it appeared. Exercises varied from an initial 161 down to 22 words at the end, totalling 1624 words overall.

Each spreadsheet used column headings identifying the type of word required from the verb stem provided in the first column (one example is given in the Appendix to this paper). For each exercise, students received a hardcopy worksheet, duplicating the ‘empty’ Excel file downloaded from WebCT, on which cell protection delimited which cells would accept answers. To count towards the course assessment, completed spreadsheets had to be uploaded before classes started, because each lesson’s answers were screened on an overhead projector throughout that lesson. As soon as the answer-set appeared at the start of class, students immediately checked and corrected their own hardcopy preparation sheets. Late submissions (automatically timed in by WebCT and therefore unequivocally identifiable to the second) received no mark.

Answer cells, programmed using Excel’s IF function, instantly auto-marked with 100% accuracy and totalled the marks. The answer-set was multiply-protected:

1. the font-colour for the answer-set cells was white,
2. the answer-cells themselves were locked
3. and their columns hidden,
4. on a worksheet that was password-protected for all functions.

For the first half of these exercises, before mid-term, this answer-set was hidden on a separate worksheet in the downloaded spreadsheet. However, some Excel-savvy students trying to uncover the answer-set corrupted their files in that process, so for the second half of the semester, the answer set was kept (under full protection) on my own computer as a master-file. Each student answer-set was then copied and pasted into this master to get the mark, a procedure that was actually quicker than uncovering a built-in answer-set on a separate worksheet in the student’s file. Results were then manually copied both to hardcopy and to WebCT’s Manage Student records, so that students could access their marks after the last of the three classes had finished that lesson.
Most of the words requiring formation came in the first month, before other courses began demanding coursework. It took roughly an hour per exercise per class for marks to be manually checked and transcribed into the students’ WebCT records. Although this was a small fraction of the time that would have been needed to mark these exercises manually, it was an extra 20 hours of work per semester for our part-time English teachers, none of whom used the word formation exercises systematically after initially trying them out.

While 27.6% of the 58 Pre-Intermediate students submitted all 20 of their word formation exercises, the overall average compliance rates varied from a low of 79.4% in the most fluent class with the best entrance results to a high of 87.1% in the class with the smallest ratio of examined entrants. This day class also had the lowest average entrance results, the highest ratio (nearly one-third) of repeat students, the highest rate (over 70%) of copying and, courtesy of the compliance and copying rates, also the highest average mark for the word formation exercises (72.1%) - which was only four percentage points above that of the least-compliant, most capable, night class. There was a good sociological reason for this difference: day students have plenty of time to interact socially with their classmates, whereas night students have extremely tight schedules.

**Copying**

I assumed that individuals would collaborate in their preparation of the words, but naively I did not foresee that they would use the ‘Save as’ option to clone completed Excel files, although this is obviously a much more time-efficient way of handling heavy coursework requirements than actually doing the work individually! Students may have assumed it would be impossible to detect copying in work marked by computer. However, when pasted into my masterfile, the answer-cells changed visibly for different answers, but didn’t even ‘blink’ when identical answer-sets were superimposed on each other. Both the way in which their marks were transcribed and the manually-recorded identical result patterns clearly identified those copying.

By the end of the semester, half of all 58 first-year students had at some stage submitted one or more ‘joint files’ for their word formation exercises. In the less time-pressured day class, copying peaked at over 70%, whereas in both night classes it was limited and sporadic, reaching only 25% in one class. Interestingly, this figure for objectively-identified cheating among Chinese students is markedly lower than for self-confessed cheating in the USA, where studies have reported around 85% (Olt 2002; Campbell 2006).

Despite the copying, I regard this experiment as having achieved most of the objectives I wanted it to, even though statistically the cross-tabulations against final examination results showed no positive correlations. No statistically significant findings emerged from this experiment for many reasons:

1. the numbers were inadequate, even in aggregate;
2. no controls were possible;
3. the word formation exercises were introduced simultaneously with other online experiments, including quizzes that also counted towards the coursework mark.
and voluntary diaries that did not, so too many experimental and intervening or background variables were involved;
4. 50% of all students copied at least one exercise, though more sensitive figures based on every individual exercise would reduce this maximum gross cheating rate;
5. and finally, of course, many factors that have little to do with students’ knowledge affect their performance in closed-book examinations.

I therefore still have no idea, because of the one-off experimental nature of the word formation exercises, whether in the long run they would improve the first-years’ understanding of how to manipulate English word forms in everyday use, and over time reduce very high levels of error in their spoken and written English usage.

Online Quizzes

I also introduced online testing primarily to ensure that students engage actively with teaching exercises instead of just waiting for the answers to be given in class. Students are encouraged to prepare their answers before their single login. There is one quiz for each unit of the textbook, and each student is allowed only one access to each quiz.

To avoid more time-consuming preparation work in html, I use the educational freeware version of ‘Hot Potatoes’ to create multiple choice, matching and gap-fill exercises which are exported individually to WebCT’s Quiz Question Database and then combined into a Quiz. Adjustments are always needed to make the final WebCT products and instructions sufficiently user-friendly to foreign-language students working independently online. Complete familiarity with all of the procedures involved mean that preparation time has now been cut to one-sixth of the time required during the experimental phase for these quizzes in late 2005.

Specifics

After the many hours of preparation, no teacher-time is required to use these quizzes. The quizzes are auto-marked by WebCT which automatically transfers the marks into each student’s personal mark record. There are no time limits for students, who take as long as they need to complete each quiz. WebCT records show login times ranging from 5 - 90 minutes for different quizzes.

Apart from my own students, eight students from other classes used these quizzes voluntarily during the experimental period, but no other teachers used them for coursework assessment. Subsequently, however, we have institutionalised the use of online quizzes, adding similarly-constructed reading tests (using textbook materials) throughout the third year, and introducing them to advanced-level students in the fourth year. All third and fourth year classes are currently using online quizzes with or without reading tests as the main base for coursework marks, to which individual teachers add extra writing or other work.
Problems

A few students have technological difficulties with WebCT, despite receiving hardcopies of instructions which are also posted on the WebCT Homepage for easy access while logged in. These problems may result from the browser settings on their own home computers.

A small minority of students have sometimes forgotten to save each answer before proceeding to the next question, but have learned very rapidly not to throw away irrecoverable marks in this way! Such mistakes have also improved their ability to write pleading emails to teachers!

In contrast to the Excel-based exercises, for the totally automated online Quizzes, there is no way to detect cheating. During the initial experimental semester, colleagues reported finding groups of my students gathered around computers in the labs doing their quizzes collaboratively. More recently, perhaps because a new edition of the third-year textbook has replaced the original used during the experiment, there have been fewer reports of English students clustered around lab terminals, and both marks and errors suggest that most, if not all students are now working independently online. Only about half-a-dozen, of 146 current third-year students, have consistently not done their online quizzes in the 2006-7 academic year. These students have consistently handed in no coursework of any kind!

This very small minority seems unresponsive to more active techniques of learning and using English, but presumably will wish to participate in Macao’s rapid economic transformation and new job opportunities. However discouraging to teachers, these students represent the hard fact that learning English in Macao will always involve second language acquisition in an EFL environment, in which communicative language teaching is likely to remain an elusive goal even if students become more actively involved in their own process of language acquisition.

Afterword: The ‘Articles Problem’

Neither written standard Chinese nor any of its spoken dialects uses articles (Al-Fotih 2003: 157, Lu 2001: 43; Wikipedia 2003) and there is a fair amount of evidence from research in mainland China (Wang Chundi, 2003), Hawai’i (Lu, 2001) and the UK (Chuang, no date) that articles are the single largest problem for Chinese learners of English. Yet articles are so invisible in Chinese that Yip and Rimmington (1997) do not even mention them in their Chinese grammar text, written in English, or give an indication of how to indicate specificity or definiteness in Chinese. Moreover, Chuang (op cit) shows that article use may be regarded as so unimportant, especially by English native-speaker instructors in tertiary educational institutions, that no corrective instruction is even attempted.xxvi Given the role of articles in nuancing meaning, this particular attitude seems irresponsible. Different authors have found different types of article misuse among learners at different levels of competence and Lu (2001) has carefully detailed the sometimes-conflicting evidence on the staged process by which competence in the use of articles is acquired by Chinese students at the tertiary level.

Lu (2001:70) summarised the reasons for Chinese learners’ difficulties with English articles: at lower levels of competence, ‘they have difficulty distinguishing [+SR, -HK]
from [+SR, +HK] contexts’, that is, contexts in which there is a Specific Referent which is not known to the hearer from contexts in which the hearer knows the Specific Referent. At higher levels of competence, when this problem has been overcome and learners can use the definite article proficiently, they still confuse indefinite and zero articles, because they continue to have difficulty in distinguishing countable from uncountable nouns and noun phrases, whether used as subject or object.

I have not personally investigated whether this process is reflected in my own students’ development, in part because I have taught mainly at an Upper Intermediate level where, impressionistically, article errors are among the top three most frequent types of error and the most important abuse does seem to be of zero articles, especially with plurals to indicate indefiniteness. But I have attempted to remedy learner problems by posting on our WebCT homepage a document that gives them, briefly, the major rules for article use, based on Alexander (1984); and by locating all instances of article (as well as other) errors in my feedback on their writing and requiring them to self-correct these errors. Unlike many native-speaker instructors, I do regard articles as important in conveying meaning, not merely because their abuse may invite discrimination. And I am considering using a variant on ‘the Excel experiment’ (described above) to give students practice, with self-correcting feedback, in correct article use. When I have time ...

Appendix 1. Hardcopy worksheet to prepare for WF exercise (Upper Intermediate level)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb stem</th>
<th>Present participle</th>
<th>Past participle</th>
<th>Noun (non-gerund)</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Adverb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>absorb</td>
<td>absorbing/absorptive</td>
<td>absorbingly</td>
<td>account/accountant</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>account</td>
<td>account/accountant</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arrange</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>back</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>commission</td>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compete</td>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contain</td>
<td>containment/container</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>contract</td>
<td>contract/contractor</td>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>favour</td>
<td>favoured/favourable</td>
<td>favourably</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
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<td>NA</td>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<td>follow</td>
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<td>NA</td>
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<td>NA</td>
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<td>meet</td>
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<td>number</td>
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<td>select</td>
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<td>supply</td>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Notes

1 Calculated from figures given in MPI’s *Annual Reports* for 2004-5 and 2005-6.
2 Neither LoI is a simple choice for Putonghua-speaking mainlanders, who are accustomed to using simplified characters and Pinyin romanisation, while Macao speaks Cantonese and still uses traditional, unsimplified Chinese characters and seemingly the whole range of Western romanisations. These internal differences among Chinese students are all masked by referring to the language as Chinese / Mandarin / Zhongwen. Many mainland students regard their proficiency as inadequate to cope with textbook content in English; but the alternative requires reliance exclusively on textbooks mostly in traditional characters and acceptance that they will understand nothing spoken in the classroom, because MPI’s spoken teaching language is Cantonese, on which local students can but most mainlanders cannot fall back when their English skills fail them. Using ‘Chinese’ in any English LoI class is strictly forbidden for instructors, but
local students routinely use their native tongue to communicate with Cantonese-speakers lecturing in technical subjects in English.

iii Calculated from figures given in MPI’s Annual Reports for 2004-5 and 2005-6.

iv Some students have in the past been exempted from this entrance examination on the basis of a head teacher’s recommendation. Mainlanders used to be exempted on the basis of their PRC public examination results. Exemptions are likely to shortly become a thing of the past.

I am particularly grateful to Conceicao Carvalho, of MPI’s Computer Service Centre, for resolving every one of the many problems I have confronted in putting various kinds of material online for student use.

vi The Macau Post Daily 31/03/2006, p. 2. A major benchmarking exercise has more recently been launched at the major casinos, involving Macao Polytechnic Institute’s (MPI’s) Casino Careers Centre.

vii The WebCT English Homepages include weblinks to online dictionaries, but most students used hardcopy dictionaries.

viii I am bemused by the negative connotations of ‘Chinglish’, coming as I do from Zimbabwe, where ‘Shonglish’ carries the very different aura of a shared insiders’ language to which both parent languages of Shona and English have contributed, and where most sentences mix both languages in ways that are acceptably grammatical to both.

ix Lee (1990) emphasises the importance of distinguishing errors proper from ‘mistakes’ similar to those made by native-speakers.

x Sometimes, the errors in the published papers themselves raise questions about the accuracy of the error identification process in the research reported (e.g. Mohamed et al 2004; Wang Chundi 2003; Xu et al 2004).

xi The ZhongDa Chinese-English Dictionary (2003) uses only 4 500 single characters in over 70 000 entries, among which are 20 000 new entries added in the 1990s. These newcomers are mainly new combinations of existing characters to name new technology, rather than modifications to the form of individual characters. It is quite conceivable that, having spent considerable effort half a century ago in simplifying the structure of traditional characters, language policy on the Chinese mainland is not too keen on re-elaborating any of them, but I have no evidence for this speculation.

xii Prefixes could potentially be used to reinforce the point that suffixes do not change meanings.

xiii Including -ility/-ability nouns formed from adjectives, backformed new verbs from adjectives, and nouns from such new verbs (e.g. passive -> passivate, transitive -> transitivise -> transitivisation: Cheater 2006).

xiv Being regarded, one presumes, as too abstruse, this distinction is almost never taught formally, yet it could help students to ‘identify’ English form in an understandable character-equivalent.

xv This confusion is reflected in the pattern of their errors: see later.

xvi MPI currently uses WebCT version 4.1 but will shortly switch to 6.0.

xvii Excel was suggested by Rui Pereira as a solution to what initially seemed an intractable problem of delivering and marking such large-scale exercises.

xviii One reason for these omissions was that I give my students other useful hints on how to deal with the last two problems, from both Chinese and English angles.

xix Of course, for the basic exercise, WebCT is not strictly necessary: Excel files could be sent between teachers and students as e-mail attachments, if meeting a specific deadline is unnecessary.

xx Students in the School of Business take a course in Microsoft Office, and are extremely competent users of both English and Chinese versions of all parts of this suite of software.

xxi One student did write to MPI’s President, complaining about the workload!

xxii Who never collaborated with others in doing them.

xxiii Night classes of new entrants of varying ages have, in their first semester, the least time to build up social relationships with new classmates, whereas day classes often comprise former classmates from the same schools.

xxiv Gap-fills were the least successful, because they allowed ‘open’ answers and, therefore, errors (spelling, typographical, word-ordering) occurred which detracted from correct identification of the answer required.

xxv The answers are provided en bloc as part of the revision sessions ahead of mid-term and final exams.

xxvi In reading the literature in this field, I was struck by the number of article errors committed by the authors whose work I consulted, and I have some reservations about the accuracy of error identification for articles in those papers that deal with the situation in China. I suspect significant undercounting.