Overcoming Chinese-English Colloquial Habits in Writing

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This article introduces common Chinese-English colloquial habits in writing and provides suggestions for instructors concerned with the writing needs of those authors. Despite the increasing number of Chinese authors submitting articles to international journals, the colloquial obstacles that Chinese face in writing are seldom addressed. In addition, although more and more on-line writing centers cater to the needs of non-native English speaking writers, the materials and services provided rarely pinpoint the language-related stumbling blocks that Chinese authors face. Directly translating from Chinese into English is not necessarily grammatically incorrect. However, once becoming aware of those repetitive writing tendencies that he or she has, the Chinese writer can begin to realize that directly translating from Chinese can sometimes hide the intended meaning.

Introduction

An increasing number of Chinese authors are submitting articles in English, as evidenced by the growing number of colleges of engineering and science in Chinese speaking universities that require doctoral and even master candidates to publish in international journals. However, limited resources are available for helping Chinese authors proofread, edit and prepare their manuscripts for publication. Moreover, in addition to grammatical and writing style errors, Chinese-English colloquial habits often prevent Chinese authors from expressing their intended meaning concisely. Although more and more on-line writing centers cater to the needs of non-native English speaking writers, the materials and services provided rarely pinpoint the language-related stumbling blocks that Chinese authors face in writing. This article summarizes the efforts underway at the Chinese On-line Writing Lab (OWL), National Tsing Hua University to incorporate awareness of Chinese-English colloquial habits in the tutorial process.

The Chinese On-line Writing Lab

Originally established in 1989 as University Editing before going on-line in 1997, The Chinese On-line Writing Lab (OWL) at National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan provides comprehensive on-line writing services and learning curricula for Chinese authors of English manuscripts. Staffed by native English speakers who are fluent in Chinese and long term residents of Taiwan, the Chinese OWL stresses the correction of Chinese-English colloquial habits in writing in addition to general writing style and grammatical errors. To achieve this objective, the Chinese OWL has published four books which are part of The Chinese Technical Writers Series. These books concentrate on aiding Chinese technical writers in the following areas: (a) writing (b) structure and content and (c) quality.

Writing in a Non-Native English Speaking Environment

From the perspective of a Chinese writer in a non-native English speaking environment, the nature of Chinese-English should be the initial concern, instead of how to emulate the writing of a native English speaker. Several helpful books are available on general ESL approaches to writing. However, few of those focus on the unique situation of a Chinese writer in a non-native English speaking environment. As an alternative approach, the language tutor can make the Chinese writer aware of his or her colloquial habits (separate of writing style and grammatical errors) so that he or she can slowly begin to examine alternative ways of constructing sentences to those taught in the classroom. This gradual process of experimenting with different ways of constructing sentences in a clear and direct manner is much more preferable to copying words and phrases from international journals. In sum, a writing approach for Chinese students in a non-native English speaking environment should be presented in a Chinese cultural perspective. Such an approach begins with examining the nature of those problems encountered when directly transposing a sentence from

Chinese to English.

Tutorial Writing Suggestions for Chinese Writers

The following tutorial writing suggestions can help the language instructor and tutor in making the Chinese writer aware of his or her colloquial habits during composition.

1. Maintain a direct English conversational flow in your manuscript - while maintaining the logical approach of the manuscript - by preventing overuse of traditional textbook words or phrases.

Writing English in a non-English speaking environment for a Chinese writer can be a formidable task. Traditional writing approaches taught in Taiwan (and other Chinese speaking countries) have sometimes placed an unrealistic demand on the Chinese writer to produce compositions of the same quality as those of native English speakers. While this does not mean that experienced Chinese writers can not write excellent English manuscripts, such an expectation placed on the Chinese graduate student or novice writing trying to publish in English for the first time is unrealistic. Although foreign journals and publications provide valuable references, traditional teaching styles have frequently over emphasized the need for making a comparison with them. Another problem created by overly relying on foreign journals and publications is that the writer many times can not justify why he or she has written a sentence in a particular manner. A typical response is "Well, that's the way I saw it in another journal". This dangerous approach of writing is largely owing to the lack of standardized technical writing curriculum in Taiwan universities and research institutions. Both the unrealistic expectation for a manuscript of native English quality as well as the overemphasis on relying on sentence phrases and structures taken from foreign journals and publications as a writing source have unfortunately led towards random copying and sometimes, even plagiarism.

2. Place the most important subject and/or clause at the front of the sentence so as to make the primary idea or emphasis more visually accessible.

Why is the main idea or primary emphasis sometimes unclear in English sentences written by Chinese authors? Directly translating from spoken/written Chinese logical structure and over relying on use of traditional textbook words or phrases often place the primary emphasis or key idea towards the back of the sentence. Unless the intention is to connect with the previous sentence, this tendency robs the manuscript of a direct English conversational flow that, in contrast, often places the primary emphasis or key idea at the front of the sentence.

3. Avoid the over tendency of placing prepositional and other phrases which indicate time (or even adverbs which indicate time) at the front of the sentence.

The Chinese verb form does not have a well defined past, present or future tense. In writing or in speaking, the Chinese verb in the sentence does not necessarily inform the reader or listener as to whether they are referring to the past, present or future. Therefore, Chinese often places prepositional or other phrases (as well as conjunctive adverbs) which indicate time at the front of the sentence so as to inform the speaker or the reader of the appropriate tense. When translating into English, Chinese writers sometimes forget that English has a well defined past/present/future verb tense. Therefore, the unconscious tendency of placing several prepositional or other phrases that indicate time at the front of the sentence is often redundant. Consider the following example of this Chinese-English colloquial habit: Now, the company is planning to expand production. Emphasizing Now in front of the sentence is only redundant since the sentence is already in present tense.

4. Avoid the over tendency of placing prepositional and other phrases that indicate comparison at the front of the sentence.

Chinese writers often place prepositional phrases that indicate comparison in front of the main idea. What the main idea is being compared to (not the idea itself) is often placed at the front of the sentence. Doing so pushes the main idea towards the back of the sentence. Consider the following example of this Chinese-English colloquial habit: Compared to dogs, cats are nice. Instead, one should say Cats are nicer than dogs.

5. Avoid prefacing the main idea all of the time by stating the purpose, condition, location or reason first.

Chinese writers often preface the main idea by first stating the purpose, condition, location or reason first. The logic behind this colloquial habit appears to be introducing the main idea instead or directly stating it would be too direct and perceived as somewhat offensive. However, such an introduction before every main idea (or prefacing the fact) may leave the reader with the impression that the author is indirect, as this tendency pushes the main idea towards the back of the sentence. Consider the following example of this Chinese-English colloquial habit: purpose (beginning too many sentences with In order to and For the sake of) condition (beginning too many sentences with If and When) location (beginning too many sentences with In, At, and From) or reason (beginning too many sentences with Due to, Because, and Since).

6. Use transitional phrases to connect two sentences or two paragraphs.

Although placing the main idea towards the front of the sentence is a good idea, always doing so would make the sentence so confined that the entire paper seems to lack any connection or flow between sentences and paragraphs. Chinese writers often

rely on conjunctive adverbs (e.g. Thus, Therefore, Consequently, and So) to connect sentences. In addition to these, the Chinese writer needs to develop the tendency of placing prepositional and other phrases that indicate transition at the front of the sentence. A transitional effect is desirable when attempting to make a connection with the previous sentence or paragraph. In such a case, information that refers to the previous sentence should be placed at the front of the sentence. A balance between placing the most important emphasis at the front of the sentence, along with occasionally creating a transitional effect, places a realistic expectation on the Chinese writer to express the content both directly and smoothly.

7. Avoid long sentences by limiting each sentence to preferably one or two primary ideas and using semi-colons.

English sentences by Chinese writers are often too long and sometimes appear awkward in the sense that catching the main idea is often difficult. Why are the sentences so long? Chinese often stresses the clarity, wholeness of thought being expressed and contained in one sentence. Recall point #5 where prefaces that denote purpose, reason, location and reason are often added before the main idea as a form of introduction. Adding a preface in the front of each sentence would obviously lengthen the sentence. When translating into English, many Chinese writers are often afraid of separating a sentence between the main clause and its supporting clause because he or she fears that by dividing the main idea into two sentences, the reader my not see the connection in forming a complete idea. The result is a long, awkward sentence. An alternative to breaking up a long sentence into two shorter ones would be using a semi-colon, which is seldom used among Chinese writers.

8. Prevent overuse of First Person; Third Person is more objective.

First Person is so common in Chinese documents (professional or otherwise) that many writers are unaware of this colloquial habit. The writer tends to lose objectivity in the manuscript when overusing First Person; in addition, the main idea often ends up at the back of the sentence. An exception to using First Person would be if the author wants to emphasize a person opinion such as We believe, We can infer, We conclude, We recommend, and We postulate. In contrast, using Third Person style removes a feeling of subjectivity or personal bias that the First Person style has. Moreover, Third Person Style creates an environment in which the author can objectively separate him or herself from the contents so that the readers can assess the manuscript quality themselves.

Conclusion

This article reviews common Chinese-English habits from the perspective of language tutors at the Chinese On-line Writing Lab (OWL), National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan. While focusing on the unique situation of a Chinese writer in a non-native English speaking environment, the Chinese OWL advocates an alternative approach in which the tutor makes the Chinese writer aware of his or her colloquial habits (separate of writing style and grammatical errors). Doing so allows the writer to slowly begin to examine different ways of constructing sentences instead of always using those taught in the classroom. Moreover, tutorial writing suggestions in this article provide a valuable reference for on-line writing labs concerned with this growing segment of writers.

References

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