

STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING L2 ENGLISH GRAMMAR ERRORS WITH L1 CHINESE WRITERS

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Abstract. *We propose teaching strategies for dealing with most pervasive errors made by L1 Chinese writers in the domain of several L2 English grammatical categories, such as agreement, articles, and relative clauses. These errors arise due to considerable differences between learners' native language structure and English. Based on a number of student essays from the University of Connecticut Writing Center, first we identify the most common errors for each of the above mentioned grammatical categories – the omission of agreement markers, the omission and overuse of articles, and the omission of relative pronouns. We then propose strategies for minimizing such errors by employing indirect teacher's feedback and follow-up activities.*

Key words: *agreement, articles, relative clauses, ESL, L2 writing, L1 Chinese, teacher's feedback*

1. INTRODUCTION

First language (L1) Chinese students constitute a significant portion of second language (L2) English speakers at colleges and universities in the United States. Most writing tutors who have worked with L1 Chinese writers will acknowledge that, in addition to grappling with higher order concerns, they find themselves confronted by the task of teaching English grammar as well. Writing center scholars have long debated how tutors should balance higher and lower order concerns when working with L2 students, and these debates echo similar conversations in composition studies more broadly. For example, a recent article by Paul Matsuda, occasioned by concerns that writing program administrators have expressed about how to best support the increasing numbers of international undergraduates, many from China, arriving on US campuses, reviews the various positions and argues for the practical and ethical merits of emphasizing sentence-level pedagogies when working with L2 writers (in tandem with higher order rhetorical, cultural, and process concerns, and within the ideological context of working in the long term toward greater cultural acceptance of accented writing).¹

Our survey of research and our own experiences as tutors suggest that L1 Chinese writers experience persistent sentence-level difficulties in several discernible categories of grammar. Such mistakes arise from the interference with L1 Chinese writers' native language whose structure is vastly different from the structure of the English language. The aim of this paper is to increase the awareness of those differences and to provide some practical solutions how tutors can assist L1 Chinese writing students in overcoming grammar obstacles during the course of their L2 writing development and second

language acquisition (SLA) more generally. Our ultimate goal is to make L1 Chinese writers aware of most pervasive patterns of grammar errors, which subsequently, we believe, can contribute to more successful revising and self-editing.

Drawing upon our training as linguists and using our own experience (both as L2 English teachers and adult L2 English learners), we will map several key differences between Chinese and English and discuss their implications for L1 Chinese writers. Understanding the development of the inter language grammar of Chinese L1 writers is the first step for tutors to help writers improve their command of written English.ⁱⁱ Thus, while we realize that international students come to the writing center for a variety reasons and that tutors should address the full range of each student's rhetorical and writing concerns, we will focus in this essay on purely grammatical mistakes that arise as a result of interference/transfer from the L1.ⁱⁱⁱ It is our belief that giving explicit grammatical instructions to the writers can help reduce some of their most persistent grammar mistakes in writing. This relies on the assumption that Chinese L1 writers were exposed to explicit grammatical instruction - and, therefore, to metal language - during their previous education in their home country. Additionally, following Dana Ferris, among many others, we argue for error feedback that focuses on certain patterns of errors rather than on every single error.^{iv,v} Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to account for several most pervasive errors, emerged due to the very specific nature of writers' L1. While the strategies we introduce can be used even in one-time tutorials, they are better suited to implementation across multiple appointments with the same writer (which is not uncommon with L2 students), and perhaps ideally as part of writing fellows programs that integrate classroom instruction and tutorials, or as part of semester-long writing partner programs, such as the one Frances Nan describes for international students at Pomona College.^{vi}

Structurally, Chinese and English differ in many respects, and we will discuss three notable differences that merit sustained attention: agreement, articles, and relative clauses. These were selected on the basis of their frequency of occurrence in a sample of essays from different writers at the University of Connecticut Writing Center. The results are consistent with a number of SLA studies and suggest that L1 Chinese writers are inclined to omit plural markers, subject-verb agreement, tense markers and (in)definite articles. Moreover, L1 Chinese writers tend to have difficulty with English relative clauses. Due to the nature of Chinese, a prototypical article-less language, another error usually made by the writers in question is the use of articles in contexts where they are not necessary, which stems from hypercorrection.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 discusses the role of grammar teaching in L2 classroom, putting emphasis on the relevance of indirect teacher and tutor feedback, which we place as a cornerstone for the strategies at stake. In the same section, we illustrate the general pattern of the strategies to be used. In section 3, the heart of the paper, we discuss and analyze errors in the domain of agreement (Section 3.1), articles (Section 3.2), and relative clauses (Section 3.3). Each subsection includes three core parts – samples of errors from original students' texts, major reasons for committing such errors, and proposed strategies for dealing with each problem. In Section 4 we conclude and discuss implications.

Table 1 Sample error codes

<i>Error type</i>	<i>Abbreviation/Code</i>
Word choice	wc
Verb tense	vt
Verb form	vf
Word form	wf
Subject-verb agreement	sv
Article	art
Number	num
Pronoun	pr
Run-on	ro
Fragment	frag
Punctuation	punc
Spelling	sp
Sentence structure	ss
Informal	inf
Idiom	id
Plural	pl
Redundant	red
Position	pos
Missing	miss

For each of the grammar errors, we propose indirect feedback that follows a series of steps. These steps are extension and elaboration of indirect feedback, as presented in Ferris's *Treatment*. We contend that writers fully benefit if provided with teacher's feedback, consisting of four basic steps – being shown the error (Step 1), elaborating on feedback (Step 2), correcting the error him/herself (Steps 3), and performing follow-up activities (Step 4). The following illustrates the process:

STEP 1 – Label the error with a corresponding code

Original student text: I have three exam.
num
Teacher correction: I have three exam

STEP 2 – Elaborate on the feedback by asking questions^{xix}

Guide the student in discovering the 'defectiveness' of the context rather than supplying a simple solution. For the example at stake, you can attempt questions such as:

What should happen with the word 'exam'? Is there anything that causes this word to change? Why is it so? What happens in your native language? How would you motivate such a change from your own perspective?

STEP 3 – Have the student make self-correction

Have the student supply the correct form. In doing so, you can ask the student to think aloud during the correction.

STEP 4 – Provide follow-up activities

Provide follow-up activities in which the writer can practice the number of nouns, which would assist him/her with subsequent revising and editing.^{xx} Alternatively, in tutorials with more than one writer, the students can exchange each other's compositions and signal the type of the error committed (peer correction) on the nouns by using the same procedure illustrated in Step 1. This can additionally enhance their awareness of the importance of noun plural endings.

In sum, we believe that the above series of steps can assist L2 writers to overcome common pervasive errors. Additionally and more importantly, once the writer becomes acquainted that (s)he is inclined to committing specific errors, the awareness of this problem is increased, as is the relevance of self-editing during L2 writing development. Keeping that in mind, we turn our discussion to our core concern – raising awareness of the most persistent grammar errors among L1 Chinese writers, followed by specific strategies for minimizing them.

3. MOST PERSISTENT ERRORS AND THEIR TREATMENT

As mentioned above, Chinese and English differ in a number of respects, although we will address just three, selected because of their frequency in students' papers brought in to the University of Connecticut Writing Center. The data show that most common errors arise in agreement (number on nouns, subject-verb agreement, and tense markers), articles (definite and indefinite), and relative clauses. We address whether such errors are manageable to correct and, if so, what would be the most appropriate way to treat them.

We will assume that L2 student writers can rely on explicit knowledge of grammar and that the above types of errors emerged in their writing are to be regarded as treatable error.^{xxi} According to Ferris, "A treatable error is related to a linguistic structure that occurs in a rule-governed way."^{xxii} Given that agreement, articles, and relative clauses are all ruled-governed, the errors in question thus should be considered as treatable. We elaborate on this in the following sections by proposing strategies and activities that tutors and writing instructors can apply.

3.1. Agreement errors

Agreement is a grammatical relation between two elements in which one element prompts the adequate form of another. Put differently, the two elements show that they agree in number on nouns (3), person and number on verbs (4), or tense of verbs (5):

- (3) I need *three cups*.
- (4) *Peter speaks* English.
- (5) *Yesterday I played* basketball.

In (3), the noun *cup* preceded by the number 'three' shows agreement with that number, by requiring the ending *-s* in English. Similarly, in (4), the subject-verb agreement requires the verb 'speaks' to show agreement with its subject through the verb ending *-s*. Finally, the verb 'played' that expresses certain time of the event shows the agreement with the past tense, requesting the ending *-ed*.

3.1.1. Most common errors: the omission of agreement markers

Common mistakes in the area of agreement pertain to the omission of the above endings in all three cases. Thus, a plural marker on nouns may be absent (6), the ending *-s* may be missing on the subject-verb agreement (7), or the verb may lack a tense ending (8):

- (6) a. *Original student text:* The Taiwanese government invests money in designing trash **can** with four **color** that indicate different **type** of recycling materials.
 b. *Correct:* The Taiwanese government invests money in designing trash **cans** with four **colors** that indicate different **types** of recycling materials.
- (7) a. *Original student text:* My professor **help** me a lot.
 b. *Correct:* My professor **helps** me a lot.
- (8) a. *Original student text:* Yesterday, I **study** all day.
 b. *Correct:* Yesterday, I **studied** all day.

The question that should be addressed at this juncture is why L1 Chinese writers often omit agreement markers. This question is particularly relevant since understanding why certain errors occur so frequently should be an important goal for writing tutors and teachers.^{xxiii} One of the possible answers comes from the fact that non-native speakers are typically influenced by their first (native) language in the process of SLA. L1 Chinese writers hence rely on the structures of their L1 and the Chinese language lacks markers/endings for plural number, person, and tense morphology.

The basic difference between English and Chinese noun plural is given in Table 2. In English, the plural on nouns is marked with *-(e)s* (e.g., *three pencils, five boxes*).^{xxiv} This is not the case in Chinese, in which the noun has the same form for both singular and plural:^{xxv}

Table 2 Nouns: Plurals in English vs. Chinese

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>
I need three pencils .	I need three pencil .

As for the verbal morphology, namely, the third person singular agreement marker for the present tense, as well as tense endings, the difference between English and Chinese is presented in Table 3 and Table 4, respectively.

Table 3 Verbs: Inflectional endings for person and number

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>
I go.	I go .
He goes.	He go
They go.	They go .

Table 4 Verbs: Inflectional endings for tense

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>
I visited a city yesterday.	I yesterday visit city.
I will visit a city tomorrow.	I tomorrow visit city.
I am visiting the city now.	I now visit city.

As already hinted at above, in Chinese there is no specific ending to indicate the link between the subject and the verb for the third person singular (cf. *He go*). The form of the verb remains identical throughout all persons, both singular and plural.^{xxvi} The same can be said for the category of tense, since tense distinction is not reflected in the Chinese verbs either, as illustrated in Table 4. Unlike English, which possesses various verbal forms to differentiate among present, past, and future, in Chinese, the time of the event is identified through expressions of time, such as ‘in the past,’ ‘yesterday,’ ‘now,’ and the like. Chinese speakers also rely heavily on the information coming from the context when interpreting the event.^{xxvii} It is not surprising then that, besides the omission of verbal tense endings, a feature that characterizes academic writing of L1 Chinese is an overuse of time expressions, as in (9):

- (9) **In the past**, I studied chemistry.

Another divergence concerns the placement of time adverbials. In English, they are normally put at the end of the sentence (or at the beginning, if emphasized).^{xxviii} Conversely, in Chinese, time adverbials are placed in front of the verb, their exact position being the one between the subject and the verb, as illustrated in (10) (as well as in Table 4):

- (10) a. *Original student text*: I **yesterday** planned to visit you.
 b. *Correct*: I planned to visit you yesterday *or* Yesterday, I planned to visit you.

Having outlined the fundamental differences between English and Chinese with respect to agreement and adverbial expressions, we propose strategies for negotiating these differences.

3.1.2. Strategies for reducing agreement errors

First, we present our proposal in relation to plural forms on nouns, subsequently extending the same pattern to problems related to L2 English verbs. Strategies are articulated in a series of steps, similar to those in Section 2.

Strategies related to the number on nouns

Step 1

Point out to the error by writing the appropriate code above it (‘num’ for ‘number’).

Original student text:

The Taiwanese government can design trash **can** with four **color** that indicate different **type** of recycling materials.

Teacher correction:

The Taiwanese government can design trash **can** with four **color** that indicate **num** different **type** of recycling materials.

Step 2

Try to elicit the rule on how to form plural nouns in English. You can prepare a set of questions in order to raise consciousness about the importance of focusing on the noun and its form when expressing plurality. Such questions are as follows:

What should happen with the word 'can,' 'color,' and 'type'? Is there anything that causes these words to change? Why is it so? What happens in your native language? How would you motivate such a change from your own perspective?

Step 3

Go back to the student's example and make him/her correct the error(s). Invite the student to think aloud if necessary.

Step 4

Introduce a follow-up classroom activity in which the writer can practice the number of nouns.^{xxix} We provide one such exercise in (11), in which the writer is supposed to complete the noun endings in the column labeled 'plural' with the first example already given a solution:

(11)

	Plural
	two (big) pencils
	three pencil_
Singular	four pencil_
one (blue) pencil	several pencil_
a pencil	many pencil_
no pencil	plenty of pencil_
any pencil	no pencil_
	a few pencil_
	the pencil_
	pencil_

Strategies related to verbal endings

With regard to the failure of supplying the appropriate ending on the verb for the third person singular in the present tense, we propose the following steps.

Step 1

Discover the error and label it using the appropriate code (in this case 'sv,' which stands for subject-verb agreement)

Original student text: My professor **help** me a lot.

sv

Teacher correction: My professor **help** me a lot.

Step 2

Provide guidance to the student in exploring the error by asking questions, such as: Who does the verb ‘help’ refer to? How do we know that it refers to ‘my professor’? What would happen if the subject changed? How do you infer the subject-verb relationship in your language? What happens in English?

Step 3

Introduce the self-correction procedure. The student goes back to the example(s) and puts the appropriate ending. Suggest him/her to think aloud if necessary.

Step 4

Optionally, you can signal just one agreement error, selected randomly. Step 4 is devised then to further improve self-correction of the student by going through the written composition and detect all similar errors. Alternatively, you can introduce peer correction for a bigger tutorial session.

In relation to the errors stemming from the absence of the grammatical category of tense in Chinese, recall that three types of errors occur. The first one pertains to the omission of the verb ending for the past tense (cf. (8a)), whereas the other two are related to the wrong placement of time adverbials in the sentence (cf. (10a)), as well as to the overuse of time expressions in general (cf. (9)).^{xxx} Also, if the writer makes an error on other forms of verb tense, we propose the same strategy. In what follows, we address all three errors, illustrating the errors on tense and the position of adverbials in the same example, taken from a student text.

Strategies related to the position of verbal endings and time adverbials

Step 1

Label the error type by writing the appropriate code above it. The code needed in this case is ‘pos’ (for ‘position’)

Original student text: I **yesterday plan** to visit you.

pos vt

Teacher correction: I **yesterday plan** to visit you.

Step 2

Build the student’s awareness about the two errors by asking questions: *When is the action of planning happening? How do we know it? Is it enough to have just ‘plan’? What does the time adverbial refer to? How is it important to the core event expressed by the verb? As a consequence, where do we place it in English? What is the alternative and does it imply any change of meaning? Can you think of reasons why English and Chinese diverge in this respect?*

Step 3

Have the student correct him/herself and comment on eventual change(s) of meaning prompted by different placement of the adverb 'yesterday', either at the end or at the beginning of the statement.

Step 4

Propose follow-up activities focusing on the placement of time adverbials in the sentence. Based on the suggestions given to the student in Step 2, you can ask the writer to go over the verb tense forms and positions of adverbials for the entire draft by using the same questions in Step 2 as guidance.

Strategies related to the overuse of time expressions

For the stylistic errors in which the repetition of time expressions emerges, we propose the following strategy.

Step 1

Mark the redundant expressions of time with red[undant].

Original student text:

Students can understand the class material more if teachers teach in formal manner **during the lecture**. When students pay more attention **during their lessons**, they are able to note the important points that the instructor is talking about. In America, many professors like to ask questions to the students **nowadays** because they want students to think.^{xxxi}

Teacher correction:

Students can understand the class material more if teachers teach in formal manner during the lecture. When students pay more attention during their lessons, they are able to note the important points that the instructor is talking about. In America, many professors like to ask questions to the students **nowadays** because they want students to think.

Step 2

Help the student think about the use of adverbials. Ask him/her to compare the first two sentences.

Is there any need to repeat the time frame of the event? Can it be retrieved in some other way? What event do the verbs describe? Under what circumstances do teachers normally teach?

And when is it that students follow what the teacher teaches? Do you think that a reader of your composition can understand the time of the event without you insisting on it?

Finally, draw his/her attention to the last sentence.

What is the use of the adverb 'nowadays'? To what circumstances does it refer in your sentence? Is it necessary to support the validity of your statement by using 'nowadays' in this particular case?

Step 3

Ask the student to restate the analyzed portion of the text on the basis of the considerations shown in Step 2.

Step 4

Bring native speakers' texts into the tutorial, if possible, and ask the student to analyze the use of time adverbials in them. The basic idea is to help the student become able to 'measure' the quantity of information needed for the reader and not display more than necessary. This means that other clues different from time expressions should be uncovered and explored.

After presenting errors and strategies in the area of agreement along with stylistic errors that emerge concomitantly, we turn our discussion to articles.

3.2. Article errors

Another common error that arises frequently among L1 Chinese writers concerns the use of the English articles 'the' and 'a'. Again, this error results from the substantial difference between English and Chinese grammar systems. Specifically, while English has articles, Chinese lacks them entirely. The difference between English and Chinese with respect to articles is given in the following table:

Table 5 The difference in articles between English and Chinese

<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>
I need a pencil .	I need pencil .
A/the pencil is over there.	Pencil is over there.

3.2.1. Most common article errors

Due to the lack of articles in Chinese, one of the most common errors in L2 English writing is the omission of articles, both in subject (***Pencil** is over there*) and object position (*I need **pencil***), as illustrated in Table 5 above. Interestingly, after careful examination of the students' texts from the UConn Writing Center, the data reveal that the omission of articles tend to occur even more frequently if the noun is pre-modified, as it is in the following examples.^{xxxii}

(12) *Original student text:*

- a. Model III provides [...] rules for **individual players** of **political game**.
- b. We need application of **three models** to **Iraq war** [...].

Correct:

- c. Model III provides [...] rules for **the individual players** of **the political game**.
- d. We need the application of **the three models** to **the Iraq war** [...].

In all instances of article usage in (12), the specific definite context is provided in the text (because the nouns are familiar to both writer and reader), the presence of the definite article hence being mandatory. For the sake of simplicity, we label such environments as 'Adj(ective)+N(oun)' context for the cases in (12) above even when a noun is premodified with a number or a noun itself, as is the case in (12b).

Another (markedly different) mistake is often made by L2 English writers of L1 Chinese. Specifically, in an attempt to comply with L2 English grammar rules, L1 Chinese writers tend to insert English articles across the board, which results in a hypercorrection error, as in (13):

- (13) a. *Original student text:* **Time is the money.**
 b. *Correct:* Time is money.

The article error made by L1 article-less speakers, including L1 Chinese writers, has been reported as an acute problem during various stages of L2 proficiency development (Parrish; *i.a.*). The complexity of the article usage is exemplified in (14), in which the same noun ‘coffee’ is used in all four examples, the presence of the article, however, causing the change in meaning (the example is taken from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman):^{xxxiii}

- (14) a. Coffee is a stimulant.
 b. I’d like a coffee please.
 c. The coffee here is good.
 d. This café has dozens of different coffees.

In (14a), no article (or the so-called ‘zero article’) is used because in this context the uncountable noun ‘coffee’ is used in its generic sense, referring to coffee in general. The situation is completely changed in (14b), where the noun becomes countable and prompts the use of the indefinite article. Yet, if we talk about a specific coffee, which is even post-modified with the adverb ‘here’ in (14c), the definite article is requested. Finally, the lack of articles is mandatory in case an indefinite countable ‘coffee’ is used in the plural, as in (14d).^{xxxiv}

Due to the considerable technical complexity and painstaking details on article usage, we will not enter into a detailed discussion of when and how English articles should be used. Rather, we will propose strategies for how writing tutors and instructors can systematically raise awareness in students and help them self-edit with respect to articles. Once students become more aware on difficulties with article usage, they can edit their papers more successfully in subsequent drafts.

3.2.2. Strategies for reducing article errors

For the omission error, we propose the following four steps for the tutor:^{xxxv}

Step 1

Identify the error and label it with the code art(icle):

Original student text:

Model III provides [...] rules for **individual players** of **political game**.

Teacher correction:

Model III provides [...] rules for **art** **individual players** of **art** **political game**.

Step 2

Guide the student in discovering the ‘defectiveness’ of the context if there is no article. You can attempt questions such as:

What kind of individual players? Do you know which players? Does the reader know which players you are writing about?

What kind of political game? Is it any political game or a more specific political game? Does the reader know which political game you are writing about?

Step 3

Have the student introduce the article by him/herself.

Step 4

For the omission error in the Adj+N context, we propose the exercise below, in which we assume the writer would use a great number of pre-modified nouns:^{xxxvi}

Imagine the following scenario:

The association you work for organizes a panel on the ongoing conflicts in the world and you are a discussant. The participants are supposed to argue for or against the relevance of the Great Powers’ involvement in these conflicts.

Task:

Submit a report to your supervisor in which you describe all the participants’ thesis and argumentation. In addition, discuss the topic from your own perspective using a separate sheet of paper.

As for the hypercorrection error, a similar procedure can be used:

Step 1

Identify the hypercorrection error by labeling it with the code red(undant):

Original student text:

The science is very important for **the humanity**.

Teacher correction:

red

red

The science is very important for **the humanity**.

Step 2

If the student does not correct him/herself, guide the student to correct the error. Try with the following questions:

What kind of science? Is it science in general or some more specific science? What about humanity? Did you refer to humanity in general?

Step 3

Have the student make the correction. (S)he should understand through teacher’s feedback that the instances of nouns in question are used in general and no article is needed.

Step 4

For the hypercorrection error, we propose the list of proverbs containing articles, in which the writer should discover an error and correct the proverbs in question (proverbs are useful in this scenario since they typically contain the generic use of nouns)

Task:

Identify the article errors in the following proverbs and write the correct form of the proverb:

1. The love is all you need.
2. The time is the money.
3. If you love the sleep, you will end in poverty. Keep your eyes open, and there will be plenty to eat!
4. The logic will get you from A to B. The imagination will take you everywhere. (Adapted from Albert Einstein's quote)
5. The education is more than a luxury; it is a responsibility that the society owes to itself. (Adapted from Robin Cook's quote)
6. If you want the happiness for a lifetime; help someone else. (Adapted from a Chinese proverb)

3.3. Errors with Relative Clauses

A relative clause (RC) (*aka* 'adjectival clause') is a type of complex postnominal modifier, as illustrated by the italicized clause in (15):

- (15) Beijing is a **city** *that hosted the 2008 Summer Olympic Games*.

The relative clause 'that hosted the 2008 Summer Olympic Games' modifies the bolded head noun (nominal) 'city' from the main clause 'Beijing is a city.' The RC is positioned *after* the noun being modified (hence, 'postnominal'). Further, in English RCs the presence of the relative pronoun is mandatory, the above sentence becoming ungrammatical if the pronoun 'that' is missing. These two features, the postnominal position of RC along with the obligatory presence of relative pronoun, constitute basic characteristics that differentiate English RCs from RCs in East Asian languages, including Chinese. It is then not surprising why mastery of RCs poses huge challenges for L1 Chinese speakers.

An additional burden for L1 Chinese speakers lies in the fact that English displays a variety of relative pronouns (*who, whom, which, whose, that, etc.*). Simultaneously, the relative pronoun indicates not only its function within the relative clause itself (acting as a subject or an object) but also the relation with the head noun from the main clause, this relation prompting a number of different forms. To illustrate, 'who' can only refer to a human entity, as in (16a), but it cannot refer to a non-human, as in (16b) or (16d). The complexity of strategies employed in the formation of English RCs is partly exemplified in (16a) through (16f):^{xxxvii}

- (16) a. I met a woman [_{RC} **who/that** lives next door].
 who – subject of RC, human, replaceable by *that*
 b. I saw the cat [_{RC} **which/ that** left its home several days ago].
 which – subject of RC, non-human, replaceable by *that*

- c. The woman [_{RC} **whom/that/∅** I met yesterday] works in Hartford.^{xxxviii}
whom – object of RC, human, replaceable by *that*, optionally dropped
- d. This is the book [_{RC} **which/that/∅** we received] as a gift.
which – object of RC, non-human, replaceable by *that*, optionally dropped
- e. The woman [_{RC} **about whom** we spoke yesterday/**whom** we spoke **about** yesterday /**∅** we spoke **about** yesterday] works in Hartford
about whom – prepositional object, human, may leave the preposition behind,
whom
 optionally omitted
- f. This is the woman [_{RC} **whose** son] I met yesterday in Hartford.
whose - possessive, human

As already mentioned, there is nothing similar in Chinese with respect to the basic properties of relative clauses in English. First, there exists no relative pronoun, the unique element signaling the presence of relative clause being the invariant element *de*. Furthermore, unlike in English, in Chinese relative clauses are prenominal, being placed *before* the head noun. Finally, recall that in English a relative pronoun can act as a subject (16a, b), an object (16c, d), or as an object with a preposition (16e). In Chinese, this task is accomplished with a personal pronoun, whose presence and form depend on the function being performed. Thus, if the personal pronoun acts as a subject, then no pronoun (\emptyset) is used (e.g., Several days ago \emptyset leave its home DE cat I see, meaning ‘I saw the cat which left its home several days ago.’). The optional use of personal pronoun comes into place if its function is to serve as an object (e.g., I yesterday meet (her) DE woman work in Hartford, meaning ‘The woman (whom) I met yesterday works in Hartford’). The presence of the pronoun, however, becomes mandatory for prepositional objects (e.g., We yesterday speak about her DE woman work in Hartford, meaning ‘The woman about whom we spoke yesterday works in Hartford’).^{xxxix} The differences between English and Chinese relative clauses are summarized in the following table.

Table 6 Difference in relative clauses between English and Chinese

<i>English vs. Chinese</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>
Position - postnominal vs. prenominal	I met a <i>woman who lives next door.</i>	I meet live next door DE woman
Relative pronoun as a subject – present vs. absent	I saw the cat which left its home several days ago.	I see several days ago \emptyset leave its home DE cat.
Relative pronoun as an object - optional relative pronoun vs. optional personal pronoun	The woman (whom) I met yesterday works in Hartford.	I yesterday meet (her) DE woman work in Hartford.
Relative pronoun as a prepositional object - optional relative pronoun vs. obligatory personal pronoun	The woman about whom we spoke yesterday works in Hartford.	We yesterday speak about her DE woman work in Hartford.
Relative pronoun as a possessive - obligatory relative pronoun vs. obligatory personal pronoun	This is the woman whose son I met yesterday in Hartford.	I yesterday meet her son DE woman this is.

3.3.1. Most frequent errors with relative clauses

Given the vast differences between the two languages, a number of errors in L2 English RCs should be expected. The first anticipated problem concerns the positioning of RCs since in Chinese, unlike in English, they precede the head noun. Interestingly, however, upon thorough examination of L1 Chinese essays at the UConn Writing Center, such mistakes were not found in students' texts, their writing reflecting the appropriate placement of English RCs – after the head noun.^{x1} What we found instead is the frequent omission of relative pronouns *who*, *which*, *that*. The error is presented in (17):

- (17) a. *Original student text*: There are various unexpected problems are happening right now.
 b. *Correct*: There are various unexpected problems **that** are happening right now.

The omission of the relative pronoun in L2 English, we believe, indicates that the writers in question have no underlying knowledge on structural representation of English RCs in their interlanguage grammar, subsequently appealing to the structure of their mother tongue, which lacks a relative pronoun in subject position (see Table 6). A viable alternative to such proposal would be that L1 Chinese writers indeed know how to form English RCs, yet fail to select the appropriate form from the fairly rich repertoire of L2 English relative pronouns. We leave both possibilities open for future research.

Based on the conclusions we have made thus far, in the next section we elaborate strategies for the treatment of such errors in L2 English writing.

3.2.2. Strategies for reducing errors involving relative clauses

For the omission of the relative pronoun we propose the following steps.

Step 1

Help the student realize the error by putting the code right above it ('miss' for 'missing')

Original student text:

There are various unexpected problems are happening right now.

Teacher correction:

There are various unexpected problems **miss** happening right now.

Step 2

Try to explore the source of the error by generating discussion whose ultimate goal is to elicit a correct answer from the writer:

What does 'are happening right now' talk about? How do we know that?

Now, let's observe the sentence 'are happening now' in isolation. What element is missing in it, subject, object or something else?

Now try to put the two sentences together. How do we fill this gap in English? Where do we put the missing word?

Step 2 is crucial for discovering the student's underlying knowledge about English RCs. You may find out that the student possesses no relative pronouns in his/her interlanguage grammar or that (s)he simply does not know which form to use and where to place it. If any of the above prediction is borne out, we suggest that the focus to be put on the analysis of the relation between the head noun in the main clause and relative clause. At any rate, always insist on the importance of placing the missing part in the relative right after the head noun being modified.

Step 3

Ask the student to go back to the example and correct it.

Step 4

Provide additional examples containing similar errors. In each sentence, first omit the relative pronoun and then discuss its use, position and obligatory presence or absence by asking questions similar to those from Step 2. We propose that the tutor always begins with simpler, subject RCs (obligatory pronouns with human/non-human distinction (cf. (16a, b)). Then, the tutor should increase complexity by introducing object relatives (that allow dropping of the pronoun (cf. (16 c, d)). Finally, the most difficult, prepositional object RCs (which allow both the omission of the relative pronoun and the preposition stranding (cf. (16e)) can be discussed. To illustrate the increasing difficulty, we provide the same examples as discussed above in (16a)-(16f), with missing relative pronouns. The writer's task is to supply the five sentences below with the appropriate pronoun, if necessary, guided by the same elicitation procedure as in Step 2.

1. I met a woman lives next door.
2. I saw the cat left its home several days ago.
3. The woman I met yesterday works in Hartford.
4. The woman we spoke yesterday works in Hartford.
5. This is the woman son I met yesterday in Hartford.

In sum, despite frequent errors in the production of L2 English relative clauses, which results from enormous differences between English and Chinese systems of RCs, we believe that providing the writer with adequate indirect feedback as described above can increase the writer's awareness and fluency.

4. CONCLUSION

We have proposed a number of teaching strategies in L2 student writing, aimed at assisting L1 Chinese writers in the course of their L2 English writing development. Only the most persistent grammar errors have been analyzed, as evident in L2 student writing brought into a university writing center. The errors are made in the linguistic domains of agreement, articles and relative clauses, and they likely originate as a consequence of interference with L1 Chinese writers' native language grammar.

In order to minimize these errors, we have proposed that the writing tutor offers indirect feedback in teaching L2 writing, which should lead the student writer to make

self-corrections. We have outlined four basic steps during this process: labeling the error with the appropriate code (Step 1); eliciting the answer from the student (Step 2); having the student make self-corrections (Step 3) and supplying the student with follow-up activities (Step 4). This form of feedback can raise student awareness of revising and self-editing and enhance L2 writing development.

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NOTES

- i. Matsuda, *Let's Face It*, 142-163.
- ii. An interlanguage is a linguistic system that emerges with L2 learners in the course of SLA.
- iii. For some issues related to composition and rhetorical patterns arising due to profound differences between the US and Chinese writing styles, see France Nan's study.
- iv. Providing the student with feedback on every single grammar error would probably be overwhelming and carry negative consequences for students' long-term L2 writing development.
- v. Ferris, *The case for grammar correction in L2 writing classes*, 1-10.
- vi. Frances, *Bridging the Gap*, 50-61.
- vii. For an overview of written corrective feedback in SLA and L2 writing within different theoretical approaches and frameworks, see Bitchener and Ferris.
- viii. Ferris, *idem*, 2.
- ix. Truscott, *The case against grammar correction*, 330.
- x. See Ferris (*Treatment*) and Bitchener and Ferris for studies involving CF and their implication for SLA and L2 writing development.
- xi. Lalande, *Reducing composition errors*, 140-149.
- xii. See Ferris (*Treatment*) for the details on differences between direct and indirect feedback. See also Bitchener and Ferris for a survey of the findings with respect to different types of feedback.
- xiii. It is worth emphasizing that there are advantages of direct feedback as well. Thus, Bitchener and Knoch show that direct feedback with meta-linguistic explanation can have a more positive effect on L2 writing development than other types of (both direct and indirect) feedback (207).
- xiv. Indirect feedback without error codes or verbal clues (as in (2b)) is also quite adequate but only with highly advanced L2 English writers. Ferris and Roberts report on the findings related to results involving error location as opposed to error identification (161).
- xv. Word-choice errors are typically untreatable as discussed in Ferris (*Treatment*).
- xvi. Ferris, *Treatment of Error*, 35.
- xvii. Ferris, *Idem*, 69.
- xviii. The main reason for favoring codes over verbal cues is the fact that the latter can be very time-consuming for the instructor.
- xix. This step should be included if the writer does not provide the solution to the error after Step 1. If the writer corrects him/herself upon receiving teacher's feedback, Step 2 obviously becomes superfluous.
- xx. An example of a follow-up exercise on the number on nouns is given in Section 3.1.2.
- xxi. Ferris (*The case for grammar correction*) introduced the distinction between treatable and untreatable errors as a pedagogical tool in response to Truscott (*The case*), who rejects explicit grammar instruction as a necessary component in L2 classroom. According to Ferris (*Treatment of Error*), treatable errors are related to articles, verb tense and form, subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, and the like whereas untreatable errors mostly include word choice errors (23).
- xxii. Ferris, *idem*, 23.

- xxiii. Ferris, *idem*, 38.
- xxiv. The irregular plural forms like *teeth, feet, children* should be treated separately given that no rule about plurals can be applied to these nouns.
- xxv. For ease of exposition, English transliteration of Chinese is used throughout the paper.
- xxvi. SLA studies report that most L2 English learners encounter difficulties with acquiring the agreement marker *-s* for the third person singular in the present tense (for an overview of studies of English tense and agreement morphology, see Hawkins, White). However, the accuracy profile of learners coming from different L1s shows that learners' background has considerable weight on the overall performance, L1 Spanish speakers supplying much more correct forms than Japanese learners, for instance, whose L1 does not mark subject-verb agreement.
- xxvii. Such overwhelming repetition of time modifiers is not ungrammatical *per se*, but it often leads to unnecessary redundancies in style or at the level of the informative structure of the text.
- xxviii. Frequency adverbs in English constitute an exception, being placed before the verb: *I often/frequently/never play tennis*.
- xxix. Although we suspect that writers may need such exercise at this level of language proficiency, we still present it as a follow-up activity of the proposed strategy, primarily for the sake of consistency.
- xxx. Hinkel, *Adverbial markers and tone in L1 and L2 students' writing*, reports that texts written by very proficient L1 Chinese writers included more time adverbials than texts by both native and non-native speakers of English (the other non-native speakers being L1 Japanese, Korean, and Indonesian learners).
- xxxi. Hinkel, *Adverbial markers and tone in L1 and L2 students' writing*, 1056.
- xxxii. Author 1 and Author 2 analyze this problem in more detail.
- xxxiii. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman. *The Grammar Book*, 294.
- xxxiv. For an overview of the rules about the distribution and meaning of articles in English, see Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman and the references and exercises therein.
- xxxv. Here the focus is on pre-modified nouns that we found lacking articles even more frequently than nouns without modifiers. For non-modified nouns, the same strategy can be utilized.
- xxxvi. For exercises involving the form and meaning of English articles, see Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, *The Grammar Book*, 295-297. For more specific issues on articles usage, see references therein.
- xxxvii. For a more detailed description of RCs and relativization (the modification of the head noun) in English, see Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, *The Grammar Book*, 350-355. For studies conducted to test the acquisition of RCs, see Hawkins, *Second Language Syntax*, and White, *Second Language Acquisition*, as well as references therein.
- xxxviii. The symbol 'Ø' stands for 'no pronoun' (or 'zero pronoun').
- xxxix. The mandatory use of pronouns applies to possessives as well (see Table 6)
- xl. Our observation is consistent with the recent study conducted by Xiaoling and Mengduo, *Interlingual Factors in Chinese College Students' Acquisition of Relative Clauses*, who analyzed L2 acquisition of English relative clauses by intermediate and advanced L1 Chinese learners.