

Mandarin

| Category | What the language does | Comments: How English differs and/or how the language will interfere with English | Example or description of errors |
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| Phonology (the sounds that exist in the language) | | | |
| Vowel mergers | Mandarin has fewer vowels than English. | English vowels merge causing mispronunciations. For example “ee” and “i” are not distinct. Neither are “u” and “oo”. | eat = it full = fool (in sound) |
| Consonants | Voiced and unvoiced ‘th’ does not exist in Mandarin (or in any Chinese language or dialect). | Speakers may substitute “th” for a similar sound. | ‘thin’ could be pronounced as ‘fin,’ ‘tin’, or ‘sin’ by a Mandarin speaker |
| Syntax (parts of speech and rules) | | | |
| Parts of speech | In Mandarin, word classes are generally determined by word order or by other words or phrases to help distinguish the word’s function. | This leads to mixing up parts of speech in English. | ‘It is very difficulty to convince him.’ |
| Gender | The spoken form of Mandarin does not distinguish gender. | In formal writing, English is careful to distinguish male from female with pronouns. | The student may not catch errors in pronouns when reading aloud. |
| Topicalization (different word order) | There is a tendency to start a sentence with the topic (which is not necessarily the subject). | This is mostly a stylistic issue, but it can lead to misunderstanding. | “Old people must respect” to mean “Old people—we must respect them.” |
| Verbs (general) | Verbs are not inflected for person or tense. | Speakers have difficulty encoding/decoding tense in English. | A sentence like “There is a film tonight” may seem contradictory. “is” is present tense, so the action should be happening currently. An example of a problem with language production is expressing the progressive tense: I sit here for a long time. (Intended: I have been sitting here for a long time.) |

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| Verbs (Auxiliary) | Mandarin does not have auxiliary/helping verbs. | In English auxiliary verbs help us ask questions, make negatives, and show tense. Mandarin speakers may drop the auxiliary or mark tense on too many verbs. | How many brothers [do] you have? I did not finished my work yesterday. |
| Verbs (Modals) | In Mandarin, modals do not have any pragmatic effect. | In English, modals can differ based on pragmatics (politeness in particular). Modals (may, might, can, could, etc) have broader meanings in English. For example “should” in Mandarin is restricted to “have to”. Modals present difficulty in reading comprehension more than writing, however. | “It is strange that you should say this.” This is a perfectly fine sentence in English, but the “should” in this case does not mean “have to/required”. |
| Verbs (Moods) | In Mandarin, the construction for the subjunctive and the indicative moods are the same. | The indicative mood shows action that is definitely happening. The subjunctive mood shows actions that may or may not happen. In English, the indicative is the default conjugation of verbs. The subjunctive uses a past tense form. | In English we can distinguish: ‘If I were a betting man.’ from ‘I am a betting man’ This distinction does not exist in Mandarin. Mandarin speakers may not produce the first sentence. Also, they may have difficulty interpreting the first sentence. |
| Verbs (with prepositions/particles) | There are no phrasal or prepositional verbs in Mandarin | In English there is phrasal: throw out, bring up, fill out, etc prepositional: talk to, help with, go out, etc | This can manifest in many ways from using the wrong particle/preposition to using a different verb that may be stylistically awkward or pragmatically wrong. |
| Verbs (Passive) | Due to the issues with tense, Mandarin speakers have difficulty encoding/decoding passive constructions. | In English, the passive uses “be” plus past particle (“-en”). This construction is unlike the tense constructions for active. | Both the burglars [were] captured by the police. Tomorrow’s meeting has [been] cancelled. |
| Nouns and Pronouns | Plurality is encoded through a different word class in Mandarin that does not exist in English. | In English, we mark plural on nouns despite using a number or other word that implies plurality. | Plurality is dropped, especially in speech. |
| Plural | English distinction between count/non-count is different from Mandarin’s distinction. | This effects agreement with words like much/many, this/these, etc | “She brought many luggages with her.” |

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| Pronouns | Pronouns (including subject pronouns) and possessives can be dropped in Mandarin if it can be easily inferred. | It is rare that English can drop subjects. This can only happen when the subject is repeated in a clause within the same sentence or with imperatives (commands). | 'I bought the book before ___ left the shop' 'The teacher came in with a big book in ___ right hand.' |
| Articles | There are no articles in Mandarin. | Mandarin speakers may use an article when there is no need. They may omit an article when there is need. They might use an article when there is a need, but the wrong one. | Let's make [a] fire. I can play [the] piano. |
| Modifiers (Adverbs and Adjectives) | Modifiers always go before the word or phrase they are modifying in Mandarin. | This can lead to wrong or just awkward phrasing | 'This is important something.' |
| Preposition | Preposition use in Mandarin tends to be more literal while they are more idiomatic in English. | They will likely use the wrong preposition | 'What are you going to do in this morning?' |
| Questions | In Mandarin, questions are statements plus a WH-particle or <i>ma</i> (a particle that makes the statement a yes/no question). [There is also the possibility to use <i>ke</i> within the sentence (as opposed to the end), but this is dialectic use and does not represent the typical case.] | In English, questions can formed by both adding a question word (WH-word) and inverting the subject and verb; In Mandarin, only the WH-word is required. | "When she will be back?" |
| Subject-verb inversion | There is no subject-verb inversion in Mandarin. | English occasionally inverts the subject and verb in more than just yes/no questions. | 'He was unhappy, so I was. ' |
| Relative clauses | Relative clauses cause comprehension problems. | This is generally a problem in reading English | In English: 'The house we wanted ___ was too expensive' can cause problems in comprehension. Speakers may produce sentences such as: 'There are many people ___ have that idea.' 'That's the shop I told you about it. ' |
| Misc (time phrases) | Mandarin expresses time on both a vertical or a horizontal axis. English expresses time almost entirely on a horizontal axis. | Time phrases can lead to awkward phrasing in English writing; vertical expressions are used especially with time | shàng ge yuè = up month (lit) = last month (trans) xià ge yuè = down month (lit) = next month (trans) |

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| False cognates (words that look similar in both languages, but have different meanings; in reading and writing they may think/intend the meaning of the original language) | Word from the language | Meaning of the word | English word used |
| | Mótūō chē | vehicle | motor car or motor bike |
| | | | |
| Style | Chinese writers tend toward understatement and avoid superlatives. | | |
| | The thesis statement is intended to be inferred, not directly stated. | | |
| Culture | The process of learning is expected to be arduous. | | |
| | One does not argue with the teacher. | | |
| | Rote rehearsal is valued as a learning method. | | |

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| [NB: the cultural points mainly apply to those who identify as traditional] | | | |
| <p data-bbox="98 326 1997 423">*Terminological note: linguists whose focus is on languages and dialects spoken in China (Sino-Tibetan languages/dialects) use the term “dialect”, e.g., Mandarin dialect; other linguists describe Mandarin, Cantonese, etc as “languages.” I have tried to use both terms (with the phrasing “language or dialect”) to avoid aligning with a particular theoretical bias.</p> <p data-bbox="98 456 1997 488" style="text-align: center;">Works Consulted</p> <p data-bbox="98 521 1997 553">Boroditsky, L., Fuhrman, O., & McCormick, K. (2011). Do English and mandarin speakers think about time differently? Cogniti</p> <p data-bbox="98 586 1997 651">Chang, J. (1987). Chinese Speakers. In M. Swan (Ed.), Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press. on.</p> <p data-bbox="98 683 1997 716">Dr. Alexandrowicz's ESL Web Site - USD. (n.d.). Retrieved May 10, 2015, from http://www.sandiego.edu/esl/cultures/chinese/teachingchinese.htm</p> <p data-bbox="98 748 1997 813">Dryer, M., & Haspelmath, M. (Eds.). (n.d.). WALS Online - Language Mandarin. Retrieved May 10, 2015, from http://wals.info/languoid/lect/wals_code_mnd</p> <p data-bbox="98 846 1997 911">Errington, J. (2012, September 3). False friends in English and Mandarin. Retrieved May 11, 2015, from http://haonowshaokao.com/2012/09/03/false-friends-in-english-and-mandarin/</p> <p data-bbox="98 943 1997 976">Maddieson, I. (1984). Patterns of sounds. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press.</p> <p data-bbox="98 1008 1997 1040">Schaffar, W. (Speaker) (2000, December). Typology of Yes-No Questions in Chinese and Tai Languages.</p> <p data-bbox="98 1073 1997 1138">Vorster, M. (2013). The difficulties faced by chinese students learning english. Retrieved May 10, 2015, from http://fr.slideshare.net/montyvorster/the-difficulties-faced-by-chinese-students-learning-english</p> | | | |