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The Headaches of Learning English

ONE OF THE FIRST PROBLEMS in learning a foreign language is that we think in our own language and attempt to translate word by word into the foreign language. What we need to do is concentrate on the structure of the sentences of the foreign language and find out how they differ from our own. This is especially true when the foreign language is totally different from our own, such as Chinese and English.

A Chinese character contains a radical, which gives us a hint about the meaning, for example, whether it is some kind of liquid, fire, or stone and so on. Another part of the Chinese character gives us the sound. A foreigner sometimes finds it difficult to locate those different parts in the characters. Even more difficult is learning the tone of each character, because using the wrong tone may give the word a totally different meaning when spoken. For example, in Cantonese, “sik” in a higher tone in one character may mean “recognize”, while the same sound “sik” in a lower descending tone but in a different character, may mean “eat”. There is a great deal of difference in “recognizing” someone and “eating him”! Chinese children are well-drilled in the tones so they become accustomed to them.

For Chinese students, learning the 26 letters of the alphabet is easy. Learning to use those letters in a word is not so

easy, because the sounds can change according to how a word is spelt. We learn the five vowels, “a e i o u”, but when those vowels are used with other letters they may change their sound. For example, “hat” is easy to read: the “a” sound is short. If we add “e” before the “a”, (heat), the “a” becomes a longer sound. Children learning English should be taught all these changes in sound or they will have difficulty in pronouncing English words.

Even more difficult in English is learning the tenses. Chinese characters never change their form, and tense is shown in the context of the sentence. Not so in English: in every sentence, the tense must be correct, and there are many different tenses. Listening and practising, as well as good teaching, are therefore essential in learning English.

I hope students who read this article will work hard on English sentence structure and tenses. Although some students can read and understand English well, they often fail in writing because they do not analyse the structure of their sentences carefully.