



An Analysis of Chinese Students' Performance in International Tests Take IELTS as an Example

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Abstract. According to the study abroad data released by the Ministry of Education, the number of students studying abroad in China continues to increase every year and has reached 703,500 in 2019. Chinese students have to pass the IELTS test and reach the standard scores universities request to study abroad.

This study aims at analyzing Chinese students' performance in international English tests. IELTS test, which comprises listening, reading, writing, and speaking, is an example. Chinese are familiar with the reading and listening test format during a long-period time of studying. Skillful approaches they summarized can be used in IELTS reading and listening tests which help Chinese students to get relatively high scores.

As for the writing and speaking part, Chinese students are less likely to achieve a high score due to the inadequacy of English knowledge and the imperfection of the education system. This study suggests there is a long way to go. Not only students themselves, but also teachers and policymakers should make efforts to improve Chinese students' performance in IELTS writing and speaking.

Keywords: IELTS test · Chinese students' performance · Chinese education system

1 Introduction

With international exchange and cooperation increasing. The proportion of Chinese students choosing to study abroad is also increasing, and the language challenges faced are unprecedented. IELTS is the international language testing system, a standard recognized by many countries, the performance of mainland Chinese candidates in such international examinations has become the focus of our attention. However, many people have looked at this issue from many angles, from attitudes about the IELTS exam in mainland China, teaching methods, etc. More often than not, the reasons are attributed to the lack of vocabulary of mainland candidates, the language environment, and so on. More people choose to analyze the test as a whole, too simplistic, too general, for the

X. Li, Y. Wang and C. Xu—Contributed equally.

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Z. Zhan et al. (Eds.): SEAA 2022, ASSEHR 675, pp. 1277–1289, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-05-3_154

scores of different individual items, the causes of low scores are not the same, generalized study results, more or less for the fact is a certain probability of misinterpretation, and for some people who have never been in contact with IELTS, will have a misunderstanding of IELTS and thus affect the test. So, this essay splits the IELTS test into three sections, listening reading in the first section, which scores higher overall, speaking in the second section, and writing in the third section part. The whole is not only combined with the type of questions on the test itself, but also a more comprehensive summary of English teaching in China. The study of the English language environment in China and the teaching priorities of teachers incorporates the policy changes in China at the time and gives a more comprehensive picture of how the whole English language teaching system has evolved and proceeded in China. In all three sections, there is an integration and comparison with domestic examinations. The paper summarizes the reasons for Chinese candidates' lost scores in writing and speaking and tries to overcome the environmental problems that cannot be changed, while for reading and listening, which are already good, they need to continue to test higher. They need to make a concerted effort to eliminate deeply rooted misconceptions in learning English, and they need to understand that learning English is not just about learning how to do exercises. Rather, it's how to apply it to daily life.

2 Reading and Listening

2.1 The Reform of the Chinese Education System and the Teaching Methods for English

The first is the development of English education in China. With the increasing international exchanges, English, as the most widely used language in the world, is an essential subject for Chinese students to learn, and as time goes by, the status of English in China's education system is increasing, and Chinese English has been defined by people. The concept of China English was first proposed by Ge Chuanchang in 1980. Since then, many scholars have given definitions to China English. English is used in native China [1]. But now many educators will hear the word "Chinglish", which sounds a bit derogatory when we pursue standard English because of unchangeable grammatical errors or grammatical errors caused by the mother tongue. Looking back at the changes in English in China over the years, both in the form of examinations and in the focus of teaching, it is believed that learning a language's grammar is the key and the foundation. In Chinese teaching practice, many teachers have a conservative attitude towards English, they once believed that if you memorize all the grammar, you can master English, but without any consideration that as a language, it should be used. The first greeting many people receive is "how are you? I'm fine, thank you." This may seem like a way of learning how to use the language in life, but in reality, there is a huge gap between this and reality. English education in China has changed from a purely linguistic education to a test-based education due to the pressure of examinations. The disadvantage of such an educational mechanism is the disconnect between the grammatical knowledge students learn and its practical application [2]. In China, English is an important subject for both junior high school students and senior high school students, and a simple look at the English questions in the college entrance examination shows that most of the questions

are mainly objective. The objective questions will take up 77% of the total score. So, in the Chinese education system, the form of examining English is very simple and very much focused on grammar, vocabulary, etc.

2.2 Comparison of IELTS Reading and Listening Test Question Types and Domestic Test Question Types

As we all know, the IELTS test is divided into four types, and their corresponding question types are still different. The listening and reading questions are objective questions, and each question has a corresponding accurate answer, while the speaking and writing are more focus on the candidates' thinking ability and adaptability. The reading question types are more complex than those of listening, and the form of examination is more comprehensive. To Chinese students, the objective questions are easy to get scores. From the above, it seems that Chinese candidates already know how to do objective questions. IELTS reading questions are divided into skill questions, language questions and a combination of the two, which is very simple and literal: Skill questions mean that after reading the article, you need to further understand the question stem. And language questions, as the name suggests, simply examine the candidate's language skills. But all in all, vocabulary and grammar are the most crucial "answering skills" and it is this skill that is the focus of the teaching of domestic teachers and the advantage of domestic candidates. Let's take a look at IELTS Listening. The question type is very fixed, but the ability to be tested is different. Compared with domestic questions, there are more questions, such as map questions. This type of question is obviously to test the ability of candidates to use. During the test, candidates will answer correctly according to the requirements of the questions when they understand the listening materials. Although the listening materials are played only once, time will be reserved for candidates to read the questions. There is no problem in reading the questions as long as you organize your time wisely. People usually summarize listening and reading as 'input' tests, where everything you do in the preparation phase is to build up your English, whether it's reading texts or listening to the material. To improve the ability to read quickly, many aspects, building vocabulary, consolidating basic grammar, grasping groups of sentence stems, and mastering fast reading skills either way [3], for candidates is a constant accumulation, no place is needed for their output, and listening is much the same, in the stage of preparation for listening, familiarity with the type of questions is also a kind of input, for the listening material is equivalent to the understanding of the meaning of the words and the familiarity of the pronunciation of the words. All the skills can be attributed to the accumulation of vocabulary and grammar, which is what Chinese candidates are most familiar with in the Chinese education system.

2.3 The Current State of Chinese IELTS Candidates' Performance

From the official IELTS white paper [4], the average score of Chinese candidates is not high in the world ranking, 5.8 is only the eighth lowest in the world. Chinese candidates' performance has a polarized state, listening and reading scores are more than the average score, respectively 5.9 and 6.2, especially the reading score, the world ranking is also

very good. Four reasons are mainly analyzed from the type of examination questions and the way of education in China.

3 Writing

3.1 Chinese Students' Performance in Writing Part

According to the statistics presented on the IELTS official website about both Chinese students' overall IELTS average grade and the grade of every part among listening, speaking, reading, and writing in 2019, Chinese students' IELTS overall average grade is 5.8, which is lower than several countries and regions, such as Spain (6.9), India (6.1), Taiwan, China (6.1), Hong Kong, China (6.6), etc. When attention is fixed on every part of Chinese students' performance in IELTS, compared to writing and speaking, Chinese students tend to have a better performance in the reading and listening part, which has been mentioned in the last part. Chinese students' average writing grade in 2019 is 5.5, lower than the overall average grade, which means that the writing part to some extent is an obstacle for Chinese students to make more progress in the IELTS test. Why do Chinese students have poorer performance in the writing part, compared to the other two parts mentioned before? This can be ascribed to two parts, respectively Chinese students' cohesive problems in writing and cultural factors.

3.2 Detailed Analysis About Reasons Why Chinese Students' Writing Task is Relatively Low

3.2.1 Cohesion and Coherence Problems in Chinese Students' Writing

English is different from Chinese and there exist many differences between English and Chinese. For example, long sentences are more appreciated in English compositions without too many punctuations, while the short sentence is more likely to be used in Chinese, and even if a Chinese sentence is short, composers tend to make use of punctuations. And English is a kind of hypotaxis language, meaning that the dependent or subordinate construction or relationship of clauses with connectives and readers will put into perspective the whole structure of the content. Chinese is a kind of parataxis language and its definition is the arranging of clauses one after the other without connectivity showing the relation between them, which means that readers need to truly understand the internal structure so that he/she can have a good understanding of the compositions and it is very common that the sentences in Chinese compositions tend to have no relations between them. Because of these intrinsic and deep-rooted differences, many Chinese students will write an English composition in the way of Chinese compositions, among which the cohesion and coherence problems are the most striking. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), two noted linguistics, the concept of cohesion deals with relations of elements within the discourse, and the relation are realized by cohesive devices, which are divided into five groups, respectively Substitution, Ellipsis, Reference, Conjunction and Lexical cohesion [5]. Research has been made by Siqi Yao and is aimed to investigate the cohesion and coherence problems in Chinese students' writing in IELTS. Fifteen writing samples composed by Chinese students in IELTS are

Table 1. Ellipsis in the study

	E1	E2	E3
Band 5	8	1	2
Band 6	7	3	0
Band 7	6	5	4

analyzed and the level of the writing ranges from 5.0 to 7.0, which is examined under the standard IELTS criticize system [6]. The focus is mainly fixed on the cohesive devices applied by Chinese students in English writing.

3.2.1.1 Substitution

Substitution is the replacement of one element in the writing with the other to avoid repeating in the composition and can be divided into three subclasses: nominal substitution and verbal substitution and clause substitution. According to the investigation upshot, among students whose writing grade is located in the 6.0 level, compositions, on average, consist of two nominal substitutions, one verbal and clause substitution. For students whose grade level is lower, they lack the use of substitution in the writing task. When they write, they will repeat using one word or one expression, such as the topic word so many times that the examiner feels a sense of monotony and that's a part of the reason why they only get 5.0. For the students who get 7.0 in IELTS writing, even if they do not take advantage of the general-purpose substitutions, such as some pronouns, they use another word or expression to represent the same subject, it is a good way. For example, when they write a composition where "young people" appears in the task part, they use the expression "young adult", "young employers" and "adult" to replace it. They use the alternatives to avoid repeating, to some extent, helping them get a relatively higher score in the writing part. To conclude, the usage of substitutions in IELTS English writing will help students get good grades.

3.2.1.2 Ellipsis

When elements are omitted from a sentence it is called Ellipsis. The omission is possible when readers can assume the meaning from the text. Ellipsis can be divided into three groups, respectively nominal ellipsis (E1), verbal ellipsis (E2), and clause ellipsis (E3). According to the investigation made by the author (Table 1).

The table shows the number of each ellipsis students use in their writing tasks. The students whose grade is the 5.0 level prefer to omit the verbs in their writing and students who can get 7.0 in the writing part show that they have a better understanding of the English grammar so that they can apply to this device, ellipsis, so well in three aspects. It cannot be denied that omitting some nouns in English writing is relatively more liable and easier to operate because students can use all kinds of pronouns to replace nouns. In Band 7, nominal, verbal, and clause ellipsis are all used by these students. The full use of this cohesive device helps these students get a 7.0 in IELTS writing. In terms of the author, among Band 5 and Band 6 writing, cohesive problems are affected by some grammar mistakes and inappropriate task responses. For example, the subject of

Table 2. References in the study

	R1	R2	R3
Band 5	33	28	8
Band 6	24	25	12
Band 7	44	33	10

the theme is “Population problems”, which is a plural form, however, Chinese students will take the place of it “demographical issue”. There is no denying that he/she avoids repeating the usage of “issue”, however, “issue” is a singular form, discording with the task part. Besides, according to the author’s investigation, this sentence, “So this trend these subjects to generate their potentials and interests” is from surveyed student’s writing sample. The mistake can be easily found and no verb exists in this sentence. Readers and examiners are also confused by a question: what is the subject of this sentence? These two examples show that some omissions in the composition way do not help students get better grades, and may even show the weakness of the grammar to others. To sum up, the full use of all kinds of ellipsis will help you get higher scores in IELTS writing tasks, however, if the grammatic problems are resulted in by the use of ellipsis, it will also lower students’ writing scores.

3.2.1.3 Reference

Reference is the item that points to another element for its interpretation. References can be classified into three subclasses, respectively pronominal (R1), demonstrative (R2), and comparative (R3) references. In the author’s research, the result is shown in the table.

As Table 2 shows, pronominal references are wildly used by most Chinese students. The pronominal references, according to Halliday and Hasan’s theory, are comprised of the use of personal pronouns, possessive adjectives, and possessive pronouns, such as he, she, it, they, etc. They are wildly used to avoid the repetition of the nouns and so on. In terms of the number of references used by Chinese students, it doesn’t have too many discrepancies, but the reason why some Chinese lie in the Band 5 level is that they overused or misused the references, especially the personal pronouns. They use too many personal pronouns, such as I, we, and other first-person pronouns, which definitely should be avoided in academic writing to show that the perspectives are objective.

3.2.1.4 Conjunction

The conjunction is a cohesive relation which obtain between clauses as well as sentences of a text which are indicated connectors. Conjunctions can be classified into five subclasses, respectively additive (C1), adversative (C2), casual (C3), temporal (C4) and continuative (C5). The statistics about the number of different kinds of conjunction shown in Chinese students’ IELTS writings are presented followingly (Table 3).

As the table shows, Chinese students use the conjunctions in their compositions as much as possible, which should be ascribed to Chinese teachers’ instruction that the more conjunctions a student uses, the more cohesive his/her writings will be. However,

Table 3. Conjunctions in the study

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5
Band 5	17	11	10	5	4
Band 6	19	12	9	7	4
Band 7	13	11	11	5	3

Table 4. Lexical Cohesion in the study

	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5
Band 5	28	3	2	0	1
Band 6	13	8	3	1	0
Band 7	3	20	2	0	1

among the level of Band 5 and Band 6, there exist some problems while using the conjunctions. Firstly, according to the author's research, students whose grade is 5.0 over-use the conjunctions in the writings, for example, when he/she wants to express the meaning of transition, the only option for him/her is "but", leading to the monotony of the compositions. Secondly, some inappropriate or mechanical conjunctions are used by Chinese students. For instance, when Chinese students want to express something in a chronological or sequent way, they tend to use the phrase "first of all which is widely observed in Chinese students' compositions. When they want to state the second viewpoint or the next stage of the affairs, they choose to use "in addition", which is not appropriate to be used here, for it is additive conjunction that simply adds more information to what is already there. To conclude, the inappropriate or repeated use of the conjunctions will not develop the grades of the writing task, what's worse, it will even influence the writing negatively.

3.2.1.5 Lexical Cohesion

Lexical cohesion refers to the cohesive effect achieved by the choice of lexical items, among which can be classified into five subclasses, respectively, repetition (L1), synonym (L2), super-ordinate (L3), general word (L4), and collocation (L5). The table presented will show the result of the author's research (Table 4).

As the table presents, students who are in the Band 5 level prefer to overuse the repetition in their writings rather than use other words or phrases to displace the repeated words technically. Under this circumstance, too much repetition means that a student lacks some knowledge of written English and he/she cannot express their thoughts in multiple ways.

3.2.2 Cultural Factors

In terms of the cultural factors, the differences between writing tasks in IELTS and the NMET mode in China, are mostly received mode by Chinese students during the

period of compulsory education. The writing tasks in Chinese NMET mode seldom require students to write argumentative compositions, which is the most common literary form in IELTS writing. Chinese students usually write practical compositions during the examination, where it doesn't need too many students' perspectives and often relate to a situation in our daily life, for example, students are ordered to write a composition about an experience of snow cleaning and the feeling on that, which is the writing topic appearing in 2021 College Entrance Examinations. What's more, Chinese students are encouraged to write their compositions in a fixed mode and structure learned from model essays. Unlike NMET mode in China, IELTS writings will offer a socially controversial and heated topic to students and students need to make an analysis on this topic and give their viewpoints on this topic with supporting ideas. Without the training in logical and critical thinking, Chinese students are puzzled about what to write and how to write when offered an IELTS writing topic. When they are given an unfamiliar topic, they feel a sense of anxiety during the examinations, which, to some extent, negatively affects them. They are not in the least familiar with argumentative essays, which leads to a phenomenon, mostly, that Chinese students have no idea to support their viewpoints and what they do is just use other points to prove the former points. These are the rooted differences between the Chinese and British education systems. Chinese education has always been regarded as examination-oriented education which pays more attention to the grades. They can easily get relatively good grades in the reading and listening part in IELTS, for they can improve their performance in reading comprehension and listening part through plenty of exercises during a short period. Chinese students are good at this and are always called "Test Machines". However, writing tasks need students to have the ability to analyze the heated questions in society and express their ideas, which examines Chinese students' logical and critical thinking. This is the shortcoming of the Chinese education system lies in. It cannot be denied that Chinese students can get good grades in College Entrance Examinations, however, the truth is that English teaching is mostly the process of passively receiving, for Chinese students, in China. Chinese students seldom express their ideas and what they need to do is just follow what teachers have taught to them. Only in this way can they get good grades in the Chinese College Entrance Examination, a path for most ordinary Chinese students to change their destiny. Therefore, this is why Chinese students have a relatively poor performance in IELTS writing—they lack one of the most fundamental capabilities in IELTS writing, thinking.

3.3 Some Suggestions for Chinese English Teaching

English is a tool that should be used during daily life rather than a subject included in the College Entrance Examination. When it comes to writing, Chinese teachers should not only pay attention to practical writing but also argumentative writing. Regular argumentative writing tasks will form students' habits of thinking and expressing. The abilities to think logically and critically and express their ideas are beneficial to their learning, working, and even their whole life in the future. Students are the owner of the class rather than the "Test Machines" and they are human beings, therefore, they shouldn't be nurtured passively. What teachers should do is combine the guidance with more opportunities for students to speak out their thoughts [7].

4 Speaking

4.1 Chinese Students' Performance in Speaking Test

Judging from the standards of IELTS speaking tests—fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation, Chinese students tend to have four aspects of questions as followed.

4.1.1 Dull Content

Chinese students tend to be boring and less creative when they take the IELTS speaking tests. For example, almost all Chinese students think of pandas subconsciously when it comes to animals. However, the examiners have listened to the same content thousands of times. As a result, they are unwilling to listen to the repeated answers so they are less likely to give these candidates satisfactory scores. Moreover, many Chinese candidates prefer to recite some model answers directly without adding their ideas and thoughts. Examiners can easily recognize that because in that case, candidates avoid having direct eye contact with examiners to think of the following words and have no stops during speaking. These unnatural behaviors will betray candidates and they are possible to get a low score on speaking tests.

4.1.2 Inadequacy of Vocabulary

Sometimes it is hard for Chinese students to find an appropriate word to express their opinions and thoughts clearly so they fail to convey their real thoughts to the examiners. This is because they lack the vocabulary or know little about authentic expressions. To get a higher score, candidates are required to use some “less common” words, such as “unity and mutual aid” rather than “work in unity and help one another” referred by Ye Zhu and Yiyi Zhou (2020) [8].

4.1.3 Grammar Mistakes

According to the SPEAKING: Band Descriptors (public version), to get a score of more than 6, candidates need to use a range of complex structures with some flexibility and rarely make grammar mistakes. Chinese students tend to ignore to keep using past tense when telling a story or experience that happened in the past, especially in part two and they sometimes find it hard to use past tense or present perfect time on suitable occasions.

4.1.4 Intonation

Trying to speak more naturally like a native speaker is the most difficult for Chinese students to acquire. Yinggui Li (2014) pointed out that when Chinese students are speaking English, some negative transfer occurs. Influenced by Chinese and the dialect, falling tones are used habitually when Chinese students speak English [9]. Chinese is a segmental tone with clear intervals between syllables. However, English is allophonic, where syllables and words in the same language are connected at the beginning and the end and no clear line of demarcation can be heard. Chinese students often do not realize

the difference between English intonation and Chinese intonation. As a result, they tend to be influenced by the rhythm of Chinese and tend to read English in a flat tone with little rises and falls. Even though some Chinese students are aware of this problem and try to imitate native English speakers, they do not know where to rise, where to fall, where to repeat, or where to pause indeed. Consequently, Chinese students are not able to emphasize their main ideas and opinions.

4.2 The Reasons Why Chinese Students Meet Difficulties in Speaking Test

4.2.1 The Introverted Character of Chinese Students

Hua Yu (2010) pointed out that influenced by the Confucian Doctrine of the Mean, Chinese students are more used to listening carefully or taking notes than actively answering questions from the teachers. Even if they know the answer to a question, many students choose to be silent in class [10]. They think that silence is a sign of modesty and students who answer too actively are often perceived by their classmates as being arrogant and overbearing. The adherence to modesty and centrism is an obstacle to Chinese students' learning of spoken English, as they lose many opportunities to practice. Moreover, Chinese students are more willing to stay on their dignity. They are afraid of being laughed at by others when they make some mistakes. As a result, they prefer to keep silent so that they have no chance to make any mistakes. With little practice, Chinese students cannot improve their speaking ability.

4.2.2 Teachers of Uneven Standards

Teachers undoubtedly play a key role in teaching and encouraging students to develop their speaking skills. However, some teachers are not so professional that they are unable to pronounce all the English words correctly or ensure an all-English teaching environment. Many English teachers use English only when they are teaching keywords or texts. Lack of language environment, students have few chances to practice English in their daily life. As a result, they find it hard to improve their oral English. The United States began establishing and implementing a teaching credentialing system in 1825, which is more than 150 years earlier than in China. In January 2001, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China held the National Teacher Qualification System Implementation Work Conference, which marked the full implementation of the teacher qualification system in China. Compared to developed countries, teacher qualification recognition in China started late. As a result, many teachers who are working may not be qualified.

4.2.3 Education and Examination System

In China, the examination system has proven to be effective since ancient times, and its essence lies in the criteria of openness, equality, competition, and merit in the selection of talents. From 1949 to 1979, China followed the practice of directly selecting cadres through grass-roots recommendations during the revolutionary war. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the state allocates college and secondary school graduates and demobilized military officers to various types of cadres. In 1977, the

Ministry of Education held a conference on college admissions, and the State Council approved the resumption of the college entrance examination system. The number of applicants for the college entrance examination reached 5.7 million at the end of that year. However, influenced by the exam-oriented education, many teachers and parents believe that the fundamental purpose of learning English is to improve students' written test scores and that there is no need for students to learn to speak, which results in students' failure to improve their speaking. What many students learn is dumb English, which means they find it difficult to communicate with others in English and use English appropriately in their daily life.

4.3 Suggestions for Improving the Speaking Test Performance

4.3.1 Changing the Relationship Between Teachers and Students

For many years, the teacher-centered teaching method has been a passive method for students to receive. The content, time, and pace of learning are all controlled by the teacher, and the whole class is dull. We must focus on developing students' communicative skills and change the role of teachers in teaching. The teacher can turn to the organizer, the controller, and the advisor in the student-centered class.

4.3.2 Keeping the Classroom Atmosphere Active

Classroom atmosphere has a very important impact on English learning. A relaxed and active atmosphere can effectively improve teaching efficiency. In the teaching process, teachers can use authentic language materials to make the activities more relevant to the students' daily lives and expose them to a real-life environment in English. This will make English classes more diverse and interesting and increase the opportunities for students to practice speaking. Pair work is also worth promoting. Organizing more group activities will help students feel less nervous and allow them to speak up. With adequate practice, students will not be so nervous or anxious when they attend the serious IELTS speaking tests.

4.3.3 Making Students Exposed to All English-Speaking Environments

In addition to actively participating in the classroom by answering questions, students can also take the initiative to create an English learning environment in their own lives and try to use English as often as possible. English movies provide a realistic language environment for English learners. When watching English movies, students not only learn more authentic expressions but also gain a better understanding of Western culture and have the chance to imitate the accent of native English speakers.

5 Conclusions

The IELTS test is not only a language test but also a cultural export. Chinese students are better at reading and listening because they can achieve a higher score through large numbers of practice. However, they find it is hard to improve their speaking and writing

due to various factors. Influenced by the education system in China, the situation is hard to change in a short period. Not only students themselves should be equipped with enough knowledge and try to learn more about the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, but also teachers and parents should change their attitudes and pay more attention to practical English and more opportunities should be given to students in classes. Fundamentally, the education system in China should change. Policymakers must attach more importance to the practicability of English rather than focus on the written scores of Chinese students. Only by breaking through the bottleneck of low scores in speaking and writing of Chinese IELTS candidates, can the overall level of Chinese IELTS candidates be improved. The significance of this paper is to present the shortcomings of the Chinese education system to the policymakers and urge more scholars to pay more attention to the practicality of English.

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