亚历山大英语学习丛书

外研社 朗文

请教亚历山大

（英语学习200问）

ASK ALEXANDER

L.G.亚历山大 编著

外语教学与研究出版社

LONGMAN 朗文

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出 版 说 明

英国著名的英语教学专家路易·亚历山大(L. G. Alexander)先生是风靡中国近30年的《跟我学》(*Follow Me*)和《新概念英语》(*New Concept English*)的作者。他的《朗文英语语法》(*Longman English Grammar*)也是语法书中的佼佼者,至今畅销世界。亚历山大先生潜心研究英语教学法,结合实际教学经验(他曾在欧洲多所大学任教),经过多年的埋头写作,又为英语作为外语的学习者和教师编写了一系列极为有用的参考书。《英语辩论手册》(*For and Against*)引导您使用英语表达自己的论点,针锋相对地驳斥对手的看法,很能帮助英语学习者提高口头表达能力。《朗文英语词汇用法手册》(*Right Word Wrong Word*)可以指导您辨析和正确使用近义词、同义词和其他难词。《请教亚历山大》(*Ask Alexander*)则可以解答您在学习和教学中遇到的疑惑,并且启发您学习和教学的思路。如果您迫切希望提高对英语语法的认识,而又是一位初学者,亚历山大先生专为您提供了一套《朗文循序渐进学英语语法》(*Step by Step*),可使您一步一个脚印地掌握英语语法。如果您认为自身已具有中级水平,但还需要提高,那么您可以选择《朗文高级英语语法(参考及练习)》(*Longman Advanced Grammar: Reference and Practice*),它会使您如虎添翼。如果您刚学完《朗文英语语法》,意犹未尽,您可以自我测试一番,做做《朗文英语语法练习》(*Longman English Grammar Practice*),该书其实是《朗文英语语法》不可或缺的一部分。

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内容提要

怎样才能学好英语？英语有什么特点？怎样看待英语学习中的语法现象？需要用什么样的工具书？怎样才能提高自己的英语阅读理解能力？如何辨别众多的英语同义词的细微差别？

本书作者致力于英语教学的推广工作，对如何提高英语学习的成效极具经验，他在本书中跟大家谈谈以上这些问题。本书有以下特点：

1. 新的概念。本书采取一问一答的形式。作者以他特有的观点，从不同的方面来讨论广大英语学习者在学习英语中所遇到的问题。
2. 可读性强。本书语言流畅，例子生动，读者可在轻松愉快中获得教益。
3. 通俗流畅，适应面广。读者不论年龄，开卷有益。初学者可从本书中看到努力的方向；英语工作者可从中寻到提高的路径；专家、学者阅读本书，相当于进行学术交流。

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Ⅰ. Questions about English-Teaching

1. I'm frustrated with reading classes. Always a rather long reading; then some comprehension questions. Is there any way to transfer what we have learned from reading into communication?

I sympathize with your frustration! The kind of reading you are describing is a total waste of time: you expend an enormous amount of effort and energy presenting a reading text through explaining grammar points and vocabulary, only to end up with a few comprehension questions which do not do justice to the text. Then you have to begin the same boring routine all over again with a new reading text. There are two observations to make here:

1) We have to distinguish between intensive and extensive reading. **Intensive reading** involves the detailed study of a very short text, followed by a variety of exercises based on the text. This is the exact reverse of what you have been experiencing. In this approach, you spend a short time presenting the text (not more than 10～15 minutes) and the rest of the lesson exploiting what you have presented. The text can therefore be used as the basis for a conversation lesson or for the development of language study and writing skills.

2) Reading long texts (stories, newspaper articles, etc.) for pleasure or information is **extensive reading**. Students should be set extensive reading exercises as homework (for example, through a class library system in which they exchange simplified Readers). You may briefly test them orally on what they have

read, or, far more efficiently, get them to complete questionnaires you have prepared in advance and which will tell you at a glance whether your students have completed a reading assignment.

The reason for your frustration is that you have been attempting to conduct extensive reading in class, which is about the most boring and unproductive thing you can do. Choose textbooks with very short texts for use in the classroom and set longer reading tasks as home assignments.

Finally, can students transfer what they have learned from reading into communication? Yes, but indirectly. Reading is not only a source of pleasure and information (therefore giving you topics to talk about), it also consolidates what you know and constantly enriches your vocabulary. Students who read a lot in English provide themselves with excellent foundations. They gain confidence, and ultimately become better at communicating orally and in writing than students who read very little.

2. Keeping the students in English is a problem. Whenever I try to do an activity, the students do it in Chinese. I tell them to use English, but they won't. Anyway, how can I keep them in English?

The students' mother tongue should be used for three purposes only: 1) maintaining class discipline; 2) explaining a tricky point of grammar and comparing and contrasting it with a structure in Chinese; 3) when you are explaining the meaning in English of a difficult vocabulary item, it is always advisable to ask one of your best students to give you a 'confirmatory translation'.

Everything else you do should be entirely in English. Don't

conduct translation exercises with beginners as this encourages them to think bilingually and invites interference from the mother tongue. Remember, the best translators are people who are fluent in a foreign language, not those who have used grammar-translation methods during their learning careers.

So why do your students insist on using Chinese even though you tell them not to? One possible reason is that you are setting them tasks which are too difficult for them, so they resort to Chinese. For example, you can't conduct a conversation lesson in English if your students are barely capable of answering or asking questions, or of formulating simple statements. In the same way, you can't expect your students to write essays in English if they can't even write a single sentence correctly. Students need to be trained in productive skills until they are ready to conduct them. This means that you give them plenty of structured exercises in English before giving them open-ended activities. For example, you train them to speak by providing them with question and answer practice, re-telling stories in their own words by referring to pictures or notes. In structured activities of this kind, your students just won't be able to avoid using English. A planned lesson begins in a highly structured way and becomes freer at the end, so students get used to using English all the time.

3. I have a large class. We are often told that every student should be motivated under such circumstances. What is the most effective way to get greater student participation?

The main reason why there is lack of participation in large classes is that lessons are dominated by one or two students (not necessarily the best ones), while the rest of the class is neglected

and consequently becomes bored and even rebellious. So how can we overcome this? Let's first ask ourselves what is required to achieve participation. Where listening comprehension is concerned we want *everybody* to participate; where speaking is concerned, we want as many students as possible to be given the opportunity to speak.

Let's look at listening comprehension first. Never ask a class simply to listen to a text while you read it to them or play a recording. If you do this you can be sure most of your students will switch off while you drone your way through the reading text. You can prevent this from happening by setting your students a listening objective. Instead of saying 'Listen to this please', you say something like 'I'm now going to read you a story about an accident. After I've finished reading, I'm going to ask you how the accident happened. Ready?' Now your students will listen *actively* to find out the answer to the question because they will be afraid of losing face.

Now we want as many students as possible to participate in speaking. How do we go about it? When you have finished reading, don't let one or two students shout out the right answer. Ask questions like: How many of you think the accident happened because ...? (The students answer with a show of hands.) Ask questions round the class using the 'question, pause, pounce' technique:

Teacher (addressing a **question** to the whole class): What action did the bus driver take?

The question is followed by a **pause** so the whole class has time to think about the answer. (You must discipline your students never to shout out answers without being asked!)

Now you **pounce**, asking one student, then another to answer

the question, asking Student A whether he/she agrees with Student B, and so on round the class. Your questions should be rapid, using a scatter-gun technique, but always following the question-pause-pounce sequence. I can assure you, if you follow this advice, your entire class will participate in the lesson!

4. There is so much emphasis on grammar, however, there doesn't seem to be much room for communication. It feels like a test. Is learning grammar really a help for communication?

You put your finger on it when you say 'it feels like a test'. What you're referring to is the old grammar-translation method. In this approach, language learning was concerned entirely with rule-giving followed by exercises (fill in the blanks, translation, etc.). This was how we learnt ancient languages like Greek and Latin, and it was considered to be the proper way to teach modern languages as well. The trouble is, we never had to speak Greek and Latin, whereas in modern language teaching we're concerned with the four primary skills of understanding, speaking, reading and writing. Clearly, grammar exercises alone are not going to meet the needs of communication. If that is all we do in class, then you are right: it is just a constant grammar test. In the past, grammar was the master and communication (if it occurred at all) was the by-product.

Today, the situation has been entirely reversed. Communication is the master and grammar is the support system. This doesn't mean that in communicative teaching grammar is unnecessary; merely that its role has been re-defined. What we do today is teach students communicative activities (conducting transactions, engaging in interaction, and so on) and then use grammar as the support system of these activities. After all,

grammar is the operating system of a language: it tells us how and why things happen, so we still need it for this purpose. This means, we teach grammar *after* conducting communicative activities, not before or instead of conducting them.

The main reason we teach grammar is that we can't avoid it. Students will always want to know how or why things happen in language. Questions about how things happen refer to form (for example, how we ask questions in English); questions about why things happen refer to use (for example, why we can't say * I haven't seen him since six years*). Language teaching must be communication-based, but it must also be supported by constant explanation, clarification and the opportunity to practise difficult forms: i. e. grammar. You can't become a skilled performer of a musical instrument without practising scales, and scales are like grammar in language acquisition.

5. How can I teach more efficiently in a communicative way by using the class textbook?

I find this question particularly difficult to answer because I don't know which textbook you are referring to. For example, is it a textbook which contains a lot of communication-based exercises, or is it one that contains hardly any? Anyway, a few comments might help to clarify the question.

The first thing to remember is that it is impossible to begin to communicate if we don't understand what we hear. Therefore listening comprehension and reading comprehension are the important receptive skills we need to develop before we can apply the productive skills of speaking and writing. You need to provide your students with as much listening comprehension practice as time

allows before they can develop their speaking skills. In order to speak a language we have to be able to do four things:

- understand
- ask
- answer
- say

Therefore listening comprehension exercises should be followed by plenty of practice in asking and answering questions. Students have to manipulate the whole regular and irregular verb system to be able to ask and answer fluently, so rapid question and answer practice should follow every listening comprehension text. Practice in 'saying' can be achieved by getting students to reproduce the substance of the listening comprehension practice in their own words. There always has to be a transfer between text-based exercises and life-based exercises. After students have practised 'saying' the text, you should switch to 'About You' exercises where students tell you about their own experiences.

We need to concentrate on three main areas when developing communicative conversational skills. These are:

- transactions: that is, 'doing business' in a foreign language: e.g. ordering a meal in a restaurant, changing money in a bank, etc. Transactions always follow predictable patterns and the participants fulfil particular roles: e.g. ticket-seller and customer; nurse and patient, etc.
- interaction involving the exchange of information: you tell me about your troubles and I'll tell you about my troubles and so on.
- interaction involving opinions and argument: you tell me what you think about something and I'll agree or disagree with you and tell you what I think.

These are just a few ideas to help you enrich your textbook or get more out of it.

6. How can I decide on when and how I correct students' mistakes?

Spoken language

If you are listening to a student speaking and your main objective is to develop fluent speech, don't interrupt. Wait till the student finishes speaking or reaches a convenient pause. Then correct only those mistakes that interfere with the student's ability to communicate. So just pick up one or two big mistakes and correct them lightly, asking the student to repeat the correct version after you. Your main aim in this situation is to build up your students' confidence and to develop *fluency*.

Drills are concerned with form, so if you are conducting a drill (e.g. to train students to add -s to the third person singular of the simple present), correct a student immediately if he/she says *He go* instead of *He goes*. Your main aim here is to develop accuracy, so you don't allow any mistake to go uncorrected. A student repeats the correct version after you until he/she really gets it right.

Written language

Use codes when correcting written work: e.g. sp for spelling; gr for grammar; voc for vocabulary. Periodically, pool the main mistakes in your students' written work and deal with them collectively on the blackboard, inviting the students themselves a) to identify errors and b) to suggest corrections.

7. As a Chinese teacher, how can I raise my students' interest so that they learn English on their own initiative?

Students are always more motivated when they regard English as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Compare the attitudes of young pupils who are told repeatedly that English will be extremely important to them in their lives, and the attitudes of students who find they need English for a particular purpose (say to study medicine or law). The former are quickly bored; the latter are highly-motivated. The way to raise motivation among young pupils is to set them project work, where English is a means to an end. For example, if you set pupils the task of finding out about the history of Hong Kong, this will be their prime objective and English will be a by-product of the process.

8. How should I teach students grammar in my teaching?

Modern textbooks concentrate on teaching communication (= how to do things in a foreign language). Grammar is the natural by-product of this undertaking. This means, you teach grammar not as an end in itself, but as a support system to communication. Most of the questions students have about English concern grammar (when to use *some* or *any*, when to use *to* or *at* and so on). Deal with these as they arise. When dealing with grammar, extract as much information as you can from your students and then set them exercises to raise their awareness of particular grammatical points, but always do this *after* you have trained them in communicative skills like listening comprehension, using language for a purpose, etc.

9. Speaking good English is not the same as being a good English teacher. Can you give me some suggestions to be a good English teacher?

I agree absolutely that speaking good English is not the same as being a good teacher of English. It goes without saying that good native speakers of English are not necessarily also good teachers: in fact their command of English may make them insensitive to problems of learners. However, in your case, as a non-native speaker it is important for you to be as fluent as possible so that you feel confident in class, so you should avoid using Chinese and make sure you constantly use your English. Additionally, however, you have to master skills which are connected with language teaching. The best way to do this is to use textbooks with a dependable graded syllabus and with sound methods, which you then follow. You will then be trained in:

- conducting exercises that develop listening comprehension
- conducting exercises that develop conversational skills (oral fluency)
- conducting exercises that develop reading comprehension
- conducting exercises that develop writing skills

Each of these is a major topic, too big to go into here. Look at the textbooks you are using and ask yourself how well they are training you in these skills. To sum up: Use your English as much as possible to maintain fluency, then master the skills that specifically relate to language-teaching and language-learning methodology.

10. I'm the parent of a seven-year-old boy, and I'm going to teach him English. To tell the truth, I prefer British English to American English. But in the real world the American one seems to be more popular. Could you tell me which one I should choose?

Choose American English: that's likely to be more useful to your son, especially in southeast Asia. However, please note the following:

- There's hardly any difference at all between British and American English. The main difference is phonological (the way the language is spoken). Differences in vocabulary and spelling are very limited and there are hardly any differences at all in structure. Of course, for adults, the range of reference can vary between BrE and AmE. British English has a European range of reference. AmE and AusE similarly reflect the references of the geographical locations. This is one reason why AmE and AusE are so important in SE Asia.
- Whatever you teach your son, he will end up speaking Chinese English. This is inevitable. However, if he has been taught American English, he will be trained to understand this right from the start. A lot of learners find spoken standard American English harder to understand than spoken standard British English.
- English is a world language. People are learning it worldwide because they have the *expectation* that they will be able to use the language they have learned in any part of the world. The dominance of English has historical reasons relating back to the British Empire, but its widespread use today is largely due to American influence worldwide. Here are some reasons why

people learn English:

—political: English may be a neutral means of communication between different language groups in a large country: e.g. India.

—economic: English is the language of trade, business and tourism.

—practical: English is the language used by air traffic controllers, in academic conferences, etc.

—scientific and technical: most scientific information is published and retrieved in English; the language of the Internet is English.

—entertainment: the language of films, videos, computer games, etc. is largely English.

11. I'm a teacher. I want to know how we can make students master basic English knowledge and at the same time improve their communication abilities.

Communication means *doing things through language*. What sorts of things? It means:

- conducting transactions (= doing business in a foreign language) like changing money at a bank, ordering a meal at a restaurant, etc.
- interaction (= exchanging information, e.g. about everyday life)
- argument (= exchanging ideas)

It follows that when you are teaching students to communicate, you should be putting them into situations where they will be required to practise any one of the areas listed above. Basic English knowledge (by which I imagine you mean grammar and vocabulary)

are the support system necessary to communicate successfully. But grammar and vocabulary are the essential means by which we communicate. Emphasize communication and everything else will follow.

12. What's the best way to teach non-English major students intensive reading?

Intensive reading is the close study of a text. I suggest you use the following technique:

- Choose a short text for study with a class. Don't let them look at the text. Provide a short introductory commentary to the text: e.g. Today we're going to study a text about the use of computers in the home.
- Set the students a listening objective: e.g. I'm going to read the text to you and then I'm going to ask you how computers in the home will affect our lives.
- Read the text to the students, then ask the above question. You will find out how well students can understand a text at first hearing.
- Now ask students to look at the text. Take them through it, line by line, or sentence by sentence. Pause after each line or sentence to make sure the students have really understood it. Get the students to provide information about difficult structure and vocabulary. Think of this as a 'corkscrew operation', where you 'extract' information from the class. This is the intensive reading phase.
- Now read the text once more. The students listen only and should understand the entire text. Or, at a higher level, ask the class to read the text silently from beginning to end.

Ⅱ. Questions about Listening Comprehension and English-Speaking

13. What is the best strategy to get used to listening to natural English? It is impossible for me to understand every word.

How often I have heard the lament: I can understand my teacher's English, but I can't understand anyone else's! I can only suggest a few tips for improving your listening comprehension:

1) Try to extend the *range* of English you listen to. This means listening to as much native-speaker English as you can (varieties of British and American English) and different varieties of non-native English (Spanglish, Frenglish, Gerlish, etc.). The BBC World Service is an excellent source of native-speaker English, as are films on video.

2) When listening to English (whatever its source) don't try to puzzle out the meaning of individual words. Try to get the gist of the whole, by listening for the *global* meaning and ignoring words you haven't fully heard or understood.

3) Remember, that native speakers in particular take a lot of short cuts when speaking and you have to get used to them. For example, something that sounds like 'Wodjasay?' would be 'What did you say?' when written out in full.

4) One of the biggest barriers to understanding is the failure to recognize word boundaries, so that you can't tell, when English is spoken at speed, where one word ends and another begins. If someone quickly says 'You shouldn't've done that' it may sound

like a single word, whereas it is actually six separate words. A good way of training yourself to distinguish word boundaries is to listen to recordings of English, while silently reading the printed text at the same time. There are whole libraries of books on tape, so that you can listen and read at the same time to train the ear and the eye simultaneously.

That's enough to be getting on with, for the time being, and good luck!

14. Which is more important, fluency or accuracy?

The idea that there is a clash between fluency and accuracy is quite false: they are equally important. There are times when we concentrate on fluency and times when we concentrate on accuracy. We don't give or require grammatical explanations with the same high level of intensity all the time. For example, if we are conducting a conversation lesson, our main objective is to build up the student's confidence and to give the student the opportunity to express him/herself freely. In this situation, fluency takes precedence over accuracy. We tolerate a great deal of error. If, for example, a student says *He go* (for *He goes*) we might completely ignore the mistake and leave it uncorrected. Our main criterion is that the student is making him/herself understood. We listen. We don't interrupt. After the student has finished speaking, we praise the student's effort and give him/her as much encouragement as possible. We correct only those errors (just one or two) that have really interfered with communication.

If, on the other hand, you are drilling students in some aspect of language like always remembering to add -s to the third person singular in the simple present (*He goes*, not *He go*) then you

want 100% accuracy and you don't accept anything less. What is acceptable in one situation may be quite unacceptable in another!

15. Though I can understand some of the programmes I hear on the BBC and VOA, I can't remember what I've just heard. How can I improve my listening skills?

You're in good company. Most of us can't remember what we've just heard, even when we're listening to broadcasts in our own language. The fact is that we don't listen to information with a high degree of concentration all the time. Sometimes, spoken language on the radio or TV is just background noise, the linguistic equivalent of muzak. So if you really want to remember what you have just heard:

1) Decide that you're interested in what's being said and that it's worth listening to from your point of view.
2) Then really listen, concentrating on the important information you want to remember.
3) Don't listen to individual words, but to the flow of the whole. It doesn't matter if you fail to catch or to understand the odd word here and there, as long as you get the 'global meaning'.
4) Test yourself immediately after the broadcast to see how much you can immediately recall.
5) Practise reporting what you heard on radio to someone else.
6) Try listening with a friend. When the broadcast is finished, you and your friend talk about what you have just heard. (Did you both hear the same thing?)
7) If you want to recall what you heard at a later date, then it's best to make a few notes covering the main points you heard.

16. When I listen to a long piece of English, I easily forget the main points of what I've just heard. Could you please tell me how to make notes?

1) Really listen so that the spoken language has your full attention. Don't worry about the meaning of individual words, but try to get the 'global meaning'.
2) Decide on the main theme of the spoken language. Write this down in note form. This is your main heading.
3) Decide which points are being made that refer to this main theme. Write these down in note form under the main heading.
4) When the spoken language moves to another theme, repeat the process.

So, for example, imagine you are listening to a discussion on traffic jams in modern cities: what causes them, and how they can be remedied. You write down 'traffic jams' as your main theme. Under that, you list 'causes' and under that, you list 'possible solutions'.

Remember, when making notes you should concentrate mainly on writing verbs and nouns without articles. Use dashes to provide the missing links, e.g.

Ban traffic—city centres

Improve public transport—more investment

Encourage more people per car, etc.

17. What's the way to practise speaking in a non-English environment?

Lack of opportunity to use the language is every student's problem. That's why, in China for example, foreigners are often rapidly surrounded by young people who want to practise their

English. (I know, because it's often happened to me.) Unfortunately, the visitors have their own agenda, which doesn't necessarily include being used for English practice!

The only natural way to use English in a non-English speaking environment occurs when you are dealing with foreigners who are visiting your country and who are using English as the medium of communication. (A visitor's English might be non-native as well.) You will then use English quite naturally when you are entertaining, showing your visitors the sights, etc. Human beings love to exchange information about themselves and their families, so there is always plenty to talk about.

If you don't come into contact with foreigners for professional purposes, then arrange to meet other local people who want to practise speaking English, just as you do. You collectively decide that you will use English only and help and correct each other as necessary. Do this regularly. Choose a topic in advance, so that members of the group can think about it and prepare some of the vocabulary they will need. Turn it into a pleasant social occasion when you meet at someone's house or go out together as a group. It will do wonders for your spoken English.

18. I always get a high score in English exams, but my English communication is poor. Can you give me some advice?

This is a common phenomenon. Passing English exams is not the same thing as being proficient in English. Why should this be? Because passing exams means mastering exam techniques (accurately interpreting and answering the questions, finishing on time, etc.) and getting plenty of practice in all the tasks normally set in exams (multiple choice questions, usage questions, etc.). You can be good

at all these 'accomplishments' and still have a rotten command of English when you need to use it in real life. The objectives of an examination and the techniques for achieving them rarely coincide with communicative skills. When do we need multiple choice in real life? Never! This problem will only be resolved when the skills required by examination boards coincide more or less precisely with the skills required for communication. Progress in this direction is extremely slow.

So what can you do about it? Once you've got the exam qualification behind you, you have to concentrate on improving your receptive skills (listening and reading) and developing your productive skills (speaking and writing) in a way that will really help you to communicate.

19. How to speak English fluently?

When learning to speak a language, we basically have to do four things:

—understand

—answer

—ask

—say

Train yourself (or find a teacher who will train you) in these four skills and you will become fluent.

20. What should we do with the mistakes we make when speaking English?

You should differentiate between an oral drill where accuracy is absolutely necessary and 'speaking for communication' where being understood is absolutely necessary. When speaking for

communication, ignore most of your mistakes. The important thing is to communicate with confidence (which isn't easy!). If you are really communicating, it doesn't matter if you make mistakes, *so long as these mistakes don't interfere with commmunication*. Try to correct only those mistakes which prevent other people from understanding what you say or write.

21. Along with listening to the radio, I always read some books about listening comprehension. I have got little progress in my listening comprehension. How can I improve it?

The way to train listening comprehension in a language course is through the technique of 'active listening', not 'passive listening'. If a teacher introduces a text with a short commentary and sets a question, students will listen actively. For example, the teacher says: 'Today I'm going to read you a story about an accident. After I have finished reading, I will ask you how the accident happened.' This will encourage students to listen actively in order to find out the answer. If, however, the teacher introduces a story by saying: 'Listen to this story', the students will have no listening focus. They will listen (perhaps) with their eyes open, but with their minds shut. Here are a few tips to improve your listening skills:

- Listen for particular information; don't worry about the meanings of individual words.
- If you have recordings of texts (the listening comprehension books you mention), first listen to the recordings, trying to pick up as much as you can at first hearing. Then listen again, while reading silently at the same time. Then listen to the text a third time (without reading).

- Try sharing a listening activity with a friend or with friends, so you can 'pool' your listening experience with others.

22. During my listening, I can understand most of the words, but I can't get the idea of the whole article. Why?

Because you are listening to words and not to meaning. I remember a visit to Beijing I made back in 1981. My interpreter constantly complained of this problem. She used to say 'I can't keep up with the words you are using' and frequently her attempts to interpret broke down completely. My advice to her is the same as my advice to you: Don't listen to individual words trying to translate into Chinese as you go, but listen to whole meanings. Listen to the English, without thinking about the Chinese. This is exactly what interpreters do: they get the sense of a piece of language, then interpret it in another language so that the listener gets the meaning of what is being said.

23. When I speak English, I always speak off and on. Could you please tell me how to develop oral skills of making connected speech?

I assume you mean you speak in bursts, when you say you 'speak off and on'. The first thing to be aware of is that most speaking is the product of interaction with another person, or with other people. We rarely give speeches. This means we have to train ourselves to understand what others are saying and then to reply to what we have heard. There are different kinds of conversation, which require different skills. For example:

- Exchange of information. This is one of the most common kinds of everyday interaction. Your friend tells you about things he/

she enjoys doing in his/her spare time. You listen carefully, then you tell him/her what you enjoy doing in your spare time. You answer like with like. The chances are that you will use the simple present tense a great deal in this kind of exchange.

- Narration. Your friend tells you about an experience in the past tense (how he/she missed the bus, was late for work, what the boss said, etc.). You listen carefully, then tell a story of your own. The chances are you will use the simple past and past progressive tenses a great deal in this kind of exchange. It's always easier to tell a story in chronological order: begin at the beginning, go on to the main event, then conclude the story.
- Exchanging views and opinions. Your friend tells you what he/she thinks about something, first by describing a situation, then saying what his/her opinion of it is and giving reasons. You listen carefully, then reply in the same way. You are likely to state facts (something you read in the paper), give an example or examples, and then say what you think of it. You are likely to use phrases like 'In my opinion...', 'I think ...', 'I agree with what you say, but ...', 'I'm afraid I disagree. I think ...' and so on.

24. It's always said that if you want to improve your spoken English, you should practise a lot. But when I meet a foreigner, I often miss the chance. I am afraid I have nothing to say. I worry about the topics. What should I do?

Yes, it is quite true that you can improve your spoken English by practising a lot, but don't depend on meeting foreigners (by which I suppose you mean native speakers of English). If you do, you will severely reduce your opportunities to practise your English.

First of all, it's often hard to meet foreigners; second, they might not wish to be 'used' by you so that you can practise your English; third, if you are speaking to a foreigner, you might become very self-conscious about your English and be unable to express yourself at all (as seems to be the case here). So what do you do? You seek or create opportunities to practise speaking English with people in your own culture who are faced with the same problems you are faced with. You do this either by regularly attending English conversation classes, so that you have the supervision of a teacher, or you get together with other people like yourself and meet on a regular basis in order to talk. Choose topics you know about and enjoy talking about in Chinese. It's an old truism that when you really have something to say, you will find the words you need to say it.

25. When I listen to English broadcast, I sometimes understand it, but I can't write out the whole sentence.

Why should you want to write out a whole sentence if you're listening to a broadcast? A broadcast is generally a flow of spoken English. It isn't a dictation. What I think you're really saying is that you don't always grasp the meaning of individual words. My advice is this: when listening to spoken English don't try to get the meaning of individual words. Concentrate on listening to complete sentences, trying to get the 'global meaning' where you can. This means you will have to guess the meaning of new words from the context. Train yourself to listen for meaning, not for words.

26. It's difficult to catch the words in the *Voice of America* sports report. Do you have some skills?

One of the most difficult skills to acquire in a foreign language is the ability to understand the natural language spoken by native speakers at a normal speed. Additionally, with sports reports, the language is often delivered at speed. Listen to a commentary on a horse race or a car rally and you will find that the commentator can hardly keep up with himself as he tries to keep pace with the events he is witnessing. You can train yourself to cope with native speaker delivery in a number of ways. One way is to use 'talking books'. These are published on audio tape, compact disc, or on video. They consist mainly of novels or biographies read by famous actors and are aimed at native speakers who like to listen to someone telling them a story, rather than reading one themselves. This is what you could do:

- Buy the book and the recorded version (in British or American English according to your preference).
- Play a small part of the audio version and concentrate on listening. Confine yourself to about two minutes at a time. Try to understand as much as you can. You will probably find it's hard to 'keep up with the reader'.
- Play the taped version again while reading the text at the same time. Guess the meaning from the context, looking up only those words which seem to you to be essential to the meaning.
- Play the same part of the tape again without looking at the book. Contentrate only on listening. This time you will find that you can 'keep up with the reader' much more easily.
- Keep doing this until you feel able to cope with native delivery. Of course, it's not a sports commentary. But following this

routine will provide you with the kind of practice you need to cope with English delivered at normal native-speaker speed.

27. When talking with English-speaking foreigners, my tongue often gets stupid. I become very uneasy. How to overcome it?

You feel shy and unconfident about your English in the presence of strangers. Why? Because you are afraid of exposing yourself to ridicule. This condition particularly affects adult speakers of a foreign language. (The younger you are, the fewer your inhibitions!) What can you do about it? Well, the first thing you can do is to assure yourself that there is nothing shameful about making mistakes when speaking someone else's language. Imagine if the situation were reversed and the foreigners were trying to speak to you in Chinese. What would you do? Would you be inclined to laugh or would you be inclined to help them? Many native speakers of English, especially those who have spent long periods outside their own country, are familiar with learners' efforts to speak English and are inclined to be patient, tolerant and helpful. Once you are aware of this, you can try joining in a conversation with foreigners. Listen carefully so that you understand more or less what they are saying. Make your own comments when it is your 'turn' to speak. Ask the people you are speaking to to explain something you think you may have misunderstood, or to correct one or two important mistakes. This will build up your confidence.

28. When my teacher tells us a story in English, some words are familiar, but I don't remember Chinese meanings. What should I do?

Put Chinese out of your mind. When you are listening to

English, you should listen-in-English and not be attempting to find a Chinese equivalent for every single English word you hear. If you persist in doing this, you will totally miss the meaning and fail to hear any English at all. Forget about individual words and concentrate on trying to catch the meanings of whole phrases, sentences and paragraphs. When you hear something you don't understand, try to deduce the meaning from the context. After you have heard a piece of English, test yourself by recalling (in English) what it was about.

29. Could you recommend us some spoken English books which are more living and non-subjunctive?

A puzzling question! A 'subjunctive' is a rare grammatical form which is rarely used in English. Perhaps you are asking me to recommend recorded English which sounds like real English and not like a grammar book. If this is the case, I suggest you look at publishers' English Language Teaching catalogues, find the 'readers' sections and select recorded readers (i.e. story-books on tape). Choose the level which you think is right for you, then choose titles that appeal to you and order the tapes. If your English is quite advanced, you can buy or borrow 'talking books', that is, unsimplified stories which are read by actors.

30. How to get along with a mistake when you're speaking English? And: What should we do with the mistakes we make when speaking English?

A mistake is only a problem if it seriously interferes with communication. If the person or people you are speaking to understand most of what you're saying, then you're doing very well

and it doesn't really matter how many mistakes you make. You can ask people whose English is better than yours to correct you if you want to, though this often becomes tedious and interferes with communication. If the people you speak to can understand the meaning of what you're saying, you're doing fine and shouldn't worry about mistakes at all.

31. When I speak English I always think the sentence in Chinese, then translate it into English. How can I avoid using Chinglish?

And another similar question: Most English learners are told to 'think in English', but how can I really do it well?

And another: How to speak English fluently?

The reason you're constantly translating from Chinese into English is that you haven't developed your spoken skills to a level that makes you feel confident. You have to master four skills before you can take part in a conversation. These are:

- understand
- answer
- ask
- say

You therefore have to concentrate on developing these skills: training yourself to understand spoken English, training yourself to ask questions, training yourself to answer questions and finally speaking. Once you have mastered the first three of these skills, you will be well on the way to mastering the last (and most difficult) one: speaking.

32. I feel that understanding is rather easier than being understood, because I always have very vague impressions of many words, which I can understand in a written text but just fail to remember when I want to express myself. How can I find the best way to change this situation?

You are quite right: understanding spoken or written text is easier than being understood when you speak or write. This is because understanding is a receptive skill, while speaking and writing are productive skills. We can always understand far more than we can produce, and this is also true when we are using our native language. Once you have accepted this reality, you should practise expressing yourself in the language that you can immediately recall. When you can't think of the right word (which you might know receptively but fail to produce when you want it), you have to find alternative words to express your meaning. Keep listening to English and reading it as much as you can. In the long term, this will improve the way you speak and write.

Ⅲ. Questions about the Distinction of Synonyms

33. What is the difference between 'whisky' and 'whiskey'?

Whisky refers specifically to Scotch (whisky). Whiskey refers to Irish or American (whiskey). American Bourbon (so called because it was first distilled in County Bourbon, Kentucky) is known simply as Bourbon or whiskey.

34. I am always confused when using 'watch', 'look at' and 'see'. Can you give an idea on how I can use them correctly?

You're right to be confused because sometimes their uses overlap, so concentrate on learning the basic uses first:

- **see** for the involuntary action of using your eyes, used in simple (non-progressive) tenses only:
  I see very well without glasses. (Not *look* *watch* *I'm seeing*)
- **see** a film at a cinema or a play at a theatre:
  We saw a good film at the Rex last night. (Not *looked at* *watched*)
- We can deliberately **watch** something happening that continues over a period of time:
  Do you have to watch me eat/eating my supper? (Not *see* *look at*)
  Please don't disturb me now. I'm watching the match/a video. (Not *seeing* *looking at*)
- We can **look at** something deliberately, with attention, e.g. a picture, an object, a shop window:

Look at this card John's just sent. (Not *Watch* *See*)

35. How to use the words 'alive', 'living' and 'lively'?

Alive and *living* both mean 'not dead', but we can't use *alive* in front of a noun:

Everything that is alive/living (= that lives) needs air and water.

Are your grandparents still alive/living? (= not dead)

(We normally prefer *alive* after a noun; we use *living* after a noun in more formal contexts.)

All living creatures need air and water. (Not *alive*)

Careful! That lobster is alive! (Not *living*)

Lively means 'full of life' and is quite different from *alive* and *living*:

Professor Flynn's lively lectures attract large audiences.

Even at 90, Grandpa is so lively. (= full of life)

(Examples from *Right Word Wrong Word*)

36. I'm always confused by 'listen' and 'hear'. Can you help me?

- I **hear** music in the distance.
  (static use of *hear*: the experience is involuntary; the noun is *hearing*, as in *I have good hearing* = the ability to hear)
- I often **listen to** music.
  (static use of a dynamic verb to express deliberate habit)
- What are you doing? —I'm **listening to** this CD. (Not *I'm hearing* *I'm listening this CD*)
  (dynamic use: giving my attention)
- I **listen to/hear** the 9 o'clock news every evening without fail.
  (Both verbs are possible to refer to something habitual and deliberate.)

- We **heard** some wonderful music at last night's concert. (Not *listened to*)
  (*hear* = experience a live musical performance)
- **Listen to** him sing/singing!
  (Not *Listen to him to sing!* *Listen him to sing!*)

37. What's the difference between 'right now' and 'right away'?

We often use 'right' as an adverbial intensifier for extra emphasis. Compare:

Where's my book? —It's here.

Where's my book? —It's right here.

There is no difference between 'right now' and 'right away'. They both mean 'immediately', 'without delay':

Please post these letters for me. —Yes. I'll post them right now./ I'll post them right away.

38. I'm still confused with the usage of 'particularly', 'peculiarly', 'specially' and 'especially'.

The first two of these should not be a problem because they have very different meanings; the second two can certainly be tricky.

- **particularly** (= meriting special attention): I'm particularly concerned about choosing the right school for my children.
  We could also say: I'm especially concerned ...
- **peculiarly** (strangely, unusually): Spring has been peculiarly early this year.
  We could also say: Spring has been especially early ...
- **Especially** and **specially** are often used in exactly the same way:
  In this example, both words mean 'more than usually':

—I think you'll find this article especially/specially interesting.

In this example, 'especially' means 'in particular' and stresses *you*; 'specially' means 'in a special manner' and stresses *speak*:

—I wanted to speak to you especially/specially. (Not *Especially/Specially, I wanted to speak to you.* We rarely begin a sentence with 'especially' or 'specially'.)

In this example, 'specially' means 'for a particular purpose' and can't be replaced by 'especially':

—I've had this area specially designed as a herb garden. (Not *especially*)

39. How can I use the words 'force', 'compel' and 'oblige' correctly?

All three verbs have roughly the same meaning of 'cause', but they vary in strength, with 'force' being the strongest and 'oblige' being the weakest:

- **force** (= make an unwilling person or animal do something): The guards forced the prisoners to work eight hours a day without a break. (We could use 'compelled' or 'obliged' in this example, but they would not be as strong as 'forced'. *Force* implies the actual or threatened use of physical strength.)
- **compel** (= make someone do something): Anyone working is compelled by law to file a tax return. ('Forced' is unlikely in this example, but 'obliged' would have almost the same strength as 'compelled'. *Compel* implies the actual or threatened use of moral or legal sanctions.)
- **oblige** (= make it necessary to do something): I had to pick my children up from school, so I was obliged to leave the meeting early. ('Forced' and 'compelled' would be too strong here.

Oblige relies on a person's accepting his or her duty and is often used in relation to social and family responsibilities.)

40. How to use 'job', 'occupation', 'profession' correctly?

- **Job** is the word we normally use to describe the work we do to earn our living. It is a countable noun:
  —I'm looking for a job. I have a good job. What's your job? It's hard to get a job. etc.
  'Occupation' and 'profession' would be unusual in the above examples.
- **Occupation** is an extremely formal word for job, so we find it on forms, for example:
  DATE OF BIRTH ... OCCUPATION ... MARITAL STATUS ...
  Please state your occupation. etc.
- A **profession** is an occupation that requires special training and skills and in which the professional person is paid for the services he or she performs for others: the nursing/teaching/ medical/ dental/legal profession.

41. I'm confused when using 'wake', 'awake', 'waken' and 'awaken'. Could you give me an idea on how to use them correctly?

- It was late when I woke up. It was late when I awoke. (Not *When I awoke up*)
  We have to say either *I woke up* or *I awoke*. However, *I awoke* is literary and should be avoided in everyday speech. Both verbs are irregular: wake – woke – woken; awake – awoke – awoken. We usually put 'up' after 'wake', but not necessarily:

—What time did you wake? What time did you wake up?

—I woke at 7. I woke up at 7.

We also say: 'wake someone up' (Not *awake someone*)

- **Woken (up)** and **wakened** often occur in passive constructions:

  —I was woken (up) by a car alarm. I was wakened by a car alarm. (Not *wakened up*)

  'I was awakened by a car alarm' is literary and best avoided.

  All the above verb forms can be very confusing. To be on the safe side, just stick to *wake up* and *wake someone up* and avoid all the others.

- We use 'awake' as an adjective after the verb *be*:

  The children are awake. (Compare: The children are asleep.)

42. I'm confused when using 'salute' and 'salute to'. What is the difference between them?

Do remember that the verb 'salute' is used for military greetings only, so don't confuse it with the verbs 'wave' and 'greet'. The verb 'salute' is often followed by a direct object:

—Soldiers are trained to salute their officers. They are trained to salute the flag.

You can *salute to* a person (salute to an officer), but you can't *salute to* a thing. (Not *salute to a flag*) However, *salute to* is less usual than *salute + direct object*.

43. In one dictionary, I find the word 'influence' is explained by 'affect', and on the contrary, 'affect' is explained by 'influence'. But, from the model sentences in the dictionary, I'm sure there are some subtle differences between the two words, yet I can't find the proper example to show the

differences. Could you give me some ideas about them?

First, let me say that in older dictionaries, one word is often defined in terms of another, so you can never find out what the meaning is. You look up a difficult adjective like 'obsequious' and it is explained by another difficult adjective like 'fawning'; you look up 'fawning' and it is explained by 'obsequious'. Modern lexicographers try to avoid this sort of nonsense, so I suggest you invest in a modern dictionary, particularly one that is compiled especially for students of English as a foreign or second language.

Affect has a more general meaning than *influence* and means 'cause a change in':

—Everyone was affected by the earthquake. (Not *influenced*)

—Global warming affects us all.

Influence contains the idea of persuasion:

—Teachers often influence their students to take up a particular career. (Not *affect*)

—Kim's mother tried hard to influence him against travelling to the city. (Not *affect*)

44. What are the differences among the following group of words and expressions: 'dress', 'be dressed in', 'have on', 'put on', 'pull on' and 'wear'?

- **dress** (= put on clothes suitable to be seen by others):

  I must get up and get dressed.

  The policeman waited outside while I dressed.

- **Be dressed in/be wearing** can often imply some kind of special outfit:

  The bride was dressed in/was wearing a white silk suit.

- **be in/wear/be wearing:**
  Most people at the party were in/wore/were wearing the same clothes they wore to work that morning.
- **have on/wear:**
  He had a hat and coat on./He was wearing a hat and coat.
  If you said 'He was dressed in a hat and coat', this is slightly more definite and deliberate: the passive form brings to mind the deliberateness of putting them on.
- **put on** (= perform the act of getting into clothes):
  Wait a minute while I put my coat on.
  It's cold. You'd better put a coat on.
- **Pull on** is the same as put on, except it contains the idea of pulling the garment over the head or over the arms or legs:
  There was just time to pull on a jumper.

45. Please tell me the difference between 'when' and 'while'.

Both 'when' and 'while' can be used as conjunctions to introduce adverbial clauses of time.

- **When** refers to a point in time: We had been waiting for ten minutes when the bus arrived. (= it arrived at that point)
  We often use 'when' with the simple tenses, especially the simple past.
- **While** refers to a period of time: I read my newspaper while I was waiting for the bus to arrive. (= during the period)
  We often use 'while' with progressive tenses.

46. I'm always confused when using 'permit', 'allow' and 'promise'.

- **Permit** is used more in formal language than *allow*:

Parking is not permitted between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m.

It is not permitted to serve alcohol to people under the age of 18.

- **Allow** is used in less formal contexts:

  My children aren't allowed to watch TV after 7 in the evening.

- **Promise** is not connected in any way with the above two words:

  Promise not to let anyone know. (= Give me your word.)

47. I'm confused when using 'noted', 'well known', 'famous'. Can you help me?

- **Noted** means *well known*, especially for a particular quality or ability:

  Oscar Wilde was noted for his sharp wit. He was a notable/noted wit.

- **Well known** means exactly what it says: known by many people:

  The details of Oscar Wilde's trial are well known.

- **Famous** relates to *fame* and is stronger than *well known*:

  Oscar Wilde is a famous author.

48. I am always confused when using 'take', 'bring' and 'fetch'. Can you give me an idea on how I can use them correctly?

- **take**: You are here, so carry it there:

  Take this glass of water to your father.

- **bring**: You are or will be there, so bring it here:

  If you're going to the kitchen, would you mind bringing me a glass of water, please?

- **fetch**: Go from here to another place and bring it back:

  Please fetch me a glass of water.

49. I am confused when using 'fast' and 'quick'. Can you give me an idea on how I can use them correctly?

The first thing to note is that 'fast' is both an adjective and an adverb:

He is a fast walker. He walks fast.

He is a quick walker. He walks quickly.

The adjectives 'fast' and 'quick' are nearly always interchangeable.

50. I want to know how to study synonyms.

The classic work on synonyms (words with nearly the same meanings) and antonyms (words with nearly opposite meanings) is Roget's *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*. This was first published by Longman in 1852 and has gone into numerous editions over the years. However, I don't recommend it for study because it's a reference book. It is intended for people who already *know* the meanings of the words listed and use the reference book to vary their choice of words, especially when writing. For this reason, it has no *citations*, that is, examples in context of the words that are listed. If you want to study and use words you are not familiar with, I recommend three works:

—*The Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English*, by Tom McArthur, first published in 1981. This is a bit like Roget's *Thesaurus*, except that it has citations as well.

—*The Longman Language Activator*, which is designed to inform you about English words with similar meanings in a way which will help you use them. It guides you to the exact word you want. If for example you know the (simple) word *thin* but you're looking for something more precise to describe a person, the *Activator* will give you (I quote): *slight*, *lean*, *wiry*, *slim*, *slender*, *trim*,

willowy, *skinny*, *bony*, *scrawny*, *scraggy*, *emaciated*, *skeletal*, etc. complete with examples, so that you can take your pick.

—My own *Right Word Wrong Word*, which is designed to deal with the problem of interference from the student's mother-tongue. For example, some languages use words like *taste* or *aroma*, where English uses the word *flavour*: *What flavour ice-cream do you want?* (Not **taste* *aroma* *scent* *perfume**) *Right Word Wrong Word* brings these words together with examples. It also provides extensive exercises for you to practise what you learn.

51. What's the difference between 'master', 'grasp' and 'catch'?

- **Master** means to learn thoroughly so that you are in complete control of what you know:

  I've been trying to learn Chinese for years and I still haven't mastered it.
- **Grasp** means to succeed in understanding:

  I only grasped the exact meaning of the word after my teacher had explained it to me.
- **Catch** means to hear clearly and/or understand:

  Sorry. I didn't catch what you said. Could you repeat it please?

52. I want to know how to use 'nearly' and 'Almost' properly.

- I think there's almost/nearly enough food here to feed a dozen people.
- Almost/Nearly all cars use unleaded petrol these days.
- There's not nearly enough food here to feed twenty people. (Not *not almost*)

Nearly and *almost* are only interchangeable in the affirmative. But note:

• The river rose by four feet almost. (*Almost* in speech is sometimes used in the end position where *nearly* sounds awkward.)

53. I am always confused when using 'good', 'well', 'fine' and 'nice'. Can you give me an idea how I can use them correctly?

• **good** and **well**

—John played well. (Not *good*)

('Well' is an adverb of manner, modifying 'played'.)

—How are you today? —Well, thank you. (Not *good*)

—John looks well.

('Well' is an adjective = in good health; 'well' normally comes after *be*, *feel*, etc. However, it is used in front of nouns in a few fixed phrases like: 'He's not a well man' or 'Well Woman's Clinic'.)

—John looks good in a suit.

('Good' refers to clothes, not physical features.)

—That pie looks good. (Not *well*)

('Good' is an adjective = has a pleasant appearance.)

• **good** and **nice**

—What's Janice like? —She's very nice.

—What's that pie like? —It's very nice.

('Nice' is an all-purpose adjective, meaning 'kind or friendly' when applied to people or 'giving pleasure' when applied to anything else. You hear it a great deal in speech, but a lot of careful users of English try to avoid it in preference for more expressive words like 'beautiful', 'interesting', etc.)

—Lizzie has been very good.

('Good' when applied to children = well-behaved; when

applied to adults = has done good/kind things: We've had a lot of troubles recently, but our neighbours have been very good.)

—I can recommend John. He's really good.

(We often use 'good' to describe a person's professional competence: e.g. She's good at computers. She's good with children. etc.)

- **good**

Some further uses showing mistakes to avoid:

—Jenny is very good at Art. (Not *good in*)

—Exercise does you good. (Not *makes*) (= It's good for you.)

—It does no good to worry. (Not *makes*)

—It's no good worrying (Not *to worry*)

—It's not good. (= It's not a good thing e.g. to worry.)

—I don't believe anyone can be entirely good or entirely bad. (Not *a good* *a bad*)

—The good die young. (Not *The goods*) (the + adjective for the group as a whole)

—Teaching is hard work, but the good thing is you get long holidays. (Not *the good is*)

- **fine**

—What's the weather like today? —It's fine. (Or, less commonly: It's good.)

—How are you today? —I'm fine. (Or: I'm well, but not *I'm good*, except in colloquial Australian or American English.)

—The Savoy Grill is a fine restaurant. (= of high quality)

—This needle is too fine for this strong thread. (= less thick than normal: applies to thread, cloth, hair, needles, etc.)

54. I am confused when I use 'rather' and 'fairly'. Will you please tell me how to use them correctly?

We use both *rather* and *fairly* to 'grade' adjectives.

- **Fairly** suggests 'less than the highest degree' and often combines with adjectives that point to a good state of affairs (e.g. fairly good, fairly nice, fairly well). It is 'less complimentary' than 'quite': The lecture was fairly good. He lectured fairly well. (Compare the sentences: The lecture was quite good. He lectured quite well—spoken with a rising tone. These are 'more complimentary' than the statements with 'fairly'.) Note that, unlike 'quite' and 'rather', 'fairly' does not combine with comparatives: He's quite better. It's rather better. (Not *fairly*)
- **Rather** can be stronger than 'quite' and 'fairly' and suggests 'inclined to be'. It can combine with adjectives which suggest a good state of affairs or a bad one: rather good, rather nice, rather clever, rather well; rather bad, rather nasty, rather stupid, rather ill. On the whole, however, 'rather' tends to combine with 'negative' adjectives and adverbs: Frank is clever, but rather lazy. I did rather badly in the competition. With 'positive' adjectives and a rising tone, 'rather' often suggests 'surprisingly' or 'better than expected': Your results were rather good—better than I expected.

55. I am always confused when using 'area', 'district' and 'region'. Can you give me some idea how I can use them correctly?

- The Sahara desert covers an enormous **area**. (Not *district* *region*)

(An *area* is a surface measurement which may be large or small.)

- This **district/area** of London is mainly residential. (Not *region*)

  (A *district* is an area within a larger whole: the Lake District in Northern England; the Central District of Hong Kong.)

- The whole **region/area** has been affected by drought.

  (A *region* is a subdivision of a country: The rock formations of the southeastern region are made up of shale, chalk and limestone.)

56. What is the difference between 'ache', 'hurt' and 'pain'?

- **hurt**

  My head hurts. (Not *pains*)

  (Here the verb 'hurt' is used intransitively: you feel pain, possibly from an injury.)

  Comments like that really hurt. (= cause mental pain: hurt feelings)

  (We use 'hurt' to mean 'inflict any kind of physical or emotional damage'.)

  I hurt my foot. (Not *ached* *pained*)

  (Here the verb 'hurt' is used transitively = injured; note that 'hurt' is an irregular verb: hurt – hurt – hurt: not *hurted*.)

  The train left the rails, but fortunately no one was hurt/injured. (Not *wounded*)

- **ache**

  My head aches. (Not *pains*)

  (Intransitive use: you feel dull, constant pain.)

  I still have a bit of an ache/a pain in my stomach. (Not *hurt*)

- **pain**

  It pains me to recall my schooldays. (= makes me feel sad)

  I need to see a dentist at once. I've got an awful pain. (Not *I pain*)

  She's sleeping better now that she's out of pain. (Not *doesn't pain*)

  I had such a pain in the stomach after eating oysters. (Not *made a pain* *had an ache* *had a hurt*)

  Pain and suffering are part of the human condition. (Not *pity*)

57. What is the difference between 'if' and 'whether'?

- We use *whether*, not *if*,

  —to begin a sentence: Whether he likes it or not, I'm going. (Not *If*)

  —after *be*: The question is not when but whether he will sign the contract. (Not *if*)

  —after prepositions: It depends on whether he'll sign the contract. (Not *if*)

  —in front of 'to': I don't know whether to disturb him or not. (Not *if*)

- We use *whether* or *if* after verbs like 'ask' and a few adjectives like (not) certain, (not) sure:

  Ask him whether/if he'd like to join us.

58. I'm always confused when using 'arrive', 'reach' and 'get to'. Can you give me an idea how to use them correctly?

- What time did you get to London/arrive in London?
- What time did you get to London/reach London? (Not *reach

to/reach in London* *arrive to London*)

(We can use 'reach', not followed by a preposition, in the sense of 'arrive after a journey'; we say *arrive at* a point or *in* an area, depending on our viewpoint: We arrived at Rome at 4.15 on our way to Florence. We arrived in Rome late in the evening. We can also use 'arrive' on its own:

When did you arrive? (Not *When did you reach?*)

- When you get to my age/reach my age, you'll be an expert in the English language. (Not *reach to*; preferable to 'arrive at'. We use 'reach' for contexts other than journeys.)
- Can you get that book for me please? I can't reach it. (= succeed in touching)
- We'll need to climb for another couple of hours before we get to the summit. (= succeed in reaching)

59. Please tell me how to use 'be fit for' and 'be suitable for' correctly.

- He's not fit for the job/suitable for the job. (= doesn't come up to the required standard; 'fit' = physically or mentally competent; 'suitable' only means 'appropriate')
- A knife is not suitable for use as a screwdriver! (Not *fit*) (= appropriate)

Linen suits are suitable for a warm climate. (Not *fit*) (= appropriate)

We must find a suitable school for him. (Not *fit*) (= appropriate)

(When describing *people*, we say they are 'fit' or 'suitable' for something, to refer to standards; when describing *things*, we use 'suitable' to refer to appropriateness.)

60. It's difficult for me to use such synonyms as 'initial' and 'first'.

- **initial** and **first**

  Initial means 'happening at the beginning':

  There were some initial difficulties when we started our new company, but we soon began to make a profit. (Not *first*)

  First refers to number 1 in a numerical sequence:

  What was the title of his first book? (Not *initial*)

  What was the name of the first man on the moon? (Not *initial*)

  What's your first name? (Not *initial*)

- The two words are only rarely interchangeable:

  Parents watch anxiously for their baby's first/initial efforts to walk.

61. What's the difference between 'deputy' and 'vice'?

I presume you're referring to rank, in the sense of 'directly below the person in charge'. There is no significant difference in meaning, just a difference in collocation, that is, the way certain nouns normally associate with 'deputy' or 'vice'. 'Vice' is more about hierarchy: Vice Captain = second in command; 'deputy' is more about roles: the Deputy Chairman, deputy officer. So 'vice' tends to associate ('collocate') with nouns like president and captain: the Vice President of the USA, the vice captain of the team. 'Deputy' tends to associate with nouns like manager and director: the deputy manager, the deputy director. Occasionally, 'deputy' and 'vice' may be interchangeable: the deputy chairman, the vice chairman, but with a different emphasis for each word: the

deputy chairman is expected to step into the actual chairman's shoes whenever the circumstances demand, while a vice chairman might just follow the principal around.

62. I am always confused when using 'seem', 'appear' and 'look'. Can you give me an idea how to use them correctly?

The verb *be* expresses certainty. Verbs of perception *seem*, *appear* and *look* express uncertainty:

He is ill. (certainty)

He seems (to be) ill. (uncertainty)

This means we can use 'seem', etc. in place of modals: He seems ill. = He may/might/could be ill. Compare these basic forms related to the verb 'be':

be	**verbs related to 'be'**
present of **be**	
He is quite rich.	He appears/seems (to be) quite rich.
It is quite dark.	It appears/seems (to be) quite dark.
past of **be**	
He was quite rich.	He appeared/seemed (to be) quite rich.
It was quite dark.	It appeared/seemed (to be) quite dark.
present progressive	
He is working hard.	He appears/seems to be working hard.
It's working.	It appears/seems to be working.
past progressive	
He was working hard.	He appeared/seemed to be working hard.
It was working.	It appeared/seemed to be working.
present perfect	
He has been hurt.	He appears/seems to have been hurt.

It has been broken. It appears/seems to have been broken.

Note that we use adjective forms, not adverbs, after verbs of perception: appear strange, feel rough, look good, look well, seem impossible, smell sweet, sound nice, taste bad, etc.:

That pie looks good, but it tastes awful.

A day in the country sounds nice, but think of the traffic!

Scratch my back please. Ah! That feels better.

The words used after these verbs are adjectives because they are describing the subject of the verb, not modifying the verb itself.

63. Please explain the differences between 'everyone' and 'every one', between 'anyone' and 'any one', between 'someone' and 'some one', between 'nobody' and 'no body'.

Everyone, spelt as one word, refers to a collection of people: Everyone enjoys a holiday sometimes.

Every one, spelt as two words, can be used to refer to separate people or things, itemised singly: There are ten houses in our street. Every one of them has a front door painted blue.

Anyone, spelt as one word, refers indefinitely to people: Anyone can apply for this job. I've never met anyone like you.

Any one, spelt as two words, can be used to refer to separate people or things, itemised singly: Thousands of lottery tickets are sold and any one of them might be the right combination of numbers.

Someone refers indefinitely to people: Someone I know is standing for the committee. I know someone who has won the lottery.

Some one, spelt as two words, doesn't exist.

Nobody, spelt as one word, refers indefinitely to people: Nobody visits me any more. There's nobody like you.

No body, spelt as two words, doesn't exist. Strangely enough, however, no one (same meaning as nobody) is spelt as two words: No one visits me any more. There's no one like you. (Not *noone*)

64. Are there differences between 'earn money' and 'make money'?

Both verb phrases can be used in the same way to mean 'gain money by working': He's a merchant banker and he earns/makes a lot of money. However, 'make money' can also refer to the idea of gaining money without working for it: He bought the shares when they were cheap and sold them when they were dear. He made a lot of money. (Not *earned*) 'Earn money' always includes the idea of working for a reward, whereas 'make money' usually suggests 'obtain money not necessarily through work'.

65. What's the difference between 'when', 'while' and 'as'?

All three conjunctions introduce adverbial clauses of time:

—I was just leaving the house when the phone rang.

—Nero played the violin while Rome was burning. / Nero was playing the violin while Rome was burning.

—The postman delivered my mail (just) as I was leaving the house.

Additionally, we can use 'as' to introduce an adverbial clause of reason:

—As there was little support, the strike was not successful.

Or an adverbial clause of manner:

—The fish isn't cooked as I like it.

Or an adverbial clause of comparison:

—He plays chess as well as his sister (does).

When points to the moment an action occurs. It often introduces the simple past tense in a sentence which contains the past progressive (in the example above). When this happens, the simple past 'interrupts' an action in progress.

While means 'during the time that'. It can introduce the simple past in a sentence which contains the past progressive, or it can introduce the past progressive to emphasize the idea of two actions in progress at the same time (as above example).

As, like *when*, points to the moment an action occurs. We often use it after *just* to emphasize this fact (as above example).

66. I am always confused when using 'happen' and 'take place'. Can you give me an idea on how I can use them correctly?

- We use the verbs 'happen' and 'occur' for unplanned events:

  When did the accident happen? (Not *take place*)

  The accident happened about an hour ago. (Not *took place*)

- Events usually *take place* by arrangement:

  When will the wedding take place? (Not *happen*)

  The wedding will take place on Saturday, April 17th. (Not *happen*)

Happen is more general than *occur*, so is the only verb possible in questions about unspecified events:

What's happened? (Not * What's occurred?* * 'What's taken place?*)

67. What's the difference between 'spark' and 'sparkle'?

The two words are entirely unconnected.

- A 'spark' is a small bit of burning material produced by a fire:
  Against the night sky, we could see sparks rising from the fire.
  We often use 'spark (off)' as a verb to suggest the immediate cause of something:
  My question seems to have sparked off a major row.
- We use the verb 'sparkle' to describe the way something reflects the light with small flashes:
  Her diamond necklace sparkled.
  Her eyes sparkled with delight.

68. I am always confused when using 'wound', 'hurt' and 'injure'.

- The train left the rails, but fortunately no one was injured/hurt. (Not *wounded*)
  ('Be injured' or 'be hurt' = suffer; injure/hurt = inflict any kind of physical or emotional damage; the noun is 'an injury/injuries'; 'hurt' and 'hurts' as nouns refer to 'hurt feelings'.)
- The battle didn't last long, but a lot of men were wounded. (Not * injured*) ('Hurt' is possible, but not as precise as 'wounded'.)
  (Wound/be wounded = give/receive e.g. a hole in the skin or flesh, especially with a weapon; the noun is 'wound/wounds'.)

69. What is the difference between 'abundant', 'adequate' and 'ample'?

- **Abundant** means 'more than enough', 'plentiful', 'generous':
  Following the heavy rains this winter, there is an abundant

supply of water in our reservoirs.

- **Adequate** means 'enough', but only just so:
  Our reservoirs are half full, so the supply of water should be adequate for the summer months.
- **Ample** means 'enough' or 'more than enough' (but not to the degree of 'abundant'):
  There's an ample supply of water in our reservoirs to see us through the summer months.

70. What is the difference between 'plant', 'factory' and 'mill'?

- **Plant** usually refers to the heavy machinery that is installed in a **factory** or to the installation that provides a continuous service:
  e.g. a desalination plant (= process, not manufacture):
  The company has invested a lot of money in new plant for its factories.
- **Mill** is another word for **factory**, but it has more limited uses. A mill is used for places where raw materials are processed or refined: a flour mill, a steel mill, a cotton mill, a paper mill, etc.
- A **factory** makes things for sale out of a number of ingredients:
  e.g. a biscuit factory (Not *a biscuit mill*).

71. I'm always confused when using 'would like' and 'want'.

Would like is much more polite than *want*:

questions: Would you like a sandwich? (polite)
Do you want a sandwich? (informal)

statements: I'd (= I would) like a sandwich, please. (polite)
I want a sandwich please. (informal)

negatives: I don't want a sandwich, thank you. (Not *I

wouldn't like*)

yes/no: Would you like a sandwich? —Yes, please./No, thank you. (Not *No, I wouldn't*)

72. Can you tell me how to distinguish 'believe' from 'believe in'?

- **Believe** means 'consider to be true':

  Don't believe everything you hear.

  He told me he's been promoted, but I don't believe it.

- **Believe in someone or something** means:

  —'think that they exist':

  A famous Christian prayer begins: 'I believe in God.'

  Do you believe in life after death?

  —'have trust or confidence in':

  The company must believe in him or they wouldn't have promoted him.

  I don't believe in taking a lot of exercise. I'm sure it isn't good for you.

73. What's the difference between 'further' and 'farther'?

- We learnt, further, that he wasn't a qualified doctor. (Not *farther*) (= in addition)
- I drove ten miles further/farther than necessary. (both possible to refer to distance)

74. I'm always confused when using 'advise', 'persuade' and 'convince'. Can you give me an idea how I can use them correctly?

- **Advise** means 'to tell someone what you think they should do in a particular situation':

John has a bad cough and I advised him to see his doctor.

Advise also has a common use in jargon in business letters where clerks use it instead of 'inform': Please advise of the dispatch details as soon as they become available.

- **Persuade** means 'to make someone take action':

  John didn't want to see his doctor, but I managed to persuade him.

- **Convince** means 'to make someone believe what you are telling them':

  The evidence finally convinced the jury that the accused was innocent.

75. Can you tell me how I can distinguish 'voyage', 'journey' and 'trip'?

- We're taking a trip to Moscow. (Not *journey* *voyage*)

  (A trip is temporary, an interruption of the normal condition of being in one place.)

  I'm just back from a business trip.

  ('Business' combines with 'trip': a 'business trip' is temporary, but not necessarily short.)

- It's a really long journey travelling by car across the USA from coast to coast. (Not *voyage*, but 'trip' is possible.)

  (A 'journey' refers to the act of travelling, especially long distance overland; it contains no reference to an end point.)

- I can remember the time when the voyage/journey/trip from England to Australia took over six weeks.

  (We use 'voyage' for long trips by sea.)

76. I don't know how to use 'except' and 'except for'.

- Everyone has helped in some way except for you/except you. (both possible)
- Except for you, everyone has helped in some way. (Not *Except you*)

  (We cannot begin a sentence with 'except + object'; we need 'except for'.)

77. What is the difference between 'demand', 'require', 'need' and 'want'?

- **Demand** means 'to make a strong request for something':

  I demand an apology. I demand an answer.
- **Require** means 'to demand by right':

  The law requires every citizen to make a tax return.
- **Need** points to the necessity for something:

  I need a new pair of shoes. I need to buy a new pair of shoes.
- **Want** points to the desire for something:

  I want a new pair of shoes. I want to buy a new pair of shoes.

  And compare these uses as nouns:
- There's a great need for money to help flood victims. (Not *want* *demand*)
- I'm ill for want of sleep. (Not *need* *demand*)
- There's a big demand for umbrellas in wet weather.

  (= A lot of people want to buy them.)

78. I'm always confused when using 'in the south of' and 'on the south of'.

Your problem is not the noun 'south', but the difference between the prepositions 'in' and 'on'. We use 'in' to indicate a

large area:

There's a lot to see in the south of France. (i.e. within that large area)

We generally use 'on' to mean 'supported by' a line or surface. This means that we can use it to pinpoint position on a map:

There are several famous resorts on the south coast of France.

79. I'm often puzzled at the difference between 'be afraid of' and 'be afraid to'.

Both verb phrases can be used to express fear. We use a noun or a noun phrase after 'be afraid of':

I'm afraid of the dark. I'm afraid of flying. I'm afraid of losing my way in a strange city.

We use a verb after 'be afraid to':

There are parts of this city I'd be afraid to visit.

80. How to use 'sense', 'feel', 'regard' and 'think' correctly?

- **'sense' and 'feel'**

  Both these verbs mean 'have the idea that something is true without having any proof', but they can't always be used interchangeably. The verb 'sense' directly refers to the senses; the verb 'feel' directly refers to feelings. 'Sense' has the idea of 'animal feelings' and is dynamic:

  I sense that it is time for a change. (i.e. the evidence of my eyes, ears, mouth, nose, intelligence leads me to that conclusion)

  The dog sensed we were in danger long before we did.

  (Stronger than: The dog felt we were in danger ...)

  'Feel' = be affected by a particular emotion/feeling:

I feel sad. I feel (= believe) this is a sad situation.

I feel the time has come for me to begin looking round for a new job.

- **'regard' and 'think'**

Both these verbs mean 'have a view of something'. We often use 'as' after 'regard' and '(that)' after 'think':

Many critics regard *Measure for Measure* as one of Shakespeare's finest works.

Many critics think (that) *Measure for Measure* is one of Shakespeare's finest works.

81. What's the difference in meaning between 'compare to' and 'compare with'?

It's virtually impossible to make a case for a significant difference in meaning between 'to' and 'with' after 'compare'. Some careful native speakers might argue that we use 'to' to compare things which are completely dissimilar, as in the first line of the famous Shakespeare sonnet:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? (The person and the summer's day are remote from each other.)

They would argue that we use 'with' to compare 'like with like':

You can't compare your lovely house with my small apartment. (A house and a flat are both places people live in.)

'With' and 'to' are often used after the adjectival past participle 'compared' with no discernible difference in meaning:

Holiday bookings have fallen dramatically compared with/compared to last year.

The above is the 'standard answer' to the question whether to choose 'to' or 'with' after 'compare'. There is another possible

answer, which is to do with the hybrid nature of English. Contrasts often invite the use of 'to', but the com- prefix in Latin means 'with', and a lot of English lexis is of Latin origin. If Shakespeare had written 'Shall I compare thee with a summer's day', the commentators would say that compare, contrast, etc. have to be followed by 'with' and not 'to', because the Latin com- = with.

82. What's the difference between 'big', 'huge', 'large', 'enormous', 'gigantic'?

- **Big** and **large** are generally interchangeable: a big man, a large man, a big house, a large house. The opposite of 'big' is 'little' and the opposite of 'large' is 'small'. 'Big' tends to refer to absolute size, and 'large' to relative size.
- **Huge** and **enormous** are generally interchangeable and mean 'extremely large': a huge/an enormous sum of money, a huge man/an enormous man, etc.
- **Gigantic** is the most emphatic of these words meaning 'very big' and means 'like a giant': a person of gigantic proportions, a gigantic building, etc.

83. I'm always confused when using 'expand', 'enlarge' and 'amplify'.

- **Expand** has intransitive uses: Water expands when frozen. (Not *enlarges*) When we use an object after 'expand', it has the sense of 'increase the range of ...': We're planning to expand our business. (= increase the range of our activities) Note that the object can be implied rather than stated: We're planning to expand into the west of the country.
- **Enlarge** is transitive and simply means 'make larger': We're

going to enlarge our premises. (= make them bigger)

- **Amplify** refers mainly to making sound louder: A woofer will greatly amplify the sound put out by a pair of small speakers.

84. I don't know whether 'salary', 'wage' and 'pay' can be used in exactly the same way.

- My **salary** is paid on the 28th of each month. (Not *wage* *wages*)(A salary is paid monthly.)
- Women often get paid a low **wage**/low **wages**, especially for part-time work. (A wage, or wages are paid daily or weekly.)
  When I worked as a waitress, the **wages** were low. (This is preferable to 'the wage was low'; we generally use 'wages' in front of a verb.)
- **Pay** used as a noun is the general word for money paid in return for work, regardless of whether the money is paid daily, weekly or monthly:
  Hospital workers are demanding higher **pay**/a higher **wage**/higher **wages**.
  You can't begin to compare the **pay** of a managing director with the **pay** of a worker.

85. Can you tell me the difference between 'love' and 'like'?

Broadly speaking, 'love' is an emotional tie based on non-rational responses. 'Like' is a reasonable response to someone or something that pleases us. Thus:

- 'Love' is stronger than 'like'. 'Love' can refer to emotional ties:
  —A mother loves her baby. ('Likes' isn't strong enough.)
  —John loves his wife. (= is in love with; 'likes' isn't strong

enough.)

We can use the verb 'love' to ask questions:

Does she love her baby? Does John love his wife? etc.

- 'Love' is stronger than 'like' when we use it with reference to places, things, activities, etc:

  I love Hong Kong./I like Hong Kong.

  I love big cars./I like big cars.

  I love sailing./I like sailing.

  Note that we do not ask questions using the verb 'love' when referring to places, things and activities:

  Do you like Hong Kong? —Yes, I like it./I love it. (Not *Do you love Hong Kong?*)

86. I'm sometimes confused while using the words 'movement', 'activity' and 'exercise'.

- **Movement** is the general noun that describes the act of moving or the condition of being moved:

  He knocked the vase over with a clumsy movement of the hand. (Not *activity*)

- **Activity** is the general word for the state of being active and can sometimes be used in the same way as 'movement':

  There hasn't been much activity/movement on the stock exchange today.

  We also use 'activity' to refer to the way time is spent:

  Playing golf is one of my favourite leisure activities. (Not *movements*)

- **Exercise** is something designed to give practice in a mental or physical skill:

  Read the text, then do the exercise. (Not *movement*

'activity')

The only way to keep fit is to take regular exercise. (Not 'movement' 'activity')

Mental arithmetic used to be a common exercise in maths lessons.

87. Can you give an idea how I can use 'desire', 'hope' and 'wish' correctly?

- **Desire** when used either as a verb or a noun is very formal and is best avoided in everyday speech:

  'We all want the best for our children' rather than 'We all desire the best for our children.'

  'The wish to succeed dominates all his actions' rather than 'The desire to succeed dominates all his actions'.

- We **hope** for things that are possible.

  —hope + to: I hope to travel a lot in my new job.

  —hope + (that): I hope (that) I'll travel a lot in my new job.

  —hope + present: I hope she gets the job. (Not 'I hope she will get the job.')

- We **wish** things which may be impossible or unlikely:

  —wish + past to refer to the present: I wish John were/was here now.

  —wish + past perfect to refer to the past: I wish John had been here yesterday.

  —wish + *would* in place of an imperative:

  I wish you would do as you are told. I wish you wouldn't make so much noise.

  Note we use *could* after *I* and *we*:

  I wish I could swim. I wish we could be together. (Not

would)

88. How to use 'take', 'bring' and 'carry' correctly?

And I would add 'fetch'.

- If you're going to the kitchen, would you mind bringing me a glass of water please? (i.e. you will be there, so bring it here)
- Please fetch me a glass of water. (= go from here to another place and bring it back here)
- Take this glass of water to your father. (i.e. you are here; carry it there)
- I had to carry the twins all the way home. (= lift and move)

89. I'm always confused when using 'lie' and 'lay'.

So are a lot of people, including native speakers! Let's look at some of the different forms:

- **lie** and **lay**

  —Are you going to lie in bed all morning? (Not *lay*)

  (lie – lay – have lain = be in a flat position)

  —Please lay the book open on the coffee table. (Not *lie*)

  (lay – laid – have laid = put down)

  (The present or imperative form 'lay' = put down, is the same as the past form 'lay' = was in a flat position.)

  —I wish Peter wouldn't lie so much.

  (lie – lied – lied = tell lies)

- **laying** and **lying** (present participles)

  —Are you going to spend the whole morning lying in bed? (Not *laying* *lieing*)

  (lie/lying – lay – have lain = be in a flat position)

  —I'm laying your clothes on the bed so you can put them away.

(Not *lying*)

(lay/laying – laid – have laid = put down)

—Peter says he put the cheque in the post, but I'm sure he's lying. (Not *laying*)

(lie/lying – lied – lied = tell lies)

- **lay, laid, lied** (past tenses)

—We were so tired after last night's party, we lay in bed all morning. (Not *laid* *lied*)

(lie – lay – have lain = be in a flat position)

—I laid your clothes on the bed so you can put them away. (Not *layed*)

(lay – laid – have laid = put down; compare normal spelling of vowel + -y: play – played – played)

(The past form 'lay' = was in a flat position, is the same as the present form 'lay' = put down.)

—I know Peter lied when he said he'd put the cheque in the post.

(lie – lied – lied = tell lies)

90. How to make a distinction between 'see through something' and 'see something through'?

- In 'see through something', 'through' is a preposition after the verb 'see'. 'See through' has a non-idiomatic meaning:

Describe what you can see through the window.

and an idiomatic meaning (= not be deceived by):

I could never deceive my mother. She always saw through all my little schemes to avoid helping out at home. (= she understood them)

- In 'see something through', 'through' is an adverb particle;

this phrasal verb has an idiomatic meaning = to persevere until something is successfully completed:

We began decorating this room a month ago and now have to see it through. (i.e. we can't leave it unfinished)

91. I don't know what's the difference between 'college' and 'university'.

- Ann's at York University. (Not 'York College')
  (= an institution that awards degrees)
- My old school is now a sixth-form college.
  My daughter is at a Teacher Training College.
  A college is a specialist school for senior pupils providing courses that do not lead to a university degree.
  Note that some independent schools in Britain use the word college (= school):
  It's very expensive to put a child through Eton College.
  However, 'college' can be used loosely to refer to Higher Education at a university in sentences like these:
  Our daughter started college/university last October.
  Joe's at college/at university for three years to study engineering.
  Joe's going to college/university next October.
  In the UK a university may consist of different colleges:
  —Joe's at Cambridge University.
  —Which college?
  —King's College.

92. I often get confused when using 'worth' and 'worthy'.

- 'Worth' forms part of the verb phrase 'to be worth' and we use it to refer to value, usually monetary value:

What's your car worth? —It's worth about £3,000.

I'd like $20 (twenty dollars') worth of gasoline please.

- 'Worthy' means 'deserving respect' and we normally use it to refer to people:

  John Grisham is a worthy writer of popular fiction.

- 'Worthy of' means 'deserving':

  This is worthy of the highest praise/the deepest contempt.

93. What's the difference between 'except' and 'besides'?

- I have other cookery books besides these. (Not 'except' 'except for') (= in addition to)
- I have no other/haven't any other cookery books except these/except for these/besides these. (= These are the only ones I have.)

94. What's the difference between 'however' and 'nevertheless'?

We use 'however' and 'nevertheless' as connecting adverbs when speaking or writing (particularly the latter). Both words mean 'in spite of this' and are often interchangeable. The difference is simply one of emphasis. We use 'however' when we want to emphasize a comparison or a contrast:

Farmers have complained about the heavy rains this year. However, it looks as though they're going to have a good harvest.

We use 'nevertheless' when we want to emphasize the idea of concession:

I don't agree with all the government's policies. Nevertheless, I'll probably vote for them in the next election.

Ⅳ. Questions about Language Points

95. I am always bad at articles. Are they so important in learning English?

The most important thing is to be understood when you're speaking to somebody in English. Assuming that your use (or misuse) of articles doesn't turn what you are saying into nonsense, then how you use articles isn't of very great importance.

Having said that, I would add that you can ask this kind of question about any aspect of English grammar, for example: I'm always bad at using verb tenses. Are they so important in learning English? The same answer would apply.

Recognizing that you are 'bad' at some aspect of grammar is the first step towards doing something about it. Try to improve your use of articles by understanding and applying the basic rules. Remember, we need to know whether nouns are countable or uncountable in order to use articles correctly and what is countable or uncountable in one language may not be in another. (For example, the noun *information* is countable in many languages and therefore has a plural: *I want an information/some informations please*, but it is always uncountable in English: I want some information please.) The briefest summary I can give you is this:

- **a/an** in front of singular countable nouns:

  He's/She's a teacher. (Not *He's/She's teacher.*)

  It's an encyclopaedia. (Not *It's encyclopaedia.*)

  But: I want some water please. (Not *I want a water please.*)

- **the** in front of singular or plural countable nouns or in front of uncountable nouns when we're referring to someone or something in particular:

  Who's the teacher responsible for this class?

  Who are the teachers responsible for this class?

  The Britannica is the encyclopaedia I like best.

  You can't drink the water in this well.
- No article + plural/uncountable nouns in general statements (= what we call 'the zero article'):

  ( ) Beans contain a lot of fibre.

  ( ) Life is short; ( ) art is long.
- No article in front of most personal names and names of places (proper nouns):

  Let me introduce you to John.

  How long does it take to fly to London from Hong Kong?

96. What's the difference between 'I get in the bus' and 'I get on the bus'?

The use of prepositions in English often reflects the point of view of the speaker and that is why we can't always give absolute rules. For example, if I say 'I'll meet you at the restaurant' I immediately imagine myself standing outside the restaurant; if I say 'I'll meet you in the restaurant' I immediately imagine myself actually inside the restaurant. This kind of thinking can be applied to the two examples you have given. If I say 'I got in the bus' I see myself entering the bus and being inside it; if I say 'I got on the bus' I see myself stepping onto it, as a mode of transport rather than as a container.

97. I am always confused by the difference between 'of' (meaning belonging to) and 's (the genitive case).

Here are some important points to remember:

1) We prefer compound nouns in English to *of* and the genitive. This means we prefer *the car key* to 'the key of the car'. Where a compound noun is available, always use it in preference to anything else.

2) With a few notable exceptions, we use 's and s' to show possession by people. The possessive is used with people's names (*Jane's diary*, *James' address*) or 'people nouns' (*a student's textbook*, *an actress' career*). We don't normally use 's/s' for things. This means we have to say *a table leg* in preference to 'the leg of the table', but never 'a table's leg'.

3) We avoid of-constructions as much as possible (preferring compound nouns, or 's/s'). It isn't wrong to say 'the sonnets of Shakespeare', but you're more likely to say Shakespeare's sonnets or to use the compound noun, Shakespeare sonnets. However, there are a few of-phrases in English for which there is no compound noun equivalent and where 's/s' is impossible, for example: *the cost of living* (not *'living's cost', or *'living cost' —though we can say *living costs*); *the book of the film / the film of the book*. In all of these, it is the first noun of the of-phrase that is the focus of the speaker's attention. The second part of the phrase is descriptive.

This is an extremely tricky area of English and you need to build up your awareness of compound nouns and then the use of 'of' and 's/s' will fall into place.

(See *Longman English Grammar*, 2.42 – 2.52)

98. Is 'an apple and a half' considered as a plural noun or a singular noun?

First of all it is a noun phrase, not a self-contained noun. We would rarely use such a phrase, preferring to say, for example: *This recipe requires one and a half apples* (not 'an apple a half'). Whether you say 'an apple and a half' or 'one and a half apples' the tendency would be to use a singular verb because in the speaker's mind the phrase refers to a single quantity: *An apple and a half/ One and a half apples is all you need for a dish this size*. The speaker isn't counting, but is referring to a quantity. On the other hand, a speaker who automatically uses a plural verb after a plural noun form (*apples*) might use *are* instead, and this would not be 'wrong': *One and a half apples are all you need* ...

99. What are the differences between the two sentences: 'Tom is funny' and 'Tom is being funny'?

In 'Tom is funny', *be* is a full verb in the simple present tense. The sentence describes a permanent state. In 'Tom is being funny', *is* is an auxiliary verb + present participle (*being*). The present and past progressive of *be* are rare and are used to describe temporary behaviour. We use the progressive with a small range of adjectives and nouns:

Tom is being naughty/silly/annoying/a naughty boy, etc. (temporary behaviour)

Tom is naughty/silly/annoying/a naughty boy, etc. (permanent condition)

(See *Longman English Grammar*, 10.10 - 10.11)

100. Are both of the two sentences right: a) What do you call it in English? b) How do you say it in English?

Yes, both of these sentences are right, but they have different uses. 'What do you call it in English?' (or better still: What's this/that called in English?) refers to *naming things*. So, for example, you might point to something and ask this question. I would answer 'It's (an envelope).' Or: 'It's called (an envelope).'

'How do you say it in English?' refers to complete phrases or sentences, rather than individual words. So, for example, you might ask a Chinese-speaking friend a question like this (in Chinese): I want to say 'I'm sorry, I was late for the meeting.' How do I say it in English? And your friend would give you an English translation of the whole meaning, rather than just a single word.

101. 'Sports and games are also very useful for character-training.' I think, in this sentence, 'for' ought to be replaced by 'to'. Please tell me how to use 'be useful for ...' and 'be useful to ...' properly.

The sentence you quote is correct. We cannot say 'Sports and games are also very useful to character-training.' We often use 'for + -ing' to express purpose:

This is a garden rake. It's a tool for raking leaves. (= for the purpose of)

Sports and games are useful. They are useful for character-training. (= for the purpose of)

We can use 'to' after 'useful' as a preposition + object. As a preposition it suggests 'destination':

This garden rake is very useful to me. I can't manage without it.
Or we can use 'to' after 'useful' as part of the infinitive:
It's very useful to speak a foreign language.

102. What's the meaning exactly of the sentence 'He is no taller than Jack'? Does that mean that 'Jack is short, so is he' or just 'He is not taller than Jack'?

'He is not taller than Jack' is a normal negative sentence formed with 'not'. It means exactly what it says: 'He is shorter than Jack.' 'No', used instead of 'not', is an adverb of degree and expresses greater uncertainty than 'not'. So if we say 'He is no taller than Jack', we are making a less certain statement. We are saying, for example, 'He may be as tall, but (I don't think) he's taller'.

103. How should I fill in the blank in the following sentence: Tom slowed down his walking pace, ____ (ashamed) of himself for acting so foolishly, for there was nothing to fear in a town as quiet as this. And why?

The answer of course is *ashamed*. *Ashamed* is a past participle here, which we use in place of a clause. Let's break the sentence down into its parts and you will see why: Tom slowed down his walking pace. He was ashamed of himself for acting so foolishly. There was nothing to fear in a town as quiet as this. If we connect up these sentences, we get:
Tom slowed down his walking pace, *ashamed* of himself for acting so foolishly, *for* there was nothing to fear in a town as quiet as this.

Compare a couple of other examples with past participle constructions:

The system which is used in this school is very successful.

→ The system used in this school is very successful.

The president was seated in the presidential car and he waved to the crowd.

→ Seated in the presidential car, the president waved to the crowd.

104. What's the difference between 'by' and 'for' in these examples: 'step by step', 'one by one', 'side by side' and 'word for word'?

You are referring to fixed phrases here, so it isn't possible to isolate distinct meanings for 'by' and 'for'. These phrases are used as follows:

- **step by step** (= gradually): I went through the instructions step by step to make sure I really understood them.
- **one by one** (= singly, one at a time): The teacher counted the children one by one to make sure they were all present.
- **word for word** (= in exactly the same words): Please phone him and give him the message. Read it exactly as it is written, word for word.
- **side by side** (= next to one another): Arrange these books side by side on the shelf.

105. I'm puzzled by two prepositional phrases: 'in front of' and 'in the front of'.

- **In front of** is a three-word preposition, the opposite of which is 'behind':

  We have a small garden in front of/behind our house.
- In the phrase 'in the front (of)', 'front' is a noun, not part of a preposition. The opposite is 'at the back (of)', where 'back'

is also a noun. The use of the definite article in both phrases makes the reference specific:

We've moved to a new house. There's a small garden in the front and a larger garden at the back.

106. I'm always puzzled when using the phrases 'be concerned about' and 'be worried about'. Would you please give me some examples on that?

Both phrases mean 'to be anxious about' something and are used in much the same way. However, 'to be worried' is stronger than 'to be concerned'. You can be concerned about something (i.e. anxious) without actually being worried (i.e. feel discomfort and even fear):

—He is concerned with the day-to-day management of the school. (= He attends to it. This use has little to do with 'worry'.)

—I'm concerned about my sister's health. (= I find that it occupies my attention.)

—I'm worried about my sister's health. (= I feel anxious about her and I don't know what will happen.)

107. Sometimes I'm confused by words that look similar. For instance: 'very' and 'quite'. I find a sentence in a book: 'She was quite able to keep things to herself.' Here can we use 'very' instead of 'quite'?

No, we can't. We can hardly ever use 'very' in place of 'quite'. Let's understand the two basic uses of 'quite':

- When we use 'quite' with gradable adjectives (that is, adjectives which have comparative and superlative forms) it means 'less than the highest degree':

—Professor Hogg's lecture was quite good, but not up to his usual standard.

—How was the meal? —It was quite nice, but just a bit too salty.

Compare the use of 'very', which is absolute:

—Professor Hogg's lecture was very good.

—The meal was very nice.

- When we use 'quite' with non-gradable adjectives (that is, adjectives which don't have comparative and superlative forms) it means 'completely':

—This sauce is quite perfect.

—The man was quite dead.

We can't use 'very' in these examples because the adjectives 'perfect' and 'dead' are absolute. (There are no 'degrees of perfection' or 'degrees of being dead': something is either perfect or it isn't; someone is either dead, or they aren't.)

We also use 'quite' with strong adjectives like *amazing*, *astonishing*, etc. to mean 'completely':

—Your stamina is quite amazing!

—Your command of English is quite astonishing!

Again, we can't use 'very' here, because the adjectives *amazing* and *astonishing* have absolute meanings: something is either amazing or it isn't: there aren't 'degrees of being amazing'.

We also use 'quite' with gradable or non-gradable verbs:

—I quite enjoyed the film. (i.e. not entirely: my enjoyment was qualified.)

Compare: I enjoyed the film very much. (My enjoyment wasn't qualified.) *Very* cannot modify a verb phrase, though *quite*

can. (Not *I very enjoyed the film.*)

She was quite able to keep things to herself. (your quoted example: = entirely)

We could use *very well* instead of *quite* with *be able to*:

She was very well able to keep things to herself.

108. 'The room was lighted by electricity' is correct, but 'The room was lighted by electric light' is incorrect. Why is that?

Let us say that both these sentences are just possible, but highly unlikely. The past participle 'lit' is far more common than 'lighted':

—The room was lit by electricity, a candle, etc.

'The room was lit by an electric light' is also possible if you use the indefinite article 'an'.

However, we use lighted (not lit) as an adjective: a lighted match, a lighted room. We can use 'lit' as an adjective in certain contexts if we qualify it: a well-lit room, a well-lit street. (Not *well-lighted*)

109. Which one is correct of the following sentences:

'There's still ten minutes to go.' or 'There are still ten minutes to go'? Or both will do?

Both will do. Technically, you would expect to use *There are* with a plural noun:

—There are two men at the door.

—There are a lot of cars on the roads these days.

A singular verb can go with phrases that include numbers, but which the speaker sees as an amount or quantity:

—There's ten minutes to go. (= That is the number of minutes to

go.)

—There are ten minutes to go. (= That is how many.)

110. In a book I found such a sentence: 'Where is your headquarters?' Later I found such a sentence in *21st Century*: 'Our headquarters are in London.' I wonder which is right and whether the word 'headquarters' is plural or not.

It's both. A few English nouns are plural in form (i.e. they end in -s). We use them with a singular verb if we regard them as a single unit; we use them with a plural verb if we regard them as 'collective'. Examples of such nouns are: *barracks*, *bellows*, *crossroads*, *gallows*, *gasworks*, *headquarters*, *kennels*, *series*, *species* and *works* (= factory). So we can say:

—single unit: Our headquarters is in London.

—'collective': Our headquarters are in London.

With *headquarters*, the 'collective' point of view is more usual.

111. What's the difference between 'be careful of' and 'be careful with'?

- **Be careful of** refers to something that is outside your control and is a danger:

  Be careful of the traffic when you're out.

- **Be careful with** refers to something that is in your control and needs care:

  Be careful with that bag. It's full of broken glass.

  Old Mr Sims is very careful with his money.

112. What's the meaning exactly of the sentence: 'He is no more taller than Jack'?

More is simply not necessary here and has been misused. The sentence should be read: He is no taller than Jack. 'No' is an adverb of degree, so 'He is no taller than Jack' means: He may be as tall, (but I don't think he's taller). * No more taller * is wrong because we don't use 'more' to form the comparative with one-syllable adjectives.

113. My reference book says the sentence 'It doesn't often snow in the South' is wrong. The right version should be 'It seldom snows in the South.' The reason it gives is that 'often' should be replaced by 'seldom' in a negative sentence. But once I read another sentence 'I don't often go home late.' It's also in a negative sentence, but 'often' is not changed to 'seldom'. Can you give me some explanations?

I think we have enough rules in the language without making up new ones and your reference book seems to me to be doing precisely that. Your reference book has confused what can happen with what ought to happen. We can use 'seldom' rather than 'not often', but we don't have to. Good style, especially in writing, is often a matter of using fewer rather than more words, and striving for simplicity and clarity, but this is a matter of style and not of correct grammar. The distinction you quote is academic. Both sentences are OK.

114. Please explain the differences between 'I had a long and good sleep' and 'I had a long good sleep'.

Both sentences sound wrong to me. The first sentence sounds

completely unidiomatic because of the use of 'and'. I'm not happy with the word order in the second sentence and would prefer 'I had a good long sleep'. The rule when using a list of adjectives is to use the most general ones first. 'Good' is more general than 'long', 'long' being more specific. The adjective 'good' would generally precede others. Compare: He's a good quick worker. (Not *quick good*) We haven't seen him for a good long time. (Not *long good*) Good old Charlie! (Not *old good*)

115. My reference book tells me that 'wind and rain whipped the house' is a metaphor. The reason it gives is 'wind and rain lashed the house as if with a whip'. But I think it should be a personification because only human beings can whip something.

'Only human beings can whip something'. Precisely. And that is the whole point of metaphor. A metaphor is an image in words which isn't literally true. That's why we commonly find metaphor in poetry: the greater the poetry, the more powerful the metaphor. Consider these four lines of poetry by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb
And out of the swing of the sea.

The adjective 'dumb' is used metaphorically, because we generally use this adjective to describe human beings, not the sea. Personification is another poetic device where human qualities are ascribed to something, usually an abstract noun, such as Truth, Beauty, Honour. In the poet Dryden's line: 'Law they require, let Law then show her face' the second use of Law is 'personified' to

represent the idea of a woman with a face.

116. What does 'eat dirt' mean in 'This does not imply that you are going to eat dirt, unless your opponent is really hostile'?

The idiomatic phrase 'eat dirt' means to be humble and to admit defeat. The phrase is a metaphor (see above) because the loser doesn't literally eat dirt. Here is an example: 'The boxer boasted that he would knock out his opponent in the first round. In fact, he was knocked out himself and had to *eat dirt*.' That is, he was humbled after his boasting and had to swallow his pride.

117. Is there a difference between 'most + noun' and 'most of the + noun'? For example, 'most students' and 'most of the students'?

Yes, there is.

- **most + noun**: Most people lead unadventurous lives. (Not *The most people* *Most of people*)

  Use 'most + noun' for general references. The absence of an article makes this a general statement. Compare the sentence without *most*: People lead unadventurous lives.

- **most of the + noun**: Most of the people I meet lead unadventurous lives.

  Use 'most of the + noun' for specific references. The use of the definite article *the* makes the reference specific. Compare the sentence without *most of*: The people I meet lead unadventurous lives.

118. The word 'billion' has a different meaning in American English and British English. I don't know how to use it correctly.

Well, it used to have a different meaning, but it doesn't any more. In AmE *billion* has always meant 1000 × 1,000,000 (= a thousand million). In BrE *billion* used to mean 1,000,000 × 1,000,000 (= a million million). However, for a long time now British English has adopted the American standard (a thousand million). How do you use it correctly? The rules for the use of *hundred/hundreds*, *thousand/thousands*, *million/millions* also apply to *billion*:

How much did the building cost? —About **a billion** dollars./About **one billion** dollars. (Not *About billion*) Note we can say *a* or *one* billion.

How much did the building cost? —About **two billion** dollars. (Not *two billions* *two billions dollars* *two billions of dollars*)

How much did the building cost? —**Billions!** (This is the normal plural.)

Billions of dollars have been spent on this project. (normal plural form + of)

If you replace *billion* in the above examples with *hundred*(*s*), *thousand*(*s*), *million*(*s*) you will have a general example for the use of large numbers.

119. We could say 'He is studying at a Technical College', but we should say 'He was educated in a Grammar School'. Why?

But we could also say: 'He was educated at a grammar school.' This is a really tricky area of prepositional use. Let's try and sort out a few basic facts:

- The preposition *at* generally combines with 'position verbs' like *be*, *stay*, *wait*, not with 'movement verbs' like *go*, *fly*, *drive*. The preposition *in* usually combines with 'position verbs', though occasionally with 'movement verbs' as well (Come in).
- We use (*be*) *at* with some nouns to mean 'a point in space': Where's Tom? —He's at school. He's at the bank. He's at the airport.
- We use (*be*) *in* with some nouns to mean 'a point in space': Where's Tom? —He's in Paris. He's in the park. He's in the kitchen. (Not *'at Paris/the park/the kitchen')
- We can use either (*be*) *at* or (*be*) *in* with some nouns depending on our point of view at the time of speaking. So if I say, *I'll meet you at the restaurant / the airport*, at the moment of speaking I view the restaurant or the airport as a single point rather than an extensive place. I would probably have to add a further prepositional phrase to clarify what I mean, such as: *I'll meet you at the restaurant, outside the main entrance*. But if I say, *I'll meet you in the restaurant/the airport* I probably mean somewhere inside a large area. Again, I would probably need to add a clarifying prepositional phrase.
- We use some nouns like *school*, *college*, *prison*, *bed*, etc. without an article when we are referring to their primary purpose; some of these nouns combine with *at*, some with *in* and some with *at* or *in*:

  Where's Tom? —He's at school/at college. (He's there in order to study.) (at + noun)

  Where's Tom? —He's in prison. (Not 'at') (= He's being punished.)

Where's Tom? —He's in bed. (Not *at*) (= in order to sleep)

- When we say someone is *at school* or *at college*, we mean he or she is attending school or college. To complicate matters further (and this refers to your original question), American English allows 'He's in school/in college' to mean 'He's attending college.' This would be less usual in BrE.

120. I don't know the meaning of 'Little girls are pink, little boys are blue. Little girls want dolls, little boys want trains.' (from *Who am I?* by Marya Mannes)

There's a Western saying: 'Pink for a girl; blue for a boy.' That is, pink is often thought of as a colour which is suitable for females and blue as a colour which is suitable for males. Mothers often dress baby girls in pink and baby boys in blue. Some toys are considered particularly feminine (like dolls), so they are given to little girls to play with; some toys are considered particularly masculine (like trains), so they are given to little boys to play with. A lot of parents these days try to avoid this kind of stereotyping, but old practices die hard!

121. 'With that he left me, but in a moment returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me.' I just don't know what's the function of 'as to'. Can you explain it to me?

As to means 'concerning' and is often used with reference to arguments and decisions. A lot of careful native speakers and writers tend to avoid *as to* on the grounds that it is rarely necessary and can often be easily replaced by 'about'. So, for example, the sentence you quote can be re-expressed with 'about': 'With that he left me,

but in a moment returned with explicit instructions about the care of the object entrusted to me.'

122. If someone asks us 'Do you think it will rain tomorrow?' we can say, 'No, I don't think so.' But why can't we say, 'No, I don't believe so'?

Because 'I don't think so' expresses an opinion which is an appropriate answer to a question of this kind. 'I don't believe so' is weightier and is possible in a more important or serious context: Have the police arrested anyone yet? —I don't believe so./I don't think so.

123. What is the difference between 'China's' and 'Chinese'? When are they used as adjectives?

- **China's** is never used as an adjective. It may be:

  a *possessive*: China's expanding economy may be in danger of overheating. (= the economy of China)

  an *abbreviation* of 'China is': China's competing in world markets. (= China is)

  an *abbreviation* of 'China has': China's negotiated a new trade agreement with the USA. (= China has)

- **Chinese** may be:

  a *proper noun* spelt with a capital letter = the language:

  I'm learning Chinese.

  an *adjective* referring to nationality:

  He's/She's Chinese. (preferable to 'a Chinese')

  They're Chinese. (Not *Chineses*)

  I've been corresponding with a Chinese man/a Chinese woman. (preferable to 'a Chinese')

I was just speaking to two Chinese men/two Chinese women. (Not *two Chineses* and preferable to 'two Chinese')

The Chinese are/The Chinese people are expanding trade with the West.

124. I don't know the meaning of 'drawing in' in the following sentence: '... and now it was October and the nights were drawing in.'

'Draw in' is an intransitive phrasal verb which we use to describe the way it gets dark earlier in the evening in autumn as winter approaches. So 'the nights were drawing in' means 'there were fewer hours of daylight'. Your quotation should read: '...the days are drawing in': i.e. getting shorter. But the primary meaning of *draw in* has been obscured by the frequency of use in this context: people often use night where day would make real sense. 'Draw in' is also used in the passive with a completely different meaning, to suggest 'involve someone in something they do not want to do': He didn't want to join us at first, but he was eventually drawn in.

125. 'It's hard to me' and 'It's hard for me.' I am always confused by 'to and 'for'.

The problem here is not so much how we use 'to' and 'for' (which is another story), but what we use after particular adjectives like 'hard':

- This sum looks hard to me. (= difficult in my eyes; 'to' here follows 'look', not the adjective: i.e. it looks to me to be hard)
  Compare: It looks interesting/difficult/easy to me.
- It's hard to write correct English.

It's hard for me to write correct English. (Not 'it's hard to me')

We can use a *to*-infinitive after a large number of adjectives in English (easy to, difficult to, etc.). 'For + noun or pronoun' can occur after many of these adjectives: It won't be easy for Tom to find a new job, etc. 'For' collocates after many adjectives describing what something is like for (= in relation to) someone.

126. Comparing the following two sentences, which is correct?

If everybody knows this secret, he will be crazy.

If everybody knows this secret, they will be crazy.

Your examples suggest you are uncertain whether everybody is a singular or a plural reference. Everybody (subject) takes a singular verb, but the rest of the sentence may switch to a third person reference because the pronoun (they) replaces everybody, not he/she/it.

The main problem (also for native speakers) is to know which personal pronouns to use to 'replace' indefinite pronouns referring to people (someone, anyone, no one, everyone, everybody). This is because English has no singular personal pronouns for both male and female. If we want to use personal pronouns in place of the gaps in a sentence like:

Everybody knows what ... has to do, doesn't ...?

the traditional rule is to use masculine pronouns, unless the context is definitely female (e.g. a girls' school):

Everybody knows what **he** has to do, doesn't **he**?

However, the modern tendency is to use the plural pronouns *they*, *them*, etc. (which refer to both sexes). They are used without a

plural meaning:

Everybody knows what **they** have to do, don't **they**?

This has the advantage of avoiding clumsy combinations like *he or she* (Everybody knows what he or she has to do) and does not annoy mixed groups of people. Even so, traditionalists still insist on using *he or she* after indefinite pronouns. My own recommendation is to use *they*.

127. What does 'The cloth does come in pale blue' mean?

Here the verb 'come' is used to mean 'be available' and we often use it to refer to size, colour, style, etc. especially where clothing is concerned:

Assistant: This cloth comes in a variety of colours: blue, green, yellow and red.

Customer: I like this cloth here, but you don't seem to have it in pale blue.

Assistant: Yes, it does come in pale blue. It comes in dark blue, too.

128. How to use such prepositions as 'for', 'on', 'at', 'across', 'with' and 'to'?

It isn't easy to answer raw grammar questions of this kind without any kind of context. I strongly advise you to look up a comprehensive grammar (like the *Longman English Grammar*, which has been translated into Chinese) so that you can sort out the information for yourself. I will confine myself to a few basic facts to show you the basic differences.

- **for**

purpose:	The best man for the job.
destination:	The train for New York.
'recipient':	This is a present for you.
reason:	I did it for the money.
duration:	He's been away for days.
exchange:	I bought it for $ 10.
meaning:	What's the Chinese for 'cat'?
= as:	I did it for a joke.
in favour of:	I'm all for the idea.
intention:	Let's go for a swim.
adjective + for:	It's difficult for an adult to find time to study a foreign language.

- **on**

place/position:	Put it on the table. (We use *on* for surfaces: horizontal and vertical flat areas.) I wish I were a fly on the wall in the President's office. Do you know the girl on the pink bike?
time (days):	I'll see you on Monday.
time (dates):	I'll see you on June 4th. I'll see you on Monday, June 4th.

- **at**

location:	I'll be at the station at 6 o'clock. (After 'position verbs' like *be*, *wait*, *stay*, etc., we use 'at' to show a point (e.g. a place: at the cinema, or an event: at a party).)
time:	I'll meet you at 6. (at + clock time)

- **across**

  lines: Walk across the line.

  Swim across the river. (from one side to the other)

  surfaces: I wouldn't try to walk across the Sahara. Would you?

- **with**

  accompanied by: I went to the zoo with my sister.

  The camera comes with a carrying case.

  'having': He stood there with his hands in his pockets.

  'taking into consideration': With the high cost of living, we are cutting down on luxuries.

  'carrying': Who's the woman with the green umbrella?

  physical characteristics: He's a tall man with a big nose.

- **to**

  direction: We're flying to New York tomorrow. (Use 'to' only with 'movement verbs': *go*, *fly*, *drive*, *swim*, *run*, etc. The opposite is 'from': They're flying from London.)

  points of time: We're open from 9 to 5.

129. In 'Well begun is half done', 'Well begun' is a past participle, but it is the subject of the sentence. Why?

The true subject of the sentence is 'What is well begun', but 'What is' is understood, not stated. It is the equivalent of 'The thing that is (or has been) well begun' and is therefore a noun clause subject complement of the verb 'is'.

130. What is the difference between the past participle and the passive voices of the present participle?

The past participle is the 'third' part of a verb. If the verb is regular, this form is the same as the past form: In, for example, play – played – played, the regular form *played* is the past participle. In the write – wrote – written, the irregular form *written* is the past participle. We sometimes use the past participle form on its own in place of relative clauses:

Played for hundreds of years, cricket is now a national sport.

(Cricket, which has been played for hundreds of years, is now a national sport.)

Written more than four hundred years ago, Shakespeare's plays still attract large audiences.

(Shakespeare's plays, which were written more than four hundred years ago, still attract large audiences.)

The present participle is the -ing form of a verb: *playing*, *writing*, etc. In the active it has two forms:

—a present form: playing: Playing in a match recently, I hurt my back. (= While I was playing ...)

—a perfect form: having played: Having played football for years, I think I have some experience. (= As I have played ...)

The passive present participle is formed as follows:

—present form: being + lost: Being lost in a strange city, I had to take a taxi to get back. (= As I was lost ...)

— perfect form: having been + charged: Having been charged for speeding, I had to pay a large fine.
(= As I had been . . .)

131. I am always confused by the gerund and the present participle. Can you give me an idea how I can differentiate between them and use them correctly?

You're in good company. A lot of people (including grammarians!) are confused by the gerund and present participle. Let me say at once that it's just a sterile academic exercise to differentiate between them and this kind of differentiation won't improve your command of English. The only difference in use is that in some sentences we would precede the gerund with a possessive adjective, where a participle would require an object pronoun:

I'm afraid of his/him knowing about it.

In practice this distinction is hardly ever observed.

As I never like to duck a question, I will give you a summary of what I have written in the *Longman English Grammar* (section 16.38). The gerund and the present participle both end in *-ing*. That's why modern grammarians prefer the term 'the -ing form' rather than differentiating between gerund and participle. The -ing form is usually called a gerund when it behaves like a noun and a participle when it behaves like a verb or adjective. However, there is some overlap between these two main functions and that's why it's difficult to draw positive distinctions. Here are a few examples:

-ing form as noun (gerund): Flying fills a lot of people with fear.
(= the act of flying: *flying* is a noun)

-ing form as verb (participle): Flying home from Japan the other day, I wrote an article for *China Daily*. (= While I was flying home . . .)

-ing form as adjective (participle): Flying planes are a real nuisance for people who live near airports. (= Planes which are flying . . .)

You will see from the above examples, that the -ing form gerund 'translates' into a noun form, the equivalent of which is 'The act of (flying) . . . '. But the -ing form participle and adjective both 'translate' into progressive verb forms. And that's the difference, though as I said above, you can die happy not knowing about it.

132. Is 'two thirds of them' or 'two-thirds of them' right? What's the right usage of numerals in such situations?

From the examples you have given, you seem to be referring exclusively to the use or non-use of the hyphen, not about the use of numerals in general. I would need a more precisely-worded question to deal with numerals in general. All I would say in response to your examples, is that it is usual to include a hyphen when we write two-digit numbers in full: twenty-four, two-thirds, two hundred and twenty-seven. I would add that we hyphenate a compound adjective:

The problem is two-thirds solved.

But we don't use a hyphen when *thirds* is a noun:

The water has gone down by two thirds.

133. I'm always confused when using 'a', 'an' and 'the' correctly. Can you tell me how to use them correctly?

First of all there is absolutely no difference between 'a' and 'an'. We use 'a' before a *consonant sound*: a fire, a house, a man, a uniform; we use 'an' before a *vowel sound*: an umbrella, an egg, an eye. When using 'a/an', we must always bear in mind two basic facts:

1) 'A/an' has an indefinite meaning (i.e. the person, animal or thing referred to may be not known to the listener or reader, so 'a/an' has the sense of 'any' or 'I can't/won't tell you which', or 'it doesn't matter which').
2) 'A/an' can combine only with a singular countable noun.

When using 'the', we must bear in mind two basic facts:

1) 'The' normally has a definite reference (i.e. the person or thing referred to is assumed to be known to the listener or reader).
2) 'The' can combine with a singular countable, a plural countable, and uncountable nouns (which are always singular in form):

I looked up and saw *a plane*. ('a' + singular countable: you don't know which plane I mean.)

The plane flew low over the trees. ('the' + singular countable: you now know which plane I mean: it has become 'definite'.)

This is just basic information about 'a/an' and 'the'. I suggest you consult a good grammar for details. I'll just add one or two more useful facts. We generally use 'a/an' + countable noun when we are 'labelling' or 'classifying'. That's why we say 'He's a doctor.' (Not *He's doctor.*) 'It's a book.' (Not *It's book.*) The plural is 'They're doctors.' 'They're books.' We also use 'a/an' for quantity, meaning 'only one': 'I have an apple', the plural of which is: 'I have some apples.'

We don't make general statements in English with 'the':

Life is difficult. (no article + uncountable noun: not *The life is difficult.*)

Doctors work long hours. (no article + plural countable noun: not *The doctors work long hours.*)

We would use 'the' only for definite references:

The life of Napoleon was full of extraordinary events.

The doctors who work in our hospital are there from morning till night.

134. Please tell me the difference between these two sentences: 'I hear (or see) someone do something' and 'I hear (or see) someone doing something'.

- He *climbed* into the building through the upstairs window. I heard/saw him.

  → I heard him (I saw him) *climb* through the upstairs window.

  This suggests you heard or saw *the whole* action.

- He *was climbing* into the building through the upstairs window. I heard/saw him.

  → I heard him (I saw him) *climbing* through the upstairs window.

  This suggests you heard or saw *part of* the action.

135. Suppose I'm talking with a foreigner about the weather. She says 'Lovely day, isn't it?' How should I respond?

You could respond:

Yes, isn't it?

Yes, isn't it lovely?

Yes, it's glorious. etc. Especially after yesterday. etc.

The important thing to remember is that in exchanges of this kind you are not having a real conversation. Talk about the weather (especially in Britain) is just an extension of a greeting. That's why in linguistics we often refer to this kind of talk as 'phatic' communion, deriving from the Greek word for 'spoken'. The purpose of the exchange is to establish a relationship, not to supply information. You and the other speaker are 'verbally stroking' each other.

136. 'The doctor says he is too much ill.' Can 'too much' be replaced by 'much too'? What's the difference between them?

The doctor says he is too much ill is wrong and should read: The doctor says he is much too ill.

- **Too much** refers to quantity and we use it with uncountable nouns. It means 'more than is desirable or necessary':

  There is simply too much oil for sale at the moment and that's why prices are low.

  That young man is spoilt because his parents give him too much money.

- **Much too** is an adverb of degree in which the adverb *much* 'intensifies' *too*:

  That car is expensive.

  That car is too expensive (for me to buy).

  That car is much too expensive (for me to buy).

  John is ill.

  John is too ill (to go into work today).

  John is much too ill (to go into work today).

137. I have read the following sentences: 'You take the next left turn. You'll see a stop sign. Make a right at the stop sign.' What is the case that both the verbs 'take' and 'make' can be replaced?

We use *make* with the words 'a right' and 'a left':

Go down this road and then make a right/make a left. (Not *take a left*)

We use *take* with noun phrases like 'the first turning on the right/left', 'the left fork', 'the third turning out of the roundabout':

Go down this road, then take the first turning on the right/on the left. (Not *make the first turning on the right*)

138. 'There is/are a book and a pen on the desk.' Between 'is' and 'are', which should we choose?

Choose 'is'. I know you want to choose 'are' because 'a book and a pen', taken together, require a plural verb. In fact, no native speaker of English is ever likely to say:

A book and a pen are on the desk. or: A man is at the door.

We always express this idea with 'There is' and we would say:

There's a book and a pen on the desk.

probably because we think of them as distinct items:

There's a book on the desk and there's a pen on the desk.

139. Could you please tell me how to use 'the verb + -ing' and 'the verb + infinitive' correctly?

The first thing to remember is that most verbs in English can be followed by a to-infinitive, not an -ing form: e.g. aim to, decide to, fail to, forget to, want to, advise someone to, etc. However, a small number of verbs can be followed only by the -ing form, never

a to-infinitive: e.g. appreciate, avoid, delay, deny, enjoy, etc. If you want complete lists of such verbs, consult a grammar, the *Longman English Grammar*. Good modern dictionaries will also tell you exactly what you can use after a particular verb.

140. I have found it most confusing to use the words: *may*, *can*, *might*, *could*, *would*, *should* and *ought to*.

You're referring to a group of verbs which we call 'modal verbs', 'modal auxiliaries', or 'modals' in English and which share the same characteristics, which are:

- we don't use a to-infinitive after them (except 'ought'): I can see you. (Not *can to see you*)
- we don't change the form of the third person: He can see you now. (Not *he cans see you*)
- we make questions and negatives without using *do/does/did*:
  Can I come in? I mustn't be late.

You can understand these verbs better, if you bear in mind that they have two main uses in English, which I shall call 'primary' and 'secondary'.

- **primary use of modal verbs**
  In their primary use, modal verbs closely reflect the meanings often given first in most dictionaries. These verbs are 'defective', that is, they need other full verbs to make up their 'missing parts'. For example, 'must' has no 'past' form, so we refer to obligation in the past with 'had to':
  I must go (now). → I had to go (then).
  The primary meanings of modal verbs are as follows:
  —*Can/could* relate mainly to ability: I can lift 25 kg.
  —*May/might* relate mainly to permission: You may leave

early.

—*Will/would* relate mainly to prediction: It will rain soon.

—*Shall* after 'I/we' relates mainly to prediction: Can we find our way home? —I'm sure we shall.

—*Should/ought to* relate mainly to 'escapable obligation': You should do as you are told.

—*Must* relates mainly to 'inescapable obligation': You must be quiet.

—*Needn't* relates to absence of obligation: You needn't wait.

- **secondary use of modal verbs**

In their secondary use, all modal verbs (except 'shall') express degrees of certainty, with 'might' expressing the highest degree of uncertainty and 'can't/must' expressing the highest degree of certainty. In their secondary use, modal verbs have only two forms:

—present: You must be right.

—perfect or past: You must have been right.

141. In the sentence 'After a quick breakfast she hurried to school', why can it use 'a' before the word 'breakfast'?

You have obviously been told that we don't use an article in front of the names of meals: breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner, supper. This rule is valid where 'meal' is an event:

Dinner is served. Michael is at lunch. Let's have breakfast. etc.

But we can use the definite article 'the' where a meal is specified as an ordinary concrete noun:

The breakfast I ordered still hasn't arrived. (Not *Breakfast I ordered still hasn't arrived.*)

And we can use the indefinite article 'a' when we're classifying (as in your example):

That was a very nice dinner. (Not *That was very nice dinner.*)

142. Please analyse this sentence: 'To compensate for his unpleasant experience in hospital, the man drank a little more than was good for him.'

This breaks down into two sentences which can be joined by a to-infinitive:

The man drank a little more than was good for him. *He wanted to compensate* for his unpleasant experience in hospital.

= The man drank a little more than was good for him *to compensate* for his unpleasant experience in hospital.

Or we can reverse the order of the clauses:

To compensate for his unpleasant experience in hospital, the man drank a little more than was good for him.

We can use a to-infinitive to express purpose:

He went to live in England to learn/in order to learn/so as to learn English.

143. Can we say 'exciting scream' instead of 'excited scream'? What's the difference between them?

Your question really refers to adjectival past participles ending in '-ed' and '-ing'. Common pairs are: amazed/amazing, annoyed/annoying, bored/boring, excited/exciting, interested/interesting, pleased/pleasing, tired/tiring.

Adjectives ending in '-ed' often combine with personal subjects and those ending in '-ing' often combine with impersonal ones:

This story excites **me**. → **I** am excit**ed** by it. → **It is exciting.**

Most '-ing' adjectives can also be applied to people. Compare:

Gloria was quite enchanting to be with.

(i.e. That was the effect she had on other people.)

Gloria was enchanted.

(i.e. That was the effect someone or something had on her.)

Here is an adaptation of your example:

I heard a terrifying scream. (= The scream terrified me.)

I heard a terrified scream. (= The person who screamed was terrified.)

Now let us consider the mechanics of your example:

The scream was exciting.

You were excited by it. But I have to say that 'an exciting scream' would be pretty rare, as the two words don't easily go together semantically. And an 'excited scream' would be very rare indeed, if not impossible. A better example would be:

I was frightened by a scream. The scream was frightening. (Not *The scream was frightened.*)

144. I have trouble using 'so' and 'such' properly when they are followed by 'many' or 'much'. Can you help me?

'Such' is never followed by 'many' or 'much'.

We use 'so many' with plural countable nouns:

There are so many apples on our tree this year, (that) I don't know what to do with them.

Look at my books! —I didn't know you had so many!

We use 'so much' with uncountable nouns (which are always singular):

There's so much traffic on the roads these days that driving

isn't a pleasure.

There's still a lot of oil under the North Sea. —I didn't know there was so much!

We use 'a/an' or the 'zero article' after 'such':

The play is so interesting, I'm sure you'll enjoy it.

→ It's such an interesting play, I'm sure you'll enjoy it.

Our new neighbours are so interesting, you'll enjoy meeting them.

→ Our new neighbours are such interesting people, you'll enjoy meeting them.

145. 'Isn't that your car?' —'Well, it was my car.' Does that mean it isn't my car any longer?

Yes—with *was* heavily stressed in the reply.

This would be a possible situation. You have sold your car, but your friend doesn't know this. You and your friend are together and your friend sees your car and says:

'Isn't that your car?'

And you answer:

'Well, it was my car.'

And the dialogue could continue:

'What do you mean, it was your car?'

'I sold it last week, so it isn't mine any more.'

146. How to use 'one after another' and 'one after the other'?

There is no distinction in use:

The lecture was boring. People got up and left one after another/one after the other.

Both phrases refer to a sequence relating to people or things:

Books have been disappearing from my shelves, one after another/one after the other.

147. What's the difference between 'how long' and 'how soon'?

'How long' can refer to length:

How long do you want the sleeves? (= What length should they be?)

'How long' also refers to duration and is often used with verbs like 'take' and 'last'.

How long does it take to fly to New York? —About seven hours.

How long does the performance last? —About ninety minutes.

'How soon' also refers to duration, but with the emphasis on rapid completion:

How soon will you know whether your application has been successful? (The emphasis is on speed.)

Compare:

How long will it be before you know whether your application has been successful? (The reference is simply to duration.)

Additionally, note that 'How long ago . . . ?' = 'When . . . ?'

How long ago did you phone your mother? = When did you phone your mother?

148. What's the difference between attributive clause and appositive clause?

Knowing the difference is unlikely to improve your English, but it might minimally improve your knowledge about English. First let us understand the terms 'attributive' and 'apposition'.

The term **attributive** refers to the position of an adjective in a

phrase or a sentence. We say an adjective is 'attributive' or is used 'attributively' when it comes before a noun, and is therefore part of a noun phrase: It's an old ticket. He's a young shop-assistant. He's an old man. The opposite is **predicative**. We say an adjective is 'predicative' or is used 'predicatively' when it comes directly after *be*, *seem*, etc., for example as a complement: This ticket is old. Your mother seems angry. We use the term **in apposition** to describe noun phrases which are placed side by side and separated by commas:

Mr Watkins, a neighbour of mine, never misses the opportunity to tell me the latest news.

Phrases in apposition are commonly used in journalism:

Ageing, recently-widowed popular dramatist, Milton Fairbanks, announced recently that *Athletes* was to be his last play.

You will see from the above that there is no such thing as an 'attributive clause' (at least, I don't know about it). You will also see that the noun phrases in apposition are actually 'verbless clauses':

Mr Watkins, (that is to say, a person who is) a neighbour of mine, never misses ...

Milton Fairbanks, (that is to say, a person who is) an ageing dramatist who was recently widowed, ...

V. Questions about English-Reading

149. I can read newspaper articles quickly, but don't really understand them and feel confused.

We rarely read newspaper articles intensively, word by word, as if our lives depend on it. We tend to skim and skip from one piece to the next, snatching what we can. We do this when we're reading newspapers in our own language and we can sometimes get away with it. Even in our own language, we have to read carefully if we want to understand a piece fully and remember what it's about. Try some of the following techniques:

1) Don't attempt to read a whole newspaper in English. Choose a single article which might really interest you and read it carefully.
2) Slow down. There's no need to read something 'quickly'. No one's chasing you. Read at a speed that's comfortable for you.
3) When reading, bear in mind the general theme of the article as a whole. Read the piece paragraph by paragraph, noting what each paragraph says about the general theme. You don't have to understand every single word, but you must try to get the general meaning. Pay attention to the way the sentences are joined to one another, so that you follow the thread of the narrative or argument.
4) You might find it helpful to make a few notes as you read.
5) When you finish reading a piece tell yourself or someone else what you think the piece is about.

150. How to do well in fast reading?

We all have a reading speed we feel comfortable with. Some people read faster than others. The main thing to remember is this: It's pointless reading something fast if you don't understand or can't recall what you have read. When we're reading a foreign language, lots of things slow us down: for example, the subject-matter might be difficult; there might be words we don't understand or sentences with difficult syntax. What we have to remember is that we have different speeds for different kinds of reading. If you are reading an engineering textbook in order to pass an exam, you will be applying a different kind of reading skill from the one you use to look up a number in a telephone directory. The essence of fast reading is learn how to ignore redundant information and concentrate on important information, but even when doing this, your reading style and speed will vary according to the kind of text you are reading and your reasons for reading it. Aim to find a speed that is comfortable and productive for you in terms of the text you are reading.

151. When I am reading, I always read aloud. It's a bad habit because I can't grasp the meaning after I read it. How can I improve my reading ability? Is it a good way not to read aloud?

Do you always read aloud when you are reading Chinese? I very much doubt it! So why do you do it in English? You can't do two things at the same time. If you read aloud, you will concentrate on that and neglect the meaning of what you are reading. The only purpose of reading aloud is to practise the sounds of English. If you are reading for meaning, no reading aloud allowed!

152. Reading stories is a good way to improve one's English. Could you recommend some good modern books which are suitable for intermediate level students?

You are quite right! Reading is one of the best ways you can help yourself to improve your English, so read as much as you can! To do this effectively, you have to find reading materials which are at the same level as your present command of English. If, for example, you try to read ordinary novels or newspapers in English, it is likely that you will find the vocabulary too difficult and you will soon be discouraged. The major publishing houses in Britain which publish books for students learning English all have graded libraries of 'readers', that is, books in simplified English. For example, the Longman Structural Readers are designed to follow the syllabus used in many languages courses. Obtain the Longman Catalogue and look up the list of readers. Then order those that you think are at your level.

153. How to grasp the main idea rapidly and accurately when reading?

1) Make sure you understand what the general theme of the text is. (Look at the title, headline or headlines.)
2) Scan the whole text quickly. This means running your eyes down each page to get the general theme of each paragraph.
3) Skim-read the text paragraph by paragraph. This means looking hard at each paragraph in turn, concentrating mainly on verbs in order to get the topic of each paragraph. Skip examples which simply illustrate the theme. Only read selected sentences in detail. It's up to you to make the best choice of sentence.
4) Make a quick note of what you think you have understood.

You need to train yourself to carry out these steps. Practise the steps over a period and test yourself by going back and re-reading the text carefully. Then see whether your notes are accurate until you have confidence in using speed-reading techniques.

154. My teachers, either in high school or in university, always emphasize the importance of grammar. I still analyze the article sentence by sentence even after I have graduated for more than 8 years. I am clear about the sentence structure, but I can make little progress. Would you show me the right way please?

It's totally pointless learning grammar for its own sake. Grammar is indispensable as a support system to communication because most of the questions we have about a foreign language have grammatical answers. For example when to use *some* or *any*, when to use *a/an* or *the*, and so on. If by 'analyze the article sentence by sentence' you mean 'read word by word', you are going about reading in the wrong way. In order to understand difficult English, we have to grasp the syntax of each sentence: that is, the way each sentence is put together. Here, for example, is a difficult sentence from an article on George Soros, which appeared recently in the *Financial Times*:

Even before arriving in England at the age of 17 to study under him at the London School of Economics, Soros had felt the influence of Sir Karl Popper, the Viennese philosopher of science whose *Open Society and its Enemies* denounced Plato, Hegel, Marx and all historical determinism.

To understand this sentence (apart from the difficult references), you have to observe that *him* refers to Karl Popper and

not to Soros. You have to break the sentence down in your head into the following sequence of ideas:

—Soros went to England to study at the London School of Economics under Sir Karl Popper.

—Before that, Soros had been influenced by Karl Popper's ideas.

—Karl Popper taught at the London School of Economics but originally came from Vienna.

—Popper was a philosopher of science who wrote a book called the *Open Society and its Enemies*.

—This book denounced Plato, Hegel, Marx and all historical determinism.

In other words, understanding what we read is a matter of constant analysis and synthesis of text and we have to do this at high speed. If you want to improve your skills, I strongly recommend my *Longman Advanced English Grammar*, which will train you to analyze and synthesize difficult texts in a way that will help you to understand them.

155. Is it necessary for me to consult the dictionary every time I meet a new word while reading? And is it necessary to remember every word I meet in reading?

The answer is an emphatic No to both questions. The important thing is to select reading texts which are at about your level. If the texts are well beyond your level, you will feel discouraged by the sheer volume of unknown words. Reading then becomes slow and painful. For example, a single paragraph out of an unsimplified Dickens novel could be quite overwhelming, so avoid reading anything that you know is too difficult for you. Reading should be a pleasure, so the texts should be within your range. Read

for meaning and only look up and try to remember words that actively interfere with your understanding of the text. Try to guess difficult words from the context. For example, in a sentence like 'He sat quietly and unobtrusively in a corner of the room', you might be baffled by 'unobtrusively', but 'quietly' gives you a clue to its meaning. Your understanding of the sentence is not diminished if you don't have a dictionary definition of 'unobtrusively'. If you read enough, you will find that you will acquire a large vocabulary without needing to turn to the dictionary all the time.

156. After reading, why can't I use English to sketch the content in anything but Chinese? Can you give me an idea on how I can remember it in English?

You can train yourself systematically to recall a text in English by making notes. You need different notes for different styles of texts. For example, if you are reading a narrative, make notes on the sequence of events: before the event, the event, after the event. If you are reading a description, make notes on the people or things described and their main features. If you are reading an argument, make notes on the points 'for' and 'against'. Once you have these notes, use them to give a little talk in English which attempts to recreate what you have just read. Alternatively, use the notes to 'say the text to yourself' as a mental exercise. You will soon get into the habit of not only reading in English, but thinking in English as well. Thinking in a foreign language is an indispensable requirement of fluency.

157. I often pick up some new words while reading. But I easily forget them. How can I remember them clearly?

Remember, there are two kinds of vocabulary: receptive and productive. Receptive vocabulary refers to the words you can recognize and understand but can't necessarily use. Productive vocabulary refers to the words you know and can use with confidence. Your receptive vocabulary is always far larger than your productive vocabulary. This refers to your command of your native language, as well as to English. So when you say you can't remember new words easily, this doesn't matter. They may have entered your receptive command. In other words, when you encounter them again you will recognize and understand them, but you might not know how to use them. This means you don't have to try to remember every new word you encounter. One way words cross from our receptive vocabulary to our productive use is through sufficient exposure to the word in a wide variety of contexts. Reading as much as you can will help you to consolidate what you know and increase your vocabulary. But a new lexical item only becomes 'entirely yours' when you know how to use it. Using words in speech and in writing will enable you to develop your productive command of English.

158. The more I read, the more unknown words I will find. I have almost lost patience to look them up in a dictionary one by one. But I want to understand the articles correctly. What shall I do?

I agree the sheer volume of new words that you will encounter in any piece of writing is very great indeed. I also fully understand how tedious it is to have to look up so many words. It just takes the

fun out of reading. One thing you should ask yourself is whether you are trying to read English which is beyond your level. You may not actually be 'ready' for completely unsimplified English. But if you think you are and want to continue reading general articles in the press, etc., I suggest you train yourself in the following:

- Scan (= quickly look through) the whole text before you begin reading it so that you get a general idea what it is about. Look particularly at the general title of an article and its section headings if it has any. Make sure you understand these by looking them up in a dictionary if necessary.
- Scan each paragraph before you begin reading it to get the general meaning.
- Read the paragraph sentence by sentence, trying to understand new words from context. Make intelligent guesses at the meanings of words and look up only those words which interfere with your understanding. You can't, for example, read a text about pigeons if you don't understand the word 'pigeon' because it's essential to the understanding of a text as a whole.

This procedure will greatly reduce the number of times you consult the dictionary and will increase your pleasure in reading. However, it may be that your difficulty in understanding a text is not the result of vocabulary, but of syntax (= the way words are joined together to make sentences). If this is the case, you need practice in analysing and de-coding sentences. A practice book like my own *Longman Advanced English Grammar* is designed to train you in this skill.

159. I like reading *21st Century*, but my teacher told me I'd better read more articles written by native authors. Do you think it's a piece of good advice?

Of course, a great deal of *21st Century* is written by native authors (like me, for example!), but I agree with your teacher that you should read as widely as you can. You don't want to read pieces which are mainly about language and language learning, so try to read articles in general magazines (either local or international). Yes, your teacher has given you a good piece of advice.

160. Reading stories is a good way to improve one's English. Could you recommend some good modern books which are suitable for intermediate level students?

I wouldn't like to recommend particular titles because I don't know what appeals to you. What I think you should do is obtain the English Language Teaching catalogues put out by different publishing houses (Cambridge, Heinemann, Longman, Oxford, Prentice Hall, etc.). Look up the sections in each catalogue that list readers, then make a list of suitable titles which are aimed at intermediate students. In this way, you'll be able to choose stories which you think will really appeal to you.

161. I don't understand English articles unless I translate them into Chinese first. Please tell me how to abandon our Chinese conception during reading English books.

What you are saying, I think, is that you are not reading in English. What I mean by this is that your thought processes are not confined to English during the act of reading. You are constantly trying to transfer the meaning to Chinese. Why are you doing this?

Probably because you're not confident of your ability to read and think in English. And why aren't you confident? Probably because you are reading texts which are too advanced for your present level. You can only read comfortably in a foreign language, without having to translate into your mother tongue, if the texts you are reading are at least one level below your present classroom level. This means you should always be reading books which look and are fairly easy for you. If you do this, you will read and think in English without having to translate into Chinese and you will build up your confidence to a point where you can proceed to a higher level. Publishers' catalogues provide lists of readers at different levels. Choose a level which at first seems easy for you (e.g. from the Longman Structural Readers, or Longman Originals) and develop your reading skills.

162. Fast reading can save myself time, but I don't know whether I can ignore the learning of grammar.

You never save yourself time if you read so fast that you don't take anything in. The art of fast reading is to read material rapidly, take it in and *remember* what you have read. If you can't take in and remember what you have read quickly, then you are wasting your time and should give up fast reading immediately, because you are not reading at all; you're merely scanning a lot of print without any understanding. It is not a choice between 'reading fast' and 'learning grammar'. You can't achieve one without the other. Reading depends on the understanding of syntax (grammar). Syntax is the term we use to show how words combine to make sentences. Therefore in order to read at all (never mind about reading fast) you have to be able to analyse a sentence and put it

together again in order to understand it. You have to do this in your head as you read. The more quickly you can do this, the better you will be able to read. Take a sentence like:

On being told by my bank manager that I couldn't borrow money to buy a new car, I decided I would give up the idea of borrowing money and would begin saving instead until I had enough money to buy the car I wanted.

This is a long and clumsy sentence. To understand it, you have to break it up into its constituent parts and then put these parts together again:

I couldn't borrow money to buy a new car. I was told this by my bank manager. I decided I would give up the idea of borrowing money. I would begin saving instead. When I had enough money, I would buy the car I wanted.

This is the sort of thing that is happening in our heads when we read. We are constantly breaking up sentences into their parts and putting the parts together again. We make all sorts of logical connections to understand what is being said. A fast reader is one who can perform this kind of analysis at speed. A slow reader performs the same kind of analysis at a more leisurely pace. But neither kind of reader can manage without syntactical (= grammatical) analysis.

163. When reading, I'm always confused with idioms, slang and colloquial words. Please tell me how to distinguish them.

- An **idiom** is a fixed phrase the meaning of which bears no relation to the meanings of the individual words that make up the phrase. Phrasal verbs can often have literal or idiomatic meanings:

  The teacher told me to *sit up*. (= sit upright: non-idiomatic)

We're going to *sit up* all night during the general election.
(= not go to bed; idiomatic)

Apart from phrasal verbs, there are numerous expressions which are idiomatic. For example:

—fixed phrases:

John imagines he'll be a millionaire before he's 25, but that's just *pie in the sky*. (= wishful thinking which is impossible to achieve)

—proverbs:

Deal with the problem now. Remember, *a stitch in time saves nine*. (= *When something goes wrong, deal with it immediately* before it gets worse.)

- **Colloquial** language is the informal language of everyday speech; **slang** is colloquial language which is so informal, and often vulgar, that it is not normally used in serious speech or writing:

I'm *wiped out*. (colloquial style)
I'm *dead tired*. (informal style)
I'm *exhausted*. (neutral/formal style)
I'm *knackered*. (slang = extremely tired, exhausted)

164. When I am doing extensive reading, I know the article's main idea. But I can't do the exercises all correctly. Why?

Without knowing what *kinds of exercises* you are referring to, it's difficult for me to advise. If you mean exercises designed to test your comprehension, then you may be making mistakes because you haven't understood the meaning of what you are reading. If you mean language exercises, then you may be making mistakes because you haven't understood the grammar. If you mean vocabulary exercises, then you may be making mistakes because you haven't

understood the meanings of words.

165. Reading original magazines, I always come across grammar, idioms, background knowledge, and so on. If I deal with them one by one, I cannot afford the time, but if I skip them, I would learn nothing from reading. What should I do?

What a dilemma! You can afford the time to read, but you can't afford the time to make sense of what you're reading! It's therefore a waste of time reading. Why don't you set yourself a very small amount to read and deal with that properly instead of 'reading [any number of?] original magazines'?

166. Could you tell me how to make a start when reading a book or an article in English?

The best way to give up smoking is to stop smoking cigarettes, etc. The best way to eat less is to start eating less. The best way to read an article is to read it. Here is some advice I have given before:

1) Make sure you understand what the general theme of the text is. (Look at the title, headline or headlines.)
2) Scan the whole text quickly. This means running your eyes down each page to get the general theme of each paragraph.
3) Skim-read the text paragraph by paragraph. This means looking hard at each paragraph in turn, concentrating mainly on verbs in order to get the topic of each paragraph. Once you've got the general idea of the piece, start reading it in detail. Pay attention to the way ideas are connected to each other.
4) Make a quick note of what you think you have understood.

Ⅵ. Questions about Vocabulary-Building and Writing

167. I want to enlarge my vocabulary, but once I saw so many new words, I was discouraged. Are there any good ways?

If you're a regular reader of this column, you will have read a lot of advice about increasing your vocabulary. Remember, your receptive vocabulary (= what you understand when you listen to English or read English) is far greater than your active vocabulary (= the language you use with confidence when you speak or write). There's nothing better than listening to English and reading English as much as you can if you want to expand your vocabulary, but don't attempt to do this if the level is too high for you. Read books which are below your present level. Additionally, there are numerous vocabulary practice books on the market which are quite suitable for self-study purposes. These can be useful in helping you to expand your vocabulary. Look up publishers' English Language Teaching catalogues for suitable titles.

168. I often have some ideas and want to write them down. But I cannot express my meaning well. How can I improve my writing?

While we're at school or university, most of our writing tasks are set by others. Because of this, we often find it difficult to know what to say. In real life, however, we write for a purpose. We may have to write reports, letters, etc. Writing for a purpose gives us

something to say and is highly motivating. However, we have to learn how to write. The essence of writing is the ability to join ideas. To do this in English, we have to master simple sentences (that is, sentences with one main verb); compound sentences (that is, sentences joined by *and*, *but*, *both ... and*, etc.) and complex sentences (that is, sentences joined by *when*, *as soon as*, *while*, *although*, *even if*, participles (*Finding that ...*), to-infinitives, etc.) In order to write well, we have to master sentence structure, so look for textbooks that provide you with this kind of practice. And remember: the more you read, the better you will write. When you read, you have a constant writing model in front of you. Writing a summary of something you have read is excellent practice. You can compare what you have written with the original.

169. If I keep a diary, will this help me gradually to improve my English?

Keeping a diary is an excellent way of improving your written English for the following reasons:

1) It is constant practice. Even the dullest days will always give you something to write about. The big problem is maintaining the discipline needed to write, so you don't skip days.
2) You are writing about true experiences, so your subject-matter is ready-made. A lot of people have difficulty writing because they don't know what to write about.
3) Writing a diary gives you constant practice in three writing styles: narration, description and reflection. You need narration (and therefore plenty of practice in using the past tense) to say what happened during each day. You need description to record your impressions of people and places. You need a reflective style

to say what you think about people and events.

4) Finally, don't be too ambitious. It's better to write briefly and within your command of English. So don't try to write at length, or to use words and structures taken from a bilingual dictionary. After all, you don't want to practise mistakes!

170. Is it necessary to remember every word you meet in reading?

Of course not. Remember this simple observation: The amount of language we can understand always exceeds the amount of language we can produce. This is true for any language, so when you are reading a newspaper in Chinese you will find words you can understand but would probably not think of using yourself. When we are reading, the important thing is to grasp the essential meaning, not to learn every single word. So, for example, if you read a sentence like 'John was often angry and often cantankerous', it is possible that you wouldn't understand the meaning of 'cantankerous'. What would you do? You would try to make an intelligent guess from the context. You know the word 'angry', so you would assume that 'cantankerous' is in some way related—and you would be right! ('Cantankerous' actually means 'bad tempered' or 'quarrelsome'.) You don't have to remember 'cantankerous' for ever. 'Angry' is a far more useful word to remember.

171. Is it a good method to write down each new word in a special notebook to strengthen the memory while learning English?

If it helps you, do it! We all have our own individual ways of learning. A lot of learners like to 'see' as well as 'hear' new words, so it helps to write them down in a notebook.

172. I met many new words while I was reading. Which ones should I look up in the dictionary and remember?

Look up and remember only those words which prevent you from understanding the essential meaning of what you are reading. Try to guess from the context the meaning of other less essential words. It is impossible to remember the meaning of every single word you encounter and if you try to do this you will rapidly become discouraged. So be selective.

173. It's not difficult for me to understand a written sentence, but I've no idea how to choose the right word to make such a sentence.

The more you read, the better you will write. A simple way of improving your writing skills is to concentrate on a short text in English. Read it carefully, then write (say) five questions about it. Then answer these questions with complete sentences which you write yourself. The answers to your questions will form a summary of the piece you have just read. You will be able to compare the sentences you have written with the sentences in the text. The essence of writing is to learn how to join ideas. If you practise in the way I am suggesting, you will come to master the words we use to connect ideas: words like *and* and *but* which we use to write compound sentences; words like *when*, *since*, *although* which we use to write complex sentences.

174. Our English teachers once told us to 'write in simple sentences', as it is easy to write in such a way, and we won't make many mistakes. But I now feel that is not enough. How can I improve my writing?

What is a simple sentence? In grammatical terms, a simple sentence has only one finite verb. Here are a few simple sentences: I opened the door. I went into the room. I walked towards the window. I opened the window. I looked out. There were children in the street. They were playing. I watched them for a long time.

Your teacher was right. You can reduce the number of mistakes you might make by writing in this way, but as your English improves, you will want to express yourself in more complex ways. This means:

- writing compound sentences, using *and*, *but*, *not only ... but*, *or*, etc.: I opened the door and went into the room. I walked towards the window and opened it. Then I looked out. etc.
- writing complex sentences, using conjunctions like *after*, *as soon as*, *when*, etc: After I opened the door, I went into the room. It was dark inside the room, so I walked towards the window and opened it. I saw children who were playing in the street and watched them for a long time.
- writing complex sentences, using participle constructions and infinitive constructions: After opening the door, I went into the room. It was dark inside the room, so I opened a window to let in some light. I saw children playing in the street, and stood at the window, watching them for a long time.

In the above examples, you can see how simple sentences can be re-expressed in more complex ways. The ideas are basically the same, but the way they are connected can vary in relation to your command of English. Use a book that approaches composition through texts. Avoid practice books that only practise single sentence examples.

175. Why does the word 'Sino' mean 'China'?

Sino comes from a Greek word 'Sinai', which was taken into Latin as 'Sinae'. It has the sense of 'relating to China' (e.g. the nation, the people, its customs, its language, its literature). This probably arose because the 'ch' combination of letters /tʃ/ doesn't exist in Greek or Latin. So we can speak of a *Sinophile* (= a person who loves China and things Chinese). Or we can combine *Sino* with nationality adjectives (Sino-American relations, Sino-Japanese trade talks) meaning 'between China or the Chinese and the other country or people named'. Or we can use *Sino* to refer specifically to language: Sino-Japanese, Sino-Korean, Sino-Tibetan, meaning 'the relationship between the Chinese language and the other language named'. I am indebted to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, Volume XV, page 538 for most of this information.

176. We often say 'How to spell it?' when we want to know the spelling of a word. But a few days ago, I read in a reference book that this is wrong. Can you tell me why?

Yes, it is wrong when asked as a direct question. I have noticed that many of your questions to this column begin 'How to ...?' used as a direct question, so it's clearly a common error resulting from interference from Chinese. The fact is that we tend to use *how to* in reported speech:

Direct question: How do I spell it?

Indirect speech: I don't know how to spell it.

Direct question: How should I spell it?

Indirect speech: I don't know how I should spell it.

(See *Longman English Grammar*, 15.24.2.)

To sum up, use *do/does/did* or *shall/should* after *How* in direct questions, but use *to* after *how* only in indirect speech.

177. We know that the past tense of the word 'fix' should be 'fixed'. But why is the letter 'x' undoubled?

The rule is that one-syllable words that end with a single consonant after a single vowel letter double the consonant when we add to the basic form. So, for example, the comparative and superlative of some adjectives are as follows: *big/bigger/biggest*; *fat/fatter/fattest*. The past tense of the verb *tap* is *tapped*: Our teacher tapped her fingers on the desk and we all stopped talking. This spelling distinguishes the verb *tap* from the verb *tape*, where the consonant is not doubled: I taped that radio interview for you. In other words, the spelling rule has a phonological purpose. This rule does not apply to the letter 'x', because the vowel sound that precedes it is always short and there are relatively few words in the language ending in 'x', *box* and *fix* being typical examples: She boxed his ears. He fixed my car.

178. I'm always confused when using the following sentences: 'Welcome to England', 'Welcome you to England' and 'I welcome you to England'. Could you tell me how I can use 'welcome' correctly?

Welcome! is used as a greeting: (You are) welcome! (Be) welcome to England. In these examples, *welcome* is an adjectival complement after the verb *be*, even if the verb *be* is not used. However, *welcome* can also be a transitive verb: He welcomed his guests warmly. I wish to welcome you. Don't confuse the use of *welcome* as a complement with the use of *welcome* as a verb: i.e.

Welcome you to England is wrong.

179. Can you tell me why a girl can say that she has a 'girlfriend', while a boy can't use 'my boyfriend'?

It is true that a woman can refer to female friends as 'girlfriends', especially in the plural and especially in American English: She's out with her girlfriends. However, in British English we refer to 'a friend' or 'a woman friend'. 'Girlfriend' to refer to non-romantic relationships is not dignified because the terms 'girlfriend' and 'boyfriend' usually suggest a romantic relationship between members of the opposite sex: Have you met Tom's new girlfriend? Have you met Jill's new boyfriend? Because of these possibly sexual connotations, a male would not refer to a male friend as 'my boyfriend'. Note, also, that many careful users of English avoid referring to mature women as 'girls' and mature men as 'boys'. Sentences like 'She's a nice girl', 'He's a nice boy' to describe young people may sound patronizing.

180. When I was in writing class, my foreign teacher always told me not to use 'for' to begin a sentence. But I've seen many times that kind of use of the word 'for' in foreign newspapers and novels. Can you explain this?

Yes, I can. You are right. You can begin a sentence in English with 'for'. Here's an example: For the next ten months, I'll be working on a new project. Here, 'for' is a time preposition. But your English teacher is right, too, and perhaps you don't now recall exactly what he or she was saying. You can't begin a sentence in English using 'for' as an adverb in the sense of 'because'. Here is an example: Because there is little property on the market, rents are

rising. (Not *For there is . . . *)

181. I have been studying English almost for ten years. I'm interested in English. But I always have some troubles in writing. Could you tell me how to improve my writing?

There are two basic things you have to do to write good English:

1) You have to understand that English is 'a word-order language'. This means that word order is essential to the meaning of everything we say and write. The word order of an English sentence is fairly inflexible. With just a few variations, it follows this pattern:

Subject | Verb | Object | Manner | Place | Time

In inflected languages (that is, languages in which the form of a noun tells us whether the noun is subject or object) the word order is unimportant. This is not the case in English. If we write 'The policeman arrested the thief', the meaning is very different from 'The thief arrested the policeman.'

Changing the nouns round radically alters the meaning. In an inflected language, this change in word order would not have this effect. So you have to train yourself to follow the sequence S/V/O/M/P/T when you write.

2) To write good English sentences, you have to master *sentence structure*. Sentence structure is the way we show the relationship beetween ideas and events. This means you have to learn how to control three different types of sentence:

a) the simple sentence, which contains a subject and a verb: The taxi has arrived. My sister answered the phone. etc.

b) the compound sentence, where two or more simple sentences

are joined by conjunctions like *and*, *but*, *or*, etc.: I phoned a number of times. No one answered. → I phoned a number of times, but no one answered.

c) the complex sentence, where two or more simple sentences are joined by conjunctions like *since*, *when*, *as soon as*, etc.: We realized that something had gone wrong. We saw him run towards us. → We realized that something had gone wrong as soon as we saw him run towards us. Of course, there are other ways of making complex sentences as well. For example, we can use the -ing form: Seeing him run towards us made us realize that something had gone wrong. But the mastery of the written language depends on how well you can control its sentence structure.

182. There is not a letter 'o' in the word 'number'. I don't know why it can be abbreviated to 'No'. Would you please explain it to me?

'Number' can be abbreviated to No. or No and 'numbers' to Nos. This is actually an abbreviation of the Latin 'numero' (= No.).

183. I've often heard that it is unnecessary for Chinese English learners to use such clichés as 'strike while the iron is hot' and 'call a spade a spade' and 'it goes without saying', etc. Can I follow this idea?

The phrases you have quoted are idioms. A lot of learners think (mistakenly) that they have to use phrases like this in order to sound as if they are speaking idiomatic English. What you have heard about them is right. Phrases like this are completely

unnecessary for communication. However, there's no harm in using idiomatic phrases provided you do so appropriately and don't just 'drag them in' in order to show off. The most cost-effective route to sounding as if you speak idiomatic English is to learn what prepositions go with what verbs and whether a verb combines with -ing or 'to'.

184. Is it right to say: agree with someone, agree to something, agree on something with someone?

Yes:

—I agree with you. (Not *agree to you* *agree you*)

—I agree to the proposal. (Not *agree with*)

—Surely we can agree on this. (= about)

185. What's the difference between 'Which class are you in?' and 'What class are you in?'

'Which ...?' always refers to a limited specified choice, so if I ask 'Which class are you in?' I'm referring to 'this class' or 'that class', and perhaps one other. 'What ...?' refers to an unlimited and unspecified choice, so if I ask 'What class are you in?' I'm referring to any number of possible classes.

186. What's the difference between 'world of English' and 'English world'?

- **World of English** could refer to the people concerned with English studies:

  The publication of this dictionary has had a great effect on the world of English studies.

- **English world** is so rare I can't think of an immediate context for it unless I adapt it to e.g. English-speaking world (= those people in the world who speak English as their native language): This new dictionary has been well received in the English-speaking world.

187. Through more than ten years' learning, I have learned about 8,000 English vocabulary. But now having a job not related to English, I find it more difficult to increase my vocabulary other than in education. I would like to ask you for the secret or skills in increasing vocabulary.

And: During my English study, I always find it one of the headaches to remember English words. Are there any other ways to extend my vocabulary as well as to work hard at it?

- Read as much as you can and as often as you can, but choose reading texts which are near your level. This is the very best way to increase your vocabulary.
- Look at publishers' English Language Teaching catalogues and choose a vocabulary practice book that is the right level for you. Do the exercises.
- Invest in books like *The Longman Language Activator* and my own *Right Word Wrong Word* and use them as reference books. Both these books will increase your vocabulary skills.

Ⅶ. General Questions

188. As dictionaries are important in my English studies, how can I use them more effectively?

People tend to think that dictionaries just explain meanings and are rarely aware of the 'range of services' they provide. It's desirable to own more than one good monolingual dictionary if at all possible, since together, different dictionaries give you a more rounded picture. However, the most important thing to do with a dictionary is really to use it, above all when you are reading. Use it till you truly know your way round it and enjoy what it offers you. Modern monolingual dictionaries provide some or all of the following services:

—British and American English variations
—spelling
—pronunciation
—structural information (for example, whether a verb is transitive or intransitive, whether it is followed by *to* or *-ing*; whether a noun is countable or uncountable, etc.)
—meaning (beginning with the most widely-used meaning)
—level of formality
—citations that a) bring out the meaning of the word b) are drawn from real use
—cross-references to other relevant entries
—usage notes
—compounds

To get the most out of a dictionary, you need to extend your

awareness of what it can do. There are also a number of extremely interesting variations on the standard dictionary, such as *The Longman Language Activator* which help you to choose the right word or phrase to express your ideas.

189. What will help me better to improve my English: studying my old textbook, or reading a newspaper?

Even though you haven't told me which textbook you are referring to, I would say that reading a newspaper is the very best thing you can do to improve your English. Don't set yourself too much reading so you become discouraged. Read a little from a newspaper every day. It will put you in touch with a whole range of subjects in good modern English. Reading will consolidate and extend your knowledge of structure and vocabulary. It will also be a source of pleasure and information. It is unlikely that any textbook can match a newspaper for sheer range. However, you will probably need some kind of reference book (a grammar and a dictionary) to answer questions that may occur to you. And don't throw your old textbook away! You may still want to remind yourself of things you may have half forgotten and your textbook will help you to do this.

190. I have been learning English constantly for more than 40 years, but I am still at intermediate level, or even worse. How can I make further progress?

Learning a language means learning a skill, not acquiring knowledge. You test your command of a foreign language by your ability to perform in it, not by how much you know about it. Performance refers to your ability to understand, speak, read and write. Knowledge refers mainly to grammar rules and vocabulary.

When we are trying to master a skill, sooner or later we arrive at our 'ceiling': that is, the best we can do. For example, I enjoy playing table tennis. But even if I were to spend the rest of my life practising, I would never reach the level of a Chinese world class player. I reached my ceiling many years ago and I have never improved since then. Of course, I don't know your individual circumstances, but it is quite possible that you have reached your ceiling in English. If so, you just have to accept this and be grateful it is as high as intermediate level and not still at beginners' level.

191. How can I think, speak and write as an Englishman does? How can I get rid of the influence of my mother tongue when I speak English?

Don't be offended by my answer. You can't. You will always think as a Chinese and speak Chinglish. When you learn your mother tongue, you also acquire the 'mental set' that goes with it. And if I, as a native speaker of English, were to learn Chinese, I would never think, speak and write as a Chinese does. I would always speak Engchin (and probably very badly!). This means that though learners can understand different varieties of English, they will (unless they are quite exceptionally gifted and have exceptional opportunities at a young age) always speak the version of English that reflects their own culture. So, for example, French learners speak Frenglish, Spanish learners speak Spanglish, German learners speak Gerlish, and so on. When we learn our mother tongues, we learn the muscular movements associated with speaking our own language. That's why native speakers of Chinese, for example, have particular difficulty with /l/ and /r/ sounds in English; native speakers of French have difficulty with /ð/, so they say 'ze' for

'the'; native speakers of German have difficulty with /w/, so they say 've' for 'we'; native speakers of Greek have difficulty with /dʒ/, so they say 'dzam' for 'jam', and so on. It is a considerable achievement to learn English to a reasonable standard, so be proud of your Chinglish and show off your skills! I would certainly be proud of my Engchin, if I had any!

192. I have been a mother for 5 months and been learning English for 12 years. Now I am eager to teach my baby English in his language learning period. Would you like to favour me with some suggestions?

The language we speak is called our mother tongue or our native language: it is the language we learn initially and directly from our mothers. Mothers can only express their love and affection for their offspring by speaking to them in their own language. It is extremely important to make sure that your baby learns Chinese from you. Your baby will be extremely surprised and confused if you start making sounds which he/she doesn't understand and you will find it very unnatural to be speaking to your baby in English. I suggest that you stick to Chinese for the first three years and then begin to teach your child English as if it were a game. The game should be for a short period only in a regularly recurring context, such as getting up in the morning, or sharing a meal. Alternatively, if you want your baby to learn English right from the start, you have to find someone else who will speak to the baby in English. In this way, the baby will come to associate Chinese with you and English with another speaker and will be bilingual right from the start. However, it is usual with children from a truly bilingual background that they will understand both languages without

difficulty, but until they are 6 or 7, they will only respond in their mother tongue. This is normal and vital for the development of their personality. Don't spoil your relationship with your baby! Don't interfere with nature!

193. How and where can we use the subjunctive mood?

The subjunctive is extremely rare in English and it shouldn't worry you. We can nearly always manage without it. We used to use the subjunctive to refer to hypothetical situations. Here are a few of the more common examples:

- after *if*: you will hardly ever hear the present subjunctive after *if* these days (If he be ...). We use the simple present instead: If he is ...

  We still use the past subjunctive after *if*: If I were in your position ... But we can avoid this as well and say: If I was in your position ...
- after adjectives like *vital*, *essential*, *important*: It's important that he see a doctor. However, we nearly always avoid this and say: It's important that he sees a doctor.
- after verbs like *propose* and *suggest*: I suggest he see a doctor. Again, we often avoid this and say: I suggest he sees a doctor.

The conclusion is: don't worry about the subjunctive forms because they are increasingly archaic and you can express yourself very well without them.

194. How to study the prepositions well?

Prepositions are generally 'small' words we use in English to show relationships, mainly in space and time:

space: We ran across the field.

time: The plane arrived at 4.

A preposition is always followed by an object and is different from an adverb particle, which does not have an object:

We drove round the city. (round + object = preposition)

We drove round. (no object = adverb particle)

If you understand the basic principles behind the use of prepositions, you will find them easier to handle. When dealing with space, you have to understand that English draws a distinction between movement and position. The choice of preposition is often determined by the verb:

Movement: I went to the station. I've come from the station. (movement to and from)

Position: I was at the station. I waited at the station. (position without movement)

To show position, we use *at* to show a point in space and *in* when referring to a larger area (especially place names):

Movement: John went to the kitchen.

Position: He is in the kitchen. (= inside that area)

Movement: John went to New York.

Position: He is in New York. (= inside a large area)

With some nouns, we can use *at* or *in*, depending on how we view them:

I'll meet you at the restaurant. (= a point in space, presumably outside the restaurant)

I'll meet you in the restaurant. (= actually inside it)

Learn the basic meanings of common prepositions (*across*, *along*, *past*, *near*, etc.) and then see how they are used with 'movement verbs' like *go*, *fly*, *run*, etc. and 'position verbs' like *be*, *stay*, *wait*.

Where time is concerned, you have to remember that we use:

at + time: I'll see you at six o'clock.

on + day: I'll see you on Monday.

on + date: My birthday is on May 13th.

in + month/year: I'll see you in January. I'll see you in 1996.

Once you've mastered these basic uses, note how other prepositions like *before* and *after* can be used to talk about time.

Really take time to master these basic uses. If you don't, you will be permanently confused by prepositions and might feel defeated by them.

195. What do you think about the idea that to master a foreign language one must forget his own native language?

There is a great deal of truth in this idea, except I wouldn't put it so strongly. I wouldn't say you have to forget your native language (after all, that is quite impossible). I would say you have to *discount* your native language. Interference from your native language is the biggest barrier to acquisition. It's natural for a learner to use the same 'linguistic behaviour' in a foreign language as he/she uses in the native language. For example, if in your own language you ask a question merely through intonation, you will want to do this in English: 'You arrived here last night?' instead of 'Did you arrive here last night?' In Chinese, you don't have the same notion of tense as we have in English, so you want to say: 'He go to school every day' instead of 'He goes to school every day.' You don't have the same notion of plural as we have in English, so you might say: 'I can see two car in the street' instead of 'I can see two cars in the street.'

In order to produce the correct English, you have to *discount*

the way you express yourself in Chinese. You then have to practise the correct way of saying something in English until you are fluent. In a sense, you have to *unlearn* the habits you have acquired in your native language in order to master the habit you need to speak a foreign language. This is very difficult and accounts for the different foreign varieties of English you hear round the world (Frenglish, Spanglish, Chinglish, etc.): the native language is asserting itself in English and 'interfering' with acquisition. Interference occurs in all areas: pronunciation, stress and intonation, grammar, vocabulary as well as in ways of thinking, ways of problem-solving. Even misunderstandings among nations are often the direct product of this kind of interference.

196. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* uses 2,000 words for all the explanations and examples in it. How are the words chosen and by what standard?

I don't know which edition of LDOCE you are using. The work was first published in 1978 and has gone into numerous editions. However, the principles behind the defining vocabulary were stated in the earliest version and can be found at the end of the dictionary, even in the latest edition of *The Dictionary of English Language and Culture*. I will quote only a fragment from the dictionary:

The Defining Vocabulary has been carefully chosen after a thorough study of all the well-known frequency lists of English words. Furthermore, only the most common and 'central' meanings of the words in the list have actually been used in definitions. We have also used a special computer program that checks every entry to ensure that words from outside the Defining

Vocabulary do not appear in definitions.

197. I bought many English materials such as *21st Century*, *AAA English* and *TV Guide*. How can I use them properly for my study?

Just regard them as reading materials, like any other reading materials. This means you can use them for extensive reading, not bothering too much whether you understand all the words you read, but trying to get the meaning from the context. Or you can read them intensively, going through a whole text, or part of a text, word by word, preferably with a good monolingual dictionary. My own preference would be for extensive reading. Remember, the more you read, the more you will consolidate and expand what you know.

198. How to teach yourself English when you have no English courses?

Difficult because there is no teach-yourself course I would recommend. Be extremely suspicious of any advertised courses that promise to teach you English in six weeks, etc. They always fail and the advertisers are liars. Why? Because though you can learn to say quite a bit in twelve weeks or less if you imitate what is on an audio-tape, you cannot learn to understand very much at all. Understanding fluent speech in a foreign language requires hours and hours of listening practice. Listening comprehension is the key to the command of any foreign language. That's one of the reasons why it's so difficult to learn on your own. There's also another human reason why it's difficult. Once you have bought a comprehensive self-study package, it requires enormous self-

discipline to work through it. Only learners with exceptional *determination* are likely to do this. I think the future in self-study will lie with interactive materials, but what can you do in the meantime? Well, clearly you're not an absolute beginner because you wouldn't have sent me this question if you were. Listen to broadcast English (the BBC World Service). Watch English-language films on video. Read as much as you can and as often as you can. These activities will do wonders for your English.

199. How can I learn so many idioms by heart?

You can't, and you will be pleased to hear, you don't need to. It's a total waste of time to learn lists of idioms by heart. And even if you do, this will not improve your English at all. What is an idiom, anyway? When people are asked for examples of idioms, they often quote fixed phrases like: *It's raining cats and dogs*, *the pot calling the kettle black*, *to add insult to injury*, and so on. If you're interested in collections like this, consult specialized dictionaries like *The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* (first published 1979). Even if you learnt this dictionary by heart, your English wouldn't be much better. The dictionary is for you to consult when you hear someone use this kind of idiom and you fail to understand it. What you should be aiming at is not learning 'idioms', but acquiring a command of *idiomatic English*, which is a completely different matter. This means sounding as much as possible like a native speaker of English when you speak, rather than sounding like someone who is constantly translating from Chinese. To improve your command of idiomatic English, you need to remember that English is a word-order language: that is, the basic order is Subject | Verb | Object | Manner | Place | Time.

Any departure from this order makes your English sound unidiomatic and 'foreign'. If, for example, you say 'I speak well English' instead of 'I speak English well', you will be breaking a fundamental rule in the English language. Another thing to remember is that English prefers phrasal verbs to ordinary verbs. We tend to say 'Come in!' when someone knocks at the door, rather than 'Enter!'; we tend to say 'Put out the fire/Put the fire out' rather than 'Extinguish the fire'. Phrasal verbs often have idiomatic uses, as well as literal uses: 'Put the cat out' is a literal use (= put it out of the house); 'Put the fire out' is an idiomatic use (= extinguish). You have to learn phrasal verbs as you encounter them in context. Towards the end of my *Essential English Grammar*, I list fifteen basic grammar rules. A command of these will ensure that your English sounds idiomatic. You will also see that this has nothing at all to do with learning fixed-phrase idioms by heart.

200. Some people in Western countries used to say that we Chinese are very serious people, and do not have much sense of humour. Do you agree? Do you think that the Western humour is quite different from the Chinese one?

I do not subscribe to any idea of human stereotypes. As human beings, we share human characteristics universally. We all experience love, fear, hope, anger, etc. —yes, and we all laugh. The only differences between us are the ways we have been conditioned by the cultures we grew up in. This means that all human beings have the capacity to laugh, but they don't necessarily all find exactly the same things funny. Humour is often the result of a clash between an idea or a situation and a culturally-defined

expectation of what is correct or normal. Insofar as we have different value systems or ideas of normality, we have different ideas of what is funny. What we consider to be funny is the product of our cultural conditioning. Your question is actually two questions, so let me answer them one at a time: 1) No, I don't agree that the Chinese don't have a sense of humour. 2) Sometimes a 'Western' and a Chinese sense of humour will converge (we are all human) and sometimes a 'Western' and a Chinese sense of humour will diverge (we live in different societies).

201. How to differentiate formal from informal English?

Formal English is generally written. We use it in business letters, when we're writing reports, in public notices, etc. Informal English is generally spoken. We use it in conversation between friends, when we're writing to a friend using a 'spoken style' and when we're generally trying to be friendly. In *An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage* Geoffrey Leech quotes two examples:

An announcement is heard on radio:

Formal: 'The police are attempting to discover the location of the missing vehicle.'

Informal: 'What did it say?' —'It said they're trying to find out where the car's gone.'

Formal style often uses elaborate combinations of verbs and nouns deriving from Latin and Greek: Our environmental awareness and protectiveness towards nature have increased.

Informal style is correct and standard, but avoids complex sentences, multisyllable verbs and a 'high-sounding' tone: More than ever, we know we've got to look after nature.

202. What is the best way for Chinese students to learn English?

I wish I could give you a simple, personalised formula, but I can't. The best way for Chinese students to learn English is exactly the same as the best way all other students in the world learn English. Be clear about the following:

- Learning a language is about acquiring skills, not acquiring knowledge.
- To learn a foreign language, we need to master four primary skills:

  —Understanding

  —Speaking

  —Reading

  —Writing

  Each of these primary skills consists of sub-skills: for example, listen and respond, listen and assimilate, listen and take notes, listen and translate simultaneously from one language into another. The development of the listening skill is fundamental and provides the basis for the acquisition of all other skills.
- To master aural/oral skills (= understanding and speaking), we have to be able to:

  —Understand

  —Answer

  —Ask

  —Say

  We then have to deploy these four activities in three main areas of discourse:

  —Transactions (= doing business in a foreign language, like changing money in a bank or ordering food at a restaurant)

  —Interaction (= the non-contentious exchange of information)

—Argument (= the exchange of ideas, sometimes contentious)

We can set out similar objectives for the reading skill and for the writing skill. But whatever culture we set out from (Chinese, Mexican or Ethiopian), the objectives will remain the same. Of course, there are phonological and grammatical problems which particularly affect speakers of Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, etc.), just as there are phonological and grammatical problems which particularly affect speakers of Spanish. These require specialized local training. However, the overall objectives do not vary according to the native language of the learner.

203. There are some differences between British English and American English in pronunciation, spelling, usage, etc. I always get confused. Would you please tell me the main differences between them? And which do you think is better and more standard?

It's all too easy to exaggerate the differences between British and American English. The first thing to understand is that they are exactly the same language. Speakers of American English have very little difficulty understanding speakers of British English and vice versá. The few differences there are can be summed up as follows:

- **phonological**: This is probably the main and most noticeable difference. American English is *spoken* in a different way from British English. In general terms, to British-English ears, American English sounds as though it is spoken through the nose. To American-English ears, British English sounds as though it is spoken through the teeth.

- **lexical**: There are a number of well-known differences: *cookie* (AmE) for *biscuit* (BrE), the *trunk* of a car (AmE) for the *boot* of a car (BrE) and so on. AmE uses *drapes* where BrE uses *curtains*, but AmE also has *curtains*. These differences are slight and well-documented. There are also slight spelling variations: *color*, *traveler* (AmE) for *colour*, *traveller* (BrE).
- **grammatical**: These are mainly differences in emphasis. Both languages use *have got*, for example, but 'I don't have much time' is probably preferred in AmE to 'I haven't got much time'. AmE sometimes uses the simple past where BrE uses the present perfect ('Did you see Tosca yet?' for 'Have you seen Tosca yet?'). There are different combinations with *have*: a British-English speaker is likely to say 'I'm going to have a wash' where an American-English speaker would say 'I'm going to wash up (before a meal)'.

And that's about it. You will find more extended lists in good student dictionaries. The latest (third) edition of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* painstakingly itemises the differences, if you want detailed inventories. But, as I said, don't over-estimate these differences. Neither version of English is 'better' or 'more standard'. In British English, there is such a thing as 'Received Pronunciation' (= RP), which is a kind of standard most people can cope with. The equivalent in American English is 'Standard American', which fulfils precisely the same function. No matter what version of English you are exposed to as a learner, you are likely to end up speaking Chinese English, which is highly acceptable for the purposes of communication.

204. I've studied English for four years. I want to know about my English level. How can I test it?

Without more information, I cannot advise you. How intensively have you studied English? i.e. How many hours a week? Have you been developing all four skills (understanding, speaking, reading and writing), or have you been concentrating on (say) reading? Have you been working with a teacher or on your own? What materials have you been using? And so on. Unless I know precisely what you have been doing, I cannot advise you about level. However, I would draw your attention to four different kinds of tests:

progress tests: These are administered frequently and tell students how they are getting on. These are often designed for students to complete on their own.

attainment tests: These are administered at the end of a period of study and tell students how well they have acquired what they have been taught. A school exam might use these.

placement tests: These are similar to attainment tests, but they enable teachers to place students in a class which is closest to their needs and level. A language school might use these.

proficiency tests: These tell students how well their English is in general terms. An employer might use these.

205. In the course of learning English idioms, I feel they are interesting but difficult to deal with. Please give me some tips.

And a similar question: I'd love to learn English idioms and proverbs, but some of them are out of date. So how can I distinguish them from modern and useful ones?

If by idioms, you mean fixed phrases like 'It's raining cats and dogs', then you are absolutely right: they are interesting but difficult to deal with. Futhermore, they are unnecessary: learning lists of them won't improve your English one bit. If you learn lists of 'idioms', there is no way of knowing which ones are out of date and which ones are currently in use. My advice is to ignore 'idioms' altogether! What you should be aiming at is not learning 'idioms', but acquiring a command of *idiomatic English*, which is a completely different matter. This means sounding as much as possible like a native speaker of English when you speak, rather than sounding like someone who is constantly translating from Chinese. To improve your command of idiomatic English, you need to remember that English is a word-order language: that is, the basic order is Subject | Verb | Object | Manner | Place | Time. Any departure from this order makes your English sound unidiomatic and 'foreign'. If, for example, you say 'I speak well English' instead of 'I speak English well', you will be breaking a fundamental rule in the English language. So forget 'idioms' and concentrate on developing idiomatic English.

206. Is it a good way to study English by reading more, not by studying more grammar?

Yes, it is. Any communicative or practical use of English is

better than studying grammar for its own sake. You can never become fluent in a language by studying only its grammar, since you would not be getting enough practice in using the language. However, you can't ignore grammar completely either, because it is (to borrow a term from computers) the operating system of the language. Think of grammar as being a support system. When you're listening, speaking, reading or writing, you will have questions about the way the language is used. Most of your questions have grammatical answers. You therefore need grammar to understand the way the English language works. For example, if you make a mistake like *I enjoy to go on holiday in the summer*, you need to know that 'enjoy' is one of a small group of verbs which is followed by the -ing form and not by a to-infinitive. This grammatical knowledge might help you to avoid making the same kind of mistake in future. So use English as much as you can (speak, read and write) and look up any points of grammar when you need to. Whatever you do, don't study grammar in isolation.

207. Is it necessary to study slang?

No, it is not. In fact it's quite a dangerous thing to do. When we're learning a foreign language, we like to know exactly what native speakers say and we like to know all the rude words in the language. Slang is usually rude and impolite, but if you are a learner you don't know just how rude or impolite. If you use slang or swear words when speaking to native speakers they might be quite shocked by what you say. Modern dictionaries clearly label certain words and expressions as 'taboo' to show that their use is rude or offensive in polite society. It's fine to understand such words and phrases, but always avoid using them in case you give offence.

208. I have learned English for almost ten years. I am interested in learning English. But now I find it's very hard for me to reach a high level. Could you please give me some suggestions?

And a similar question: I'm a graduate and I've taught myself English for ten years. Now I wonder how I can develop myself. That's to say I don't know how to arrive at a higher level. Can you give me any good advice? Thanks.

Perhaps you have reached your ceiling and cannot go to a higher level. Learning a foreign language is not about acquiring knowledge, but about learning to perform a *skill*. Millions of people can drive a car, but only a tiny fraction of them can participate in rally driving. In other words, we all perform skills with different levels of ability and, sooner or later, reach our ceilings. Only a tiny fraction of those learning English will arrive at near-native proficiency. If, however, you feel you haven't reached your level, then:

- Listen to as much English as you can (e.g. the BBC World Service and the Voice of America).
- Read as much as you can, choosing books which are at your level.
- Choose self-study practice books like my *Longman Advanced English Grammar* to see how you get on with them.
- Take every opportunity you can to speak English, either with native speakers or with people like yourself who want to practise their skills.