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Error Diagnosis in Singapore's Chinese Language Teaching: Difficulties and Solutions

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Abstract

Language learners' errors are often seen as a vital resource for understanding their learning process. However, error diagnosis can be a big challenge for language teachers, especially in second language learning contexts when there are discrepancies between the prescribed standard and prevailing uses. This article explores Singaporean students' Chinese language (CL) learning "errors" with an aim to understanding their difficulties in error diagnosis and correction, and proposing possible solutions to this practical problem in CL instruction. The students' language outputs have many deviations in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar vis-à-vis the *Putonghua* standards, yet the lack of a clearly stated standard at the official level leads to a dilemma for CL teachers in the management of such variations. It is suggested that in Singapore's language environment, the localised usages be tolerated rather than be treated as errors to be corrected, so as to minimise the perception/practice gap.

1 Introduction

In applied linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA) studies, there has been a keen and long-lasting interest in the description, classification, explanation and pedagogical treatment of learners' errors in their language learning. The term *error* is defined as "a linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers' native speaker counterparts" (Lennon, 1991). In other words, a linguistic error refers to a language form produced by learners that deviates from, in one way or another, or violates, a target language rule or norm. Different from *mistakes*, which are random lapses in performance due to the lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness or other reasons, errors are regarded as systematic and consistent deviations to established standards due to faulty or incomplete learning (Brown, 1994; Corder, 1967; Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Language errors may occur at any levels of language components: phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactical. The language errors are conceived to be of immense pedagogical significance in that they

may reflect some universal learning strategies, and they are key to the understanding of interlanguage development (Corder, 1967). Thus, studying students' language errors has crucial implications for language teaching and SLA research.

Language errors constitute an inherent component of second and foreign language learning, and teachers are expected to provide corrective feedback in due time in order to diminish the potential negative effects that errors may engender to students' overall learning. Here a seemingly *a priori* assumption is that language errors, as a major or minor deviance to linguistic rules or norms, can be diagnosed by native or non-native language teachers. More importantly, there exists a well-established linguistic standard that can be used as a benchmark for teachers in their judgement of errors or non-errors. For instance, British English or American English is often taken as a benchmark in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning, and violations of linguistic rules in the standard language would be considered as errors.

However, error diagnosis is not always a straightforward task for language teachers. There are cases where the verdict of language errors or non-errors cannot be easily given, and error correction becomes a baffling and challenging work for language educators in their daily practice. Such difficulties in error diagnosis are particularly prominent in contexts where the target language has developed some distinct norms of its own, making it a new variety alongside the standard variety of the target language. This is the case for learners of Mandarin in Singapore, where the locally spoken variety of Mandarin (Singapore Mandarin), exists alongside *Putonghua*, the standard variety of Mandarin in Mainland China.

In this article, we examine some issues related to error diagnosis and treatments in Singapore's Chinese Language (CL) teaching, and discuss how the identification of students' language errors turns out to be a perplexing puzzle for language educators. We first introduce the background of Singapore's language environment and CL education, and then use concrete examples to illustrate the difficulties in defining errors in Singapore's CL teaching and learning. We proceed to explain the causes for such difficulties from a language policy perspective, and propose some strategies to tackle the problems. Finally, we conclude the discussion with a summary of our arguments.

2 Chinese language and its education in Singapore

2.1 Language policy in Singapore

Singapore is a multiracial and multilingual city state in Southeast Asia. As of 2015, it had a total population of 5.535 million, of which Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other groups account for 74.3%, 13.3%, 9.1% and 3.2% respectively (Department of Statistics, 2015). Singapore stipulates four official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, with a purpose to manage ethnic diversity in the country and maintain socioeconomic mobility (Gopinathan, 2001). Among them, English is the language of administration, education, commerce, science and technology, and it is the *de facto* national language. Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, in contrast, are the three recognised and designated "mother tongues" for the three major ethnic groups, that is, Chinese, Malays and Indians, respectively. These official languages are also supposed to serve as the intra-ethnic lingua franca within the various ethnic communities, although they do not necessary coincide with the main language spoken by the population in their homes (Chan, in press).

In education, Singapore enacts a bilingual policy and takes it as the cornerstone of its education system. Under this so-called "English-knowing" bilingual policy (Chua, 2011; Pakir, 1991), all Singaporean students are expected to learn English and an official mother tongue. As articulated in official discourses, English is the language of modernity, which enables Singaporeans to gain access to information and knowledge from around the world and to help Singapore maintain its competitive edge in global economy (CPDD, 2010; MOE, 2006). In this regard, apart from a major subject of study, English is also the medium of instruction in all subjects except Mother Tongue and Character and Citizenship courses. Mother tongues, on the other hand, function as "cultural ballast" that connects individuals to the traditional cultures and values of each ethnic community (CLCPRC, 2004; MTLRC, 2011). Students are encouraged to be proficient in their

mother tongues so that they can benefit from the economic growth of Asia as well as preserve their long-standing cultural traditions.

The teaching of the Chinese Language (CL) in Singapore schools, which refers to the teaching of Mandarin, the common language used by the largest ethnic group, is a matter of great concern to the broad community of Chinese speakers. According to Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE), the objectives of the CL education are to help students acquire the necessary proficiencies to communicate, appreciate Chinese culture, and establish connections with other Chinese-speaking communities in Asia and beyond (MTLRC, 2011). MOE regularly reviews and reforms the CL curriculum and pedagogy to cater to the ever-changing language environment and the students' diversified learning abilities. In the last review conducted in 2010, for instance, the Mother Tongue Language Review Committee (MTLRC) recommended that the CL curriculum should be redesigned to develop active learners and proficient users, making Chinese a living language in daily life.

It should be noted, however, that Mandarin is not the only Chinese language spoken in Singapore. Instead, there are a number of mutually unintelligible vernaculars (referred to as "dialects" in political discourses) that are also used among Chinese communities. Albeit being the *bona fide* mother tongue of the Chinese residents who emigrated from Southern China, such Chinese varieties were considered by the Singapore government as a hindrance to communication for the Chinese community and an obstacle to children's CL learning. To taper off the assumed negative effects of the so-called "dialects" and to improve communication and understanding amongst Chinese Singaporeans, the government launched "The Speak Mandarin Campaign" in 1979, encouraging people to use more Mandarin and less Chinese "dialects". Over the past 35 years, the population of Chinese "dialect" speakers has declined rapidly. Nowadays, few young Chinese Singaporeans use Chinese "dialects" in their daily communication, and it is common for the term "Chinese language" to be used almost exclusively to refer to Mandarin in Singapore.

For the purposes of this article, we will use the term "Chinese language" (CL) to refer to "Mandarin Chinese."

2.2 Singapore Mandarin as a new variety

Mandarin in Singapore, which is called *Huayu* in the local context, is often seen as a new variety of Modern Chinese (Shang & Zhao, 2013; Wang, 2002). Based on Kachru's (1985) widely-cited three-circle model of Englishes used worldwide, the Chinese language used in the world can also be categorised into three circles (Goh, 2010), namely the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. According to Goh (2010), *Putonghua* in Mainland China and the Chinese learnt and used as a foreign language belong to Inner Circle and Expanding circle respectively, while Chinese varieties like Singapore Mandarin are in the Outer Circle, where the CL functions as a second language.

Generally speaking, the linguistic features of Singapore Mandarin are similar to other Chinese varieties such as *Putonghua* in Mainland China, *Guoyu* in Taiwan, *Zhongwen* in Hong Kong, and so forth. However, due to its prolonged contact with other languages or language varieties found in Singapore, such as Southern Chinese varieties, English and Malay, Singapore Mandarin has acquired – and integrated into its system – a myriad of unique linguistic features from the contact languages/varieties, making it distinct from *Putonghua* in many aspects. In addition, code mixing is very common in the colloquial form of Mandarin used by Chinese speakers. Such differences can be identified easily by observant Mandarin speakers from other regions.

For instance, in local Chinese newspapers, vocabulary and sentence structures exclusively found in Singapore Mandarin are not rare. In locally-made TV dramas and entertainment programmes, the pronunciation and vocabulary featured in Singapore Mandarin can be easily recognised by *Putonghua* speakers as well. In order to find out the development of Modern Chinese in a global context, many scholars have explored the distinctive linguistic features of Singapore Mandarin, showing that a plethora of variations exist between Singapore Mandarin and *Putonghua*,

which is widely recognised as standard Chinese (e.g. Chen, 1986; Goh, 2010; Li & Chew, 2002; Lock, 1989; Shang, 2012; Lu, Zhang, & Qian, 2002).

The CL used in Singapore's official and educational domains, however, albeit its distinctive features, resembles *Putonghua* on all linguistic levels. This can be testified by the Chinese textbooks used in schools and news broadcasts in national Chinese radios and TV channels, where the Mandarin presented is virtually identical to *Putonghua*. This is likely to be due to a tacit policy of following the *Putonghua* as a standard, as can be seen through the adoption of *Hanyu Pinyin*, that is, Romanised Chinese Phonetics, the use of simplified Chinese characters, and so forth (Shang & Zhao, 2013). However, due to the political sensitivity of establishing standards, Singapore authority has never formally endorsed *Putonghua* as a norm or standard to follow in its Chinese education. This has resulted in the co-existence of two parallel norms for Mandarin: a localised norm and the *Putonghua* norm, neither of which has been authorised as an official standard to be implemented in CL education and uses. As will be elaborated in ensuing sections, this tacit approach to the CL norm has resulted in difficulties for the treatment of deviances in CL learning and teaching in Singapore.

3 Error management in Chinese teaching and learning: the difficulties

We now move on to look at issues related to the treatment of students' Chinese "errors" in Singapore's context. The CL is, as aforementioned, the compulsory subject that ethnic Chinese students have to learn as a second language at school, and making errors is an inevitable part of the CL-as-a-second-language learning process. However, what makes things complicated is the fact that the Mandarin spoken by the Chinese community in Singapore has many "deviant" usages from *Putonghua*, and whether or not the deviances are errors is still a matter of debate.

Due to the lack of a clearly-stated standard for Mandarin, CL teachers often have to face a fundamental yet significant issue regarding students' Chinese language output, namely, should the language usages prevailing in local context yet unacceptable in *Putonghua* be treated as errors? If the localised norm is recognised, the usages that differ from *Putonghua* should not be taken as errors. On the contrary, if *Putonghua* is taken as the standard, the variations have to be categorised as errors and corrected. The problem at stake is that neither the localised norm nor *Putonghua* has been institutionalised as an official standard for the CL in Singapore. Consequently, the identification of errors constitutes a great challenge for frontline teachers.

In the following, we present some aspects of the linguistic differences between Singapore Mandarin and *Putonghua*, and the different ways CL teachers treat such differences in their teaching. Most of the Singapore Mandarin examples listed here are widely used in spoken or written Chinese, and our CL classroom observation in the past five years[1] shows that they also permeate into primary and secondary school students' CL oral presentations or written work. The discussion below is mainly based on our first-hand observation of CL teachers' management of "deviant" usages in their CL classes.

3.1 Localised pronunciation

One typical feature of Singapore Mandarin is that most of the neutral tones in *Putonghua* pronunciation are de-neutralised (Xu & Wang, 2004). That is, the neutral tones annotated in *Putonghua*, particularly in compound words, are read as their original tones in Singapore Mandarin. Table 1 shows the difference in tones for some words.

Table 1. Tonal differences between Singapore Mandarin and *Putonghua*

Written form	Meaning	Pronunciation in Singapore Mandarin	Pronunciation in *Putonghua*
回来	to come back	*huílái*	*huílai*
衣服	clothes	*yīfú*	*yīfu*
窗户	window	*chuānghù*	*chuānghu*
地方	place	*dìfāng*	*dìfang*
东西	thing, stuff	*dōngxī*	*dōngxi*
关系	relation	*guānxì*	*guānxi*
粮食	food, grains	*liángshí*	*liángshi*
葡萄	grapes	*pútáo*	*pútao*
喜欢	to like	*xǐhuān*	*xǐhuan*
妈妈	mother	*māmā*	*māma*

We notice that in the CL textbooks currently used in Singapore schools, most of these words are annotated in the same manner as *Putonghua*, namely the second syllable marked as neutral tone. However, in actual applications, few students would articulate in that way, especially in natural and spontaneous speech. When such de-neutralised pronunciations are articulated by students, some Chinese teachers, particularly those Chinese nationals, tend to see them as errors and recast the pronunciations according to the *Putonghua* standard, while other teachers tend to neglect them or regard them as acceptable pronunciations, thus providing no corrective feedback to students in this regard. Those who insist on correction may hold that the deviances to *Putonghua* as well as textbooks should not be allowed in order to develop good and accurate pronunciations. By contrast, those who subscribe to non-correction may argue that such pronunciations are not wrong given that most Chinese speakers in Singapore do pronounce the words in that way.

3.2 Localised vocabulary

In Singapore Mandarin, there are some lexical items referring to objects or things that are typically or uniquely found in Singapore. This type of vocabulary, mostly nouns, is not used in *Putonghua*, yet they are essential components of Singapore Mandarin (Chew, 2002; Wang, 2002). In their CL speech or writing, students use such vocabulary to refer to the objects or things exclusively found in Singapore. In such cases, the teachers unanimously accept the Singapore Mandarin vocabulary as correct forms. Some examples of such localised vocabulary are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Localised vocabulary in Singapore Mandarin

Written forms	Transliteration in *hanyu pinyin*	Meaning in Singapore Mandarin
组屋	*zǔwū*	public housing
大牌	*dàpái*	block of public housing flats
甘榜	*gānbǎng*	village (from Malay *kampong*)
大耳窿	*dà'ěrlóng*	loan sharks
食阁	*shígé*	food court
罗惹	*luórě*	*Rojak*, a local dish containing a mix of fruits and vegetables

Another type of vocabulary items found in Singapore Mandarin is special in that they are used despite the existence of equivalent forms in *Putonghua*. In other words, the same objects or things are denoted with different word forms in Singapore Mandarin and in *Putonghua*. Table 3 shows some examples of such localised vocabulary.

Table 3. Words that are locally used in Singapore and their *Putonghua* counterparts

Singapore Mandarin		***Putonghua***		**Meaning**
巴刹	*bāshā*	菜市场	*càishìchǎng*	wet market selling fresh vegetables
做工	*zuògōng*	工作	*gōngzuò*	to work
德士	*déshì*	出租车	*chūzūchē*	taxi
巴士	*bāshì*	公交车	*gōngjiāochē*	bus
拜一	*bàiyī*	星期一	*xīngqíyī*	Monday
锁匙	*suǒshí*	钥匙	*yàoshi*	key
纽西兰	*Niǔxīlán*	新西兰	*Xīnxīlán*	New Zealand
简讯	*jiǎnxùn*	短信	*duanxìn*	message sent or received on phone

We notice that in CL textbooks, which largely follow the *Putonghua* standard, the word forms in Singapore Mandarin do occur. In students' outputs, there is often a mix of *Putonghua* and Singapore Mandarin vocabulary, or a switch from one code to another. It is noteworthy that Singapore Mandarin vocabulary forms often outnumber *Putonghua* forms, especially in the young children's oral production. In such cases, most teachers would accept the Singapore Mandarin forms, while a small number of them tend to be intolerant to some Singapore Mandarin forms and correct them according to the *Putonghua* forms.

3.3 Localised grammar and syntax

There are some grammatical and syntactic features in Singapore Mandarin that are distinct from *Putonghua* (Chen, 1986; Chew, 2002; Shepard, 2005; Xu & Wang, 2004). In the following we use a few concrete examples collected from CL classrooms to show some of the grammatical differences between the two varieties, and discuss CL teachers' management of the variations.

3.3.1 Negation markers **bù** *and* **méi(yǒu)**

In Chinese, *bù* and *méi* (or *méiyǒu*) are two frequently used negation markers. They have a division of labour in their functions, and are used thus to form different kinds of negation. In *Putonghua*, one difference between *bù* and *méi(yǒu)* is that *méi(yǒu)* is used when negating the existence or the achievement of an event, while *bù* is used in those unchanging and stable situations to indicate the non-existence of the state (Li & Thompson, 1981; Liu, et al., 2004; Chan, 2011). As a result, *méi(yǒu)* is usually not used in simple sentences to negate the existence of a future event. However, in Singapore Mandarin, *méi(yǒu)* is almost always spelt out in full as *méiyǒu,* and both *bù* and *méiyǒu* can be used to negate future events. The following sentences with *meiyou* produced by Singaporean students are quite acceptable in Singapore Mandarin, while in *Putonghua*, the sentences can only use *bù* to make well-formed negation.

(1) a. 我哥哥明天**没有**上学。 (Singapore Mandarin)
Wǒ gēgē míngtiān ***méiyǒu*** *shàngxué*
I/me brother tomorrow *meiyou* go-to-school
"My brother won't go to school tomorrow"

b. 我哥哥明天**不**上学。 (*Putonghua*)
Wǒ gēge míngtiān **bù** shàngxué
I/me brother tomorrow *bu* go-to-school
"My brother won't go to school tomorrow"

(2) a. 她下个星期**没有**去做工。 (Singapore Mandarin)
Tā xià-gè xīngqī ***méiyǒu*** *qù zuògōng*
She next week *meiyou* go work
"She will not go to work next week"

b. 她下个星期**不**去工作。 (*Putonghua*)
Tā *xià-ge* *xīngqi* ***bù*** *qù* *gōngzuò*
She next week *bu* go work
"She will not go to work next week"

3.3.2 Number expressions

In Chinese, *wàn*, meaning "ten thousand" / "tens of thousands", is a unit term for a number's ten thousandth place digit. This is different from English, which groups numbers into sets of three digits from the right and no term is given for a number's "ten thousandth" place. For instance, the numbers 40,000 and 350,000 are read as *sì wàn* (literally, four tens-of-thousands) and *sānshíwǔ wàn* (literally, thirty-five tens-of-thousands) respectively in *Putonghua*.

In Singapore Mandarin, in contrast, large numbers can also be read in the way that they are read in English. That is, the numbers 40,000 and 350,000 are often read as *sìshí qiān* (literally forty thousands), and *sānbǎi wǔshí qiān* (literally three-hundred fifty thousands) respectively, literally meaning twenty thousand and three hundred and thirty-five thousand.

(3) a. 四十千 (Singapore Mandarin)
Sìshí *qian*
Forty thousand
"40 000"

b. 四万 (*Putonghua*)
Sì *wàn*
Four ten-thousand
"40 000"

(4) a. 三百五十千 (Singapore Mandarin)
Sānbǎi *wǔshí* *qiān*
Three hundred fifty thousand
"350 000"

b. 三十五万 (*Putonghua*)
Sānshíwu *wàn*
Thirty-five ten thousand
"350 000"

3.3.3 Perfective aspect marker **yǒu**

In Singapore Mandarin, *yǒu* is often used before predicate verbs to function as a perfective aspect marker to denote the completion of an action or event (Chen, 1986). In *Putonghua*, however, this usage of *yǒu* is unacceptable. This difference between Singapore Mandarin and *Putonghua* is illustrated below.

(5) a. 我**有**去台湾的夜市。 (Singapore Mandarin)
Wǒ ***yǒu*** *qù* *Táiwān de* *yèshì*
I **yǒu** go Taiwan of night market
"I have been to the night market of Taiwan"

b. 我去过台湾的夜市。 (*Putonghua*)
Wǒ *qù-guò* *Táiwān de* *yèshì*
I go-PERF Taiwan of night market
"I have been to the night market of Taiwan.

3.3.4 Word order

In CL, word order is an important means to distinguish semantic meanings. When a word occurs in different positions within a sentence, the meaning may be totally different.

Take the adverb *duō* "more, much/many" for instance. The verbal predicate *chī duō*, is usually understood to mean "to eat too much". This refers to a situation in which the consumed amount is beyond the eater's perceived sufficiency level. On the other hand, *duō chī* is usually understood to mean that there is "more to eat", that is, some more is to be eaten.

In Singapore Mandarin, however, the word order of *duō* and the modified verb does not seem to make this distinction, as shown in the examples below.

(6) a. 他要我再吃多一个。 (Singapore Mandarin only)

Tā	*yào*	*wǒ*	*zài*	***chī***	***duō***	*yí-ge*
He	wants	me	again	eat	more	one

"He wants me to eat one more"

b. 他要我再多吃一个。 (Both *Putonghua* and Singapore Mandarin)

Tā	*yào*	*wǒ*	*zài*	***duō***	***chī***	*yí-ge*
He	wants	me	again	more	eat	one

"He wants me to eat one more"

Another example is the syntactic position of the time adverb *xiān* 'first', which in *Putonghua*, is used before the verb to indicate the order of events in a time sequence. However, in Singapore Mandarin, *xiān* often occurs at the end of a sentence to express the same meaning, as shown in the following sentence.

(7) a. 爸爸让我回家先。 (Singapore Mandarin only)

Bàba	*ràng*	*wǒ*	***huíjiā***	***xiān***
Father	let	me	go-home	first

"Father lets me go home first"

b. 爸爸让我先回家。 (Both *Putonghua* and Singapore Mandarin)

Bàba	*ràng*	*wǒ*	***xiān***	***huíjiā***
Father	let	me	first	go-home

"Father lets me go home first"

3.3.5 Classifiers

In CL, nominal classifiers are used not only to quantify, but also to qualify, the nouns that follow them (Paris, 1989), and "the occurrence of a classifier with a noun in a given context is the trace of the perception that the speaker has of the object that he speaks of" (*ibid.*, p. 12)[2]. This explains that in *putonghua,* a classifier like *lì* is only compatible with small round objects (such as rice, beans and sand particles), which cigarettes are not:

(8) a. 一粒米

yí	***lì***	*mǐ*
one	-Cl.	rice

"a grain of rice"

b. *一粒香烟。

yí	***lì***	***xiāngyān***
one	-Cl.	Cigarette

(examples from Paris, 1989, p. 12)

In Singapore Mandarin, some classifiers or measure words are used differently as compared to *Putonghua* (Xu & Wang, 2004). For example, the same classifier *lì* illustrated above can be used in Singapore Mandarin to count any round objects, be they large or small in size, whereas in these cases, *Putonghua* speakers would use the general classifier *ge* instead:

(9) a. 妈妈买了一粒西瓜和五粒苹果。 (Singapore Mandarin)

Māmā	*mǎi-le*	*yì-**lì***	*xīguā*	*hé*	*wǔ-**lì***	*píngguǒ*
Mother	bought	one-Cl.	watermelon	and	five-Cl.	apple

"Mother bought one watermelon and five apples."

b. 妈妈买了一个西瓜和五个苹果。 (*Putonghua*)

Māmā	*mǎi-le*	*yì-**ge***	*xīguā*	*hé*	*wǔ-**ge***	*píngguǒ*
Mother	bought	one-Cl.	watermelon	and	five-Cl.	apple

"Mother bought one watermelon and five apples."

The Singapore Mandarin sentences above are just a few examples that students in a Singapore CL class produced in language tasks, with most of the "deviant" usages occurring in spoken language. It is clear that the language structures found in Singapore Mandarin have been integrated into the Chinese language system acquired by Singapore students, and the Singapore Mandarin sentences are completely natural to them. We notice that most junior CL teachers, especially those newly recruited from Mainland China, show intolerance to the sentence structures that are well formed in Singapore Mandarin, although unacceptable in *Putonghua*. They tend to correct them according to grammatical rules of *Putonghua*. However, we doubt that this is effective, simply because when the students are out of classroom, they are exposed to a language environment where Singapore Mandarin is prevalent in the local Chinese community, and they would then tend to discard what the teachers highlighted about the *Putonghua* usages.

4 The dilemma of error correction in CL teaching and learning

When there are discrepancies between Singapore Mandarin and *Putonghua* usages, CL teachers have to determine whether correction should be made. Many language teachers believe that it is their responsibility to identify and correct students' language errors so that the learning process can be facilitated (Cook, 2008; James, 2013). However, for CL teachers in Singapore, where Mandarin, along with English, is used as a major language in the Chinese community, error diagnosis and error correction are often a task fraught with great challenges. One of the major challenges is that CL teachers are not clear as to whether language forms that are characteristic of Singapore Mandarin should be corrected or not. If judged against *Putonghua* norms, most of these usages should be considered as errors and corrected accordingly. However, the fact is that these forms are far more often used in Singapore than their *Putonghua* counterparts. When these "deviant" linguistic forms or structures used by students are taken as errors and corrected, students may argue with the teachers, claiming that their parents, friends, classmates or all others in their linguistic community use the language in that way. "To correct or not to correct" thus constitutes a dilemma that all CL teachers have to face in their teaching practice.

Both views towards the variations in Singapore Mandarin seem to be tenable. On one hand, it is discernible from the language usages in CL mass media (especially news broadcasts) and instructional materials that the pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar of *Putonghua* are followed to a large extent. In light of this practice, it seems plausible that the language uses that differ from *Putonghua* are to be regarded as errors and corrected according to *Putonghua* rules. Teachers who insist on correction can justify themselves on the grounds that *Putonghua* is the default standard or norm practiced in Singapore. On the other hand, there is the alternative view that students' Singapore Mandarin usages, though deviant from *Putonghua* norms, are not errors in a real sense and should not be corrected to align with *Putonghua*. Non-correction can be justified on the grounds that most of the Singapore Mandarin usages have taken root and should not be regarded as errors

that are detrimental to learning. It is hard for CL teachers to convince their students that the Mandarin they are using in their daily life is nonstandard and full of errors that have to be corrected by teachers. When corrective feedback is provided for such commonly used language forms in Singapore Mandarin, students may get even more confused about the standard of the CL, simply because they rarely or never use the so-called standard forms in their daily speech. After all, they learn the CL in order to use it rather than to acquire knowledge about *Putonghua*.

The crux of the matter is, in our opinion, that no CL variety has been established as an overt standard for the CL in any of Singapore's official discourses. Without official recognition, the correction based on *Putonghua* norm would be unconvincing for CL teachers and learners. Moreover, the habitual Mandarin usages in Singapore's local Chinese communities should also be considered in the establishment of an official standard.

5 Possible solutions

To address the challenges faced with CL educators and learners, we suggest that the gains and losses be weighed before a decision can be reached regarding error diagnosis and treatment. It might be ideal that the CL used worldwide contains homogeneous linguistic features, so that international connections and social mobility can be enhanced among Chinese speakers. In practice, however, this is nearly impossible to be realised. As discussed in previous sections, Singapore Mandarin is a new but deeply established variety of Modern Chinese language used in the Outer Circle, and due to close and prolonged contact with local languages and varieties, it has developed some unique linguistic features of its own vis-à-vis *Putonghua*. Since *Putonghua* is not an officially declared standard for CL education in Singapore, the imposition of *Putonghua* standard in CL teaching and learning would be untenable. Moreover, since many Singapore Mandarin language forms have taken roots in people's language system, it would be of little avail to correct the students' "deviant" uses in practice.

It is not true that all learner errors, global or local, need to be pointed out or corrected in language learning. According to Hendrickson (1978), language errors that need some form of correction may include the following:

- Errors that impair communication,
- Errors that have a stigmatising effect, and
- Errors that are produced the most frequently.

Other errors, especially those having little disruption for intelligibility and communication, may not have to be corrected. With regards to intelligibility, we find that most of the variations in Singapore Mandarin are not harmful for communication with Chinese speakers elsewhere. In fact, many linguistic features in Singapore Mandarin are formed under the influence of southern Chinese varieties, and such usages are actually also prevalent in Southern China where *Putonghua* is the prescribed standard language.

In addition, second language (L2) learning research suggests that learners be judged by the standards appropriate to them, not by those used for natives (Cook, 2008). In Singapore's current linguistic milieu, nurturing learners who are willing to use Chinese is vital, and over-emphasis on language rules may thwart the learners' interests. In other words, the objective of CL teaching is to nurture fluent L2 users, not fluent *Putonghua* speakers. If *Putonghua* is emphasised as a rigorous norm to follow as opposed to Singapore Mandarin in CL teaching and learning, students may gradually develop a notion that the language they are using every day in Singapore is a nonstandard and stigmatising variety. This line of thought may affect students' identity construction via the language of their heritage.

Pedagogically, we thus suggest that more tolerance be granted to the locally acceptable variety of Mandarin Chinese in Singapore in order to make Chinese a living language for Singaporean students. Only those errors that are rarely or never used in Singapore Mandarin should be picked out and corrected in CL teaching. As for the norm of *Putonghua*, it should be introduced not as a prescriptive standard but as a reference for students in their CL learning. That is, students should

learn about the differences between Singapore Mandarin and *Putonghua* usages, while the locally acceptable Singapore Mandarin forms they produce should be left alone. Nevertheless, this practice towards Singapore Mandarin usages should be endorsed by educational authorities before CL teachers can reach a consensus in teaching. Moreover, scholars should study the Singapore Mandarin usages, and identify the entrenched usages and codify them in the Chinese dictionaries customised for Singaporeans students. Thus, we call on the joint efforts from the authorities, linguists and frontline teachers to find a more feasible solution to deal with the dilemmas in question.

6 Conclusion

In this article, we have attempted to describe and address a puzzle that has long been baffling educators, learners and linguists. In Singapore's CL teaching and learning, there is a long-standing dilemma regarding the treatment of usages characteristic of Singapore Mandarin, and the question of correction or non-connection has caused much confusion for both CL educators and students. The CL instructional materials implicitly adopt the linguistic features of *Putonghua* as a benchmark, yet *Putonghua* as CL norm has never been announced in official documents. On the other hand, the Mandarin spoken in Singapore, though similar to *Putonghua* in its linguistic profile, has some variant features in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar due to its prolonged and close contact with English, southern Chinese and other language varieties. As a result, problems arise as to whether Singapore Mandarin usages should be regarded as errors and corrected according to the *Putonghua* norm. This dilemma is ultimately concerned with the tension between the habitual usage and the imposed norm or standard, a phenomenon typically observed in Singapore.

In this article, we presented some examples to illustrate part of the linguistic differences between *Putonghua* and Singapore Mandarin, and more importantly, to demonstrate the difficulties that CL teachers have to face in their teaching. Specifically, this study has drawn attention to a fact that the teaching of a second language can be discouraged by a tacit language policy. It shows that the lack of a clearly-stated standard in language policy has a profound implication for error identification and correction in CL teaching. We suggest that the "deviant" usages in students' CL output, so long as they are widely acceptable and prevalent in Singapore Mandarin, be tolerated in teaching in order to be aligned with the fundamental objective of CL education, that is, making CL a living language for Singaporean students in an English-dominant language environment.

Finally, this study has raised a fundamental question in error correction research, namely, how language errors should be defined in a society where the target language in learning involves a new language variety, which contains a set of language features that are not found in Inner Circle varieties. We contend that not all deviances from a well-established exonormative standard should be defined as errors; instead, only those uses deviant from endonormative standard applicable for the variety should be treated as errors and provided with some kind of corrective feedback.

Notes

[1] Chinese classroom observations were conducted as a major methodology and research activity in several MOE-funded research projects undertaken by our research team from 2010 to 2014. The class observation involved altogether 30 schools, 62 CL teachers and over 200 hours' CL classes. These classes were video-recorded, and some fieldwork notes about the Singapore Mandarin usages were made during the class observation.

[2] Original citation in French: "On peut, de façon générale, caractériser l'occurrence d'un classificateur avec un nom dans un contexte donné, comme la trace de la perception qu'a le locuteur de l'objet dont il parle" (emphasis in the original).

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