Written accuracy is a major problem for Chinese students following academic courses in British Higher Education. British academic writing programmes, however, are generally more concerned with academic literacy than with grammar. Errors in written work may be corrected and commented on, but class time tends to be spent discussing the rhetorical structure of academic writing, uses of citation, avoidance of plagiarism and the like. A recent survey of the wants and needs of Chinese students on Warwick University’s pre-undergraduate foundation programme indicated that the students considered grammar instruction the least satisfying aspect of their English course, and wanted grammar to feature more prominently in their language lessons.

In response to this mismatch between students’ requirements and course content, we have been developing GrammarTalk, an e-learning grammar resource. GrammarTalk is intended to address students’ most common grammatical mistakes, to improve proofreading skills, and to provide international EAP students with flexible and independent learning support. It is targeted at Chinese and East Asian learners in particular, although it has also proved popular with students from other parts of the world.

The syllabus for the GrammarTalk materials was informed by our systematic analysis of a corpus of 50 assignments (88,000 words) written by Chinese participants on a British pre-undergraduate foundation programme. This analysis (reported in Chuang and Nesi 2006) indicated that mismanagement of the English article system was the most frequent cause of error in the students’ writing, and misuse of prepositions was the second most frequent cause. We thus decided to initially develop two units of materials focusing on the use of articles and prepositions. To provide an EAP focus for the materials, we selected excerpts from the Chinese learner corpus we had previously used for error analysis, and from a corpus of proficient university student writing (the pilot corpus of British Academic Written English). Both corpora have an academic focus in terms of language, communicative purpose and information content. Of course there are good reasons for this: short and simple texts allow learners to concentrate on the relevant grammar point without the distraction of unknown vocabulary or interesting new information. Our examples, taken from authentic academic assignments, were far more linguistically and cognitively demanding, but we justified this on the grounds that they provided models for the kind of texts our learners themselves had to write. Longer excerpts also provide more information to help learners make appropriate grammar decisions; article use, for example, often depends on a consideration of context beyond the level of the sentence.

We also noted that our approach to syllabus design differed from that of standard pedagogical grammars. Grammar teaching materials do not normally prioritise topics according to error frequency, and typically give the same degree of attention to structures that our target learners know well and those that they often get wrong. Once again, there are good reasons for this. Article and preposition use is notoriously difficult to teach and learn, and misconceptions are often deeply entrenched. An increase in the amount of time and space devoted to frequently occurring problems will not necessarily result in a proportionate increase in learning. Moreover, common grammar errors do not always affect communicative effectiveness to any great extent; indeed this is one reason why they are not eradicated at an earlier stage in the learning process. Allowances are usually made for article and preposition errors in speech, and when such errors occur in written text they usually result in loss of precision, rather than complete communication breakdown. It is understandable that teachers should prefer to concentrate on problems that are easier to resolve, and that might lead to errors of apparently greater gravity.

GrammarTalk aimed to revise learners’ understanding and raise their awareness of problems that they had previously been able to ignore. The activities were devised to encourage apperception and comprehension of the target features, using consciousness-raising tasks to promote self-discovery, as advocated by Rutherford (1987), Ellis (1991) and Thornbury (2001). We also included production-oriented activities as a means of initiating hypothesis testing and rule refining. Deductive and inductive presentations were combined, so that learners had opportunities to formulate their own grammar rules by analysing selected language data. The operation of the program was kept simple to counteract the effect of task complexity, and we hoped that the clues, help features and feedback in GrammarTalk would enable learners to work independently, and that the pictures, sound and animations would make the materials more accessible and fun.

Following these principles the first unit of GrammarTalk (articles) was developed and introduced to international students at Warwick University. The dedicated GrammarTalk website also provided a tutor-
mediated discussion forum and an online questionnaire. We evaluated the materials by gathering students’ responses to the questionnaire and asking them to comment in writing on their likes and dislikes, the ease of use of the program and their suggestions for improvement. Forty students (37 Chinese and 3 non-Chinese) used the materials and filled in the questionnaire. Another 33 students (all Chinese) used the materials and then commented on them. The following excerpts from the two sets of data indicate the impact of the materials. Students agreed on several positive aspects:

**GrammarTalk raised awareness of grammar deficit**
“I thought the concept of singular count nouns, plural count nouns and noncount nouns is easy, but actually I made mistakes on this topic, and I discovered that I am not so clear with some nouns.”
“I came to realize that why I made so many mistakes before. I never really identify those specific and unspecific or definite and indefinite nouns, although I used to believe I knew something about them.”
“Some of the problems always appear in our essays. By doing the exercises we can avoid making the same silly mistakes again.”
“I didn’t notice many of those grammatical mistakes before.”
“I found that something is not as easy as I thought, such as count and noncount; singular and plural.”

**The use of technology enlivened boring topics and supported learning**
“The Flash in Uniqueness is very attractive. It makes me more interested in this exercise, because grammars are always boring.”
“I am really interested in this e-learning program, which differs from learning grammar using thick and boring grammar books.”
“The good combination of illustrations, tutorials, exercises and the pop-up further explanations not only leads students to finish the exercises smoothly but also helps them remember and re-remember some important grammar points in the use of articles.”

**The materials fostered self-discovery and independent learning**
“The exercise first gives examples instead of the definition, then it comes with the definition. In this way, we can work out the definition after our own analysis.”
“I can check the answer and have the feedback as soon as I did it.”
“The exercises tell you why your answer is right and wrong with thorough explanations.”

Some students responded negatively, however, to our use of academic assignments as example texts:
“There were some new and difficult words which made some examples difficult to understand.”
“Could you add a glossary of difficult words?”
“Some passages are very long, which makes the exercises a bit boring. Can we have shorter texts?”

Overall, it would appear that our choice of syllabus and teaching methods were appropriate for our target learners. In the process of completing the GrammarTalk materials many of them seemed to reappraise their own grammatical knowledge and recognise common errors that they had not previously been aware of. We think that it would have been difficult to achieve this result with traditional print-based materials, without instant feedback and interactive activities to support and motivate learning.

The choice of appropriate example texts remains problematic, however. The authentic texts we have used so far seem too difficult for some learners; but we reject the option of simplification (we do not want to alter register or discourse structure) and we fear that a glossary of ‘difficult words’ might distract learners and encourage them to concentrate on vocabulary rather than grammatical structures. Thus our next challenge is to improve accessibility, whilst maintaining relevance and authenticity.

**References**