

### Mistake #3 Ignoring Chinese measure words

“Measure word” or “classifiers” might be one of the most foreign concepts for English speakers.

A student of mine once tried to joke with his Chinese friends by saying that “我有四太太 ( wǒ yǒu sì tài tai ) . He had meant to say “I have four wives” , but since he omitted the crucial measure word “个 (ge)” , nobody could understand what he was trying to say and the joke completely fell flat. The correct way of saying “four wives” is “四个太太 ( sì ge tài tai )” .

The concept of “measure word” or “classifier” shouldn’ t be too foreign to you, because in English, you have something similar, such as “a SHEET of paper” , “a BAR of soap” , “a SET of furniture” “a SCHOOL of fish” etc. Here, sheet, bar, set, and school can be considered as measure words or classifiers.

What’ s different between English and Chinese is not so much the existence of measure words or classifiers, but rather the extent to which measure words are used. In Chinese, we use measure words all the time. Here’ s a summary when measure words have to be used.

1. When a quantity is involved – You must insert a measure word in between the NUMBER of the object and the NAME of the object.

English	Pinyin	Chinese Characters
One hamburger	yí <b>ge</b> hàn bǎo bāo	一个汉堡包 / 一個漢堡包
Two younger sisters	liǎng <b>ge</b> mèi mei	两个妹妹 / 兩個妹妹
Three people	sān <b>ge</b> rén	三个人 / 三個人
Four books	sì <b>běn</b> shū	四本书 / 四本書
Five tables	wǔ zhāng zhuō zi	五张桌子 / 五張桌子
Six chairs	liù <b>bǎ</b> yǐ zi	六把椅子 / 六把椅子

2. When you want to specify a noun, in other words if you use “this-这(這)-zhè” , “that-那-nà” and “每-měi-every” .

English	Pinyin	Chinese Characters
This chair	zhè <b>bǎ</b> yǐ zi	这把椅子 / 這把椅子
That person	nà <b>ge</b> rén	那个人 / 那個人
Every book	měi <b>běn</b> shū	每本书 / 每本書

3. When the question words “which-哪-nǎ” and “how many-几(幾)-jǐ” are used.

English	Pinyin	Chinese Characters
Which book	nà běn shū	那本书 / 那本書
How many people (number usually < 10)	jǐ gè rén	几个人 / 幾個人
How many people (number usually > 10)	duō shǎo rén (* “duō shǎo” is an exception. It doesn’ t need a measure word.*)	多少人 (* “多少” is an exception. It doesn’ t need a measure word.*)

### Classifiers

Measure words are also referred to as "classifiers" because some measure words actually have the additional function of classifying nouns along some physical dimensions, such as size, shape and so on. Different measure words are used for different kinds of objects.

### The Generic Measure Word - “个(個) - ge”

The most widely used and the most generic measure word is “个(個) - ge” . You can generally get away with using “个(個) - ge” when you’ re not sure what measure word to use for a particular noun, so until you learn new specific measure words or classifiers, you should use “个(個) - ge” to save yourself some trouble.

You can also think this way: maybe a good English word that can be used to describe measure words is “unit” . For example, “一个汉堡包 (yí ge hàn bǎo bāo)” is like saying one unit of hamburger. “三个人 (sān ge rén)” is like saying three units of people.

Measure words are so important. If you use the generic measure word “ge” for everything, it’ s okay. It just shows that you’ re not a native speaker, but Chinese people will still understand you. However, if you skip measure words completely, Chinese people will NOT understand you at all. So it’ s better to use a less-than-perfect measure word than not to use one at all.

From now on, I suggest you seriously consider getting into the habit of adding “ge” to your daily English conversations, e.g. saying four “ge” apples, three “ge” people, and 10 “ge” hamburgers.

## Common Chinese Mistakes Made by English Speakers

The following table is a summary of common measure words. If you want to sound like a native speaker, memorize them. If not, it's okay to simply use "ge" to replace all the following measure words and you will do just fine. ☺

### Measure words used in a similar way in English

For example:

Measure Word	Used with	Examples		
包 bāo	Pack	One pack of cigarettes	yì bāo yān	一包烟
杯 bēi	Cup of, glass of	One cup of coffee	yì bēi kā fēi	一杯咖啡
盒 hé	Box of	A box of chocolate	yì hé qiǎo kè lì	一盒巧克力
块 / 塊 kuài	Piece of (cake, soap, land)	One piece of cake	yí kuài dàn gāo	一块蛋糕 一塊蛋糕
瓶 píng	Bottle of something	One beer	yì píng pí jiǔ	一瓶啤酒
群 qún	Crowd, group, herd, flock, pack of (cows, bees, sheep)	One pack of herd	yì qún yáng	一群羊
双 / 雙 shuāng	Pair of (shoes, chopsticks, gloves)	One pair of shoes	yì shuāng xié	一双鞋 一雙鞋
套 tào	Set of (furniture, stamps)	One set of furniture	yí tào jiā jù	一套家具
种 / 種 zhǒng	Types of, kind of	One type of fruit	yì zhǒng shuǐ guǒ	一种水果 一種水果

### Measure words sometimes used or not required in English

For example:

Measure Word	Used with	Examples		
把 bǎ	Objects with a handle such as Knife, umbrella, toothbrush and chair	One knife	yì bǎ dāo	一把刀

## Common Chinese Mistakes Made by English Speakers

本 běn	Things with volume, such as books, magazines	One book	yì běn shū	一本书 一本書
串 chuàn	Items joined together, e.g. by a string	One bunch of grapes	yí chuàn pú táo	一串葡萄
顶 / 頂 dǐng	Hat	One hat	yì dǐng mào zi	一顶帽子 一頂帽子
份 fèn	Newspaper	One newspaper	yí fèn bào zhǐ	一份报纸 一份報紙
封 fēng	Letters, mail	One letter	yì fēng xìn	一封信
个 / 個 ge	Generic measure word that can be used with anything	One person	yí ge rén	一个人 一個人
间 / 間 jiān	Room (living room, bedroom, etc)	One bedroom	yì jiān wò shì	一间卧室 一間臥室
件 jiàn	Items of clothing (generally for the upper body), matters, affairs,	One shirt One matter	yí jiàn chèn shān yí jiàn shì	一件衬衫 一件襯衫 一件事
棵 kē	Trees	One tree	yì kē shù	一棵树 一棵樹
辆 / 輛 liàng	Wheeled vehicles (such as cars, bicycles, trucks)	One car	yí liàng chē	一辆车 一輛車
篇 piān	Essay, article, report	One article	yì piān wén zhāng	一篇文章
首 shǒu	Passage of text (such as poems, songs)	One song	yì shǒu gē	一首歌
台 tái	Fairly large electrical items (such as computers, washing machines)	One computer	yì tái diàn nǎo	一台电脑 一台電腦
条 / 條 tiáo	Long and winding objects (such as towel, street, <b>pants</b> , rope)	One towel One (pair) pants	yì tiáo máo jīn yì tiáo kù zi	一条毛巾 一條毛巾 一条裤子 一條褲子
位 wèi	People (a polite measure word to replace 个-ge)	One guest	yí wèi kè rén	一位客人
张 / 張 zhāng	Flat surfaces (table, sheet of paper, bed, photo)	One table	yì zhāng zhuō zi	一张桌子 一張桌子

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支 zhī	Fairly long, stick-like objects such as pens, pencils, cigarettes	One pen	yì zhī bǐ	一支笔 一支筆
只 / 隻 zhī	Animals, birds and insects  One of a pair	One cat  One hand  One shoe	yì zhī māo  yì zhī shǒu  yì zhī xié zǐ	一只猫 一隻貓 一只手 一隻手  一只鞋子 一隻鞋子
座 zuò	Large, relatively permanent thing	One mountain	yí zuò shān	一座山

**Have fun with measure words!**