

## CHINGLISH IN THE ORAL WORK OF NON -ENGLISH MAJORS

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### Abstract

Chinglish often exists in the oral work of college students and becomes one of the major problems that adversely affect cross cultural communication and the quality of oral expression . Though much research has been done on Chinglish , statistical studies of Chinglish are still insufficient , especially in China . This paper reports a quantitative research on Chinglish in the oral English of college students . The paper proposes an objective attitude towards Chinglish ; more input of western culture , and more regard for appropriate oral English learning strategies .

### Key words

college oral English ; Chinglish ; oral English teaching ; learning strategies

### 1 . Introduction

For a long time , English teaching to college students has been centered on reading , writing , and listening . English speaking has long been neglected . With the advent of the new century , the need for proficient English speakers in many fields is ever increasing , which drives many colleges and universities to open oral English classes and many non -English majors to study spoken English . Although the enthusiasm of learning spoken English has increased , the oral English proficiency of college students is far from satisfactory , much Chinglish being produced in their oral work . To some extent , Chinglish is very destructive . It may adversely affect cross cultural communication and the quality of oral expression . If it occurs often , it may lead to communicative failures .

Ge Chuangui was the first scholar who proposed the terms “ Chinglish ” and “ China English ” in his essay *On Chinese to English Translation* ( 1984 ) ; in which he makes a distinction between Chinglish and China English . Since Ge , many scholars have also illustrated their point of view . Deng Yanchang ( 1989 : 150 ) once said that “ Chinglish is a speech or writing in English that shows the interference or influence of Chinese , some sentences being little more than word to word translation of Chinese expressions . Chinglish may be grammatically correct , but the choice of words and phrases and the manner of expression do not conform to standard usage . Although understanding may be a problem , Chinglish is unacceptable . ” According to Li Wenzhong ( 1993 : 18 - 24 ) : Chinglish is misshapen English which is produced by Chinese learners who draw upon Chinese rules and structures mechanically as a result of mother tongue interference . China English belongs to Normative English whose composition and scope of use are far richer and wider than Chinglish . In contrast , Chinglish is a deformed language phenomenon . Its composition and scope of use are both unstable and limited , and it causes barriers in international communication and cultural exchanges . Wang Rongpei ( 1991 ) , Zhang Hongwu ( 2000 ) and many other scholars feel the existence of Chinglish is objective , and it is an unavoidable language phenomenon . Joan

Pinkham, in her book *The Translator's Guide to Chinglish*, points out "Chinglish... is a misshapen, hybrid language that is neither English nor Chinese but that might be described as 'English with Chinese characteristics'" (2000: 1).

In recent years, many scholars believe that Chinglish is the result of the negative transfer of learners whose first language is Chinese, and it is a kind of "interlanguage", which is unavoidable in the process of foreign language learning. It cannot be regarded as linguistic error, but a kind of developmental error when the foreign language learners are forming their self-contained linguistic systems in an attempt to produce meaningful performance.

Basically the common errors of Chinglish are mainly at four levels: pragmatic level, lexical level, syntactic level and the level of pronunciation (Li Wenzhong, 1993). Chinglish at pragmatic level occurs when students rely on Chinese customs and culture to speak English and it is not culturally acceptable to native speakers of English. For example, when meeting a foreign guest at the airport, a student greets him by saying "You must have a tiring journey." Jiang Yajun (1995: 52-53) saw the following variations as the phonetic features of Chinglish: first, due to the lack of sounds like /f/, /v/ in Chinese, they are likely to be replaced by /s/ or /z/, such as think /sɪnk/, they /zei/ etc. Second, because most Chinese words are likely to be pronounced as CV (a consonant plus a vowel) there is a tendency to impose a CVCV structure on English. Thus words like act, stand are pronounced as /kt/, /stnd/. Also the ignorance of "shifting stress" is regarded as Chinglish. According to Lin Qiong (2001: 14-15), lexical Chinglish is produced when students have confusions of the words or terms in both languages that have the same denotations but may have different connotations. For example: look at a newspaper, learn knowledge. Syntactic Chinglish is usually produced when students resort to Chinese syntactic forms to construct English sentences. For example: The reason why I am absent was because I was ill.

Though the study of Chinglish is flourishing, quantitative studies are still insufficient, and many practical questions still need to be explored, especially in the oral work of students. This thesis mainly focuses on answering two questions: Which type of Chinglish occurs most frequently or ranks the first among the four general types of Chinglish in the oral work of college students? Is there any correlation between the students' oral English learning strategies and Chinglish?

## 2. Quantitative Research

**Subjects:** 120 non-English major freshmen from China University of Geosciences participated in this study. The participants had received almost one year of training in oral English in the college, when the study was carried out on May 28th, 2004, the end of their oral English class in the second semester.

**Research Instruments:** two instruments were employed: one self-design test paper, and one questionnaire. As the sample is big, a test paper much more easily covers all the four aspects of Chinglish and is more economical. The test paper consists of four parts, altogether forty multiple-choice questions that measure students' Chinglish at pragmatic level, the level of pronunciation, lexical level, and syntactic level. The design of the test paper is in accordance with the features of Chinglish on the four levels. Most of the questions are daily used sentences or conversations and the validity of the test paper had been tested before it was finally adopted.

The statements in Wen Qiufang's *On English Learning Strategies* (1996) were used as the basis for the questionnaire to assess the difference in uses of oral English learning strategies between high score and low score students in the test. The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part A includes the students' beliefs about the interference of mother tongue in oral English learning. Five statements are involved in this part. Part B is composed of ten statements concerning their individual experience in oral English learning strategies. The raw data were processed by means of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS Software).

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 The high frequency of Chinglish on lexical level

As is shown in Table 1, a total of 1527 errors were collected out of 99 effective sample test papers.

Of all these errors , Chinglish errors at lexical level are the most distinctive , which count 533 , about 34.90 % of the total ; next come Chinglish at pragmatic level , accounting for 28.60 % of the total . The Chinglish errors at the level of syntax and pronunciation are 18.80 % and 17.7 % respectively .

Table 1 . The total number and proportion of each kind of errors

Types of Chinglish Distribution of Errors	Pragmatics	Pronunciation	Lexis	Syntax	Total
Number of errors	437	270	533	287	1527
Proportion	28.60 %	17.70 %	34.90 %	18.80 %	100 %

Among the 99 valid sample test papers , the scores were arranged from the highest to the lowest . The scores higher than 84 were labeled high score , and the scores lower than 66 were labeled low score . So there are 28 students in high score group and another 33 in the low score group .

Table 2 shows Chinglish at these four levels in the test papers all significantly distinguish the students whose speech contains less Chinglish and those whose speech probably contains much Chinglish . Chinglish at lexical level ranks the first to distinguish the high score and low score test papers ; pronunciation the second .

Table 2 . The difference between the high score and the low score test papers

	t	df	Sig ( 2 - tailed )	Mean Difference	95 % Confidence Interval of Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Pragmatics	4.174	59	0.000	1.4372	0.74924	2.12622
Pronunciation	5.669	59	0.000	2.0227	1.30871	2.73675
Lexis	10.605	59	0.000	3.4978	2.83783	4.15784
Syntax	5.473	59	0.000	1.9091	1.21115	2.60703

### 3.2 The reasons for high frequency of Chinglish on lexical level

The high frequency of Chinglish at lexical level shown in the present study indicates that the biggest difficulty for students to reduce Chinglish is lexis . The interpretation for the reasons may be the following :

First of all , the fundamental difference between languages is the lexical difference . Language consists of words that are basically the smallest meaningful units . Due to different cultures , people speaking different languages have their own ways of expressing ideas . Therefore , the basic difference between languages lies in the different use of words in denotation or connotation .

Secondly , the EFL learners false assumption of the semantic and syntactic equivalence of English and Chinese words is significant . There are many constraints in foreign language learning . However , “ one of the constraints is the presence of an established conceptual and semantic system with an L1 lexical system closely associated with it . The impact of these established systems on lexical development in L2 appears less straightforward , but may be actually more significant ” ( Jiang Nan 2000 47 ) . The Chinglish found at the lexical level in the sample test paper shows that students usually rely on their established Chinese lexical system to speak English . This is a tendency that has long been acknowledged and can be testified by many foreign language learners and teachers ( Jenkin et al . 1993 119 ) . It is true that there are sometimes overlaps between two languages , such as English - Chinese translation pairs school and xuexiao . But the term “ transfer ” has two sides . It can be positive and negative . When both the native language and the target language have the same form , pattern or rule , positive transfer occurs and it

facilitates learning. However, negative transfer hampers learning. It occurs when the first language interferes in the foreign language learning.

Thirdly, some Chinglish at lexical level is induced by teaching. There has always been a problem of the poverty of input in terms of both quantity and quality in college oral English classes. The students often lack sufficient, highly contextualized input in their learning. When explaining an unknown word or a phrase, teachers usually spend much time explaining the formation, synonyms, and syntactic usage of the new item. Little attention is given to the cultural difference and pragmatic rules of the word. This kind of teaching practice can only be helpful for the students to memorize the word rather than acquire it. Knowing that a letter string forms a word, or even knowing its meaning, does not tell us much about whether one is able to actually use the word appropriately and efficiently in communication (Ellis & Beaton 1993). Consequently the students may have a large vocabulary, but they cannot use the words properly; there is often pragmatic failure when they are in actual communication.

### 3.3 Reasons for the high frequency of Chinglish at pragmatic Level

Table 1 clearly shows that Chinglish errors at pragmatic level are also very noticeable accounting for 28.60% of the total. There are two major interpretations for the result.

Firstly, there is a great difference between Chinese and western culture and teachers often fail to draw students' attention to cross-cultural differences. "Language is influenced and shaped by culture" (Deng Yanchang 1989:3). Language is a symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical, social, and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. Different languages have their different cultural norms. The same word or expression does not necessarily mean the same thing to different peoples, and misunderstanding may arise although the language and words used in communication are otherwise grammatically correct. So cultural instruction should be an unavoidable part of language teaching and learning. But only a small number of oral English teachers realize the significance of the relationship between language and culture in the process of language instruction.

Secondly, the negative transfer and lack of pragmatic knowledge is also a major factor. As we have mentioned, the negative transfer is the influence resulting from the differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired. In communication, when Chinese learners make inappropriate transfer, Chinglish may occur, and probably it will result in communication failure. For Question 5 in the test, the students were asked to choose the correct expression for greeting; suppose he/she is studying at Oxford University, and meets Professor Newton in the campus in the morning. Most of the students chose D "Good morning! Teacher" as the correct answer. This is regarded as a pragmatically inappropriate utterance. In English speaking countries, "teacher" can't be used to address people. In China, however, we keep greeting our teachers like "老师" or "老师好". That's why the students greet the professor by saying "Good morning, teacher." Quite a number of students told the author that they did not know "teacher" can't be used to address people in the west. So we can draw a conclusion that many students may not be pragmatically knowledgeable.

### 3.4 The difference in the use of oral English learning strategies between High score and Low score groups

Twenty students from each of these two groups were randomly chosen to answer a questionnaire. A T-test on the questionnaire is performed to examine the differences between the two types of learners.

The first five statements that measure the students' beliefs about the involvement of mother tongue in oral English learning do not reveal any significant difference between the two types of students. However, the means of the five statements in high score group are higher, especially in the statement 2. Its mean difference is 0.6500; t value is 1.920, the highest in Part A. That is to say, although both of them believe that relying on mother tongue to learn English cannot make much improvement, the students in high score group hold a stronger belief that "Though English is not my mother tongue, it is very probable that we can think in English."

Table 3 shows the significant difference in the actual use of oral English learning strategies between the two groups. The greatest difference between the two groups on Strategies 7 and 12 shows that the

students in high score group attach more importance to English culture and idioms on their process of learning oral English ,and they make more conscious efforts to acquire English idioms and customs . The significant difference on Strategies 13 and 15 shows the students in high score group rely less on mother tongue to speak English . The difference on Strategy 8 probably tells us the reason why the students in high score group have less Chinglish in the aspect of pronunciation . As the students in this group often listen to and imitate the pronunciation and intonation of authentic English tapes . But the less advanced students do not often do that . Wen Qiufang said in his book *On English learning Strategies (1996 )* that to listen to and imitate the pronunciation and intonation of authentic English tapes is a good and effective way to improve one s pronunciation . She also pointed out that the learner who relies less on mother tongue would do better than those who always or often fall back on it .

Table 3 . The significant difference in the use of oral English learning strategies

Strategies	Means of High score Students	Means of Low - score Students	Mean Difference	t	df	Sig . 2 tailed	95 % Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
7	3.9500	3.1500	0.8000	2.421	38	0.020	-0.33533	1.03533
8	3.9000	3.2000	0.7000	2.534	38	0.016	-0.82422	0.52422
12	4.0000	3.4500	0.5500	2.065	38	0.046	0.01088	1.08912
13	3.4500	2.7000	0.7500	2.915	38	0.006	0.22920	1.27080
15	3.9000	3.2000	0.7000	2.131	38	0.040	0.03504	1.36496

The data analysis in Strategies 9 and 10 reveals that although both of these two groups believe that to talk to oneself in English is a good way to practice oral English ,in practice ,they seldom do it . The reason is probably that the sample students major in science and technology ;seldom do they have the chance to talk to foreigners ;or they are not so active in taking part in oral English activities .

#### 4 . Implications for Oral English Teaching in China

The study is valuable in two respects . In the first place ,the investigation on Chinglish in non -English majors will shed light on the research into the nature of Chinglish . In the second place ,the implications drawn from the findings of the study will help to make improvements of oral English teaching and learning of non -English majors . The study has the following implications :

Firstly ,oral English teachers should develop an objective ,tolerable and positive attitude towards Chinglish . “ Objective ” here means that teachers should realize the fact that Chinglish does exist in the oral work of college students and it is an unavoidable stage for EFL learners in China . “ Tolerable ” means that teachers should give advice or correct the students Chinglish expressions on the premises that the correction will not cause negative effects on the students interest in English . “ Positive ” indicates teachers should have the confidence that Chinglish will be reduced somehow through his /her appropriate teaching and students cooperation .

Secondly ,oral English teachers should attach great importance to lexical teaching and help the students to get rid of the false assumption on the semantic and syntactic equivalence of English and Chinese . Sometimes comparisons should be made between an English word and its Chinese equivalence . And it is also important for teachers to explain the pragmatic rules and cultural difference of a new word or to put it in a given context for the students to see the right situation the word is in ,so that students will not have a vague idea about the right context of the words .

Thirdly ,teachers should increase students cultural awareness and help students to develop English thought pattern . As Li Wenzhong (1993 ) said that as cultural exchanges intensified between China and the West ,this kind of unaccepted form of English will be diminished . That is to say ,culture teaching plays an important role in foreign language teaching and cultural competence is an integral part of

communicative competence. So in oral English teaching, we should pay attention to the development of learners' awareness of cultural difference. Students should be encouraged to read widely and watch foreign films or TV programs, go to English corner, and talk to foreigners.

Finally, successful oral English learners' strategies should be known by students. From the study, we know the degree of Chinglish has a close connection with the strategies adopted by students. A study by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) also suggests that effective foreign language learners are aware of the learning strategies they use and why they use them. Graham's (1997) work in French further indicates that foreign language teachers can help students understand good learning strategies and should train them to develop and use them. So it is necessary to let students know the successful oral English learners' strategies. This will be helpful for them to develop and adjust their own oral English strategies.

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