Research Article

THE CAUSES OF CHINGLISH IN ENGLISH WRITING OF THE FIRST YEAR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN CHINA

Li Chenhao[1*] and Supinda Lertilt[2]

[1,2]Suryadhep Teachers College, Rangsit University, Pathum Thani 12000, Thailand

*Corresponding Author, E-mail: li.c61@rsu.ac.th

Abstract

The study's objective was to determine what causes first-year students to use Chinglish in their English writing. The research adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods. Moreover, the research sample consisted of 40 first-year students from the Information Electronics Technology Faculty at Jiamusi University in China. The researcher used 1) Writing test, 2) Questionnaire, and 3) Interview as research instruments. Descriptive statistics were utilised to analyse the data. The causes of Chinglish in English writing found from the questionnaire and interview were 1）Language culture, 2）English writing habits, and 3）Teacher's less attention. Based on the three causes, some suggestions were presented for both the learning and teaching aspects. According to the findings, the researcher identified that: 1）Students should learn more about the Western way of thinking to eliminate the impact of differences in language culture, 2) A good learning habit could reduce the use of Chinglish, and 3）English teachers should continue to pay closer attention to their students with greater care.

Keywords: Chinglish, Non-English Major Students, English Writing, First Year Students

Introduction

After China acceded to the WTO in 2001, English has become increasingly important as an international language in Chinese society (Li, 2014). With the increasing demand for foreign language talents in various fields, society has increasingly higher requirements for college students' English proficiency. Strong reading skills no longer suffice, as strong communication and writing skills are also necessary. For many years, under the influence of examination-oriented education, English education in China only pays attention to textbook-based learning and grammar. It also neglects the actual ability of students to communicate and write in English. In 2012, China Daily said companies were unsatisfied with university graduates' English proficiency (Zheng, 2014).

Due to some restrictions, several problems still exist in English education in China. First, college English teaching in China has always been conducted in a non-English environment. Consequently, English teaching for Chinese students can only be executed as a foreign language. Second, college English teaching is mainly taught in

large classes. For example, a college English class might have 60 to 90 students. Third, many universities hire foreign English teachers who are tolerant of students' English errors because they know that Chinese students' English ability is subpar (Guo, 2017).

The Report on Chinese College Students' English Writing Ability (2020) collected a sample of 1,299,425 articles from 100 Chinese universities in February 2020. The results showed that the overall composition score was close to the normal distribution with 68 points, and the total score was mostly 60 points. The total score was 100 points. Moreover, the results also demonstrated that Chinglish errors accounted for 58.92% of the total errors, specifically 32.16% in spelling errors and 8.92% in syntactic errors where most were related to subject-predicate agreement and the flow of sentences. In conclusion, the report highlighted the low proficiency of Chinese students in English writing.

Chinglish affects high vocational students' English writings in a negative way. It is believed that the more Chinglish appears in compositions the lower score may be gained. The adverse impact of Chinglish can be categorized into two levels: lexical level and syntactic level. At lexical level, Chinglish happens under the situations of redundancy, improper use of words, inversion of word order, and improper collocation. At syntactic level, Chinglish happens under the situations of overuse of verbs, overuse of nouns, improper use of synthesis, improper use of active voice, and improper use of topic-prominence. Identifying the causes of Chinglish is essential.

Literature Review

Chinglish is a combination of Chinese and English words and refers to spoken or written English in which Chinese culture has a significant effect. Others claim that Chinglish refers to the irregular language form created by English language learners in China because of their mother tongue and Chinese culture's influence. Additionally, it exhibits Chinese characteristics and is also called the deformation of English. Chinglish is an inaccurate form of expression in English writing because it violates English grammar rules (Liu, 2017). Figure 1 illustrates an example of Chinglish.

Figure 1: Illustrates of an Example of Chinglish

Source: English Today, 2011, pp. 64-70

The term **智力玩具** is translated as "mental toy", while a more appropriate translation would be 'intellectual toy'. The latter concept might arguably be a lexical item exclusive to China, as a Google search of the phrase in English yields only Chinese-based toy manufacturers (compared with 'educational toy' in other varieties of the English language). Thus, 'mental toy' might be classified as Chinglish because of its nonsensical nature and poor translation (Eaves, 2011).

Chinglish was related to two theories, particularly Interlanguage theory and Language transfer theory. In the 1970s, Selinker (1972) first proposed the Interlanguage theory. The so-called interlanguage is a unique language system between students' native language and target language. Suppose that interlanguage fails to reach the target language's endpoint with the increase in learners' age and their amount of learning. In that case, the structural system no longer evolves as it tends to be fixed, which is the fossilisation phenomenon (Dai, 2009).

Selinker (1972) defines interlanguage as systematic knowledge of an L2 independent of these learners' L1 and the target language. He points out that 'Some, but certainly not all, items, rules and subsystems of a learner's interlanguage may be transferred from the first language.' He believes that specific aspects determine interlanguage: language transfer, overgeneralisation, transfer of training, strategies of L2 learning, and L2 communication (Selinker, 1972). Language transfer means that a second language shares the characteristics of the learners' native language. Overgeneralisation refers to the use of certain expressions fabricated by the learner based on one's existing knowledge of the language, which is not advisable by the rules of this second language. In this context, the transfer of training is related to teaching. If a teacher is less likely to or rarely uses certain words, it might be the same case with students. L2 learning strategies lead to interlanguage because learners tend to simplify or over-summarise some grammar rules in the SLA. Moreover, communication strategies include syntax errors that learners may commit in the communication process (Selinker, 1972).

Based on the interlanguage theories, the deep-seated place of Chinglish lurking in the second language learners' learning strategy is also called mother tongue migration strategy, which takes place in the second language acquisition process. Learners' use of cognitive structure based on their accumulated experience has enabled them to master their mother tongue's language system. However, they tend to have limited, incomplete knowledge of and experience in the target language to understand and express the new language phenomenon. When the rules associated with the mother tongue are the same as those in the target language, the positive interlingual transfer usually occurs. When there is a difference between the two, negative interlingual transfer occurs, leading to Chinglish becoming a pathological language (Li, 2011).

Rod Ellis (1985) defined language transfer as 'the process of using knowledge of the first language in learning a second language'. The transfer can be positive when a first language pattern identical with the target-language pattern is transferred, or it can be negative when the former pattern, distinct from the latter, is transferred. If the similarities and differences can facilitate and contribute to L2 learning, the transfer is considered positive. On the contrary, if the similarities and differences hinder and deter the learning process, then it is a negative transfer.

Research Objective

To find out the causes of first year students using Chinglish in English writing.

Research Question

What are the causes of Chinglish in first year students' English writing?

Research Methodology

The study was conducted using the following four steps:

Step 1: English writing test. There was a given topic from the CET-4 (College English Test Level 4). Forty students were required to finish the writing test with no more than 150 words within the allotted 30 minutes.

Step 2: Definition and Classification of Chinglish. After the writing test, the researcher got a support from Miss Liu Hui and Dr Jeff. They are English instructors in Jiamusi University and also performed as co-evaluators in grading to avoid bias and to get the accurate assessment outcomes as accurate as possible. They evaluated students' writing test and scored them accordingly. The Chinglish errors were classified into three categories:

1. Wrong format. The wrong format meant that students misused the accurate formatting of words such as verb form, adjective form, -ing form, or past or perfect tense.

2. Creating new words. It meant that students created new English words that were directly translated from Chinese words.

3. Syntax errors. The syntax error was a branch of linguistics that studied the language structure. It was about how words were arranged into sentences or phrases, or grammatical rules that govern that.

Step 3: Conduct Questionnaire. Students were required to finish the questionnaire in class. The 11 questions aimed to investigate students' opinion on 1) Students' understanding of Chinglish, 2) Learning methods involved in English writing, 3) Students' writing habits, and 4) Teaching methods of the English teacher. The questionnaire was submitted to three experts to assess the content validity using the Unidimensional Item Congruence Index (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977).

Step 4: Conduct the Interview. The researcher interviewed three students who scored lowest on the English writing test. It contained seven questions that focused on the 1) Students' understanding of Chinglish, 2) Students' writing behaviour, and 3) Teachers' teaching methods. Given the English communicative ability of first-year students, the interviews were conducted in Chinese.

Participants

Three hundred eighty-five first-year students who studied at the Information Electronics Technology faculty were the population of this study in Jiamusi University. Their ages range from 19-21 years. All the students had at least nine years of English learning, with Chinese being their native language. Therefore, the students had mastered a certain amount of English vocabulary, grammar and writing skills.

In order to ensure the sample was representative, stratified sampling was adopted in this study. The researcher divided 385 first-year students into four layers according to their final exam's English writing scores. After selecting, the research sample consisted of 40 students.

Research Instruments

1. English writing test, and interview.

The English writing test came from CET-4 (College English Test Level 4). Students were asked to complete the writing in an English class. Students needed to write at least 150 words in 30 minutes.

2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire had a total of eleven questions to investigate the English writing of first-year students from the following aspects: 1) Students' understanding of Chinglish, 2) Learning methods of writing, 3) Writing habits, and 4) Teaching methods of teacher.

3. Interview

The interview selected the three students who got low scores in the writing test. There are seven questions in the interview. And the interview questions mainly covered three aspects: 1) Students' understanding of Chinglish, 2) Writing habits, and 3) Teaching methods of English writing.

Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

1. Validity

The instruments submitted to three experts to assess the content validity by using the Unidimensional Item Congruence Index (IOC). The index was calculated by the formula proposed by Rovinelli and Hambleton (1977). The formula showed as following:

$$I_{ik} = \frac{(n-1)\sum_{j=1}^{n} X_{ijk} - \sum_{i=1}^{N}\sum_{j=1}^{n} X_{ijk} + \sum_{j=1}^{n} X_{ijk}}{2(N-1)n}$$

After calculating, the validity of the questionnaire is 1.0.

2. Reliability

A trial group was used to test reliability of instruments. Generally, Cronbach's Alpha was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. After calculating, the result showed as following:

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.885	11

According to reliability analysis where the Cronbach's Alpha > 0.8, which meant the questionnaire had a high degree of condition.

Data Analysis

Students' writing papers were evaluated to tally the Chinglish errors, which were classified into three levels: 1) Wrong format, 2) Creation of new words, and 3) Syntax errors. The researcher counted Chinglish errors for each level and calculated the percentage. The frequency of the responses to the questionnaire was used to analyse students' opinion on English writing. Finally, the interview was evaluated using descriptive analysis.

Findings and Discussion

According to data analysis, the causes behind the use of Chinglish among first-year non-English students were categorised into three aspects: 1) Language culture, 2) English writing habits, and 3) Teachers' teaching methods.

1. The Causes that were categorised under Language Culture

A total of 264 Chinglish errors were found in 40 post-evaluation writing tests. Table 1 divides the distribution into three categories.

Table 2 Distribution of Chinglish in Three Levels

	Wrong Format	Creating New Words	Syntax	Total
Frequency	97	99	68	264
Percentage	36.74%	37.50%	25.76%	100%

Language culture was one of the reasons. The researcher found 264 Chinglish errors in the students' writing assessment. Table 1 itemises that 36.74% of Chinglish came from the wrong format, 37.50% from creating new words and 25.76% from syntax. Moreover, the wrong format could be attributed to language culture. The former is defined as the improper use of verb tenses, as well as confusion with regards to passive and active voice, he and she, and independent and dependent clauses.

In Chinese, verbs do not have tenses. Equally important, Chinese students learned Chinese from an early age and had a good command of their grammatical structure. Hence, in English writing, students still used Chinese grammatical structures subjectively. While most of them preferred to use 'we' in expressing an appeal, students cannot represent other people in English writing.

Since language culture referred to language transfer, in second language learning, learners expressed their ideas through their pronunciation, vocabulary, structural rules or habits. If the rules in one's native language were consistent with those of the foreign language, the transfer of the former's rules would positively impact the target language. However, Chinese and English had different grammatical structures, negatively influencing students' English learning. For this reason, Chinglish consistently appeared in students' English writing. Generally, language culture would lead to the use of Chinglish in their writing. Table 2 shows the findings obtained from students' opinions.

Table 3 Frequency of Question 2 in Questionnaire

Question 2	Item	Percentage
Do you believe that there are cultural differences between China and the Western country in writing?	Absolutely	22.50%
	Almost	30.00%
	General	40.00%
	Almost not	5.00%
	Absolutely not	2.50%

The results presented that the highest rank of choice was 'General' at 40%. The second rank of choice was 'Almost' at 30%, and the third was 23% of students who thought there were cultural differences between China and the Western country in English writing. Only three students chose 'Almost not' and 'Absolutely not'. The findings also indicated that students believed the existence of cultural differences in writing. Furthermore, traditional Chinese

thinking belongs to intuitive thinking, implying that no strict logic procedures and light theoretical analysis exist. This way of thinking focuses on the expression that emphasises artistic conception, performance and thinking. In contrast, traditional Western thinking underlines analysis, positivism, and logic, which is one of the Western thinking characteristics. Many conjunctions in English sentences are reflected in the sentence structure. Their rational use defines the logical relationship among the sentence structure components, making the sentence structure rigorous (Tong, 2011).

2. The Causes that were categorised under Students' Writing Habit

The researcher found that students had several bad behaviours in their English writing. Table 3 summarises the findings collected from students' opinions.

Table 4 Frequency of Question 4 in the Questionnaire

Question 4	Item	Percentage
In order to improve your English writing ability, do you read some English articles with writing reference value?	Always	27.50%
	Often	27.50%
	Sometimes	25%
	Seldom	10%
	Never	10%

Eleven students accounted for 27.50% of those who always reading some English articles with writing reference value. And there were another eleven students accounted for 27.50% of those who often reading some English articles. Eight students who accounted for 20% chose seldom and never. The results indicated that students did not habitually read some English articles to improve their writing skills.

Table 5 Frequency of Question 7 in Questionnaire

Question 7	Item	Percentage
Do you use a translation application to write your English essay?	Always	67.50%
	Often	32.50%
	Sometimes	0%
	Seldom	0%
	Never	0%

As demonstrated in Table 5, the highest rank of choice was 'Always' at 67.50%, and the second was that 32.50% of students often used a translation application to write an essay. This finding indicated that the translation application became a tool for students to write an English essay.

In Interview. The question 5 "In English writing, do you like using a translation application? Why?" The full set of responses was as follows:

Interviewee 1: I often use it. I don't know how to write many Chinese sentences in English, so I have to rely on translation. It's fast and accurate.

Interviewee 2: Sometimes, I use it. If there are some sentences that I cannot write, I will use it to help.

Interviewee 3: Yes, I use translation software for all the writing assignments. It saves me time.

According to the replies, it showed that all three students had a high frequency of using translation software. The students gave roughly the same reasons. Generally speaking, the students lacked the ability to organize the language in English. They needed the translation software to help them complete the English sentences.

The correct use of a translation application could improve one's English. Otherwise, it would lead to Chinglish. When students relied on convenient translation application, their motivation to learn English would decrease. On the one hand, the translation application's output was too mechanical, as it lacks the consideration of the translation context. On the other hand, given the lack of context in the translation application's support and conversion, the cultural differences between China and the West lead to the misunderstandings of expressions. Translation software often produced Chinglish, and students' excessive reliance on them was the primary reason for using Chinglish (Fang, 2019).

A good writing habit could reduce the usage of Chinglish in students' English writing. First of all, they should develop their English self-learning ability. Generally, Chinese students' writing ability was subpar, and students had to learn more English after class. Second, they needed to develop English thinking skills. Chinese students were accustomed to thinking about their writing content in Chinese before converting and translating it into English, which led to the appearance of Chinglish in writing. As a result, they had to enhance their English thinking skills and practice more to reduce their use of Chinglish. Finally, students needed to reduce their reliance on translation software, as its excessive use would diminish their initiative to think, and they would frequently use its Chinglish output (Wang, 2016).

3. **The Causes that were categorised under Teachers' Less Attention**

The researcher found that teachers' less attention was one of the causes. Table 6 shows the findings from students' opinions.

Table 6 Frequency of Question 10 in Questionnaire

Question 7	Item	Percentage
Does your teacher teach you logical thinking in English?	Always	5.00%
	Often	12.50%
	Sometimes	27.50
	Seldom	52.50%
	Never	2.50%

Table 6 exhibits that 'Seldom' was the highest rank of choice at 52.50%, and the second was 'Sometimes' at 27.50%. The results indicated that teacher dedicated less time on teaching English thinking mode to students.

Table 7 Frequency of Question 11 in the Questionnaire

Question 7	Item	Percentage
Does your teacher correct Chinglish in your writing assessments?	Always	2.50%
	Often	20.00%
	Sometimes	42.50
	Seldom	20.00%
	Never	15.00%

Table 7 presents that 'Sometimes' was the highest rank of choice at 42.50%. Eight students accounted for 20% of the sample, and six students that accounted for 15% thought that the teacher allocated less time to correct the Chinglish mistakes.

In Interview. The question 6 "What writing method does the teacher usually teach you?" The full set of responses was as follows:

Interviewee 1: My teacher allotted less time on teaching writing. She just sent me numerous workable writing samples. As instructed by her, I imitated several good sentences and tried to rewrite them in my own words.

Interviewee 2: My teacher gave me a writing template that had a complete structure of an essay. I just needed to insert some words.

Interviewee 3: My teacher said that I could obtain a high writing score by using the template. She did not devote more time to teaching writing.

According to the replies, two interviewees said the teacher gave writing template to them to do English writing. And another interviewee said the teacher asked him to imitate good sentences and rewrote it.

In Interview. The question 7 "Does your teacher correct Chinglish in your writing?" The full set of responses was as follows:

Interviewee 1: The teacher just used some funny Chinglish from students' writing as examples in class. She did not tell us how to avoid using Chinglish.
Interviewee 2: As the teacher pointed out some Chinglish errors in class, students only treated it as a joke.

Interviewee 3: The teacher did not correct the students' use of Chinglish. Instead, she only marked and scored the student's writing task.

However, the teacher should pay more care and closer attention to teaching English writing, where error analysis was of great significance. The prevalence of Chinglish in students' English writing was a kind of feedback to the teachers. By analysing Chinglish use in students' writing, teachers could better grasp students' weaknesses. Based on error analysis feedback, teachers could create better teaching plans and methods or adjust them accordingly. Furthermore, learning involved a process of making and correcting mistakes. If students were unaware

of Chinglish in their writing, they might find such expressions acceptable and repeatedly make the same mistakes in the future. Receiving timely feedback from teachers helped them become aware that they were creating and reducing their use of these expressions. In contrast, delayed feedback would certainly discourage students, lead to English learning deficits and reduce their determination to correct their use of Chinglish (Chen, 2015).

Conclusion

Language culture was the first causes for the appearance of Chinglish in the writing of first-year non-English major students. The negative transfer of the Chinese language and the lack of understanding of cultural differences led to the formation of Chinglish. Second, students' learning habits were perturbing, which also aggravated the dilemma concerning Chinglish. For example, students relied on a translation application and did not practice English writing after class. Finally, the teacher lacked the effective method in teaching writing and had not carried out the prompt correction of the students' Chinglish.

In order to avoid the occurrence of Chinglish in the future, teachers should correct it in a timely and effective manner, cultivate students' writing interests and habits, and establish a specific writing time. In English learning, the researcher put forward the following suggestions: 1) Use English thinking to write an essay, 2) Allot more time to learn the Western culture, and 3) Maintain a good English writing habit.

Language culture would lead to Chinglish in students' writing. According to Table 2, the findings confirm that there were 36.75% Chinglish from the Wrong format. The results could be explained in two aspects. Firstly, the first-year students had a bad ability in English grammar. For example, students used her to describe a boy. Secondly, students overused the wrong format because of the language culture difference. Culture determined and influenced language, and language was the carrier of culture. Therefore, culture and language were inseparable. Although many beginners had mastered some English vocabulary and basic grammar, they were not aware of the English language's cultural habits and failed to consider the language's appropriateness. Chinglish was mainly manifested in two aspects. Expressions with correct grammar but not in line with English cultural background; Improper expressions of lexical and syntactic structures were caused by the differences in awareness and thinking habits between English and Chinese (Peng, 2009).

A good learning habit can reduce Chinglish in writing. According the finding 2, it showed that Chinese students relied on translation application. Machine translation software had high efficiency and high speed in assisting college students in English learning. The results of machine translation software did not pass through the human brains' thoughts. Therefore, in the actual translation process, machine translation software was challenging to consider the specific context. As a result, Chinglish often appeared when students used machine translation, which harmed college students' writing ability. Finally, in translating English words, machine translation software had the problem of simplifying the interpretation. When students needed to do a professional translation, machine translation was straightforward to mislead them, affecting students' writing accuracy (Gu, 2019). Therefore, Students should get rid of the dependence on translation application.

English teaching needs teacher's care and attention. According to the finding 3, the researcher find that teacher gave less attention on students. For example, the teacher did not correct Chinglish in students' writing. In researcher's opinion, teacher could actively correct students' Chinglish in writing. Error Analysis was of great significance in English teaching. Students' Chinglish in English writing was a kind of feedback to teachers. Through the analysis of Chinglish in students' writing, teachers could understand students' writing. Based on error analysis feedback, teachers could make better teaching plans or adjust teaching plans and methods. Learning was a process of making mistakes and correcting them. If students were not aware of Chinglish in their writing, they might find these expressions acceptable and make the same mistakes again in the future. Timely feedback from teachers helped them become aware of the Chinglish they had created and reduces these expressions. On the contrary, feedback without feedback or delayed feedback would certainly discourage students, reduce their English learning deficiencies, and reduce the determination to correct Chinglish (Lin, 2015).

The teacher's timely correction helped the students to be aware of the Chinglish they have made. On the contrary, any feedback or delayed feedback would severely dampen students' motivation; reduced their ability to write English and their determination to correct Chinglish. Chinglish, which appeared in students' English writing, was a kind of feedback to teachers. By analyzing students' mistakes or Chinglish, teachers could understand the students' language status, their mastery of the language, and the existing problems. Learning was a process of making mistakes and correcting them. If students did not recognize the Chinglish they wrote in their compositions, they might find these expressions acceptable and make the same mistakes again in the future (Wang, 2013).

Recommendations

The research aimed to find the root causes behind the Chinglish of first-year non-English major students at Jiamusi University, which consisted of only a small proportion of the entire population. The findings may not be generalisable to other institutions in various areas. Besides, this study's limitations also point out the direction for further studies, which should use different research instruments to determine the causes.

Acknowledgement

References

Chen, Y. Y. (2015). Research on the teaching of academic English writing based on corpus. *Modern Educational Technology,* 12(2), 84-89.

Ellis, R. (1997). *The study of second language acquisition.* Shanghai: Foreign Language Educational Press.

Fang, C. (2019). Advantages and disadvantages of mobile phone translation software in English learning. *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Engineering*, 264(9), 112-114.

Gu, H. (2019). A brief analysis of the causes of Chinglish. *Journal of Hefei University of Technology*, 4, 119-122.

Guo, X. Y. (2017). Review and prospect of college English writing research in China in the past decade. *College Foreign Language Teaching Research*, 10(1), 75-92.

Li, X. (2014). Development trends and future prospects of English education in China. *Science and Technology Information,* 12(2), 178-180.

Li, X. H. (2011). A brief analysis of the causes of Chinglish. *Journal of Hefei University of Technology*, 4, 119-122.

Lin, B. (2015). Cause analysis of Chinglish. *Journal of Longyan University*, 8(1), 24-29.

Liu, J. (2017). General view on Chinglish. *Overseas English*, 7, 105-106.

Peng, X. F. (2009). Cognitive analysis of causes of Chinglish and discrimination of typical phenomena. *Journal of Southwest University for Nationalities*, 4, 197-199.

Rovinelli, R. J., & Hambleton, R. L. (1977). On the use of content specialists in the assessment of criterion-referenced test item validity. *Dutch Journal of Educational Research*, 2, 49-60.

Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 10, 209- 231.

Tong, X. H. (2011). The influence of cultural differences between English and Chinese on college English writing teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 10(4), 215-216.

Wang, D. (2013). *The influence of Chinglish on oral English learning and communication.* Sichuan: Chengdu university.

Wang, H. (2016). An analysis of the correlation between English writing proficiency and writing habit. *English Square,* 67(7), 164-165.

Zheng, Y. (2014). An analysis of the current situation of English education in China and a study of its improvement. *Science and Education Guide*, 9, 27-32.