

## Chinglish: Unraveling the Cultural and Cognitive Pattern Differences in Cross-Linguistic Communication

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### ABSTRACT

English, as a foreign language in China, is often influenced by the first language (L1), which is Chinese, giving rise to the phenomenon of Chinglish. Chinglish, a distinct English variety, significantly differs from standard English in various aspects. The prominent reason for these differences lies in the variance of culture and thinking patterns. Unfortunately, Chinglish impedes effective cross-cultural communication and hinders the advancement of English learners' proficiency. This study aims to elucidate the current state and specific manifestations of Chinglish concerning vocabulary and syntax from the perspective of cultural and cognitive disparities. The research employs questionnaire surveys and material analysis methods to gather data. Preliminary analysis reveals the widespread prevalence of Chinglish during the English learning process, with the primary vocabulary errors being redundancy, improper word usage, and incorrect collocation. In terms of syntax, word order, tense, and voice are particularly discussed as problematic areas. This paper concludes with suggestions for avoiding Chinglish, aiming to enhance cross-cultural communication and elevate English proficiency levels among Chinese learners.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study is one of very few studies which have investigated Chinglish from cultural and cognitive pattern differences. It contributed to the understanding of Chinglish and the ways to avoid Chinglish in English language learning.

## 1. Introduction

In most advanced democratic countries, the conduct of by-elections is an integral part in

English, not only as first and second language, is widely used all over the world, it is now the language most widely taught as a foreign language in over 100 countries, such as China, Russia, Germany, Spain, Egypt and Brazil (Crystal, 2003, p.5). English as a lingua franca, it takes into consideration not only the various roles English plays in several contexts, but also its diverse users who take part in the shaping and progress of the language. Bearing this in mind, English as a foreign language (ELF) comprises “*the obvious need for linguistic knowledge, but it also incorporates other aspects like intercultural awareness*” (Cavalheiro, 2018, p. 71-72). In China, Chinese is the mother tongue or first language (L1), but due to the country’s reform, economic development, and the government’s emphasis on English education, English is becoming increasingly important and appreciated. English is a compulsory course from the third grade of primary school until university in most parts of China. As Kirkpatrick and Schaller-Schwane (2022) highlighted “[n]otwithstanding the inherent variability within ELF, a number of non-standard morphosyntactic forms appear to be shared by speakers”. As a result of the English learning process, Chinglish has become a common phenomenon in China. Some Chinglish phrases have even gained widespread popularity in China, such as “good good study, day day up”, “people mountain, people sea”, and “give you some colour to see see”. Chinglish is seen as an incorrect English variant influenced by Chinese. Its formation is influenced by the learners’ mother tongue, as English learners in China initially use typical Chinese thinking when learning English, rather than adopting an English thinking approach. They often mechanically apply Chinese vocabulary, sentence structures, and even discourse patterns to English learning. For instance, the sentence “*good good study, day day up*” in Chinese means “study hard and make progress every day,” but when directly translated into English, it results in ungrammatical language. Language is an integral part of culture, and it reflects the external form of a thinking mode. English and Chinese belong to different language systems, and their cultures and thinking modes are inherently different. These differences are the primary reasons for the emergence of Chinglish. Therefore, this paper discusses the causes and manifestations of Chinglish from the perspectives of vocabulary and syntax, emphasizing the cultural and thinking mode disparities between Chinese and English. The paper also proposes practical countermeasures to reduce Chinglish, aiming to improve cross-cultural communication and enhance the effectiveness of English teaching.

### 1.1. Objectives of Research

- i. To explore the current situation of Chinglish usage.
- ii. To investigate the aspects in which Chinglish exists within the context of English learning.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Chinglish and Chinese English

In the research of Chinglish, scholars have consistently focused on differentiating between Chinglish and China English. Therefore, we believe that it is essential to clarify the definitions of Chinglish and China English. Since the 1980s, scholars have studied Chinglish and provided different definitions of it. Among these, the most representative figure abroad is Pinkham (2000), who described Chinglish as “*that misshapen, hybrid language that is neither English nor Chinese but that might be described as ‘English with Chinese characteristics’*” (p.1). In China, the most comprehensive definition of Chinglish comes from Yanchang and Runqing (1989). They assert that Chinglish refers to speech or

writing that shows the interference of Chinese influence. Some sentences may be literal word-to-word translations of Chinese expressions. Chinglish may be grammatically correct, but the choice of words or phrases and the manner of expression do not conform to Standard English usage. Although understanding may not be a problem, Chinglish is considered unacceptable.

Regarding China English, [Chuangui \(1980\)](#) posits that “*English is the language of the English people, and other English speakers should certainly adhere to the idiomatic ways of the English people. However, each country possesses its unique characteristics. Concerning China, there are always some typical Chinese expressions used in written or oral English*”. He supports his point by citing examples such as “The Four Books” and “The Five Classics”. (“The Four Books” includes *The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, The Analects of Confucius* and *The Mencius*. “The Five Classics” includes *The Book of Songs, The Book of History, The Book of Changes, The Book of Rites* and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*. “The Four Books” and “The Five Classics” provide detailed records of historical facts in politics, military, diplomacy, culture, and other aspects of China's early ideological and cultural development, as well as the significant thoughts of philosophers like Confucius and Mencius. They are ancient classics that hold a prominent position among the literary works of Chinese traditional culture.

By comparing Chinglish and China English, we can conclude that Chinglish is essentially incorrect English influenced by rigid Chinese rules and habits. It can be seen as an English variant affected by Chinese. Chinglish does not conform to the Western way of thinking, standard English rules, and collocations, which can lead to misunderstandings and confusion in cross-cultural exchanges. On the other hand, China English is correct English that adheres to English norms. It reflects China's unique culture and Chinese characteristics in its content.

## 2.2. Interlanguage and Fossilization

“Chinglish” is a common phenomenon in the process of Chinese English learners learning and applying English. It serves as an “interlanguage”, representing a transitional stage between learners’ non-standard expressions and the standard target language. [Selinker \(1972\)](#) first proposed the term “interlanguage” in 1969 and officially published his paper “Interlanguage” in 1972, establishing its significant position in the theory of second language acquisition. Fossilization occurs when scholars cease to develop their interlanguage continuum and fail to reach the target language state. Some language errors become fixed as language habits and cannot be altered through further learning. [Selinker \(1972\)](#) identifies five processes of interlanguage construction, among which includes mother tongue interference. He mentions that some rules and subsystems of a learner’s interlanguage may be transferred from the first language. As a language variant between the mother tongue and the target language, interlanguage exhibits both the characteristics of the mother tongue and the target language. For instance, expressions like “*good good study, day day up*”, “*Long time no see*” and “*People mountain, People sea*” are examples of mechanical translation made by Chinese English learners between Chinese and English meanings. They do not adhere to the rules of either Chinese or standard English. When most Chinese English learners try to express the idea of “studying hard and making progress every day”, they tend to use “good study, day, day up” instead of the correct translation.

### 3. Research Method

#### 3.1. Research Approach

A mixed- method approach was conducted in this study. A survey method was employed firstly to address research question one. A document analysis method was conducted to figure out research question two.

#### 3.2. Research Instrument

An open-ended questionnaire was employed as one of the instrument to collect data. The questionnaire was designed to include relevant questions about Chinglish, aiming to explore the prevalence of Chinglish in English learning, students' understanding of Chinglish and the specific aspects in which Chinglish exists. In addition, the materials for documents analysis were derived from the test papers taken by sophomores during one English translation class test last semester.

#### 3.3. Research Subject

Convenience sampling was used to collect survey responses from sophomore students in a university of China. Eventually 160 students were volunteered to participate in this study. Sophomore students were chosen for the reason that they are required to pass College English Test Band 4 (CET4), leading them to place greater emphasis on English. Additionally, being in their second year of college, they have more exposure to the widely spread Chinglish. Moreover, these students possess some ability to distinguish Chinglish expressions. Regarding the sample of materials collected for document analysis, altogether 30 pieces of test papers were collected from one English translation class.

#### 3.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics was firstly conducted to analyze data regarding the five most commonly used Chinglish sentences from the questionnaire. The materials gathered for documents analysis were then analyzed by looking at the error. These errors were analyzed using thematic analysis to categorize the errors made by the students. [Braun and Clarke's \(2012\)](#) six steps of reflexive thematic analysis guided the process of identifying patterns and categories within the qualitative data.

### 4. Findings and Discussion

There is no doubt that Chinglish does exist in the process of students' English learning. To investigate the current situation of Chinglish usage, the questionnaire survey was conducted. [Table 1](#) shows one of the questions included in the questionnaire survey. The five Chinglish statements mentioned above are the top five sentences that students are most familiar with. It is evident that every student knows "*good good study, day day up*". When questioned, the students readily recognize these as Chinglish statements. However, when asked about the correct translation, the students often need to take some time to think about it. This observation strongly indicates the widespread existence of Chinglish in the process of English learning. Therefore, the author collects students' translation materials to analyze the specific aspects in which Chinglish exists.

Table 1: One sample question in the questionnaire

Question : What Chinglish expressions have you seen in your life and study?	
Expressions	Rates
Good good study, day day up.	100%
People mountain people sea	90%
No zuo, No die	76.67%
Give you some color to see see	73%
Open/close the light	66.67%

#### 4.1. Vocabulary

By analyzing students' translation materials, we identify that Chinglish primarily exists in the following aspects concerning vocabulary: (1) Redundancy; (2) Improper use of words, and (3) Improper collocation. These aspects will be analyzed in detail below.

##### 4.1.1. Redundancy

As exemplified by Pinkham (2000, p.26) in her book *The Translator's Guide to Chinglish*, many adjectives and adverbs carried over into translation from Chinese originals are often redundant in English. That means that their sense is already contained or implied in the word they modify or in some other element of the sentence.

For instance, Pinkham (2000) mentions examples like "advance forecasts" and "female businesswoman Liu Zhihua", which have been seen in Chinese publications. In these examples, the word "forecast" already includes the meaning of "advance", and the word "businesswoman" implies that Liu Zhihua is female. Therefore, adding "advance" and "female" is unnecessary, but when translated word by word, these redundant elements appear in Chinese. In the materials collected from the students, this phenomenon can also be observed.

Example 1:

*We agree to say that school offers us the best methods of acquiring knowledge. (We agree that school offers us the best methods of acquiring knowledge.)*

"Agree to say that" is typical Chinglish, agree that actually means agree the statement which included the meaning of "say".

##### 4.1.2. Improper Use of Words

English and Chinese words do not always have one-to-one equivalents, and due to cultural differences, their extended and connotative meanings are not exactly the same. Consequently, improper use of words is quite common in English-Chinese translation. This can be illustrated with an example from Jikuang and Xiaojia (2005): "*I doubt* (means *huai yi* in Chinese) *he isn't telling the truth*" (correctly translated as "I suspect he isn't telling the truth"). The Chinese phrase "*huai yi*" has two commonly used English counterparts, "doubt" and "suspect". Although they have similar meanings in Chinese, they differ in their use in English. "doubt" means to believe that something may not be true or is unlikely, while "suspect" means to think that something probably exists, is true, or will happen. Based on the Chinese meaning, "suspect" should be used instead of "doubt" in this sentence.

Example 2 :

这是我的爱人 (ai ren)。

*This is my lover. (This is my wife.)*

“*Ai ren*” in Chinese culture refers not only to the person you love, but also to your wife. In this context, when introducing someone, it refers to your wife. However, the meaning in English is very different. “*Lover*” denotes a partner in a romantic or sexual relationship or someone with whom a married person is having a love affair. Therefore, in this sentence, “*lover*” should be changed to “*wife*”.

#### 4.1.3. Improper Collocation

Collocation error is one of the difficulties for Chinese students in learning English and is a common area where they tend to make mistakes. Influenced by Chinese, students often translate literally without considering the authentic English collocations. For example, they might use expressions such as “*deep sleep*”, “*open the light*”, “*the answer of the question*”, and “*old customer*” whereas the correct authentic English expression should be “*sound sleep*”, “*turn on the light*”, “*the answer to the question*”, “*regular customer*”.

Example 3 :

*Reading can increase my words, rich my knowledge and enlarge my eyesight. (Reading can enlarge my vocabulary, rich my knowledge and expand my horizon.)*

Words is the plural form of “*word*”, in this sentence, it actually refers to the number of words used. However, there is a specialized term for this, which is “*vocabulary*”. The verbs that commonly collocate with “*vocabulary*” are “*expand*” or “*enlarge*”. For example, using “*enlarge my eyesight*” is also a typical Chinglish expression. “*Eyesight*” means “*field of vision*”, which is the range that your eyes can see in the literal sense. In English, the correct phrase with the same meaning should be “*open my mind*” or “*expand my horizon*”.

## 4.2. Syntax

### 4.2.1. Word Order

There are great differences in the position of sentence components between English and Chinese. In English, the core and essential information is typically expressed at the beginning of the sentence. Modifying components and clauses are often placed after the words they modify. Conversely in Chinese, modifying components and clauses are often placed before the modified words. This difference often leads to word order errors, especially in spoken English. Examples of such errors are plentiful, as seen in phrases like “*good good study, day day up*” and others. For instance, sentences like “*you me you me (That makes the two of us)*”, “*watch sister (younger female cousin)*,” and “*How are you? How old are you (Why you, why always you)*” are frequently encountered, demonstrating the common occurrence of word order mistakes.

Example 4:

*She very much likes eating fish. (She likes eating fish very much.)*

The position error of “very much” is a common mistake made by Chinese students. This mistake arises from the influence of Chinese language thinking patterns, where “very much” is placed before the modifier “like” in Chinese word order. However, in English “very much” is typically placed at the end of a sentence.

#### 4.2.2. Tenses

There are 16 tenses in English, some of which have only slight differences. The expression forms of tenses are primarily reflected in the changes of verbs, while Chinese does not have a concept of tenses. As a result, many verbs in English do not have corresponding forms in Chinese. For instance, modal verbs do not exist in Chinese. Chinese mainly employs auxiliary words, adverbs, and time markers to convey the changes of tenses in English.

Example 5 :

迈克很累，他刚刚一直在努力工作。

*Mike is very tired, he worked hard just now.* (Mike is very tired, he has been working hard.)

Using the past tense to express this sentence is a literal translation. However, from the perspective of the logical relationship in English, “Mike is tired” and “he worked hard” do not have an inevitable connection. They are two separate sentences describing Mike's current state and his past actions. The present perfect continuous tense indicates an action that started in the past and has just ended recently, showing time continuity.

#### 4.2.3. Voice

Passive voice is a common grammatical phenomenon in English, surpassing its use and quantity in Chinese. Particularly in formal written styles like science and technology style and news articles, passive voice is prevalent. Its use in contexts imparts objectivity and fairness and avoids conveying a sense of judgment. Conversely, passive voice is rarely used in Chinese sentences. In Chinese culture, the emphasis is on the importance of people, where human behavior dominates everything. On the other hand, English culture emphasizes objectivity.

Example 6:

水泄露破坏了生产线。

*A water leak damaged our production line.* (Our production line was damaged by a water leak.)

On the surface, there may be nothing wrong with translating into the active voice, but it becomes evident that it reflects a purely Chinese way of thinking, resulting in Chinglish. Translating into the passive voice represents authentic English.

## 5. Ways to Avoid Chinglish

### 5.1. Enhance Bilingual Competence

Enhancing bilingual competence can reduce the degree of mother tongue interference and interlanguage fossilization. English learners should excel at comprehending the

general rules of both their mother tongue language and the target language and develop a comprehensive perspective on language learning.

## **5.2. Cultivate Cross-cultural Awareness**

The cultivation of cross-cultural awareness is a vital aspect of avoiding Chinglish. English learners should actively explore the cultural customs, politics, economy, religion and people's way of life in English-speaking countries as part of their daily life. They should also gain understanding of the cultural connotations behind common idioms and proverbs in English. Language serves as a carrier of culture, and culture finds expression through language. Consequently, cultivating more cross-cultural awareness will not only aid in overcoming the Chinglish phenomenon but also foster English learners' interest in the language.

## **5.3. Comparative Analysis and Error Analysis**

In fact, after a prolonged period of learning, most English learners have built a solid foundation in English and have accumulated considerable knowledge of English grammar, vocabulary and common expressions. At times, English learners might even identify mistakes in Chinglish on their own. Therefore, English learners should engage in deeper thinking and careful consideration while using English. They should contemplate whether their sentences and paragraphs adhere to English conventions and thinking patterns. Engaging in more comparative and errors analysis will aid in avoiding Chinglish.

## **6. Conclusion**

Chinglish frequently emerges in the process of Chinese English learners' language acquisition and application. This paper primarily analyzes Chinglish from the perspective of cultural and thinking differences, focusing on vocabulary and syntax. The research concludes that Chinglish is prevalent among Chinese English learners, representing an interlanguage and petrified English rather than standard English. Consequently, during English learning, learners should consciously strive to overcome Chinglish, accumulate English language knowledge, reduce the influence of their mother tongue, and cultivate cross-cultural awareness. By doing so, they can achieve better cross-cultural communication and more efficient English language learning.

## **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Malaysia Sabah. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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