

# The Causes of Chinglish of Chinese Students

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## Abstract

**Based on the theory of interlanguage, the phenomenon of fossilization, and contrastive analysis, this paper illustrates the causes of Chinglish in students' learning by giving examples. It reveals that Chinglish is closely related to cultural differences and linguistic differences which are gaps between Chinese and English. In addition, students' inadequate exposure to authentic English and insufficient practice can turn their language errors gradually into a habit. Hence, it can be essential to further analyze the causes of Chinglish from these three aspects.**

## Keywords

**Fossilization; Interlanguage; Chinglish; Cultural Differences; Linguistic Differences; Inadequate Exposure; Insufficient Practice.**

## 1. Introduction

English has been designated a compulsory course for Chinese students from elementary school to university for more than 40 years. However, a common phenomenon—Chinglish has occurred during the process of second language acquisition, which can be an obstacle for students in their way of learning English as well as a language barrier to China's international communication.

A scholar defines Chinglish in this way: it [Chinglish] is a kind of developmental language produced in the process of creative construction of second language acquisition, and it reflects the inevitable national psychology as well as language phenomenon of Chinese learners in the process of English learning as well [1]. In other words, Chinglish is non-idiomatic English with Chinese characteristics produced by Chinese learners under the influence of Chinese cultural and linguistic characteristics, and it has its own rules.

## 2. Theoretical Perspective

The causes of Chinglish are intimately related to the fossilization phenomenon of interlanguage theory. The native language of language learners is called L1, and the second language they are learning is known as L2 (target language). Interlanguage means that during second language acquisition, L3 (interlanguage) is produced, but it is neither identical to L1 nor L2. Thus, Ellis defines interlanguage as "a unique linguistics system" [2]. In addition, the learners' language development can be at a standstill before the interlanguage reaches the target language with some errors eventually becoming language habits, which is named fossilization phenomenon [1]. In this paper, English and Chinese are correspondingly L1 and L2; therefore, Chinglish is L3, a phenomenon of fossilization. Based on the fossilization phenomenon of interlanguage theory and contrastive analysis, this paper aims to reveal the causes of Chinglish which include cultural differences, linguistic differences, and students' inadequate exposure to authentic English and deficient practice.

### 3. Causes of Chinglish

#### 3.1. Cultural Differences

Wang argues that “Language is the best carrier of our history, culture, and spirit; cultural differences will be the gap [bridge] between languages”[3]. In other words, cultural differences are the key factor in the formation of Chinglish.

##### 3.1.1. Different Modes of Thinking

Different modes of thinking are the first gap between Chinese and English. In Chinese tradition, people think in a circuitous and implicit way whereas the English thought pattern is more direct and explicit. The (a) sentence below shows the explicit thought pattern and (b) is its implicit counterpart:

(a) He finally became the most successful person though he was a poor performer at school.

(b) Though he was a poor performer at school, he finally became the most successful person.

In (a), the paramount information “he finally became the most successful person” comes first and then the clause; whereas (b) gives the clause first and then the paramount information. The different sentence order is related to different thinking modes of Chinese and English.

##### 3.1.2. Non-equivalence of Culture-loaded Objects

Another gap between the two cultures is the non-equivalence of culture-loaded objects. In English, “medium-well” is used to show the doneness of meat. However, there is no such expression in Chinese because Chinese people only eat well-done meat. Hence, Chinglish such as “seventh-level cooked meat” is thus produced. In a word, different modes of thinking and non-equivalence of culture-loaded objects are two cultural gaps that lead to the formation of Chinglish.

#### 3.2. Linguistic Differences

Differences in linguistics are another critical cause of Chinglish, which is reflected in the levels of phrase, grammar, and text.

##### 3.2.1. The Level of Phrase

At the level of the phrase, the majority of collocation errors of L2 learners, which can be traced to L1’s influence, represent a common Chinglish phenomenon [4]. The phrases “kick football” and “write homework” are directly translated from Chinese; however, the proper phrases in English should be “play football” and “do homework”.

##### 3.2.2. The Level of Grammar

Then, Chinglish in the level of grammar is mainly caused by the English grammatical items that do not have existences in Chinese [1]. There are no specific marks of verbs in the tense and the third person subject in Chinese. And students always ignore verb conjugations at the beginning of English study. The following sentences could illustrate this point:

(a) She go (goes) to school.

(b) We achieve (have achieved) gender equality already.

(c) He becomed (became) angry.

The proper verb in (a) should be “goes”, and the reason for this kind of Chinglish is that there is no conjugation of the verb in Chinese when the subject is “she”. The error in (b) is caused under the influence of Chinese, in which the present perfect tense and simple present share the same verb form. The misuse of “becomed” in (c) is because the learner applies the general verb conjugation rules to particular words.

### 3.2.3. The Level of Text

In terms of Chinglish in the level of text, lack of coherence and cohesion between sentences is a principal problem. It is mainly because English is a ruled-by-law language that gives prominence to hypotaxis whereas Chinese is a ruled-by-meaning language that pays attention to parataxis. Consequently, students seldom use conjunctions in English writing before fully grasping the characteristics of English due to the influence of parataxis. For example,

(a) 1998 was the United Nations' designated International Ocean Year, Chinese government would take this opportunity, introduce China's marine affairs' development.

People can easily understand it but it is typical Chinglish and not proper in English. The proper one should be:

(b) 1998 was designated as the International Ocean Year by the United Nations, and the Chinese government would like to take this opportunity to introduce the development of China's marine affairs to this world. Thus, linguistic differences between Chinese and English in the level of phrase, grammar, and text can cause Chinglish before the learners completely distinguish the differences.

### 3.3. Inadequate Exposure and Deficient Practice

Furthermore, students' inadequate exposure to authentic English and insufficient practice can also lead to the formation of Chinglish. Xu argues that the learners can be less likely influenced by the mother-tongue interference if they are competent enough in the second language [5]. So deficient input of English is a major impediment to achieving proficiency in English. Input is the base of language learning so the lack of exposure to native English counts against broadening knowledge of language, culture, and society for students. In addition, "active use of the target language, with a strong emphasis on practice in naturalistic situations, was the most important factor in the development of proficiency in a second language" [6]. In other words, insufficient and incorrect practice could lead to students' poor abilities in language learning including speaking, writing, listening, and reading, and result in erroneous collocations, grammar, and sentence structures. Therefore, insufficient exposure and practice are not conducive to the proficiency of English learners and lead to the formation of Chinglish.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Chinglish is a kind of interlanguage produced during Chinese learners' second language (English) acquisition. It is systematic, dynamic, and variable. The paper discusses the causes of Chinglish including the interference of cultural differences and linguistic differences between English and Chinese, and students' deficient exposure to and practice of idiomatic English. Different modes of thinking and non-equivalence of culture-loaded objects are the two gaps between Chinese and English. Moreover, it also explores the formation of Chinglish in the levels of phrase, grammar, and text. This is done by contrastively analyzing the examples of Chinese, English, and Chinglish. As for English learners, it is of vital importance to learn more about English, recognize the differences in culture and linguistics between Chinese and English, and practice more to overcome Chinglish in English learning.

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