

# Conquering Chinese English in the ESL Classroom

Helena Prins  
helenaprins [[at]] gmail.com  
(Tainan, Taiwan)

## Defining the Problem

Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in Taiwan is for the most part pleasant and exciting. Students are eager to learn. However, one of the frustrations ESL teachers often complain about is that students seem to make the same mistakes repetitively. Learners will often transfer the rules of their first language to express something in their second language. This transference happens when they have insufficient knowledge of the rules of the second language (Cook, 2001). In Taiwan, students fall back on the rules of their first language (Mandarin) when they do not know the rules of the second language (English). The result is a poor form of English, informally referred to as "Chinglish". The errors that occur are also called language interference errors. These errors affect students' academic performance in English. Foreign teachers with limited knowledge of Mandarin may not even know why the same kinds of errors are being made repeatedly. Teachers feel frustrated and discouraged. To find textbooks that provide information on common interference errors and ways to "teach" them, is hard. Knowing where these errors come from may guide teachers to deal with these interference errors effectively. This article will identify some of the most common errors made by Taiwanese students in writing, as well as offer some strategies for teachers to use in the ESL classroom.

## Where Does Chinglish Come From?

There are a number of causes leading to language interference errors. Errors are chiefly due to differences between the two languages, structurally and phonologically. The greater the difference, the more acute the learning difficulties are. The differences between English and Mandarin are many. These differences lead to confusion of the appropriate gender and number inflection for subject and object pronouns. For example, students confuse "he with she" and "him with her" and vice versa. In spoken Mandarin they do not have pronouns indicating the gender of the object or subject! Even an intermediate student can be heard saying, "I love my husband. She is so handsome." When one looks at sentences in Mandarin, verbs frequently appear in the final position as opposed to English verbs that appear in the middle of sentences.

Another example of a big difference between the languages is that in Mandarin, nouns stay the same, but "counting words" are used to indicate plural. Students do not add the -s to plurals. It is common to hear sentences like "Monkeys like to eat banana." The first noun was pluralized, but not the second noun. This is not only a grammatical error in writing, but happens frequently in speaking too. Mandarin speakers use a specific time phrase to mark the time. Typical sentences that can be found in the writing and speaking of ESL learners are "I yesterday eat cake" and "She eat rice". The correct form, "I ate cake yesterday" and "She eats rice" would be considered redundant in a Mandarin way of thinking!

There is no lexical equivalent for the definite article "the". Students are confused about when to use it and when to omit it. They often place the definite article in front of a proper name. For example, they often produce, "I want to go to the Taipei for the weekend." Mandarin uses double transitions which English speakers consider redundant. To Mandarin speakers it is logical to say, "Because Kate is English, therefore Kate can speak English." Multi-syllabic words cause confusion for since ESL learners since most words in Mandarin tend to have one morpheme and Mandarin sentences are shorter. Mandarin nouns, adjectives and adverbs do not show suffixes as they do in English. The word "happy" can be a noun, adverb and adjective in Mandarin. Many ESL teachers in Taiwan consider the incorrect use of adverbs and adjectives the most common interference errors. Students produce English such as "You can sing beautiful" instead of "You can sing beautifully". These reoccurring errors hinder students' English performance in tests and English assignments and may also be detrimental to their confidence in using their second language.

As stated earlier, an insufficient knowledge of the second language's grammar rules, forces students to fall back on the rules of their first language. Language interference errors occur. For example, students repeatedly ignore the agreement between the verb and

subject. Another common mistake students make is the use of a comma instead of a period at the end of a sentence. In Mandarin sentences are separated with the use of a comma. Since many ESL schools put the main focus on teaching communication skills, grammar is often neglected. This poses a big problem for elementary school students. They enter elementary school with acceptable speaking skills but they have tremendous difficulty in writing English sentences and paragraphs. Many schools underestimate the value of teaching grammar at an earlier age. They think grammar is too abstract. Lack of age and developmentally appropriate English grammar resources specifically designed for Taiwanese children, add to the problem.

It is hard to address language interference errors in schools with a No-Mandarin-During-English-Time-policy. Children do not get the opportunity to make the necessary links and comparisons between English and Mandarin. Again, though knowledge of the students' first language is not compulsory, it may help teachers in understanding the interference errors made by students.

## How to Limit Language Interference Errors

1. Error Analysis provides insight into the process of language acquisition. Determining the source of an error constitutes a major portion of the teacher's time prior to actual teaching but it is not the only task to be considered. Once the teacher has identified the errors, he or she must prioritize the mistakes and determine which ones to teach immediately and which ones "to put on a back burner." This task cannot be stressed enough because the sequencing of errors can radically affect the way in which a student responds to language teaching. It is not unusual, for instance, for a student to be devastated when confronted with 20 to 30 different problems to solve in one essay. It is the teacher's responsibility to provide a positive learning experience for the student by first determining the student's level of proficiency and selecting accordingly specific errors to be discussed in a specific sequence. Beginning students should concentrate on global errors, those which inhibit their communication. The more advanced student ought not to exhibit so many global errors and may need and want to have all the errors identified and explained if necessary. Teachers can use a simple frequency table to list and count the errors made by each student. Give students a 50-word assignment and document the errors. Teachers can then discuss the errors with the class or individually.

2. The effective use of various auditory and visual mode instructions can reduce interference during encoding processes. According to Chung (2003) second language words were better remembered when first language words were presented auditory with the visually presented second language word. An example of a visual reminder may be for teachers to write the phonetic "in" versus "en" on the board, highlighting to students what they've said. Teachers should follow that up by writing the phonetic "en" on the board to be a visual reminder of what has been said as a pronunciation interference error.

3. How teachers provide feedback on language interference errors can be detrimental or conducive in the acquisition of a second language. It can be quite harmful to treat errors as "diseases" or "pathological situations". The correction of every error as soon as it occurs can be discouraging. Some of the negative consequences can include anxiety, fear of making an error, the development of avoidance strategies, reduced motivation for participation and lack of trust towards the teacher. Karra (2006) promotes self-correction as an efficient way to identify errors. Self-correction can be very effective when it is done with the help of children's classmates. The younger the children are, the more they like to cooperate and the self-correction process seems less intimidating. Self-correction is a very effective way of limiting interference errors in students' writing tasks. The following is a suggested four-step-approach for self-correction. This process is practical and can be used for any ESL class, not only in the Taiwanese ESL classroom. The process is based on four questions the teacher provides to the students. Students will read their own work four times while answering all four questions one at a time. For each step students have to focus on only one aspect of their piece of writing.

- Highlight the verbs and check the tenses.
- Double check prepositions.
- Concentrate on nouns – spelling and the agreement between the subject and the verb.
- Correct potential personal mistakes.

4. Peer-correction may benefit not only the student correcting the errors, but it promotes social interaction in the students' second language. Students may feel more comfortable discussing their work with a peer, than with the foreign teacher in front of the class.

5. Teachers should revise the way in which new vocabulary are presented and selected. A different manner may make learning easier. For example, Tinkham (1997) illustrates how semantic clustering of new second language vocabulary serves as a detriment to the learning process. An example of a semantic cluster is peach, apple, pear, watermelon, etc. These are the names of fruit. On the other hand, thematic clustering serves as a facilitator of learning. Thematic clusters are cognitively based as well as based upon

psychological associations between clustered words. An example of such a cluster is frog, pond, hop, slippery, green, swim. Here the common thematic concept is frog.

6. Repetition plays a very important role in the ESL classroom. Recent research has stated the importance of second language learner's use of repetition for conversational participation and language learning (Veslemoy, 2005). Veslemoy stated that repetition helps students to produce more language, while also formulating what to say next. Repetition is a strategy that may scaffold participation when young children are exposed to a second language for the first time. Repetition enhances comprehension, because it provides learners with opportunities to process input. Teachers can use repetition as a feedback technique. Teachers should repeat the incorrect sentence a student makes with the corrected grammar and sentence structure. In this way the teacher does not hinder the flow of the conversation to point out the grammar mistake. The teacher can keep the conversation flowing by only repeating the student's incorrect language with the correct form of English. The benefit of this technique lies in the fact that students will not get discouraged by a continual interruption when they make a mistake. By hearing pure and correct language, learning can still take place. Recent research (Rydland & Aukrust, 2005) has stated the importance of second language learner's use of repetition for conversational participation and language learning. When a student says "I better now", teachers can echo this by repeating the correct English, "I am better now".

7. Since students fall back on the rules of the first language when they do not know the rules of the second language, teachers will have to find ways of introducing grammar rules in a "child-friendly" way in kindergarten classes already. One practical and fun idea for young learners would be to have a "Chinglish" board where the correct and incorrect grammar are displayed and the children can police themselves and earn reward points for correcting other children's "Chinglish".

8. A solution that may not be popular is the suggestion that schools should revise their NO CHINESE DURING ENGLISH TIME-policy. Instead of seeing students' minds as a tabula rasa, a clean slate, English teachers can recognize students' previous experiences with language and learning and can build on them, and they can expand on learners' linguistic knowledge by employing their first language intelligently. There is no evidence that the use of the first language in the classroom, constrains the learning of the second language. To prevent the over-use of Mandarin in the classroom, Ku (2004) made the following suggestions:

- Use the students' first language for class management such as disciplining students, organizing activities or giving activity instructions.
- Use the students' first language to link the thoughts of first and second language, such as for explaining grammar and conveying the meaning of the second language.
- Use the first language to maintain students' collaborative dialogue in their second language by switching unfamiliar words of the second language to the first language.

It is hard to address these errors in schools with a No-Mandarin-During-English-Time-policy. Children do not get the opportunity to make the necessary links and comparisons between English and Mandarin. Again, though knowledge of the students' first language is not compulsory, it may help teachers in understanding the interference errors made by students. By relaxing the No-Mandarin-policy, students may experience a sense of mutual appreciation of each other's language.

## Conclusion

In general, it is important to reform the way English is taught in Taiwanese schools. The most crucial improvement needed lies in the adoption of methods aimed at enhancing students communicative abilities. Instead of making students spend all or most of their time memorizing grammatical rules, English classes should focus on developing the abilities to speak and write the language. Toward this goal, the textbooks that are used in schools for teaching English should be drastically revised or rewritten. Staff recruitment as well as parental and auxiliary staff instruction may be needed if teachers want to make an impact on more than just their classroom.

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