

The Implement of Language Pledge in China's Oral English Class

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the results of a questionnaire survey on the implement of the language pledge in some oral courses of English majors in China's university, which is representative and involves in the variables including both the subjective factor of mentality, and objective factors of sociality and cultural identify. The emphasis is put on the difficulties students meet in executing the language pledge, such as negative cultural transfer, negative mother-tongue transfer, inter-language fossilization, and improper communicative approaches. The countermeasures are put forward afterwards, which suggest that the language pledge must be revised and proved, besides the practicability and flexibility must be taken into consideration so that "to speak English only" is a mission possible to accomplish.

Keywords: Language Pledge, negative cultural transfer, inter-language fossilization, improper communicative approaches, countermeasures

1. Introduction

Language Pledge was first sponsored by Summer Schools of Middlebury College. As it stipulates, all the students who come into this school for learning foreign languages must sign a contract beforehand, promising to listen, read, speak, and write only in the target languages. Besides, once the students break their promises, they would be punished for expelling their status as a student in Middlebury. The Language Pledge aims at building up a natural language environment of the target language up to the hilt, to cultivate students a habit of expressing and thinking in the target language by subconscious, and to help students improve their skills of using the target languages, internalizing the communicative structure and cultural implication of the target languages (Dulay, 1982:14-16).

In several decades' implement, the Language Pledge has got great success in Summer Schools of Middlebury College, and gained many public praises in the field of foreign language education. Then following the Summer Schools of Middlebury College, almost all American intensive language programs adopt to this method, and regard it as one of the criteria to measure whether a language program is successful or not.

Imitating the pattern of Middlebury College, many programs at abroad, mandate that students "speak Chinese only" at all times when they are in an intensive Chinese language program. A majority of study abroad programs have even made a disciplinary procedure that students have to sign a language pledge right upon their arrival at the program. Relevantly, at home, this pattern appears in the opposite way, for example, we choose English as target language, and then we try our best to create environment where only English exists, for Chinese students usually begin learning English after they have mastered their mother tongue, which has a strong and inevitable effect on their English learning. As Chinese and English have a lot of differences with each other, such as language forms, language rules, articulatory systems, and cultural reasoning, etc. so it is obviously believed that Chinese has more negative transfer to English learning than positive transfer, then the environment where only English exists is quite needed. And one of the practical circumstances is the oral course, in which all teachers and students clearly know that the method of total penetration makes much contribution to improve students' skills of speaking and using foreign language.

However, how about the actual circumstances? Being the planners of this program, they make out the Language Pledge for all their pains. But the beneficial owners maybe are not willing to abide the pledge. In fact, the pledge has been constantly violated.

In the past few years, I have ever held counsel with some freshmen and junior students who major in English, and found that they all inevitably speak Chinese in their oral class to some degree whether their English is good or not. “Breaking the contract” seems to be an open secret, which is an embarrassing phenomenon to the pledge of “speaking English only”. Foreign teachers either simply put on a deaf ear to the situation, or constantly remind students of the pledge but to no avail. Persistence in enforcing the pledge can often lead to defiance.

According to the students’ feedback, we believe that, the planners and performers should not turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to this unfavorable situation any more, instead, they had better be serious with it. We should rethink the feasibility of this language pledge from the angle of students. The specific points are as follows: Is it really necessary to carry out the Language Pledge? How frequently do the students break the pledge? What are the reasons for students speaking Chinese in oral class? What are the views of students to the supervision from their teachers? Next part is an initial survey in the form of questionnaire, on which the writer spent nearly three months, making paper, giving out paper, taking back and making analysis.

2. A Questionnaire Survey on the Implement of Language Pledge in Oral English Class

2.1 Objective

This survey aims at investigating the application of Language Pledge in oral English classes, focuses on analyzing the difficulties students meet in the process of second language learning, and puts forward some practical strategies. The objective is to drive the Language Pledge practicing successfully, conduct students to speak more and better English, and totally, to improve their English learning. .

2.2 Participants

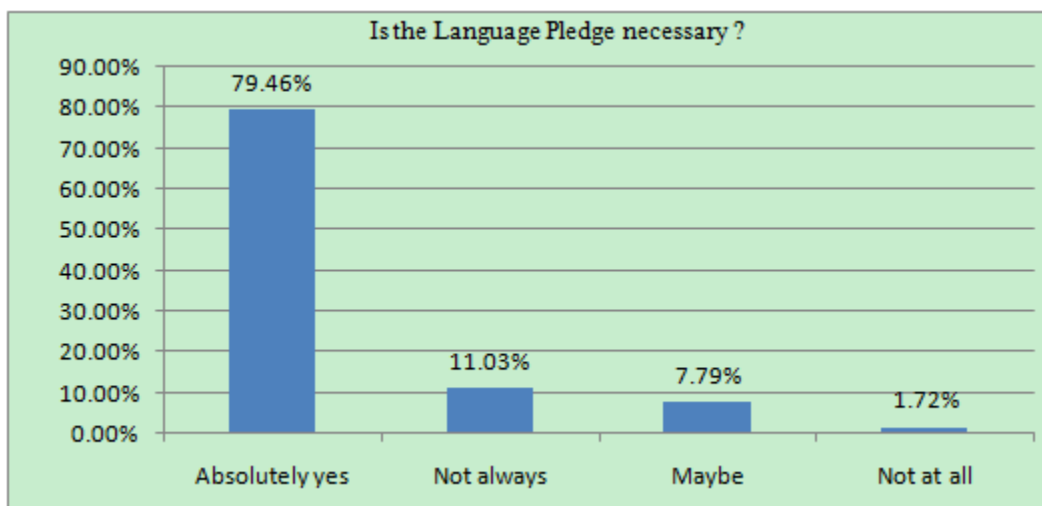
The participants are English majors in Hubei University for Nationalities, from eighteen to twenty-one years old. They have oral English classes twice a week in which they are required to speak English only.

2.3 An Analysis of Results

The total number of this questionnaire is 160, among which 153 papers have been taken back, yet 148 papers are resultful. The following part is to analyze and discuss the 148 effective questionnaires.

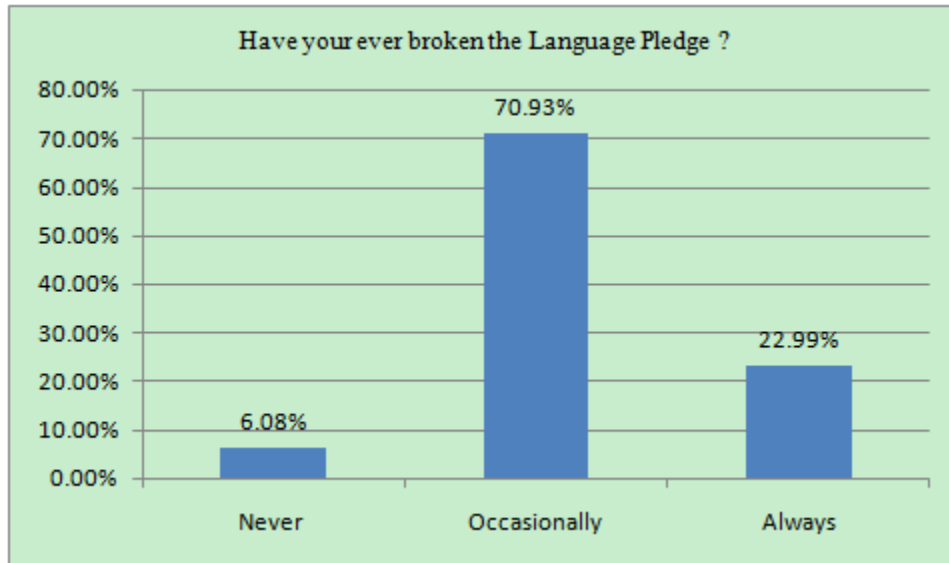
The questionnaire includes seven multiple-choice questions, all of which are written in English clearly and divided into two parts, one of which asks about the Language Pledge itself and the other is related to the supervision from teachers and the implement of the Language Pledge.

First question:



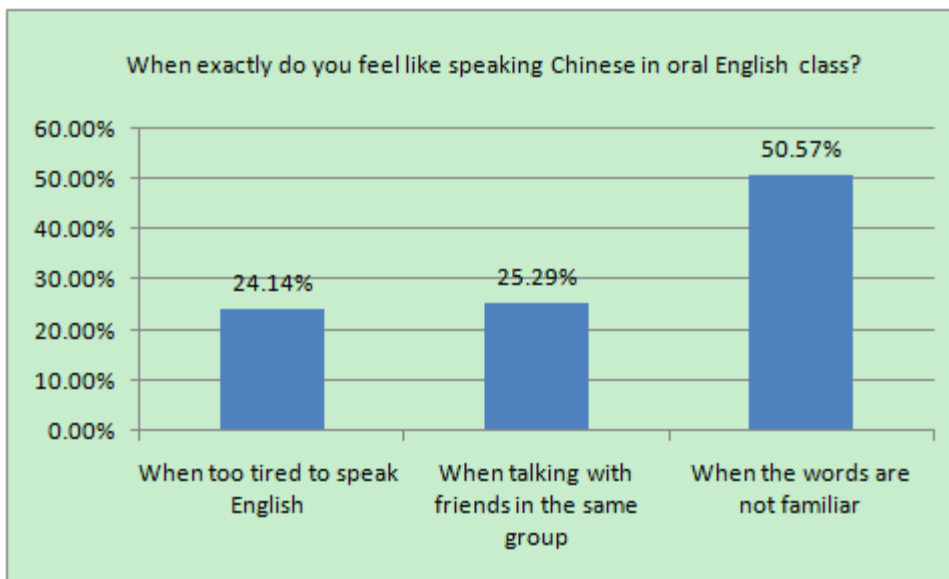
In the first column chart, among the total 148 students, 118 students choose “absolutely yes”, which is about 79.46% of the total, indicating they hold a positive attitude towards the Language Pledge. And among them, about one third students emphasize that “It is the very reason I came to this course”, “It is what makes this course work” and so on. Then 11.03% of students choose the answer “not always”, stemming from their conservative attitude to the Language Pledge. Another 7.79% of students choose the answer “maybe”, expressing their skeptical attitude and unsureness. However 1.72% of them still believe the Language Pledge is unnecessary at all.

Second question:



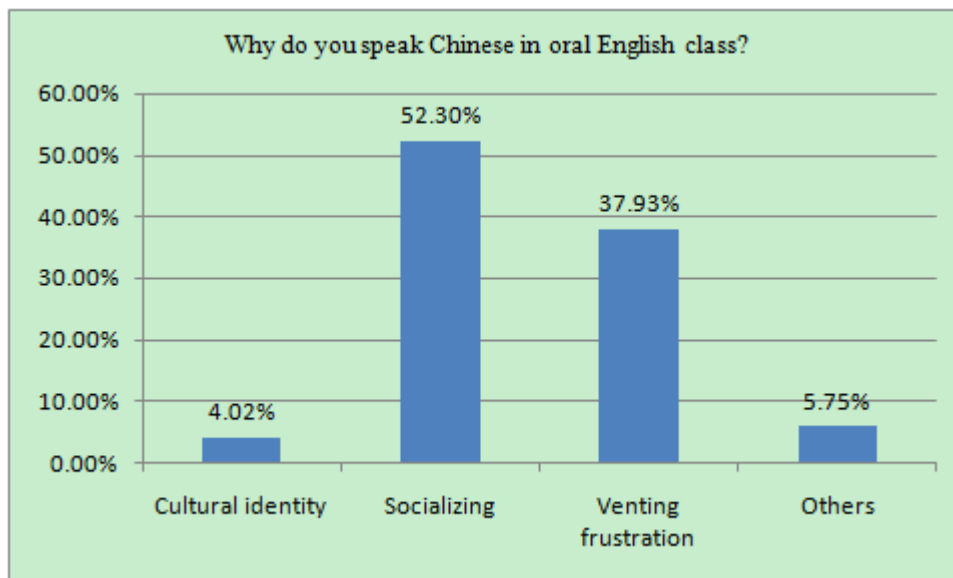
This question discusses the implement of the Language Pledge ---- Do students keep it or not? Most students, more or less have violated the Language Pledge, among whom only 9 students claim that they never do so. Nearly 70.93% students choose “occasionally”, which means sometimes they don’t speak English .The left 22.99% of students choose “always”, suggesting that they speak Chinese more frequently than English, which is totally the opposite to the Language Pledge.

Third question:



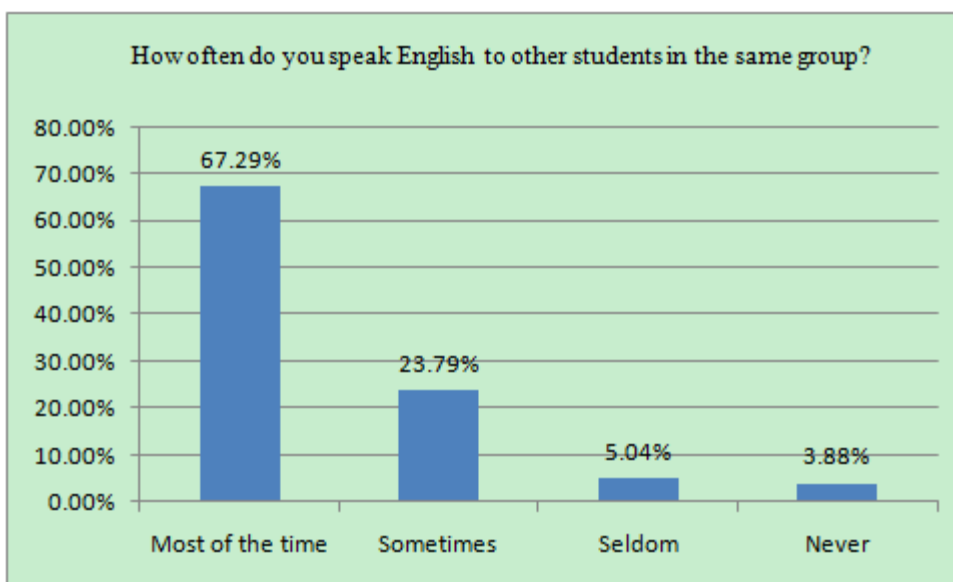
This question provides three situations for students to choose. 24.14% of the students agree they speak Chinese because of tiredness in oral English class. 25.29% of them speak Chinese when they are talking with their friends in the same group, in which some members don’t usually have the habit of speaking English and prefer to speak Chinese, for it’s more convenient and effortless. The left 50.57% of students speak Chinese when they meet difficulty in expressing themselves in exact or accurate English, so they have to speak Chinese for smooth communication.

Fourth question:



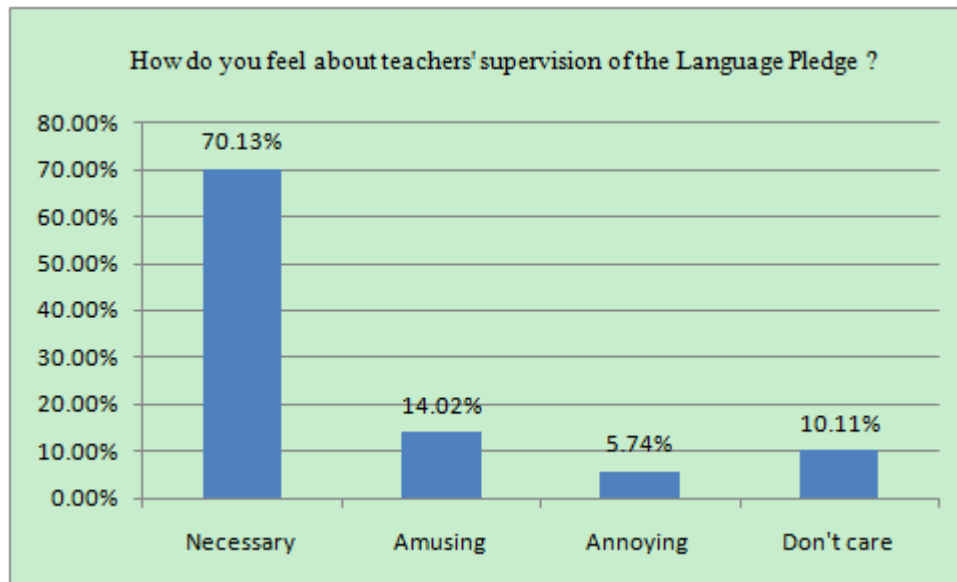
This question aims at revealing the reason why students speak Chinese in oral English class. Only 4.02% of the students regard speaking Chinese as a kind of cultural identity; 52.3% of them speak Chinese in order to socialize, and 37.93% of them just want to relax themselves, since speaking Chinese is much easier for them. Besides, 5.75% of them hold other reasons, such as “in order to express something more clearly and exactly” or “for emergencies” etc.

Fifth question:



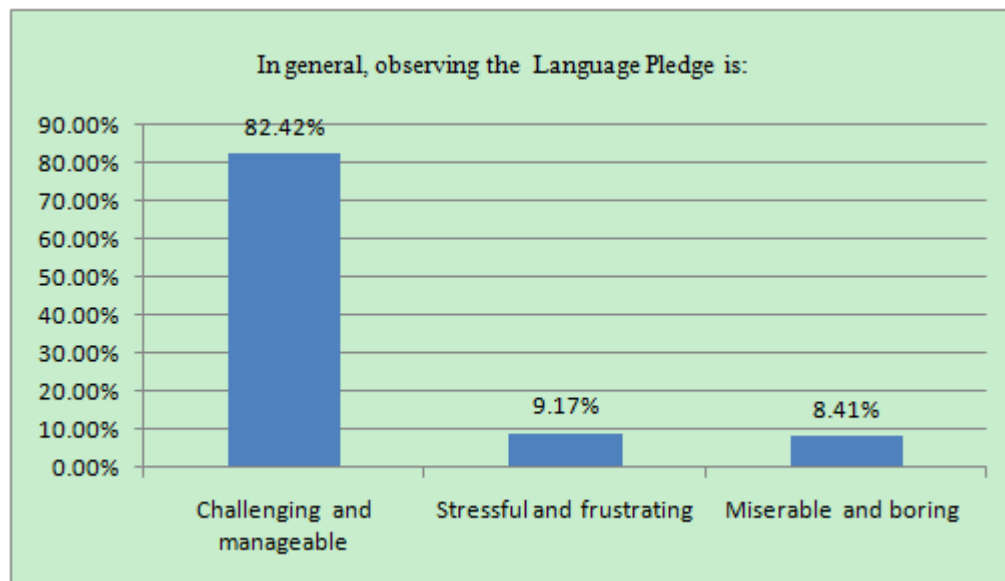
This question seeks for the frequency of students speaking English to other students of the same group. And the fifth column chart indicates that most of the time, students speak English, but not always. Sometimes they may speak Chinese for different reasons. Surprisingly, 3.88% of Chinese students never speak English to other students in the same group, which means they speak Chinese in oral English class all the time.

Sixth question:



In the sixth column Chart, 70.13% of students believe that it is necessary for teachers to supervise the implement of Language Pledge and 14.02% of them regard the supervision as an amusing conduct. These two parts of students show a positive attitude towards teachers' supervision. Still 5.74% of them don't accept it and express their sickness. The last 10.11% of students don't care about it.

Seventh question:



The last one in fact is not a question but an overall opinion of the implement of Language Pledge. Although a small part of students think it is stressful and uninteresting, the reason of which is that those students have no good habit of English study, no solid foundation of English language, and no correct attitudes towards the Language Pledge. Thankfully 82.42% of students think it challenging and manageable, showing enough determination and confidence, which suggest the Language Pledge should not be given up.

As some researches show, the second language learning is divided into two main kinds: learning in the environment of target language and learning out of the environment of target language. And in teaching environment, learners learn more theoretical knowledge of language, while in the native environment, learners do more practice in communicative skills. So in oral classes, foreign teachers demand students **Speak English Only**, which is an oral pledge and a correct way to create man-made native environment.

The above-mentioned first column chart makes it clear that a majority of students believe the Language Pledge is quite necessary and hold a positive attitude toward it, which indicates the Language Pledge gets acceptance widely.

The second question discusses the implement of the Language Pledge, the result of which shows no difference with foreign teachers' feeling. As is often found in oral English class, when foreign language teachers turn round, some students would speak Chinese instead of English. It's so surprising that since most students believe the Language Pledge is quite necessary, and they are willing to accept it, why don't they speak English? Are there any subjective or objective reasons or causes?

Researchers have found that to most students, intensive language learning is a process which always challenges their mental power, physical strength and willpower, so they always feel exhausted. A certain part of students say, "There is a definite limit to the pledge's usefulness. After several weeks, the constant stress upon my mind begins to take a toll on my mind, body and spirit. Violations of the pledge become rampant to pent up frustration"; and some others say that they simply broke down towards the end of the oral English class. They all feel their minds are not functioning in a normal way when they keep on speaking English with an unfamiliar topic.

Here involves affective factors in second language learning. It is universally acknowledged that anxiety, one of affective variables, has produced negative effect upon language learning. Language anxiety refers to the fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language. In Oxford's opinion, language anxiety is the main factor of those that affect the second language learning (Hao Wenjuan, 2008:35). It showed that the less anxious and more relaxed the learner is, the better language acquisition proceeds. MacIntyre and Gardner found that the term language anxiety (the anxiety specifically generated by attempts to learn the second language) was negatively but efficiently correlated with the second language performance.

3. Difficulties in the Implement of Language Pledge in Oral English Class and Second Language Learning

Apart from what has been mentioned above, some objective factors, related with the cultural, linguistic, and social factors create more difficulties of language pledge in second language learning.

3.1 Negative Cultural Transfer

In chart 4, 4.02% of the students believe that speaking their mother tongue is a representative of their cultural identity in oral English class. Although only a minority of them holds this view, they also express a strong and interesting conception, that is, people need some ways to find out their cultural identity in English-only environment.

Then here involves the Cultural Transfer. As Odlin has pointed out transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and dissimilarities between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired (1989:27). Cultural Transfer can be positive or negative. When one's native cultural norms are similar to the ones of the target culture, positive transfer occurs, whereas when those norms are different, negative transfer occurs. As Dai Weidong (et al, 2000:2) has defined, Negative Cultural Transfer refers to the cultural interference caused by cultural differences, which shows that people subconsciously use their cultural norms and values not only to guide their behaviors and thoughts but also to judge others' behaviors and thoughts. Negative Cultural Transfer can be found in all processes of intercultural communication and foreign language learning and is of great significance in both fields. Meanwhile it often results in communicative difficulties, misunderstandings and even hatred.

According to Guiora (et al, 1972: 421-428), as adults, some English majors do not have the motivation to change their accent and to acquire native-like pronunciation. Unlike primary learners, who are generally more open to target language culture, English majors have more rigid language ego boundaries. Thus, they may be inclined to establish their pre-existing cultural and ethnic identity, and this they do by maintaining their stereotypical accent.

As for foreign language teachers, creating a circumstance of target language means that students should give up a part of their own culture—their mother tongue—and try their best to identify with the target language. And this is of advantage to learn the target language. However, it is not easy to achieve. In fact, mother tongue has a strong negative transfer in the process of target language learning. For concrete conditions, it is revealed in two main aspects. One is negative vocabulary transfer, which means some words in one language have no equivalents in the other language because of the differences of culture and language.

This will be a negative transfer for language learners in learning target language, thus obstructing their second language acquisition.

The other one is negative pragmatic transfer. They are those cases under which non-native speakers differ from native speakers in interpreting and producing a speech act in the target language. As elements within a pragmatic analysis are all free from ill grammatical forms, negative pragmatic transfers are all sound but in different forms and means that non-native speakers employ in situations where native speakers do not use.

3.2 Inter-language Fossilization

In group discussion of oral class, even though students speak English, it is probably a kind of “Chinglish”—an awkward mixture in which ideas conceived in Chinese are ungrammatically or unidiomatically expressed in English (He Mingzhu, 1996:59). The main cause of Chinglish is, of course, the linguistic interference. Some students may say, “I often wonder how useful observing the Language Pledge is while speaking with other students whose English is as bad as mine. We don’t know what is correct and what is not. At times it seems that we are creating our own language and we are not improving at all.” Some students express the same idea that speaking with non-English natives who have improper pronunciation doesn’t help their English. They are simply amplifying and reinforcing each other’s mistakes. Besides, other students even consider that speaking English to fellow students is totally ridiculous and pointless.

Here involves the inter-language, which is common and practical, especially among the junior students. When mastering a target language, second language learners develop a linguistic system that is self-contained and different from both the learner’s first language and the target language (Nemser, 1971: 115-124). This linguistic system has been variously called inter-language (Selinker, 1972: 209).

In oral English class, teachers demand students keep on speaking English all the time, but in some degree, it is a way of promoting the fossilization, which refers to a permanent cessation of progress toward the target language. This linguistic phenomenon, inter-language fossilization, can occur despite all reasonable attempts at learning (Selinker, 1972:230). Fossilization includes those items, rules, and sub-systems that second language learners tend to retain in their inter-language, that is, all those aspects of inter-language that become entrenched and permanent, and that the majority of second language learners can only eliminate with considerable effort (Omaggio, 2001).

It is inevitable that the target language students can not always speak correct English and they would make some mistakes in all aspects of linguistics, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, etc. Many reasons are involved here. For one thing, it is the Interlingual Interference, which is similar to the mother tongue transfer discussed before. For another, it is the Intralingual Interference. In the research of inter-language, it is common to find that language learners always make mistakes because of the rules they created on assumptions all by themselves. The over-generalization of inter-language will cause mistakes in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, and even lead to the internalization of these mistakes, which will be fossilized after a long time.

3.3 Improper Communicative Approaches

In chart four, about 52.30% of the students in oral English class speak Chinese in need of socializing. Some students believe that it is impossible to chat with friends in basic English, so they speak Chinese because they need to really get to know friends and engage in deeper meaningful conversation, or because they need to be relaxed, and thorough and deep in getting the message across. In this situation, in order to keep the Language Pledge, teachers always overlook students’ mistakes of their words or communicative tactics if the students are trying their best to express themselves in target language. But something worse may happen. To overcome the communicative problems caused by lacking in knowledge of target language, learners always resort to various communicative approaches, such as borrowing vocabulary from mother tongue, using general words that have the similar appearance or meaning, explaining the target words, creating new words, and something else, during which language learners achieve the purpose of socializing, but also cause many mistakes of target language, which will hinder them from improving the accuracy and proficiency of target language.

4. Countermeasures

In order to put the Language Pledge into effect successfully, it is urgent to put forward some practical strategies or countermeasures to overcome those subjective disadvantages and objective difficulties in oral English class and the second language learning.

Firstly, as the Language Anxiety is the subjective reason, anxiety reduction strategies became an extremely urgent task in second language teaching. Teachers need to change their roles to be facilitators instead of authoritative figures in language class and they are required to make efforts to help students to get rid of unnecessary anxiety in language learning. It is to create more effective language learning and to help students to cultivate interest and motivation in second language learning.

Secondly, in the process of language teaching and learning, it is inevitable to meet the negative mother-tongue transfer. Therefore, teachers should guide students to master a mode of thinking in target language, reducing or even eliminating the negative influence from mother tongue. Some concrete measures are as follows. In one place, it is better to adopt the method of Comparative Analysis-- Teachers had better help students find out the similarities and differences between Chinese and English, and precipitate the positive mother-tongue transfer instead of the negative transfer. In another place, it is better to refer to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which tells us "humans acquire language in only one way — by understanding messages or by receiving 'comprehensible input'" (Krashen, 1985: 2). So the input must be neither too difficult nor too easy. This is conceptualized by Krashen in terms of the learner's current level, called "i", and the level that the learner will get to next, called "i + 1", which shows that the learners progress rather than remain static in their knowledge of the language, so the input has always been slightly beyond their present level.

Thirdly, as for the Inter-language Fossilization, foreign language teachers should pay attention to two points in the process of encouraging students to speak English. One is a misunderstanding that some teachers simply regard sending out the sound of English as executing the Language Pledge; then it is unwise to allow students giving up executing the Language Pledge just because they are lacking in language skills. To resolve this contradiction, foreign teachers should emphasize much more about the participating process, and make students realize that the main purpose of listening and speaking English as much as possible is to build a sense of target language and a habit of using target language. Even though students cannot speak out Standard English, it is also better than speaking Chinese totally. At the same time, students should be encouraged to write down the vague or disputed language fragment, and then ask for consultations from teachers whenever and wherever. Meanwhile, teachers should provide the correct grammar or vocabulary as soon as they find the inter-language or mistakes in students.

Lastly, in order to help students overcome difficulties caused by improper communicative approaches, teachers had better give some topics to students before the oral class so that students can make full preparation, including looking up some new words or expressions for the topic. Besides when students make discussions in class, the teachers could go around and give some help or guidance so that the students can be much braver and more interested in speaking and participating. And in this way, the discussion in oral class will be carried on smoothly. However, chart six shows some students' obstruction and dislike of teachers' supervision. To reduce the conflict, teachers should control proper limits for speech or action, paying special attention to the situations talked above. Especially when coming to the topics involved in culture, psychology and society, teachers had better make more communication with students. What's more, it is a mistake to regard the Language Pledge as an administrative discipline, which simply demands students to speak English just for speaking English. Foreign language teachers ought to make students realize that they are not their antithesis but their assistants, who are devoting themselves helping students make progress.

It is firmly believed that many negative factors have resulted in the difficulties in executing the Language Pledge—speaking English, but it is a mission still possible to accomplish if the pledge can be revised and modified. At the same time, it is quite important and crucial to balance its technicality and flexibility, so that students are willing and initiative to speak English more and only.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, second language learning is neither a short nor an easy process, during which abiding by the Language Pledge is a good way to create a man-made circumstance of target language. This paper has analyzed the subjective reasons and objective difficulties involved in enforcing the Language Pledge. The subjective factors include students' motivation and attitude, the language anxiety, etc. and the objective difficulties include the negative cultural transfer, the inter-language fossilization, and the improper communicative strategy, all of which not only restrict the successful implement of the Language Pledge, but also hinder the learners' improvement in language learning. So students should hold a positive attitude towards the Language Pledge and second language learning.

Meanwhile it is important for teachers to control the whole process in the oral English class, guiding students the right way to learn and helping them overcome all kinds of difficulties. Since the second language learning is like a long journey, which needs more deep researches and feasible strategies, and because of the writer's limited knowledge, it is necessary to get more help from other teachers and students to work for the Language Pledge. Only in this way can we go further in this journey.

Acknowledgments

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