

# ***Word Choice Errors in the Spoken English of Chinese EFL Learners***

**Tianyue Yang**

*School of Foreign Languages, Shandong First Medical University, Tai'an, China  
14737640057@163.com*

**Abstract.** This study examines word choice errors in the spoken English of Chinese university students. It aims to identify common error types and understand their causes. The research uses a qualitative approach. Data collection involved thirty-five Chinese EFL learners. Researchers recorded the learners' speaking tasks. They then conducted stimulated recall interviews. These interviews helped reveal the participants' thought processes. The team transcribed and analyzed the spoken data. They classified errors using a specific framework. This framework considered whether errors were overt or covert. It also examined potential influence from the students' first language, Chinese. The findings show that L1 Chinese interference was a major cause of various lexical errors. This study offers practical suggestions. English vocabulary teaching should include more contextualized practice. It should also use more chunk-based learning. Raising students' awareness of differences between Chinese and English is also important. These steps can help reduce negative transfer. They can also improve lexical accuracy and idiomaticity.

**Keywords:** EFL learners, Oral English, Word Choice Errors, L1 Negative Transfer, Teaching Strategies

## **1. Introduction**

Against the backdrop of deepening globalization and the Belt and Road Initiative, interactions between China and the world have become increasingly frequent, positioning cross-cultural oral communication as central to diplomacy, business, education, and cultural exchange. According to the latest data from China's Ministry of Education, the number of foreign language learners in China has surpassed 300 million, the vast majority of whom are English learners. Concurrently, the number of Chinese students and professionals going abroad has seen a steady increase, with the total number of overseas students exceeding one million in 2023.

The oral English skills of Chinese EFL learners matter greatly. Their word choice accuracy directly influences cross-cultural communication. It can even affect the perception of their national image. Frequent lexical errors often cause misunderstandings. Sometimes these errors stop communication completely. However, existing error classification frameworks have a key limitation. Researchers developed these models primarily in Western learning contexts. Consequently, the models often miss the unique error patterns of Chinese learners. This gap becomes most obvious at higher proficiency levels. At these levels, mistakes in pragmatic usage are more common. Current

research has not yet fully explained this trend. This situation highlights a clear need for localized studies. Such research would help refine our existing models [1].

Therefore, this paper sets out to analyze the types of word choice errors in the spoken English of Chinese EFL learners, investigate their root causes, and propose targeted strategies. Furthermore, it will explore how oral English teaching methodologies can be enhanced to help learners develop greater lexical proficiency and minimize such errors.

## 2. The evolution of English oral language teaching

The development of English oral language teaching represents an evolutionary journey from a focus on linguistic forms to a emphasis on communicative competence, and finally to a deep integration of technology and humanistic approaches. The evolution of its pedagogical models profoundly reflects advancements in second language acquisition theory and changing demands of the times.

In the mid-20th century, traditional teaching models, exemplified by the Audio-Lingual Method, were dominant. Based on structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology, this approach emphasized mechanical drills like pattern practices and repetitive memorization to foster accuracy in speech. While this method had some effect in consolidating foundational language skills, its training methods, detached from authentic contexts, often resulted in students being able to memorize sentence patterns yet struggling to use them flexibly in real communication.

The latter part of the 20th century saw the rise of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This methodology shifted the priority in oral instruction. The new focus moved from "linguistic form" to "communicative function" [2]. CLT established communication as the primary goal of language learning. Consequently, classroom activities began to feature authentic tasks. These tasks included role-plays and group discussions. The teacher's role transformed significantly. Teachers evolved from knowledge transmitters into learning facilitators. Their main objective became the successful conveyance of meaning. They prioritized this over strict grammatical accuracy. This new emphasis aligned teaching more closely with real-world language use. It also led to a marked increase in students' fluency and their confidence to speak.

The principles of CLT were later refined by Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). This 21st-century approach provided a more structured model. Its three-stage framework—pre-task, task-cycle, and post-task—offered a clear path for lessons [3]. This structure allowed teachers to balance fluency activities with accuracy correction. Simultaneously, digital technology began to transform education. Tools like AI speech recognition and virtual reality entered the classroom. These technologies created rich, immersive practice environments for students. Online platforms also connected learners with global communities. This access allowed students to practice without time or space constraints. They could now get immediate feedback and engage in genuine conversations.

Today, English oral teaching shows clear trends. It is becoming more diverse, digital, and personalized. Blended learning models are a key example. They combine the benefits of online technology with the value of in-person interaction. Furthermore, big data analytics can now create customized learning paths for students. A central goal is developing cross-cultural communicative competence. Looking forward, technology will continue to progress. English oral teaching will then focus more on a learner's ability to communicate effectively in real global situations. This direction is the inevitable future of language teaching. It is also a fundamental requirement for preparing talent in our globalized era.

### 3. Types of word choice errors

Although the academic community has not yet established a unified classification system for lexical selection errors among second language learners, the core analytical dimensions generally focus on two main levels: the formal accuracy of words themselves (e.g., spelling, part of speech, morphological changes) and the contextual appropriateness of words in specific situations (e.g., semantics, collocation, register, pragmatics). This distinction has been profoundly influential.

Early groundbreaking research, such as that by Levenston [4], built upon this foundation by categorizing lexical errors into "overt errors" and "covert errors." The former refers to obvious mistakes that violate formal language rules, such as grammatical errors involving noun plurals or verb tenses. The latter are more subtle, referring to instances where the grammatical form is correct but the word choice does not conform to target language conventions, typical examples being inappropriate collocations or preposition misuse. This classification highlights the critical role of context in determining the appropriateness of a lexical choice.

Addressing the specific and systematic challenges observed in the vocabulary acquisition process of Chinese Learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), domestic scholars have conducted more explanatory localized explorations. For instance, Zhang Peicheng [5] explicitly proposed the concept of "L1 Negative Transfer Errors," profoundly noting that many lexical errors made by Chinese students stem not from ignorance of English rules but are deeply influenced by the thinking habits and linguistic systems of their mother tongue (Chinese). The core mechanism behind such errors is L1 transfer, whereby learners consciously or unconsciously apply knowledge from their L1 (including phonological, syntactic, semantic, and cultural patterns) to the production of the target language (English).

L1 transfer is a broad concept encompassing various linguistic levels. Based on its effect, it can be divided into positive transfer (facilitation occurring when L1 and target language rules are similar) and negative transfer (interference errors caused when L1 and target language rules differ). The lexical issues of Chinese EFL learners primarily arise from negative transfer, which is particularly concentrated and typical in the domain of lexis. Lexical transfer specifically refers to the influence of L1 lexical knowledge on second language vocabulary acquisition in terms of sound, form, meaning, and usage. Its main manifestations include:

First, Literal Translation/Calquing: Translating Chinese words or expressions word-for-word into English, resulting in awkward, obscure Chinglish. For example, translating "开门" literally as "open the door" (should be \*answer the door\*), or "喝汤" as "drink soup" (should be \*eat soup\*).

Second, Collocational Transfer: Directly transferring Chinese collocational habits into English, leading to collocation errors. For example, expressing "学习知识" as "learn knowledge" (should be \*acquire/gain knowledge\*), or "价格昂贵" as "The price is expensive" (should be \*The price is high\* or \*The item is expensive\*).

Third, Semantic Transfer: Mistakenly assuming complete semantic equivalence between Chinese and English words, leading to the misuse of synonyms. For example, confusing the various English words corresponding to "看" (see, watch, look, read), producing sentences like "I am seeing a book."

Fourth, Part-of-Speech Transfer: Overlooking the strict distinctions between parts of speech in English and applying the flexible usage where one word can serve multiple functions in Chinese. For example, expressing "沟通很重要" as "Communicate is important." (should use the noun form \*Communication\*).

For Chinese EFL learners, the concept of "L1 Negative Transfer Errors" is highly explanatory. It reveals the underlying cause of their deviations in word choice, particularly covert errors like inappropriate collocations and literal translation—namely, negative lexical transfer from Chinese.

This perspective shifts the research focus from superficial formal errors to deeper cross-linguistic influences and differences in thinking patterns, holding significant implications for teaching practice.

Recent research has further refined the characteristics of error distribution. Empirical analysis based on Saudi EFL learners showed that literal translation errors (33.97%), collocation errors (24.88%), and subject-verb agreement errors (18.66%) ranked top three, accounting for 77.51% of total errors, corroborating similar issues among Chinese learners [6]. Wang Chuming's classification framework [1] aligns highly with the five error types in this study and reveals new trends:

**Increased Salience of Pragmatic-Level Errors:** The error rate for register misuse rises among high-proficiency learners (e.g., using the colloquial word "kids" in academic discussions), while literal translation errors decrease, indicating a shift in error types from the "formal level" to the "pragmatic level" as proficiency increases.

**Overuse of Intensifiers:** Chinese learners overuse "very" (frequency 2.3 times that of native speakers), blurring the semantic boundaries between it and the Chinese "很" [7].

Among these error types, collocation errors and literal translation errors have been confirmed by multiple studies [8] as high-frequency error types for Chinese students. This distribution pattern profoundly reflects a common problem in Chinese students' vocabulary learning: prioritizing the memorization of word forms over their contextual application. Specifically, literal translation errors mainly manifest as mechanical correspondence in directly converting Chinese expressions into English words, such as translating "喝汤" as "drink soup" (should be \*eat soup\*) or expressing "价格很贵" as "the price is expensive" (should be \*the price is high\*). Collocation errors are evident in unconventional word combinations, such as expressing "学习知识" as "learn knowledge" (should be \*acquire/gain knowledge\*) or describing "大雨" as "big rain" (should be \*heavy rain\*). These errors not only reveal the deep-seated influence of L1 negative transfer but also reflect the current insufficient emphasis on word collocations and the pragmatic dimension in vocabulary teaching.

#### 4. Research methods

This study used a quantitative approach to investigate word choice errors in the spoken English of EFL learners. The research involved 35 Chinese undergraduate students, randomly selected. The group consisted of 40% male and 60% female participants, all aged between 18 and 22. Data collection centered on a speaking test. Each student delivered an impromptu speech on the topic "A Day in University." The speeches lasted three to four minutes. Researchers recorded all speeches to capture the students' natural language output.

This method provided raw, spontaneous speech samples. These samples formed the direct basis for identifying and analyzing lexical selection errors. The familiar topic ensured students could express themselves fully. It also minimized potential constraints caused by unfamiliar subject matter.

The data analysis phase employed quantitative statistical methods for processing to comprehensively present the research results.

**Error Identification and Classification:** The recorded content of the students' speaking tests was first transcribed. The transcripts were examined sentence by sentence to identify lexical selection errors, which were then classified and annotated according to five predefined error types: literal translation errors, collocation errors, subject-verb agreement errors, overuse of intensifiers, and semantic confusion errors.

**Frequency and Proportion Statistics:** The frequency of occurrence of each error type across all errors was counted, and the proportion of each error type was calculated to determine the distribution pattern of the errors.

## 5. Research findings and discussion

Through the analysis of spoken language data from 35 EFL learners, a total of 258 lexical selection errors were identified. The distribution of these error types is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of lexical selection errors

| N | Lexical Selection Error Type  | Total Frequency | Typical Error Examples                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Percentage |
|---|-------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 1 | Literal Translation Errors    | 30              | 1. "Bubble kids" → inferred as "belongings/things" (items needed to carry)2. "maple tofu" → "mapo tofu" (Mapo Tofu)3. "wrong bin" → "wrong bag/suitcase" (incorrect bag/luggage)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | 11.63%     |
| 2 | Collocation Errors            | 96              | 1. Verb Collocation: "help me" → "helped me", "play the computer games" → "play computer games", "waited them" → "waited for them"2. Article Collocation: "the class" → "class", "the Washing up" → "washing up", "class meeting" → "a class meeting"3. Quantifier Collocation: "so much snacks" → "so many snacks"4. Preposition Collocation: "arrived my dormitory" → "arrived at my dormitory", "playing phone" → "playing with my phone"                                                                                                                                                     | 37.21%     |
| 3 | Subject-Verb Agreement Errors | 54              | 1. Plural Subject + Singular Verb: "my roommates was" → "my roommates were", "Another roommates" → "Another roommate"2. Singular Subject + Plural Verb: "each give" → "each gave"3. Subject-Verb Matching Issues Due to Tense Inconsistency: "I find" → "I found", "need" → "needed", "Sorts" → "sorted", "Ask" → "asked"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | 20.93%     |
| 4 | Overuse of Intensifiers       | 42              | 1. Lexical Repetition: repeated "exciting", repeated "exhausted, but happy", repeated "uninteresting"2. Over-modification: "very much more" → "ate a lot/more", "talked for like forever" → "talked for a long time", "too hot/too big" → "very hot/very big"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | 16.28%     |
| 5 | Semantic Confusion Errors     | 36              | 1. Part-of-Speech Confusion: "lonely" (adjective) → "alone" (adverb, modifying "handle")2. Contextual Semantic Deviation: "route" (referring to "route" in a class meeting context) → inferred as "rules/campus facilities" (rules/campus facilities), "drill" (referring to receiving "drill clothes") → "military training clothes" (military training uniform)3. Action Semantic Confusion: "pick up" (to lift) → "put" (to place inside, referring to putting a toothbrush)4. Semantic Incompleteness: "nothing is" → inferred as "nothing is difficult" (nothing is difficult in the world) | 13.95%     |

**Explanation of Specific Categories of Lexical Selection Errors:** Lexical selection errors happen when learners use incorrect or inappropriate vocabulary in oral expression, which may include semantically unsuitable words or words that do not fit the context.

**Literal Translation Errors:** Literal translation means converting words directly by their basic meaning. This approach ignores established language conventions. It also disregards the surrounding context. For example, a learner might translate the idiom "pull one's leg" word-for-word. The result would be the Chinese phrase "拉后腿." However, the actual meaning in English is "to joke." This literal method creates a significant deviation from the original meaning. Consequently, the speaker fails to communicate their intended message accurately.

**Collocation Errors:** Word combinations that do not conform to fixed language usage. For instance, "make a decision" is correct, whereas saying "do a decision" violates conventional verb-noun collocations, making the expression sound unnatural and prone to misunderstanding.

**Subject-Verb Agreement Errors:** Mismatch between the subject and predicate in terms of person and number. For example, in "The team are working hard," when "team" refers to a single entity, the verb should be "is." Such inconsistencies disrupt grammatical structure and compromise sentence correctness.

**Overuse of Intensifiers:** Excessive use of absolute or extreme words such as "never," "absolutely," and "every." For instance, stating "Everyone hates this book" ignores objective differences, making the expression exaggerated, imprecise, and lacking in persuasiveness.

**Semantic Confusion:** Expressive dislocation happens during language transfer. It occurs because of differences in vocabulary, culture, or grammar. This process creates errors in concept association. It can also cause a loss of the original meaning. For instance, one might translate the Chinese proverb "世上无难事" literally as "Nothing is." This translation loses the original's motivational sense. It is a typical example of expressive dislocation.

The data shows a total of 258 word choice errors. Collocation errors are the most frequent type. They account for 37.21% of all errors. These mistakes appear in verb partnerships, article use, and preposition choice. This finding matches existing studies. It confirms that a shallow understanding of vocabulary is a primary cause [9]. Learners might know a word's basic meaning. However, they do not learn its common word partners. For example, they know "decision" but use "do" instead of "make." Teaching methods contribute to this problem. Instruction often focuses on memorizing single words. It neglects how words are used together in context. This leads to errors like "do a decision" and "make a crime."

Subject-verb agreement errors are the second most common. They make up 20.93% of the total. These errors clearly show the effect of negative transfer from Chinese. The Chinese language does not change verbs to match subjects. This key difference causes interference. Learners then produce errors like "The team are..." Large class sizes make this issue worse. Teachers cannot provide consistent, individual correction. Without feedback, these mistakes become persistent habits.

Literal translation errors are especially revealing. Their proportion is lower at 11.63%. Yet, they are the most distinctively Chinese. They show how Chinese thought patterns directly influence English. Examples include "maple tofu" for Mapo Tofu and "bubble kids" for belongings. Learners try to map Chinese concepts directly onto English words. They ignore the precise meaning and cultural context of the English terms. This problem also highlights a lack of exposure to real English. Learners cannot access or learn natural, idiomatic expressions without sufficient authentic input.

## 6. Multi-perspective analysis of error causes and improvement methods

Research on the causes of lexical selection errors presents a dual perspective of "internal learner factors" and "external teaching environment," which are intertwined and collectively shape the unique vocabulary acquisition path and challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners.

Among internal learner factors, L1 negative transfer is recognized as the most critical trigger [2]. For Chinese students, this goes far beyond simple word-for-word misuse; it represents cross-linguistic interference from deep-seated Chinese thinking patterns. First, there is a fundamental difference between the paratactic nature of Chinese and the hypotactic nature of English. Chinese sentence construction emphasizes parataxis, relying on semantic logic for connection, with flexible parts of speech and forms. English, conversely, emphasizes hypotaxis, depending on strict grammatical structures and formal markers. This leads Chinese students to frequently produce sentences lacking necessary formal markers, such as omitting articles ("I am student"), misusing parts of speech (expressing "Communication is important" as "Communicate is important"), and

confusing countable and uncountable nouns ("a lot of homeworks"). Second, the broad semantic scope of Chinese vocabulary contrasts with the precision of English vocabulary. A single Chinese word often corresponds to multiple English words with blurred semantic boundaries. For instance, students confuse the usage scenarios of "say," "speak," and "talk" due to the 泛用性 of the Chinese word "说"; similarly, "看" corresponds to "see, watch, look, read," and "借" corresponds to "borrow, lend"—these "one-to-many" mappings are high-frequency error areas. Third, the absence of cultural concepts can also lead to transfer, such as directly equating "龙" with "dragon" while ignoring the vast differences in their cultural connotations.

Furthermore, insufficient depth of vocabulary knowledge [9] is another core internal cause. Chinese students often settle for shallow learning of "form-meaning" connections, mastering only word meanings while neglecting collocational rules, stylistic differences, semantic prosody, and syntactic behavior. This directly leads to collocation errors (e.g., using "make a crime" instead of "commit a crime") and register misuse (e.g., using the colloquial word "guy" in written language). The underlying reason is that many students' learning strategies, influenced by exam-oriented culture, tend to rapidly expand receptive vocabulary through memorizing vocabulary lists and Chinese definitions, severely neglecting productive vocabulary knowledge and its application in specific contexts. This results in the common dilemma of "knowing a word but not being able to use it, or using it incorrectly."

The influence of the external teaching environment is equally significant and distinctly "Chinese-characteristic." The traditional vocabulary teaching model that "emphasizes spelling over application" [10] is the primary issue. Classroom activities often revolve around word dictation, example sentence memorization, and multiple-choice exercises. This decontextualized, fragmented teaching means that while students can pass exams, they cannot accurately retrieve and use vocabulary in authentic contexts. Textbooks and teachers often present isolated "exemplary sentences" rather than rich lexical chunks and collocational networks from authentic corpora, making it difficult for students to internalize the partnership of words.

Secondly, the lack or inefficiency of feedback mechanisms further exacerbates the fossilization of errors. Given the reality of large-class teaching, teacher feedback often focuses only on correcting global grammatical errors, with little time to address local inappropriate lexical choices (especially covert errors). Even when corrections are made, they often merely provide the correct form (e.g., "You cannot use 'big rain'; you must use 'heavy rain'") without explaining the cause of the error (e.g., differentiating the collocational restrictions of "big" and "heavy") and subsequent reinforcement practice, leading to the repeated occurrence of similar errors.

Finally, the dual limitations of the quality and quantity of input cannot be ignored. Chinese students lack sufficient, comprehensible, authentic language input. Their primary input sources are textbooks and simplified materials written for language learning, the language of which is sometimes not natural corpus. Meanwhile, although online resources are now abundant, the habit of proactively engaging with original English films, TV shows, books, and websites is not yet widespread among students. This limits their acquisition of subtle knowledge about lexical stylistic features and semantic prosody (e.g., "cause" often collocates with negative outcomes), thereby affecting the precision of their lexical choices.

To systematically improve Chinese English learners' lexical selection errors in oral production, based on the prominent problems identified in this study (primarily collocation errors, followed by subject-verb agreement and literal translation errors), we propose a comprehensive teaching improvement plan spanning four stages: "Input → Internalization → Output → Feedback."

First, in the input stage, corpus-driven vocabulary collocation teaching should be vigorously promoted. Teachers can guide students to use native speaker corpora like COCA and BNC to independently search for typical collocations of high-frequency words (e.g., "make a decision," "commit a crime"). This data-driven learning enables learners to induce the partnership of words from authentic corpora, fundamentally solving the problem of collocation errors caused by insufficient depth of vocabulary knowledge and replacing the traditional model of isolated word memorization.

Second, in the internalization stage, a two-pronged approach is needed. On one hand, Chinese-English comparative analysis should be strengthened to explicitly deconstruct L1 negative transfer. To address subject-verb agreement errors, teachers should clearly contrast the differences between Chinese parataxis and English hypotaxis, reinforcing awareness of English grammar through extensive practice. For characteristically "Chinese" literal translation errors, a list of English-Chinese "false friends" should be established (e.g., "pull one's leg"  $\neq$  "拉后腿"), analyzing cultural connotations and semantic differences. On the other hand, root and affix teaching can be integrated, drawing on the systematic analytical thinking of Chen Shifa [11] to teach common roots and affixes and skillfully utilize knowledge of Chinese character radicals for positive transfer, thereby enhancing students' vocabulary inference and memorization efficiency to address semantic confusion.

Next, in the output stage, the key is to design task-based language activities to promote active retrieval and use of vocabulary. Teachers can design communicative tasks requiring collaboration, such as "information gap" or "problem-solving" activities, forcing students to actively utilize learned vocabulary in authentic contexts to achieve communicative goals, bridging the gap from "knowing" to "using" and solving the problem of disconnection between learning and application.

Finally, in the feedback stage, form-focused targeted feedback must be implemented. Teachers should adopt selective error correction strategies, avoiding interrupting students' fluency during expression, but instead providing concentrated, systematic feedback on a specific type of high-frequency error after the task, along with metalinguistic explanations to guide students' self-correction. This feedback method can effectively prevent error fossilization and is particularly suitable for large-class teaching scenarios.

In summary, this plan is interlinked, aiming to form a teaching closed loop from deepened input, efficient internalization, active output to effective feedback, comprehensively addressing the various causes of lexical selection errors and holistically improving students' oral vocabulary application ability.

## 7. Conclusion

This study aimed to empirically investigate lexical selection errors in the oral English of Chinese EFL learners, focusing on five specific types: literal translation errors, collocation errors, subject-verb agreement errors, overuse of intensifiers, and semantic confusion errors.

Together, these errors show that L1 negative transfer is the main cause of word choice mistakes for Chinese EFL learners. The differences between Chinese and English in structure, word partnerships, and cultural concepts directly create these problems. Learners often make literal translations, collocation errors, and semantic mix-ups. The results also highlight a key internal issue: learners' vocabulary knowledge is not deep enough. They frequently lack a detailed understanding of how words combine, their stylistic level, and their positive or negative associations.

This study offers useful insights, but it also has some limitations. The first limitation is the sample size. Our research involved only 35 learners, which is a small group. This limits how broadly

our findings can be applied. Future studies should include more participants from diverse backgrounds to improve the generalizability of the results.

The second limitation is methodological. Our data came mainly from one-time speaking tests. We did not use long-term observation or diary studies to track how errors change over time. Furthermore, our analysis focused on the errors themselves. We could have explored the underlying thought processes more deeply. Future research could use interviews or think-aloud protocols to better understand the cognitive mechanisms behind word selection.

Finally, the error classification system may have shortcomings. The five-category framework we used covers most error types, but language is complex. Some errors might not fit perfectly into this system. Future work should refine these categories or test different frameworks to get a more complete picture.

In summary, this study provides clear evidence of the vocabulary challenges Chinese EFL learners face. Our analysis systematically identifies the types, patterns, and causes of their word choice errors in speech. The findings suggest that effective vocabulary teaching must start with a comparison of Chinese and English. Instruction should strengthen the learning of lexical chunks and deepen vocabulary knowledge. Teachers should also fully use modern technology to create realistic practice environments. This approach is the best way to improve learners' word choice. Ultimately, it will help them achieve the goal of accurate, fluent, and natural spoken English.

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