Choices and Patterns of English Names among Taiwanese Students

LINDSEY N. H. CHEN

National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

The English names of 248 students studying at a Taiwan university were examined to study the choices and patterns of English names. Consistent with previous findings, female names were significantly more likely than male names to end in one of three vowels, *a*, *e*, or *i*, while male names were significantly more likely to end in consonants. Monosyllabic English names were equally common among males and females, in contrast to previous findings that one-syllable names are significantly more common among males. Finally, homophonization was a common phenomenon among male and female names. The findings of this study indicate that the choice of an English name is partly motivated by a sense of identity preservation.

KEYWORDS given English names, phonetic patterning, Chinese names, onomastics

Introduction

Personal naming is a frequent topic in onomastic studies. As Alford (1988) noted, names can signify many things. In Chinese society, women's names tend to be associated with female virtues and stereotyped roles, while men's names tend to relate to future achievements, ambition, and contributions to family or country (Ling and Yiu, 1993). As documented in several cross-cultural studies, names may be connected to family values and tradition (Hallan, 2007; Cheng, 2008), inform others about the aspirations of the parents for their children (Zuercher, 2007), or, in the case of North American Indian names, provide an autobiographical sketch of the individual (Exner, 2007). With respect to English names, studies include phonetic patterning of male and female names (Barry and Harper, 2003), the role of popular culture in naming a child (Evans, 2007), and the relationship of given names to other forms, such as nicknames and presentation names (Callary, 2008).

As noted by linguist David Crystal (2003), the English language has taken as prominent position among global languages, and the impact of globalization in the lingua franca is apparent. This influence can be seen in the trend toward adoption of English

names. It is now common for non-English speakers to adopt an English name, at least for professional purposes. However, the practice of bestowing an English name is increasingly taking place long before entering the workforce. Today, children in Taiwan are enrolled in some kind of English class or program; some begin as early as kindergarten. At some point in their academic lives, most Taiwanese children are given an English name. Since English names are not legally registered, the name giver has great liberty in choosing an English name, and the name bearer can change the name at any time. In this sense, the English name is considered more fluid, or changeable, than the birth name; it is an optional, rather than an obligatory, linguistic category. As noted by observers of English naming phenomena (Lee, 2001; FlorCruz, 2013), these names can range from the common *John* and *Sophie* to pop-culture-inspired names such as *Popeye* and *Rocky* or to cringe-inducing names like *Devil* or *Medusa*.

The present study aims to investigate the selection of English names by examining choices and patterns among given English names. Questionnaires were distributed to 248 university students studying at a public university in Taiwan. The phonological cues for gender names reported by Barry and Harper (2003) were very much in effect in the present sample. Contrary to previous studies on personal English names (cf. Cassidy et al., 1999), monosyllabic names were equally distributed among male and female names in the present study. Moreover, homophonization was commonly observed among male and female names; specifically, English names were selected because they sounded like the Chinese name. These findings are significant as comparatively little attention has been given to the investigation of English names among non-English speakers.

Methodology

A total of 248 students — 144 females and 104 males — were asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding their English names, if available. All participants were university students and participation was optional. Those who volunteered to participate in the study filled out the questionnaires after class. Students were asked to complete them individually and were assured of confidentiality. The questionnaire included the following items:

(1) List your Chinese name and English name.
(2) When did you receive your English name? (e.g., kindergarten, high school)?
(3) Who gave you this name? (e.g., you, parents, friends)?
(4) Why was that name chosen? (Briefly explain in spaces provided.)
(5) Did you ever want to change your English name? If yes, why?

Upon completion of the questionnaire, students were asked follow-up questions if clarifications were needed. All responses were collected and organized in a Word document. For organizational purposes, students were asked to provide the answer to Question 2 in terms of level of schooling, rather than a specific age. Thus, responses to Question 2 were categorized as *kindergarten*, *elementary school*, *high school*, and so forth. For Question 3, response categories included *parents*, *myself*, *relatives*, *teachers*, *friends*, and so forth. For Question 4, response categories included *pop culture*/

famous figures, *sounds like my name*, *I don't know*, and so forth. For Question 5, the answer was either *yes* or *no*.

For Question 1, students provided their Chinese names written in Chinese characters. Three-character Chinese names (there were no two-character names) were then transcribed into English words using the Hanyu Pinyin system of Romanization. To avoid confusion, the terms *first name*, *middle name*, and *last name* were not used; instead, the terms *surname* and *personal name* were used, where *personal name* refers to the second and third Chinese characters. For example, the Chinese name 陳 張 三 is transcribed to Chen Zhang San: the first character (Chen) forms the surname, and the second and third character together (Zhang San) form the Chinese personal name. The function of the transcribed, Romanized Chinese names will become apparent later in the discussion.

To test whether the English names follow certain gender-associated phonological cues, the following criteria were used, as described by Barry and Harper (2003): the final letters *a*, *e*, and *i* were coded as female and the final letters *b*, *c*, *d*, *g*, *k*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *o*, *p*, *r*, *s*, *t*, *w*, and *x* were coded as male. Since the letters *h* and *y* were equally likely to be found in male and female names, they were coded as ambiguous. Names ending in *f*, *j*, *q*, *u*, *v*, and *z* were coded as rare since they were rarely found in the English names. Final phonemes were also categorized, as described in Barry and Harper (2003): consonantal phonemes and the vowel *o* were classified as male, sonorant phonemes (*m*, *n*, *ng*, *r*, *l*) were classified as ambiguous, and vowels other than *o* were classified as female. Finally, the number of syllables in male and female names was determined.

Results

Of the 248 English names in this study, 105 (42%) were received in elementary school, 41 (17%) in kindergarten, 40 (16%) in high school, and 18 (7%) in college, as shown in Table 1. Here, the term *high school* includes junior and senior high schools in Taiwan, which are equivalent to middle and high schools in the US. Thus, the majority of students in this study received their English name some time before the age of 20. Not all students received an English name while in an educational institution, however. Eighteen students reported that their names were bestowed by their parents when they were babies. The 26 students (10%) in the *other* category included

TABLE 1
PHASES OF LIFE WHEN ENGLISH NAMES WERE RECEIVED

Categories	n *(N* = 248)	Percentage (%)
Baby	18	7
Kindergarten	41	17
Elementary School	105	42
High School	40	16
College	18	7
Other	26	10

TABLE 2
CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE WHO CONFERRED ENGLISH NAMES

Categories	n (*N* = 248)	Percentage (%)
Teachers	107	43
Myself	67	27
Parents	48	19
Relatives	12	5
Friends	6	2
Others	8	3

those who did not remember when they received their English name, one student who reported that she received her name when she was baptized as a Catholic, and another student who reported that he received his English name when he went to live in Australia for a year.

In terms of the people who chose the English name, 107 of the 248 English names in this study (43%) were bestowed by teachers, as shown in Table 2. This is consistent with the finding that most students received their English name while at school. Teachers included those working in an elementary school, high school, university, or cram school (akin to a tutoring center, a place for students to receive additional instruction or brush up on an academic subject). Besides teachers, students also received their English names from parents (48, or 19%), relatives (12, 5%), or friends (6, or 2%). Sixty-six English names (27%) were not derived from outside sources; rather, students chose their own names. The other category included 8 students (3%) who did not remember who chose their name.

In terms of why a particular English name was given, 68 students (27%) responded that they did not know. Eleven students (4%) who responded "no particular reason" explained that they drew a card randomly from a pile of name cards. Where concrete reasons were given, they fell into one of three categories: phonetic motivation (e.g., homophonization, easy to pronounce), external motivation (e.g., popular media, idols), and other (e.g., association with physical features).

Phonetic motivation

Of 248 students, 84 (34%) gave reasons for choosing their English names that were phonetically motivated. Of those 84, 55 students (65%) chose their English name because it sounded like their Chinese name. Homophonization can occur with any character morpheme in a student's Chinese name. For example, the phonetic similarity between the English name *Wesley* and the Chinese personal name *Wei Yi* lies in the rounded initial consonant and the front vowel phoneme. The English name *Sean* shares similar sounds with the Chinese personal name *Xiang Fu*. The English name *Tinny* contains syllables that correspond to the character morphemes of the Chinese personal name, *Ting Ning*. On the other hand, the English name *Christine* may be an attempt at a phonetic spelling of the Chinese personal name *Shi Ting*. An interesting example is that of Willie, whose English name is an inverted form of his Chinese personal name, *Li Wei*. These examples demonstrate close phonological relationships

TABLE 3

PHONETICALLY MOTIVATED NAMES

English Name	Chinese Name (Surname + Personal Name)
Wendy	Zhuang Ya **Wen**
Annie	Chen Rou **An**
Lynn	Chang **Ling**
A**da**	Jian Ming **Da**
Tammy	Wu **Tian** Yu
Tinny	Chang **Ting Ning**
Y**veline**	Wang **Wei Ling**
Yvonne	Chang **Yu Fang**
Shanny	Lu Ying **Xuan**
Sean	Xu **Xiang** Fu
Tony	Sun **Tong**
Wade	Li Guo **Wei**
Wayne	Lin **Wei** Ming
Wes**le**y	Jiang **Wei Yi**
Jim	Shi **Jun** Yao
Ray	Lin Ping **Rei**
Ian	Han Jun **Yan**
Peter	Jiang **Pei** Ze
Willie	Chou **Li Wei**
A**braham**	Liu **Bo Han**

Note: sounds that are shared between the two names are shown in bolded text

between English and Chinese names. Table 3 provides examples of phonetically motivated names; the share sounds are shown in bolded text.

Of the 84 students who gave reasons for choosing their English name that were phonetically motivated, 15 (18%) described the pronunciation of their English names as "short," "short and simple," or "easy to pronounce." In reviewing the examples in Table 3 and the other names collected for this study, the use of short English names appeared consistent through the list. To further explore this phenomenon, the number of syllables per English name was determined for male and female students. In terms of syllabicity, 180 of the 248 names (73%) were monosyllabic, 55 (22%) were disyllabic, and 13 (5%) were trisyllabic, as shown in Table 4. No difference was found in syllabicity between the genders; shorter names were preferred by both male and female students. This finding is in contrast to previous studies that showed that monosyllabic names were significantly more likely to be male than female (Cassidy et al., 1999). Finally, 14 of the 84 students in this category (17%) offered reasons for choosing their English names such as "sounds good" or "sounds great." For example, Leo reported that his name "sounds brave" and Agnes reported that her name "sounds elegant."

TABLE 4

NUMBER OF SYLLABLES IN ENGLISH NAME, BY GENDER

	Number of Syllables			
	1 syllable	2 syllables	3 syllables	Total
Male	84	17	3	104
Female	96	38	10	144
Total	180	55	13	248

External motivation

Of the 248 students in this study, 34 (14%) attributed their name to external factors, such as popular media and famous individuals. For example, cartoon characters and children's programs provided sources for names across both genders. Jerry's favorite cartoon was Tom and Jerry, and so he picked the name of the clever mouse. The name *Maggy* was modeled after the name of baby Maggie in the Simpsons. Jasmine, a Disney fan, said she wanted to be like the princess in Aladdin. Charlie attributed his name to Charlie Brown of the *Peanuts* comic strip. Oscar referenced the character in the children's program Sesame Street. Alice's favorite story is *Alice in Wonderland*. The name *Kitty* refers not to the formal name *Katherine* but to the universally beloved Sanrio character Hello Kitty. Cindy and Cathy said that they named themselves after a "girl in a cartoon."

Among real-life celebrities, NBA players Eddie House, Le Bron James, and Allen Iverson were the inspiration for Eddie, James, and Iverson, respectively. Roger likes tennis, and his idol is Roger Federer. Vincent, Edison, and Albert wanted to be like the famous artist, inventor, and scientist, respectively. Jennifer stated that she was "named after a news anchor." Whitney's name was taken after her favorite singer, Whitney Houston. Sophie chose her name based on the season 16 winner of America's Next Top Model.

Other reasons

Of the 284 students, 55 (22%) gave reasons for choosing their English name that did not fall into the first two categories of phonetic or external motivation. Examples in this *other* category include references to physical or behavioral characteristics with which the students wished to identify. For example, Sunny reported that her name is tied to her positive disposition ("teacher thinks I'm a sunny girl") while Silver considered her name "a good word — bright, shining, and full of hope." Mini is short in stature, and Circle received his name when he was a "quite chubby" child. The two students named *Angela* said the name givers (teacher and father, respectively) described them as "angelic." Choosing a verb for her name, Chase declared that she's a person who "chases after everything, like knowledge, etc." Three students shared aspects of their English names with family members: Eddy has the same English name as his father, Jenny reported that her father wanted everyone's name to start with the letter J, and Jacinth — whose name was originally Hyacinth — later altered her name because the names of her siblings all begin with the letter J. Other names were considered "unique" by the students; for example, Catrina, Yolanda, Dean, Daphne,

and Aston described their names as "unique" or "different." The name *Anna*, a common English name, was nevertheless thought to be unique by the student who bears that name: she reported that she wanted a name that was "symmetrical." Tirina and Amie thought the names *Tina* and *Amy*, respectively, were too common, so they altered them slightly. Stark's father named him *Star*, but Stark decided to be creative by adding a –*k* at the end. Opting for an invented name, Spe explained that her name is short for *Special*. Finally, Jamie said she wanted a gender-neutral name.

Gendered naming characteristics

As noted in previous studies (cf. Barry and Harper, 2003), the most distinctive gendered naming characteristic is the final alphabetic letter: female names are more likely than male names to end in one of three vowels, *a*, *e*, or *i* (e.g., *Amanda*, *Jane*, *Vicki*), whereas male names are much more likely to end in consonant. In addition, female names are typically characterized by a final vowel phoneme. To examine whether non-native English-speaking name givers follow similar phonological cues when selecting an English name, the distribution of particular final vowel phonemes among male and female students was calculated. The results are shown in Table 5. The vowels *a*, *e*, and *i* were overwhelmingly associated with female name endings (80 female vs. 15 male), while consonants in combination with the vowel *o* were associated with male names (66 male vs. 23 female). The gender-neutral final letters *h* and *y* were found more often among female students. Few English names in this study ended with the letters *f*, *j*, *q*, *u*, *v*, or *z*, which is consistent with previous findings (Barry and Harper, 2003).

The finding that female names were typically characterized by a final vowel phoneme was also significant. These names included vowel phonemes other than *o*, such as a long back vowel *a* (e.g., *Flora*, *Anna*, *Ada*) and a long front vowel *e* (e.g., *Cathy*, *Sally*, *Tinny*).

Table 6 shows the distribution of final phonemes in the study sample. As shown, sonorant phonemes (*m*, *n*, *ng*, *r*, and *l*) were equally distributed among male and female names (e.g., *Jocelyn*, *Irene*, *Allen*, *Jim*). Other names included the vowel *o* and all the consonants other than the sonorants. The consonantal phonemes, including palatal, interdental, and labiodental consonants, were more prevalent among male names (e.g., *Jack*, *Derek*, *Ted*, *Howard*, *Jeff*).

When asked whether they would change their English name, 204 of the 248 students (82%) said "no." The 44 individuals who answered "yes" gave various reasons for doing so. Winnie reported that she did not like her name because others teased her

TABLE 5

FINAL LETTER OF ENGLISH NAME, BY GENDER

	Final Letter				
	a,e,i	h,y	f,j,q,u,v,z	All others	Total
Male	15	21	2	66	104
Female	81	40	0	23	144
Total	96	61	2	89	248

TABLE 6

FINAL PHONEME OF ENGLISH NAME, BY GENDER

| | Final Phoneme | | | |
	Vowels other than *o*	Sonorant phonemes	All others	*N*
Male	31	32	41	104
Female	99	30	15	144
Total	130	62	56	248

about Winnie the Pooh, and Donna recalled that her kindergarten classmates laughed at her name because it sounds like the word *donut*. Angel considered her name to be childish. Cynthia, Catrina, Patricia, and Joanna complained that their names were too long. James, Mary, Jenny, and Peter felt that their names were too common. Linda and Elaine wanted their English names to sound more like their Chinese names; for example, Elaine said, "I want the name Wennie because my last name is *Wen*." Aston said that he might want to change his name if he found another person with the same name.

Discussion

In examining the presentation names of politicians, Callary (2008) noted that nicknames (e.g., *Fred*, *Tom*) or the familiar form of a forename (e.g., *Freddy*, *Tommy*, *Marty*) were commonly used in addition to full forenames, such as *Frederick*, *Thomas*, or *Martin*. Likewise, *Liz* was used in place of *Elizabeth*, and *Peggy* was used in place of *Margaret*, in the presentation names of female politicians. In a way, given English names may be considered similar in nature to informal presentation names. The onomastic samples in this study show that, overall, given English names tend to be informal, rather than formal. In this study, formal multisyllabic forenames, such as *Margaret*, *Elizabeth*, *Winifred*, *Victoria*, *Lillian*, or *Catherine*, were rare, while names such as *Maggie*, *Liz*, *Winnie*, *Vicky*, *Lily*, and *Cathy* were more common. In comparison to two students named *Christina*, there were six students named *Tina*. Among the male students, names such as *Ken*, *Kenny*, *Jeff*, *Nick*, *Tony*, *Eddie*, *Joe*, *Mike*, and *Ted* were preferred over full forenames *Kenneth*, *Jeffrey*, *Nicholas*, *Anthony*, *Edward*, *Joseph*, *Michael*, and *Theodore*. One exception was Samuel, who attributed his name to a biblical character and therefore did not wish to use the shorter alternative, *Sam*.

   As noted by Wierzbicka (1992), use of an abbreviation or nickname rather than a surname or formal title can reveal subtle distinctions in the nature of social relationships. As a form of presentation name, the given English names in this study underscore the notion that use of particular names is reflected in personal and group relationships. The given English names in the educational context of this study are used among peers in the same way that English names often serve as office names, or names frequently referred to in the workplace. On the other hand, Chinese parents are unlikely to call their children by their English names. Thus, in some contexts, using a foreign name instead of a Chinese name (or affectionate variant thereof) may indicate a more distant relationship between the speaker and the subject.

In general, native Chinese speakers have no trouble identifying the gender of individuals from their names, as the semantics of the morpheme characters usually reveal such information. The findings of this study suggest that name givers, though non-native English speakers, are aware of which English names are male and female (i.e., they are aware of sex-stereotypic phonological characteristics). As shown, the assigned names, whether chosen by the students themselves or by others, were gender appropriate and closely followed the gendered phonology or semantics described in the previous literature. For example, names that connote flowers (e.g., *Flora*, *Iris*, *Lily*) or gemstones (e.g., *Jade*, *Crystal*) were exclusively female.

Although name givers have a great degree of freedom in their choice of name, the names in this study suggest they rarely go against tradition. For the most part, name givers did not explicitly aim to be different or to flout linguistic expectations. Except in a few unconventional cases (e.g., *Circle*, *Silver*, *Chase*), the gender of given English names were recognizable by non-native English speakers. This is likely due to an influence of popular media: American shows are popular in Asia.

As this study has shown, names are often selected because they are phonetically similar to the individual's Chinese name. In this way, homophonized names are highly personal and individualistic; they represent an attempt to associate a new name with the self. They can be viewed as salient markers of the affinity between sound and self-identity. The phenomenon of homophony in the selection of English names can be seen in other instances of acculturation, such as the transformation of Mvskoke appellations (Moore, 1995), where the title is literated and town names are transformed by homophonization. For example, *Artusee Harjo* became *Otis Harjo*, *Milltis Yahola* became *Mitchell Yahola*, and *Pinay Micco* became *Barney Micco*. French immigrants in Canada use what is known as a *dit* name, or a name that is used in place of a French heritage name in an English-speaking community. Some *dit* names are mild phonetic alterations of their French-Canadian originals (e.g., altering *Grenier* to *Green*), while others are false cognates or calques (i.e., loan translations).

The sample size in the present study was small, but several findings of onomastic interest were identified in regard to given English names. Moreover, given English names provide fertile ground for future research on the relationship between language and culture.

Acknowledgements

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Notes on contributor

Lindsey N. H. Chen is Assistant Professor of General Linguistics at the National Taiwan Normal University. Her areas of interest are language and culture, onomastics, and personal finance.

Correspondence to: Lindsey Chen, National Taiwan Normal University, 162 Heping East Road, Taipei, Taiwan. Email: chenlindsey@yahoo.com