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RESEARCH ON NEGATIVE TRANSFER OF CHINESE DIALECT PHONETICS TO ENGLISH PHONETICS

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ARTICLE DETAILS

ABSTRACT

English phonetics is both essential and difficult in English learning process of mainland China, especially for college students. Based on related researches of most provinces, the research conducted for this paper collected the pronunciation samples of 121 non-English majors who speak in local dialects instead of mandarin, had an all-round analysis of their pronunciation features and errors, and eventually made suggested modification based on the reasons leading to the errors.

KEYWORDS

1. INTRODUCTION

China is rich for language resources, and dialect diversity has a great manifestation in all provinces across the country. However, some specific tones, word pronunciations and expressions that exist in some types of dialects may cause obvious negative effects in English learning process, especially during the period of International Phonetic Alphabets (IPA) and tone learning. There have been dozens of scholars in most provinces of China who have recognized negative transfer phenomenon and made research on it.

But the problem lies that similar researches based on Chinese dialects in western provinces can hardly be found in most Chinese databases, and that researches on dialects of central or eastern China may be difficult to draw a definite conclusion due to different research directions. At the same time, summative and detailed conclusions drawn from case studies to prove the statement that "Chinese dialect phonetics can separately cause negative transfer to English phonetics" cannot be justified. Therefore, a piece of extensive research is made, which covers the negative transfer of dialects among all provinces of mainland China, and aims at providing suggestions on phonetic correction process.

2. FIRST LANGUAGE (L1) TRANSFER THEORY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

2.1. Overall explanations of L1 transfer and negative transfer

As a psychological concept, transfer is a phenomenon which refers to the impact caused by the knowledge learned to another part of knowledge that has not been or will soon be acquired. Such an impact can be positive (to promote knowledge acquiring), or negative (to inhibit knowledge learning) also. And after linguists borrowed the word to describe the influence on language learning, the word was given a new meaning that the learning process of one language can have positive or negative effects on another, and was eventually involved into the phrase "language transfer" [1].

In professor Rod Ellis' book *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, he mentioned that first language (L1) transfer can be generalized into four individual aspects: positive transfer, negative transfer, overuse and avoidance [2]. When discussing the phenomenon of L1 transfer of EFL learners in colleges of mainland China, the former two phenomena are usually studied. Furthermore, it is largely proved that negative transfer, rather than positive transfer, is frequently mentioned in researches between dialect phonetics and English phonetics (2008).

Negative transfer in linguistics refers to the actual situation that foreign language learners tend to apply similar pronunciation and intonation in their first language to the corresponding foreign language pronunciation. What is opposed to negative transfer is positive transfer, which refers to the situation that foreign language learners are able to reduce the pressure of language learning by borrowing some similar pronunciation and intonation in their first language, when two phonetic systems are overall similar. Because Chinese and English belong to Sino-Tibetan language family and Indo-European language family respectively, there are large differences in vocabulary composition, word sequence, syllables, etc. Accordingly, Chinese phonetics in most cases causes negative transfer to English phonetics.

In addition, as for the majority of college students studying English in mainland China, English is the first and only foreign language they are in contact with, so most learners are accustomed to naturally putting Chinese language habits into English learning, as well as to understanding English phonetic rules based on Chinese phonetic alphabets and dialect tones. Therefore, in English phonetic learning, the negative transfer of Chinese phonetic habits to English phonetic learning deserves more detailed research. What's more, the dialect resources in mainland China are extremely rich, which even causes people living in same cities to

speak in different dialects, so the degree of negative transfer of Chinese dialect phonetics to English phonetics is definitely not the same in every district of China [3,4].

2.2 Overview of case analysis based on L1 transfer theory

After comparing 121 pronunciation samples from universities across the country, it can be found that:

(1) As for college students who apply Mandarin instead of local dialect as their first language, their mastery of standard English pronunciations (including Received Pronunciation, General American, etc.) is relatively better, compared with those English learners who use dialects as their mother tongue.

(2) As for English learners from different provinces but in the same learning stage, mistakes are often made by students in such places where pronunciation rules are totally different from Mandarin, such as southeastern and southern China. Most learners misread some consonants directly as initials in Chinese phonetic alphabets, or tend to pronounce rigidly or read in a "jumping" way due to the cadence of Chinese [5].

3. THE SPECIFIC IMPACTS ON NEGATIVE TRANSFER OF CHINESE DIALECT PHONETICS TO ENGLISH PHONETICS

Based on IPA, we conclude that the negative transfer of Chinese dialect phonetics to English pronunciation is reflected in vowels, consonants and tones. For example, some students may misread short vowels like [ʊ] or [e] as corresponding Chinese finals, or may confuse several pairs of consonants which obey similar pronunciation rules. Detailed analysis is listed below:

3.1 The negative transfer of Chinese dialect phonetics to English stresses

In English, words with no less than 2 syllables will have obvious stresses. They can help English learners to effectively distinguish stressed and unstressed syllables, and correct use of word stress in cognitive and expressive processes is beneficial to students' gaining sentence fluency. The stress of English words will appear in the beginning or middle of the word, and some foreign words do not conform to the general stress rules. That causes students, especially learners who are not in an Indo-European language environment, to pay a greater memory cost. In contrast, most of the word stress in Chinese vocabulary is located on the last part, and Chinese EFL learners are easily affected by this and will move the stress to the corresponding position in those English words, so as to seek the cadence like that in Chinese pronunciations. In fact, the placement of stress on the last syllable in Chinese vocabulary directly leads to the formation of a "stress-stress" language rhythm when speak Chinese. Eventually the stress in the sentence will be confused, and the emphasis marked by stresses cannot be reflected either [6].

3.2 The negative transfer of Chinese dialect phonetics to English rhythm

The premise of producing a sense of language rhythm in English is to stress the content words, weakly read the function words, and alternate the stressed and unstressed syllables. English is timed according to the stress, and the time required to read a sentence mainly depends on the number of stresses contained in the sentence. Different communication needs also form different language rhythms. However, when Chinese students practice English, teachers always emphasize that each word must be spoken with a mellow and full tone, and therefore they lack of practice in linking and unstressed syllable reading in the process of daily practice. Furthermore, it is easy for Chinese students to lengthen English expressions that should originally be unstressed, which eventually leads to a lack of normal English rhythm.

3.3 The negative transfer of Chinese dialect phonetics to English tones

Chinese is called a tonal language by modern linguists which has 4 basic tones - Yinping, Yangping, Shangsheng and Qusheng. Each Chinese character corresponds to one or several fixed tones, and changing the tones means changing in meaning also. However, the intonation of English can be roughly divided into five tones including rising and falling, and original meaning of a sentence will not be changed due to different sentence stresses in various contexts. Chinese native speakers may encounter problems such as unclear emphasis due to wrong intonation when learning English pronunciation.

4. CASE ANALYSIS OF NEGATIVE TRANSFER

According to the analysis of the 121 samples, all the problems existing in English pronunciation can be divided into two parts: universal problems and regional (existing in some specific provinces) problems.

4.1 Universal problems

4.1.1 Vowels

(a) Non-standard opening degree

The opening degree is not standard, which is generally too large or too small. Take the pair [i:] and [ɪ] for example. This pair of long and short vowels always make Chinese EFL learners confused due to the non-standard opening degree, such as vowel pronunciation of "sheep" and "ship". In addition, there is also confusion between vowels like [u:] and [ɔ:], [ɒ] and [ʌ], [ɒ] and [u], [ʌ] and [æ], [æ] and [e], [aɪ] and [eɪ].

(b) Wrong duration

There are problems of inaccurate time value for long and short vowels. For example, there are pronunciation errors due to confusion between [u:] and [ɔ:], [ɒ] and [ʌ]. The vowel [ʌ] in the word "hut" is wrongly read as [ɑ:], which equals to reading the whole word as [hɑ:t] mistakenly.

4.1.2 Consonants

(a) The confusion of alveolar, dental and fricative pronunciation is common in China, especially between [s] and [z], [θ] and [ð], [ʃ] and [ʒ]. Mouth shapes and tongue positions of some English pronunciations are not reflected in the Chinese phonetic alphabets, leading to the common problem made by most students in pronunciation. They directly replace some specific consonants with corresponding initials in Chinese phonetic alphabets, and even omit the action of forming the right mouth shape that do not exist in the Chinese phonetic alphabets when read rapidly.

Some consonants that are easily mixed are as follows:

[θ] is easily pronounced as [s].

e.g. the word "tooth" is misread as [tu:s] instead of [tu:θ].

[ð] is easily pronounced as [z].

e.g. the word "this" is misread as [zɪs] instead of [ðɪs].

[ʃ] is easily pronounced as [ʒ].

e.g. the word "fish" is misread as[fɪʒ] instead of [fɪʃ].

(b) Labio-dental and bilabial

There is confusion between labio-dental [v] and bilabial [w].

e.g. the word "vocabulary" is misread as [wə'kæbjələri] instead of [və'kæbjələri]. They omit the action of biting lip.

(c) Confusion among [n], [l] and [r]

It's easy for students to confuse [n], [l] and [r].

e.g. [n] is confused with [l] in the word "monologue". Some students misread it as ['mɒləlɒg] or ['mɒnənɒg].

(d) Nasal

There is confusion or loss of nasal consonants [n] and [ŋ]. When pronouncing these two nasal consonants, there will be confusion and the absence of [ŋ] in most cases.

e.g. the word "ring" is misread as [rɪ] or [rɪn] instead of [rɪŋ].

4.2 Region-based mistakes

4.2.1 Glides in diphthongs

(a) Glide missing of [eɪ], [aɪ] and [ɔɪ]

The problem often happens in provinces such as Zhejiang and Qinghai.

Zhejiang: When analyzing samples, we find that English learners in Zhejiang province fail to pronounce the glide in diphthongs, which is reflected on missing the glide process of [eɪ], [aɪ], [ɔɪ], etc.

Qinghai: Dialects of Qinghai province lack of diphthong pronunciations. Therefore, the glide process is missing, which leads to misreading [eɪ], [aɪ] and [ɔɪ] as [e] mistakenly.

(b) Glide missing of [ɪə], [eə] and [ʊə]

English learners in the provinces of Chongqing and Guangxi may encounter the glide problem shown in the title above.

(c) Glide missing of [aɪ] and [aʊ]

Learners in Guangxi province cannot distinguish mouth shape changes in diphthongs such as [aɪ], [aʊ], [ʊə] etc., resulting in the absence of glide process.

(d) Unclear glide

Shaanxi: English learners in Shaanxi province have the problem of showing an ambiguous glide process in oral English.

(e) Over-emphasized tail vowel

Tibet: In the course of preliminary case studies, we also find that the tail vowel rhymes were strongly emphasized by Tibetan learners.

(f) Tail vowel missing in diphthongs

In the central and southern parts of Anhui, tail vowel rhymes are lacking in pronunciation, such as the missing tail [ɪ] in diphthongs [eɪ] and [aɪ] [7].

4.2.2 Misuse of consonants before and after certain vowels

(a) [w] mistakenly added before vowels

Shanghai: English learners add consonant [w] before vowels, which leads to obvious pronouncing mistakes, such as misreading the word "flour" ['flaʊr] as ['flawʊr].

Beijing: Learners tend to add the diphthong [w] before the short vowel [ʊ].

(b) [v] mistakenly added before vowels

The problem mainly occurs in provinces of Gansu and Yunnan. Several Beijing English learners also make such a mistake.

Gansu: Influenced by dialect pronunciation habits, learners in Gansu province tend to add [v] before short vowels such as [ʊ] and [ɪ].

Yunnan: Due to the influence of dialect habits, learners in Yunnan province mistakenly add [v] before the short vowel [ʊ], and replace [ʊ] with [vʊ].

(c) [j] mistakenly added before vowels

Shanghai: Shanghai learners are specially influenced by the dialect by adding [j] before vowels.

(d) [ŋ] mistakenly added after vowels

Gansu: Due to the influence of the dialect, the nasal [ŋ] is added before the short vowels such as [ʊ] or [ɪ].

(e) [n] mistakenly added after vowels

Inner Mongolia: The learners of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region are influenced by dialect habits, which causes a special case of adding consonants after vowels, such as adding [n] after [æ] to form the pronunciation as [æn].

4.2.3 Misuse of vowels before and after other vowels

Inner Mongolia: Affected by dialect habits, learners in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region have the problem of adding another vowel before vowel, which is mainly reflected in adding [ɪ] before [əʊ] to form the pronunciation of [ɪəʊ].

4.2.4 Problems with schwa

(a) Stressed schwa sound

The problem is mainly shown in Anhui and Shanxi provinces.

Anhui: Some learners are affected by dialect habits and have schwa stressed in some syllables.

Shanxi: In Shanxi province, schwa stress among a small part of learners is affected by dialect habits.

(b) The absence of schwa

Hubei: English learners are prone to encounter the absence of schwa sounds in the process of pronunciation learning, which is a special case for learners in Hubei province [8].

(c) Mistakenly adding schwa

Sichuan: Learners mainly add schwa to some syllables for no reason, such as pronouncing the word "ask" as ['ɑːəskə].

4.2.5 Problems with plosives

(a) [ə] mistakenly added after plosives

This phenomenon exists mainly in Anhui, Guangxi, Hunan, Liaoning, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Zhejiang, etc.

Hunan: The main effect of Hunan dialect tone on consonants is that it makes learners add vowels mistakenly in consonant clusters, especially short vowels such as [e] and so on.

Liaoning: Learners in this province have problems of adding [ə] or other vowels unconsciously at the end or middle of the words.

Qinghai: Qinghai dialect has problems of insufficient opening degree and no diphthongs, causing the phenomenon that learners read [eɪ], [aɪ] and [ɔɪ] as [e].

Inner Mongolia: the phenomenon of adding [ə] at the end of a word is extremely obvious.

Zhejiang: The effect of Zhejiang dialect on tone is that in most cases, Zhejiang learners may add [ə] at the end of a word [9].

(b) Problems with detonation

The problem is mainly shown in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces.

Guangdong: Take the word "attempt" for instance. Because there are two connected plosives [p] and [t] in the end, English learners in Guangdong tend to pronounce only the first plosive [p], while in some tests participants even leave out both of them.

Guangxi: Influences of Guangxi dialect phonetics on English tone also causes the problem of losing consonant clusters, which can be proved in the word "attempt" and other words with similar pronunciations [10].

4.2.6 Problems with fricatives

The researches exploring fricative phenomenon mainly focus on the pronunciation problems of consonant pairs like [h], [f] and [r], [ʒ].

(a) Confusion of pronunciation between [h] and [f]

It mainly exists in Fujian, Shanxi and Sichuan provinces.

Fujian: [h] and [f] are often confused. The reason why they are easily confused is that this pair of consonants is originally listed as easily confused pronunciation in Fujian dialect. While learning English, students will naturally apply the same pronunciation regulation to oral English, which leads to this common problem existed among most of the Fujian English learners.

Shanxi: Shanxi dialect also has a big influence on English consonant pronunciation of local college students, which leads to the confusion of [h] and [f] [11].

Sichuan: The main effect of Sichuan dialect on the consonant pronunciation is that it makes some students confuse [h] and [f] while learning.

(b) Confusion of pronunciation between [r] and [ʒ]

Beijing: The local dialect includes obvious R-coloured vowels, so the main problem of consonant is that students always wrongly regard [ʒ] as [r]. In addition, most of Beijing participants choose to imitate American accents due to the special phenomenon existing in the province.

4.2.7 Confusion of voiced and voiceless consonants

(a) Reading voiceless consonants as voiced
Guangxi: English learners in Guangxi tend to pronounce voiceless consonants as voiced. This phenomenon is related to the pronunciation habits of Guangxi local dialects.

(b) Reading voiced consonants as voiceless

It mainly exists in Gansu and Shanxi.

Gansu: English learners in Gansu have problems of making voiced consonants voiceless, which mainly exists in plosives [b], [d] and [g].

Shanxi: English learners in Shanxi have a big problem of pronouncing voiceless consonants as voiced [11].

4.2.8 Tone problems

What we mainly focus on is the universal treatment of tones in English sentences in different provinces, which is divided into rising tone, flat tone and falling tone, according to the tones in various provinces. In addition, the problems of the statement stress, R-coloured vowels and the phenomenon of stress anti-displacement are very obvious too.

Tone problems are more obvious and mainly analyzed in such provinces as Anhui, Beijing, Tianjin, Hunan, Jilin, Liaoning, Zhejiang, etc.

(a) Rising tones

The problem exists in provinces such as Anhui, Hunan, Jilin, Liaoning, Zhejiang.

Anhui: In Anhui dialect, people always speak in rising tones. Problems exist such as uneven distribution of sentence stress and the rise in the tone at the end of sentences, especially in affirmation sentences and information question sentences in English phonetic learning.

Hunan: Hunan dialect contains a considerable number of the sentences in the rising tones. Information questions and other sentences with falling tones in English pronunciation will be read with rising ones.

Jilin: The tone of Jilin dialect lacks flat tones. As for Yes/No questions and information questions, they have the problem of accent distribution which leads to wrongly unstressed syllables.

Liaoning: In Liaoning dialect, the tone of the sentences is mostly rising. Therefore, problems exist such as the misuse of information questions in English pronunciation.

Zhejiang: Most sentences in Zhejiang dialects end with a rising tone which leads to rising tones in affirmative sentences or information questions in English. Moreover, flat tones will be used in some question sentences among some Zhejiang learners. For example, when reading the question "What are you talking about?", most college students from Zhejiang province will read the whole sentence in a rising tone. This has a lot to do with Zhejiang dialect, which is often featured by flat or rising tones. But sometimes students will deliberately use the rising tones in information sentences, which is quite different.

(b) Flat and falling tones

The problem is shown in provinces such as Guizhou, Qinghai, Shandong, Shaanxi, Inner Mongolia and Yunnan.

Guizhou: The dialect of Guizhou is mainly based on falling tones. The habit of applying falling tones is often brought to Chinese students' English learning.

Qinghai: The pronunciation habits of Qinghai dialect affecting the tone stress is mainly reflected in word stress retro-displacement. The tone lacks both up and down as well, leading to flat and falling tones.

Shandong: The negative transfer to English pronunciation of Shandong dialect is mainly reflected in the tone. The inverted sentences are commonly used in Shandong, which easily causes problems such as general falling tones and excessive tail tones in English learning. Using many determiners, English learners in Shandong tend to put the emphasis at the end when reading long paragraphs or sentences, with the subject and predicate verbs not being emphasized, leading to information missing.

Shaanxi: In Shaanxi province, the falling tones are used mostly in dialect. The result is that falling tones are used correctly by most students in information questions. But in Yes/No questions, the falling tones are also used, which leads to incorrect pronunciation and the problem of unbalanced tone stress in sentences.

Inner Mongolia: The flat tones are used in most sentences, which causes the problems in English pronunciation are that the flat of falling tones are used in the end of sentences in Yes/No questions, whereas the flat tones are used in information questions, causing unbalanced tone stress distribution in information questions.

Yunnan: In Yunnan province, the falling tones are used in most sentences in dialect. The problems caused by it in English pronunciation are that the falling tones are used in the end of the sentence in affirmation sentences and information questions and that the balanced distribution of the tone stress are broken in affirmation sentences and information questions.

(c) Overused stresses

The phenomenon is mainly reflected in Chongqing. English learners in Chongqing are often accustomed to leaving the R-coloured syllables alone instead of appending them to vowels, which leads that add 1-2 stressed syllable to the actual sentence than the standard pronunciation. It may also lead to the problem of stress component mistake.

(d) Overused R-coloured vowels

Beijing: The biggest influence is that the R-coloured vowels is overused by English learners in Beijing, which results in the misunderstanding of some phonetic symbols, easily causing obviously prolonged pronunciation time in oral English. In addition, the phenomenon of missing consonants in sentences in Beijing and Tianjin is also very worthy of attention. In English learning, when one or more adjacent words include the same consonant, only one of the consonants is often pronounced, and the rest of the consonants will be automatically dropped, which leads to the disorder of words and sentence rhythm.

Tianjin: In Tianjin, the biggest influence on English learners is the

overuse of R-coloured sounds. Part of the phonetic symbols is recognized or added mistakenly, resulting in prolonging the pronunciation time in oral English.

(e) Forward-moved stress

Shanxi: Negative transfer of Shanxi dialect to English tones is mainly caused by moving stress forward. Considering that students in many areas of China show the characteristics of stress backward universally, this phenomenon is of great significance for studying phonetics and other aspects.

4.2.9 Exceptions

English learners in Shanghai confuse fricative and dental. It is worth noticing that a special phenomenon often occurs that the [m] in front of any other consonants will be pronounced as[n], which makes Shanghai the only area showing such a problem.

5. SUGGESTIONS

5.1 Suggestions for college self-learners of English

Methods of contrast can be applied for English phonetic learning. It is recommended that self-learners search for English phonetic materials all over the world, find phonetic learning materials suitable for all levels from news media worldwide such as BBC, AP, CNN, etc., so as to understand the authentic and pure English pronunciation. First one needs to listen carefully, marking the stress of words and the rising or falling tones of sentences. Further requests such as marking the pausing point and imitating the pronunciation by autonomous recording and recitation are essential as well. Through comparing with the data of standard pronunciation, one is able to find the way to pronounce correctly on his own, pronounce in a way as native speakers do by simulating their pronunciation and intonation, and finally detect the difference between scene-based language and written language.

Try to make English learning part of your life, and listen to English songs in your spare time, spot how English singers deal with liaison and intonation.

Pair work is also a good choice for correction. Find a suitable partner, who is of the same oral English level as you or even a native speaker, who can correct your mistakes and point out where you are prone to make such mistakes. In this way, you will make rapid progress in English pronunciation. When communicating with foreign teachers or international students, you have the chance to notice how they pronounce words and imitate them. You can also read the text aloud and let them correct your pronunciation.

5.2 Suggestions for oral English and phonetics teaching in universities of China

The importance of pronunciation in English learning should be paid attention to and phonetics should be on Chinese college and universities' curriculum. Input of good pronunciation teaching can help students output good English. Learners must first learn how to pronounce words, that is, to understand the general pronunciation rules of English, which is also one of the most important parts of new language learning. In recent years, the number of English learners in China, especially the number of students who study English as a foreign language, has greatly increased. In most Chinese colleges and universities, English is one of the compulsory courses. Taking the samples from the eastern and western parts of China as an example, it is obvious that the overall pronunciation and intonation of the eastern part of China, including weakened reading and skimming, is better than that of the western inland provinces. As the window of English learning, the speaking process needs to be paid enough attention by learners, and the teaching content should become more targeted and efficient.

As for the opening degree and duration in pronunciation, it is necessary to focus on teaching pronunciation by targeted practice of related vocabulary with a feedback collection as a follow-up to make timely adjustments to teaching.

6. CONCLUSION

English phonetic learning plays a very important role in thesis reading and scientific researches. Considering the dialects of various provinces across China have negative transfer in the learning process of English phonetic, it is necessary for college students to find or create a good English learning atmosphere, and get rid of the "paper and pen" learning method in junior and senior high schools. Integrating into the appropriate language environment for reading, speaking and teaching can be regarded as a high-level goal for English learners in mainland China.

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