

The Accented English Pronunciation of Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Preschoolers

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ABSTRACT

Even though the patterns of Chinese English as a new variety of English is gradually emerging, very few studies have been done to explicitly explore the unique patterns of Chinese English comprehensively with consideration of all areas of China. To fill in the previous gaps, ten Chinese EFL preschoolers have been recruited to investigate the pronunciation features of their accented English. The participants were asked to read a list of ten short sentences in the form of a recorded homework task. From the the data analysis in this paper, the most salient characteristics of their speech production including the extra vowel /ʊ/ at the word-final positions, word-final lateral glide /l/ pronounced as /əʊ/, vowel rhoticity, substitution of interdental fricative /θ/ with the alveolar fricative /s/, and vowel substitution with /ʌ/. These patters could be seen as the proof of the emerging of Chinese English as a new English variety. Future research is suggested to focus more on providing a comprehensive description of different speech patterns in different areas of China.

Keywords: *Accented English, Pronunciation, Consonant, Vowel, Chinese EFL, Preschoolers.*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the development of globalization, the number of people who speak English in China has increased dramatically. Nowadays, learning English as a foreign language (EFL) has gradually become younger. At this stage, preschool children have already begun to learn English before they formally enter elementary schools. According to Deterding, there are countless Chinese people have mastered a certain degree of English language ability regardless of their age and Chinese English is likely to become a unique variety of English language due to its large population base of second language (L2) English speakers [1]. Admittedly, Chinese English has the potential to become a member of the Outer Circle English varieties from the currently expanding status [2].

Even though the patterns of Chinese English as a new variety of English is gradually emerging, very few studies have been done to explicitly explore the unique patterns of Chinese English comprehensively with consideration of all areas of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Yet, there did exist some studies that have been done to exclusively considering the features of several

accented Chinese English varieties [1], [3], [4]. For instance, Deterding made a detailed discussion on the features of Chinese EFL speakers' pronunciation of English who were from the central, East, and Northeast part of Mainland China. In his study, he found that some Chinese L2 learners prefer to insert a vowel after the final plosive of a word specifically before another consonant-beginning word. Other salient patterns include the emphasis on the pronouns which appeared at the sentence-final positions, the avoidance of vowel reductions in function words, heavily nasalizing the vowels that occurred before a final nasal stops and a series of consonant substitutions (e.g., /s/ for /θ/ or /x/ for /h/) [1]. Deterding also suggested that the found patterns in Chinese English were highly possible to become a new variety of world Englishes that is manifesting in China.

Similarly, Rau, Chang and Tarone used the framework of variationist to investigate the pronunciation of Chinese learners of English, who were from Mainland China and Taiwan Province, with a specific focus on the English interdental fricative sound of /θ/ [3]. They demonstrated that people from both Mainland China and Taiwan

Province regarded /s/ as the most acceptable sound that could substitute the sound of interdental fricative /θ/. In addition, they also found that the frequency of lexicon would also facilitate the accuracy of the production of the interdental fricative /θ/ yet the degree could be very slight [3].

Other varieties of Chinese English such as Hong Kong English have also received some attention. Deterding, Wong and Kirkpatrick provided the frequency counts of pronunciation patterns by interviewing Hong Kong students and further compared the found features with some regional accented English varieties of China, Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries [4]. They argued the importance of describing the phonological properties of every language variety of English independently without referencing to any other external varieties [4].

However, some research papers have identified certain features of Chinese English as errors and problems from a critically prescriptive perspective [5], [6]. As Zhang and Yin argued, from a total prescriptive point of view, the pronunciation mistakes of Chinese EFL learners could be caused by L2 learners learning "DUMB ENGLISH" which emphasized listening and reading skills acquisition without especially paying attention to their oral skill development. They also laid the stress on "attain pronunciation accuracy and perfection" of individual sound after a certain age [5]. Same as Zhang and Yin, Han considered the distinct speech sounds production patterns of Chinese EFL learners as problematic as well and further identified possible causes that could affect their somewhat "wrong" pronunciations, including first language transfer, age, attitudes and insufficient L2 knowledge [6].

Generally speaking, previous studies have explored the issues behind the distinct patterns of accented Chinese English. Yet, most of these studies have concentrated on the subject of grown-up adults, whereas few studies have very carefully studied the pronunciation characteristics of younger Chinese EFL learners, let alone the ones with a specific focus on the remote areas of Northeast China, although there were some studies compared the pronunciation patterns of children and adults with the focuses mainly on the age effect [7], the L1 effect [8] or the different social context [9].

The current study, therefore, intends to illustrate the pronunciation patterns of Chinese young EFL learners to see what some possible characteristics manifest in the process of testing. To achieve the

objective of this paper, this research will provide a detailed description of the English language pronunciations by a group of ten young preschoolers from Northeast China, based on the recordings of a short sentences list reading task, and answer the research question:

"What are the features of the English pronunciation of Chinese young EFL learners in Northeast China?"

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Subjects

A class of 10 young preschoolers (5 boys: B1-B5 and 5 girls: G1-G5) were invited to participate in the research project. Most of them were at the age of 5 at the time of recording. As the nature of the data collection process itself should be autonomous and completely voluntary, no coercive measures were imposed on the children and their parents to force them to participate in this experimental study. All the subjects were claimed to be born in the city of Changchun, Jilin Province, Northeast of China and stated that they have learned English for approximately a year at the time of recording. Their parents also confirmed that they would also attend English tutorial classes in their spare time as a reinforcement of class content. All the participants were rewarded with a small gift at the end of the experiment, and their parents also received suggestions for training their children's pronunciation skills.

2.2 Material

The main task in this experiment is a short sentence reading list. The stimuli in this experiment were a list of simple sentence patterns most commonly used by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) beginners including greeting sequences, name asking and self-introduction sequences, Chinese class opening sequence as well as the expression of thanks sequence (details see "Table 1"). These sentences were selected not only because they were relatively easy but they contained the very first words that young preschoolers have learned during their first year of English language learning.

Table 1. Short sentence reading list

Short sentence reading list		
1. I am a girl.	2. I am a boy.	3. Thank you.
4. You are welcome.	5. Stand up.	6. Sit down.
7. What is your name?	8. My name is xxx.	9. How are you?
10. I am fine, thank you.		

A total of 27 words appeared in the reading list containing some repetitive parts such as "thank you", "I am a" and "name". A computer-based Standard British English (SBE) transcription of these sentences was provided in "Table 2" with reference to the International Phonetic Association symbols on the phonemic level (IPA (Phonemes)). The reason of choosing SBE as the target reference was that the textbooks and the teaching materials that the subjects and their teacher employed was based on SBE norms. Among these words, there were 17 different consonants including 6 oral stops /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/ and /g/; 3 nasal stops /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/; 4 fricatives /s/, /z/, /h/ and /θ/; 2 glides /w/ and /j/, and a lateral glide /l/. In consideration of vowels, there were a total number of 14 vowels appeared in the selected stimuli including 5 lax monophthongs /ɛ/, /ə/, /ɪ/, /ʌ/ and /ɒ/; 4 tense monophthongs /ɜ:/, /u:/, /ɑ:/ and /ɔ:/, and 5 diphthongs /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /æ/, /ɔɪ/ and /aʊ/.

Since the main goal of this paper is to describe the features of Chinese preschoolers' pronunciation

Table 2. IPA Transcription (Phonemes)

IPA Transcription (Phonemes)			
1. I am a girl.	/aɪ æm ə ɡɜ:l/	6. Sit down.	/sɪt daʊn/
2. I am a boy.	/aɪ æm ə bɔɪ/	7. What is your name?	/wɒt ɪz jɔ: neɪm/
3. Thank you.	/θæŋk ju:/	8. My name is xxx.	/maɪ neɪm ɪz/
4. You are welcome.	/ju: ɑ: welkəm/	9. How are you?	/haʊ ɑ: ju:/
5. Stand up.	/stænd ʌp/	10. I am fine, thank you.	/aɪ æm faɪn θæŋk ju:/

2.3 Procedure

All the participants were individually recorded separately by their parents at home since the stimuli were presented to them in the form of a small part of their homework. The subjects were asked to finish their task at the same day, yet the exact time of their doing the task was not strictly limited. Their parents were allowed to help their children practice the pronunciation of the chosen short sentences. However, they were not encouraged to intervene, interrupt, or assist their children's pronunciation production process during the official recording since their intervention was likely to affect the results. The recordings were done by the employment of a Chinese social media chatting app

patterns, it is worth noticing that there were also some drawbacks considering the design of this experiment:

- The degree of task difficulty indirectly caused the absence of instances of some relatively difficult consonants, i.e., fricatives, including the labiodental fricatives /f/ and /v/; the voiced interdental fricative /ð/; the 2 palatal fricatives /ʃ/ and /ʒ/; the 2 affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. There were no instances of the glottal stop /ʔ/ or retroflex liquid sound of /ɻ/ as well.
- Same as above, a few of the vowel symbols were also not considered since there were no instances of 1 lax monophthong of /ʊ/, 1 long monophthong of /i:/ or 4 diphthongs /əʊ/, /eə/, /ɪə/ and /ʊə/.
- The examples of the occurrences of consonants and vowels did not include all the positions that they could occur.

called "WeChat" with the use of the function of "voice message". Subsequently, these recordings were forwarded to the laptop and further transcribed by 2 well-trained Chinese phonemic transcribers to ensure inter-rater reliability based on the rules and standards of SBE transcribing system.

3. FEATURES OF PRONUNCIATION

Below are some salient features of the pronunciation of Chinese preschoolers that have been analyzed based on the task recordings. Due to space limitations, several very rare situations or specifically individual phenomena have not been included in the scope of detailed discussion and analysis.

3.1 Extra Vowel at the World-final Positions

Same as that has been found by Deterding [1] and Ho [11], the most obvious characteristic of the subjects that could distinguish them from other accented English varieties is the extra vowels that have been inserted at the word-final positions. Like Deterding [1] and Ho [11] stated, the subjects in this paper also tend to place an extra vowel at word finals, which as a result made the word pronunciation, for example, "am" from /æm/ into /æmʊ/. Yet, one thing that is different from what has been found in the past studies is that the extra vowel that has been added to the word-final

consonants is the lax vowel /ʊ/, whereas the formerly found epenthetic vowel was usually the schwa sound /ə/. Throughout the data collected, the epenthetic /ʊ/ was usually been added to the words which end by the consonant of the nasal stop /m/ and the oral stop of /p/. In addition, among the recordings, three of them has omitted the pronunciation of /m/ in the word "name" in Sentence 7 with all others fully realized (see "Table 3"). The research originally also predicted that there would occur an epenthetic vowel schwa at the end of the word-final /t/ sound in Sentence 6 and 7, yet the sound /t/ was linked together with the following word so that the epenthetic did not occur.

Table 3. Extra vowels at the world-final positions

Sentence	Context	Extra vowel /ʊ/ at word-final	No extra vowel at word-final
1	I am a girl.	10	0
2	I am a boy.	10	0
4	You are welcome.	9	1
5	Stand up.	7	3
7	What is your name?	9	1
8	My name is xxx.	7	3
Total		52	8

3.2 Word-final Lateral Glide /l/ Pronounced as /əʊ/

Normally, in both SBE and Standard American English (SAE), the phoneme /l/ at the word-final position is realized as the allophone dark [ɫ] of the phoneme /l/. However, the data collected in this experiment found that an overwhelming number of subjects (i.e., 7 out of 10) have realized and produced this sound as the diphthong vowel /əʊ/ which is very similar to the Chinese Pinyin

systematic symbol of /ou/ (see "Table 4"). Different from the pronunciation substitution of word-final positioned /l/, the word-middle positioned /l/ is normally pronounced by the subjects, just as the same allophone of dark [ɫ] as that would be produced by SBE and SAE native speakers. Except for this, only one preschooler (G3) has pronounced the word-middle positioned /l/ as the allophone of light [ɫ] which is usually occurred at the word-initial position. This has then been counted as an outlier and omitted from the data analysis.

Table 4. Word-final lateral glide /l/ pronounced as /əʊ/

Sentence 1: I am a girl.	
Realization of /l/	3 (G1; B4; B5)
Realization of /əʊ/	7

3.3 Vowel Rhoticity

Another feature found in the recordings was the sound pattern of vowel rhoticity. According to the teaching materials and textbooks they used, SBE sound patterns were employed as the target language norm of speech production and perception in the subjects daily L2 teaching and learning process. However, among the 40 tokens which included the letter r in the 4 sentences, a total number of 11 tokens of sounds were rhoticized (see "Table 5"). It is worth noting that the rhotic vowels were not produced by the same group of people in

each sentence. In fact, most of them would produce some rhotic vowels from time to time in different sentences and vocabulary. In addition, one of these subjects realized and produced the word "are" in sentence 4 as /lɑ:/ which was considered to an outlier of the data in this section and thus omitted from detailed description.

Table 5. Occurrence of rhotic /r/ after vowels

Sentence sequence	Context	Rhotic	Nonrhotic
1	I am a girl.	4	6
4	You are welcome.	0 (G3 realized as /lɑ: /)	9
7	What is your name?	4	6
9	How are you?	3	7
Total		11	39

3.4 Substitution of Interdental Fricative /θ/ with the Alveolar Fricative /s/

The most surprising finding of the data is that the subjects were all found to substitute the interdental fricative /θ/ with the alveolar fricative /s/, which overlapped with the results that have demonstrated by Rau, Chang and Tarone in their

study [3]. Deterding [1], Chung [12] and Hung [13] also confirmed that a large amount of Chinese EFL learners from other different areas of China showed this pattern in their speech production (see "Table 6"). Another very interesting point is that the vowel appeared in the same word (i.e., thank) is highly nasalized.

Table 6. Substitution of interdental fricative /θ/ with the alveolar fricative /s/

Sentence sequence	Context	Pronounced as /s/	Pronounced as /θ/
3	Thank you.	10	0
10	I'm fine, thank you.	10	0
Total		20	0

3.5 Vowel Substitution

The final salient feature, which is very different from the previous findings, is that the subjects tend to use the mid-central vowel /ʌ/ to substitute several vowels including /æ/ in "thank" and "stand", /ə/ in "welcome" and /aʊ/ in "down". According to the data collected, nearly all the participants substitute the vowel of /æ/, /ə/ and /aʊ / with /ʌ/

except for one token in which B5 pronounced the vowel in "welcome" correctly (see "Table 7"). This phenomenon may be due to the fact that the preschool students are also learning the Chinese pinyin symbols at the same time, and the first Chinese pinyin symbol that they learned is /a/, which sounds very similar to the vowel /ʌ/ in English. This similarity in pronunciation then further caused their misuse and substitution.

Table 7. Vowel substitution with /ʌ/

Sentence sequence	Context	Substituted with /ʌ/	Unsubstituted
3	Thank you.	10	0
4	You are welcome.	9	1
10	I am fine, thank you.	10	0
9	How are you?	10	0
Total		39	1

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the experiment, some of the most obvious characteristics of the pronunciation of Chinese EFL preschoolers has been illustrated above. It is not hard to see that some features are so widespread that they are clearly reflected in the pronunciation of every participant. Like Deterding [1] stated in his study, Chinese English could develop into a freshly new variety of world Englishes for its unique pronunciation patterns and huge population base of speakers. From the current study, we see that the overwhelming features are

even evident when L2 learners are still young. This also indirectly shows that it is not enough to study the pronunciation characteristics of only adults or children or any single group of people, rather, pronunciation characteristics require a comprehensive understanding. China has a vast majority of ethnic cultures, which means that people from different regions are likely to use very different language norms and pronunciation characteristics. Moreover, this difference in pronunciation characteristics begins to show up when people learn an L2 at a very young age. Future research needs to have a comprehensive

grasp of different pronunciation features of different regions in China.

5. CONCLUSION

This research project has been focused on the exploration of the pronunciation characteristics by Chinese EFL preschoolers from the Northeast part of China. Through data analysis, some salient features have been found to be extremely overwhelming among young Chinese children, including extra vowel at the word-final positions, word-final lateral glide /l/ pronounced as /əʊ/, vowel rhoticity, substitution of interdental fricative /θ/ with the alveolar fricative /s/ as well as vowel substitution with /ʌ/. These patterns could be seen as the proof of the emerging of Chinese English as a new English variety [1], [4]. Future research should be focused more to provide a comprehensive description of different speech patterns in different areas of China.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Jingyi Yang.

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