

The Influence of Chinese Dialects on English Pronunciation Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

Dialect is a special symbol of Chinese cultural diversity. Its influence on Second Language Acquisition has been ignored by many people. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers need to realize the effect of dialects on English education for Chinese students. As a language variant, dialect belongs to the same language system as Putonghua (Mandarin) and its most significant effect on English acquisition is in speech. Based on the review of previous studies, the paper aims to investigate the influence of Chinese dialects in different areas on English pronunciation acquisition and try to provide the pedagogical countermeasures to deal with the negative effects of dialects in English learning, which will be helpful for further English pronunciation acquisition.

Keywords: Chinese Dialects; English pronunciation acquisition; Influences; Pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

As a compulsory item in China's college entrance examination, it is not necessary to further elaborate on the importance of English. The English education industry is also expanding, and English teachers take great responsibility to help Chinese students master this global language. But the fact is that Chinese EFL learners still have lots of different problems with English pronunciation for a long time. Generally, pronunciation is a significant part of a language, which is complex and flexible, and evolutionary [1]. Nowadays the English teaching method is very monotonous, teachers are not aware of the influence of dialects on English learning. It is not easy for a foreign language learner to pronounce English like a native speaker, especially without realizing the negative transfer of their mother tongue. It is unavoidable that EFL learners will be influenced by a variety of Chinese dialects, which may cause difficulties in English pronunciation. Some EFL learners speak Chinese English with phonetic errors that will cause communication difficulties, even between the Chinese English speakers [2].

1.1. Chinese Dialect

With a vast territory and a long history, the number of Chinese dialects is innumerable. Dialect, as one of the most influential forms of standard language, has a great

influence on second language pronunciation acquisition [3]. As a unique symbol of national culture, Chinese dialect has been paid more and more attention in recent years. The conventionally accepted set of seven dialect groups first appeared in the second edition of the dialectology handbook edited by Yuan J. H. [4]. For decreasing number of speakers, they are mandarin dialects (Guanhua or Putonghua, the dominant dialect), Wu dialect, (mostly spoken in Shanghai, Zhejiang, Jiangsu provinces), Yue dialect (also known as Cantonese), Min dialect (mostly spoken in Fujian and Taiwan province), Hakka dialect, Xiang dialect (spoken in Hunan province) and Gan dialect (mostly spoken in Jiangxi province). For any Chinese dialect, the absolute existence time is as long as the history of the Chinese language. They all have great linguistic and cultural value.

1.2. Language Transfer

To figure out how dialect accent influences second language acquisition, we should first understand what "language transfer" is and what the reasons cause the negative transfer. The problem of "transfer" of the structural patterns of one's native language to a foreign language is well known to linguists as a general phenomenon. As Faerch and Kasper [5] hold the point of view that Language Transfer is a linguistic psychological process, in whose process, second language learners

stimulate their native knowledge to develop or use their interlanguage.

According to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, “the language we learn as a child (mother tongue) strongly influences the ways we think and view the world” [6]. For language learners, foreign language learning is organized within existing linguistic knowledge bases, such as the basic lexical items and grammatical structures of their mother tongue that have been already mastered. Consequently, EFL learners unconsciously transfer those lexical items, pronunciation, and grammatical structures of their mother tongue into the target language learning. As a result, the mother tongue mostly affects the learning of the target language. This phenomenon is called language transfer. According to the previous studies, the negative transfer of Chinese dialects to phonetic acquisition is greater than the positive transfer, which causes certain difficulties for second language learners in English learning.

1.3. Language Variation

It is important to mention the conception of language variation. In 1988, Chen had a special discussion on language variation. He believes that “living language can constantly and continuously produce variation” [7]. This variation exists objectively and does not depend on human will. He discusses the influence of social factors on language variation from four aspects: temporal variation, spatial variation, human variation, and contact variation. Language variation is the main object of sociolinguistics research, and it is also one of the existing forms of natural language. This is a new field of sociolinguistic research that has developed gradually in the 1960s, founded by William [8]. He believes that language variations are caused by assimilation or variation. The interaction between personal physiological and psychological characteristics and language systems is realized through the processes of analogy, borrowing, fusion, and occasional variation. He also studied the correlation between language variables and social variables through econometric and statistical analysis and conducted a multi-directional investigation and Research on the pronunciation, semantics, grammar, and discourse analysis of language items through questionnaires and qualitative and quantitative analysis. Regional differences between speakers are important sources of language variation, especially of phonetic variation, and carry information about the talker’s origin [9].

There have been many scholars who have made more in-depth research on the phenomenon of negative transfer between Chinese and English, but because most of these studies are based on Mandarin Chinese as the research object, the scope of research is too macro, therefore the relevant research results are lack of pertinence to foreign language teaching in different dialect regions of China.

2. THREE MAIN ASPECTS OF NEGATIVE TRANSFER IN PRONUNCIATION

Traditional language transfer theory holds that parts of the mother tongue that are similar to the target language promote the acquisition of the second language, called positive transfer, while parts of the mother tongue that differ from the target language hinder or interfere with the target language, known as negative transfer [10]. English and Chinese belong to different sounds of the system and they all have their rules of pronunciation. The negative transfer of pronunciation is highly emphasized. As mentioned in “The Sino-Tibetan Languages”, none of the purely local forms of Chinese has the status of a standard language. The national standard, Putonghua, is based on the dialect of Beijing but is by no means identical with it [11]. Due to a series of historical and political reasons, the biggest difference between Chinese dialects is in pronunciation. Most dialects do not have a writing system, and their grammatical structure is mostly the same as Mandarin.

The influence of Chinese dialects on English pronunciation Acquisition mainly focuses on the influence of segmental phonemic level on vowel acquisition, the influence of segmental phonemic level on consonant acquisition, and the influence of suprasegmental phonemic level on stress.

2.1 The Influence of Segmental Phoneme on Vowel Acquisition

The negative transfer on vowel acquisition is the main cause of misunderstanding. In the research of Qi [3], they used the method of sample inspection and a tape recorder to record the experimental samples, the following conclusions are drawn: due to the antagonism of vowels in Chinese dialects, the differences between the length and short sounds of English units in dialect areas are often not obvious for example in Shanxi dialect the pronunciation of “fool” and “full” sound the same. In addition to monosyllabic sounds, the pronunciation of some diphthongs will lead to the confusion of some diphthongs in English. For example, English learners in northern Shanxi do not distinguish between [AI] and [EI]. In dialects, they often pronounce the Chinese character “Lai” as [Lei], which leads to confusion between [AI] and [EI] in English, and pronunciation errors such as “line” and “lay”.

In another study by Jiang [12], to compare the differences of Wu dialect and Min dialect in English pronunciation, the author used Praat to extract the English corpus formants containing / a, i, u, ε, α, / and then Using Lobanov's formula to normalize all vowel formants F1 and F2:

$$Z = (F_n - \text{MEAN}_n) / S_n \quad (1)$$

In the above formula, Z is the normalized value, F_n is the formant, $MEAN_n$ is the mean value of F_n of the speaker, and S_n is the standard deviation of F_n .

This normalization method can not only eliminate the difference in informants caused by physiological reasons to the greatest extent but also retain the characteristics of vowels between different languages or dialects as much as possible. It is considered to be one of the best normalization formulas [13].

Due to the greater similarity between the vowel systems of the two dialects, the interlanguage systems of L2 learners in the two places also show a greater degree of overlap. However, due to the influence of other factors besides mother tongue transfer, the interlanguage phonetic systems of the learners in Min and Wu dialects have their characteristics.

2.2 The Influence of Segmental Phoneme on Consonant Acquisition

The influence of segmental phoneme on consonant acquisition is less than the influence on vowel acquisition, but the error pronunciation on consonant can lead to the misunderstanding of minimal pairs-words which differ from each other only by one sound. In Huang's Case Study Of Wenzhounese" [2], we can see that because of the differences in phonology, it is more likely for EFL learners from Wenzhou to speak English with identifiable accents. For instance, the nasal consonants are difficult for native speakers of Wenzhounese because of the confusion between the alveolar and the velar nasals for Wenzhounese speakers.

In Sichuan and Guizhou province, people often mix the [n] and [l] in pinyin when speaking Mandarin, for example, they pronounce "milk" [niunai] in mandarin as [liulai], which causes them to mispronounce consonants in English, for example, nine, notice and other words with consonant[n]. Also, in the English phonetic system, [w] and [v] are different types of consonants, [w] is a Bilipal-palatine lateral sound, and [v] is a labial-tooth fricative. The pronunciation system of many dialects does not contain consonant [v]. English learners in these dialect regions often pronounce [v] as [w], for example, the word "vest" is pronounced as "west", while the students from other dialects barely make similar mistakes.

2.3 The Influence of Suprasegmental Phoneme

English learners from different dialect regions often speak English with obvious dialect accents, with almost no distinction between light and heavy syllables, mixed intensities, similar durations, and flat rhythms. For example, Liao and Zhu found that English learners in the Meizhou area have problems such as stress, unclear syllables in weak reading, and too frequent pauses, as well as problems with multiple sounds and unclear

rhythms in sentences [14]. Guo mentioned the influence of dialects when studying the influence of Beijing dialect and Cantonese dialect on English stress acquisition [15]. English learners in these areas have a higher pitch, shorter duration, lower pitch, and less weakening of vowels in the pronunciation of English words.

These studies help to improve English learners' understanding of the impact of the negative transfer of mother tongue, guide them to consciously analyze the phonological system of dialects and English, and correct the errors caused by the interference of mother tongue in time.

3. COUNTERMEASURES

It is inevitable that second language students will be affected by the negative transfer of their mother tongue in the process of English acquisition, especially in the initial stage. In the teaching process, teachers should take effective measures to help students analyze and understand the phonetic similarities and differences between English and their mother tongue, as well as the negative transfer phenomenon that may occur under the influence of mother tongue, to minimize the impact of the negative transfer of mother tongue. We sum up the following three effective teaching methods.

3.1 Error Analysis

Error Analysis is one of the major topics in the field of second language acquisition research. Errors are an integral part of language learning. The learner of English as a second language is unaware of the existence of the particular system or rule in the English language. The learner's errors have long been interesting for second and foreign language researchers. The basic task of error analysis is to describe how learning occurs by examining the learner's output and this includes his/her correct and incorrect utterances. Error analysis cannot be studied properly without touching upon the notion of contrastive analysis. Contrastive analysis and error analysis have been commonly recognized as branches of Applied Linguistic Science [16].

Teachers' timely feedback on the students' speech mistakes in their English pronunciation habits is the key to students' acquisition of correct pronunciation of English. Corder maintains that interlanguage can be seen as a restructuring or a recreating continuum, thereby evaluating their role in second language acquisition. Teachers should consciously guide students to compare and analyze the pronunciation of English and dialect, collect and organize typical errors, and timely correct and explain the errors caused by interference with their mother tongue. After that, students can have a rational understanding of their mistakes, which is helpful for them to consciously avoid the relevant errors in the future

language output, and effectively overcome the negative impact of the mother tongue.

3.2 Comprehensible Input

According to Stephen, the acquisition of language neither require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, nor tedious drill. All L2 learners have to master the mediation phase during the learning of the second language. The intermediary language system of second language learners is a system that is formed naturally in the process of learning a second language, starting from the mother tongue and evolving gradually toward the target language, which is different from the mother tongue system and the target language [17]. "The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production [18]." In a recent report by Stephen, it is not correct that any kind of input we provide in class is acceptable as long as it provides some comprehensible input. Thus, we can teach songs, put on a play, and lead the students in exercises, because they all involve some comprehension of messages. Comprehensible is not enough. Other factors make up "optimal input." We present here the Optimal Input Hypothesis [19].

Overall, Optimal input has these four characteristics:

1) It is comprehensible. This does not mean full transparency. Language acquisition does not require understanding every word and every part of every word. Input can be quite comprehensible and useful for acquisition even if there is some "noise" in the input, some incomprehensible bits.

2) It is very interesting: it is "compelling," so interesting that you temporarily forget that you are listening to or reading in another language. If the input is comprehensible and compelling, acquirers will often not notice noise in the input.

3) Optimal input is rich in language that contributes to the message and the flow of the story or text. The language included in the input also gives the reader support in understanding and therefore acquiring new aspects of language.

4) Language acquisition is a gradual process: Each time we encounter a new item in a comprehensible context we acquire a small amount of the meaning (and form). Optimal input must therefore be abundant, providing numerous opportunities for acquisition of new language

3.3 Comparative Analysis

The famous Chinese linguist Lv believes that the most useful help for Chinese students is to let him understand the difference between English and Chinese [20]. For each specific circumstance, it includes word form, word meaning, grammatical category, sentence structure, etc., tries to compare Chinese with English as much as possible, so that he can get a deeper experience through this comparison. Through the comparison and analysis of the similarities and differences between English and different dialects, students can notice possible errors in English acquisition, thereby reducing the impact of the negative transfer of mother tongue.

4. CONCLUSION

Due to the previous studies, we could find that the influence of dialect on English acquisition is significant and varies by different dialects. According to the experimental data of different studies, we can summarize several targeted teaching methods: Error analysis, comprehensible input, and comparative analysis. Although the impact of negative migration of mother tongue is inevitable, as long as we can scientifically and rationally analyze and study, correctly guide students' English learning, and consciously cultivate students' ability to learn independently, so that students can carry out effective language input and output, we can certainly maximize students' language skills. I hope this article can provide new ideas for English teaching.

Most of the research methods are empirical and descriptive, lacking objectivity. 60% of the research is still descriptive. The analysis is based on teaching experience and personal feelings, which are subjective and lack innovation. Due to the complexity and diversity of Chinese dialects in various regions of China, it is difficult to obtain a corpus. This paper mainly focuses on the typical sample of dialects and the experimental data is not equilibration. In addition to exploring the influence of Chinese Dialects on speech acquisition, researchers can find a new perspective to make more innovative research.

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