

Factors affecting second language pronunciation acquisition

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Abstract: Pronunciation is always a problematic subject for language learners, as its own complexity and the negligence from both teachers and students all the time. Some linguists claim that it is not necessary to learn pronunciation, due to the fact that most English exams take no account of pronunciation in China. Whereas, some linguists believe that students are supposed to learn pronunciation when learning a foreign language, mainly because good pronunciation performance is an effective way to facilitate successful communication and build up self-confidence when giving a speech. Although recently more and more language learners are gradually aware of the significance of pronunciation to some degree, they still have little knowledge of how to improve it and take little actions to improve it as well. To figure out the factors that affect second language pronunciation acquisition, several findings have been presented in the present research, such as the influence of the first language, motivation, age, identity.

Keywords: Pronunciation, Target language, First language, Second language acquisition

1. Introduction

Pronunciation plays an important role in terms of learning a second language, but it is thorny for Chinese high school students and college students to have a good grasp of authentic Standard English pronunciation perfectly. A majority of Chinese students have a tendency to pronounce English with the combination of Chinese accents, because most of their time the language they choose to use is their mother tongue rather than the Target Language (TL), and also their mother tongue has a strong influence on learning TL. This is also due to the fact that the inadequate emphasis on English pronunciation for required exams from primary school to college in China, therefore, teachers and students do not pay much attention to learning pronunciation. A number of researches have showed that individuals' pronunciation is strongly related to their value set, attitudes and socio-schemata [1]. Although a number of reasons made by a plenty of researches contribute to this phenomenon, the tendency of negligence of pronunciation from both teachers and students has not changed a lot.

There are a number of researches that have made successful outcomes on second language acquisition (SLA), I will try to dig out possible factors that affect pronunciation learning. In this paper, I will first demonstrate my previous beliefs and observations. Then, I will present the outcome of literature reviews and my new understandings by analyzing factors that affect individuals' pronunciation acquisition, which is the core of the research. Finally, I will present some possible suggestions.

2. Teaching beliefs and observations

I have several beliefs in terms of teaching pronunciation. I assumed students had done loads of practice such as imitating pronunciation features in the class, or learning from videos which were recorded by native speakers. Thus, they could have a sense of how to pronounce accurately. When they made pronunciation mistakes in the class, I would correct them and ask them to read after me. Then I would ask them to take notes in order to intensify their understanding of accurate pronunciation features which would be beneficial for their later review.

It is common to see that students are lack of the ability of recognition and reading all the pronunciation features clearly and accurately, not to mention correcting them when making mistakes.

Even worse, students tend to be unconscious of this phenomenon.

2.1 Standard English Pronunciation

The concept of Standard English was first raised in a book called “English Pronouncing Dictionary” compiled by a British linguist called Daniel Jones. Standard English Pronunciation is also called Received Pronunciation (RP), showing a decent and standard pronunciation among well-educated British people especially in southern England. In America, Standard English is called K.K. because a book called “A Pronouncing Dictionary of American English” compiled by two linguists called John Samuel and Thomas A. Knott, the first letter of both their surnames is K, and the book is also called K.K. (Kenyon and Knott). Nowadays, there are some disputes that language is learned for communication, the usages and rules of language should be flexible according to individuals’ situations, so it could be widely accepted and used by a majority of people. However, until now, RP is still commonly regarded as the Standard English pronunciation.

Standard pronunciation consists of the 48 International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) including 20 vowels, 28 consonants and standard pronunciation features including consonant clusters, incomplete plosion, nasal and lateral plosion, weak forms, pausing, liaison, word stress, sentence stress, rhythm and intonation.

2.2 Teaching observations

As Roach ^[2] argues that muscle in the larynx make different changes in the flow of air from the chest to the mouth. After that, the air goes to the vocal tract, which leads to the vocal tract and nasal cavity. The changes of muscles cause the changes in the shape of the vocal tract. Therefore, if we know different parts of the vocal tract well and weak or strong sounds by both teachers’ performance and videos in audio and in visual, students are more likely to be familiar with how to pronounce every syllable sound. So I believed that after presenting all the rules of pronunciation features one by one in the class based on the Standard English pronunciation, students could have a sense of both accurate pronunciation and their mispronunciation so that they were able to correct their mistakes on their own after class.

Apart from that, I believed high usage of the TL could stimulate a persons’ cognitive mechanism which is a psychological state that you are able to put out the language. Thus, I supposed repeated practice would help them for shaping a solid concept of both what accurate pronunciation and their mispronunciation were. Such as reading words and some paragraphs after me again and again until they could pronounce accurately, or repeating reading some paragraphs or tongue twisters after recordings. Then asking them to read it out or recite them either in class or after class. This approach was strongly affected by a belief which individuals should learn language mechanically and repeatedly, as “foreign-language learning is basically a mechanical process of habit formation.” ^[3]

However, through my observations only if they were imitating my pronunciation immediately, could they pronounce accurately, but when they practiced on their own like reading the notes or some paragraphs after class, more mispronunciation might occur. It is worth noting that it was very difficult for them to change their mispronunciation even though they had known what their mistakes were and I had already corrected their mistakes one by one beforehand. At the end of the class their mispronunciation almost had not changed at all.

3. Factors that affecting Pronunciation

To judge whether or not students pronounce accurately is based on the Standard English pronunciation. From my teaching experience, students who came to the class had already shaped their own scheme of pronunciation at different degrees. Based on my analysis, there are four possible factors that affect second language pronunciation acquisition as following.

3.1 First Language influence

Chinese students learn English in formal and exam-centered classrooms instead of a natural and practical environment. They are lack of sufficient input and output authentic language resources. Learning environment is greatly affecting a person’s SLA, for example, when students imitate the TA pronunciation around them, they are learning the language by this way. Learning environment includes

people around you, and geographical location where you stay. However, Chinese students are under strongly influence of their mother tongue, which in return intervene second language pronunciation acquisition.

Due to the exam-oriented learning environment in China, the goal for students to learn English is to pass the exams rather than using it in a practical way. In other words, the contents of English subjects that students require to learn are determined by the Central Education System in China, aiming for selecting talents who can ace exams mechanically, which covers from primary school education to high school education. But some linguists argue that language is used for communication, pronunciation is one of the most important issues that students have to take into consideration in order to make their speech more intelligible. Although students have “9 years Compulsory Education” in China from primary school to junior high school and English is one of the compulsory courses as well, the grammar and vocabulary teaching are dominant, the emphasis on pronunciation was less with reference to school exam criteria. That is to say, students are lack of the environment of pronunciation practice for both in-put and out-put. Only for college freshmen who are majoring in English, could have the specialized courses related to pronunciation, but it just occupies a small proportion of the whole credit hours, which means their input and output learning time is still fairly limited.

On the other hand, the results would be opposite if students are exposed to an environment which is full of in-put and out-put TL practice. Those students who have experiences of studying abroad claim that they have more fluent and accurate speaking performance of the second language including better pronunciation performance in TL countries. As “Practice makes perfect”, those students who have oversea learning experiences in TL countries also state that apart from attending full TL classes in school, they are pushed to communicate in this language with their international classmates after class and local people they come up with in the living place out of school. Gradually, they are much more familiar with the pronunciation features of the TL by listening and talking day by day. Ironically, the situations have changed completely when those same students go back to China where no people speak foreign language around them. Their second language pronunciation has a tendency to degenerate quickly, which means the language environment especially input and output learning environment is one of the most important factors to influence a person’s pronunciation acquisition.

Moreover, it is also showed in some studies that there are more differences between First Language (L1) and Second Language (L2), there are more challenges for learning L2. Taking the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam which is a standard international English exam made by British Council for an example, it is showed that the highest average score of IELTS Speaking test which is 7 to 7.5 (the total score is 9) is got by German people, mainly because both English and German language are under the same language group that is Germanic group. There are more similarities between those two languages. However, the average score of Chinese candidates is only 5.4, which is far lower than the average level all over the world, for the reason that Chinese belongs to Sino-Tibetan languages, which is totally different from English. For example, there are some consonants like [θ], [ð] which do not exist in Chinese, most Chinese students tend to mispronounce them, if without intensive and conscious training.

Last but not the least, a number of Chinese students read English IPA according to the Scheme for Chinese phonetic alphabet, for example, they tend to pronounce an English word “good” with the sound “gu de”, rather than [gʊd]. There is another evidence proving that a number of studies have found that speaking English spoken by different Chinese dialect groups has different accents^[4]. When students move from one geographical context to another, a totally new sound is often easily perceived as alien. So, they are reluctant to transform and recreate the sense of who they are. Subconsciously, they pronounce the same with people in the environment where they mostly stay. This also could explain why Chinese students learn English pronunciation according to Chinese pronunciation rules and habits.

3.2 Motivations

Students have different learning styles and motivations, which means every student has their attitudes towards study. Motivation includes many aspects. Some students are stimulated by “intrinsic motivation” like passions or interests. Students who have “intrinsic motivation” from inner hearts tend to learn the language in order to communicate with it. For example, some students claim that they are passionate about American soap opera, pop music, or foreign culture and so forth, they are much more inclined to imitate their native pronunciation by getting close to the information in the media.

Whereas some students are stimulated by “extrinsic motivation”^[5] driven by surroundings tend to

learn the language for other purposes, like passing exams, getting prizes or avoiding punishments. For example, in the absence of the element of pronunciation regarding the learning contents of most English exams in school as mentioning in the previous point, students are reluctant to learn the element of pronunciation, because they learn what they are required to learn in order to pass exams. Whenever there is less motivation, there is poorer performance.

Apart from that, some varieties like teaching methods, contents or classroom atmosphere are in relation to students' motivations as well. For example, out-of-date teaching method or tedious classroom atmosphere is likely to weaken students' motivations. As a result, they do not position themselves to this context to practice pronunciation.

Finally, their learning motivations are also influenced by the degree of self-esteem and the diversity of personality. For example, some students believe they cannot learn the language for the loss of confidence or low self-evaluation, they may behave more pessimistic. When students feel uncertain of learning the new language or they are worried that they may have a feeling of loss, they may keep silence or show hesitation occasionally.

All in all, positive motivations bring positive learning performance, while negative motivations bring negative learning performance.

3.3 Age

Compared with adult learners, children have a tendency to pick up a new language quickly and easily. As children grow older, their native language has become a stronger and stronger interference for their SLA.

In recent years, a popular hypothesis called "the Critical Period Hypothesis" (CPH) has pointed out by a plenty of brain scientists and linguists. Research has made by Eliis ^[6] suggests that there is a critical period existing in a person's brain development, the language acquisition occurs naturally and effortlessly during this period of time. However, the brain is not capable of processing language input after the critical period. Therefore, it is more and more troublesome for a person to learn a language since then.

Penfield and Roberts ^[7] first pointed out a concept of "the Best Age" (BA): the golden age for a person to learn a language is before 10 years old, because children have a greater brain plasticity during this period. The laterality of left hemisphere linguistic function has shaped well since 10 years old, thus the brain plasticity of language acquisition by nature has gradually disappeared.

Despite there are some criticism disapproving the theories of CPH and BA after which have presented, they still have widespread and far-reaching contributions to further research. Regarding Chinese students, they had started to learn English since junior high school more or less a decade ago. Even now, students have almost started to learn English since grade three in primary school. According to the theory of BA, children almost miss the golden age of shaping facial muscles and the development of brain plasticity.

In addition, it is untrue to neglect the pronunciation of those teachers in China, who have become an English teacher in primary school, middle school or high school with certificates of English qualifications without tests of the element of pronunciation. What's more, they were lack of pronunciation training and practice when they were learning English as students, due to the fact that students started to learn English since junior high school or senior high school almost a decade ago. So their pronunciation is not completely authentic, which is called "Chinglish" that is the combination of both Chinese and English. Finally, when they now become English teachers teaching English to students during their Critical Period (CP) or BA, students tend to unconsciously imitate teachers' pronunciation which may be not correct at all. As a result, students have possibilities to learn mispronounced English words or pronounce not as accurate as Standard English pronunciation features. In fact, many high school students, college students or people have graduated from colleges have said that it is difficult for them to correct mispronunciation when they try to learn it at that time, even though they have cognition of the correct pronunciation features and their mispronunciation. For the reason that, they have already missed their golden chances to learn accurate pronunciation features when they were at their CP or BA, it is not easy for them to change the facial muscles memory and brain plasticity after they have formed and consolidated back then.

3.4 Identity

Identity is also one of the factors that affect pronunciation from a psychological perspective. Your pronunciation is about who you are, as Rebecca ^[8] suggests teachers should take responsibility to expand students' identity to explore the culture of TA language. That is to say, identity is affected by a wide range of aspects of our lives. Identity is a process of becoming a member of the society as well. For the reason that it is fluid and unstable, which means your sense of identity can be destabilized. But only if you allow your identity to change, could it change to another identity.

The process of changing your identity connects both the past and the present. As Papastergiadis ^[9] says "encounter and transform each other". During the process, a sense of ambivalence which "is the uncertainty of feeling a part and feeling apart" may emerge ^[10], because how newcomers participate and old members of the community of practice react really determines your engagement and construct your identity as well.

3.4.1 Factors that affecting Identity

There are many factors affecting a person's identity such as geographical, biological, social, cultural, economic, psychological, symbolic factors and so forth. More importantly, those factors are interacted with each other. First, geographical factor is about geographical location changes. When people change from one geographical or sociocultural area to another, your identity could be destabilized and recreated. Second, biological factors including age, gender and so forth. Third, cultural factor is something from your inner heart which is profound and strong as well, but we can see a person's cultural identity from his or her behavior and attitude. For example, because of L1 influence, Chinese students tend to pronounce English words with Chinese accents. Fourth, social factor is about your status, your fame, your reputation and so on. For example, politicians and singers may have different identity. Lastly, psychological factor is always obscure and abstract, but identity is a self-conscious and it requires a sense of belonging and self-worth. For example, students' recognition of non-native speakers can be changed and even empowered by native speaker teachers or peers, so they have a tendency to change their identity of non-native speakers into authentic native pronunciation speakers.

3.4.2 A possible Identity Construction

Wenger ^[11] claims that identification can take place through three pathways: imagination, engagement, and alignment (see Figure 1). Imagination relates to imagining and positioning "ourselves in a completely different context" (p. 194). For example as a student, you envision yourself talk to a L2 native-speaker who has correct pronunciation, resulting in increased self-confidence in learning L2 native pronunciation. Engagement is about when you interact with others, you invest actions and activities with others. The relation between you and others gives you a sense of who you are. The participation is exposed to "mutual engagement with other members, to their actions and their negotiation of the enterprise, and to their repertoire in use" ^[11]. Finally, when members have their alignment, you have to demonstrate your alignment, because it reflects your belief and subjective position.

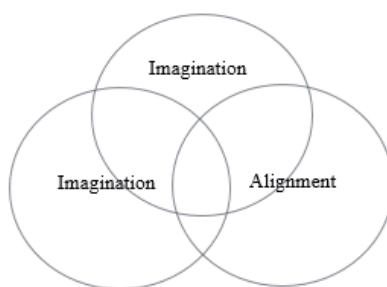


Figure 1: Identity Construction

Students are reluctant to transform their identity unconsciously, so they are not impacted profoundly on identity for either imagining identity or engaging identity as "take on new dimensions" ^[11]. Acton ^[12] sees "preparing students psychologically as a necessary correlate to improving their pronunciation. Phonology, he says, has both 'inside-out' and 'outside-in' dimension which function in a kind of loop: 'Not only does personality or emotional state show in pronunciation... but the converse is also true: speakers can control their nerves or inner states by speaking properly'. This is the basic tenet of successful programs in voice training and public speaking.'

4. Conclusion

“Pronunciation is considered to be the most difficult part of a language for adult learners to master”^[13], which is not difficult to have the widely accepted knowledge. There are four factors affecting second language pronunciation acquisition based on my present research, which includes influence of the first language, motivation, age, identity. Despite pronunciation is not easy to change, there are still two ways which can be helpful based on my observations and analysis.

Firstly, technology can mediate a person’s pronunciation issue. For example, learning pronunciation from videos or applications via their electronic devices is an excellent way to change their mispronunciation. Especially for those students who are at lower level are reluctant to practice in the class, as a lack of motivation. But when they learn TA pronunciation from some other cutting-edge technological ways with amusing approaches, they tend to have a willing to imitate the pronunciation features from the speakers as it is a great way to stimulate motivations, for example in a video or in a game. This is due to the fact that they are not afraid of being laughed by other classmates or even teachers when making mistakes because of low self-esteem. Also, they have strong preferences for the elements of up-to-date high technology and intriguing learning styles. Interaction and engagement have emerged through this way as well. Moreover, when they have a desire to pronounce as correct as pronunciation from technological platforms, they have more possibilities to gain confidence when they make efforts to practice and get improved. Then when they engage in with different activities in audios or videos, for example reading after speakers according to their instructions, they tend to build an alignment. Hence, technology enables students to change their identity about pronunciation in SLA.

Secondly, it is not surprising when one considers that pronunciation is constantly mediated by the broader environment of the communities of practice. Students should be aware of the fact that they would better get out of the classroom for SLA, for example, practicing foreign language in a foreign language corner with partners who are combined with both Chinese and TA foreigners. Another example is attending Study Abroad (SA) programs directly. More importantly, as Isabelli-García^[14] suggested, SA participants who manage to become part of local social networks (i.e., communities of practice) are more likely to move away from ethnocentrism and toward greater intercultural sensitivity and ethno-relativity than those SA participants who do not. They have a tendency to avoid L1 influence by getting away from L1 environment as well.

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