



Learner strategies for dealing with pronunciation issues in Mandarin



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ABSTRACT

Learners have difficulty with the pronunciation of both consonants, vowels, and tones in Mandarin Chinese. While there are numerous studies which describe these difficulties, there seem to be few studies looking at the strategies that these learners actually use in order to cope with them. This study focused exclusively on oral production and not auditory comprehension, with special emphasis on the strategies that learners reported using in attempting to master pronunciation of Chinese. The study examined reported and actual difficulties in Chinese pronunciation, along with reported and actual pronunciation strategies. The findings showed both consistencies and inconsistencies between students' self-report of difficulties in pronunciation and the errors that they made. Likewise, there were found to be similarities and differences between what the students reported their strategies were for dealing with Chinese pronunciation and the strategies that were reportedly used in the read-aloud task.

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1. Introduction

This study was prompted by an interest in identifying the strategies that English-speaking learners use in dealing with the daunting challenges involved in pronouncing Mandarin effectively (DLI, 2010). The ultimate motive was to be able to provide these learners of Chinese¹ suggested strategies for coping with pronunciation issues, especially those involving tones since English is not a tonal language.

2. Review of literature

A recent review of studies on the teaching of Chinese as a second or foreign language (L2 or FL) published in Chinese journals identified no fewer than 44 studies dealing with the teaching of the Chinese sound system (Ma, Gong, Gao, & Xiang, 2017). Characteristically, such studies describe pronunciation problems, but do not deal with students' means for dealing with these problems, such as through the use of language learner strategies. In fact, the Ma et al. review only mentions learners' strategies for Mandarin in passing.

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¹ Chinese and Mandarin are being used interchangeably in this paper.

2.1. Pronunciation difficulties of first-language (L1) English learners of Mandarin

From previous research we know that English-L1 learners share common problems in distinguishing various consonants in Chinese, namely, /tɕ/ [j], /tɕ/ [q], and /ɕ/ [x]; /tʂ/[zh], /tʂ/ [ch] and /ʂ/ [sh]; /ts/ [z], /ts/ [c] and /s/. Students have been found, for example, to confuse the consonants /tʂ/[zh] and /tɕ/[j] (Ni & Wang, 1992).² With regard to vowels, learners have been found to have difficulties distinguishing the vowel /y/[ü] from /u/. In addition, while there have been signs of English vowel transfer in the production of Chinese vowels by American students, sometimes the students' production of vowels has appeared to be random (Shi & Wen, 2009). Also, vowel sounds which are distinctively different from L1 vowels have been easier to acquire than those that are similar. Nevertheless, if the new vowels are heavily marked (e.g. having features strikingly different from those in the L1), then they are more difficult to acquire than more similar-sounding ones (Wen, 2010).

With regard to tones, research has found that especially beginning American learners may have difficulty approximating Chinese-L1 speakers' pitch range (Chen, 1974), but that after a year or more of Chinese learning, they are able to achieve a similar pitch range to that of the native speakers (Miracle, 1989). They do, however, have difficulty with tone production (Chen, 1997; Guo & Tao, 2008; Miracle, 1989; Shen, 1989; Wang, 1995). Research has suggested that American learners have the most problems with the 2nd tone, somewhat less with the 3rd tone, even less with the 4th tone, and least with the 1st tone. Part of the problem is that English-L1 learners confuse the 2nd tone with the 3rd tone and also confuse the 1st tone with the 4th tone (Chen, 1997). Another part of the problem is that in naturally-occurring Chinese-L1 speech the 3rd tone it is not necessarily a falling-rising tone, but rather more of a low tone as a result of tone sandhi (Li, 2017). In other words, there is a tendency for the 3rd tone to change its pitch contour depending on the tone of the following syllable.

Yet another complicating factor is that American learners have been found to use English phrase-level intonation to map their Chinese tonal production, which hinders them from producing the actual Chinese tones. In fact, English intonation has been seen as the source for four typical types of tonal errors in Chinese as an FL: 1) using the same tone for each syllable in two-syllable Chinese words (e.g. to pronounce *yì nián* as *yí nián*); 2) using contrastive tones such as the rising 2nd tone and the falling 4th tone to pronounce single-syllable words that have a falling-rising change (e.g. to pronounce *mèi guó* as *méi guò*); 3) using the 4th tone to pronounce the last syllable of a Chinese phrase (e.g. to pronounce *shì nán de* as *shì nán dè*); and 4) using the 2nd and 4th tones repetitively in every two consecutive syllables (e.g. to pronounce *yǔ yán xué xí* as *yú yán xué xì*) (Gui, 2000).

Finally, interpreting research results is somewhat problematic in that the studies vary with regard to the length of time the learners spend studying Chinese, as well as with regard to the research methods employed. For example, participants in the Shen (1989) and the Wang (1995) studies had studied Chinese for about 4–5 months, whereas in Miracle's (1989) study, participants had studied for a full year. Also, the various researchers used different tasks to measure participants' tonal performance: reading a familiar text (Shen, 1989), reading sentences (Miracle, 1989), and reading words (Wang, 1995). So, the variation in tasks may also partially explain differences in the findings. This is one of the comments that Ma et al. (2017) made in their review of numerous studies published in Chinese journals – the unevenness of the research procedures. Because of the differences between studies of pronunciation focusing on elicited tasks as opposed to those looking only at pronunciation occurring in natural speech, our study just looked at pronunciation in elicited tasks.

What is largely lacking from this body of research studies is a focus on just what strategies learners might use to cope with the rather daunting task of learning how to pronounce Chinese. The following section deals with how the language learner strategy literature relates to the challenges that learners face in gaining control in this area.

2.2. Learners' strategies for dealing with target-language pronunciation

Characteristically, studies have described problems that learners have with Chinese pronunciation, but have tended not to deal with students' strategies for coping with these problems. Of late, there has been renewed interest in language learner strategies (LLS), including a comprehensive definition of what they entail: contextually-specific thoughts and actions that can be both mental and physical; combinable in clusters or chains; having cognitive, emotional, and social roles to play as determined by the individual; and characterized by complex patterns of self-regulation (Oxford, 2017). This new definition invites us to deal with strategies in a more rigorous way than in the past, where a one-size-fits-all approach often was used when describing strategies. By now it has been rigorously documented in the research literature that LLS can benefit learners' efforts to deal successfully with their development of the various language skills, such as speaking listening, reading, and writing (see Oxford, 2017).

What has characterized past research on LLS in Chinese is that it has used the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (Oxford, 1990) or an adapted version to identify learners' strategies for Chinese character learning (e.g. Everson & Ke, 1997; Shen, 2005), for reading (e.g. Chang, Lan, Chang, & Sung, 2010; Everson, 1986), for listening (e.g. Zhang, 2007), for speaking (e.g. Lu, 2005), and for describing learner variables (e.g. Wang, Spencer, & Xing, 2009). While Jiang and Cohen (2012) found numerous LLS studies dealing with Mandarin, conspicuously absent from this body of research were studies focusing on how English L1 learners might resolve specific pronunciation problems in Mandarin – such as studies providing a handy set of specific strategies to use in order to master language areas such as tones in Mandarin (Cohen, 2017).

Given the newly proposed rigor in dealing with LLS, it would appear to be a propitious moment to investigate the types of strategies operationalized in language skill areas such as that of learning pronunciation. Previous examples of efforts to deal

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