

The Influence of the First Language on the Pronunciation of the Second Language: Taking Consonant “r” in English as an Example

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Abstract: In recent years, the importance of learning English has risen to an incredible stage, especially in China. As educators always emphasize, speaking is much more important when it comes to all aspects of a language. So it is necessary to do research on the pronunciation of the second language (L2), or to be more specific, a foreign language. This paper will mainly discuss the influence of Chinese on the pronunciation of the consonant “r” in English, to correct and make people pay attention to their pronunciation, so as to avoid misunderstandings due to pronunciation. The author will invite students in university to complete a questionnaire relating to oral English and learning. The results show that the possible reasons for the wrong “r” consonant include dialect factors and educational factors.

Keywords: First language, Second language, Pronunciation, Consonant

1. Introduction

In the present studies, researchers focus more on the practice of phonetics in class and psychological reasons for difficulties in second language acquisition (SLA) and so on. It might be out-date for scholars to study the pronunciation problems occurring in SLA, while a lot of people do have such pronunciation problems in China without realization. In the class at university, professors might spot the mistakes, but since those do not affect understanding, to encourage students, make them less embarrassed and avoid pronunciation anxiety, professors choose not to feedback on their errors that are not critical [1]. Even if it is not serious or harsh that learners have any kinds of accents or make mistakes in pronunciation, compared with students from American and European countries, most Chinese students are introverted and easier to get embarrassed, so some students do suffer from the fear of losing identity. Meanwhile, it is convincing that learners who set higher goals for themselves, which means they force themselves to use more advanced words or expressions, will get higher marks in the exam [2].

This paper will focus on the influence of the first language (L1) on the pronunciation of consonant “r” in L2 and the author would like to set forth possible reasons for the consonant r pronunciation deviation of English learners whose L1 is Chinese, by means of delivering questionnaires and interviewing. And finally, this paper will give measures to cope with that influence, especially for L2

teaching, which might be a guidance for L2 phonetics teaching and learning, giving a research direction of phonological differences between L1 and L2.

2. The Use of Consonant “r” in English among Native Speakers of Other Languages

In this chapter, the author will take Japanese, French (2.1) and Chinese (2.2) as examples to analyse the use of consonant “r” in English.

2.1. Japanese and French

People who often watch Japanese anime will find out that there are many words in Japanese that are borrowed from English and when Japanese pronounce those words or speak English, many of them have accents. It wouldn't be a problem that people speak with an accent unless the accent has an effect on people's comprehension [3]. Native Japanese speakers usually make some the last consonant of the stress and secondary stress in a word voiced and add a /ɔ/ after the voiced consonant. For example, they will pronounce “hint” as /hɪndɔ/. And when it comes to /r/, no matter whether it is the end of a syllable or not, they often turn it into a /lɔ/. Anyone who has ever watched JoJo's Bizarre Adventure must be impressed that the supervillain of part three, Dio, will yell “the world” before using his powers. It is brainwashing that he shouted /zɹ 'wɹldɔ/ instead of /ðə 'wɜ:ld/, in such an aggressive and arrogant way. In spite of exaggerated and dramatic performances, people can still witness their pronunciation habit.

Mind Your Language is a famous scene play published in the 1970s, and it is still worth studying nowadays. In the scene play, a French beauty called Danielle is really good at English, of course speaking with a French accent. She, like many native French speakers, would like to replace the rhotic “r” with a uvular one, pronouncing “French” as /fʁɛntʃ/ and “more” as /mɔ:ʁə/, which is similar to French pronunciation. In a word, the cases above can be attributed to the negative transference of L1, habits of L1, pronunciation, grammar, etc., the interfering process of SLA on account of concepts and mindsets having shaped by L1, due to the difference between the pronunciation of the same letter in the first and second language.

2.2. Chinese

During the interview, the author found that some students have kinds of pronunciation problems with consonant r which might exert a negative impact on understanding. One of the interviewees sharing interesting experiences said TikTok, the famous and popular short video social platform, as “pick a pork”. That'll make listeners believe that she was going shopping in a market instead of surfing online. It is, indeed, confusing but interesting that the /r/ is created and appeared in the position where it shouldn't be. Even if, there exists “intrusive” /r/, a kind of linking /r/ appears in words that did not have /r/ historically and thus have no letter r in the spelling, for example “idea [r] of” and “draw[r]ing”, for convenience and comfort when spelling, it occurs when coherence and melody are needed. Another interviewee pronounced the word “gothic” like “gorthic” instead. It is obvious that there's no need for an intrusive /r/ here in that word, and it won't be really weird for the existence of /r/, so some pronunciation problems or habits should be to blame. Besides, when this interviewee used conjunction “and”, she seemed to say “ander” with hesitation.

3. Possible Reasons for English Learners in China Have a Deviation in Pronunciation

An interviewee born in the north part of China said breakfast, /'brekfɜ:rst/, instead of breakfast. In view of her birthplace, northern China, which is known for similar dialects, and the rhotic accent of Chinese, here comes a hypothesis. One possible reason for the phenomenon of overusing r is being

influenced by the rhotic accent. So, the author made a wordlist and sent it to passers-by in universities to read, every college student has to take English as a commonly required course in China so that the quality can be guaranteed. It was from the 8th to 14th of August, 2022 that the author interviewed 100 students from the nearby universities in Xiasha, Hangzhou, recording their speech samples, listening to the audio with the author's professional colleagues over and over again, discussing the pronunciation problems of the participants and summarizing statistics. Despite research delivered by Pavel Trofimovich and his colleagues claiming that Chinese learners of English indicated that speakers with higher levels of L2 pronunciation accuracy were less loyal to their home group, this is not the case in China at present. After analyzing the data, there comes three possible reasons [4].

3.1. Accent Reason

First of all, the data shows that generally speaking, people from northern China are more likely to have this problem, pronouncing “campus” as “campurs”. Rhotic accent pronunciation is a phonetic change in the final finals of some characters in modern Mandarin and most official dialects due to tongue rolling. An r is usually added to the final of the simple or compound vowel of a Chinese syllable. It not only has the function of distinguishing semantic meaning but also can make the pronunciation slower and labor-saving, making the timbre softer and livelier. It will be hard for people to change their speaking and pronouncing habit, especially comfortable ones [5]. Furthermore, people in southern China could also be affected by rhotic accents nowadays, through social media, short videos and so on. In fact, the rhotic accent Chinese is quite popular with people.

Another accent issue is the distinguishment between /l/ and /r/, which is found occasionally while interviewing. It is true that there are always some people in some places, especially in southern China, who are confused by /l/ and /r/. In research a few interviewees made that mistake, pronouncing “cancel” like “cancer”, which might cause misunderstanding sometimes.

3.2. Education Reason

The view of behaviorist psychology is that in the process of learning, the knowledge or skills already possessed by the learner will have a certain impact on the new knowledge and skills. In other words, Chinese English learners tend to use Chinese Pinyin to spell English when they learn English [6]. Fortunately, there's only a slight difference between the two sounds, so that won't be a trouble.

A few interviewees majoring in English can't get rid of this kind of mistake either, and some of them claim that they just can't help curling their tongues even if they know it's wrong. As is known that most parts of America prefer to roll their tongues when pronouncing, which could be verified in many US TV series. Therefore, it might be the influence of the American accent and the lack of guidance from teachers about when should roll their tongues and when should not that make students misunderstand this.

Negative transfer of previously learned knowledge is always the cause of learning problems. To confirm that, here's an example. According to the survey results, over 90 percent of interviewees will mispronounce “breakfast” as “breakfirst”. It's really horrible. The rest of 10 percent are those who actually care about their pronunciation and get trained. On one hand, it might be because the word first was used more often than breakfast, and as time goes by, learners are used to the pronunciation of first and transfer it to some words else. On the other hand, teachers in primary schools or training institutions have never corrected learners' pronunciation and taught pronunciation systematically, or maybe some teachers themselves pronounce it in the wrong way.

There's an interesting theory that some teachers, in school, in institutions or even making a living by delivering a speech in primary and middle school, told students that the pronunciation of vowels should be full and while pronouncing the sound r, students should curl their tongues as much as they

can, which is shared by some interviewees while the author has the same experience. It might work while teaching kids because when speaking Chinese, people won't open their mouths wide, and exaggerated performance will make young children more engaged in class. However, it should have an edge.

3.3. Mental Reason

It is apparent that some interviewees will get nervous when talking to a stranger or acquaintance in a language they aren't really good at. If a girl is asked to deliver an impromptu speech and introduce her experience to everyone in the class in a foreign language she's still working on, she must feel nervous and embarrassed unless she has a card up her sleeve. Confidence, therefore, is quite important and could have effects on pronunciation.

4. Ways to Improve Pronunciation

Although pronunciation issues won't be such a huge problem and, in most cases, others could understand what people say, the more standard the pronunciation is, the more comfortable the listener will be. Standard speaking makes it easier for others to understand.

4.1. Learner

What should learners do first is correct their attitudes. It is fine for people to have accents and pronunciation problems, so don't push oneself so hard, and instead, learners should try their best to make themselves clear. Besides, learners should be clear about the basic difference among English accents and make sure learners follow the right or standard one when learning pronunciation by themselves with videos or audios.

And the most important is, as a saying goes that practice makes perfect, practicing as often as one can, and asking someone to monitor learners' pronunciation. The practice theory can be applied to correct the accent of L1 as well, for example, the confusion of /l/ and /r/ in Chinese. It's normal for people to choose a familiar way to solve a problem, and that's the phoneme pronunciation here and all we can do is remind ourselves of those differences when practicing [7].

What practice could bring to learners else is confidence. In the research, those who usually speak to the public, take positions and major in presiding or some similar majors are more confident while facing the interviewer, and made fewer mistakes. Another way to make oneself confident is to keep studying and gain knowledge from everything that could help. If learners get well prepared, they will be more confident and get through the silent period in language acquisition, whether it is the first or second language, as Krashen put forward, which is also a form of natural approach [8].

4.2. Educator

It's the basic requirement that all educators should be well trained and proficient in teaching theory and skills. In other words, educators should keep the balance between the initiative of students and the efficiency of the class. Also, don't push students so hard that people should abide by the law of learning. And this is likely to make learners feel frustrated, gradually lose enthusiasm for L2 learning, and eventually form resistance to language learning [9]. Audiolingual Method (ALM) can be practical in phonetic teaching, in spite of ultimate failure in long-term communicative proficiency. Habitual training and overlearning cannot effectively learn a language, and mistakes cannot be avoided at all costs [10]. So keep an open mind toward mistakes students made and put them right selectively. What should be kept in educators' minds is that the aim of education does not lie in the right and error, but to make students better individuals.

5. Conclusion

The paper mainly discussed L2 pronunciation problems caused by L1, and gives some possible reasons and solutions for that. L1 does have plenty of influences on the pronunciation of the L2, and if those influences don't affect other people's understanding, we could just ignore them. If someone has a high demand for their spoken pronunciation, or maybe someone's unclear or incorrect pronunciation is affecting understanding, then seeking help to correct pronunciation is a good option. In terms of pronunciation, accuracy and naturalness are the key features of evaluation, but pronunciation must also be "internationally understandable", which the latter is the most important principle. There is still plenty of room for improvement in this paper. Researchers can set up multiple age and educational level groups in experiments. What's more, manners of articulation and the ways meaning are distinguished between languages can be viable orientations for further research.

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