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The Pronunciation of Two Different English Consonant Sounds Namely Voiceless Inter-Dental Fricative and Alveolar Liquid among Two Groups of Chinese Speakers

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the pronunciation of two different English consonant sounds namely voiceless inter-dental fricative [θ] and alveolar liquid [r] among two groups of Chinese speakers. These two groups of Chinese speakers are differentiated based on their nationality. The first group of speakers is the Malaysian Chinese from Malaysia while the second group of speakers is the China Chinese from the mainland of China. To make sure the validity and reliability of the result, the research sample from both groups of speakers will be chosen from beginner level of English learners. In details, the Malaysian Chinese speakers of English are chosen from students who sit for English Communication 1 course (the first core English course for UUM students, MUET band 1-2) while the China Chinese speakers of English are selected from students who sit for Intensive English course (course provided for UUM international students who failed their ELPT test). The two groups of speakers will be asked to read English words containing the two analyzed English sounds in two different formats. Firstly, they are tested with a word list in which the words are treated as separate items and out of context. Then, they were asked to read a connected text namely a poem. The data then analyzed quantitatively. Based on the result, it is believed that the nationality and background of a speaker might affect their English pronunciation.

Keywords: Consonant sounds, fricative, alveolar liquid, pronunciation

Introduction

English is considered as an international language with millions of speakers around the world. People from many different countries learn English either as their second language or foreign language for many different reasons. Some people may learn English to be globalize while some others might learn it just for the sake of knowing the language. Although English can be considered as a language that is spoken by most speakers in the world, the majority of English speakers are non-native, (Tapia, 2010).

There are various ways of pronouncing even a particular English word among the non-native speakers and it depends on their background as a learner. Generally, most non-native English speakers' pronunciation is affected by their first language. Many scholars believe that the native language interference plays a big role in most mistakes made by English learners in acquiring the language (Gao, 2005). Similarly, Zhang and Yin (2009) also suggest the pronunciation of second language learners to be influenced by their "first language interference, learner's age, learner's attitude and psychology, prior pronunciation instruction, and insufficient language knowledge of English phonology and phonetics,"(p.142).

By using first language interference as a ground theory, this research seeks to compare the English pronunciation made by two groups of English language learners; namely Malaysian Chinese learners of English and China Chinese learners of English. In details, Malaysian Chinese learners of English refer to English Chinese learners from Malaysia

where as China Chinese learner of English refers to English Chinese learners from China. Both groups of these Chinese learners may seem to be similar based on the same mother tongue. Then again, they are distinctively different due to their different nationality and different dialect of Chinese language.

Despite the different nationality and dialect of Chinese language, most Chinese learners of English are always known as having similar problem in learning and acquiring English due to the different system and structure of English and their native language, Chinese. For instance, some English consonants and vowels might not exist in the Chinese sounds system, (Zhang & Yin, 2009). Additionally, some sounds of English might be viewed differently in Chinese language. Due to these differences, Zhang and Yin (2009) have claimed that many Chinese learners of English face difficulties in pronouncing English. Then again, their difficulties in producing English sounds might differ based on their nationality and Chinese language background.

Problem Statement

Non-native English speakers around the world usually have their own way of pronouncing English sounds. This happens due to the interference of their native language. According to Lott (1983), interference refers to “the errors made by learners in using the target language and it can be traced back to the learner’s native language,”(p.256). The interference of native language also happens among Chinese learners of English. Both Chinese and English languages have distinctively different language system. Focusing solely on the production of sounds, the different segmental features of these two languages can still be clearly observed.

Phonetically, Yiing (2011) claims that it is definitely difficult for Chinese English learners to produce some English sounds as those sounds never exist in their native language. For instance, the voiceless inter-dental fricative [θ] sound of English never exists in Chinese (Yiing, 2011). Additionally, Zhang and Yin (2009) strongly state that “the place and manner of articulation function are different in English and Chinese,”(p.142). As an example, native speakers of Mandarin view the [r] sound as a voiced pair to their voiceless [ʃ] sound, (Zhang & Yin, 2009).

Although the difficulties faced by the Chinese learners of English in pronouncing the target language might be similar, their non-native English pronunciation might vary according to their background as Chinese English learners. According to Yiing (2011), “the influence of Malay language as a national language in Malaysia should not be disregarded for Malaysian Chinese learners of English,”(p.3). As a clear example, Malaysian Chinese speakers of English have been reported to pronounce the [θ] sounds of English as [t], (Yiing, 2011). China Chinese on the other hand might be strongly influenced by the Chinese native language without interference of any other language. Due to the strong influence of their mother tongue, China Chinese learners of English usually use [s] sound to replace [θ] sound which does not exist in their native language, (Rau, Chang & Tarone, 2009).

Based on previous researches, it is believed that there will be great differences between the English pronunciations produced by the two different groups of Chinese English learners from Malaysia and China. Focusing only on two different English sounds which are the voiceless inter-dental fricative [θ] sound and alveolar liquid [r] sound, an assumption can be made that these two different groups of Chinese English learners might have different ways of pronouncing English words with the two respective English sounds [θ] and [r]. Then again, linguists are still debating on the extent to which one’s nationality affect a speaker’s English pronunciation. Hence, it is believed that there is a need to conduct a research to

investigate and compare English pronunciation of two different nationalities of Chinese English speakers.

Purpose of Study

This research aims to investigate the production of two distinctive English sounds [θ] and [r] made by the two different groups of Chinese English learners. In details, this research seeks to compare the pronunciation of voiceless inter-dental fricative [θ] sound and alveolar liquid [r] sound made by Chinese from Malaysia and Chinese from China.

Research Questions

The research questions of this study are as follow:

- i. How accurate do Chinese learners of English from Malaysia and China pronounce the voiceless inter-dental fricative [θ] sound? To what do extent changes of pronunciation happen?
- ii. How accurate do Chinese learners of English from Malaysia and China pronounce the alveolar liquid [r] sound? To what do extent changes of pronunciation happen?

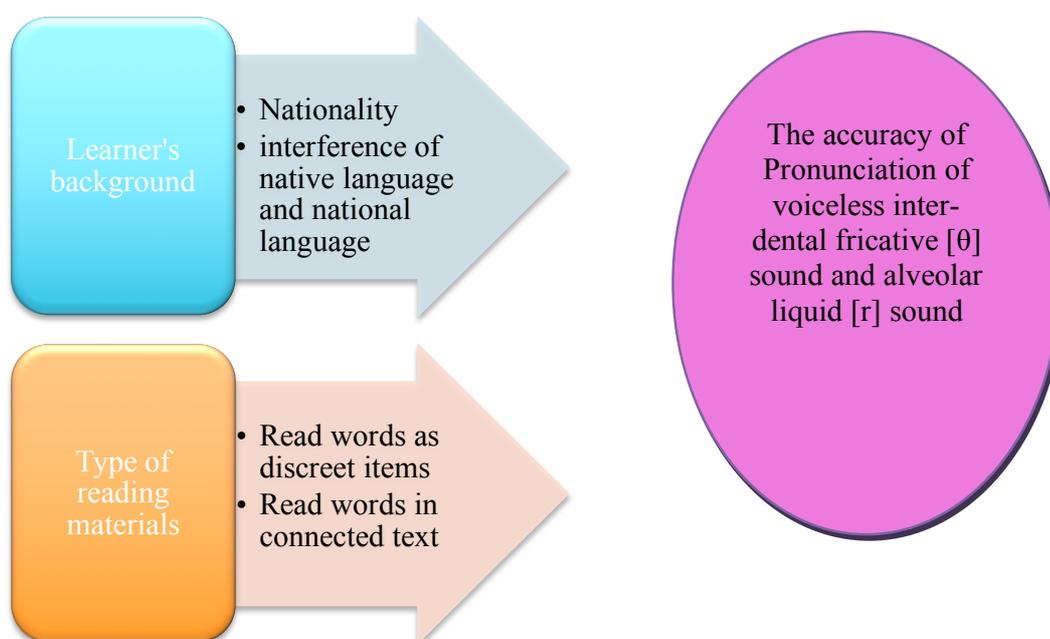


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Significance of Study

Recently, many students from China choose to enroll in Malaysian universities. This might be due to Malaysia's multiracial identity and the government's efforts in encouraging more foreign students to further their studies in Malaysia. "The government has implemented adjustments on education policy, such as the issuance of approximately 100% student visas in recent years to strongly encourage foreign students to study in Malaysia," (Zhang & Chen, 2012, p.123). This adjustment of the education policy leads to the increasing number of the main land Chinese students studying in Malaysia.

Since English has become one of the importance medium of instruction in Malaysian universities, China Chinese learners are required to learn and acquire English before they are allowed to sit for other courses. Hence, it is very important for English teachers to understand the difficulties faced by the China Chinese learners in learning and acquiring English.

Although Malaysian English teachers are used to teaching Malaysian Chinese learners of English, they should never have similar perception towards the China Chinese learners of English. This is because these two different groups of Chinese English learners have different learning background and exposure to English. Therefore, it is believed that this research helps English teachers to discover the different pronunciation problems among Chinese English learners from different nationality and consequently able to design better teaching methods and learning material for the different groups of Chinese English learners in learning English.

Limitation of Study

This study only focuses on two aspects of phonetic sounds which are the voiceless inter-dental fricative [θ] sound and alveolar liquid [r] sound. The Chinese English learners however might be having more problems in producing other English sounds as some English consonants and vowel sounds do not exist in Chinese language. Hence, it is suggested for the future research to investigate all types of phonetic sounds among Chinese, Malays, and India in Malaysia. The study will contribute to body of knowledge by highlighting the main spelling error made majority of Malaysians, as it also help to soar the finding to foreigners who are interested to travel to Malaysia.

Research Design

Observation analysis is selected as the research design in comparing the different pronunciation made by two different groups of Chinese English learners from Malaysia and China. In details, two specific English sounds [[θ] and [r] are chosen by researchers as the focus of observation. Using two reading worksheets as the instrument of this research, the respondents' pronunciation is observed and assessed using a specific scale in the evaluation form.

Population and Sample

The sample of this research is selected from Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) Chinese students. The Chinese students from Malaysia will be chosen from English Communication 1 classes while the Chinese students from China will be chosen from Intensive English programme. This sample has been chosen using probability sampling (simple random sampling) based on a master list from the Language Centre.

Instrumentation

The instruments used in this research are two reading worksheets. These two reading worksheets are meant to be read by both groups of Chinese English learners. The first reading worksheet includes a list of English words and a poem with the presence of the [θ] sound in three different positions; initial, medial, and final. The poem presented in the first reading worksheet is adopted from "The Teaching of [θ] and [ð] in English, by Ali Karakas (2012). Meanwhile, the second reading worksheet includes a list of English words and a poem with the presence of the [r] sound in initial, medial and final positions. A poem from a research carried by Nik Rahilah, Mohd Fauzi and Ramachandran (2007) is adopted to be used in this worksheet. The researcher then tick the accuracy level made by the respondents in a specific form.

Research Procedures

The data of this research is collected from the target population of Malaysian Chinese students who are currently taking English Communication 1 course and China Chinese students who are attending the Intensive English programme at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Sintok, Kedah. Before the data collection was conducted, a consent letter and a master list of UUM students attending English Communication 1 course and Intensive English programme is obtained from the Language Centre, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The student master list is then narrowed to Chinese students only.

In order to provide equal chance for every student to be selected as the sample, simple random sampling technique is conducted to select the desired samples for this research. After the sampling process, 150 students from the target population are identified as the selected respondents.

The respondents then are brought to a closed classroom and are asked to read Reading Worksheet 1 and Reading Worksheet 2 individually. The whole reading session is recorded using a video camera. The respondents' pronunciation then is analyzed and transcribed by three different examiners to ensure the reliability of the transcription.

Data Analysis

The data collected will be analyzed using SPSS 16, which applying regression analysis to see the impact of demographic factors and types of reading on the accuracy of pronunciation of both techniques. The researcher will also make comparison between two groups (Malaysia Chinese and Mainland Chinese) to see whether there have any differences in pronouncing those words. For this purpose, independent t-test will be used to measure the differences.

Conclusion

This research will provide empirical evidence to members of academia in understanding the level of English pronunciation aspects among Chinese students, who typically have the effect of their mother tongue language. This study will also very fruitful to English educators who actively involved in English education as it can help them to have prior knowledge on identifying major weaknesses among local and international students in classroom.

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Appendix

Sample Evaluation form

Type of respondents : Malaysian Chinese / China Chinese

Worksheet : 1 / 2

Examiner : _____

Score : _____

		<i>Completely -----> Perfectly</i> <i>Wrong correct</i> <i>pronunciation pronunciation</i>						
	Word	IPA Transcription	1	2	3	4	5	Substitution
1.	Rubber							
2.	Roasted							
3.	Roll							
4.	Raccoon							
5.	Random							
6.	Ripe							
7.	Rumble							
8.	Roaring							
9.	Rose							
10.	Rain							
11.	Raise							
12.	Rainbow							
13.	Borrow							
14.	Sorrow							
15.	Very							
16.	Lorry							
17.	Sorry							
18.	Eraser							
19.	Brisk							
20.	Fragile							
21.	Drape							
22.	Present							
23.	Browser							
24.	Crain							
25.	Trap							
26.	Ice-cream							
27.	Strawberry							
28.	Parents							
29.	Sprinter							
30.	terrace							