

A Study on the Negative Phonetic Transfer of English Learners in Henan Province^{*}

LI Ning-ning

School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

Due to the influence of dialect, many English learners in China tend to speak English in the way they usually speak during second language acquisition, which results in negative transfer on English pronunciation. In order to reduce this phenomenon and improve the students' English pronunciation level, it is necessary for us to study the topic and put forward solutions. By using the contrastive analysis, this paper compares the pronunciation of English, Chinese and Henan dialect so as to find out the influence of Henan dialect on English learners at segmental level and suprasegmental level. The results show strong correlation between the pronunciation of English and Henan dialect for English learners. Therefore, this paper analyzes the mistakes and reasons that learners of Henan province are prone to make in the process of learning, and puts forward corresponding suggestions for teaching on students' negative transfer, so as to enhance the awareness of negative transfer for teachers and students.

Keywords: second language acquisition, negative transfer, Henan dialect, contrastive analysis

Introduction

For Chinese English learners, the differences between Chinese and English result in the transfer of learning. Language transfer is the influence of the first language on the second language learning, which can be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer. The former can promote the learning of the target language, while the latter hinders it (Ellis, 1989).

As Gimson (1970) says, "To speak any language a person must know nearly 100% of its phonetics, while only 50%-90% of its grammar and 1% of the vocabulary may be sufficient," which emphasizes the importance of phonetics. This paper takes the learners in Henan province as the object, compares the differences in pronunciation between Henan dialect and English, analyzes the negative transfer phenomenon and puts forward the corresponding teaching countermeasures, so as to enhance the awareness of negative transfer for teachers and students. Moreover, it is beneficial to promote the English phonetic teaching in Henan province, and provide reference for the English phonetic teaching in other areas.

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LI Ning-ning, Master degree, postgraduate, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology.

Literature Review

Transfer is actually the category of psychological research, and the fundamental meaning of it is the impact of previously learned knowledge or skills on later learned knowledge or skills.

Odlin (1989) summarizes the definition of language transfer as the effect of the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been or is not fully acquired. Learning any kind of new knowledge and skills is based on the knowledge and skills that have been subordinated to them, and all meaningful learning must involve transfer.

Transfer can be divided into different categories from different perspectives, such as forward transfer and reverse transfer; intralingual transfer and interlingual transfer; positive transfer and negative transfer; phonetic transfer, pragmatic transfer, lexical transfer, syntactic transfer and discourse transfer (Zhong, 2016).

Two methods are usually used in the previous studies, which are contrastive analysis and error analysis. The former is proposed by Lado, a famous American linguist. By comparing the forms and meanings across native language and target language, contrastive analysis locates their differences so that people can predict the possible learning difficulties learners may encounter. However, this analysis is uninformative, because predicted errors did not materialize in the learner language while errors did show up that the contrastive analysis had not predicted (Dai, 2013). Later, Corder (1967) puts forward the error analysis. Starting with describing the learners' interlanguage, error analysis compares the two forms to locate their mismatches. However, it has the subjectivity of its interpretation of errors and lacks any predictive power that any scientific procedure must have.

In China, much research of the negative transfer and phonetic transfer in second language acquisition has been made. In general, these studies can be divided into three types.

First, some studies are based on the theory of English phonetics. Such as Tian (2013) studies Guizhou dialect. Second, there are some studies fixed on English phonetic teaching. For example, Fan (2002) analyses the attitude toward one's native language from every teaching method. Third, some studies make experimental research in English phonetics by making use of modern equipment or technology. For example, Chao and Zhan (2016) conducted an experimental study for 511 Mongolian junior high school students to study the negative transfer of their mother tongue to second language acquisition.

However, there are few studies on the negative transfer of Henan dialect to English pronunciation learning and the corresponding teaching methods. Thus, this paper will pay more attention to this aspect.

Comparison between Pronunciation of English and Henan Dialect

This paper introduces English and Chinese standard pronunciation, and then compares English and Henan dialect from the segmental level and suprasegmental level, so as to find out the negative transfer of Henan dialect to English pronunciation.

Standard Pronunciation of English and Chinese

Received pronunciation is regarded as a model and has been promoted all over the world. Generally speaking, it has two features: first, the pronunciation of it does not have the characteristics of dialect sounds in a specific region. Secondly, standard English has always been regarded as a symbol of superior society and a

manifestation of good education. English pronunciation can be divided into two categories: vowels and consonants. There are 20 vowels, 12 monophthongs (i:, i, e, æ, ʌ, ɑ:, ɔ, ɒ:, ʊ, ʊ:, ə:, ə) and 8 diphthongs (eɪ, aɪ, ɔɪ, əʊ, aʊ, ɪə, eə, ʊə), and 28 consonants in English (Zhong, 2016).

The standard Chinese, also called mandarin, is the common language for Chinese, which takes Beijing pronunciation as the model. It has some distinct features. First, the syllable structure is simple and the voice is loud. There are at most four phonemes in a syllable. Second, the syllables are clearly defined and have a strong sense of rhythm. Chinese syllables are composed of three parts: initial, final and tone. Third, the tone is cadence and expressive. Putonghua can express one's emotion strongly because of its distinct tone change (Wu, 2011).

By comparing English and standard Chinese, some differences can be found. First, the syllable of English is composed of vowel and consonant while the syllable of Chinese consists of initial, final and tone. Second, Chinese is a tone language, which means different tones can change the meaning of the same syllable. Third, the vowels of English can be divided into monophthong and diphthong, while the vowels of Chinese have two types. One is completely played by vowels, such as a, ai. The other is played by individual nasal consonants with vowels, such as an, ang.

Comparison between Henan Dialect and Mandarin

Dialect refers to a language that is different from the standard language and is only used in one area. The differences between Henan dialect and Mandarin are described from segmental and suprasegmental levels.

Initials and finals belong to segmental levels, so there are the differences in this aspect:

- “V” in Henan dialect is labiodental, which belongs to zero initial in Mandarin.
- The sound of flat tongue and warped tongue in Henan dialect is usually confusing. For example, learners cannot clearly distinguish the sound “z” and “zhi,” “s” and “shi.”
- The confusion between aspirated and unaspirated sound is usually made by learners. For example, “bocai” is often pronounced as “pocai.”
- In the vowel system of Henan dialect, there are some special vowels, i.e. cuokouhu vowel [yo], kaikouhu vowel [ɛ], hekouhu vowel [uɛ] and qichihu vowel [iai].
- The opening degree of “a” in Henan dialect is not as large as that in Mandarin.
- There is no post nasal sound (ng) in Henan dialect, so “ang” is usually pronounced as “an.”

Suprasegmental level of Henan Dialect and Mandarin is mainly compared by the tone system. The tones of Henan dialect, including Yin Ping, Yang Ping, Shang Sheng and Qu Sheng, are different from those of Mandarin. The characteristics of Yin Ping tone in Henan dialect are low and rising, and the tone value is generally 24; the Yang Ping tone is from high key to middle tone, and the tone value is generally 53; the upper tone is high flat tone, and the tone value is generally 44; the falling tone is the same as Putonghua, but the tone value is different; the falling tone of Putonghua is all down tone, while Henan dialect is half tone down, and the tone value is 31 (Wu, 2011).

Negative Transfer of Henan Dialect on English Pronunciation

As mentioned by previous section, Henan dialect has a great negative effect on English pronunciation. Local students speak English unnaturally, which is reflected in segmental level and suprasegmental level.

Negative Transfer in Segmental Level

The negative transfer of vowels in Henan dialect is mainly manifested in the following four aspects:

Firstly, the length of vowels cannot be clearly distinguished by learners. Since there is no obvious difference between long and short vowels in Chinese, students usually cannot distinguish them. Such as [i:] and [i], [u:] and [u], [e] and [æ].

Secondly, the opening of the mouth is not big enough, which makes the pronunciations of the front vowels inaccurate. For example, /æ/ is pronounced as /e/, students want to express “bad”, but they often speak “bed.”

Thirdly, Henan dialect makes some vowel phonemes omitted or misread. Due to the lack of a vowel “an” in the Northern Henan dialect, learners tend to read “thank” [θæŋk] and “mind” [maɪnd] as [θaɪk] and [maɪd]. What’s more, it is difficult for students in western Henan to distinguish the words like “sank” and “son” because they usually pronounce “an” as “a.”

Fourthly, the pronunciation of some vowels is often replaced by Chinese pronunciation, which is a common problem in the process of English phonetics learning. Since most people only learn phonetics roughly, they will use Chinese pronunciation to take place the similar pronunciation of Chinese and English. For example, “u” in Chinese replaces [u] in English, “a” replaces [ɑ:] and “ai” replaces [aɪ]. In addition, students from Eastern Henan will read [an] as [aɪ], such as man [mæn] as [maɪ]. The main reason for this problem is that the two languages have different manners of pronunciation. Chinese is pronounced by lips, teeth and the tip of tongue, while English is pronounced by the air flow of the mouth and nose.

There are three aspects of negative transfer of English consonants in Henan dialect.

Firstly, learners usually confuse the Chinese initials with English consonants. Owing to some similarities between the initials b, p, t, d, f, k, g in Henan dialect and the English plosives [b], [p], [t], [d], [f], [k], [g], it is difficult for learners to distinguish the differences between them. When these phonemes appear at the end of a word in English, many students usually unconsciously add vowels “ə” after them.

Secondly, learners often look for similar consonants in Chinese or English. The phonemes [θ] and [ð] have the same place of articulation, but they donot exist in Henan dialect. It is easy to be confused with [z], [s] when reading these two sound words. For example, teeth [ti:θ] would be read as [ti:s], and these [ði:z] would be read as [zi:z].

Thirdly, the manner of articulation is greatly influenced by different dialects. As for Xinyang dialect, the pronunciation of initial “n” and “l” are almost same. For example, night [naɪt] is read as [laɪt]. In some areas of Northern Henan, people often read [w] as [v]. For example, well [wel] is read as [vel].

Negative Transfer in Suprasegmental Level

The negative transfer of Henan dialect in suprasegmental level is greatly revealed from the aspects of syllable structure and intonation.

Students in Henan dialect area have the following characteristics in syllable aspects: Firstly, since there is no consonant cluster similar to English in Chinese, students usually add a vowel in the middle of the consonant conjunction. For example, please will be read as [puli:z], and clean as [kəli:n]. Secondly, students in Henan province often add a vowel to the consonantal suffix at the end of the word. Unlike English, Chinese syllables often end with consonants, except “n” and “ng.” Therefore, hope is read as [həʊpə], and like is read as [laɪkə].

Thirdly, due to the pronunciation habits of native language and dialect, students are easy to read every syllable evenly and forcefully. Therefore, their sense of rhythm is not obvious, sometimes even produces wrong emotion, which affects the expressive function of language.

The negative transfer of Chinese is more obvious in intonation. Chinese is a tone language, which refers to the use of tone determines the meaning of words. The range of intonation fluctuation and pitch change of the whole sentence is not so large. While English belongs to intonation language, its intonation usually falls in the order of stress syllables in sentences. What's more, the rising and falling of the last stressed syllable determines the intonation at the end of sentences. The four tones in Chinese belong to the change of high pitch in one syllable, so does Henan dialect. Therefore, when students speak English, they are easy to be influenced by dialects, but this is not in line with English intonation habits, which is why some students always have a so-called "hometown flavor" when they speak English.

Suggestions for Future Teaching

This part proposes effective suggestions for teaching, which are beneficial for learners to overcome these mistakes, but also cultivate their interest in learning English to a certain extent.

Teachers can help students make a clear distinction between similar sounds by comparing the different pronunciation of English and Chinese. Firstly, they should choose the standard listening materials. Then, in the process of listening, students should be asked to compare their own pronunciation with standard pronunciation, so as to find their own mistakes.

Teachers should give students the appropriate guidance, which is also essential. They should let students know the speech organs, then ask students to look for their own speech organs according to the diagram of them.

Teachers should instruct students step by step by combining syllables, stress, rhythm and intonation together. First, starting from syllables, teachers need to train weak reading, liaison, reduction and assimilation. The second is stress training. Teachers should train students for the stress of words and sentences respectively. The third is the rhythm, including sense group and pause. The last is the intonation. Teachers should give different intonation according to different sentence patterns so that students can experience different feelings.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of Henan dialect, Putonghua and English pronunciation, Henan dialect has obvious influence on English pronunciation learning, which is manifested in the segmental and suprasegmental levels. As for the former, first of all, students are often unable to distinguish long and short sounds. Second, learners often use Chinese pronunciation to replace some English phonemes. Finally, influenced by the dialect, students usually confuse the pronunciation of some phonemes. In terms of suprasegmental, learners' dialect learning of English phonetics is mainly manifested in syllable structure, stress and intonation. Firstly, learners usually add a vowel around the consonant. Secondly, due to the effect of mother tongue, learners often stress every syllable. Thirdly, learners usually do not master English intonation well, which is mainly caused by the differences between the two languages.

Effective teaching methods can help learners reduce the negative transfer of Henan dialect on English pronunciation. According to the different aspects of negative transfer, this paper puts forward corresponding

suggestions for teaching. Teachers should let students be aware of the pronunciation of some words and find the differences between the two languages through observation. Under the correct guidance of the teacher, students can gradually reduce the negative transfer at the segmental level by imitating pronunciation.

Although this paper explored the influence of Henan dialect on English phonetic learning, there are some limitations. Most of these data are obtained through the writer's experience, so the analysis may not be comprehensive and the conclusions are relatively shallow. Therefore, the future studies need to do more surveys and invite students who suffer negative transfer caused by their dialects in different degrees to take part in the investigation.

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