The Negative Transfer of Sichuan Dialect on English Speech Sounds
Learning and New Perspectives on its Solutions

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Abstract. This paper attempts to expatiate upon the most saliently erroneous English sounds by Sichuan people. What is special is that this inter-disciplinary work offers some suggestions from the perspective of broadcasting training, which proves effective in my coaching and testing of students. As well as this, the author also puts forward level-based teaching.

Introduction

Background

English is a mandatory subject for Chinese students from primary school to the end of schooling. Most employers require their English-related staff to speak with standard pronunciation. Since, however, the English language belongs to the Indo-European language system and the Chinese language to the Sino-Tibetan one, it is intractable for people of the latter to learn a language of the former, or vice versa. In Sichuan, a large proportion of people often speak English with a strong accent. Herein lies the crux of the problem—even less research can be found.

Speech Sound and Sichuan Dialect Defined

Speech sound, according to Merriam-Webster, is any one of the smallest recurrent recognizably same constituents of spoken language produced by movement or movement and configuration of a varying number of the organs of speech in an act of ear-directed communication.

Sichuan Dialect is a branch of Southwestern Mandarin spoken mainly in Sichuan and Chongqing, which was part of Sichuan Province until 1997, and the adjacent regions of their neighboring provinces. Here I mainly discuss Sichuan and Chongqing.

Literature Review

An overview of the history of English phonetics reveals that domestic research into English phonetics can be categorized into five respects, i.e., exploration of theories of English phonetics, acquisition process of it, factors affecting phonetics learning, building up systems of assessing phonetics competence, and pedagogy thereof. Besides, prior to 1999, only a handful of them could be found[1].


I studied extensive literature on English Phonetics, Sichuan dialect, Mandarin Chinese proficiency test, and broadcasting training methods as well.

The Negative Transfer of Sichuan Dialect on English Consonants

Confusing/n/ or /l/

This is the most distinctive one. According to A Book for Mandarin Proficiency Test (BMPT) by Sichuan Provincial Language Work Committee, people throughout Sichuan and Chongqing do not distinguish[10], for example, “Nan” and “Lan” are no of difference to them. In Sichuan, “n” and “l” are either pronounced as “n” with light nasal, which is not completely correct, or as “l”, even
those two perfectly well. More examples are listed here. Among all my students from almost every city of Sichuan, only some top students can do it. The Chinese “ng” sound is close in pronunciation to the English one /ŋ/, the only difference being that the root of tongue touches the front part of soft palate and a little back when producing /ŋ/[5]. To pronounce this sound, the tip of tongue rests at the bottom of the lower teeth, while the root of tongue is lifted high enough that the airflow is fully obstructed in the oral cavity, thus coming out from the nasal cavity. Now that “ng” and “ŋ” are nearly identical, why Sichuan people have difficulty in producing it accurately? Because Sichuan dialect has no “ng” sound[10]. Notwithstanding learning or even professional training, only a small number can virtually master it. In Sichuan, “ng” is either unnaturally pronounced, with too strong nasal sound, or unconsciously substituted by “in”. Indeed, even some native speakers cannot do it right, let alone Sichuan people, of the other language system, as stated at the beginning of this paper.

/j/, “q”, “x” on English /dʒ/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/, /l/. In Mandarin Chinese, to pronounce “j”, “q”, “x”, the tip of tongue should be placed at the bottom of the lower teeth, but the English affricates /dʒ/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/ sound a bit like “j”, “q”, “x”; therefore, failing professional training and practice, most English learners substitute /dʒ/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/ for “j”, “q”, “x”. This happens at the very beginning of their English learning process. The following example perfectly elucidates the phenomenon: When countless students begin to learn the 26 English letters, their teachers read “G (/dʒ/)” and “J (/dʒi/)” as the Sichuan “ji” “jie”, which are so “Sichuanized” that they swiftly master the wrong ones. Among all my students from almost every city of Sichuan, only some top students can do those two perfectly well. More examples are listed here:

Join /dʒɔɪn/ as the Sichuan “Jio Yin (footstep)”; Jelly /dʒɛli/ as the Sichuan “Jie Li (relay)”; Judge /dʒʌdʒ/ as “Jia Ji (fake plane)”; juice /dʒu:s/ as “Ju (orange) Si”; She /ʃi/ as “Xi (wash)”; fish /ʃiʃ/ as “Fei Xi”.

Judging from the above exemplifications, the English pronunciations are replaced with typical Sichuan dialectal ones, yet ignored. One more that fails to capture English learner’s attention is that even though in some part of Leshan and some other regions, “j”, “q”, “x” are produced, to some extent, like /dʒ/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/[10], they are not exactly the same. /dʒ/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/ are all Palatal, which by definition requires the tongue rest tightly up to the teeth ridge, while the aforementioned seemingly correct dialectal “j”, “q”, “x” reveal that a speaker place the blade of tongue is not high, making the airflow stronger than it should be.

“y”, “r” on English /ɹ/, /r/. The Chinese initial “y” is frequently confused with the English palatal fricative /ʃ/ and the Chinese “r” with the English liquid /r/. The reason for that is obvious--Chinese dose not have /ʃ/, and the Sichuan “r”, rather differentiated from Mandarin “r”, is approximate to the English alveolar /ɹ/. Wherever there is /ʃ/, students are prone to displace it with “y”, examples listed as follows:

Measure /ˈmeʒər/ is produced as /məyiːər/; pleasure /ˈpleʒər/ as /ˈpleyiːər/; Casual /ˈkɛziəl/ as /ˈkəziəl/; television /ˈtelɪvɪʒən(also /ˈtelɪvɪʒn)/ as /ˌtelɪˈvɪʒn/; In some rural areas, especially some impoverished regions, English learners usually supplant the English /r/ by the Sichuan “r”, a totally erroneous pronunciation absurd to native speakers. To pronounce the Sichuan “r”, the blade of tongue is flatly placed in the oral cavity; conversely, to produce the English alveolar /ɹ/ (also approximant by Roach, P.), the tip of tongue is curled and lifted up near the transitional part between teeth ridge and the front hard palate. Here are some cases:
Many students do “read” (/riːd/) as /ˈzuide/ or /ˈzuida/ (here in the English way) Ride /raɪd/ as /ˈzuai Dickinson as /ˈmaarri/ as /ˈmaizui/; rock as /ˈzuakka/ or /ˈzuakka/. All the above-listed wrong ones are typically adversely affected by Sichuan dialect.

/l/, /z/ on /θ/ and /ð/ and Vice Versa. Another grave problem is to produce dental sounds /θ/ and /ð/. For the overwhelming majority of Sichuan people, it is intractable to do the two correctly. They cannot inure themselves to such eccentric pronunciation, “biting my tongue”! In effect, to practice those two sounds really takes courage and persistence. When practicing at the outset, it is normal that the tongue goes from being a bit painful to numb. Another reason is that the tongue must intermittently goes inside and outside of the mouth[7], and since in most parts of Sichuan, accustomed to speaking with a “flat tongue” thus not being nimble, people have more problems of doing the alternate action.

There is, indeed, positive influence. In such place as Neijiang, some locals say Sichuan as /ˈzɜi.chuən/, 1234 as yi er θän θi. It is definitely wrong in Mandarin Chinese, even ridiculous to Sichuan people, though, it is conducive to learning English phonetics. The problem is that do not have a standard or regular system of which th should be th in the right place. Some could pronounce “think” “thought” perfectly well, but “success”, may be articulated as /ˈθə.kθəθ/. There is, indeed, positive influence. In such place as Neijiang, some locals say Sichuan as /ˈzɜi.chuən/, 1234 as yi er θän θi. It is definitely wrong in Mandarin Chinese, even ridiculous to Sichuan people, though, it is conducive to learning English phonetics. The problem is that do not have a standard or regular system of which th should be th in the right place. Some could pronounce “think” “thought” perfectly well, but “success”, may be articulated as /ˈθə.kθəθ/.

Other Consonantal Problems. There are other problems worth paying attention to—add a vowel at the end of a word and confuse “hu” and “f”. Suppose one is in Sichuan, he can always hear /sto:pu/ /ˈsto pu/ /ˈsto pu/, /za:ts/ (za:ti:), /fi:ti/ /ˈfi ti/, /zuaida/ /ˈzuai.D/., /kei:kɔ:/, /baugɔ:/ (bag), et cetera, pretty much like /ai senko ze laizuvezui i:z vezui (in the English way) la:ji /. This sort of English accent sounds no different from Sichuan language; even to someone who have never learn English, he can immediately tell it is Chuanglish (Sichuan English).

In Sichuan, especially in rural areas, it is normal to hear people say Kai Fei (convene a conference), Chi Huan (have a meal), Fu So (nonsense). There are few places where people can fully differentiate “hu” and “f”, including Jiajiang and Emei of Leshan, Danling and Hongya of Meishan, Bazhou District and Pingchang County of Bazhong, Downtown Guangyuan and Mianning of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. Since English does not have too many /hu:/, /hʊ:/, the gravely affected dialectal accent exert little influence on English phonetic pronunciation. Some would still say “/fu: a: ju:” “/fu:liɡə/”. Apparently, it’s the negative influence of Sichuan dialect on English phonetics learning.

The Negative Transfer of Sichuan Dialect on English Vowels

Apart from consonants, vowels are also affected by Sichuan dialect. There are either nuances or stark differences between those formally similar Chinese finals (Yun Mu) and English vowels; even the English /a:/ and /i:/, seemingly identical to most English phonetics learners, are slightly different from the Chinese “a” and “i”. As we are not native speakers, our mother tongue will more or less influence our English Accent.

/i/. There are several speech sounds that confuse learners, namely, /iː/, /ɪ/, /ɪ/ in IPA. Note that /ɪ/ only appears at the last syllable, for example, /ˈevri/ or /ˈevrɪ/, /ˈbiːləti/ or /ˈbiːləti/. In the obsolete IPA, being only /i/, was supplanted by /ɪ/, /ɪ/ to distinguish from /iː/, because /ɪ/ was considered to be merely a little shorter than / iː / but factually their positions of tongue are different. The IPA /ɪ/ is identical to the Chinese “i”, thus learners always replace the English /iː/ and /ɪ/ with the Chinese one. Examples are given as follows (Cook, 2008: 79):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ի</td>
<td>/iː/ (e)</td>
<td>/ɪ/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mi</td>
<td>/miː:t/ (meet)</td>
<td>/mɪd/ (mid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ni</td>
<td>/niː/ (knee)</td>
<td>/knɪt/ (knit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ti</td>
<td>/tiː/ (tee)</td>
<td>/tip/ (tip)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

People from Yibin, Luzhou may find both /i/ and /iː/ difficult. In those places, the Chinese “y” is pronounced as “ye” (jie/ in English). So it is common for them to mistake meet as “miet”.

Intractable to Pronounce /u/. Like /iː/, /ɪ/, and /ɪ/, /uː/, /ʊ/, and /u/ are perplexing. It has long
been redeemed that the English /u:/ is identical or at least very similar to the Chinese “u”, thus, such articulation as /gu:/, /kuk/, /lu:k/, /fu:t/ are prevalent, though actually they are different in tone quality and feeling.

“er” on English /ɜː/. As Sichuan belongs to the northern Chinese language system, everywhere except Suining and part of Nanchong where people pronounce “er” as Mandarin “e” (fall-rise tone), people can do the Mandarin “er” correctly. It is, however, also fallacious to say a Sichuan person can do the American /ɜː/ if s/he curls his/her tongue when speaking Sichuan language, or the British /ɜː/ provided he or she is a Sichuan person. Because both /ɜː/ and /ɜː:/ ( /ɜː/ equals /ɜː/and a /r/) require a wider and a bit more rounded mouth and a lower and more front tongue position than “er” [7]. Replacing the English /ɜː/ or /ɜː:/ by Sichuan “er” or “e” is by no means right.

Other Problems of English Vowels. There are other pronunciation problems negatively influenced by Sichuan dialect. The most obvious ones are /ɒ, ə/ and /aʊ/, since in Chinese, also in Sichuan dialect, the seemingly similar “o”, “er” and “ao” are the “perpetrators”. The Chinese “o”, being identical to /ɒ/, is frequently used to replace /ɒ/, one that never appears in Chinese. As mentioned above “er”, differing from /ɜː/ and /ɜː:/, is also a substitute for /aʊ/. For example, /ˈvərˌkeɪʃn/, /ˈərəʊt/, /aɪˈɪər/ cannot be more normal in Sichuan (Note that /aɪˈɪər/ is infallible in linking with of a subsequent word initiated with a vowel). The English diphthong /aʊ/, is a combination of /ɑ/, /ʊ/, both of which are different from the Chinese counterparts, because the Chinese “ɑ” requires a more unrounded mouth and /ʊ/, as analyzed previously, is dissimilar to the Chinese “u”. All in all, /aʊ/ sounds more exaggerated than “ɑo”.

Targeted Measures to Tackle the Negative Transfer

Level-based Teaching

For a long time, English phonetics is taught according to students’ administrative class, which means students of various pronunciation levels are put in the same class, irrespective of their level. This is insufficient and detrimental to those lower-level students since most programs offer only one term of phonetics lecture with two periods each week. Within such short time, some programs can either only cover speech sounds (vowels and consonants) or quickly teach sounds and cover the connected speech.

I recommend level-based phonetics training, be it in schools, universities or training centres if conditions permit. In this way, students of strong local accent could be coached in a targeted way. Indeed, level-based teaching of grammar and lexis has been widely employed in language teaching, especially in foreign language schools and some institutions of higher education[8]. In the same can phonetics be taught. Students with strong local accent can take one academic year of phonetics training and those without, one term.

Applying Broadcasting Training Methods

Pronunciation involves the movement of tongue and the control of resonance in the cavities, a basic skill every will-be broadcaster has to harness. For students with accents, it is crucial to train the flexibility of their tongue and muscles in the face. Teachers of phonetics often familiarise students with the positions of tip, centre and back of tongue, yet still some students fail to master it.

One of the reasons may be their tongue flexibility. For such students, coaches should consciously train them in erecting, stretchering, pulling out, curling and whirling the tongue. For example, by quickly pulling out and in the tongue, students will find it much easier to pronounce /θ/ and /ð/, and erecting the tongue greatly helps enunciate /l/ and lateral plosion. /ɜː/ can be no obstacle after practising tongue curling[11].

Training muscles in the face is conducive to back vowels, open vowels and consonants such as /k/ /g/, and /ŋ/. Raising zygomaticus, for instance, facilitates the pronunciation of /k/ /g/, and /ŋ/, and strong masseter muscle, /θ/ and /ð/[6].
The point is that the pronunciation coach must know some basics of broadcasting method first, which can be soon acquired through online resources, MOOCs learning, for example. Tongue flexibility and oral muscle training, a warming up practice for broadcasters, usually about minutes and has proved effective in my practice and teaching.

Conclusion

The Chinese often find it hard to learn English pronunciation. And since many regions in Sichuan are comparatively remote, it is perceived even harder. With the internationalization of Sichuan, Chengdu in particular, people crave for professional instructions on English phonetics. But a search on the Internet barely shows relevant Chinese resources, not to mention English ones. All in all, the miscellaneous Sichuan dialects, more often than not, adversely influence English phonetics learning.

Next comes the Problems part, which elucidates major difficulties or intractability of various Sichuan dialects. The solution part analyzes the cause of such difficulties and put forward practical approaches, including examples familiar to Sichuan people. In addition, some suggestions are given. First and foremost, one must beware of the nuances and stark differences between English their mother tongue; it is therefore crucial to learn English phonetics. Only when one is clear about his pronunciation problems, does s/he know how to correct them. Major pronunciation mistakes made by the vast majority of Sichuan people are mentioned. The paper, limited by length, does not encompass every problem. Also, since it is highly likely that people from different regions of Sichuan do not understand each other, the author is incompetent to have knowledge of and research into every speaker. I therefore suggest that speakers always beware of their pronunciation, communicate more with foreigners and imitate broadcasters. Hopefully, the paper would be instrumental in ameliorating English pronunciation learning and in piquing their interest in phonetics study.

References