

# The Negative Transfer of Sichuan Dialect to the Study of English Pronunciation

— Error Analysis on the Supra-segmental Phonemes

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Received 2013

Supra-segmental phoneme is one of the most important factors in distinguishing meanings in English. Due to the influence of Sichuan dialect, many students in Sichuan tend to speak English without noticing the striking features in the continuous speech such as word stress, liaison, loss of explosion, or elision. The monotonous tones and pitches result in their non-fluency in the communication. Based on the theory of contrast analysis and error analysis, this paper analyzes the common errors in their pronunciation and the reasons so as to make some suggestions on how to teach and learn English pronunciation.

*Keywords:* English Pronunciation; Supra-Segmental Phoneme; Language Transfer; Contrast Analysis; Error Analysis

## Introduction

Language acquisition strategies have been the concerns of linguists and language teachers for many years. In order to find better ways for learners to learn foreign languages, linguists compare the differences when young children learn mother tongue and when adults learn foreign languages. By observing children's mother tongue learning process, linguists find that the differences lie in that children start from the very beginning while adults have already had comparatively systematic knowledge of mother tongue before they start to learn foreign languages, thus learning foreign languages seems more difficult for them. What kind of influence would mother tongue have on foreign language acquisition become the concern of linguists and language teachers. The contrast analysis hypothesis was put forward in the 1950s (Fries, G./Lado, R), based on the transfer theory which insists that mother tongue habits would influence foreign language acquisition, that is, language transfer defined by linguists. It is positive transfer, if learner's native language helps in learning the second language, otherwise, the negative transfer. (Wang Chuming, 1990).

Despite the conflicting views on the significance of language transfer in historical linguistics, the notion of language transfer remained uncontroversial among language teachers well into the twentieth century. As early as the schools of the ancient world, teachers were writing down contrastive observations about the languages students knew and the languages they wished to learn (Kelly, 1969). And as recently as the schools influenced by figures such as Sweet (1899/1972), Jespersen (1912), Palmer (1917), Fries (1945), and other proponents of new (or seemingly new) methods of language teaching, there is a widespread acceptance of the idea that native language influence could greatly influence second language acquisition (Terrence Odlin, 2001), especially when learning the pronunciation (Rod Ellis, 1994). Chinese is categorized into Sino-Tibetan family while English belongs to Indo-European family thus

they differ greatly in all aspects. From the perspective of language acquisition, the lack of social and family language learning environment leads to the negative transfer rather than the positive one.

English as the second language had not been taught in most of the middle schools in China until 1957. Most learners begin to learn English from the first year in middle school (Fu Ke, 1986), so they miss the best time for learning the second language, that is from 6 to 12. The sound system, grammatical system and syntax have already rooted in their knowledge long before they get contact with the second language. Some linguists believe that language acquisition is a process of getting into habits, not that of learning. If learners drill repeatedly in listening, speaking, reading and writing, they would gradually master the second language. But the result goes against the prediction of the theorists. According to Full-time Six Years Middle School Teaching Plan, the required time for English learning is: 960 hours for arts majors, five hours per week; 932 hours for science majors, five hours per week in the first two years, and in the last year, four hours per week. (Fu Ke, 1986) The Chinese students in fact spend a lot of time in learning English before entering colleges, and they are excellent in listening and reading comprehension, but very poor in oral English, especially in Sichuan dialect area. Due to mother tongue's negative transfer, students' poor pronunciation seriously influence their spoken English.

Supra-segmental phoneme is one of the most important factors to distinguish meanings in English. Due to the influence of Sichuan dialect, many students in Sichuan tend to speak English without noticing the striking features in the continuous speech such as liaison, loss of explosion, elision or stress. The monotonous tones and pitches result in their non-fluency in the communication. Based on the theory of contrast analysis and error analysis, this paper analyzes the common errors in their pronunciation and the reasons in order to make some suggestions on how to teach and learn English pronunciation.

## Error Analysis on the Supra-Segmental Phonemes

### Word Stress

There is a large vocabulary in the English language and the English words are much more complex than any other languages in the world. English words mainly originated from two sources: Germanic languages and Romance languages, and it has also borrowed a lot of words from most of the languages in the world(Xu Tianfu, 1985). As A.C.Gimson explains in his "An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English", "The accentual pattern of English words is *fixed*, in the sense that the main accent always falls on a particular syllable of any given word, but *free*, in the sense that the main accent is not tied to any particular situation in the chain of syllables constituting a word, as it is in some languages....." (A.C.Gimson, 1972). Thus English word accentual patterns differ greatly, not easy for learners to master.

As one of the most important supra-segmental phoneme, word stress is the base of learning rhythm and intonation and plays an important role in communication. Mispronouncing word stress may lead to ambiguity in understanding. Therefore, it is of vital importance for learners to master correctly the word stress patterns. However, many students in Sichuan Dialect area make mistakes when pronouncing words: misread word stress, neglect the differences of vowel sound quality in stressed and non-stressed syllables.

According to English pronunciation rules, in most disyllabic words, word stress falls on the first syllable, only a few falls on the second syllable. Our students tend to mispronounce the following words with two syllables:

correct	wrong
prefer /fɪˈfɜː/	/fɪˈfɜː/
advise /ədˈvaɪz/	/ədˈvaɪz/
discuss /dɪˈskʌs/	/dɪˈskʌs/
event /ɪˈvent/	/ɪˈvent/

In English, quite a few words can be both noun and verb but with different word stresses. Generally speaking, word stress falls on the second syllable when it functions as a verb, and on the first syllable when it is a noun. For example:

Noun	Verb
record /rɪˈkɔːd/	/rɪˈkɔːd/
present /pɪˈzent/	/pɪˈzent/
digest /dɪˈdʒest/	/dɪˈdʒest/
refuse /rɪˈfjuːz/	/rɪˈfjuːz/
subject /sʌbˈdʒekt/	/sʌbˈdʒekt/

In Chinese, it is the tones not stress that distinguish meanings, so Chinese is Tone Language. The pitch of syllable is the striking feature to distinguish meaning, while the intensity of sound is its redundant feature, that is to say, the meaning and part of speech of Chinese words have nothing to do with the sound intensity.(Xu Tongqiang, 1993). In most parts of Sichuan Dialect area, there are four tones: high and level, rising, falling rising, falling. In some parts of Sichuan, such as in the east and south of Sichuan, there is still Ru tone ( the fourth tone in the old Chinese pronunciation), and tones decide the meaning of words as those in the standard Chinese. In Sichuan dialect, each word is stressed if it is a monosyllabic word. The word stress always falls on the first syllable in most disyllabic and trisyllabic words but sometimes on the second syllable. In quadrisyllabic words, there are usually two stresses, one on the first syllable and the other on the third syllable. So it is common to

find word stress misplacement in students' pronunciation, as are shown above. They tend to read English words in the accentual pattern in Sichuan dialect and usually stress the first syllable whether the word is a none or a verb.

The stress is also closely related with the quality of vowels. Generally speaking, the quality of vowels is complete only in the stressed syllables; in the unstressed syllables, vowels are often weakened to /ɪ/, /i/, /u/. (A.C.Gimson, 1972) If the stress of a word is misplaced, the vowel would be mispronounced. Many students in Sichuan often pronounce the vowels in the unstressed syllables as they do in the stressed ones:

correct	wrong
breakfast /ˈbreɪkfst/	/ˈbreɪkfst/
Sunday /ˈsʌndɪ/	/ˈsʌndɪ/
ago /əˈɡoʊ/	/əˈɡoʊ/
suppose /səˈpəʊz/	/səˈpəʊz/
forget /fəˈɡet/	/fəˈɡet/

### Sentence Stress and Rhythm

Most English words have their own accentual patterns when they are uttered one by one, but in the connected speech, the native speaker expends relatively great articulatory energy on those parts of the utterance to which they wish to attach particular accentual meaning, while the remaining words or syllables are weakly and rapidly articulated. An utterance containing a high percentage of content words is likely to receive more stresses than one with the same number of syllables but a higher proportion of form words. Nevertheless, the syllables uttered with the greatest stress constitute, for the speaker, hubs with which unstressed syllables will be associated to form rhythmic groups. (A.C.Gimson, p.260)

Rhythm is one of most important supra-segmental phoneme. It is a feature of English that the utterance is delivered as a series of close-knit rhythmic groups, ...and the rhythmic beats of an utterance occur at fairly equal interval of time. As a result of this, the speed at which the unstressed syllables are uttered will depend upon the number occurring between the strong beats. All the unstressed syllables occurring between two strong beats may not, however, be uttered with equal rapidity. (A.C.Gimson, p.261)

Rhythm in English is stress timed, that is to say, the length of the speech is decided not by the number of the syllables but by the number of the stress. So the native speakers will not articulate each syllable very clearly and usually they utter the stressed syllable stronger, longer and clearer but the unstressed weaker, shorter and vaguer. In Chinese rhythm is syllable timed, and the length of the speech depends on the number of syllables. The more there are the syllables, the longer time the speakers will take. The Chinese speakers are used to articulating each Chinese word very clearly and for each word they will take roughly the same length of time except for special purpose. Thus, many learners in China utter each English word very forcefully and clearly as they speak their mother tongue.

Students in Sichuan dialect area error in sentence stress and rhythm in the following two cases:

(1) They utter each word very clearly with same stress, and vowels, no matter in stressed syllables or unstressed syllables, are usually articulated completely:

Example:  
I am an English teacher.



full use of the similarity of the two languages to help the students master the correct pronunciation. As for the differences between them, teachers should help them grasp the basic knowledge of English phonetics and drill on them. For young children, imitating is the most effective way to learn the pronunciation of one language, but for adults it is much more difficult because they have already had learned the rules of pronunciation in their mother tongue, thus negative transfer influence on adults are much more prominent than on the young children. Students should learn English phonetics systematically and correct their pronunciation consciously. Of course, imitation is also very helpful for them to improve their pronunciation, since only practice can make perfect.

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