

# The Negative Transfer Effect of Jianghuai Dialect in Huai'an on Local Students' English Pronunciation

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## Abstract

In English pronunciation learning, the difference between Chinese dialects and English will interfere with the acquisition of pronunciation. Students often transfer the pronunciation characteristics of dialects to English pronunciation, which affects the learning and application of English pronunciation. Therefore, it is necessary to study the influence of dialect on English phonetic acquisition. On the basis of systematically summarizing the theory of negative transfer of Chinese and dialects to English acquisition, this paper takes the students of a junior high school in Huai'an as samples, and investigates the negative transfer effect of Jianghuai dialect on the phonological transfer of local students' English. On the one hand, negative transfer effect of Jianghuai dialect on local students' English vowels pronunciation manifests in the following aspects: no distinction between long and short vowels, tightness and length are indistinguishable, incomplete pronunciation of English diphthongs. On the other hand, negative transfer effect on consonant pronunciation is obvious, including unable to distinguish between [n] and [l], lacking rhyme [v] and initial "r", no interdental fricatives [θ] [e]. The research results can help junior high school students to overcome negative transfer and provide scientific guidance for English phonetic teaching in Huai'an.

## Keywords

English Phonetics, Jianghuai Dialect, Negative Transfer, Vowels, Consonant

## 1. Introduction

Pronunciation is the most basic form of a language, and the basic means to realize the communicative function of a language. Student whose native language is

not English is often affected by the pronunciation habits of his native language in the process of learning and mastering English pronunciation (Leather, 1983; Foote & Trofimovich, 2017), and Chinese students are no exception. When Chinese people learn English, pronunciation is the key, but also the difficulty point. China is a multi-dialect country. Dialects are a variant of the mother tongue. There is an internal connection between different dialects, and between each dialect and the common language of the Chinese nation—Mandarin. At the same time, the differences are also very obvious, and one of the most obvious and perceptible differences is in pronunciation. Therefore, in the process of English phonetics learning, Chinese students are often influenced by dialect habits and make “dialect English pronunciation”.

The city where the author teaches is Huai’an, which is located in the north-central part of Jiangsu Province and the east of the Jianghuai Plain. Huai’an dialect belongs to Jianghuai mandarin, one of the dialects in the Canal area of Jiangsu. Although Jianghuai dialect has many similarities with Mandarin, it also has its own unique phonetic features. In English pronunciation learning, the difference between Chinese dialects and English will interfere with the acquisition of pronunciation. Students often transfer the pronunciation characteristics of dialects to English pronunciation, which affects the learning and application of English pronunciation.

According to the past survey, some junior middle school students who speak Jianghuai dialect in Huai’an have difficulties in English phonetic learning at both the segmental level and the suprasegmental level. Therefore, it is necessary to study the negative effect of Jianghuai dialect on the English phonetic acquisition of junior high school students. The purpose of this article is to review the theory of negative transfer of Chinese and dialects to English acquisition, analyze the characteristics of Jianghuai dialect in Huai’an, and investigate the negative transfer effect of Jianghuai dialect on the vowels and consonant pronunciation phonological transfer of local junior high school students’ English. The results of this research will play a very good role in guiding junior high school students’ English teaching and learning in Huai’an.

## 2. Literature Review

Language transfer is an important phenomenon in second language acquisition. In the 1920s, Western linguists used the method of contrastive analysis to compare two or more languages, and to compare the structure and function of different languages. In *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957), American linguist Robert Lado proposed the concept of language transfer, which refers to that when learners communicate in the target language, they rely extensively on the native language they have already mastered, and often transfer the phonetics, word meanings, structural rules of the native language, and the culture associated with the native language to the second language acquisition (Lado, 1957). Lado’s comparative analysis hypothesis holds that the learner’s native language is the

main obstacle to second language acquisition, and the difference between the native language and the target language is proportional to the difficulty it may cause, and the greater the difference is, the greater the difficulty will be. That is to say, when the rules of the mother tongue are different from those of the foreign language, the learner will transfer the rules of the mother tongue to the foreign language, and the mother tongue will seriously interfere with the learning of the foreign language. At this time, the influence of the mother tongue on the learning of the foreign language is negative, which is called “negative transfer”. Negative transfer causes difficulties in second language acquisition and students’ mistakes and the main obstacle to second language acquisition comes from the interference of the first language (native language).

Based on this theory, scholars have carried out an empirical study on the negative transfer of English learning among students whose native language are German (Born, 1985), Arabic (Thyab, 2016), Spanish (Rodríguez, 2018), French (Negadi, 2015) or Kurdish (Rashid, 2015). The results of the study show that the negative transfer of native language may occur at multiple language levels such as grammar, phonetics, and pragmatics. In the past two decades, domestic scholars have done some research on the negative transfer effect of native Chinese on English acquisition (He, 2002; Liu, 2010; Bu, 2016). The summary of statistical literature about negative transfer effect of native Chinese showed that: 1) The number of research results showed an obvious upward trend. 2) The research content mainly involves the impact of negative transfer on pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary on English learning. Domestic researchers are paying more and more attention to the transfer impact of native language transfer on English phonetic acquisition. 3) In terms of research methods, descriptive and investigative studies based on statistical data are only a minority, but the survey research has shown an upward trend in recent years.

China is very vast in territory and rich in culture. The culture and natural geographical conditions of different regions have created a variety of dialects in various places. Generally speaking, there are seven dialect areas in China, and each dialect has its own unique phonological system (Jin & Xie, 2013). Different phonological systems have different effects on English phonetic acquisition. Before learning English, most Chinese students have mastered the phonetic system of the local dialect and have developed a pronunciation habit. Therefore, they often unconsciously substitute some of the sounds in the foreign language with their familiar sounds and the similar tones leads to negative transfer of phonetics. With the gradual increase in the popularity and importance of English, English teachers or related researchers around the world have begun to think about how to avoid errors in phonetic acquisition caused by dialects, so as to improve the quality of English phonetics teaching.

Since the 20th century, the research on the influence of dialect on English phonetic acquisition has gradually taken up a larger proportion in the research on the phenomenon of second language phonetic transfer. The representative

results of studying negative transfer of dialects to English phonetics are as follows: 1) Analysis of English vowels acquired by Shanghai dialect speakers (Yue, 2018). 2) Negative transfer of the Hakka dialect on English phonetics learning (Zhong, 2016). 3) Influences of Heilongjiang dialect on junior high school students' English pronunciation (Xu, 2016). 4) Typical errors of English pronunciation of middle school students from Changsha dialect area (Zhu, 2008). 5) Cantonese's negative transfer on English pronunciation and teaching strategies (Shi, 2013).

From what has been discussed above, it is found that when learning a second language, the pronunciation of the mother tongue is easy to have a negative transfer to the pronunciation of the second language. This phenomenon occurs all over the world among English learners who are non-native speakers of English. For some Chinese students, they have formed a mature dialect pronunciation system before learning English. Scholars have studied the negative transfer phenomenon of English students speaking Shanghai, Heilongjiang, Hakka, Changsha and other dialects. However, there are so many dialects in China, and students from different places have different language characteristics. According to document retrieval, very few scholars have carried out research on the negative transfer effect of Jianghuai dialect on English phonetic acquisition.

### 3. The Characteristics of Jianghuai Dialect in Huai'an

Huai'an dialect belongs to Jianghuai mandarin, one of the dialects in the Canal area of Jiangsu. Although Huai'an dialect has many similarities with Mandarin, it also has its own unique phonetic features. As the most important branch of Jianghuai mandarin, Huai'an dialect has unique pronunciation characteristics.

In the 1980s, scholars began to study the Jianghua dialect of Huai'an systematically. In terms of phonological research, *Local Records of Jiangsu Province: Dialect* can best reflect the phonological characteristics of Huai'an dialect. The book selected 25 dialect survey sites, 700 common words, and compiled a comparison table of common words (Editorial Board of *Local Records of Jiangsu Province*, 1998). The book comprehensively reflects the situation of Huaian dialect after the second half of the 20th century. Based on modern dialogology and sociolinguistics, Feng (2019) took the intonation and rhyme of Huai'an dialect as the research object, described and analyzed the current situation of the intonation evolution of Huai'an dialect through a series of specific survey data, and summarized the characteristics, rules and reasons of the intonation evolution of Huai'an dialect. Yan (2015) sorted out the phonological system of Hongze dialect (a branch of Huai'an dialect) on the basis of field investigation and previous research materials. The characteristics of Hongze dialect are summarized by analyzing the internal differences of the pronunciation of towns in Hongze County. In addition, there are some researches that complement the phonetic features of Jianghua dialect in Huai'an, such as Zhang (2011) and Wang & Kang (2012). Most of these studies are carried out on the basis of large-scale field investigation, which provides detailed reference for the study of Huai'an dialect phonetics.

Summarizing the above literature, the main features of Jianghua dialect of Huai'an are list in **Table 1**.

## 4. The Negative Transfer Effect of Jianghuai Dialect

As shown in the table above, the Jianghuai dialect has a special phonology. This paper only discusses the pronunciation differences between the Jianghuai dialect in Huai'an and English in terms of vowels and consonants from the perspective of phonetics.

### 4.1. Research Methods

1) Survey Objects. In order to study the problems existing in the English phonetic acquisition of local junior high school students, students from six classes of the first grade of a middle school in Huai'an were selected as the research objects. The six classes are taught by different English teachers. The following factors were considered in the selection of survey subjects: a) Most of the test subjects were from native Huai'an families; b) The first year of junior high school was the beginning stage of junior high school. It is convenient to investigate the phonetic appearance of the test subjects and understand the degree of influence of dialect; c) Students from different classes are selected to avoid being influenced by the same English teacher's teaching method.

2) Voice test. The content of the speech part test includes segmental and suprasegmental, as follows: vowel and consonant phoneme reading, word reading with error-prone phonemes, sentence reading. The voice test is carried out in a professional voice laboratory, and an internationally common voice tagging and analysis software is used to perform voice tagging, data extraction and sound spectrogram analysis on the corpus.

### 4.2. Negative Transfer of Vowels

#### 4.2.1. Tones Contrast

Generally speaking, it is difficult for Chinese students to pronounce English vowels, because the tongue positions of Chinese finals are all at the limit of front,

**Table 1.** The main features of Jianghua dialect in Huai'an.

Phoneme	Jianghuai Dialect in Huai'an
Blade-alveolars & Retroflexes	no difference
Completely voiced consonant initial	not exist
L & N	no difference
Initials R	read as [z]
en & eng	no difference
an & ang	sometimes different
Entering tone	Still keep

back, high and low positions of the tongue, while the front, middle and back vowels in English do not reach the limit position. At the same time, the vowels in English have the opposite of tightness and looseness, so they have the opposite of length; while the finals of Chinese have no difference between the tightness and the length. According to negative transfer theory and the test results, local junior high school students in Jianghuai area have negative transfer effect when pronouncing English vowels.

#### 1) No distinction between long and short vowels

There are 12 vowels in English language, in which there have 5 pairs of opposite lengths, while the Jianghuai dialect has no difference in length, so the students here often use the “corresponding” vowel pronunciation to pronounce English vowels. For example, when the sound [i:] is pronounced, the front of the tongue of the students in the Jianghuai area is raised higher, so that friction occurs when the airflow passes through. At the same time, students do not understand that the tongue positions and pronunciation methods differ between long and short sounds in English. They mistakenly think that short sounds are to read sounds short, resulting in confusion in the pronunciation of long sounds and short sounds. For example, pronounce [I] as [i:], leave and live are read as [li: v], sit and seat are read as [si: t], and lid is read as [li: d].

#### 2) Tightness and length are indistinguishable

The tightness and length of the Jianghuai dialect pronunciation are indistinguishable, resulting in some vowel pronunciation errors. For example, the vowel [ʌ] is not pronounced well by many people, and it is often pronounced as [a:], so duck is pronounced as [da: k]. There is also the vowel [æ]. Students often make mistakes because their tongues are not placed low enough and their mouths are not open enough, so they confuse [æ] and [e], and as a result, cup and cap are confused, bat and bet are indistinguishable.

### 4.2.2. Diphthong Comparison

The small opening of finals in Jianghuai dialect results in incomplete pronunciation of English diphthongs (e.g.: [ei] [ai] [əu]). Because there are no complex finals such as ao, ai, ei, ou, etc. in the dialect, and people here are not accustomed to the change of mouth shape and tongue position when making diphthongs, mostly they pronounce “lai” (来) as “le”, “pai” (拍) as “pa” and “bei” (杯) as “be”, in other words, they have difficulty pronouncing English diphthongs.

Also, they pronounce some English phoneme as the sound in their Jianghuai dialect, e.g. [ei] as the sound “爱” [love], “late” becomes [let], and [əu] is pronounced as the sound of “ou” which is incorrect because “欧” in their dialect is hardly slides.

### 4.3. Negative Transfer of Consonant

In addition to the negative transfer of English vowels, Jianghuai dialect in Huai’an also has a certain negative transfer effect on consonants. The effects of negative

migration are reflected in the following aspects.

#### 4.3.1. [n] and [l] Are Indistinguishable

In Jianghuai dialect, [l] is mixed up with [n] before vowels, so English consonants [n] and [l] cannot be pronounced correctly. If [n] is pronounced as [l], “哪里” (where) is pronounced as “la li”, “拿” (take) is pronounced as “la”, and “脑” (brain) becomes “lao”; “辣椒 làjiāo” (chili) becomes “nàjiāo”, and “老路” (lao lu) becomes “nao nu” (恼怒 angry). Therefore, students may not be able to distinguish between [n] and [l] when reading and speaking in English. For example: last night [la:st] [nait] is pronounced as [na:st] [nait] [la:st] [lait] or [na:st] [lait]; next [nekst] is pronounced as [lekst] and so on.

#### 4.3.2. No Rhyme [v]

Students in the Jianghuai dialect area cannot generally pronounce the [v] in English. They are not used to make the upper teeth touch the lower lip, and pronounce it similar to [w]. For example, “five” is pronounced as [faiu], and “very well” is pronounced as [weri] [wel].

#### 4.3.3. No Initial “r”

Many students cannot distinguish between [l] and [r] in English in the Jianghuai dialect area, because there is no word with the initial “r” in their dialect, and when they pronounce [r], they only raise the tip of the tongues, but not protrude and round the lips. The initial consonant “r” is a warped tongue sound in Mandarin, but a flat tongue sound in their dialect, which is similar to the [z] sound in English. For example, the pronunciation of “hot” (rè) becomes [zè], and road [rəud] and rose are easily pronounced as [ləud] and [zəud].

#### 4.3.4. No [θ], [e] Two Tones

There are no interdental fricatives [θ] and [e] in the Jianghuai dialect, which is one of the difficulties for students when learning consonants. The two sounds are pronounced in the same position: the tip of the tongue touches the upper teeth and rub. However, [θ] is an unvoiced consonant, and the airflow passes smoothly; [e] is a voiced consonant, and the airflow is hindered and friction is aggravated, so the vocal cords vibrate. Many students often use similar pronunciation and both fricatives [s] and [z] instead. For example, they pronounce “thank, thing, and thus” as [sink], [sin] and [zAs].

## 5. Conclusion

In accordance with the theory of negative transfer of Chinese and dialects to English acquisition, students often transfer the pronunciation characteristics of dialects to English pronunciation, which affects the learning and application of English pronunciation. First of all, the pronunciation characteristics of Jianghuai dialect in Huai’an have been summarized. Then, taking the students of a junior high school in Huai’an as samples, the negative transfer effect of Jianghuai dialect on the phonological transfer of local students’ English has been studied.

Through a series of investigations and tests, some interesting conclusions have been found. 1) The pronunciation of initials and finals of Jianghuai dialect in Huai'an are unique. 2) Negative transfer effect of Jianghuai dialect in local students' English vowels pronunciation manifest in the following aspects: no distinction between long and short vowels, tightness and length are indistinguishable, incomplete pronunciation of English diphthongs. 3) Negative transfer effect of Jianghuai dialect in local students' English consonant pronunciation is obvious, including unable to distinguish between [n] and [l], lacking rhyme [v] and initial "r", no interdental fricatives [θ] [e].

The interference and impact of "negative phonetic transfer" on phonetics is one of the more prominent phenomena in language learning. As for the problems of speech barriers caused by dialects, teachers should start with the details and let students understand the difference between Chinese and English phonetic systems. It is because of this difference that some pronunciations in English do not exist in Chinese. At the same time, teachers in the Jianghuai area should take the right approach to the common mispronunciation of students in the region, and focus on the phoneme that are difficult for students to pronounce, instead of conducting general teaching. In the teaching process, teachers should detailly describe the pronunciation of the English target phoneme, show the similarities and differences between the English phoneme and the dialect pronunciation, and let students take more phonetic imitation and exercises, not only the simple sound imitation, but also the imitation of the mouth shape, the degree of mouth opening, the tongue pronunciation position, etc., to help them correct the mouth shape and pronunciation method they are used to. After systematic teaching and training, students' pronunciation will be less affected by the negative transfer of their native language, which can truly remove the dialect accent in spoken English.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.



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