

Acquisition of English Segmental Categories by Chinese EFL Learners:
Examining the Effects of Instructional Intervention

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Despite years of learning, many Chinese intermediate learners of English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) still face the challenge of reaching second language (L2) phonetic targets (Chen & Yang, 2010). Some phonetic categories seem to be more difficult than others (Cunningham, 2013). This paper reports on an experimental research which examined some frequently occurring phonetic/phonological errors in the English production by Chinese intermediate EFL learners. Attempts were made to identify the degree of difficulty and learnability of the phonetic/phonological units involved and the effectiveness of certain instructional intervention.

Sixty-five English-major sophomores in a university in China, who had learned English for 7-10 years were recruited for the study. A diagnostic reading aloud pretest adopted from Baker (2006) was administered to the participants prior to a new academic year. Evaluation of the test results by 5 evaluators (3 native English speakers and 2 Chinese teachers of English) revealed the following phonetic/phonological units as being especially problematic: 7 initial consonants (/b, l, n, p, r, v, w/), 10 vowels (as in pop, bat, bait, bet, beat, bit, bite, boy, cow, respectively), 4 onset clusters (/gr-, fr-, str-, br-/) and 3 final consonants (/s-, -t, -k/).

Then participants were randomly divided into 3 groups of 21 to 23 members, with Group 1 receiving 4 sessions of large-class pronunciation instruction, and Group 2 receiving 3 sessions of the same plus 7 sessions of small-class pronunciation tutoring (about 5 students in each of the small class). All the pronunciation instructions done over a period of four months from September to December were additional to regular English lessons of the period. Group 3, a control group, received no pronunciation instruction other than regular English lessons. All the instructional intervention was designed based on the identified pronunciation errors from the pretest, and the instruction was provided by the five evaluators.

A reading aloud post-test, the same used in the pre-test, was given at the end of the instructional intervention. The results showed that all the three groups demonstrated a significant progress from Time 1 to Time 2, with the average number of errors decreasing significantly ($p < 0.000$) for all groups (by 36% for Group 1, 43% for Group 2 and 35% for Group 3). Group 2 showed the greatest decrease in error count, while no significant difference is found between Group 1 and Group 3 in error count. The phonological units of the onset clusters, the vowels and the consonant finals all showed significant decrease ($p < 0.000$, 0.003, 0.045 respectively) in error count. The results also revealed an order of acquisition difficulties for the phonological units, from the easiest to the hardest—the onset clusters < the vowels < the final consonants < the initial

consonants. Based on the results, we conclude that intermediate learners' L2 pronunciation performance can be effectively improved with the right explicit instruction such as a combination of large-class instruction plus small-class tutorials. Markedness Differential Hypothesis and the Interlanguage Structure Conformity Hypotheses (Eckman, 1991) were also discussed based on these results.

References

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