

A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON CHINESE EFL LEARNERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS THEIR ACCENT

Wei Zhang^a & Lijuan Ding^b

^aSchool of Translation and Interpretation, Qufu Normal University, Rizhao, China;

^bKey Lab of China's National Linguistic Information Technology, Northwest University for Nationalities, Lanzhou, China

zwwinona@hotmail.com; dxp615@163.com

ABSTRACT

The paper evaluates Chinese EFL (English Foreign Language) learners' attitudinal responses toward Chinese accent. Questionnaires administered among 81 intermediate proficiency EFL learners who were from China and UK (70 of whom were university students, 11 of whom were university English teachers). Results show clearly that the respondents do not have significant negative attitude towards their own non-native accent--Chinese accent. When asked if people would respect them more if they pronounced English well, the majority agree. About forty percent of the respondents felt that pronunciation played an important role in their communication problems, and their pronunciation difficulties mainly are the suprasegmentals that generally have little effect on intelligibility.

Keywords: Chinese EFL learners, accent, attitude, English pronunciation

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that English is now the primary lingua franca, that is, 'the language used to communicate among speakers of different native languages throughout the world' [5]. Thus, English made up of many varieties, and it has different kinds of foreign accent. It believes that foreign accent influences speakers and listeners in perception and production, and it directly has serious influence on social interaction. Second language accent has long been a topic of research for a few decades, but just recently, it has focused on a systematic attempt to study the impact of second language accented speech on communication [7].

As we know, it is hard for adult language learners to attain native-like accent, but most of adult language learners still aim to achieve native-like. In fact, the majority of adult language learners have their own non-native accent when they speak

their second language. As a language teacher, we notice this point from our teaching practice. We find many students try to avoid their Chinese accent when they talk to their foreign teachers. Moreover, the English language teachers encourage students to imitate native-like speech in order to help them to sound like native speakers during their teaching practice. However, when people communicate with English native speakers or non-native English speakers in UK or USA, their Chinese accent English did not affect their communication. This phenomenon made us doubt our pronunciation teaching aim is correct or not, and have interest in language learners' attitude in order to find a better way for pronunciation teaching. To contribute more to our understanding of the essence of accent speech and the results it has on its speakers, we design the study that based on the China EFL context. EFL is term for the use or study of the English language by non-native speakers in countries where English is generally not a local medium of communication. The particular interests are their perceptions of their own pronunciation difficulties and the relationship between accent and attitude. We will discuss the Chinese EFL learners' perceptions according to intelligibility and pronunciation instruction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Broadly speaking, people hold a negative attitude toward accent speech whether second language accent or first language dialect, and most people who have accent experience a negative reaction to it. It is obvious that native listeners are extremely sensitive to nonnative speakers' speech. The previous studies have found that listeners tend to assess foreign accented speech more negatively than the 'standard' speech [6]. Brennan and Brennan [2] Nesdale and Rooney [11] later confirm these findings. Moreover, the negative judgments of accent speech are not only limited to

native speakers. Fayer and Krasinski [8] investigate Spanish non-native speakers' attitudes towards other accent speech. He has found that non-native speakers judged extremely severe than some of native English speakers. In addition, non-native speakers annoyed with the accent speakers.

There are only very few studies about the perception of non-native speakers of different varieties of English. For example, Forde [9] studies the attitudes of Chinese students who studied in primary school towards Hong Kong English as well as various native English accents. He has found that Standard American English (GA) and Standard British English (RP) accent were the preferred choice among all parameters. Chiba [3] investigates that the attitudes of Japanese university students towards different varieties of English. The results has showed that the students evaluated those accents positively which they recognized easily and with which they were familiar. In summary, American English and British English graded favorably. The acknowledgement of Japanese English is lower than expected and the attitude towards it is negative.

Although the increasing number of study on pronunciation and its effect on intelligibility, as well as the huge literature on the attitude towards second language accent, there are few studies on the language learners' perception. For example, Dalton-puffer, Kaltenboeck and Smit [4] show the advanced Austrian EFL learners demonstrates negative attitude towards their own non-native accent of English, and the preferred accent is mostly RP in their study. Derwing's [6] study demonstrates that ninety-five percent of her subjects strongly expressed that they want to have native-like accent. However, they also believe their foreign accent does not affect their communication and they recognized their identities in relation to their first language. In Jenkins' data [10], all her participants have ambivalence attitudes toward their own accent.

3. METHOD

This study required two groups of respondents; one consisted of Chinese English teachers, who work at one of a university, China. Some of them lived abroad not less than one year. All of them have five years English teaching experiences at least. Moreover, the other group consisted of Chinese students. These respondents commenced their

study of English after the age of 11. The second group divided into two subgroups: the first portion of student respondents were the final year students, because they are adults who can have their own opinion, and they have some experiences about foreign accent during their job interview when they apply for job now. Another portion of student participants was from Leeds, UK. They are postgraduate students in UK.

Due to differences of respondents, there were two sets of questionnaires: one for teacher; the other for student. In addition, this questionnaire combined with close-ended questions and open-ended questions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. General findings

The test population consisted of 81 respondents of English learners. All of them were first language speakers of Chinese. Their ages range between 20 and 40 years old. The male respondents outnumbered the female respondents. Moreover, there were 82.7 percent of the respondents are Chinese students.

In general, while above half (69.1%) of respondents reported that they do not mind people recognize their Chinese accent, Table 1 (below) shows the detail of the response to Chinese accent. However, the majority of respondents wanted to sound like native speakers. When they answered the following question, 'how would you feel if someone thought your accent was native speaker accent?', all of the respondents answered they felt (very) happy/excited, and they also said it meant they were successful in English language learning if people thought their accent sounds like native speaker. In addition, around 55.6 percent of respondents reported that they agree or strongly agree that English native speakers would respect them more if they pronounce English well. In other words, 'although they are reluctant to declare that there is discrimination against accented speech, they are clearly aware that there is a social component related to accent that affects their interaction with others' [6].

Table 1: Respondents' attitude to Chinese accent.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
yes	56	69.1	69.1	69.1
no	19	23.5	23.5	92.6
other	6	7.4	7.4	100.0
Total	81	100.0	100.0	

When asked whether it is great to pronounce English like native speaker, the respondents were nearly unanimous. An overwhelming 92.8 percent reported that they believe or strongly believe that it was important to pronounce English like native speaker. Moreover, they did not think they would be taking away from their identity with their own culture and language if they spoke like native speaker. For example, one of the respondents said, 'No, I am not afraid of that. My personal opinion is that since you're a Chinese, more or less, you would be in the possession of Chinese accent when speak English, even if I could speak like a native speaker, in blood, I'm still a Chinese, I don't lose any part of my identity. A saying goes "you can never change the spots of a leopard."' Thus, we can see the respondents did not think there was a close relationship between second language accent and identity in my data.

To establish whether the respondents perceived accent to be a problem or not, they were asked the following question: 'When you have problems communicating in English, it is more likely because of a grammar problem or a pronunciation problem or a vocabulary problem or all of them, or none of them?' Thirty-four respondents reported having experienced communication problems that they attributed to pronunciation. In addition, they were asked to identify what their problems were, they thought the main problem was in relation to the usage of suprasegmentals for communication in English, such as intonation, stress, elision, weak form and assimilation. It is clear that all suprasegmentals are equally learnable, but the type of instruction that the second language learners had received did not reflect actual intelligibility they may have encountered. Several studies have suggested that prosody has more important to comprehensibility than segments (Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson & Koehler, 1992; Derwing & Wiebe, 1998; Munro & Derwing, 1995) [6]. Although there are several pronunciation-teaching resources, which emphasize prosodic elements, it might be difficult to know where to begin for English teachers. If teachers are lack of a strong background in linguistics or pronunciation instruction, it will have more challenging to teach prosody in English than individual segments [6].

An examination of responses by gender indicated that there were no significant gender differences on the attitude to Chinese accent. The majority of male and female respondents felt that it was acceptance for their own English accent, but

they did not want to have Chinese accent when they communicated with English native-speaking people. When they talked to non-native English speakers, male respondents (47%) still did not mind their Chinese accent. On the contrary, female respondents (46.7%) said they did not like their Chinese accent. Thus, we can see women are more sensitive to language accent than men due to their different characteristics are, and women tend to conform more to standard forms of language than men do. Simply speaking, whether male or female, they do not want their first language to have negative influence on their second language learning, especially for language pronunciation.

Language environment is another important factor, which can influence language learners' attitude. If the second language learners have natural language environment, it might help them to master the second language easily as well as affect their language attitude. In the data, there were seventy subjects who lived in China, and eleven subjects who lived in UK. When we asked whether it is important to avoid Chinese accent when they communicate with English native speakers, around 71.4 percent of respondents who lived in China and around 54.6 percent of respondents who lived in UK reported that they believed it would be better not have Chinese accent when they talk to English native-speaking people. The data showed living environment did not dramatically affect the respondents' language attitude. When we asked whether it is important to avoid Chinese accent when they talk to non-English-native speaking people, more than half (57.1%) of the respondents who lived in China felt they were unhappy with their Chinese accent at that time. However, the majority (72.2%) who lived in UK thought it is acceptance to have Chinese accent when they communicate with non-native English speakers. It reflects the respondents who lived in UK live in real language survival environment, but the respondents who lived in China do not have this kind of environment because most of time they only have hypothesized language learning environment.

4.2. Identity and accent

The respondents in this study did not demonstrate an interest in retaining an accent as an indicator of identity. When asked whether they thought their identities would be at risk if they could speak English without an accent, all of them replied that

they had nothing to lose. The respondents in this study use their first language with their families and within their own ethnic communities. Undoubtedly, accent and identity are related issues. Thus, the language-using context should take into consideration. The respondents are EFL learners and the majority of respondents in this study live in China, that is to say, the language-using context here is 'a foreign language setting where language learners share competence in the same first language' [6]. Moreover, the respondents are adult language learners; they start to learn English after the critical period. Thus, second language accent is commonplace in this language context, and people may not feel 'marked'.

4.3. Implication

Interestingly, slightly over half of the student respondents felt that they do not mind their Chinese accent, but they still want to pronounce like English native speaker. Furthermore, all the teacher respondents reveal ambivalence attitudes toward Chinese accent: they think it is acceptance to retain their Chinese accent, but they are not happy with their students' Chinese accent. In fact, according to their teaching experience, they know it is hard for students to attain English native-like accent because of the absence of a suitable linguistic environment and the critical period theory. They also know that very few of students are learning English to go to an English-speaking country or even to work primarily with native speakers. The vast majority will use English to communicate with other non-native speakers. We should also consider another situation, that is, China appeals many foreign people to work and live. Thus, English becomes a communicating language among Chinese and foreign people who includes not only English native speakers but English non-native speakers. It means that Chinese EFL learners have more opportunity to be familiar with different varieties of English.

The findings of this study have implications for English pronunciation teaching. The first one is language teachers should help students to master not only American English or British English but also other English varieties, such as Indian English, Singapore English. The second is it would be better to improve the students' intelligibility by teaching them pronunciation and communication strategies are not only focus on single words or sounds. In addition, language teachers should

realize the importance for teaching suprasegmentals in language teaching. The last but not the least, the current pronunciation teaching course books which used in Chinese universities need to do some improvement, such as, adding more to the portion of prosodic factors, to offer different English varieties.

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