

A Review of Studies on English Pronunciation Learning Status of Sichuan Dialect Speakers

Jingsi Tan^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Foreign Languages, Hubei Minzu University, Enshi, Hubei, 445000, China*
a. tanjingsi2021@hbmzu.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper reviews the English pronunciation learning status of Sichuan dialect speakers, including Sichuan dialect speakers' English pronunciation problems and the English pronunciation teaching methods in the Sichuan dialect area. By analyzing the characteristics of their pronunciation problems and current teaching methods taken by educators in Sichuan, the author tries to find out the appropriate way to teach Sichuan dialect speakers English phonemes, which is aimed at improving their English pronunciation. There are three main kinds of pronunciation problems in this research: vowels (to have no contrast in long and short vowels, produce some vowels incorrectly as well), consonants (to replace some consonants with other sounds, have no awareness of nasal and lateral, and pronounce some sounds wrongly), and word stress (to ignore and misread the word stress). The author analyzed the cases of these problems and causes and discussed the teaching methods taken by teachers in the Sichuan dialect area. The author also indicates some problems when educators use these methods, like teachers in kindergarten who intend to teach kids knowledge instead of inspiring their interests. In China, most students study Standard Mandarin as their Second Language. When teachers teach students English, they can take advantage of the positive transfer of L2 to help them acquire L3 pronunciation. Hence, how to design the English pronunciation teaching methods based on the Sichuan dialect speakers' special situation and improve learning efficiency is very important.

Keywords: English, Sichuan Dialect, Pronunciation, Problems, Teaching

1. Introduction

In China, most citizens speak Chinese. Chinese, which is a group of language varieties, is a member of the Sino-Tibetan family [1]. Standard Mandarin is the official language in China, almost every school in China teaches and uses Standard Mandarin to study or work. Actually, not all school children and adult students in China are First Language (L1) speakers of Standard Mandarin [2]. Most people speak various dialects as their mother tongue. Even in different parts, there are individual and regional differences in accents. In China, there are numerous types of dialects. Based on different regulations, linguists have different classifications as well. Among these studies, the most authoritative and widely accepted scheme is that Chinese dialects have ten groups: Jin dialect, Xiang dialect, Hui dialect, Hakka, Min dialect, Gan dialect, Wu dialect, Cantonese, Pinghua and Mandarin. Sichuan dialect, also called Southwestern Mandarin, is a branch of Mandarin. Sichuan dialect is used in almost nine provinces, including Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Chongqing, Hubei, Hunan, Guangxi,

Shaanxi and Jiangxi, with a large population of about 270 million people [3]. Almost 20% of the Chinese people speak Sichuan dialect as their mother tongue. In China, most students choose to learn English as their foreign language in school education. Most of the time, the degree of linguistic difference leads to bilingual conflict. That means the closer the target language and mother tongue are, the easier to learn the target language. When it comes to Sichuan dialect and English, their sound systems differ greatly in many aspects [4]. So it's quite necessary to find the effect of Sichuan people's L1 on English pronunciation learning and adjust teaching methods to help Sichuan dialect speakers improve English pronunciation learning. This research will review the Sichuan dialect speakers' English pronunciation problems and the teaching methods in the Sichuan dialect area, giving suggestions as well.

2. Sichuan Dialect Speakers' English Pronunciation Problems

Based on the differences and characteristics of the Sichuan dialect, when its users speak English, they will be influenced by the special effect of their first language. In fact, language has individual and regional differences. When experts do research, these factors can cause errors. However, here the author analyzed the most specific, authoritative and widely accepted issues. The problems they are faced with are general three kinds: vowels, consonants and word stress.

2.1. Vowels

2.1.1. Long and Short Vowels

An experiment and a questionnaire showed that over 65% of Sichuan dialect speakers cannot find the difference between long vowels and short vowels [5]. Actually, the skills of distinguishing these two kinds of vowels relied on the auditory sense, which is different from the concept of the correct position of vocal organs. This means when telling the difference of sounds, the listening ability is also crucial. So the first step to deal with this problem is to train learners' listening skills to tell the differences between long and short vowels.

2.1.2. Wrong Pronunciation of Some Vowels

According to a research, Sichuan dialect speakers have difficulty producing /e/ and /oi/, and more than 50% of the participants pronounced wrongly these two phonemes [6]. About 25% of vowels /a:/ and /ei/ were produced incorrectly by subjects, and the error rates of /ɔ/, /əu/, and /au/ are all about 18.0% [6]. That is to say, the main problems lie on /e/ and /oi/. When Sichuan dialect speakers are learning English, these two phonemes they should pay more attention to them and spend more time practicing.

2.2. Consonants

2.2.1. Ambiguity of /n/ and /ŋ/

Because there is no Yunmu with back nasal like ing, eng, or ong in the Sichuan dialect, Sichuan dialect speakers cannot differ /n/ from /ŋ/. Some research found this problem. Based on an experiment, about 55% of subjects used /n/ to replace /ŋ/, and almost 30% of subjects had no idea about distinguishing these two phonemes [5]. Sichuan dialect speakers cannot make them or have no awareness. They also have trouble in English listening [7]. Therefore, they often replace /ŋ/ with /n/ or mix up these two sounds.

2.2.2./n/ and /l/ Pronunciation

Sichuan dialect has no contrast between /n/ and /l/. A result showed that this only happened in syllable-initial /n/, the same phenomenon didn't occur in the syllable-final position [8]. However, a research held the view that there is a /l/ and /n/ merger in acoustic and transcription results [9]. While an experiment emphasized the /n/ and /l/ pronunciation deviations in the Sichuan dialect speakers [10]. Sichuan dialect speakers tend to produce only /n/ or /l/ instead of two distinct sounds, and their merging of /n/ and /l/ was confirmed. Sichuan dialect speakers have significant difficulties with nasal and lateral sounds, especially the latter [10]. In the research of the English pronunciation problems of Sichuan dialect speakers, this problem is the dominant one, which takes a large part in this aspect.

2.2.3.Replacing / θ / / ð/and /v/ with /s/ /z/and /w/

In Sichuan dialect, there are no two phonemes - / θ / and /ð/, thus it's easier for Sichuan dialect speakers to make errors when speaking English. Over half of Sichuan dialect speakers can't properly produce these two sounds. They prefer to use /s/ and /z/ to replace the former ones [5]. This can cause misunderstandings when speakers are using English to talk. /w/ is bilabial and glide, while /v/ is labiodental and fricative, but there is no labiodental in the Sichuan dialect [11]. A research showed that around 53% of subjects use /w/to replace /v/ [5]. For example, when they read the word "very", they can change /veri/ to /weri/, so it's common for Sichuan dialect speakers to replace /v/ with /w/.

2.2.4.Wrong Pronunciation of /ʃ/ and /ʒ/

There are no /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ sounds in the Sichuan dialect. A scholar did an investigation and found that Sichuan students thought that /x/ is quite similar to /ʃ/ in English, many of them had no idea about the pronunciation of /ʒ/ and their performances were of diversity as well [5]. When they read the word "sheep", they usually use /xi:p/ to replace /ʃi:p/. The pronunciation sounds strange if they replace this phoneme. This can cause misunderstandings when Sichuan dialect speakers are trying to talk with people in English.

2.3. Word Stress

According to Gimson, the accentual pattern of the English language is fixed but free [12]. Therefore, the learners cannot master it easily. This is a reason why English learners have problem learning accentual patterns. For Sichuan dialect speakers, they have more special obstacles.

Some research found that Sichuan dialect speakers don't only have difficulty producing the English phonemes, but also have problems with word stress. For example, they misread word stress, and ignore the differences of vowels in syllables that non-stressed and stressed [13]. This is because the word stress pattern of the Sichuan dialect is much easier than English [14]. So Sichuan dialect speakers won't notice more word stress in English. For Sichuan dialect speakers, it's quite easy to use word stress in their mother tongue. Thus, speakers will be disturbed by the rules of speaking their mother tongue. If they pay more attention to the comparison, they will tell the difference.

3. English Pronunciation Teaching Methods in Sichuan Dialect Areas

In China, most English learning activities happen in school education. Sichuan dialect speakers' English pronunciation problems showed in their conventional classes. In the teaching process, teachers tried some measures to deal with these problems. In researches of teaching methods taken in Sichuan dialect areas, there are few of them that focus on the periods of compulsory education and senior high school. This is caused by special education status in China, students in those periods have

no more time to spend on pronunciation. Therefore, most scholars paid much more attention to preschool kids and college students. They analyzed the learners' characteristics and tested some measures.

3.1. Pre-school Education

3.1.1. Students

According to Lenneberg's well-known theory of a period when kids can acquire language easier than during other periods, the nervous system being mature influences the first language learning capacity. Kids cannot acquire a language unless their neural mechanism relevant to language acquisition is activated before eighteen months. Thus, the preschool period is the most crucial time of language learning, during which children have the best conditions.

For the Sichuan dialect speakers, some of them start to learn English in kindergarten in this period. If teachers take proper measures to lead them to learn English phonemes based on the characteristics of Sichuan dialect speakers' English pronunciation problems, their English pronunciation will be more accurate.

3.1.2. Teachers

Some scholars did a research on status of oral English learning in a kindergarten in Chongqing [15]. Teachers in the Sichuan dialect area have the awareness of teaching basic pronunciation to children, but over half of educators tend to let kids learn English theory instead of cultivating their interests. The dominant part of learning activities is to ensure that children master a certain number of words, sentences and basic usage (see Table 1).

Table 1: Teachers' Cognition of the Objectives of Kindergarten English Education Activities [15]

Objective Type	Proportion
Learn basic pronunciation	62.71%
Cultivate children's initial listening and speaking skills	71.19%
Guide preschool children to master a certain number of English words, sentences and basic usage	84.75%
Cultivate children's interest in learning English	44.07%
Prepare for transition from kindergarten to primary school	50%

These teachers tried to catch the critical period to lead kids to learn language and teach young learners basic English pronunciation. But without any interesting elements, kids lose motivation to acquire a new language in a boring context, their study won't be significantly effective.

3.2. Tertiary Education

3.2.1. Students

In Chinese tertiary education system, English teaching is not just based on some foundational skills. In this period, it needs students to use English language as a tool to learn other knowledge.

However, a large amount of college students' English is not so good as expected. In fact, most students lack knowledge of phonetics, and their English pronunciation has lots of problems, especially the Sichuan dialect speakers [16]. Most of these problems don't lead to individual aspects, but come from the special influence of their mother tongue. Because of unique pronunciation problems, some

freshman students are so anxious and awkward that they dare not speak English in public places, lose interest in acquiring English, and even escape from English classes.

3.2.2. Teachers

Because Sichuan dialect speakers have totally different habits of pronunciation, their teachers design some new teaching methods to help them to correct their English pronunciation. Teachers can use differentiation teaching method, which comes from Perceptual Assimilation Model [17]. For example, they can design some activities to deal with pronunciation problems that Sichuan dialect speakers have [18]. Here are some examples (see Table 2).

Table 2: Some Activities Taken by Teachers in the Sichuan Dialect Area

Activities	Examples
Contrast Training	sin-sing win-wing thin-thing sheep-ship heat-hit leave-live met-mat set-sat said-sad net-let name-lame nook-look
Tongue Twister	①There is no need to light a night light on a light night like tonight, for a bright night light is just like a slight light. ②I thought a thought. But the thought I thought wasn't the thought I thought I thought. If the thought I thought I thought had been the thought I thought, I wouldn't have thought so much. ③She sells sea shells by the seashore. The shells she sells are surely seashells. So if she sells shells on the seashore. I'm sure she sells seashore shells.

In this research, it divided students into A and B two groups (A used the differentiation teaching method, and B used the traditional method), and the result showed that A group's learning was better than B's performance [18]. The differentiation teaching method works very well. But, it is not the most efficient way to do that. Otherwise, there are still other teaching methods taken by some teachers in Sichuan dialect areas, like leading students to read poems, singing English songs and imitating newscasts and film dubbing to help students correct English pronunciation. These devices cannot only help Sichuan dialect speakers correct the sounds they produced, but also let them have fun in the English learning process.

4. Conclusion

In this review, the author analyzed the Sichuan dialect speakers' English pronunciation problems and the current teaching methods carried by educators in these areas. After reviewing the problem part, it can be found that Sichuan dialect speakers have obvious difficulty on producing right English phonemes. This is because in the Sichuan dialect, the position of the tongue and teeth don't change very often. So Sichuan dialect speakers have no awareness when they are speaking English, and the negative transfer can cause troubles when Sichuan dialect speakers try to pronounce English phonemes. Even though their teachers take a few types of methods to help them, the efficiency is still uncertain. In the preschool period, whether children can learn well relies on raising their interest in learning a new language, or else their studies won't be efficient, though teachers have awareness of teaching them and redressing their performance. In a university or a college, students learn English because of certain reasons. At that time, teachers have no need to focus on raising their interests.

Instead, to find out the best way to revise their pronunciation is the most important. The contrast training works very well on them, but it is not the most useful device. Based on the English education status in China, most students learn Standard Mandarin in school education, when they start to learn it, they will learn some new sounds that don't occur in the Sichuan dialect. Some of these sounds can help them to tell or produce a few sounds when learning English. That is to say, teachers can use the positive transfer of Standard Mandarin to help students learn English pronunciation. Therefore, teachers should find more appropriate ways or activities to use the positive transfer of Second Language (L2) to help students distinguish and practice Third Language (L3) pronunciation in future learning.

References

- [1] Huang, H., Grieve, J., Jiao, L., & Cai, Z. (2024). Geographic structure of Chinese dialects: a computational dialectometric approach. *Linguistics*, (0).
- [2] Francis, N. (2016). Language and dialect in China. *Chinese Language and Discourse. An International and Interdisciplinary Journal*, 7(1), 136-149.
- [3] Li, L. (2009). Southwest mandarin division (draft). *Dialect* (01), 72-87.
- [4] Ma, C., & Tan, L. (2013). Comparison on the Sound Systems between Sichuan Dialect and English (Part One). *Creative Education*, 4(7), 461-464.
- [5] Qin, Q. (2014). A Probe into the Negative Impact of Sichuan Dialect on English Phonetics Learning and Countermeasures. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 9(2), 16.
- [6] Jin, J., & Liu, D. (2021, December). Negative Transfer of Sichuan Dialect in English Vowel Acquisition. In *2021 International Conference on Asian Language Processing (IALP)* (pp. 247-251). IEEE.
- [7] Zhou, L. (2012). College English phonetic teaching method and classroom design in Chongqing dialect area. *Journal of Chongqing University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition)* (23), 192-194.
- [8] Zhang, W. (2007). Alternation of [n] and [l] in Sichuan dialect, Standard Mandarin and English: A single-case study. *Leeds Working in Linguistics and Phonetics*, 12, 156-173.
- [9] Huang, J., Shibata, K., Hsieh, F. F., Chang, Y. C., & Tiede, M. (2023). The L~N merger in Sichuan dialect: An articulatory study. In *20th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences, Prague*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370352942_The_LN_merger_in_Southwestern_Mandarin_An_articulatory_study.
- [10] Zhang, W., & Levis, J. M. (2021). The Sichuan dialect/n/-/l/merger: effects on production in standard mandarin and english. *Frontiers in Communication*, 6, 639390.
- [11] Yuan, C. (2023). On the Transfer Effect of Sichuan Dialect to the Learning of English Pronunciation. *The Educational Review, USA*, 7(3), 329-332.
- [12] Gimson, A. C. (1962). *An introduction to the pronunciation of English*. Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd..
- [13] Ma, C., & Tan, L. (2013). The Negative Transfer of Sichuan Dialect to the Study of English Pronunciation. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(1), 1-4.
- [14] Ma, C., & Tan, L. (2015). Comparison on the word stress patterns and functions between English and Sichuan dialect. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(10), 33-39.
- [15] Liu, J., & Yang, X. (2020, June). Research on Problems and Countermeasures of English Education Activities in Kindergartens--A case of kindergarten A in Dazu District of Chongqing. In *2020 International Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Education (ICAIE)* (pp. 347-351). IEEE.
- [16] Ma, C., & Tan, L. (2013). Analysis on Sichuan College Students' Segmental Phoneme Errors. *Creative Education*, 4(6), 415-417.
- [17] Best, C. T., McRoberts, G. W., LaFleur, R., & Silver-Isenstadt, J. (1995). Divergent developmental patterns for infants' perception of two nonnative consonant contrasts. *Infant behavior and development*, 18(3), 339-350.
- [18] Yang, L. (2023). Research on English speech differentiation teaching mode based on speech perceptual assimilation mode — Take the southwest mandarin square pronunciation area as an example. (eds.) *Foreign Language Education and Translation Development Innovation Research* (14) (pp.145-151). Chongqing Normal University.