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Impact of '/r/' in the Accented English of Chinese Learners in Childhood

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Abstract: With the development of globalization, the gap between urban and rural areas in terms of the level of economic development has increased, and accordingly, resources are tilting more and more towards the cities, and more and more people are finding that there is an imbalance between urban and rural development. In the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) acquisition in China, this research is aimed to explore the phonetic nuances of the /r/ sound in English pronunciation of Chinese children at the elementary level, specifically focusing on urban and rural distinctions because of its representativity in phonetic. This research uses graphs and charts for visual analysis to comparatively study the English pronunciation skills of children in the lower grades of urban and rural elementary school and analyze potential causes, finding out that Chinese English learners' accent in childhood undergoes differences between urban and rural area.

Keywords: Rhoticity, Accented English, Chinese English

1. Introduction

Phonetically, the /r/ sound is an element that has received much attention in English accents. Sounding like a native speaker's /r/ sound is a form of cultural capital. Presently, English is the most widely spoken language in the world because of globalization. However, there are significant differences in the acquisition of English accents in different regions of China, especially in urban and rural areas. Teaching of speech/pronunciation is neglected due to the myths, such as: Pronunciation is not important. But in fact, there is a shortage of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in many districts, and Local educational agencies (LEAs) are not equipped to meet the markers of student demand for phonics/pronunciation instruction. The research of phonetics has attracted the attention of domestic scholars for a long time, but there are few studies on different accents of rhotics in Chinese children's English acquiring. This research aims to find out whether or not Chinese English learners' accent in childhood undergoes differences in the urban and rural area.

The rhotic part of English pronunciation practiced by children in the Foundation Stage of elementary school (Grade 1-3) is researched in this study. Information is collected from web videos, including children in rural and urban China. Then, the position of /r/ pronunciation words is categorized. The respondent's speech pronunciation of /r/ determines whether it is rhotic or non-rhotic. The test items are one or two-syllable English words with the elementary language level for English learners in non-native English-speaking countries. Several tables were created to visualize the data obtained, processed and analyzed. This study has practical implications for the teaching of English in

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the Foundation Stage of elementary schools. It also reminds researchers of the cultural capital differences brought about by the urban-rural development gap.

2. Theory-Based Speech Experiments

2.1. Theoretical Explanation

2.1.1. Accented English

The distinctive pronunciation of non-native English speakers is probably the most noticeable among the different aspects of English language variants when this research discusses English speech acquisition, and accent is the term that needs to be clarified when talking about these differences: Accent is the pattern of pronunciation used by a speaker or, more generally, by the community or social group to which he or she belongs. Accents are an important dimension of social identity, both individual and communal, due to their ability to identify group or community belonging [1]. Every speaker has his/her own unique accent. Not only do people have accents when speaking their native language, but when speaking a foreign language, they are influenced by their own factors. In the case of English as a Second Foreign Language acquirers, for example, for English speakers whose native language is different, these patterns produce a foreign language accent that showcases many features of their native language, such as social status, gender, age, and level of education. It is worth mentioning that the accents of individuals who are not native speakers may be influenced by the characteristics of their native language, as each language has its own unique set of sounds. However, neurological constraints associated with brain development appear to limit most non-native speakers' ability to sound native-like [2].

2.1.2. Rhoticity

In phonetics, rhotic consonants are liquid consonants divided into rhotic and non-rhotic accents. The pronunciation of the "r" sound in different positions determines whether a speaker has a rhotic or non-rhotic accent. Rhotic accents, also known as r-full accents, involve the pronunciation of /r/ in all possible positions within words, including initial, pre-vocalic, intervocalic, final, and pre-consonantal positions. In rhotic accents, the set of vowels preceding the /r/ sound is generally the same as those occurring before other consonants or at the end of words. On the other hand, non-rhotic accents pronounce the /r/ sound only in pre-vocalic positions, especially in initial and intervocalic positions in words. In non-rhotic accents, the /r/ sound is omitted in post-vocalic positions, including pre-final stops and non-final positions in words. Unlike rhotic accents, non-rhotic accents demonstrate the phonological difference in vowels before /r/ compared to vowels before other consonants or at the end of words.

2.1.3. Difficulties in Pronunciation

The acquisition of pronunciation and distribution of the consonant /r/ in English for Chinese learners is difficult due to several characteristics: difficulties in reaching the closeness and the complexity of distribution peculiarity. For foreign learners, /r/ has a recommended standard pronunciation, phonetically named the posterior alveolar approximant. Proximal consonants can be challenging to characterize, specifically, proximal consonants are those in which the organs of articulation are close to each other, but not as close as is required for "full" consonants (such as plosives, nasals, or fricatives), which is difficult for English language learners who do not have any proximal consonants in Chinese. In addition, the unique distribution rule for /r/ in the BBC accent is that it only appears

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before vowels. Foreign learners often assume that if there is an "r" in the spelling, this is the sound that should be pronounced, which results in confusion for them.

2.2. Experimental Design for Accent Testing

2.2.1. Testing Preparation

It is widely acknowledged that the pronunciation of English is worldwide categorized into two main accent groups, namely rhotic and non-rhotic. Foreign learners from China and Japan, as well as those who have Received Pronunciation (RP) as their model, tend to be non-rhotic [3]. With globalization, more and more urban Chinese children speak English with a native American accent, which is regarded as a sort of cultural privilege. Whereas children who grow up in rural areas do not experience rich educational resources and are more likely to speak accented English.

In order to investigate the issue of differences in English accents between Chinese students from rural and urban areas in the lower elementary grades, this research conducted a controlled experiment on the /r/ sound accent of the respondents in the video. with a total of two subjects, both of whom were students at the lower elementary school level, one from an elite family in Shanghai and the other from a farm. Both videos contain the sound /r/, which test items focus on the occurrence of the rhotic in different positions. The average length of the video of the recordings was 1:26, the shortest being 1:11 and the longest 1:46.

During careful and repeated listening to the individual recordings, each word with the /r/ sound was marked according to its degree of warbling (Table 1). In most cases, the distribution with or without the rhotic is clearly distinguishable. In some cases, however, the rhotic is unclear and more difficult to recognize, because it can't be distinguished by the presence of the rhotic. These cases are eventually referred to as weak pronunciations of /r/. Depending on the case, the following markers are used in Table 1.

Table 1: Classification of the use of rhotic

√	Fully pronounced
----	Weak pronounced
×	Not pronounced

2.2.2. Result

For the purpose of the spelling test, following vocabulary of different levels of difficulty was prepared for this paper, as shown in Table 2. By comparing the pronunciation of students in urban and rural areas, this thesis draws the following relevant results.

Table 2: Word list

difficult	carnivores	herbivores	Jurassic	triceratops	reptiles	carnivores
middle	different	fierce	America	largest	dinosaurs	material
easy	earth	ever	rock	from	grass	meters

As shown in Figure 1, the most rhotic are well pronounced by the urban participant. A significant portion of the fully pronounced /r/ is allocated to research. The difficult words, such as reptiles, carnivores and herbivores belong to fully pronounced /r/.

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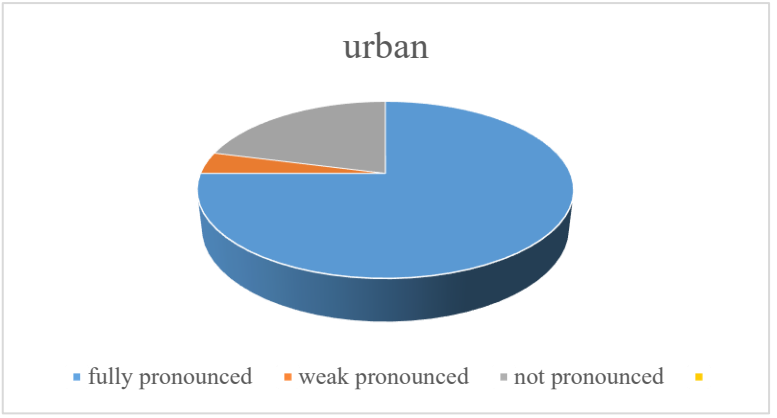

Figure 1: Distribution of /r/ in the speech of the participant from the urban area

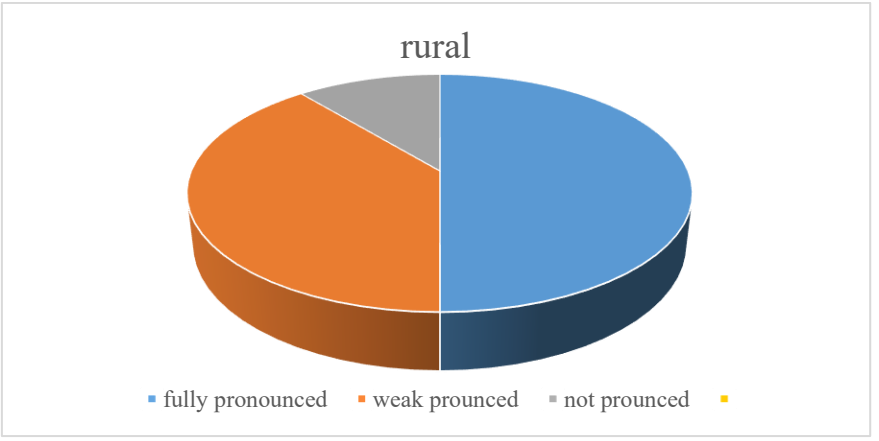

Figure 2: Distribution of /r/ in the speech of the participant from the rural area

Figure 2 suggests that the three modes of pronunciation of /r/ are more evenly distributed among the participants from rural areas.

2.2.3. Discussion

The hypothesis was proposed before the research was carried out, that Chinese English learners' accent in childhood undergoes differences in urban and rural area. The urban kid's accent, though, proved to be almost fully rhotic with only a few instances of non-rhoticity. Her spoken English is consistent with American English pronunciation, and it can be assumed that she was exposed to a wide range of international educational resources in Shanghai and practiced her pronunciation diligently in order to learn fluent American-accented English as a second-language acquirer. Meanwhile, the rural tester, coming from a farm, whose English teacher is an iPad and a tape recorder, and he's shadowing a US material. And most rural children speak English with a Chinese accent because they lack English learning resources. Their /r/ sound is between rhotic and non-rhotic, and they do not systematically develop a pronunciation pattern that conforms to the American or BBC accent, probably because they do not have the opportunity to receive systematic training in spoken English, and they do not learn about pronunciation in regular classes, and they learn "mute English". A typical teenager's Southeast Asian English would be rhotic, mainly from the prominent influence of American English [4]. There are even areas where students are only exposed to English from secondary school because of the lack of highly qualified English teachers in the area. Hence, it is important to promote equity in education resources. One potential reason is that teachers are

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underpaid. Teachers must be willing to teach it because pronunciation is related to the meaning of the words and how to pronounce them clearly and correctly [5].

3. Conclusion

The theme of this thesis is to discover the degree of urban-rural differences in the pronunciation of r sounds in the pronunciation of English learners at the primary elementary level in China. For this purpose, a web-based study was conducted and non-linguistic factors that may play a role were explored. After carefully listening to the recordings, English learners at the primary elementary in an urban area's pronunciation was shown to be fully rhotic. The /r/ pronunciation results agree well with the standard American accent, whereas the rural counterpart does not systematically develop a pronunciation pattern and the pronunciation of rhotic shows the characteristics of Chinese English. It is important to take into account that the research in this thesis focused on the pronunciation problems of young English language learners at the primary elementary level in China. It is hoped that more valid samples can be collected.

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