Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Social Psychology and Humanity Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.20380

Negative Transfer of Changzhou Dialect to English Phonetic Acquisition of Primary School Students and Its Teaching Implications

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Abstract: With China's ongoing opening up and steady progress in internationalization, English, as an international common language, has become a bridge for everyone to communicate across cultures with the world. However, many Chinese learners focus more on reading and writing skills while neglecting speaking proficiency. Speaking, as the most basic pattern of communication, plays a vital role in English second language acquisition. China is a vast country with many dialects. However, there is limited research on how the Changzhou dialect influences phonetic transfer in second language acquisition. Therefore, this paper focuses on Changzhou dialect to explore its negative transfer effect on primary school students' English phonetics acquisition and the corresponding teaching implications. This paper analyzes the negative transfer effect based on former research, online resources, and teaching and learning experiences. In addition, it examines the extent of the negative transfer of Changzhou dialect on English phonetics acquisition through questionnaire survey. Research has shown that the Changzhou dialect exerts a negative transfer effect on the English phonetic acquisition of primary school students. The primary causes of students' pronunciation errors are phoneme substitution, phoneme incompleteness and the inability to distinguish between long and short sounds. Improving students' English accents requires joint efforts from schools, teachers, and students.

Keywords: Changzhou dialect, English, vowel system, language transfer theory.

1. Introduction

As a city in Jiangsu, a major educational province, and adjacent to the international metropolis of Shanghai, Changzhou attaches great importance to English education. Moreover, as a branch of Wu language, the study of Changzhou dialect holds representative significance.

American linguist Lado first proposed the phenomenon of language transfer, which means that when learners learn a second language, they are influenced by the structure, vocabulary, pronunciation and other aspects of their native language, thus producing positive or negative transfer effects in the learning and use of the second language [1]. This paper focuses on the negative transfer effect of the Changzhou dialect on English phonetic acquisition.

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To minimize the influence of native language transfer effects, which tend to weaken over time with increased exposure to the second language, and to exclude the impact of the negative transfer effect of the mother tongue that will weaken with the learning time, this paper focuses on primary school students as the research subjects. The research questions are as follows: Firstly, does Changzhou dialect have a negative transfer effect on English phonetics acquisition? Secondly, if so, how does the negative transfer effect work? Last, what implications does the negative transfer effect have for primary school English phonetics education?

This paper uses two research methods including qualitative research and contrastive analysis. It investigates the negative transfer effect of Changzhou dialect through interviews and questionnaires, and analyzes the errors or difficulties in English pronunciation by primary school students whose native language is Changzhou dialect. This paper provides theoretical guidance for primary school oral English teaching.

2. Introduction of Changzhou Dialect

2.1. Overview of Changzhou Dialect

Changzhou is located in the economically developed Yangtze River Delta region, in the northwest of Wu dialect (the most marginal area in the north of Wu dialect), commonly known as the "Su-Xi-Chang" zone. Changzhou dialect belongs to the Wu dialect group [2]. However, the Changzhou dialect differs significantly from Mandarin, particularly when compared to the Suzhou, Nanjing, and Shanghai dialects. It has unique phonetic characteristics that can not be easily understood by other native speakers of Mandarin. Therefore, before exploring the negative transfer effect of Changzhou dialect on English pronunciation, it is necessary to first examine the differences in its phonetic features from Mandarin. Changzhou dialect contains 29 initials, 42 finals and 7 tones, while Mandarin contains 22 initials, 39 finals and 4 tones [3].

2.2. The difference of phonetic features between Changzhou dialect and Mandarin Initial Distinction

In Changzhou dialect, the pre-tip sound [ts] [ts’] [s] is confused with the post-tip sound [tʂ] [tʂʰ] [ʂ], the apical midpoint [l] is confused with the apical postpoint [ɹ] [3]. This is what's known as "no discernible tongue." The initial consonants of the tongue tip in Changzhou dialect tend to be in the front position when they are pronounced, which leads to the habit of the tongue tip being in the front position when Changzhou people speak. For example, when pronouncing [ɹɑn], Changzhou people may not roll their tongue and pronounce it as [lɑn].

(1) Final Distinction

Changzhou people confuse the finals of [n] and [ŋ] in Mandarin pronunciation. For example, when saying the word “yingyu”, Changzhou people may pronounce [ŋ] as [n]. Besides, there is no final [uei]in the Changzhou dialect's final system. When saying the word “hui”, Changzhou people may pronounce [wuɑi] instead of [huei].

3. Negative transfer effects of Changzhou dialect

3.1. Vowel Quality

(1) The finals in Changzhou dialect do not make a detailed distinction in the degree of mouth opening when pronouncing them, which results in Changzhou students being unable to distinguish the degree of mouth opening required for different vowel pronunciations in the English vowel system. For instance, Changzhou students cannot tell the differences between [æ] and [e]. About 34% of

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Changzhou primary school students pronounce “apple” as /ˈ ep(ə)l/ instead of /ˈæp(ə)l/. About 45% of the students pronounce “bed” as /bæd/ instead of /bed/. In addition, Changzhou students may also confuse the pronunciation of [æ] and [ʌ]. About 14% of the students cannot distinguish the pronunciation of “cap” and “cup”.

(2) Although some Changzhou dialect finals have similarities with some English vowels, there are still subtle differences in their pronunciation tongue positions. Many Changzhou students tend to transfer the pronunciation habits of their native language finals to English vowels. For example, the English vowel [i] is pronounced with a lower tongue position than the Chinese pinyin "i". About 67% of Changzhou students pronounce the word “if” incorrectly.

(3) The lip shapes of some English vowels are also different from the finals in Changzhou dialect, although they are somewhat similar. The lip shape of Changzhou students when pronouncing English vowels is also affected by the finals of their native language. Affected by the final “u”, Changzhou students do not relax their lips enough when pronouncing [u], making it sound more like [w].

(4) The negative transfer effect of Changzhou dialect finals on English phonetics acquisition also makes it difficult for Changzhou students to pronounce diphthongs. They often substitute diphthongs with similar-sounding words in Chinese, overlooking the subtle differences between the two. For example, when pronouncing [əu], Changzhou students may replace it with the pronunciation of the Chinese character "ou." The “ou” sound is pronounced with a lower tongue position and more constricted lips.

3.2. Consonant Quality

(1) Many initial consonants in Mandarin do not exist in the Changzhou dialect phonetic system, or the Changzhou dialect conflates two similar initial consonants. For instance, Changzhou dialect is unable to distinguish the pronunciation of the Chinese characters "wang" and "huang", "wu" and "hu"[4]. As a result, some Changzhou students to be more affected by negative transfer from their mother tongue in consonant pronunciation than Mandarin speakers.

1) Mispronounce [v] as [w]

Changzhou students might mispronounce “very” as /weri/ instead of /veri/, “five” as /faɪw/.

2) Mispronounce [r] as [l]

Compared with Mandarin, Changzhou dialect lacks the initial consonant “r” [2], which causes students to look for similar initial consonants [l] in their native language to replace the consonant [r] when they encounter it in English pronunciation. For example, Changzhou students may pronounce “room” as /luːm/ instead of /ruːm/.

3) Mispronounce [ŋ] as [n]

Like most students in Wu dialect areas, Changzhou students cannot distinguish between the front and back nasal sounds [ŋ] and [n], and pronounce [ŋ] as [n]. They might mispronounce “English” as /ˈɪnglɪʃ/ instead of /ˈɪŋglɪʃ/.

4) Mispronounce [h] as [w]

In Changzhou dialect, the Chinese characters "wang" and "huang" are both pronounced as "wang", so students may confuse [w] and [h], and mispronounce [h] as [w]. For example, they might pronounce “hood” as “wood”.

(2) Some English consonant phonemes do not exist in Changzhou dialect or Mandarin, which makes it difficult for students to pronounce these sounds, so they look for similar sounds in their native language to replace them.

1) Difference between the initial consonant "r" and the consonant [r]

Since both phonemes are represented by the letter "r" in both languages, many students mistakenly think that the two are pronounced the same. In fact, there is a big difference in the lip shape between

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the two. Students who are not aware of this are likely to pronounce "run" the same as the Chinese character "rang".

2) Lack of [l] in the mother tongue

Neither Changzhou dialect nor Mandarin has the phoneme of the English consonant [l]. Therefore, students often ignore it when reading words containing this phoneme. About 74% of Changzhou students pronounce “rule” as /ruː/ instead of /ruːl/; about 83% of Changzhou students pronounce “world” as /wɜːrd/ instead of /wɜːrld/.

3) Replace [θ] with [s]

Neither Changzhou dialect nor Mandarin has the phoneme of the English consonant [θ]. Therefore, they often replace [θ] with a similar consonant [s] and their tongue position is incorrect when they pronounce it. About 79% of Changzhou students pronounce “thank” as

/sæŋk/ instead of /θæŋk/.

4) Replace [ð] with [z]

Neither Changzhou dialect nor Mandarin has the phoneme of the English consonant [ð]. Therefore, they often replace [ð] with a similar consonant [z] and their tongue position is incorrect when they pronounce it. About 81% of Changzhou students pronounce “those” as

/zoʊz/ instead of /ðoʊz/.

3.3. Vowel Quantity

There are 5 pairs of long and short sounds in the 12 English vowels, but there is no distinction between long and short sounds in Changzhou dialect and Mandarin [5]. Some students may not be aware of this and end up pronouncing long sounds in words as short or short sounds as long. For example, some students may pronounce “come” as /kɑː m/ instead of /kʌm/. When reading long words that end with a short sound, some students may draw the last sound due to the influence of their native language habits. For example, some students may pronounce “morning” as /ˈmɔːrnɪːŋ/ instead of /ˈmɔːrnɪŋ/. Some Changzhou students know the concepts of long and short sounds, but they think that the two differ only in the duration of pronunciation and ignore the difference in pronunciation methods. For example, when pronouncing [i], the tongue position should be lower than that of [iː]. However, about 43% of the students just simply shortened the [iː] sound without adjusting the tongue position when they read "live".

4. Teaching Suggestions

4.1. Schools and Teachers

Changzhou students are immersed in both Changzhou dialect and Mandarin, with limited opportunities to interact with native English speakers. School and English classrooms are the only environment where students can be exposed to and use English. Therefore, teachers play an important role in students' English pronunciation acquisition. First of all, schools should add courses on English phonetics to the English curriculum. Relying solely on teachers to help students learn the pronunciation of every word is unrealistic; therefore, students must be equipped with the ability to understand phonetic symbols. Secondly, English teachers should have basic knowledge of English phonetics and understand the International Phonetic Alphabet so as to correct students' pronunciation in teaching. Teachers can also adopt teaching methods that can effectively improve students' accents in class, such as "shadowing", which can effectively improve students' language imitation ability [6].

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4.2. Students

Students should understand the negative transfer effect of their mother tongue on English phonetics learning and take action to overcome it. First, students should fully understand the pronunciation of each phonetic symbol from the aspects of tongue position, lip shape, duration, and degree of mouth opening. Secondly, students should make full use of the English class discussion time to practice their oral English and actively correct mistakes through classmates' feedback. Through mutual communication and correction, they can complement each other's phonetic knowledge. Secondly, students can use their spare time to find opportunities to be exposed to authentic English accents. For example, watching classic English TV series, listening to English songs, and imitating the pronunciation and habits of native speakers can greatly help improve their accents.

5. Conclusion

The article highlights the significant impact of Changzhou dialect on primary school students' English phonetic acquisition, demonstrating a specific negative transfer effect on both vowels and consonants. By analyzing the unique phonetic features of the Changzhou dialect and its differences from English, this paper identifies common pronunciation errors among Changzhou students. The main reasons for the error are: Firstly, the lack of equivalent phonemes in Changzhou dialect leads to difficulties in English pronunciation, such as [l]; Secondly, the tendency of students to replace English phonemes with similar ones from the Changzhou dialect, overlooking subtle differences, as with the [i] sound; and [i]; Last but not least, the influence of their native language, which makes it difficult for students to distinguish between long and short vowel sounds. Measures to avoid the negative transfer effect of Changzhou dialect on English phonetic acquisition can be taken from the perspectives of schools, teachers and students. Schools should offer courses related to English phonetic symbols; teachers should adopt diversified teaching methods such as shadowing to improve students' accents; and students should have a comprehensive understanding of phonetic symbols.

The research subjects of this paper are students from only one primary school. However, it should be noted that the Changzhou dialect exhibits slight regional variations within the city, which may result in differing negative transfer effects on English phonetic acquisition.

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