

Analysis of College English Phonetic Learning

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Abstract: Improving students' speaking ability is one of the fundamental requirements for English teaching. However, some English majors have few chances in oral English learning and lack the motivation to practice phonetics, moreover, teachers may face challenges to teach them phonetics. Therefore, in order to discuss the problems in English phonetics teaching and improve the efficiency of it. This paper analyzes the current situation and problems of college students' phonetic learning by utilizing questionnaire investigation. The students' attitudes, difficulties, methods of English phonetics learning are analyzed based on the linguistic. Furthermore, the corresponding teaching and learning are put forward. The investigation shows that nowadays, college students pay more attention to their English phonetics. There are three influence factors contributing to their dissatisfaction with it, including the negative influence of language transfer, low attention to English phonetics teaching, and lack of expertise in phonetics. Based on the analysis of these contributors, this paper purposes corresponding methods: Teachers should know the similarities and differences between English and Chinese in pronunciation, add English tests as a part of students' English final exam, and colleges should conduct systematic phonetic training for English teachers.

Keywords: phonetics, second language learning, transfer

1. Introduction

With the accelerating process of globalization, high-quality talents who master English, as an important bridge, begin to attract more attention connecting the communication between China and foreign countries [1]. Good pronunciation of any language is as much a sign of gentility as good dress [2]. English phonetics teaching also plays an important role in college English teaching and research. In 2007, the Ministry of Education issued College English Curriculum Requirements, which claimed that the teaching goal of college English is to cultivate and develop students' comprehensive English skills, especially listening and speaking skills. Phonetics teaching has always been neglected in college English teaching, and it is a weak link, especially for non-English majors.

In domestic studies, Gan expressed that through his practice and experience in college pronunciation teaching [3], he found that the pronunciation problems of English major students should not be ignored. Firstly, students still had trouble pronouncing few phonemes. Secondly, there are also problems with linking, assimilation, and stress. Thirdly, the English language sense

needs training. In addition, Some scholars have analyzed the phenomenon of transfer in phonetic learning, such as Gao proposed that students should develop correct pronunciation habits by analyzing the negative transfer of vowels, consonants, and intonation [4]. Emphasis should be placed on understanding the basic features of Chinese and English phonetic systems and the differences between them. In teaching activities, teachers should correctly grasp the transfer law, promote the positive transfer of speech and avoid the negative transfer of speech. These studies analyzed various problems existing in students' English pronunciation from different aspects. On this basis, this paper analyzes the problems existing in current college students' phonetic learning and put forward feasible improvement measures.

This study explores and analyzes English phonetics learning by Chinese university students and identify the factors that hamper their phonetic accuracy. Firstly, the current situation of phonetics learning in college is introduced. Then, the phonological problems that hamper the English spoken by Chinese university students are found. At last, this paper analyzes several factors that influence students' phonetics learning. It is hoped that based on the data analysis, collected from a questionnaire concentrating on college students' phonetic learning, several phonetics methods in modern college English courses can be proposed, which is targeted to the improvement of students' English phonetics.

2. The Connotation and Characteristics of Language Transfer

Language transfer refers to the influence of the mother tongue on the acquisition of the second language, including linguistic influence, such as phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, semantics, and so on. It also includes the influence of factors besides language, such as thinking patterns, cultural traditions, social history, and so on. In Language Transfer, Odlin defined language transfer as the effect of commonalities and differences between the target language and any other language that had been learned (or not perfectly learned) [5]. According to his definition, transfer was not only the influence from the learner's mother tongue as referred to in the traditional transfer research, but also the influence of the knowledge of any other language that the learner had acquired on the acquisition of a new language. Besides, Ellis listed six factors that restrict transfer. There are different levels of language. The first one is social factors, such as different communication objects and learning environments. The second one is Tokenness, such as the specificity of certain linguistic features. Then there are archetypal concepts, such as the extent to which the meaning of a word is considered core and fundamental compared to other meanings. Then, there are language distance and psycholinguistic types, such as learners' psychological feelings about the distance between a language and a second language. The last one is developmental factors, such as limitations on the natural processes of interlanguage development [6].

Mother tongue has a duality in English teaching [7]. On the one hand, when the pronunciation, structure, function, pragmatics, and cultural background of the mother tongue are the same or roughly equivalent to those of English, these "common factors" of the mother tongue and English will not cause communication barriers. Students can "borrow" them directly, which helps them to learn English. At this time, the mother tongue plays a positive role in promoting English learning. On the other hand, when there are differences between the mother tongue and English, especially those parts that appear to be ignored by students, they often unconsciously use the mother tongue to directly replace the parts of English that they think are corresponding but are varied. These "different factors" between mother tongue and English interfere with students' English learning and play a negative transfer role of negative restriction [8].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Method

In this work, a sample survey was conducted on college students from all over China. In the form of a questionnaire survey concerning English phonetics learning, a total of 70 questionnaires were sent out and 65 were recovered, with a recovery rate of 92.9%. Among them, 65 questionnaires are valid, with an effective rate of 100%. 65 testers are selected from various colleges all around China with different majors, such as law, management, mechanical engineering, computer, and so on.

3.2. Research Content

The questionnaire includes 16 questions administered to collect the test takers' learning situation in English phonetics.

First of all, the first two questions ask students to compare the importance of English listening, speaking, reading, and writing and difficulty learning. Then, the following five Questions 3-7 focus on students' degree of emphasis on English pronunciation and their understanding of pronunciation learning. Questions 8-10 inquire about students' specific time allocation and whether they receive professional teaching of English pronunciation. Besides, Questions 11-12 ask about students' opinions on pronunciation correction, Questions 13-14 find students' difficulties in pronunciation learning, and Question 15 statistics the ways students learn pronunciation. Finally, an additional question is set to know students' English level through English-level test scores.

3.3. Results

3.3.1. The Importance of Speaking

Firstly, the statistics from the questionnaire show a majority of students believe that speaking is the most important part of English learning, meanwhile, it is also considered to be the most difficult one to handle, compared to listening, reading, and writing. Students' average satisfaction with their pronunciation is medium with 3.28. However, among them, a vast majority of students pay attention to their pronunciation and believe it could influence English learning and communication.

3.3.2. Learning Process of Phonetics

Secondly, according to Figure 1, it can be seen that only approximately half of the students have been taught International Phonetic Alphabet (hereafter referred to as IPA) by teachers. However, they have a supportive viewpoint of improving it and consider English learners should correct their phonetics as early as possible, during primary school or junior high school. Figure 2 reveals that university students resort to a variety of methods to practice, such as listening to native speaker pronunciation material, imitating teachers' pronunciation, using IPA, learning from English applications on mobile phones, and so on, sorted by frequency of use.

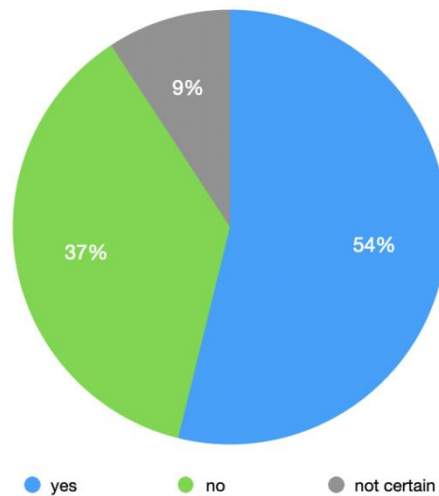


Figure 1: Situation of having learned IPA.

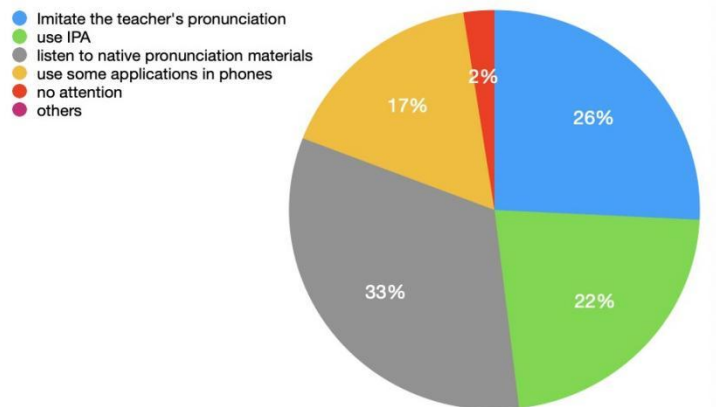


Figure 2: Methods of learning phonetics.

3.3.3. Difficulties of Learning Phonetics

Finally, when it comes to difficulties in the process of English phonetics studying, research shows students are stuck in suprasegmental features in the language aspect. As for the social aspect, the main causes of this dilemma are the lack of language environment and the motivation to learn phonics.

4. Analysis of Influencing Factors and Strategy Discussion

4.1. Negative Influence of Language Transfer

Firstly, language transfer influences phonetics learning to some extent. The results of the questionnaire show that students are stuck in phonetics in many aspects, such as the accuracy of vowels and consonants, intonation, linking, and so on. For example, Chinese students often confuse pronunciation when spelling syllables that start with the phoneme/w/and/v/. This phenomenon is caused by the interference of Chinese phonetic pronunciation habits.

English teachers should know the similarities and differences between English and Chinese in pronunciation [9]. This is because the comparative knowledge of English and Chinese can help

teachers predict the difficulties and key points of students' learning to take corresponding measures, thus improving the quality of English teaching. To learn English pronunciation well, it is necessary to know which sounds are not in Chinese, and which sounds are easy to be disturbed by the interference between English and Chinese sounds.

4.2. Low Attention to English Pronunciation Teaching

According to the data collected, only nearly half of students have been taught to correct their pronunciation during English learning. Since only a few cities in China have oral tests during National College Entrance Examination and senior high school entrance exams. Most middle schools focus on reading, grammar, vocabulary, and writing. As far as phonetics is concerned, students mainly recognize English phonetic symbols, like IPA. In college, due to various reasons, such as fewer class hours, teachers largely ignore or have no time to pay attention to college English phonetic teaching and students' phonetic problems.

Colleges should resort to English tests added as a part of students' English final exam, and then students can realize the importance of oral expression, so as to motivate them to strengthen oral training and practice more consciously.

4.3. Lack of Expertise in Phonetics

Based on former statistics, only half of college students have received IPA teaching. In some areas, there is a shortage of secondary and primary school English teachers, let alone teachers with good pronunciation. This can be felt in the universities. Some students from small towns or remote areas can score as high as 130 on the written English test, while pronunciation is not so good. The pronunciation of these students is fixed, and a few pronunciations are quite difficult to correct.

The key to strengthening English pronunciation teaching and improving its quality is teachers [10]. Therefore, it is vital to conduct systematic phonetic training for these English teachers, especially for foreign language teachers in mountainous areas and remote areas.

5. Conclusion

This paper studies the current situation of college students' English phonetics learning by means of a questionnaire survey, including learning basis, learning time, learning methods, and learning difficulties. Through the analysis of the effective questionnaire data, it is found that nowadays, college students begin pay much attention to their pronunciation and use various ways to improve their pronunciation, but they are not satisfied with their pronunciation. Almost half of them have not received systematic pronunciation teaching, and the difficulties they encountered in learning English pronunciation are mainly due to suprasegmental features of language and lack of language environment and learning motivation. Then the paper summarizes three factors that affect English phonetics learning: negative influence of language transfer, low attention to English phonetics teaching, and lack of expertise in phonetics. Furthermore, the measures are also briefly analyzed.

However, there are still shortcomings in this study, such as the sample size is not large enough to fully represent all college students. In the future, the number of samples can be enlarged, further study can focus on the current situation of Chinese college students' phonetic learning, and the modern education technology can be carried out to research in the teaching of college English phonetic electives.

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