

The Roles of Mandarin and Local Dialect in the Acquisition of L2 English Consonants Among Chinese Learners of English: Evidence From Suzhou Dialect Areas

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Abstract : In the domain of second language acquisition, whenever pronunciation errors or acquisition difficulties are found, researchers habitually attribute them to the negative transfer of the native language or local dialect. To what extent do Mandarin and local dialects affect English phonological acquisition for Chinese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL)? Little evidence, however, has been found via empirical research in China. To address this core issue, the present study conducted phonetic experiments to explore the roles of local dialects and Mandarin in Chinese EFL learners' acquisition of L2 English consonants. Besides Mandarin, the sole national language in China, Suzhou dialect was selected as the target local dialect because of its distinct phonology from Mandarin. The experimental group consisted of 30 junior English majors at Yangzhou University, who were born and lived in Suzhou, acquired Suzhou Dialect since their early childhood, and were able to communicate freely and fluently with each other in Suzhou Dialect, Mandarin as well as English. The consonantal target segments were all the consonants of English, Mandarin and Suzhou Dialect in typical carrier words embedded in the carrier sentence Say again. The control group consisted of two Suzhou Dialect experts, two Mandarin radio broadcasters, and two British RP phoneticians, who served as the standard speakers of the three languages. The reading corpus was recorded and sampled in the phonetic laboratories at Yangzhou University, Soochow University and Cambridge University, respectively, then transcribed, segmented and analyzed acoustically via Praat software, and finally analyzed statistically via EXCEL and SPSS software. The main findings are as follows: First, in terms of correct acquisition rates (CARs) of all the consonants, Mandarin ranked top (92.83%), English second (74.81%) and Suzhou Dialect last (70.35%), and significant differences were found only between the CARs of Mandarin and English and between the CARs of Mandarin and Suzhou Dialect, demonstrating Mandarin was overwhelmingly more robust than English or Suzhou Dialect in subjects' multilingual phonological ecology. Second, in terms of typical acoustic features, the average duration of all the consonants plus the voice onset time (VOT) of plosives, fricatives, and affricatives in 3 languages were much longer than those of standard speakers; the intensities of English fricatives and affricatives were higher than RP speakers but lower than Mandarin and Suzhou Dialect standard speakers; the formants of English nasals and approximants were significantly different from those of Mandarin and Suzhou Dialects, illustrating the inconsistent acoustic variations between the 3 languages. Thirdly, in terms of typical pronunciation variations or errors, there were significant interlingual interactions between the 3 consonant systems, in which Mandarin consonants were absolutely dominant, accounting for the strong transfer from L1 Mandarin to L2 English instead of from earlier-acquired L1 local dialect to L2 English. This is largely because the subjects were knowingly exposed to Mandarin since their nursery and were strictly required to speak in Mandarin through all the formal education periods from primary school to university.

Keywords : acquisition of L2 English consonants, role of Mandarin, role of local dialect, Chinese EFL learners from Suzhou Dialect areas

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