



# A Probe Into the Negative Impact of Sichuan Dialect on English Phonetics Learning and Countermeasures

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## Abstract

Dialect is a kind of language variation. According to the different regional and national, there are different dialects. It directly or indirectly affects the learning of English. Through questionnaire and recording, this paper aims to analyze the differences between the pronunciation of Sichuan dialect and that of English, looks into the negative transfer of Sichuan dialect on English phonetics learning and finally puts forward some suggestions.

**Key words:** English phonetics; Dialect; Pronunciation

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## INTRODUCTION

Among English listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, phonetics is the base; vocabulary are remembered with the help of phonetics; and listening and speaking are conveyed through phonetics, thus we can say that phonetics is the carrier or externalization form of language ability. Although phonetics is a part of foreign language learning, the study of phonetics has an impact on learners' assessment on their foreign language ability and affects their scores. Besides, phonetics is an important factor to realize the communication function of language, and inaccurate phonetics may give rise to misunderstandings in communication. Therefore, phonetics is important in language learning.

In 1957, American linguist Lado (1957) put forward in the Intercultural Linguistics that in learning a foreign language, a learner relied on his mother tongue and tended to transfer linguistic forms and meanings of his first language as well as the cultures relevant to his mother tongue to foreign language learning. Ellis (1997) also pointed out that the learning of a second language would be greatly affected by the mother tongue of learners. For students whose first language is Chinese, when learning a second language—language phonetics, they will be affected by pronunciation habits of their mother tongue more or less, because there has a set of language symbol system in their minds and they will obtain known concepts by transferring their mother tongue. As a big country as China, it has lots of dialects. As a language learned first, local dialect has an influence on the learning of modern common spoken Mandarin and other languages. As a branch of Southwest Mandarin, Sichuan dialect has a big influence in the southeast of China. Therefore, when learning English phonetics, students from Sichuan are usually affected by the dialect and have English phonetics with Sichuan dialect.

The writer had read major journals about foreign language and education at home in recent years and found that many scholars had studied on comparison of local dialects and English, for example, some scholars studied the effect of Hakka dialect, Shandong dialect and Cantonese on English learning. However, studies on Sichuan dialect are very few and incomplete. Thus, the writer thought it was necessary to have a study on the negative transfer of Sichuan dialect on English phonetics and to put forward countermeasures.

## 1. DESIGN OF THE STUDY

### 1.1 Study Subjects

The study subjects were 30 freshmen from West Normal University in Sichuan whose major was not English,

including 18 boy students and 12 girl students. They came from different regions and counties of Sichuan such as Chengdu, Dazhou, Panzhihua, Jinyang and Nanchong, which almost covered all the area of Sichuan where Sichuan dialect was used. And their mother tongue was Sichuan dialect and their second language was English. Although Sichuan dialects are different in different areas of Sichuan, they are similar in general, especially in the learning of English phonetics where their similarities and their dissimilarities with English phonetics are more obvious. Furthermore, because it was not very long since they entered into an environment where mandarin was widely used and the effect of local dialect was still very strong, the study was feasible.

## 1.2 Study Methods

First, the writer put forward assumptive differences between Sichuan dialect and the Received Pronunciation according to his own and familiar Sichuan people's experience of learning English phonetics and dialogues, conducted investigations through questionnaire and recording, and then analyzed the study results.

Questionnaire included three parts: (a) do the students have the sense to pronounce some phonemes correctly; (b) how is their evaluation on their first English teacher and the hardware environment of the first English learning school; and (c) what phonemes do they think they could not pronounce or have problems when pronouncing them. To improve the reliability of the study results, after doing questionnaire, the writer selected the words and phrases which were in line with the assumptive theory as reading materials to be read by the study subjects. These words and phrases were accompanied by the Received Pronunciation for the sake of comparison. The 30 students who were invited to a quiet place one by one were given one minute to get to know the materials, then the writer made a record while they were reading. The comparison of records aimed to further prove and extend the questionnaire.

## 1.3 Study Results and Analysis

Through comparison, the recording results basically conformed to the assumption while some had differences with the questionnaire. Meanwhile, that study subjects wrote down phonemes that they cannot pronounce or had problems in pronouncing them in the questionnaire had supplemented and completed the assumption. The write will put emphasis on the comparative analysis of results of field recording and questionnaire in the following paragraph.

### 1.3.1 Ambiguity of /l/ and /n/

The recording comparison indicated that 76.7 % of the students (23) cannot be distinguish /l/ and /n/; another 3 students cannot pronounce /n/ correctly; and only 4 can distinguish them. While the questionnaire showed that 7 students thought they could distinguish the two phonemes.

Therefore, few students did not realize that they had problems when pronouncing /n/.

In Sichuan dialect, /l/ and /n/ are variations of a same phoneme and there has been no difference between them in the sense of meaning. Sichuan dialect often mixes up the two and the people usually pronounce /n/ as /l/, for example, people with a Sichuan dialect often pronounce Niu Nai as Liu Lai. Under the influence of negative transfer of the mother tongue, the students usually neglect the pronunciation of /l/ and /n/ in English learning, for example, they often mix up night /nait/ and light /lait/ and pronounce night /nait/ as /lait/. When pronouncing /n/ in English, the tongue should be met with the upper alveolar ridge to lead to the resonance of the top of the nose, during which the tongue will not leave off the upper alveolar ridge, which is different from /l/.

### 1.3.2 Ambiguity of Long Vowels and Short Vowels

66.7% of the students (20) did not distinguish long vowels and short vowels and 10 students could not totally make a difference between them, which was the same with the results of the questionnaire.

In English vowels, four pairs need distinguishing long and short vowels, namely, /i:/ and /i/, /u:/ and /u/, /ə/ and /ɜ:/ as well as /ɔ:/ and /ɒ/. The judgment of long and short vowels depends on the external standard—the sense of hearing, which is different from the classification according to physical property of vocal organs. Therefore, some people described them according to the state of laryngeal. When pronouncing a long vowel, the muscle in the laryngeal is in a state of tension while it is in a state of relaxing when pronouncing a short vowel. Thus, some linguists called long vowels and short vowels as tense vowels and lax vowels respectively. However, in Sichuan dialect, long or short of a vowel and tense or relax of a muscle have nothing to do with meaning. Therefore, students often mix up /i:/, u:/, ə:/, ɔ:/ with /i, u, ə, ɔ/.

### 1.3.3 Replacing /ŋ/ With /n/

The investigation results indicated that 55.7% of students (17) used to replacing /ŋ/ with /n/ and 9 often mixed up /n/ and /ŋ/.

In Sichuan dialect, there has no Yunmu with a back nasal such as eng, ing and ong, and nasals are not obvious. However, from the aspect of place of articulation and articulation method, /ŋ/ belongs to velars and also to nasals. Therefore, students often pronounce /ŋ/ as /n/ or mix them up. In English, when pronouncing /ŋ/, the tip tongue does not meet with the upper jaw and air gets out from back nasal cavity through the nasal cavity and the sound is made because of vibration in nasal cavity and laryngeal.

### 1.3.4 Replacing /v/ With /w/

53.3% of the students (16) replaced /v/ with /w/, for example, they pronounced five /faiv/ as /faiw/, which was in contrast to that /w/ was often replaced with /v/ in some northern dialects.

/v/ belongs to labi odentals and fricatives, and it is made because the air is forced between lips and teeth due to the contact of upper teeth and under lip. However, /w/ belongs to bilabial and glides (sometimes called semivowel). Thus, there has been a big difference between the two. However, since most areas (except for Chongqing and other few places) where Sichuan dialect is used have no labi odentals and because of the negative transfer of the dialect on English phonetics, it is common for students replace /v/ with /w/.

### 1.3.5 Replacing /θ/ and /ð/ With /s/ and /z/

The recording results showed that 53.3% of the students (16) could not pronounce /θ/ and /ð/ correctly, and the number was less than that the writer assumed before. The writer thought that there did not have the two phonemes in Chinese, thus it was easier for students to make mistakes. However, the fact just goes the opposite. In the interview after the analysis, the writer recognized that 80% of the students were aware of that the two phonemes did not exist in Mandarin by themselves or teachers, thus they paid special attention to them. Surely, some people could not pronounce them correctly although they had known their problems and some even had not realized that.

A part of students from Sichuan used to replace /θ/ and /ð/ with /s/ and /z/, for example, they pronounce thank /θæŋk/ as /sæŋk/ and these /ði:z/ as /zi:z/. Although /s/, /z/, /θ/ and /ð/ all belongs to fricatives, they are different in place of articulation: /s/ and /z/ are alveolar while /θ/ and /ð/ belong to dentals. When pronouncing /θ/ and /ð/, the tip tongue should meet with the upper teeth to make air blocked. Besides place of articulation, the two pairs of sounds are different in sound quality: the sounds /s/ and /z/ are clear while /θ/ and /ð/ are relatively raspy and the air is not as fluent as the former two.

### 1.3.6 Pronouncing /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ Incorrectly

40% of the students (12) could not pronounce /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ correctly; 10 people could make the sound /ʃ/ correctly but /ʒ/; and 8 could basically make the two sounds.

In Sichuan dialect, there have no sounds corresponding to /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. Through investigation, it can be seen that students from Sichuan used to regard /x/ as a sound equal to /ʃ/ in English, for example, they pronounced sheet /ʃi : t/ as /xi : t/ and shift /ʃ ift/ as /xift/. The pronunciations were not very English and they had a strong sense of Chinglish. However, many students did not know how to pronounce /ʒ/ and their pronunciations were varied. And some students even skipped over the sound when reading. In fact, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ are made when the tongue lifts close to teeth and the before palate with a small hole between them and the lips form a circle forward to let air out. Meanwhile, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ are a pair of consonants with a voiceless one and a voiced one. When pronouncing /ʃ/, air is strong and the vocal cords do not vibrate. The pronunciation of /ʒ/ is the same with /ʃ/ in mouth shape,

place of tongue and phoneme except that the vocal cords vibrate.

In addition, in the last question of the questionnaire, few students also supplemented some phonemes that they had problems when pronouncing them such as /r/ and /j/. Although they are not representative in the negative transfer of Sichuan dialect on English phonetics, students can surely make expected progress if they think carefully and practice more according to theoretical methods.

## 2. COUNTERMEASURES AND SUGGESTIONS

Schools and teachers should pay attention to the importance of phonetics. Among the 30 study subjects, 16 came from the city and the other 14 came from the countryside. The study indicated that students from city were better than that from countryside in English phonetics and the negative transfer effect of dialect on English phonetics was weaker, which showed that teachers' phonetics, hardware environment of schools as well as attention paid in phonetics can affect students' level of phonetics directly. Furthermore, most students admitted that the first English teacher had an effect on their English study more or less. In the question which asked for students' assessment on phonetics of their first English teacher, only few students thought that their teachers' accent was standard. It means that teachers should improve their quality, phonetics in particular. Therefore, teachers' discourse is not only a tool for teachers to complete teaching tasks but a major source of language impart of students in class, which plays a very important role in the process of teaching and language acquisition of learners (Nunan, 1991).

On the other hand, it is a new turning point in language study when they enter into college and an important chance for them to strengthen speech training and correct pronunciation. Therefore, colleges and English teachers should emphasize on the improvement of English phonetics of college students and further reduce the negative transfer of dialects on English phonetics.

Students themselves should be fully aware of the negative transfer of local dialects on English phonetics learning and have a clear understanding of differences between local dialects and standard English phonetics. Only when students can distinguish Sichuan dialect and corresponding English pronunciation can they correct their pronunciation. An efficient pronunciation correcting method is to have minimum pair training such as sing-thing, thank-sank and thin-thing as well as to have tongue-twisters like the rain in Spain is mainly on the plain. According to the investigation, many students with relatively standard pronunciation corrected and practiced consciously after recognizing differences between dialects and standard English, and thus their phonetics was better than students without noticing that.

The improvement of English phonetics is a long and boring process. To improve English phonetics, besides recognizing the above mentioned negative transfer, students must grasp certain pronunciation theories and need further thinking as well as long time practice. Students themselves should contact English more often and make full use of resources to strengthen their study of standard English phonetics, for example, repeating standard English pronunciation, imitating lines of original movies, watching English programs, taking part in English corner, speech contest, debate competition and other English activities, as well as communicating with people whose first language is English.

Furthermore, teachers should make comparisons and point out the differences in practical teaching to attract students' attention. Meanwhile, teachers must know about students' difficulties and problems and provide proper guidance so as to help students come over pronunciation mistakes and defects due to various factors including dialects and grasp correct English pronunciation methods and form good pronunciation habits, thus improving the situation of time-consumption and low-efficiency in oral practice.

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## CONCLUSION

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The study took the 30 freshmen from Sichuan whose major was not English as the case, adopted questionnaire and recording, looked into the negative transfer of Sichuan dialect on English phonetics learning and put forward corresponding pronunciation correcting theories as well

as suggestions and countermeasures for the improvement of phonetics from the aspect of Sichuan dialect. When students with Sichuan dialect are learning English, the negative transfer of the mother tongue is obvious and the effect of Sichuan dialect on the pronunciation of English consonants is the strongest with the highest error rate; while the effect of Sichuan dialect on English vowels especially diphthongs is the weakest with the lowest error rate.

The number of subjects in this study was only 30 and they were limited to students from Sichuan in a same school, thus the representativeness of the study results needs wide sampling verification. However, through comparative analysis, the study is enlightening to deep understanding of the negative transfer of Sichuan dialect on English phonetics learning to a certain degree. Surely, English phonetics refers to not only the pronunciation of single sounds. Accurate pronunciation of single sounds does not stand for good phonetics and it is not the only parameter of the understanding of language. Stress, rhythm and intonation are keys to phonetics learning, which needs further study.

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