

The Negative Transfer of Dialects on Primary School Students' English Phonetics Acquisition and Its Teaching Implications

-Taking Kunming Dialect as an Example

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Abstract: In the process of learning a second language, correct pronunciation is an indispensable prerequisite for having strong listening and speaking skills. Primary school students in Kunming (represented by the urban area) often experience negative phonological transfer in the process of English phonological acquisition due to their habitual use of dialects, resulting in inaccurate pronunciation and weak listening and speaking skills. Based on the information from three aspects—teaching experience, literature reading and internet search, this paper summarizes the common negative phonological transfer problems of primary school students, such as mispronouncing the vowel [aɪ] sound as [e] sound, having difficulty in effectively distinguishing between consonant [v] sound and [w] sound, and being very prone to confusing basic long and short sounds. The above problems can be solved by strengthening teacher training, optimizing teaching strategies and introducing educational resources. Such measures can significantly aid students in improving their pronunciation accuracy, thereby laying a solid foundation for better listening and speaking skills.

Keywords: elementary school students, Kunming dialect, negative phonological transfer, language teaching.

1. Introduction

Language transfer has been a hot topic of research in the fields of linguistics, second language acquisition and language teaching for at least one hundred years [1]. Odlin analyzes linguistic transfer from the cognitive point of view, and believes that positive transfer occurs when there is the commonality between the acquired language and the target language, while negative transfer arises when commonalities exist between the target language and the learner's native language, and that the similarity of the languages determines the amount of positive or negative transfer. This definition focuses attention again on the influence of similarities and differences between a new language and an acquired language on the learning of a new language [2].

The paper mainly focuses on the elaboration and analysis of the phenomenon of negative phonological transfer and the solution of negative transfer. Negative phonological transfer is common

in the pronunciation of vowels, consonants and short and long sounds in English, which is mostly due to the influence of the Kunming dialect, the problem of phonemic mismatch, and the absence of phonemic symbols between Chinese and English. This paper provides solutions from the perspectives of the lecturers, the primary school students and the society as a whole.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the phenomena and causes of primary school students' difficulties in learning English phonetics, and to provide new thinking dimensions and perspectives for frontline second language teachers. This analysis aims to assist educators in identifying teaching challenges and discovering effective strategies to address these issues.

2. Negative Phonological Transfer

For contemporary primary school students, the greater influence of the Kunming dialect on English pronunciation lies in the indistinguishable front and back nasals and the lack of Chinese-English phonetic equivalents [3]. This leads to the phenomenon of substituting approximate pronunciations during English phonological learning. Consequently, the above erroneous pronunciation habits are inadvertently brought by primary school students into their initial English phonological learning, thus forming a negative phonological transfer. In the long run, the incorrect pronunciation of English is deeply rooted and difficult to correct, resulting in the general problem of weak listening and speaking skills of primary school students in Kunming. The following is a compilation of common pronunciation errors in the process of English phonological learning for primary school students affected by the Kunming dialect in terms of vowel and consonant pronunciation and long and short sounds.

2.1. Vowels

(1) The [aɪ] sound is wrongly pronounced as [e].

The [aɪ] sound in English requires the mouth to have a larger degree of closure and a longer length of articulation in the process of articulation. However, the Kunming dialect often combines diphthongs into single vowels [4], and due to the absence of some phonemic positions between English and Chinese, students are accustomed to replacing the missing English pronunciation with phonetically approximate sounds in Chinese. As a result, words such as “bide” are pronounced as “bed,” “light” as “let,” and “white” as “wet.”

(2) Mispronunciation of [ɔ:] sound as [ɑ:] sound

The [ɔ:] sound in English is a short vowel pronounced with rounded lips. When articulating this sound, the lips should be slightly firm, rounded, and not protruding. Such a pronunciation habit is almost absent in Chinese, thus students used to replace the [ɔ:] sound with [ɑ:] sound, and their mouths were opened to a greater extent when pronouncing it. Consequently, difficulties arise in pronouncing words such as “water,” “doctor,” “box,” and “wall.”

(3) Difficulty in getting diphthongs in place

In the early English learning stage, students are not sensitive enough to capture phonetic information and have a harder time grasping the details of pronunciation. For example, diphthongs need to be pronounced by sliding from the first letter to the second letter. However, since Chinese pronunciation lacks this sliding and changing process, students find it extremely challenging to pronounce [aʊ]. Achieving a clear and emphasized [a] sound followed by the more subtle and indistinct [ʊ] sound proves difficult, leading to inaccuracies in pronouncing words such as “house,” “clown,” and “outside.”

2.2. Consonants

(1) Difficulty in distinguishing [v] and [w] sounds effectively

The most common mistake in the pronunciation of consonants is to replace the English pronunciation with the similar sound pronounced in Chinese, such as using the bilabial sound [w], which exists in Chinese, to replace the vacant labiodental sound [v] in Chinese. As a result, for the pronunciation of [v] and other sounds that require a light biting of the lower lip, the students have no relevant awareness, and they often pronounce “vent” as “went”, “various” as “warious”, and “very” as “wery.”

(2) Difficulty in effectively distinguishing [n] and [ŋ] sounds

There is almost no obvious distinction between front and back nasals in the Kunming dialect, and thus students who have been in the dialect context for a long time are used to pronouncing all of them as [n] when they are confronted with [n] and [ŋ] sounds. For example, many students struggle to recognize and differentiate the pronunciations of words like “drunk,” “clown,” “sing,” and “song,” making it challenging to correct their pronunciation.

(3) Ignoring [n] and [l] sounds at the end of words.

Since Chinese does not end with consonants and has no consonant affixation, [n] and [l] sounds are often subtracted from the pronunciation when they appear at the end of words [5]. For example, “school” may be pronounced as [sku:], “trouble” as [trʌb], and “green” as [gri:], which exemplifies the phenomenon of negative phonological transfer.

2.3. Long and short sounds

Since there is no distinction between short and long pronunciation in Chinese, and the length of pronunciation does not affect the understanding of word meaning[4]. Due to the influence of negative transfer, students are unable to perceive and differentiate between short and long tones in English phonetics, and they often confuse the pronunciation of basic vowels such as [i:] and [ɪ], [u:] and [ʊ]. This leads to mispronunciations like “hit” pronounced as “heat,” “leave” as “live.”

3. Practical Teaching Implications

In view of the above problems in the early stage of primary school students' English phonological learning, it is necessary to help students recognize the common and basic English phonological pronunciation features and the negative transfer phenomena arising from Putonghua and dialects. This can be achieved by deepening their understanding of correct pronunciation through the analysis, prompting, and correction of mispronunciations, ultimately enhancing their pronunciation accuracy and English spelling abilities. Based on the psychology of education and cognitive development, strategies to address these issues can be approached from three perspectives: the instructor, the student, and the community.

3.1. Teacher training

Most students learn English through teachers' teaching in the English classroom, so the accuracy of the teachers' English pronunciation needs to be paid attention to and emphasized to ensure that the students can receive correct phonological demonstrations when they first come into contact with English learning. Therefore, teacher training is necessary to improve the negative transfer of dialect to English phonology, which means that teachers should emphasize and learn more about English phonology. At the same time, employing engaging games and English scenarios in the classroom can guide students in identifying phonological errors from their dialects and comparing them to standard English pronunciation. This approach encourages students to avoid developing similar pronunciation habits based on Chinese. Through these interactive methods, students can gradually develop strong phonetic skills, leading to improved intonation and spelling abilities.

3.2. Learning methods

Elementary school students should pay attention to cultivating the habit of “understanding before imitating”. Prior to encouraging imitation of phonetics, students should be guided to discover and understand the rules of phonetics, and then imitate on the basis of understanding the rules, so that their phonetics ability can be improved qualitatively. For example, when teaching the rules of diphthong pronunciation, examples such as the [aɪ], [aʊ], and [eə] sounds can help students identify the pronunciation rules of diphthongs through the teacher's pronunciation, so that they can learn by example in future spelling learning. When imitating, pay special attention to the oral tongue position and mouth shape, and review the pronunciation rules while imitating to consolidate, which is conducive to the accumulation of phonological knowledge and improves the efficiency of phonological learning. In addition, elementary schools can also regularly organize phonics competitions to stimulate students' enthusiasm for phonics practice, improve students' motivation and create a good atmosphere for phonics learning, ultimately providing more support for their educational journey.

3.3. Educational resource allocation

Compared with the first-tier cities in China, the language education resources in Yunnan are relatively scarce and of lower quality. In order to address the negative phonological transfer phenomenon and its effects, the relevant departments should devote themselves to developing various school districts, community language activities and cultural exchanges, so as to provide primary school students with opportunities and platforms for practicing English phonology. Secondly, the relevant departments should introduce more high-quality educational resources by collaborating with top English educational institutions in China to develop and provide more phonological learning software and resources for primary school students in the province [6]. This will enhance their exposure to English, foster standard pronunciation, and boost their enthusiasm, interest and motivation in English learning in a specially created language environment. Finally, the relevant departments can effectively make use of the network platform to screen out cutting-edge and scientific English phonetics teaching methods and learning resources, distributing them uniformly to schools. Teachers will receive the teaching methods and optimize the teaching strategies according to the actual classroom situation, and at the same time lead students to complete the learning of high-quality phonetics resources.

4. Conclusion

Based on insights from teaching experience, literature, and internet research, this paper concludes that the negative phonological transfer of English among primary school students in Kunming is significantly influenced by the Kunming dialect.

The accurate pronunciation of vowels, consonants and long and short sounds of primary school students in Kunming is affected by negative phonological transfer. The common vowel mispronunciation is reflected in the mispronunciation of the [aɪ] sound as [e], the mispronunciation of the [ɔ:] sound as [ɑ:], and inaccurate diphthong articulation. The common errors in consonant articulation are reflected in the difficulty in effectively distinguishing between [v] and [w] sounds, [n] and [ŋ] sounds, and the often overlooked articulation of [n] and [l] sounds at the end of words. Furthermore, confusion arises in differentiating basic short and long vowels, such as [i:] and [ɪ], [u:] and [ʊ]. The root cause of this negative transfer lies in the differing oral tongue positions required for Chinese and English pronunciation, as well as the absence of certain phonemes in English that do exist in Chinese. This leads students to habitually replace missing English sounds with phonetically similar sounds from Chinese, resulting in pronunciation errors.

Based on the above problems, schools need to strengthen teacher training, pay attention to the accuracy of teachers' English pronunciation, teach students correct phonological demonstrations, enrich phonological classroom teaching strategies, guide students to observe and summarize the rules of pronunciation, and prompt students to correctly pronounce words; and focus on cultivating students' phonological learning habit of 'understanding the rules of pronunciation before imitating the pronunciation' instead of mechanically imitating the pronunciation. The education authorities concerned have introduced more quality phonics education resources to the province, carried out various language activities and cultural exchanges, developed phonics learning software suitable for primary school students, and organized phonological competitions in the school districts on a regular basis. These initiatives will increase exposure to English, promote standard pronunciation, and sustain student interest and enthusiasm in learning English.

Due to the limited level of personal knowledge, this paper only takes the Kunming dialect as an example for research, and the scope of the research is relatively small. Future studies are anticipated to expand this scope in order to yield more accurate conclusions.

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