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Common Pronunciation Errors of Chinese-Speaking Students in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

One of the leading reasons of the high unemployment of Malaysian graduates is their poor command of and inability to communicate in English. Employers affirm that English proficiency is an important hiring criterion, and pronunciation plays an important role in assessing speakers' language skills in job interviews. This research was conducted to identify the common pronunciation errors of Form 5 higher proficiency Chinese-speaking students and the possible contributing factors to these errors. This study utilised the mixed-method research design, combining elements of quantitative and qualitative research: reading-aloud word-list, questionnaires and interviews. Students were individually asked to read a word list containing 200 words that cover all 24 consonant sounds and 20 vowel sounds in the English language. Results indicated that the 5 most common pronunciation errors according to articulatory types are voiced vs. voicing consonants, fricative consonants, short monophthongs, plosive consonants and final consonant deletion. Outcomes indicated that the main likely factors contributing to students' pronunciation errors are mother tongue interference, lack of input and usage of the English language and lack of attention to the pronunciation element in the classroom. As this study uncovers common pronunciation errors amongst students, educators may considerably focus on areas making their teaching of pronunciation more effective and conclusive to reduce students' pronunciation errors and improve their language speaking ability.

Keywords: *phonetic; proficiency; pronunciation error; second language; speaking*

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021) indicated that the number of unemployed Malaysians nearly exceeded 768,000 persons in 2021. The high unemployment rate were majorly due to their poor command of the English language and poor communication skills as the leading reasons of high unemployment in the country (Aun, 2020). English is used in the Malaysian workplace either as primary language or bilingually with Malay, Mandarin or Tamil (Ong, Leong, & Singh, 2011). Companies consider graduates who are highly skilled to be fluent in English and are markedly effective in work within firms to boost productivity (Zulkifli & Rajoo, 2016). These reports show the crucial role of English language proficiency (ELP) in employability. ELP that is highly considered in employment includes the aspect of speaking, in which pronunciation is a major element.

Pronunciation is the quality that has the most effect on the manner by which speakers are judged by others, and acts as a basis on how they are formally assessed in other skills (Fraser, 2000). Poor performance of the learner's language can essentially affect the effectiveness of the conveyance of meaning (Lee, 2021). Employers easily equate bad pronunciation with interviewees' lack of competence in English. Briefly, the English language proficiency of graduates in Malaysia, particularly the poor communication skills (i.e. speaking), is a drawback for employment of Malaysian graduates.

MAIN FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS

INTERFERENCE

Pronunciation is an essential component of a language, and language acquisition depends on a person's native language. Malaysia is a multiethnic country, and so are the students; the three major ethnicities are Malays, Chinese and Indians (Manan & Shamsudin, 2012). All varieties of ethnic groups use Malaysian English (MalE); in the context of ethnolects, MalE can be categorised in the three subvarieties of Malay, Chinese and Indian-influenced English (Phoon, Abdullah, & MacLagan, 2013). In the learning or acquisition of a second language, mother tongue is important as a basis to help people learn the second language (Suliman, 2014). However, learners' difficulties in a second language, including phonology, are due to the interference of habits from the mother tongue (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). The more the resemblance between the first and second languages, the lesser difficulties will be faced in the L2 acquisition and vice versa (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). Selinker (1983) explained that there are two types of transfer in L2 development: positive and negative transfers; in the former, L1 facilitates L2 acquisition, whilst in the latter, L1 has bad effects on L2 and interferes in L1 (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015).

PHONOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES/TRANSFERS

Knowledge of the phonological properties of Mandarin is crucial in understanding the characteristics of Chinese-Malaysian English because when languages meet, they exhibit the same influences (Tan, 1997). When there are similarities in the structure of both languages, an understanding of basic sounds in one language may be transferred to the other (Do¨pke, 2000, as cited in Phoon, Abdullah, & MacLagan, 2013). However, when there are structural differences, target sounds in one language may be replaced by equivalent sounds from the other language (Tan, 1997). Chinese students tend to struggle with English sounds with similar counterparts in Mandarin, particularly given that the two languages are unlike each other. In such instances, Chinese learners are inclined to replace sounds with the closest substitutes in Mandarin.

Mandarin is used as reference for speakers of Chinese-Malaysian English, which is a formal language used by the Chinese (Tan, 1997). The modern Chinese's phonetic system is known as Hanyu Pinyin. This system comprises 23 consonant sounds and 36 vowel sounds, whereas there are 24 consonant sounds and 20 vowel sounds in English (Zhang & Yin, 2009). Between English and Mandarin, the most contrasting phonetic difference is that Mandarin is a tone language, whereas English is an intonation language. In Mandarin, every syllable has four distinct tones; the sounds are (1) high level (-), (2) high rising (/), (3) low rising (V) or low dipping and (4) high falling to low (\). In English, sound variations for different words are influenced by changing the vowel and consonant sounds (Zhang & Yin, 2009).

TEACHING OF PRONUNCIATION IN MALAYSIA

Pronunciation errors of students are also reflections of the poor pronunciation teaching in classrooms. English teachers commonly struggle to be intelligible to students (Shak, Lee, & Stephen, 2016). The reason is that teachers lack competence and are not comfortable in pronunciation teaching; incorporating pronunciation with other language skills is also found to be difficult (Shak et al., 2016). Teachers do not use beneficial strategies in teaching pronunciation and they are not equipped with the right tools to aid students in proper pronunciation learning. The reason is that teachers place utmost importance on comprehensibility and students' expressive ability, thereby neglecting the purpose of achieving native-like qualities in teaching pronunciation. Therefore, comprehensibility is the central goal

in Malaysia instead of accuracy (Shak et al., 2016). Teachers admit that they lack a fundamental understanding of articulatory phonetics to teach students (Wei, 2006). Additionally, the insufficient attention given to any form of pronunciation was determined to be caused by the same inadequacy in the teachers' education (Shah, Othman, and Senom, 2017). Previous experiences of teachers act as the base of their developed beliefs (Shah, Othman, & Senom, 2017). If teachers exert effort to equip themselves with strategies for pronunciation teaching, then they will not be embarrassed, thereby resulting in a positive change in students' pronunciation (Wei, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

This research utilised the mixed methods design, combining elements of quantitative and qualitative research. The instruments used were questionnaires and reading-aloud word lists and interviews. The list of words in the reading-aloud word list covers all 24 consonant and 20 vowel sounds of the English language. In constructing the word list, all possible graphemes of each sound were included. The majority of the positions of each sound were placed at different places of words (i.e. initial, middle, back). The word list covers all phonemes that Chinese speakers tend to pronounce wrongly based on previous studies. A word list was used instead of a reading passage because this study only focused on segmental features. Suprasegmental features, such as intonation and stress patterns, were not considered. The students' readings of the passages were recorded and phonetically transcribed thereafter. Auditory analysis was also conducted by comparing the students' pronunciations with the correct ones to identify their errors. Errors were also compared with Chinese phonetics to identify if such errors were caused by L1 interference.

For the semi-structured interviews, English teachers with at least five years of teaching experience were asked about their abilities and perceptions towards the teaching of pronunciation. Descriptive statistics of the questionnaire results were reported through the spreadsheet programme to show the data in a condensed form. Thereafter, data from the students' questionnaire, reading-aloud words and teachers' interviews were collectively analysed. This process reflects the triangulation of this study to determine the different research dimensions and ensure research validity. The research questions were answered after all data were analysed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

COMMON PRONUNCIATION ERRORS

FIGURE 1. List of Pronunciation Errors According to Articulatory Types

Types of Errors	Frequency
Voiced vs voiceless consonant	**729**
Fricative consonant	**567**
(dental)	356
(alveolar)	100
(labiodental)	97
(post alveolar)	14
Short monophtong	**498**
	309
(schwa)	189
Plosive consonant	**478**
(alveolar)	271
(bilabial)	172

(velar) (post alveolar)	29 6
Final consonant deletion	**270**
Diphtong	**149**
Long monophtong	**86**
Long vs short vowel	**57**
Final consonant cluster reduction	**54**
Affricate consonant	**50**
Lateral approximant	**28**
Deletion of final consonant	**24**

VOICED VS. VOICELESS CONSONANTS

Figure 1 shows that the most common error amongst students is the inability to distinguish voiced and voiceless consonants. The most common occurrence is the voicing of the retroflex plosive consonant /t/ to /d/, such as pronouncing /ve**t**/ as /ve**d**/ and pronouncing /ræbɪ**t**/as /ræbɪ**d**/; followed by the voicing of the bilabial plosive /p/ to /b/, such as reading /zɪ**p**/ as /zɪ**b**/ and /slɪ**p**/ as /slɪ**b**/. Voiced and voiceless consonants are special features of the language; each phoneme in the eight consonant pairs (i.e. /p/,/b/;/t/,/d/;/k/,/g/;/s/,/z/;/ʂ/,/ð/;/f/,/v/;/đ/,/ƛ/;/ɯ/,/dƛ/) are different from each other only through voicing (Zhang & Yin, 2009). In Mandarin, there is only a pair of voiced and voiceless sounds /sh/ and /r/, which are different in aspiration; all other pairs (i.e. /p/,/b/;/t/,/d/;/k/,/g/;/z/,/s/) are voiceless and contrast in aspiration alone (Zhang & Yin, 2009). This result could explain that distinguishing between voiced and voiceless consonants is a difficulty for students. This finding interlays with Phoon, Abdullah and MacLagan (2013), in which Chinese participants exhibited the devoicing of final fricatives and affricates.

FIGURE 2. Pronunciation Errors According to Voiced vs. Voiceless Consonants

No.	Errors	Type of Errors	Frequency	Examples of Words			
				Word	Accurate		Errors
					UK	US	
1	Voicing of /t/ to /d/	Plosive consonant (alveolar) Voiced vs voiceless consonant	267	Vet	/vet/		/ved/
				Rabbit	/ræbɪt/		/ræbɪd/
				Hot	/hɒt/		/hɒd/
				Cat	/kæt/		/kæd/
				Set	/set/		/sed/
				Height	/haɪt/		/haɪd/
				Pot	/pɒt/		/pɒd/
				Hoot	/hu:t/		/hu:d/
				Wet	/wet/		/wed/
				Hot	/hɒt/		/hɒd/
				Shout	/ʃaʊt/		/ʃaʊd/
				Heart	/hɑ:t/	/hɑ:rt/	/hɑ:rd/
				Nut	/nʌt/		/nʌd/ /hɑ:d/
				Put	/pʊt/		/pʊd/
				Flute	/flu:t/		/flu:d/ /flɜ:d/
2	Voicing of /p/ to /b/	Plosive consonant (bilabial) Voiced vs voiceless consonant	170	Zip	/zɪp/		/zɪb/ /tsɪb/ /sɪb/

FRICATIVE CONSONANT

The second most common error made by higher proficiency students is fricative consonants, with dental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/ holding the highest frequency. For example, /ð/ was substituted with /d/, and /**ð**ɪs/ was read as /**d**ɪs/. The consonant /θ/ was substituted with /t/ and /f/, and /**θ**ɪk/ was pronounced as /**t**ɪk/ and /tiː**θ**/ was pronounced as /tiː**f**/.

FIGURE 3. Pronunciation Errors According to Fricative Consonants

Substitution of /ð/ with /d/	Fricative consonant (dental)	144	This	/ðɪs/		/dɪs/
			Their	/ðeər/	/ðer/	/deɑːr/ /deɪr/ /deər/ /der/
			Mother	/mʌðər/		/mɑːdə/ /mʌdə/ /mʌdər/ /mɑːdər/
			Breath	/briːð/		/bred/
			Father	/fɑːðər/		/fɑːdə/
			There	/ðeər/		/der/ /de/
Substitution of /θ/ with /t/	Fricative consonant (dental)	122	Thick	/θɪk/		/tɪg/ /tɪk/
			Thirsty	/θɜːsti/		/tɜːsti/ /tɜːsti/
			Through	/θruː/		/truː/ /truːf/

The possible reason is that dental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/ are absent in the Chinese language. Therefore, the closest sounding fricatives are used as substitutes. In the errors of alveolar and labiodental fricatives, the majority are the devoicing of /z/ to /s/ and of /v/ to /f/, respectively. Another common error of labiodentals fricative was the substitution of /v/ with /w/, such as /**v**et/ being pronounced as /**w**et/. A common strategy for L2 learners to produce phonemes that do not exist in their L1 is to substitute similar phonemes from their L1 (Zhang & Yin, 2009). Given that the consonant /v/ is absent in Mandarin, the closest substitution of a familiar /w/ present in Mandarin and English was used. Chinese speakers in Phoon, Abdullah and MacLagan (2013) occasionally replaced the consonant /v/ with /w/ as well, such as /**v**az/ with /**w**az/. Fricative consonants also held the highest frequency amongst the pronunciation errors in Shak, Lee and Stephen (2016).

FIGURE 4. Pronunciation Errors According to Short Monophthong

Substitution of /ʌ/ with /ə/	Short monophtong	87	Love	/lʌv/	/ləf/
			Just	/dʒʌst/	/dʒəs/ /dʒəst/

SHORT MONOPTHONG

Short monophthong is the third most common type of error of students. In this category, the most common error is the substitution of /ʌ/ with /ə/. The low mid-central vowel /ʌ/ absent in the Chinese language is substituted with the mid-central vowel /ə/ (schwa), which is closest to /ə˞/, the mid-central vowel in Chinese. The short monophthong /ə/ is often mispronounced as /ɑː/. For example, /səʊfə/ was pronounced as /sɒf**ɑ**ː/ and /deɪtə/ as /deɪt**ɑ**ː/. This method could be an influence from the Malay language, in which the letter a‖ often represents the sound /a/. Consequently, students immediately made the same associations in the English language. Substituting /æ/ with /e/ is another short monophthong with numerous errors made. For example, /p**æ**n/ was read as /p**e**n/ and /**æ**pəl/ was read as /**e**pəl/. Although the vowel /æ/ is not

present in Mandarin, there is an open-mid vowel /ê/, the position of which is between the English vowel /e/ and /æ/. This condition may explain students' inability to distinguish between the two.

PLOSIVE CONSONANT

The subjects also commonly made errors in plosive consonants, particularly with the alveolar consonant /t/, which had the highest frequency. The phoneme /t/ was devoiced and substituted to /d/, an example of which would be pronouncing /kæ**t**/ as /kæ**d**/. The bilabial consonant /p/ was also often mispronounced as /b/. For example, /dɪ**p**/ was read as /dɪ**b**/. One possible explanation is that plosive consonants do not exist in Mandarin as syllable-final consonants.

FINAL CONSONANT DELETION

Students often eliminated the final consonants of the words in the reading-aloud test. Final consonants that were deleted include the consonants /l/, /t/, /d/ and /k/. Several examples would be reading owl‖ as /aʊ/ rather than /aʊ**l**/, and reading elephant‖ as /elɪfən/ instead of /elɪfən**t**/. Mandarin syllables mainly end with a vowel, and the only two possible end syllable consonant sounds in Mandarin are /ŋ/ and /n/ compared with the 20 in English (i.e. /b/, /p/, /d/, /t/, /g/, /k/, /v/, /f/, /ð/, /θ/, /z/, /s/, /ʒ/, /ʃ/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/, /dʒ/ and /tʃ/). This situation could justify students' inability to accurately pronounce end consonants because of their absence as final syllables in their mother tongue. Phoon, Abdullah and MacLagan (2013) indicated that one of the Chinese consonant realisations from their study is the omission of the final /l/. For example, /smɔl/ was read as /smɔ/.

POSSIBLE FACTORS CAUSING PRONUNCIATION ERRORS

MOTHER TONGUE INTERFERENCE

Data from the questionnaire indicated that Mandarin is the most frequently used language amongst the students. Moreover, Mandarin is the main language of communication at home and in school for 62.5% and 100%, respectively, of the students. A total of 62.5%, 31.25% and 6.2% of the students grew up speaking Mandarin, Cantonese and English, respectively. The data also indicated that students mainly speak Mandarin inside and outside of the school. Meanwhile, 62.5% of the students agreed that Mandarin affects their pronunciation in English. This result can also be supported by the outcome of the interview, which established amongst the five respondents that mother tongue interference is one of the main factors contributing to their inaccurate pronunciation. The majority of the errors occurred as a result of the absence of certain English phonemes in the Chinese sound system. Beardsmore stated that learners' difficulties in a second language, including phonology, are due to the interference of habits from the mother tongue (as cited in Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). The more the resemblance between the first and second language, the lesser difficulties will be faced in the L2 acquisition and vice versa (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). A common strategy for L2 learners to produce the phonemes that do not exist in their L1 is to substitute similar phonemes from their L1 (Zhang & Yin, 2009).

LACK OF INPUT AND USAGE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The interviewees stated that one of the factors contributing to students' inaccuracy of pronunciation is the lack of exposure to the English language, in relation to exposure from the media, family's background and usage of English at home. The respondents mentioned that the

younger generation does not read and listen to materials in English, thereby contributing to the problem. This statement can be partially supported by the result of the questionnaire, in which 56.25% of the students never watch the news in English, while only 6.25% of the students do so daily. Although all the subjects watch movies or videos in English, 87.5% of them depend on subtitles when doing so. The degree of learners' daily exposure to the language is a determinant of the pace at which learners are able to improve their pronunciation (Zhang & Ying, 2009). The factor regarding the effect of students' family background and usage of English at home could be supported by their minimal use of English based on the results of the questionnaires.

LACK OF ATTENTION ON THE PRONUNCIATION ELEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

Although 87.5% of the students indicated that pronunciation is taught in their classrooms, four out of five of the interview respondents (i.e. teachers) stated that they seldom or nearly do not teach pronunciation in their classrooms and not as a standalone lesson. All interview respondents acknowledged that the pronunciation element is not given sufficient attention in classrooms and often sidelined to cater to other elements of the English language, on top of 78% of the students agreeing to this statement. A total of 90% of the students also agree that in classrooms, reading and writing are given considerable emphasis. Moreover, time constraint was an emerging theme amongst all respondents. Given that current academics is exam-oriented, numerous reading and writing elements should be covered in the classroom in limited time to prepare the students for their exams.

Teachers are aware that the pronunciation element is part of the syllabus, but they have no choice but to make it secondary owing to the limited time and large enrollment in their classrooms. The interview also indicated that the lack of reading-aloud activities, dictation and spelling activities affect students' pronunciation. The reduction of dictation of spelling was said to be one of the factors because the belief is that these activities contribute to the listening skill. That is, as students listen, they are able to know the pronunciation; when they do not listen, there is no input and, hence, no output. Liang (2015) explained that listening and speaking are language skills closely integrated and simultaneously occurring.

The habit formation of incorrect pronunciation since childhood is said to be one of the reasons that contribute to students' pronunciation errors. Based on experience, the respondents said that students who are repeatedly exposed or drilled with the wrong pronunciation since they were young had difficulty accepting the correct pronunciation when corrected. They likewise experienced difficulty changing, often returning to their old habit. This situation indicates that input from teachers could be a contributing factor.

CONCLUSION

The substantial demand for English-speaking proficiency in employment has justified the need for a reflection on the teaching of pronunciation in schools. The pronunciation element is often disregarded in classrooms owing to time constraints. Therefore, given that this study identifies the common errors of students, educators could effectively use the limited time by directly addressing the students' common errors. This endeavour will enable the teaching of pronunciation to be less time consuming and more effective and students could also reduce their English pronunciation errors and result in more accurate use of the language. Lastly, the more understanding of the factors affecting the pronunciation of speakers, the easier for teachers to structure their teaching to improve the learners' pronunciation accuracy (Singer, 2006).

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