Russian Learners’ Acquisition Features of Chinese Tones

Lijun Zhao

School of International Cultural Exchanges, Dalian University of Technology, China
laurendlut@hotmail.com

Abstract

Tone is an important aspect of speech in standard Chinese language. Acquisition of Chinese tones is directly related to the learner’s speaking level. There is little research published on Russian learners’ acquisition of Chinese tones, therefore a group of students from Belarus were chosen as a sample for this investigation. Abundant data and results were gained from their demonstration over a period of one and a half years. As regards their tones, we determined that the main errors made by Russian students are errors of changing tone categories. The acquisition order from easy to difficult is tone 1, tone 4, tone 2 and tone 3. The reasons for the errors and the teaching countermeasures are analyzed and explained within this paper.

Index Terms: tone

1. Introduction

The acquisition of tones is both the most difficult and the most important aspect of Russian learners’ speech in Chinese. Sound acquisition is an important part in the theory of acquisition of Chinese language. Chinese language is a tonal language, and the acquisition of tones is quite different among different learners, such as those from Japan, Korea, Thailand, the U.K. the U.S.A., Russia, other European countries, African countries, and so on. Russian learners have their own foreign accent in their Chinese speech, which is different even from that of other learners from Europe.

At present, research in this field contains weaknesses, and one of these is a lack of attention to acquisition research of some group learners of Chinese language. It is seen from the statistics table below that articles about sound acquisition of Russian learners are very few. They only account for 1.1% of the total essays published from 1977-2007, which is too low in contrast with the percentage of English ones, which are 22.5% (See Table 1).

2. Methods

Sound acquisition research on Russian learners is so weak, let alone research on their tone acquisition. Specific and in-depth studies are far fewer. Russian learners include mainly the students from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. The group we investigated is composed of 11 year-2 students from Belarus who major in Chinese language. They are all round the age of twenty. The results from our long-term survey have great value both in theory and in practice.

Tone acquisition refers to the process of learning and gaining the skill of tones under the teacher’s guidance. According to one questionnaire we made, 91% of the Russian group regarded tones as the most difficult aspect of the three aspects of Chinese sound, which consist of initials, finals, and tones. The learners can pronounce quite well except for the final ü, which is wrongly pronounced as a compound vowel ‘iu’ by 36% of learners. However, they show quite different tone levels from each other. Some are very foreign, but some are particularly native. It is said that “the foreign accent comes from tones or higher-level phonetic elements, rather than from the initials and finals”. The following are the proportions of each grade: native speakers account for 9%, excellent ones account for 36%, fine learners account for 18%, and the ones with strong foreign accent account for 36%. We found commonalities in their errors through their test record together with their daily work performance tracking. By listening to their test record (Including 3 tasks, which are reading a given short passage, answering questions with the given words and talking based on a given topic) and classifying the errors, we got the following results.

3. Results

Through these tests we have explored the features of tones of Russian learners, reasons for their errors, and teaching strategies.

In teaching Chinese sound to foreigners, tones are always difficult and important, but the difficulty isn't the same for all foreigners. It is easy for Japanese, Koreans, Thais, and Singaporeans. This can be proved by their high acquisition efficiency. Africans are not bad. Europeans and Americans are not as good as others. Russians are not good, either.

It is found that most excellent students are good at speech, including their tones. The main errors found in the excellent students from Belarus are the errors of tone 3 and tone 2, and then tone 4 and tone 1, while the failures made errors on tone 4, tone 3, tone 2, and then tone 1. So, tone 4 is easy for good learners, but tone 3 remains difficult, which is the main error of good learners. Tone 2 is difficult for all the students. Tone 1 is easy for them all if only they can keep the correct pitch.

3.1. Acquisition of tone 1

In the excellent learners, only one girl made an error on tone 1, who pronounced it as tone 4. See below.

(1) 忍伤 (sad): běishāng
(2) 安全 (safe): ānquān
(3) 之所以 (reason why): zhīshǐ yǐ
(4) 商量 (discuss): shāngliáng
(5) 妈妈 (mum): māmā

Table 1. State of Languages Concerned in Phonetic Research of TCFL 1977-2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Russian</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Korean</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>Thai</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total paper</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion (%)</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the weak learners can pronounce tone 1 correctly, but some cannot, and they also produce other kinds of errors. They pronounce tone 1 as tone 3, which is mostly found in tone 1 and tone 3 or combinations. For example,
3.2. Acquisition of tone 4

Errors on tone 4 are frequently seen. They fall into two types:

3.2.1. Change tone 4 to tone 2

(1) 让他 (let him): ràng tā
(2) 以后 (later): yǐ hòu
(3) 为什么 (why): wèishénme
(4) 欺骗了 (cheated): qī piánle
(5) 要不是 (if it were not for): yào bù shì
(6) 你的朋友 (ask your friend): nǐ de péngyǒu
Most of these errors are seen in tone 4 and tone 4 combinations, which account for 50% of all the errors on tone 4 errors. The errors that are seen in tone 4 and the neutral tone combinations account for 30%.

3.2.2. Change tone 4 to tone 3

(1) 地震 (earthquake): dì zhèn
(2) 重要 (important): zhòng yào
(3) 这么想 (think so): zhēnme xiǎo ng
(4) 饭菜 (meal): fàn cài
(5) 发电站 (power station): fā diàn zhàn
(6) 要不要 (would you like or not): yào bù yào
It is similar to error type 1, because it is also frequently found in tone 4 and tone 4 combinations and then tone 4 and neutral tone combinations.

Additionally, when tone 4 is the last syllable of a word, occasionally it is pronounced as tone 1. For example,

(1) 环境 (environment): huán jìng
(2) 麻将 (mahjong): mǎ jiàng
It is thus clear that tone 4 is difficult for the Russian beginners because of its high pitch with a sharp fall. If the pitch is not high enough, starting from point 3, it will change to tone 2 (35). If it starts from point 2, it will probably change to tone 3 (214). When it starts correctly from point 5, it is possible that it will not be lowered.

The good learners acquired tone 4, so it is learnable. Beginners must practice much in the period of learning tones. One must remember these two points: start from point 5 and fall drastically without any rise.

3.3. Acquisition of tone 2

The errors on tone 2 are common. They are commonly changed to tone 1. For example,

(1) 钩上了 (hooked on): gōu shàng le
(2) 觉得 (feel): jué dé
(3) 还是 (or): hái shì
(4) 原因 (reason): yuán yín
(5) 心急 (impatient): xīn jí

In these errors, the combinations of tone 2 and the neutral tone account for 50%. It is considered in many articles that the problem on tone 2 is just that the learners cannot make the sound high enough. It is true, however, in many wrong examples, that tone 2 is changed to tone 34 or tone 45. So, some do not get to the high terminal point of pitch 5, and some start point 5 at too high of a pitch. The learners must begin from point 3 and rise to the high point 5. They need to remember it and practice more until they can use it correctly in a sentence or a conversation.

Errors of tone 2 have some other patterns, too. For example, it is changed to tone 4.

(1) 麻将 (mahjong): mǎ jiàng
(2) 叫吧 (come straight to the point): zhào bā
(3) 原子弹 (atomic bomb): yuán zi dàn
In this situation, there is another syllable with tone 4 or tone 1. The two tones both start the pitch from point 5, which affects tone 2 and change it to tone 4.

One or two learners change tone 2 to tone 3:

(1) 能源 (energy resources): néngyuán
(2) 核能 (nuclear power): hé néng
This occurred in the combinations of tone 2 and tone 2. The former tone ends with pitch point 5, and then the pitch has to come back to point 3 to start the latter syllable, so the former one rises first then falls later, which is similar to the pronunciation of tone 3.

For the latter two types of errors, the teachers should remind the learners not to let the tones of adjacent syllables affect the pronunciation of the given syllable. The simple way to correct this is to pronounce the word syllable by syllable, and then connect them correctly.

3.4. Acquisition of tone 3

The full tone contour of tone 3 is 214, but in actual sound context, most of them are pronounced as a half-tone 3 (21) or tone 2 (35). This is an essential point for teaching because it is not only a tone with a turn, but it also has many changes according to its sound context. It is like the difficulty of learning the tone sandhi of “什么”, “在” and neutral tones. Tone 3 causes much difficulty for Russian learners.

There are three types of errors on tone 3. The former two types are mainly from the failures and the latter two types are mostly from the excellent learners.

3.4.1. Change tone 3 to tone 4

(1) 洗衣服 (wash clothes): xǐ yī fú
(2) 整天 (all day): zhěng tiān
(3) 很多人 (many people): hěnduō rén
(4) 污染了 (polluted): wū rǎn le
3.4.2. Change tone 3 to tone 2

(1) 五 (five): wǔ gè
(2) 怎么 (how): zěnme
(3) 跟你说 (talk to you): gēn nǐ shuō
(4) 你们 (you): nǐmen
(5) 酒吧 (pub): jiǔ bā
(6) 两次 (twice): liǎng cì

The former four are from the failures and were related to the combination of tone 3 and tone 1. As for the combination of tone 3 and the neutral tone, its neutral contour is 44, which is quite high, too. In the rest of the examples, the errors were made because the learners hadn’t mastered the reading skill of double tone 3 strings.

3.4.3. Change tone 3 to tone 1

(1) 小心 (be careful): xiǎoxīn
(2) 你们 (some people): nǐmen
(3) 站 (to master): zhāng wò
(4) 也要 (also want to): yě yào
(5) 比较少 (less): bǐ jiāoshǎo

These errors occur when the learners try to simplify the pronunciation of tone 3. They omit the fall and the rise, and the tone gets shorter, too. So, this type of error is more common among good learners than among failures. When the learners want to quicken their speech, the teacher needs to remind them to maintain accuracy in this sense.

The errors on tone 3 are more complicated sometimes. The tone shows a big instability. Take 假如 as an example. Some say jiàrú and some say jiàrǔ. There are two possible errors for one word. Another example is the word 发展. It can be wrongly pronounced fāzhǎn or fāzhūn.

Simply put, the three types of errors on tone 3 can be divided into three classes: just to fall, just to rise, and to omit any turns. How does one avoid these errors? Teachers should teach the complete third tone contour to the learners firstly with the help of a tone gesture so that the learners can remember the fall-rise tone. Then, we teach the half tone 3, which is most useful. At last, we teach tone 3 sandhi. They can probably learn it naturally. Finally, remember to enhance the practice of the combinations such as tone 3 and tone 1, tone 3 and neutral tone, tone 3 and tone 4. Practice makes perfect. It has been proven that the acquisition of tone 3 can be successful.

4. Discussion

The sample in the research is small, but it can reflect the true performance of the acquisition of tones of Russian learners. The results certainly can’t cover every situation of Russian students, but it is basic research and it is representative. On that basis, the solutions for teaching tones to Russian learners are practical.

5. Conclusions

All in all, Russian learners’ acquisition of Chinese tones contains the following features (See Table 2).

5.1. The tone category error is the most prominent error.

There are two other types of errors, which are of the contour and the vocal tonal range, but the category error is the main one as far as Russian learners are concerned.

5.2. The difficulty sequence of the Chinese tones from easy to hard for Russians is tone 1, tone 4, tone 2 and tone 3

To sum up the solutions mentioned above, the teachers have to emphasize the necessary key points, declare the importance of the tones, make them quit linking sounds in a foreign way, master the pitch and rhythm, and practice tones step by step. If teachers and students can achieve these, their tone acquisition will certainly be successful.
5.3. The strategies for teaching and learning Chinese tones for Russian learners

5.3.1. Lay a good foundation for tone acquisition.

Since inaccurate tones are less functional in conveying meaning than are initials and finals, many students overlook the significance of learning them. There is often not enough time both for the teacher to teach and for the students to practice. According to one Swedish boy, his nearly one-year study of Chinese pronunciation and singing contributed to his native pronunciation. Spending much time on laying tone foundation will save students much more time in their further studies.

5.3.2. Teaching tones must follow the principle of gradual improvement.

It is advisable to start learning from monosyllable, disyllable, multi-syllable, neutral, and sandhi of “一” and “不” before moving on to sentences. We tried to use combinations composed of different tone categories to train the learners, but it is a good test measure rather than a good way to teach. It is probably more effective to use the listen-pronounce approach instead, though this needs further testing.

5.3.3. Long-term supervision is necessary to tone acquisition.

The fundamental phase is certainly critical to tone acquisition, but it is not enough. Tone skills need time and patience, too.

5.3.4. To point out the reasons for errors and the strategies is essential.

The main reason for the errors is the difference between Chinese and Russian languages. Russian is a non-tonal language, which has a negative effect on tone acquisition for Russian learners. Another reason for errors is Russian intonation. Some of the Russian learners won’t pronounce tone 1 with a 66 or even higher pitch without the influence of their mother language intonation. Many tone errors occurring at the end of a sentence are due to the same thing. As for the learners, they should keep paying attention to their tones, remembering the tones of the characters and pronouncing them correctly. They should practice not only the syllables and words alone, but also in more complex contexts like sentences and conversations. Quality is more important than fluency. Listening more and imitating more are the best ways to learn tones. As Mr. Lu said, “Tones are unconquerable but by imitation and good memory.”

6. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my office director, Ms. Xu, for her continue attention and the staff of TAL 2012, especially Mr. Gu for his kind help. It is also my great honor that this research is supported by “the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities.”

7. References