



# A Study on English Phonetic Acquisition from the Perspective of Transfer Theory

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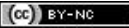
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### **Abstract**

English, as an international lingual Franca, has become one of the most widely-used languages in the world. Mastering English doesn't just mean getting information from all over the world; it also means communicating and expressing yourself with people from different cultural backgrounds. So far, EFL has received much attention in many counties. As an indispensable part of language acquisition, pronunciation learning should be valued at the beginning of foreign language study, for example, the kindergarten stage. This paper aims to illustrate the negative transfer of the mother tongue on English pronunciation acquisition from the segmental and suprasegmental aspects. Based on the studies and analysis, it hopes to inspire teachers to arouse awareness of the differences between English and Chinese pronunciation among learners, making students acquire native-like pronunciation actively and positively. It's suggested that EFL learners can their pronunciation and intonation through practice.

**Keywords:** contrastive analysis; transfer theory; English phonetic acquisition

### **1. Introduction**

Native language, like a schema or knowledge that existed in the learners' mind, plays an important role in the process of second language acquisition. Inevitably, language transfer happens because the native language influences the learning of the target language. Gass & Selinker (2001) mentioned that language transfer can be divided into two categories: positive transfer and negative transfer. If two languages are similar, then the native language facilitates the second language acquisition so that students can master the target language quickly or easily. In this case, we call it a "positive transfer". If the mother tongue interferes with the second language acquisition, we then call it a "negative transfer".

Language transfer takes place in almost all aspects of language acquisition. That is to say, during the process of second language acquisition, learners will unconsciously recall their mother tongue and compare the two languages, bringing the knowledge and habits of their mother tongue into any process of target language acquisition (i.e., pronunciation, lexical, and grammatical structure).

Previous studies investigate language transfer in the teaching process of grammar, reading, and translation courses. Despite this common lore, considerably work in the field of second language acquisition has been done in the area of syntax than in the area of phonology (Gass & Selinker, 2001). In this paper, the importance of pronunciation teaching is reiterated. Abercrombie (1949) emphasized the importance of pronunciation acquisition and argued that it is difficult to teach a foreign language to any type of student, for any purpose, by any means with little attention paid to pronunciation. Without adequate pronunciation training, students may experience misunderstandings and even breakdowns in verbal communication, which may further adversely, affect their self-confidence in language learning (Sifakis & Sougari, 2005). This article aims to investigate transfer errors in pronunciation from both phonetic and phonological levels and provide implications to English language instructors in China.

## 2. Negative Transfer of Chinese Pinyin System on English Pronunciation Acquisition

Chinese and English belong to two different language systems. The former is ideographic, while the latter is phonographic. And the differences in their phonological systems are huge. The English sound system includes two parts: segments and suprasegments. Segments include individual vowels and consonants, and suprasegments consist of stress, pitch contour or intonation, and rhythm (Seferoglue, 2005).

Modern Chinese is composed of initials (shengmu), vowels (yunmu), and tones, including 22 initials, 39 vowels, and 4 tonal types. Chinese learners begin to learn English in primary school. At that time, they have already mastered the Pinyin system to some extent, thus interfering with their English pronunciation if teachers do not tell them the differences between the sound systems.

For example, they would note "三克油" (sankeyou) besides "thank you" because they don't know how to produce the sound /θ/.

### 2.1 Phonetic perspective

#### 2.1.1 Vowels

English vowels are not consistent with the Chinese ones because some English vowels do not exist in Chinese vowels, such as the front vowel /e/. When presenting these sounds to students, instructors should make it clear about the height of the tongue raise and the tenseness of the vowel. In Chinese, there is no distinction between a long vowel and a short vowel (also called a tense vowel and a lax vowel). In this vein, students should pay attention to sounds like /ɪ/ and /i:/, /ʊ/, and /u:/. Examples are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Examples of the vowel.

Long vowel	Short vowel	Chinese
/i:/ (beat, deep, least, leave, feet, sheep)	/ɪ/ (bit, dip, list, live, fit, ship)	Yi(一, 衣)
/u:/ (boot, foot, food, fool, shoot)	/ʊ/ (book, good, foot, full, shook)	Wu(乌, 屋)

Besides, the Chinese diphthongs are different from the English ones. English diphthongs involve a movement from one element to another, thus the combining vowels are produced. However, Chinese diphthongs don't have to glide; they are produced either as a whole or individually. Students should notice English diphthongs like /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /oʊ/, which is similar but different from Chinese pinyin /ei/(诶), /ai/(爱), /ou/(欧). Words like bay[bɛɪ], pay[pɛɪ], toe[tɔʊ] are mispronounced as pinyin [bɛɪ] (贝), [pɛɪ] (陪), [tɔʊ] (透). Attention should be paid to the examples shown in table 2.

Table 2: Examples of diphthong.

/ɛ/ and /eɪ/	/eɪ/ and /ɪ/	/aʊ/ and /ɑ/	/u/ and /ʊə/
get, gate	gave, give	bound, bond	two, tour
let, late	fail, fill	cloud, clod	shoe, sure
said, say	sake, sick	pound, pond	pull, poor
sell, sale	whale, will	mouse, moss	

IPS 国际音标	拼音	中文	英文
/i/	i	里 (lǐ)	k <u>i</u> ck
/e/			m <u>e</u> n
/ʌ/	a	啊 (ā)	b <u>u</u> g
/ʊ/	u	路 (lù)	b <u>oo</u> k
/ə/			l <u>o</u> ck
/æ/			b <u>a</u> d
/eɪ/			l <u>ay</u>
/aɪ/	ai	爱 (ài)	t <u>y</u> pe

Table 3: Contrast between Chinese and English vowels

### 2.1.2 Consonant

One of the biggest problems when producing consonants is that Chinese tend to stress the consonant ending like /t/, /d/, and /g/ by adding the vowel /ə/ to a word with a consonant ending to ensure they heard and understood. Take “pig”, “big”, “and” for example, students are very likely to produce them as [pɪgə], [dɒgə], and [ændə]. Another problem is students can't pronounce /ð/, /θ/, and /v/ correctly because these sounds don't exist in the Chinese pinyin system and students don't fully understand or master the place of articulation. We may hear students say “I sink” [sɪŋk] instead of, “I think” [θɪŋk], [zæt] instead of [ðæt] in “that” /'veri/ for /'wəri/ in “very”, and /vet/ for /wet/ in “wet” in class, which may be laughed at by peers thus damage their self-confidence and lose interests in studying English. Yu (2004) also mentioned due to the existence of dialects, students and even teachers in Hubei province would feel it's hard to pronounce the nasal /n/, frequently they mix up “light” with “night”. Nonetheless, Students can master sounds that Chinese have similar counterparts like /b/, /p/, /d/, /t/, /g/ and /k/ correctly and easily.

To conclude, the comparisons between Chinese and English vowels as well as consonants are displayed in Tables 3 and 4.

IPS 国际音标	拼音	中文	英语
/b/	b	爸 ( <u>b</u> ɑ)	<u>b</u> e
/m/	m	妈 ( <u>m</u> ɑ)	<u>m</u> other
/w/	w	王 ( <u>w</u> ɑŋ)	<u>w</u> ait
/f/	f	法 ( <u>f</u> ɑ)	
/v/	v		<u>v</u> acation
/d/	d	打 ( <u>d</u> ɑ)	<u>d</u> og
/n/	n	拿 ( <u>n</u> ɑ)	<u>n</u> ew
/l/	l	拉 ( <u>l</u> ɑ)	<u>l</u> ay
/s/	s	苏 ( <u>s</u> u)	
/dz/	z	祖 ( <u>d</u> z <u>u</u> )	
/ts/	c	粗 ( <u>t</u> s <u>u</u> )	
/z/			<u>z</u> ero
/θ/			<u>th</u> ing
/ð/			<u>th</u> is

Table 4: Contrast between Chinese and English consonants

## 2.2 Phonological level

### 2.2.1 Stress

Stress can be divided into two types: word stress and sentence stress. For word stress, there are many words with more than one syllable in English, while every Chinese character only has one syllable, so students often feel confused when reading multi-syllable English words. In English, no stress or the incorrect placement of stress can mean something different or even nothing at all. The same word may experience class changes or even meaning changes when stress placement shifts from the first syllable to the second (Li, 2016). Some evidence is listed in table 5.

Table 5: Examples of stress.

Class changes	Meaning changes
discount	desert
export	conduct
insult	record
progress	subject
contrast	present

For sentence stress, Chinese learners are accustomed to stressing every syllable and every word in a sentence because in Chinese we give stress to every syllable in a sentence. In this vein, a negative transfer happens. However, native English speakers read sentences or paraphrase naturally with clear stressed syllables and unstressed syllables.

### 2.2.2 Intonation

Intonation is as important as pronunciation. From the lexical perspective, there are four tones for

each syllable in Chinese: the first high-level tone, the second rising tone, the third falling-rising tone, and the fourth falling tone. Each tone for a syllable has a meaning and stands for a character, which is different from the English language. From the syntax perspective, Chinese students can understand and grasp the different meanings, attitudes, and emotions behind intonation within the context. For example, "This is her skirt." (Falling tone) stands for a statement. "This is your book." (Raising tone) stands for a question.

### **2.2.3 Liaison and Incomplete Plosion**

Liaison refers to the situation when there is a word ending with a consonant and the following word starting with a vowel, and we don't put any pause between the two words, but instead, we link the two sounds or connect them so that they sound like one syllable or one word. Whereas Chinese emphasizes every syllable in a sentence and there is no liaison in the Chinese language, a negative transfer occurs. With careful attention, English phrases like "good morning" and "hold on" can be pronounced correctly. However, when reading longer materials, such as poems or paraphrases, students are prone to reading word-by-word, and it's hard for them to read every word correctly.

Incomplete plosion happens when two plosives (/p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/) meet together or a plosive is followed by a fricative (e.g., /f/, /s/, /ʃ/). In this case, the pronunciation of the first plosive is incomplete—that is, just to form the stricture of the speech organs but not to release the compressed air and hold it for a quick pause until the complete plosion of the next sound. For example, phrases like "lap top," "sit down," etc., and sentences like "Let me have a look at the factory." In Chinese, there is no such thing as an incomplete plosion, so students should practice a lot when they produce such sounds.

## **3. Implications for English pronunciation Teaching**

### **3.1 Phonetic Perspective**

In the case of the phonetic perspective, by placing more emphasis on some phonemes, Chinese may exert a negative transfer on English pronunciation acquisition. Teachers need an ear sufficiently trained to recognize mistakes, then make it clear to students how the vocal organs work and make sure students know the right manner and place of articulation. A good understanding of the differences between English and Chinese will facilitate their phonetic learning. But bear in mind that phonetics is a technique for the teacher, and not a subject to be taught (Abercrombie, 1949). And phonetics is not equal to pronunciation.

### **3.2 Phonological Perspective**

In the case of the phonological perspective, paying attention to stress, intonation, liaison, and incomplete plosives, which don't occur in the Chinese sound system, however, it doesn't mean students must practice a lot to speak like a native speaker or a person with perfect pronunciation. The goal of English pronunciation teaching should be more practical, in other words, to be able to

understand and be understood. In modern society, it means we can get global information directly and can speak to the world. Teachers should first clarify that it is true that received pronunciation is socially the most advantageous of the dialects of England when used in that country; but outside England, in the rest of the English-speaking world (including Scotland), it carries with it no special privileges, though it is, of course, widely understood. Other forms of English are socially equal to Received Pronunciation in England, such as Scottish, Irish, and American dialects (Abercrombie, 1949). In this vein, instructors should encourage students and tell them it's unnecessary to be ashamed because of their non-native pronunciation.

### **3.3 Strategies in Real Teaching Situation**

The first thing to do in phonetics learning is to understand the similarities and differences between Chinese and English phonetics and to master the skills and abilities to listen to and distinguish sounds. Secondly, on this basis, repeated imitation should be carried out. By reading the words and sentences in English materials and comparing the phonetic differences between Chinese and English, the wrong pronunciation and intonation should be corrected to enhance the sense of language and to give full play to the dual effect of practising both the ear and the mouth. Therefore, when teaching students to imitate the English recording, they must be asked to read aloud with emotion and make sure that the pronunciation is accurate, then imitate the intonation and rhythm. In this way, students will form a complete impression of English pronunciation after long-term repeated training, and it can also help students to effectively grasp the rules of English pronunciation so that they have a good English accent.

### **4. Conclusion**

EFL learners will inevitably be influenced by their mother tongue in the process of second language acquisition, and this kind of transfer can be both positive and negative. Through contrastive analysis, this paper demonstrates some points worth noticing in the process of English language acquisition and gives inspiration to instructors. For example, instructors should attach great importance to the difference between the two sound systems, especially sounds that don't occur in Chinese, as well as the stress, intonation, and so on, to decrease this kind of negative transfer. Besides, Bai&Yuan(2018) also indicated that instructors have the responsibility to help learners to build a positive attitude toward language learning and arouse their interest in pronunciation practice.

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