

ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN LEARNERS' ACQUISITION OF CHINESE TONES

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Introduction

The acquisition of tones is both the most difficult and the most important for 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).

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

	English	French	Russian	Spanish	Korean	Japanese	Thai	Vietnamese
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Total paper	107	7	5	4	113	97	17	13
Proportion (%)	22.5	1.5	1.1	0.8	23.8	20.4	3.6	2.7

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.

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.

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) 悲伤(sad): bèishāng
- (2) 安全(safe): ànquán
- (3) 之所以(reason why): zhìsuǒyǐ
- (4) 商量(discuss): shàngliàng
- (5) 妈妈(mum): māmā

Some of the weak learners can pronounce tone 1 correctly, but some can not, and they also produce other kinds of errors. They pronounce tone 1

as tone 3, which is mostly found in the first and the third or the fourth combinations. For example,

- (1) 经济 (economics): jīngjì
- (2) 干净的(clean): gǎnjìngde
- (3) 十一个(eleven): shíyīgè
- (4) 乌克兰(Ukraine): wūkèlán

However, when tone 1 is at the end of a word without any effect on the intonation, their pronunciation is accurate. For example, 很多,比如说, 恐慌,认真,首先,应该,离婚,etc.

In conclusion, tone 1 is not hard to acquire. It is much easier when it is at the end of a word, but it can easily transform to tone 4 or tone 3 when it is the first syllable of a word because it is difficult to begin with the correct pitch. However, as long as one can find the right pitch and keep it all the way, there should be no problem.

Acquisition of tone 4

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

Change tone 4 to tone 2

- (1) 让他(let him): rángtā
- (2) 以后(later): yǐhóu
- (3) 为什么(why): wéishénme
- (4) 欺骗了(cheated): qǐpiánle
- (5) 要不是(if it were not for): yáobúshì
- (6) 问你的朋友(ask your friend): wènnǐdepéngyǒu

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%.

Change tone 4 to tone 3

- (1) 地震(earthquake): dǐzhèn
- (2) 重要(important): zhǒngyào
- (3) 这么想(think so): zhěmexiǎng
- (4) 饭菜(meal): fàncǎi
- (5) 发电站(power station): fādiǎnzhàn
- (6) 要不要(would you like or not): yǎobúyǎo

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): huánjīng
- (2) 麻将(mahjong): màjiāng

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 can master tone 4. 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.

Acquisition of tone 2

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

- (1) 迷上了(hooked on): mīshàngle
- (2) 觉得(feel): juéde

- (3) 还是(or): hāishì
- (4) 原因(reason): yuānyìn
- (5) 心急(impatient): xīnjī
- (6) 别的方面(in other respects): biēdefāngmiàn
- (7) 便宜(cheap): piānyí
- (8) 想法(idea): xiǎngfǎ
- (9) 完了(be over): wánle

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 can not 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 position 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.

- 麻将(mahjong): màjiāng
- 直说吧(come straight to the point): zhìshuōba
- 原子弹(atomic bomb): yuánzǐdàn

In this situation, there is another syllable with tone 4 or tone 1, which start the pitch from point 5. This type of combination affects tone 2 and change it to tone 4.

One or two learners change tone 2 to tone 3:

- (1) 能源(energy resources): nēngyuán
- (2) 核能(nuclear power): hē 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.

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 “一”, “不” 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.

Change tone 3 to tone 4

洗衣服(wash clothes): xiyīfu

整天(all day): zhèngtiān

很多人(many people): hènduōrén

污染了(polluted): wūrànle

Table 2. *Russian Learners' Tone Errors & Error Type*

Subjects(11)	Errors Statistics	Conclusi on 1	Conclusion 2
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		Tone 1	Tone 2	Tone 3	Tone 4	Difficulty	Tone Difficulty Sequenc e:	Errors type		
Good	Excellent (1)	0	2	3	1	Tone 1<		Original	In errors	
	Average (4)	7	18	20	10	Tone 4< Tone 2<	Error 1		Error 2	
	Total	7	20	23	11	Tone 3	Tone 1		Tone 4	Tone 3
Poor	Inferior (2)	6	3	11	5	Tone 1<	Tone 2		Tone 1	Tone 4
	Poor (4)	1 2	23	23	41	Tone 2< Tone 3<	Tone 3	Tone 4	Tone 2	
	Total	1 8	26	34	46	Tone 4	Tone 4	Tone 3	Tone 2	

可以吧(can you): kèyǐba

永远(forever): yǒngyuán

好几件(quite a few): hàojǐjiàn

哪儿写的(where written): nǎrxiěde

想法(idea): xiǎngfǎ

It can be seen via observation of the first two examples that it is the too-high pitch(55) that caused the errors in most combinations 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.

Change tone 3 to tone 2

五个(five): wúgè

怎么(how): zěnmē

跟你说(talk to you): gēnnǐshuō

你们(you): nǐmen

酒吧(pub): jiǔbā

两次(twice): liǎngcì

The former four are from the failures and were related to the combination of tone 3 and the neutral tone. Tone 3 is the only twisted tone in Chinese tones, and it is truly hard to pronounce. One has to fall firstly and rise again. If one fails to fall, it will change to tone 2. The errors in the latter two are from good learners and are not very common. So it can be expected that the learners can improve and will master tone 3 one day.

3.4.3. Change tone 3 to tone 1

小心(be carefull): xiǎoxīn

有的人(some people): yǒuderén

掌握(to master): zhǎngwò

也要(also want to): yěyào

比较少(less): bǐjiàoshǎo

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

jiārú. There are two possible errors for one word. Another example is the word 发展. It can be wrongly pronounced fāzhàn or fǎzhān.

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.

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.

Conclusions

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

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.

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.

The strategies for teaching and learning Chinese tones for Russian learners

Lay a good foundation for tone acquisition.

Since inaccurate tones are less functional in conveying meaning than 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 pronouncing and singing contributed to his native pronunciation. Spending enough time on laying tone foundation will save students much more time in their further studies.

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.

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.

To point out the reasons for errors and the strategies are 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.”

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