Russian Learners’ Acquisition Features of Chinese Tones

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Introduction

The acquisition of tones is both the most difficult and the most important aspect of Russian learners’ speech in Chinese. 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Subjects(1)</th>
<th>Tone 1</th>
<th>Tone 2</th>
<th>Tone 3</th>
<th>Tone 4</th>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Sequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total paper</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (%)</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects(2)</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects (%)</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects(3)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects (%)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects(4)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects (%)</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects(5)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects (%)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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”. These Russian learners can be divided into four grades: native speakers (9%), excellent ones (36%), fine learners (18%), and the ones with strong foreign accent (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.

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.

The strategies for teaching and learning Chinese tones for Russian learners should include:

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. Spending much time on laying tone foundation will save students much more time in their further studies. 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. Long-term supervision is necessary to tone acquisition. 3. 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. Another reason for errors is Russian intonation. 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.”

References

2. Liu Yang, “Reviews on Acquisition of Chinese Tones in Last Ten Years”, Modern Chinese, 2009.11.