INTRODUCTION

In functional grammar, matters of focus are treated as assigning pragmatic function to linguistic expression. In languages like English, focus is always realized by highlighting a particular piece of information against information already shared by the conversation participants. Focused items are always considered as bearing new information in discourse, which is neither inferable from the context nor shared by the interlocutors.

I. Focus realized by native speakers

A narrow focus is realized by expanding the pitch range of the on-focus stressed syllables, suppressing the pitch range of post-focus syllables, and leaving the pitch range of pre-focus syllables largely intact.

II. Focus realized by Chinese EFL learners

☆ Chinese English learners’ speech are always perceived as ‘flat’ in intonation.
☆ In many learners’ performance the stress is realized by extending the length of the syllable rather than adjusting the pitch range.

II. How is this study different from the existing ones.

☆ Experimental method has been adopted.
☆ Learners’ dialects have been controlled. Only Chinese EFL learners speaking Beijing dialect are recorded.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

☆ Do Beijing EFL learners adopt the same method to realize narrow focus in English speech?
☆ Are alignments of $F_0$ peaks and valleys in and around focus produced by Beijing EFL learners the same with native speakers?
☆ Would listeners perceive the focus if $F_0$ adjustments are insignificant?

METHODOLOGY

Materials

☆ Short declarative sentences designed with or without a narrow focus.

Recording

☆ Sixteen Beijing EFL learners and two native speakers of American English
☆ Recording was conducted in quiet room with the microphone of Sennheiser PC166.

Data labeling and extraction

☆ Auto-segmentation software and refinement by hand
☆ $F_0$ was extracted and one syllable being selected ten points to normalize the duration and then averaged across all subjects to obtain the mean $F_0$ contours.

Grading

☆ One native speaker of American English was invited as the grader to evaluate each subject’s English pronunciations.

Focus effects on Beijing EFL learners’ $F_0$ contours

Alignments and shapes of $F_0$ contours

Figure 1 Mean $F_0$ contours produced by 16 Beijing subjects

Figure 2 Mean $F_0$ contours of stimuli with focus on sentence-initial

Figure 3 Mean $F_0$ contours of stimuli with focus on sentence-medial

Figure 4 Mean $F_0$ contours of stimuli with focus on sentence-final

Figure 5 Mean $F_0$ contours produced by a good speaker (M8, a) and a low achiever (F13, b)