

The Influence of Educational Background on Malaysian Chinese Learners' Mispronunciation of /l/ and /r/

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Abstract

Maintaining intelligibility among interlocutors while communicating in English remains a challenging task for many second or foreign language learners. This problem is attributable to many reasons, including learners' obstacles with pronunciation. The recurring report of Chinese learners having incomprehensible pronunciation of /l/ and /r/ in English words has engendered debate on various factors underlying the problem. Despite the extensive discussion of this issue, previous studies had overlooked educational background as a potential factor which could affect learners' pronunciation. Thus, this study investigated mispronunciations of /l/ and /r/ among Malaysian Chinese undergraduates vis-à-vis their educational background, namely Chinese-educated (CE) and non-Chinese educated (NCE). The study objectives were to determine CE and NCE learners' frequency of mispronunciation of English words containing /l/ and /r/ according to phoneme, phoneme position, and mispronunciation characteristics. To this end, a quantitative approach was employed to conduct the study. For data collection, two pronunciation word lists covering /l/ and /r/ in initial, medial, and final positions were provided to 20 CE and NCE undergraduates respectively for assessment purposes. The participants' pronunciations were recorded, transcribed and transformed into numerical data. The results of the study reveal that Chinese-educated Malaysian undergraduates tend to mispronounce English words containing /l/ in medial and final positions. Furthermore, words containing /l/ in the medial position tend to be substituted; while words with /l/ in the final position tend to be deleted or vocalized by the students. The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the teaching and learning of English pronunciation.

Keywords: English language learners, Chinese education, educational background, mispronunciation, /l/ and /r/ phonemes

1. Introduction

Being the most spoken language in the world, English is reported to be used by approximately 1.452 billion people around the world, either natively (372.9 million) or as a second language (1.080 billion) (Eberhard et al., 2022). The statistics glaringly reveal that the number of second language (L2) users of English has surpassed its first language user by 3.9 times. This further confirms English's significant role as a lingua franca or a contact language among people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Among ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) learners, however, communicating in English still remains challenging to many of them, particularly the pronunciation aspect of the language. To note, this problem is also evident among Chinese learners of English as they have been found to face difficulty to produce certain English sounds (Hamzah et al., 2017; Huang, 2017; Regalado, 2018; Ruan, 2013; Utami, 2020), and this problem has also hindered them to be understood by native speaker or other ESOL learners (Han, 2013). Therefore, the recurring report of Chinese learners having an unclear and incomprehensible pronunciation is considered to be worthy of scholarly attention and requires further research from a different perspective.

A search in the corpus database could easily discover academic article, blogging or write-up about Chinese learners' difficulties in English pronunciation, particularly on their obstacles in pronouncing the consonant /r/ in English sound (Hamzah et al., 2017; Ibrahim et al., 2007; Utami, 2020). Interestingly, Regalado (2018) found that quite a number of 'southern Chinese' could not pronounce the /r/ consonant where they substitute it with a /l/ consonant. Thus, having difficulty to distinguish /l/ and /r/ has been perceived "the most common error in Chinese speakers" (p. 53). This has given rise to the stereotypical view that Chinese speakers often mix up the consonant /r/ with consonant /l/. Those who possess such view frequently attribute this scenario to an imbalance of Chinese words formed by these two consonants. To a large extent, this view is deemed appropriate because there are more Chinese words with consonant /l/ than consonant /r/ in which the ratio of the former to the latter is approximately five to one (新华字典 Xinhua Dictionary, 2004). To note, there is less than 150 Chinese words which are formed using consonant /r/. Within a similar perspective, Kho (2011) claims that it is difficult for Chinese English learners to produce some English sounds as those sounds are not available in their native language's phoneme inventory system. Nonetheless, this view remains debatable because from the point of acoustic analysis, the tongue position involved in pronouncing these two consonants are distinctive. The alveolar lateral sound /l/ is produced with the tongue tip raised while the rest of the tongue remains down and permits air to escape over its sides. Whereas the alveolar retroflex or liquids /r/ sound is produced by curling the tip of the tongue back behind the alveolar ridge. Therefore, this argument justifiably rejects the former explanation of why some Chinese learners