In Search of an Effective Romanized Transcription System for Learning Chinese Pronunciation

Background. Learning to pronounce Chinese characters has always been a challenge for native English speakers for two reasons: 1) the Chinese language contains certain sounds that are not present in the English language and 2) due to the logographic nature of Chinese, romanized transcription systems have been developed to aid in the learning of Chinese pronunciation, however, most romanized transcription systems do not accurately represent Chinese sounds when read by native English speakers. In our present global community foreign language must be taught in methods that most efficiently reflect the needs of the target language learner. To adequately address these needs, Chinese language pedagogy in America and possibly other English speaking countries must shift to accommodate the target’s learner characteristics which includes developing a curriculum of learning Chinese pronunciation not by associating Chinese sounds with misrepresented Latin letters, but by allowing the transcription system flow naturally from the learner’s language.

Research Procedure. Noticing this hindrance from first hand experience and from other native English speakers in several elementary Chinese language classes, I chose to examine the five most popular romanized transcription systems for Chinese and test them on native English speakers with no prior knowledge of Chinese to see which one(s) produced the most standard pronunciation. The Scripts chosen were: Hanyu Pinyin, Tongyong Pinyin, the Wade-Giles System, the Yale System, and Gwoyeu Romatzyh. A survey instrument was compiled and administered to one hundred subjects in Los Angeles County, California. In order to better distinguish between common and differing sounds in English and Chinese, two sets of sentences were constructed for each of the scripts, one labeled “Easy” in which sentences constructed reflected the sounds that are found in both English and Chinese, and one labeled “Difficult” in which the sentences constructed reflected sounds that are not found at all in English that are present in Chinese. The test subjects were given one of the two sets (“Easy” or “Difficult”) for one script and read it aloud while their speech was recorded for later analyzation. In order to compose a more accurate survey, the subjects tested were instructed to read only one script’s set and no more so as not to gain a better understanding of what it may sound like if compared with other transcription systems. If more than two subjects mispronounced a word, all further mispronunciations of that word were counted as “mistakes” and the mistakes of all tested scripts were compared in both the “Easy” and “Difficult” sentences and compared.

Major Findings. The findings were quite interesting. The test subjects’ “pure” English mindset shed some light on how phonetic scripts could be improved to better assist the teaching of elementary Mandarin to native English speakers. It was found that the Yale system produced the most standard pronunciation of Chinese when read. This finding is very intriguing considering that the Yale system was compiled by Americans for American use during World War II to aid in communication with their Chinese allies. Just as the Yale system was developed from the learner’s perspective and from their language rather than teaching the soldiers the popular script at the time (the Wade-Giles system), we too can make language learning more efficient by using modern findings and integrating them into new curriculum for elementary learners of Mandarin as well as giving Chinese language teachers a sociolinguistic background for their target learner
group and thus making the process of teaching pronunciation more understandable and helpful to their students.

**Follow-up Study.** Since this research project, the pros and cons of the analyzed scripts have been assessed and have been used to develop a new script which has been tested on another one hundred subjects in Los Angeles County, California; and has shown to be even more effective than the Yale system when read by a native English speaker. Although this new script will not likely replace the widespread use of Hanyu Pinyin, it can be a helpful aid for tutoring curriculum, teacher development, and military use.

**References.**