The Effectiveness of On-line Training on Chinese Learners’ Perception of Chinese Tones

Significance of the study

Chinese is a tonal language. Tones play an important role in speech recognition, speech perception, and in developing clear patterns of speech production (Levis, 2007; Eskenazi, 1999). However, due to the lack of class time and individual differences in students’ errors in tone perception and production, the training on tones is inadequate in class. One way to compensate this lack of training may be to make students use on-line tools to their perception and production. This study was conducted to test the effectiveness of one of the on-line tools. The findings will help the instructors to decide whether to use the tool and how much time to spend on it.

Background

There is less than sufficient research that investigated effective tools to help students improve their perception of tones. However, there is much research on the effectiveness of computer-assisted pronunciation teaching (CAPT) in general. First of all, it improves the accuracy of both perception and production among learners. A wide variety of pronunciation-related features have been examined, including general pronunciation quality (Seferoǧlu, 2005); fluency (Hincks, 2005), vowels and consonants (Wang & Munro, 2004); intonation (Levis & Pickering, 2004); pitch and duration (Hirata, 2004) and stress (Coniam, 2002). Most of the studies indicate that computer-assistant pronunciation instruction and practice, if used properly, are effective in facilitating the instruction and acquisition of pronunciation of the target language. It is also found that improvement in accuracy transfers to untrained contexts and over time. Hirata (2004) found that L2 Japanese learners’ performance in perceiving and producing Japanese words contrasting in pitch and duration transferred to words that were not part of the training section. Wang and Munro (2004) also found transferred improvements among L2 English learners in perceiving the vowel contrasts. More than that, research also found that improvements in perception can spill over to improvements in production (Bradlow, et al. 1997). Hirata (2004) also found evidence of improved ability in perceiving contrasts when there are production improvements. This proposed study will contribute to the literature along this research line.

Research procedure

This study used a quasi-experimental design due to the limited number of subjects available. The subjects are true beginners of Chinese. The on-line tool chose was the application embedded in pinyinpractice.com. There were two twenty-minute training session with four days between the two sessions.

The effectiveness of the on-line training was measure mainly by a pretest, a posttest and a delayed posttest, accompanied by a short survey with five open-ended questions on their feeling of using the on-line tool. There were 20 syllables, all of which have four tones, resulting in a total of 80 tones. Students listened to the tokens and picked the tones they thought they heard. The same set of tokens were used in all of the tests, however, the tokens were presented in randomized orders. The pretest was given right before the training session. The first posttest was given right after the second training sessions. The
data has already been collected. A very preliminary analysis of the data indicated that there was a significant increase in the accuracy rates of their tone perceptions between the first posttest and the pretest: 93.3% vs. 84.9% (p<0.05). Further analysis will be done on the improvement among the tones, etc.

References


