

A Comparative Study of Pronunciation among Chinese Learners of English from Malaysia and China: The Case of Voiceless Dental Fricatives /θ/ and Alveolar Liquids /r/

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Abstract

This study took up a socio-phonetic investigation among Chinese learners of English by comparing English pronunciation produced by Chinese learners from two different countries: (1) Malaysia and (2) China. Two segmental sounds in English were chosen for comparison: (1) voiceless dental fricatives /θ/ and (2) alveolar liquids /r/; these sounds were known to be problematic for both groups of learners. The key motivation was to explore the extent to which these two groups of English learners behaved differently in terms of the selected sounds, given the differences in their nationalities, language exposure and social backgrounds. Production data were gathered from 10 Chinese learners each from Malaysia and China. They were all undergraduate students at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Two types of reading materials were used to elicit the data: (1) discrete items (i.e., an English wordlist each for /θ/ and /r/) and (2) connected speech (i.e., an English poem each for /θ/ and /r/). The data were auditorily analysed by three evaluators using a likert-scale evaluation form. The findings show that the Chinese learners from Malaysia were able to produce the /θ/ tokens more successfully as compared to those from China, particularly in the connected texts. Those who failed to produce the target sound substituted it with /t/ (for the learners from Malaysia) and /s/ or /z/ (for the learners from China). As for the /r/ tokens, it was found that both groups of learners could produce the target sound correctly across both reading materials; only a few of them substituted /r/ with /l/. The study highlights the importance of understanding the difficulties faced by specific groups of learners when mastering English pronunciation for different purposes. It also calls for further experimental research in language instructions that can effectively cater the needs of English language learners with diverse backgrounds.

Keywords: English pronunciation; Chinese learners of English; voiceless dental fricatives; alveolar liquids

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Non-native English speakers around the world usually have their own way of pronouncing English sounds, which can probably be accounted for by the interference of their native language. According to Lott (1983), interference refers to “the errors made by learners in using the target language and it can be traced back to the learner’s native language” (p. 256). The interference of native language is also evident among Chinese learners of English. Yiing (2011) claims that it is difficult for Chinese English learners to produce some English sounds as those sounds are not available in the phoneme inventory system of their native language. Similarly, Zhang and Yin (2009) state that many English phonemes have their counterparts in Chinese language, but some of them do not share with Chinese language counterparts. For instance, the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ sound of English is not available in Chinese phoneme inventories (Yiing, 2011). Additionally, Zhang and Yin (2009) assert that “the place and manner of articulation functions are different in English and Chinese” (p. 142). For example, native speakers of Mandarin view the alveolar liquid /r/ sound as a voiced pair to their voiceless /ʃ/ sound (Zhang & Yin, 2009).

Although the difficulties faced by the Chinese learners of English in pronouncing the target language might be similar, their non-native English pronunciation might vary according to their background. Rau, Chang and Tarone (2009) claim that Chinese speakers from different backgrounds may substitute different alternatives for the target English /θ/. Peust (1996) reports some variants for the production of English /θ/: /f/ by Hong Kong Chinese, /t/ by Malaysia/Singapore Chinese, but /s/ by Chinese in Taiwan. In the Malaysian context, Yiing (2011) points out that “the influence of Malay language as a national language in Malaysia should not be disregarded for the Malaysian Chinese learners of English” (p. 3; for more recent studies in Malaysia, see, e.g., Pillai et al., 2012; Pillai, 2014, 2015; Tan & Low, 2014). To illustrate, the Malaysian Chinese (henceforth MC) speakers of English have been reported to pronounce the /θ/ sound of English as /t/ (Yiing, 2011). The Chinese learners of English from China (henceforth CC), on the other hand, might be strongly influenced by their native language; they usually use the /s/ sound to replace the /θ/ sound, which does not exist in their native language (Rau et al., 2009). Gao (2005) states that, Chinese languages have the retroflex initial /r/ as in the word “rì”, but the Chinese /r/ is pronounced differently from the English /r/, with the tip of the tongue curling much further back than the English /r/. It is also well known that many MC learners may have problem in pronouncing the /r/ sound; they usually substitute it with the /l/ sound. For example, instead of saying “rabbit”, they may potentially replace it with “labbit”.

According to Zhang and Yin (2009), many CC learners are facing difficulties in learning English in their home country. The Chinese-speaking environment makes learning process difficult for CC learners to use English in their daily routines. The writing systems are also different between Chinese and English; English is written alphabetically while Chinese uses a logographic system. Based on past studies (e.g., Gut & Pillai, 2014; Pavlik, 2012), there are differences in English pronunciations between MC and CC learners. Focusing only on several English sounds, such as voiceless dental fricatives /θ/ and alveolar liquids /r/, an assumption can be made that these two different groups of English learners may have different ways of pronouncing English words with these sounds. However, linguists (e.g., Brannen, 2002) are still debating on whether one's nationality can affect one's English pronunciation. Hence, there is a need to investigate and compare English pronunciation of two different nationalities of Chinese English speakers.

In this study, we will explore the substitution patterns for English sounds among non-native speakers of different first languages. We aim to investigate the production of two distinctive English sounds made by two different groups of Chinese English learners. To be more specific, we seek to compare the pronunciation of voiceless dental fricatives /θ/ and alveolar liquids /r/ produced by MC and CC learners. The research questions of this study are as follows:

1. How do MC and CC learners pronounce the English voiceless dental fricatives /θ/? To what extent do changes of pronunciation occur?
2. How do MC and CC learners pronounce the English alveolar liquids /r/? To what extent do changes of pronunciation occur?

We hope that this study can help English teachers discover the different pronunciation patterns among Chinese learners of English from different nationalities. We also hope that English language practitioners can design better teaching methods and learning materials that can cater for different groups of Chinese learners of English.

■2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The sample of this study was selected from Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) Chinese students. 10 MC learners were chosen from English Communication 1 classes while 10 CC learners were selected from Intensive English programme. They were recruited using probability sampling (simple random sampling) based on a master list from the Language Centre, UUM.

2.2 Materials

The instruments used in this research were two reading worksheets. The first reading worksheet included a list of English words and a poem with the presence of the /θ/ sound in three different positions; initial, medial, and final (see Appendix A). The poem presented in the first reading worksheet was adopted from Karakas (2012). The second reading worksheet included a list of English words and a poem with the presence of the /r/ sound in initial, medial and final positions (see Appendix B). A poem from Wan Ibrahim, Kamarudin, Devi and Ramachandran (2007) was adopted in this worksheet.

2.3 Data Collection

Before the data collection was conducted, a consent letter and a master list of UUM students attending English Communication 1 course and Intensive English programme were obtained from the Language Centre, UUM. The respondents were taken to a closed classroom and asked to read Reading Worksheet 1 and Reading Worksheet 2 individually. The reading session was recorded using a video camera and it took approximately an hour for each respondent.

2.4 Data Analysis

The pronunciation for each respondent was analysed and transcribed by three different examiners to ensure the reliability of the transcription. The respondents' pronunciations were evaluated using a five-point likert scale in an evaluation form (see Appendix C). Besides, the substitutions used in replacement of wrong pronunciations were also documented. In the following section, the results from this study will be presented in percentages, i.e., wrong pronunciation to correct pronunciation of two given tasks, which are wordlists and connected speeches.

■3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Voiceless Dental Fricatives /θ/

Table 1 shows 30 words in a wordlist for /θ/ produced by 20 respondents. Under each group of speakers, there are two columns that indicate the percentages of correct pronunciation among respondents and the substitutions used. It can be observed that most of the words produced by MC learners were pronounced correctly (70%), while 30% were wrong (the respondents substituted /θ/ with /t/). For CC respondents, only 30% of them pronounced the words correctly, while 70% pronounced the words incorrectly and substituted /θ/ with either /s/ or /z/.

Table 1 Wordlist for /θ/

	Malaysian Chinese		China Chinese	
	Correct pronunciation (%)	Substitution used (%)	Correct pronunciation (%)	Substitution used (%)
Think /θɪŋk/	70	t=30	20	s=70 z=10
Anything /ɛnɪθɪŋ/	70	t=30	20	s=60 z=20
Thin /θɪn/	70	t=30	20	s=70 z=10
Everything /ɛvrɪθɪŋ/	70	t=30	20	s=70 z=10
Through /θru:/	70	t=30	20	s=30 z=30 t=20
Thank /θæŋk/	70	t=30	40	s=50 z=10
Thousand /θaʊzənd/	80	t=20	30	s=40 t=30
Thirty /θɜ:ti/	70	t=30	20	s=60 z=20
Something /sʌmθɪŋ/	70	t=30	30	s=50 z=20
Three /θri:/	20	t=80	30	s=50 z=20
Thing /θɪŋ/	70	t=30	30	s=60 z=10
Math /mæθ/	70	t=30	30	s=60 z=10
Threat /θret/	60	t=40	30	s=60 z=10
Birthday /bɜ:θdeɪ/	80	t=20	30	s=60 z=10
Teeth /ti:θ/	60	t=40	30	s=60 z=10
South /saʊθ/	60	t=30 h=10	30	s=60 z=10
Thick /θɪk/	80	t=20	30	s=60 z=10
Thought /θɔ:t/	70	t=30	30	s=60 z=10
North /nɔ:θ/	70	t=30	40	s=50 z=10
Earthquake /ɜ:θkweɪk/	60	t=40	20	s=70 z=10
Tenth /tɛnθ/	60	t=40	30	s=60 z=10
Tooth /tu:θ/	70	t=30	40	s=50 z=10
Mathematics /mæθɪ'mætɪks/	70	t=30	20	s=70 z=10
Both /bəʊθ/	90	t=10	30	s=60 z=10
Nothing /nʌθɪŋ/	80	t=20	20	s=80
Wealth /welθ/	70	t=20 deletion=10	30	s=60 z=10
Youth /ju:θ/	80	t=20	30	s=60 z=10
Health /helθ/	60	t=30 deletion=10	20	s=60 z=10 deletion=10
Month /mʌnθ/	70	t=30	20	s=70 z=10

Table 2 shows 13 connected texts in a poem with the /θ/ sound pronounced by 20 respondents. It can be seen that 80% of MC learners pronounced the tokens correctly, while 20% of the respondents substituted them with /t/. As for CC respondents, only 20% of them pronounced the texts correctly, while 80% of them pronounced the texts incorrectly and substituted them with either /s/ or /z/.

Table 2 Connected speech for /θ/

	Malaysian Chinese		China Chinese	
	Correct pronunciation (%)	Substitution used (%)	Correct pronunciation (%)	Substitution used (%)
two thin thumbies /tu: θɪn θʌmbɪz/	90	t=10	20	s=40 z=30 t=10
My favorite thumb /maɪ feɪvərɪt θʌm/	80	t=20	30	s=40 z=30
My thumbies always soothe me /maɪ θʌmbɪz sə:lwɛɪz su:ð mi:/	70	t=30	10	s=90
My thumbies help me fall asleep /maɪ θʌmbɪz help mi: fɔ:l əsli:p/	80	t=20	20	s=40 z=30 t=10
sucking thumbs is bad /sʌkɪŋ θʌmz ɪz bæd/	80	t=20	20	s=40 z=30 t=10
I suck my thumbs /aɪ sʌk maɪ θʌmz/	80	t=20	20	s=50 z=20 t=10
don't suck thy thumbs /dəʊnt sʌk ðaɪ θʌmz/	80	t=20	20	s=60 z=10 t=10
front teeth out /frʌnt ti:θ aʊt/	80	deletion=20	20	s=50 z=30
get straight teeth /get streɪt ti:θ/	80	deletion=20	30	s=50 z=20
braces on your mouth /'breɪsɪz ɒn jɔ: maʊθ/	100	0	20	s=50 z=10 t=20
keep your thumbs down south /ki:p jɔ: θʌmz daʊn saʊθ/	50	s=50	20	s=40 z=30 t=10
people thinking /pi:pl θɪŋkɪŋ/	80	t=20	20	s=40 z=30 t=10
my teeth look like a rabbit's /maɪ ti:θ lʊk laɪk ə 'ræbɪtɪz/	80	s=10 t=10	30	s=50 z=20

3.2 Alveolar Liquids /r/

Table 3 shows a wordlist for /r/ pronounced by 20 respondents. In most cases, all MC speakers pronounced the words correctly. One MC speaker, however, pronounced “lorry” as “lolly”, substituted /r/ with /l/. As for CC respondents, the same trend was observed: mostly all of them pronounced the words correctly. One CC respondent, however, pronounced the word “rose” as “lose”, substituting /r/ with /l/.

Table 3 Wordlist for /r/

	Malaysian Chinese		China Chinese	
	Correct pronunciation (%)	Substitution used (%)	Correct pronunciation (%)	Substitution used (%)
Raccoon /ræku:n/	100	0	100	0
Superman /sju:pəmæn/	10	Deletion=90	100	0
Random /rændəm/	100	0	100	0
Rose /rəʊz/	100	0	90	l=10
Rain /reɪn/	100	0	100	0
Raise /reɪz/	100	0	100	0
Rainbow /reɪnbəʊ/	100	0	100	0
Borrow /bɒrəʊ/	100	0	100	0
Sorrow /sɒrəʊ/	100	0	100	0
Rubber /rʌbə/	100	0	100	0
Roasted /rəʊstɪd/	100	0	100	0
Roll /rəʊl/	100	0	100	0
Lorry /lɒri/	80	l=20	90	l=10
Sorry /sɒri/	100	0	100	0
Ripe /raɪp/	100	0	100	0
Trap /træp/	90	Deletion=10	90	Deletion=10
Roaring /rɔ:raɪŋ/	100	0	90	Deletion=10
Eraser /ɪreɪzə/	90	Deletion=10	100	0

Brisk /brɪsk/	100	0	100	0
Fragile /frædʒaɪl/	100	0	100	0
Drape /dreɪp/	100	0	100	0
Present /preznt/	100	0	100	0
Browser /braʊzə/	90	Deletion=10	100	0
Ice-cream /aɪskri:m/	100	0	100	0
Sorrow /sɒrəʊ/	100	0	100	0
Strawberry /strɔ:bəri/	100	0	90	1=10
Parents /peərənts/	100	0	100	0
Sprinter /sprɪntə/	100	0	100	0
Very /veri/	100	0	100	0
Terrace /terəs/	100	0	100	0

Table 4 shows connected texts in a poem with the /r/ sound pronounced by 20 respondents. It can be seen that MC speakers produced most texts correctly. As for CC respondents, the trend was quite similar to that observed for MC learners.

Table 4 Connected speech for /r/

	Malaysian Chinese		China Chinese	
	Correct pronunciation (%)	Substitution used (%)	Correct pronunciation (%)	Substitution used (%)
I've got whiskers /arv gɒt wɪskərz/	0	Deletion=100	0	Deletion=100
I've got fur /arv gɒt fɜ:r/	0	Deletion=100	0	Deletion=100
I don't bark /aɪ dɒnt bɑ:k/	0	Deletion=100	0	Deletion=100
I do purr /aɪ du: pɜ:r/	0	Deletion=100	0	Deletion=100
Make me angry /meɪk mi: æŋgri/	100	0	100	0
a rat to catch /ə ræt tu: kætʃ/	100	0	100	0
My world is watery /maɪ wɜ:ld ɪz wɔ:təri/	0	Deletion=100	100	0
I prefer a bowl /aɪ pri' fɜ:r ə bəʊl/	100	0	100	0
carrots I like /kærəts aɪ laɪk/	100	0	100	0
front teeth are sharp /frʌnt ti:θ ɑ: ʃɑ:p/	100	0	100	0
My ears are long /maɪ rɜ:z ɑ: lɒŋ/	100	0	0	Deletion=100
my fur has no lice /maɪ fɜ: hæz nəʊ laɪs/	100	0	100	0
fly over /flaɪ əʊvə/	100	0	100	0
in front of me /ɪn frʌnt ɒv mi:/	100	0	100	0
can repeat /kæn ri:pi:t/	100	0	100	0

4.0 DISCUSSIONS

In this study, we have observed that MC learners were able to pronounce the /θ/ sound more easily compared to CC learners. The data highlighted that majority of MC learners (60%-70%) pronounced all 30 English words with the /θ/ sound correctly, while less than half of CC learners (20%-40%) pronounced the words correctly. As for the connected speech, majority of MC learners (50% -100%) pronounced all the texts with the /θ/ sound correctly. In contrast, there were very few CC learners (10%-30%) who pronounced the /θ/ sound in the connected speech correctly. It is clear that MC speakers pronounced the /θ/ sound more clearly compared to CC learners.

In term of text type, the results show that MC learners pronounced the /θ/ sound better in a connected text compared to a wordlist. CC learners, however, pronounced the /θ/ sound better in a wordlist compared to a poem. This observation could be the result of the learners' awareness of the text type when pronouncing these words. That is, MC learners pronounced the /θ/ sound better in a poem as they were more familiar with the words after reading a long wordlist containing the same word. In contrast, CC learners pronounced the wordlist better than the poem because the wordlist probably contained simpler words compared to the poem. We also observed that 80% of MC learners who failed to pronounce the /θ/ sound correctly chose to substitute it with /t/. 20% of them chose to totally delete the sound while pronouncing the words. Meanwhile, majority of CC learners (40%-70%) chose to substitute the /θ/ sound with /s/, while others (10%-30%) substituted the sound with /z/.

Our data generally accord well with some of the previous findings on the pronunciation of the /θ/ sound among Chinese learners. According to Yiing (2011), it is common for MC learners to replace /θ/ with /t/ as they do not have such a sound in Mandarin. In addition, Gao (2005) reports that it is common for CC learners to replace /θ/ with /s/. However, CC learners rarely replace /θ/ with /z/ as found in this study.

Our findings reveal that both MC and CC learners were able to pronounce the wordlist with the /r/ sound correctly; mostly all of them pronounced the words with the /r/ sound correctly (80%-100%). Additionally, 10% of both groups of learners failed to pronounce the /r/ sound correctly in one word only, i.e., "lorry". Instead of pronouncing the /r/ sound correctly, the respondent chose to substitute it with the /l/ sound. This is not surprising since it is well known that most Chinese learner of English have difficulties in differentiating /l/ and /r/ sounds (e.g., Wan Ibrahim et al., 2007). Moreover, 10% of the respondents failed to pronounce the /r/ sound in the consonant cluster "fragile". Instead of pronouncing the cluster, the respondent chose to totally delete the /r/ sound from the word "fragile".

As the respondents were asked to read aloud from a poem, it was found that all respondents managed to pronounce all the words with the /r/ sound in initial and middle positions correctly. However, all of them did not pronounce the /r/ sound in the final position, which was due to the respondents' preference for the British English model that does not pronounce the /r/ sound in the final position. Hence, it can be concluded that both groups of Chinese learners of English are not having difficulties in pronouncing alveolar liquids /r/.

Our results nevertheless are not on line with those found in Wan Ibrahim et al. (2007); MC learners were found to face more problems in pronouncing /r/ compared to CC learners. Besides, Wan Ibrahim et al. (2007) also highlight that both groups of Chinese learners of English have problems in pronouncing the /r/ sound in a wordlist compared to a connected speech, in contrast with our results that show that both groups of English learners can pronounce the /r/ sound easily, either in a wordlist or in a poem.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Our study focuses on the English pronunciation between two groups of Chinese learners of English and we believe that the results presented in this study will contribute to the development of English language teaching among Chinese learners of English especially in Malaysia. Since many English learners from China come to learn English in Malaysia, it is hoped that this study will help English teachers in Malaysia to acknowledge the different language abilities between two different groups of Chinese learners of English.

Based on the findings of this study, a few recommendations are put forward to assist English teachers in accommodating the learning needs of Chinese students from China and Malaysia. Firstly, it is recommended that teachers need to clearly highlight the difference between /θ/, /t/, /s/ and /z/ to Chinese learners of English. They are recommended to explain the different quality, manner and articulators needed in pronouncing the four different English consonants.

Besides, English teachers may also want to highlight the difference between the liquids /r/ and /l/. As highlighted earlier, many Chinese learners, regardless of their nationality, face difficulties in differentiating both sounds. Besides, it is also suggested for teachers to focus more on the pronunciation of consonant clusters as some students face difficulties in pronouncing two consonants together.

This research only highlights two English consonants, which are /θ/ and /r/. During the process of data collection, it was observed that the respondents faced more problems in pronouncing other sounds including vowels and other consonants. Hence, it is suggested for future research to focus on the pronunciation of other English sounds especially those that do not exist in the respondents' native language.

All in all, it can be concluded that the respondents from both groups of Chinese learners have more difficulties in pronouncing the /θ/ sound compared to the /r/ sound. Besides, it can also be concluded that CC learners are facing more difficulties in pronouncing both consonants compared to MC learners.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Reading Worksheet 1

(i) Wordlist

1. Think
2. Three
3. Thing
4. Thin
5. Thick
6. Thought
7. Through
8. Thank
9. Threat
10. Thousand
11. Thirty
12. Something
13. Nothing
14. Birthday
15. Anything
16. Earthquake
17. Everything
18. Mathematics
19. With
20. Teeth
21. South
22. North
23. Math
24. Tenth
25. Tooth
26. Both
27. Wealth
28. Youth
29. Health
30. Month

(ii) Poem

My Thumbies

Child:

I have two thin thumbies
 They're with me day and night
 My favorite thumb is on my left
 The other's on my right
 My thumbies always soothe me
 when I am feeling sad
 They help me to protect myself when I am feeling mad
 My thumbies help me fall asleep
 when I am feeling tired
 I do not know how better friends
 could ever be desired
 My mother says it's time to quit
 that sucking thumbs is bad
 And every time I suck my thumbs
 my mom gets very mad.

Mom:

You've got to quit
 Don't suck thy thumbs
 your left one or your right
 It's pushing all your front teeth out
 It's ruining your bite
 It might take years to get straight teeth
 with braces on your mouth

It isn't fun
Believe me, son
So keep your thumbs down south.

Child:

I'm 5 years old
It's time to quit
of all the silly habits
I don't want people thinking
that my teeth look like a rabbit's.

Appendix B: Reading Worksheet 2

(i) Wordlist

1. Raccoon
2. Superman
3. Random
4. Rose
5. Rain
6. Raise
7. Rainbow
8. Borrow
9. Sorrow
10. Rubber
11. Roasted
12. Roll
13. Lorry
14. Sorry
15. Ripe
16. Trap
17. Roaring
18. Eraser
19. Brisk
20. Fragile
21. Drape
22. Present
23. Browser
24. Ice-cream
25. Sorrow
26. Strawberry
27. Parents
28. Sprinter
29. Very
30. Terrace

(ii) Poem

I've got whiskers and I've got fur
I don't bark but I do purr
Make me angry and I'll scratch
My hobby is waiting for a rat to catch.

My world is watery and wet
That's why you can't see me sweat
I can live in a tank but I prefer a bowl
So that I can show off my fins and scales of gold.

I don't eat meat but carrots I like
My two front teeth are sharp like spikes
My ears are long and my fur has no lice
I make a good pet because I'm gentle and nice.

I've claws for toes and wings instead of hands
So I can fly over the seas and land

Mind your language when in front of me you speak
 For I can repeat even though my mouth is a hooked beak.

Appendix C: Evaluation Form

Word	IPA Transcription	----->					Substitution
		1	2	3	4	5	
1.							
2.							
3.							
4.							
5.							