Teachers as researchers: getting a better understanding of our classrooms and students
Rob Neal

Why bother? (Lamb and Simpson, 2003)

Urgent need to develop a research base for Mandarin Chinese

‘In common with other lesser taught languages, the sustainability of Chinese is not assured’ (CfBT, 2014: 8)

‘Almost nothing is known of what works and what does not for the teaching of Chinese to English-speaking school children’ (Orton, 2011: 159)

A sample study – focus on students’ tonal awareness

Research aim was to try and get inside my students’ heads and investigate their perceptions of their own tonal processing

Research Question

To what extent are learners able to notice and correct their tonal errors?

Oral proficiency tasks

Recorded 5 students taking part in role plays and pre-prepared speeches

Topics included self-introductions, hobbies and schools
Each student was asked to listen to ten short audio extracts from their oral proficiency tasks and judge whether their own tonal production was correct or incorrect. 5 extracts had been rated by two Chinese speakers as correct, 5 extracts had been rated as incorrect. Student scores ranged between 20% and 40%.

Interviews with students revealed that they did have some awareness of their own tonal performance. For example, if I was just walking past someone and I haven’t got much time, I’m just passing, I might just say ni hao other than like putting a lot of like emphasis on it. Otherwise they might be gone by the time I say it or whatever. And like if it’s easier, like if I’m doing a long sentence and I don’t want to forget it, I'll like do it in flat tone ‘cos like even though it might mean different things in different tones, I think they'll still understand the context.

To what extent do incorrect tones interfere with intelligibility?
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Mark’s intelligibility rating

- Intelligibility – the extent to which a listener understands a speaker’s message
- Measured by the number of words correct in a dictation task
- Average score of 7 Hanban teachers – 86%
- Average score of 14 Beida Fuzhong students – 90%

Error Analysis

- Only very limited examples of tone being the sole cause of misunderstandings
- Intelligibility problems as likely to be a result of incorrect segments (i.e. individual vowels and consonants) as incorrect tones
- 我喜欢吃饺子 v 我喜欢吃九子

Action Research as a journey

- Initial research questions will probably lead to more important questions – i.e. now moving away from a narrow focus on tones to identifying problems likely to interfere with intelligibility
- Takes time, effort and perseverance but can be intellectually stimulating and provide some useful clues about how to be a more effective teacher.

References