

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

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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

Stimulated Recall Interviews

- ▶ 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%

Pedagogical Implications

- ▶ Students appear to have limited awareness of their own tonal performance
- ▶ Need to help students pay more attention to tones

Caution needed

- ▶ Interviews with students revealed that they did have some awareness of their own tonal performance

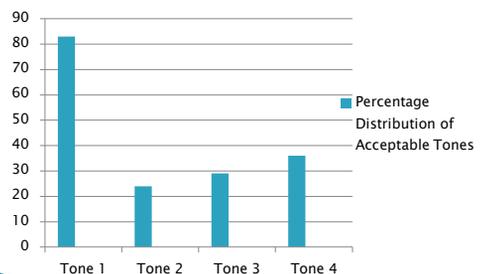
Mark

- ▶ 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 like 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.

Next phase: Investigate Mark's assumptions

- ▶ To what extent do incorrect tones interfere with intelligibility?

Mark's tonal performance



Mark's overall tonal acceptability
rating = 43%

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
喝 和
- ▶ 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

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