Evidence-informed perspectives for teaching pronunciation to beginner learners of Chinese

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Establishing a research base

'Old authorities about the right and proper way to teach Chinese will have to make room for new voices posing new questions about Chinese in new sites of learning for new populations of learners' (Lo Bianco, 2016: viii)

How important are tones?

'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'

Mark, 14 years old

Definitions of key terminology (Derwing and Munro, 2015)

Term	Definition	How to measure
Accentedness	Perceived differences in pronunciation as compared with a local variety	Scalar ratings
Comprehensibility	Perceived degree of difficulty experienced by the listener in understanding speech	Scalar ratings
Intelligibility	Extent to which listeners' perceptions match speakers' intentions (actual understanding)	Transcription tasks

Category	Intelligibility	Comprehensibility	Accentedness
1	Utterance completely intelligible	Very little effort required to process utterance	Accent barely noticeable
2	Utterance completely intelligible	Very little effort required to process utterance	Accent noticeable
3	Utterance completely intelligible	Some/considerable effort required to process utterance	Accent barely noticeable
4	Utterance not (fully) understood	Rater has false impression of easily understanding intended utterance	Accent barely noticeable

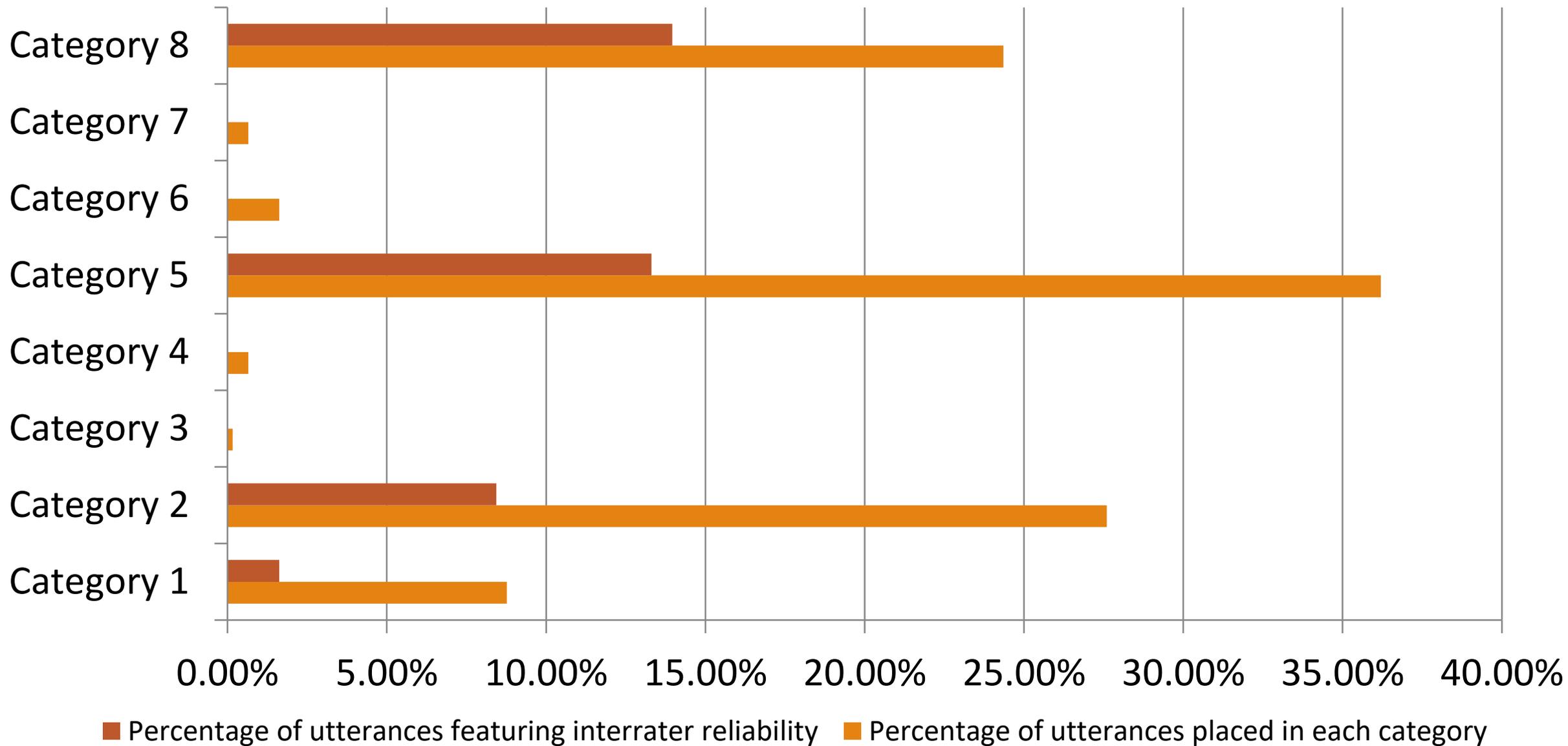| Category	Intelligibility	Comprehensibility	Accentedness
5	Utterance completely intelligible	Some/considerable effort required to process utterance	Accent noticeable
6	Utterance not (fully) understood	Rater has false impression of easily understanding intended utterance	Accent noticeable
7	Utterance not (fully) understood	Some/considerable effort required to process utterance	Accent barely noticeable
8	Utterance not (fully) understood	Some/considerable effort required to process utterance	Accent noticeable

My research project

Recorded the spoken Chinese of 20 Year 9 pupils during a variety of speaking tasks – from reading aloud single words to role plays

Using randomised speech samples, 40 postgraduate students from China tried to work out what the pupils had said and also rated the pupils' sentences in terms of comprehensibility and accentedness

I also interviewed the raters and asked them to explain their ratings and transcriptions

Category 8

Category 7

Category 6

Category 5

Category 4

Category 3

Category 2

Category 1

0.00%   5.00%   10.00%   15.00%   20.00%   25.00%   30.00%   35.00%   40.00%

■ Percentage of utterances featuring interrater reliability   ■ Percentage of utterances placed in each category

Category 2 utterances

Intelligibility	Comprehensibility	Accentedness
Utterance completely intelligible	Very little effort required to process utterance	Accent noticeable

What contributes to the perception of a foreign accent in Category 2 utterances?

Main finding

Tone by far the single most important cause of accent in sentences which were rated as highly intelligible and easy to understand

Category 8 utterances

Intelligibility	Comprehensibility	Accentedness
Utterance not (fully) understood	Some/considerable effort required to process utterance	Accent noticeable

What are the main causes of intelligibility breakdowns in Category 8 utterances?

Main finding

None of the intelligibility breakdowns at the sentence level could be traced solely to tone

Discussion

Do you agree that having an accent is not very important provided that you are intelligible and can be understood easily?

Have you found any effective ways of teaching pronunciation beyond listen and repeat?

Do learners need to be explicitly aware of their pronunciation errors or simply need to know what sounds correct at an implicit level?

Does age play a role – i.e. should there be differences in teaching Chinese pronunciation at primary and secondary levels?

Which particular sounds cause your learners the most problems?

Practical teaching ideas

Spend time teaching the basics and providing firm foundations

https://www.yoyochinese.com/chinese-learning-tools/Mandarin-Chinese-pronunciation-lesson/pinyin-chart-table

Pronunciation activities should be included in every lesson – not just in the first few weeks

Record and play back student oral production – can learners notice their own pronunciation errors and those of their peers?

Use voice recognition software on phones – does it recognise what you're trying to say? Try with individual words and sentences

Practical teaching ideas

Shadowing (imitation of a speech model, either simultaneously or slightly after)

Mirroring (exact imitation of speech and body movements)

Short dictation activities

Surrender listening

Mandarin techno project

Youtube videos (e.g. Chinese Buddy)

References

Derwing, T. M and Munro, M. J. (2015) *Pronunciation fundamentals: Evidence-based perspectives for L2 teaching and research.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins

Lo Bianco (2016). 'Foreward', in Moloney, R. and H. Xu (eds.), *Exploring innovative pedagogy in the teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language*, v-viii. Singapore, Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, and London: Springer.