

TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION TO MANDARIN SPEAKERS:  
SOME PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

by

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Diploma, Wen Tzao Ursuline College, 1975

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the


requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Speech

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas  
1979

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2668  
R4  
1979  
C49  
C.2

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank all those who assisted me during my study, especially my advisory committee professors Dr. James L. Armagost, Dr. Robert Grindell, Dr. William Schenck-Hamlin and Dr. Norma D. Bunton. Grateful acknowledgment is particularly due to Dr. James Armagost, whose patience, concern and guidance contributed invaluable help in the completion of my studies.

Appreciation and thanks are also due to all my friends and families and my heartfelt praise to the Lord Jesus Christ.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will contrast the sound systems of American English and Mandarin Chinese--the national language of China.<sup>1</sup> Teaching English as a second Language to the Mandarin speaker at the present stage.

It is important for the teacher to realize that there are some sounds in English which closely approximate Mandarin sounds. These sounds in Mandarin can be helpful for the students to find the right articulation of the sounds in English. But as language teachers, we also need to understand why the student cannot correctly pronounce other sounds in the second language.

Taking advantage of the Mandarin phonemic inventory can be very helpful in teaching English to the Mandarin speaker for at least two reasons: first, as I said, there are similarities between the sounds of English and Mandarin; second, by using linguistic knowledge and abilities the student already possesses, the teacher of English as a second language can facilitate the learning process.

1. The Mandarin dialect is used as the national standard language throughout China. It implies the use of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet as a guide to pronunciation and it stands for national unity. Before 1923 (from the end of Ching Dynasty to the beginning years of the Republic of China) Peiping's was the official dialect and everybody spoke his own dialect according to the province he came from. Since 1923, the Chinese National Phonetic Alphabet has made a tremendous contribution to our country. It helps us to standardize our pronunciation, to advance the implementation of Mandarin. It is a very powerful tool for learning Mandarin. My charts for the consonants and vowels phonemes are all based on the Chinese National Phonetic Alphabet.

Teachers, aware of the mistakes students are liable to make because of interference from their native language, can clearly point out the differences between the two languages through practice drills. Some teachers may ignore the native sounds totally. I think teachers should note the differences, give some explanations about them, and provide practice drills on them for the student. It is foolish to ignore them since students may make particular mistakes through the natural influence of their native language.

John Amos Comenius said 350 years ago in The Great Didactic, "All languages are easier to learn by practice than from rules. But rules assist and strengthen the knowledge derived from practice." Therefore, I am going to emphasize some practice drills stressing the differences between English and Mandarin pronunciation. There are two major sections in my paper: Single sounds and phonetic patterns. Practices will be based on the contrasts between English and Mandarin in each section.

All of the difficulties and the practical solutions offered in this paper are the result of my experiences with Mandarin Chinese speakers. While I have not had an opportunity to use these techniques in a formal classroom setting, I have found them useful in working with individual Mandarin speakers who had already acquired some degree of proficiency in English. I have also worked with some English speakers who were learning Mandarin. I myself am a Mandarin speaker and English is my second language.

To give some suggestions toward building up an effective way of teaching English pronunciation to the Mandarin speaker is my hope for this paper.