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Chunsheng Yang’s *The acquisition of L2 Mandarin prosody. From experimental studies to pedagogical practice*, does an exceptional job filling in the research gap in L2 Mandarin learners’ acquisition of Mandarin prosody. Little research has been devoted to the acquisition of L2 Mandarin prosody despite its critical role in L2 learners’ comprehension and production of Mandarin speech. In this book, Yang first introduces the main theoretical models of second language phonology. He then compares the prosodic structures of English and Mandarin and presents empirical investigations of the acquisition of L2 Mandarin prosody. Yang also discusses the pedagogical implications of these studies and concludes with directions for future research.

Chapter 1 provides background and historical information about the Chinese languages and establishes the focus of the book – Mandarin Chinese – the standard language promulgated as Chinese. The author reviews SLA and L2 phonology models, such as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Speech Learning Model, and Perceptual Assimilation Model and describes how the transformation from controlled to automatic processing is central. In Chapter 2, Yang lays out a definition of prosody, based on the relationship between higher and lower-level prosodic structures, elaborating on the prosodic hierarchy in Mandarin Chinese. Specifically, the lowest unit in the hierarchy is the syllable, and each syllable represents a specific lexical tone. One or more syllables make up a prosodic word, which may consist of different tones and tone sandhi, that is, changes in tone as conditioned by adjacent tones. Several prosodic phrases together then constitute a breath group, between which the speaker makes longer pauses. The chapter ends with a detailed cross-linguistic comparison of Mandarin Chinese and English prosody.

Yang argues that the prosodic structure of an utterance “mediates between syntax and phonology” (p. 15), and it is important to study the acquisition of Mandarin prosody at different levels in the hierarchy. Chapters 3 to 8 present empirical studies that examine the learning of Mandarin prosody at different prosodic levels, and the interactions between the acquisition of lexical tones and utterance-level prosody in L2 Mandarin learners’ speech production and perception. The
prosodic features examined in these studies include Mandarin tone production, F0 patterns at the utterance-level, perception of Mandarin tones and intonation, Mandarin tone sandhi, discourse boundaries in Mandarin speech, and intelligibility, comprehensibility, and foreign accent in L2 Mandarin Chinese. Participants in these studies included a group of demographically homogeneous Chinese as a second language (CSL)/Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) learners from a Midwestern university in the United States and a control group of native Beijing Mandarin speakers.

Chapter 3 investigates L2 learners’ Mandarin lexical tone production in both read-aloud and spontaneous speech, and Mandarin production. In contrast to previous studies, the author observed that L2 learners produced most errors for the falling tone (Tone 4/T4), and they also replaced the high pitch tone (Tone 1/T1) most frequently with T4. In addition to task type, Yang found that L1 transfer, articulatory mechanism, and individual differences also influenced the learning of L2 tones. The author calls for more longitudinal studies that include L2 learners from different proficiency levels and L1 backgrounds. He also suggests that CSL/CFL instructors explicitly teach tones and discuss these errors in class to raise learners’ awareness of their tone production.

Chapter 4 examines the acquisition of Mandarin prosody at the utterance-level, specifically tone co-articulation and quick changes of F0 direction and tone targets. This study included both intermediate- and advanced-level American learners of Mandarin, as well as native Beijing Mandarin speakers as controls. The author looked at three types of tone sequences: compatible tone sequences (the target at the offset of the preceding tone and the target at the onset of the following tone are identical), conflicting tone sequences (the target at the offset of the preceding tone and the target at the onset of the following tone are different), and other tone sequences. Yang transcribed all participants’ speech production data using the Pan-Mandarin Tone and Break indices (ToBI) transcription system. Results showed that L2 learners of intermediate proficiency performed worse than the control group and the advanced L2 learners in certain tone sequences. The comparable performances between control participants and advanced L2 learners also suggests that L2 prosodic production can be close to native-like or near-native-like as L2 learners’ proficiency increases. This chapter highlights the importance of utterance-level prosody and using an “authentic” speech rate in Mandarin L2 classrooms.

Chapter 5 then looks at the interactions between lexical tones and utterance-level intonation from the L2 learner’s perspective. Three groups of Mandarin L2 learners who varied in their L2 proficiency level and one native Mandarin speaker group participated in these experiments. The results showed that advanced Mandarin L2 learners’ tone identification skills are almost as good as
native Mandarin speakers and much better than beginning Mandarin L2 learners. Beginning L2 learners are often confused with T3 and T4, and they also have trouble distinguishing T2 and T3. The findings revealed the developmental trajectory of tone acquisition and confirmed that tone perception can be influenced by intonation.

Chapter 6 discusses tone sandhi, an important phonological process in Mandarin that involves a change in tone as conditioned by adjacent tones, and then investigates the acquisition of Tone 3 (T3) sandhi. The focus of Chapter 7 is on temporal and duration patterns at various discourse boundaries in extemporaneous speech produced by L2 learners and native Mandarin speech, and Chapter 8 examines the role of prosody in L2 Mandarin Chinese speakers’ intelligibility, comprehensibility, and foreign accent as defined by Munro and Derwing (1995). In Chapter 9 Yang synthesizes the empirical studies presented in the previous chapters and makes pedagogical recommendations based on the findings. He argues that the pedagogical practice for prosody at both lexical and utterance-level is “not only necessary but also indispensable” (p. 142), and his pedagogical recommendations reflect this view. He concludes in Chapter 10 that prosody instruction should be considered a necessity in L2 Mandarin instruction for learners at all proficiency levels. He also discusses the theoretical implications of the empirical studies in the book and suggests several directions for future research, including longitudinal studies of the acquisition of tones and other prosodic features of Mandarin, and cross-linguistic studies on L2 prosodic acquisition.

This book is a valuable resource for both researchers and Chinese as a second or foreign language (CSL/CFL) learners and teachers. Since lexical tones have received the primary focus in the research on L2 Mandarin speech, this book fills an important gap in the literature by examining utterance-level prosody and interactions between the acquisition of lexical tones and prosody at the utterance-level. Not only does the book provide a refreshing perspective on prosody, it represents a helpful source for experimental methodologies and data interpretation for research on L2 Mandarin speech learning. It also does an excellent job translating theories and empirical results into concrete recommendations for pedagogical practices.

One limitation of the book is the sample size and the homogeneity of the L2 learners in the empirical studies presented in Chapters 3 to 8. The sample sizes of the empirical studies are all fairly small, ranging from four to ten participants per group. We believe that such small sample sizes may not only affect the standard error measurement (Urdan, 2010), but also make it more difficult to conduct and interpret advanced statistical analyses (Lenth, 2001). Furthermore, there is little variation in the demographic background of the L2 learner sample and in the type of L2 instruction they received. All L2 learners were CFL learners recruited from a single university in the United States, and the instruction they received mainly
focused on building communicative competence in and outside the classroom. The homogeneity of the sample limits the generalizability of the results to other L2 Mandarin learners. Future studies with a larger sample size that include L2 learners from different demographic backgrounds across multiple sites would help make the results more widely applicable (Lenth, 2001). Finally, since there is a large specialized vocabulary in the L2 speech learning discipline that may be not readily accessible to L2 instructors and learners, readers of the book would benefit from a glossary that includes the technical words, such as fundamental frequency, and a brief definition for these words.

Despite these limitations, this volume contributes to the research on L2 Mandarin speech learning as well as L2 speech learning in general. It also presents an effective effort to bridge research and practice through empirically based pedagogical recommendations. The research findings help shed light on the process and product of L2 speech learning, and the discussions on the practical applications and implications of these findings are insightful and thoughtful. In conclusion, this book is not only an informative read for researchers but a useful reference guide for instructors and L2 Mandarin learners who would like to improve their pronunciation and speaking proficiency.

References


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