

ASPECTS OF CHINESE PHONETICS TEACHING IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The present article is an introduction to the main difficulties of studying the Chinese language: Chinese pronunciation (including tones, consonants and vowels), as well as vocabulary. The article is structured into 3 parts: A brief introduction, the main part describing aspects of Chinese language learning to be taken into account by Romania students, and a conclusion. The second part of the article is divided into four sections (a, b, c and d) focusing on various aspects of Chinese phonetics. The article aims to help both Romanian students and teachers with their Chinese language classes. This article is also an incentive for Romanian students to learn more about China and Chinese culture starting from language.

Keywords: chinese pronunciation, tones, vowels, consonants, vocabulary.

1. An Introductory note on the purpose of this article

Since I engaged in Chinese language teaching in Romania, through the frequent contact with Romanian teachers and students during the work, as well as through observation to my Romanian students and teaching experience, on the basis of theoretical research of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, I summarize some understanding and thinking on teaching Chinese to Romanian teens, and organize them in this article.

2 Aspects of Chinese language learning that should be taken into account by students

I think the following concepts should be clarified for Romanian students who have just started to learn Chinese. Chinese language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of languages, characters belong to the analphabetic system that is Chinese writing. The pronunciation and the writing system of Chinese is different from the Indo-European languages, Chinese does not belong to read-and-write isomorphism. In modern Chinese, handwriting unit is one character (called zi), not one vocabulary. Different tones of Chinese separate different characters, this forms the distinctive characteristic of numerous homophones.

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2.1 An outline of Chinese phonetics

In terms of pronunciation, there are significant differences between Chinese and European languages, including Romanian. Chinese reading and writing belong to different systems, whereas in Western phonetic alphabets, reading and writing are the same system. Western phonetic alphabets are usually pronounced the way these are spelled. English and French generally comply with this phonetic principle, with few exceptions. Romanian is pronounced phonetically. About the two different systems of reading and writing in Chinese, the interpretation of Chinese Characters can be found in the book *Analytical Dictionary of Characters (in Chinese, Shuo Wen Jie Zi)*, written by Xu Shen, which offers help to the native speakers for reading and writing. However, for the non-native Chinese language learners, Chinese reading and writing are two completely different knowledge systems. About this issue, we need to explain to them clearly at the beginning, that Chinese *pinyin* (pronunciation system) is not the real Chinese language, it is just a tool for learning Chinese pronunciation. In fact, the Chinese pronunciation system does not seem to be complicated to Romanian students. There are 60 basic sounds in Chinese, including 21 initials (vowels) and 39 finals (consonants). Initials and finals form 366 sound combinations, if we consider the four tones, there is a total of about 1300 sounds (Liu, 2009: 74). This is the whole content of Chinese pronunciation, but the 1300 sounds have to express more than 60,000 Chinese characters (Jiuying, Shuangbao, Meng, 2004: 21). This explains a unique feature of Chinese – a large number of polyphones, which shows that Chinese reading and writing are two different knowledge systems. Therefore, the teaching of Chinese characters is deemed important, which should gradually follow after *pinyin* (the pronunciation system) learning. Because there is not a one-to-one correspondence between Chinese characters (writing system) and *pinyin* (pronunciation system), if the students only learn *pinyin*, they cannot express their ideas clearly. One same *pinyin* equals many different words, so teachers need to guide the students understand the necessity of learning Chinese characters. For example, only according to *pinyin* “gong (55) li (51)”, we can write a group of words that have exactly the same pronunciation and tone, like 功利 (utility), 公立 (public), 功力 (capability), 公历 (Gregorian calendar), 工力 (craftsmanship), 公例 (general rule), etc. There are many other examples. If Chinese characters learning is neglected, the students will have difficulty making progress in language learning.

2.2 Chinese word formation

Second, there is another difference between Chinese and Romanian: one Chinese character (*zi*) is one writing unit, and the characters are the independent units of Chinese writing. Chinese characters are not exactly the same as English “word” and Romanian “cuvânt”. I found this confusion in the students’ homework. For example, after I taught the word of “生日” (birthday) in Chinese writing, they

wrote the two characters in the same grid. It is not just a problem of writing position, but of understanding. They thought "birthday" is one word as in English, so they naturally believed the word "birthday" in Chinese should be written in one grid. In fact, although the "birthday" is one vocabulary, it is composed of two characters. Chinese character and vocabulary are two concepts, and in modern Chinese, a vocabulary is usually composed of two characters. One Chinese character can be combined with many other characters into other new vocabularies, which is another prominent characteristic of Chinese vocabulary. This practice of forming characters into vocabulary only exists in Chinese, which does not exist in other languages.

2.3. Tones: an important aspect of Chinese phonetics

Third, Chinese tones are also difficult to teach. Tones have the function of differentiating lexical meanings (Liu Xun, 2009: 8). At the beginning of learning, teachers must take time to cultivate Romanian students' awareness and perception of the four tones. Because in their native language, tones do not have the function of differentiating meanings (this is a great difference between Romanian and Chinese), it may be difficult for students to understand. Differentiating the functions of tones is important, that is why we should have the patience to correct students' pronunciation. When students read the wrong tone, teachers can tell them the meaning of what they read. For example, when I taught the word "sheng mu" (which means "initials", 55, 214), my students pronounced "sheng mu" (51, 214), which is the same pronunciation but a different tone. I told the students that "sheng mu" (51, 214) means the mother of God, not Initials. They were very surprised, and understood the importance of tones. If you are not Chinese, I think you will be surprised by the difference that a tone can make to the meaning of a word. In Chinese language, there are four tones that are used to distinguish between various meanings. One of the methods of teaching tones is to attach numbers to them, so the numbers for the four tones from first to last are 55, 35, 214 and 51 respectively. In the example I gave above, sheng (55) as the first tone, followed by mu (214), spelled as 声母 in Chinese characters, means Initials, while sheng (51) as the fourth tone, followed by mu (214), spelled 圣母, means holy mother so the different tones represent different meanings. The Chinese characters are different with sheng (55) 声 the first tone, and sheng (51) 圣 the fourth tone. Therefore, it is not enough if we just teach characters, the teachers also needs to train the students' awareness of different tones. For example, after teaching the numbers from zero to 10, I reviewed the numbers from one aspect; while from the other aspect, I tried to use the numbers repeating to help them practice tones. I asked them to group 10 numbers by four tones. The fourth tone should include numbers 2, 4 and 6. Students gave the right answer, but they pronounced these three numbers using a tone close to the second tone. In this situation, teachers need to take the time to help them enhance the sense of tones. This set of exercises not only helps the

student learn the numbers, but also trains them to grasp the tones. Although the tone practice takes a lot of time and energy, it could improve students' ability to distinguish sounds, which will be a great benefit for their Chinese pronunciation.

2.4 Advice for Romanian students learning Chinese phonetics

Fourth, the phonetic learning characteristics of Romanian students. Based on my Chinese teaching practice in recent years, I also reviewed and summarized phonetic learning performance of Romanian students. In general, Romanian and Chinese are different in the pronunciation pitch area. It seems the Romanian pronunciation area is narrower than Chinese because it does not include so many tones. According to Chinese *pinyin* phonetic levels, the pronunciation area of Chinese four tones is between 5 to 1, from the first to the fourth tone are 55, 35, 214 and 51 respectively (Chen Bo, Zhu Zhiping, 2010: 1). The pronunciation area of Romanian seems to be approximately between 4 and 2. Because of this relatively smaller area of the pronunciation, when they pronounce the first tone (55), their sound pitch is not up to level 5, which is the highest one, but usually at level 3. When they pronounce the third tone (214) and fourth tone (51), their sound pitch is not as low as our level 1, it is usually at level 2. This will not only influence the accuracy of two pitches 5 and 1, because the high pitches in the first tone (55) and fourth tone (51) are not correctly pronounced, this also will affect the pitch positioning of other pronunciations. When the students pronounce the third tone (214), the first pitch should be at level 2, but they usually pronounce it higher than level 2, close to level 3, and this is incorrect pronunciation. Influenced by their mother tongue, when the students pronounce the fourth tone (51), their pronunciation is not decisive, short and determined enough, and the end tone always goes up a little. Teachers should correct students in time, and ask students to practice more. In addition, due to their mother tongue pronunciation characteristics, when they read sentences, students often keep raising the tone in the sentence, with a falling tone at the end of the sentence. Chinese is different, speakers don't have to consider the position in the sentence, tones are not affected by the position. This also causes difficulty to Romanian students, which must be overcome in Chinese learning.

Finally, characteristics of the Chinese finals and initials phonetic teaching in Romania. In the finals of Chinese *pinyin*, “e” in *pinyin* sounds different from the Romanian. In Chinese, “e” sounds “鹅” (which means “goose”), like /ə/ of “sir”, but in Romanian it sounds /e/ of “bed”. So Romanian students tend to pronounce “哥哥” (meaning brother, ge, 55) like “该该” (gai, 55). All Chinese words associated with “e” will be affected, teachers need a long time to correct them again and again. About the pronunciation of *pinyin* “a”, they don't open the mouth big enough, so teachers should be very careful to correct the Chinese *pinyin* pairs like an-en, ai-ei, ao-ou, ang-eng (Zhang Hui 2008: 58), and do more comparison exercises. In addition, when they read a Chinese *pinyin* set of ang, eng, ing, ong, they tend to end with a gentle “g” sound, which also belongs to the mother tongue

interference with Chinese learning, and needs to be corrected by the teachers. We need also pay attention to *pinyin* “ü” (read “鱼”). When the two dots of “ü” are omitted, “ü” is spelled with *pinyin* j, q and x, students usually mistakenly pronounce it as *pinyin* “u”. For Chinese *pinyin* initials j, q and x, their mother tongue does not have similar pronunciations, so teachers need to spend more time on these three *pinyin* sounds. Teachers need to explain the mouth shapes, tongue positions, teeth positions, air flow in the mouth and so on. Because the pronunciation position and characteristics of these tones are similar, their differences should be identified carefully. It would be better for teachers to walk close to students, let them observe the delicate differences of mouth shapes and pronunciations. Training should be repeated with patience. In addition to the two sets of tones Chinese *pinyin* b-p and d-t, Chinese people separate them by aspirated or unaspirated tone, but Romanian people separate them by unvoiced or voiced tone. Different standards make it relatively difficult to distinguish the sounds. This is also a difficult point for Chinese students learning Romanian. In two sets of *pinyin* apicals “zi ci si” (Zhang Hui, 2008: 27) and “zhi chi shi ri” (Zhang Hui, 2008: 42), Romanian students often still pronounce the finals as i (衣), which also needs to be corrected again and again. Finally, when they study Chinese *pinyin* “c” and “q”, because the lips are close together, this also causes learning difficulties to the students.

3. Conclusions

Mentioned above are the characteristics and my experience of teaching Chinese to Romanian students. For beginners, the accuracy of Chinese pronunciation is very important, it will promote further Chinese studying and standard Chinese speaking. So as a Chinese teacher, I must pay special attention to correct students' pronunciation, as correcting pronunciation actually is an important part of Chinese teaching. Teachers could show more demonstration in the process of teaching, organize students to imitate and practice more, mobilize the students' eyes, mouth, nose and ears, to develop organic contact between them, so that teachers can improve the students' learning efficiency, having twice the result with half the effort. At the same time, teachers should pay attention to the key and difficult points, practice them repeatedly and correct their mistakes. Of course, there are methods of correcting pronunciation mistakes, like using gestures, phoneme figures, exaggerated mouth shapes and so on. Students will recall the classroom situation when they pronounce, this helps students to memorize.

In short, teachers should pay attention to students' pronunciation characteristics, analyze the regular pattern of their regular wrong pronunciations, think about the reasons for those errors, constantly sum up experience and lessons from teaching, accumulate good teaching experience and methods, to improve their teaching

ability and level, and help the beginners to learn Chinese as a foreign language more easily.

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