



# A Research Proposal on Applying Chinese Phonetic System in Teaching Pronunciation of English Words to Older Chinese EFL Adult Learners

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**Abstract:** Recent years have seen a rapid growth of older Chinese people going abroad, either visiting their relatives or taking on a long-term trip. These older adults find it is necessary to learn some English words to help them blend in local environment. However, a lot of them encounter challenges of memorizing the pronunciation of English words via using English phonetic alphabet, because many have little English learning experience. Their tongues had never been trained to pronounce English words in their childhood, and it is so difficult for them to remember a new pronunciation system and change their pronunciation habit. So they tend to memorize the pronunciation of words by referring its sound to their acquired pinyin system—a phonology system for Chinese characters. This inspires the author to think it may be, in a way, meaningful to exam the feasibility of applying such approach in teaching older Chinese adult beginners for specific purpose. Hence, the proposal of designing a controlled experiment to explore this teaching method. By offering a tentative research design, the paper provides predicative analysis and implications on studying the L1 play in L2 pronunciation acquisition in second language classroom.

**Keywords:** teaching pronunciation, Chinese phonetic system, adult EFL learners

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## 1. Specific aims and significance

This study is designed to compare the effectiveness of two methods in teaching pronunciation of English words to Chinese EFL adult learners who are over age of 50. One of the methods is to teach the pronunciation by using Chinese phonetic system — pinyin. The other method is to teach the pronunciation through using English phonetic alphabet. In this study, in order to avoid ambiguous of several phonetic systems among English speaking countries, the researcher choose IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) as the experiment method. The research will show which way of teaching can contribute more to the result of learning in a short period. In other words, it reveals what method will help the older Chinese EFL adult learners to master the pronunciation quicker and keep a longer memorization of the pronunciation. There are two specific aims of this research. First one is to test how many numbers of words the learners can pronounce after acquiring the pronunciation in a certain period from two different methods. The researcher expects that using Chinese phonetic system would facilitate the learners to acquire more words' pronunciation than using English phonetic alphabet, which is hypothesis one. The second aim is to exam the two methods' effect on the sustainability of learner's memorization of pronunciation, which is mainly focus on how many words' pronunciation the learner can remember fifteen days after receiving the treatment. The researcher predicts that there is no significant difference in the result of the experiment. This is hypothesis two.

## 2. Background

In the recent couple of years, language play in second language classroom has aroused social-linguistics interests. Many researchers have studied the significance of using language play in second language acquisition. Strong claims about the crucial role of language play in learning process have begun to surface. Lantolf (1997) wrote, "I do not believe that language play, in and of itself, leads to successful SLA. ...I do believe, however, that without language play learning is unlikely to occur." In the meanwhile, a lot of scholars studied the possibility and influence of L1 use in L2 acquisition and linked the L1 use in second language play. Prevailing opinion in early years typically saw L1 use in the classroom as counterproductive and even deleterious to L2 acquisition (Belz, 2002). However, recent work in this area has offered new evaluation of L1 use in second language acquisition. Empirical investigations by Anton and DiCamilla have studied the L2 learning process within a social framework, examining L1 interactions used by learners as they participate in cognitively demanding L2 activities. It suggested that L1 use may function as an advantageous metacognitive tool that aids L2 acquisition (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998). Brooks and Donato (1994) investigated the dialogue of eight pairs of 3rd-year high school learners of Spanish, observed that L1 was used for three functions. One of the functions is to initiate and sustain verbal interaction. The other

two functions served by L1 were to establish a joint understanding of the task and to formulate the learners' goals (Brooks & Donato, 1994). But all these studies focused on the using of L1 in understanding L2 or classroom discussion. There is barely direct use of L1's forms or sounds to learn L2's certain features. In the acquisition of L2 pronunciation, the work Wieden and Nemser provided possibility and clue to use L1 directly to learn L2 phonemes. They studied of how Austrian school children acquiring English phoneme, in which shows that there are three stages of phoneme learning: presystemic, transfer, approximative (Wieden & Nemser, 1991). "In the stage of transfer, learners start to treat the second language sounds systematically as equivalent to the sounds of their first language. This shows the important role of transfer from one language to another in acquiring pronunciation." (Cook, 2008) Moreover, Amin Rahman and his co-workers designed a Bengali Phonetic Alphabet (BPA) in which they used Bengali characters to represent phonemes common to both English and Bengali, and eight IPA symbols for other English phonemes, to use in teaching native Bengali speakers English. This gives a hint to apply similar way for other language English learners. Besides, nearly all the research was looking at the methods for long term L2 acquisition in a broad background. Little studies on teaching methods for specific purpose in SLA were found. And the author found limited studies on how to use Chinese pinyin system to help acquire English word pronunciation. Therefore, there is space for researchers to further develop the L1 usage in L2 acquisition and extend the application to Chinese.

In this article, the author is aiming to find out the possibilities of acquiring pronunciation in a short period for older adult language learners. The inspiration comes from an emerging phenomenon — a rising population of older adult learners who are parents visiting their children abroad. Some of these parents had the experience of using English before. But, most of them do not have any background of learning English. When they plan to go to an English-speaking country for a short visit, they find it necessary to learn some English words for survival. A number of them prefer to participate in training programs lectured in English, often taught by native speakers, and think that they can take in some useful expressions via emersion. However, they soon encounter the challenges of mastering the English phonetic alphabet when learning the pronunciation. It is difficult for them to follow the native speaker to pronounce the vowel and consonants correctly. Thus, there is a need to figure out some solutions for these learners. When teaching English to a group of Chinese adult learners in an institution, the author discovered that older adult learners acquired the pronunciation faster if they were taught the sound by referring it to a similar Chinese pinyin sound. This kind of strategy is more like a language play rather than a proficiency-oriented approach. The author is curious about the feasibility of applying this teaching method to second language classroom. Whether or not to use L1's phonetic system directly in the acquisition of L2 pronunciation is a way to facilitate the older adult learners to be productive in learning. In order to figure out this possibility, we need to compare the mainstream teaching method with the special designed L1 play teaching method. The research questions are 1) would acquire pronunciation of English words by using Chinese phonetic system get better result than using English phonetic alphabets for older Chinese EFL adult learners? 2) Is there any significant difference in sustainability of memorizing the pronunciation between using Chinese phonetic system and English phonetic alphabet?

### **3. Research design**

The research uses a control experiment. The sample difference is not the participants but lies in the groups of words that taught by two methods. The group that will be taught the pronunciation through using Chinese pinyin system is called pinyin group. The controlled group is that one that learns the pronunciation through IPA. This experiment has pretest, posttest and delayed posttest. After pretest, participants will be asked to go through an evaluation for two times. The first time is taken right after receiving the training of pronunciation by using Chinese phonetic system. And then they will have the other posttest followed by the training of pronunciation through English phonetic alphabet. The same procedure will be carried in the delayed posttest as well. So the study will use repeated measures. There are two variables in this experiment. The independent variable is the way of learning pronunciation of the chosen English words. Two methods are involved — using the Chinese phonetic system and using English phonetic alphabet. In this case, the variable is categorical and has two levels. The dependent variable is the number of words the participant can pronounce in the posttest and delayed posttest. It is continuous.

## **4. Methods**

### **4.1 Participants**

All the participants will be selected from the Chinese adults who plan to visit their relatives in United States. To minimize the influence of other factors in this experiment, the target participants must meet some certain criteria given in the pretest. It is a survey that checks the applicants learning background to make sure the 40 volunteers have little background in

learning English before and opt out the ones who had been exposed to the English environment for more than three months. These participants should be in their fifties or sixties. In the light of medical research, people who in that age have their vocal organs already developed and their tongues have formed habit to pronounce certain words that they had acquired in their childhood.

## 4.2 Instruments

**Background questionnaire.** The simple questionnaire will consist of three major components — the basic information of the applicant, applicant's language and educational background, and their immersion period in United States. The complete set of items is given in Appendix A.

**Pronunciation judgement test.** This test includes a word list of 30 words that are randomly chosen from the vocabulary in the book *Practical Spoken English Talk Show* written by Shuang Liu. It is a guide book for Chinese who may use English to travel in English speaking countries. The reason of choosing this book as the resource is that it is popular among users and contains vocabulary for survival use. This test is designed to eliminate the possibility that a word out of the 30 words is already known to the participants. If there is any word that can be pronounced, a substituted word will be selected from the book to make a new word list.

**Pronunciation ability test.** The pronunciation ability test is a list of 15 words that comes from the 30 words in pronunciation judgment test. The words in the pronunciation judgment test will be divided into two groups of words with 15 words in each group. It is a random division and would not be changed once the division is made. The two 15-word lists are served as teaching samples for two different teaching methods. In another word, one group of 15 words will be taught to the participants by using Chinese phonetic system. The other group of word list will be taught through using IPA. The pronunciation ability test is given to the participants to test how many words they can pronounce in the posttest and how many words' pronunciation the participants can remember in the delayed posttest.

## 4.3 Procedures

Participants will complete the background questionnaire and pronunciation judgment test before the treatment begins. Experimenter will collect the results of the pronunciation judgment test and may run it again for some of the participants until all the words in the list are new to them.

The first pronunciation ability test will come immediately after all the participants receive a 30 minutes training by using pinyin system (treatment 1). The sample treatment is given in Appendix B. Participants will read the 15-word list to two native speakers individually. The native speakers will circle out the words that both think the participant's pronunciation can be understood. After the first pronunciation ability test, all the participants will get another 30 minutes training to learn the rest 15-word list by using IPA (treatment 2). In order to get an approximate authentic result difference, the treatment will only teach the IPA symbols that will appear in the 15 words rather than to teach the pronunciation after teaching all the IPA symbols. The second pronunciation ability test follows the treatment 2. The reason to limit the treatment to 30 minutes is based on the author's experience of teaching adult English beginners. The experimenter will put the Chinese pinyin treatment before the IPA treatment to reduce the interference of the two treatments as low as possible. The participants will take the pronunciation ability test for the second time after 15 days they have taken the immediate posttest. Between the posttest and the delayed posttest, the participants are requested not to review the pronunciation they have learned to make sure that all the participants spend the same time on learning so that the result of the pronunciation test only interferes with individual's aptitude.

## 5. Predicative analysis

Since there are 40 participants in this experiment, a parametric test will be used. The participants are required to do the posttest and the delayed posttest two times respectively. Then, the experiment will apply repeated measures. Due to the different attributes of two variables, the independent variable is categorical and the dependent variable is continuous, the experimenter chooses to run paired-sample t-test. The result of the test will provide the number of the participants; the means of the two variables compared; the t-value, and the effect size.

The first hypothesis of this study is that, comparing to using English phonetic alphabet, using Chinese phonetic system to teach English words pronunciation will improve the efficiency of acquisition for older Chinese adult EFL learners in a short time. When running the t-test by using the data of posttest, the researcher expects to see that there is a mean difference between the two groups with a 95% confidence interval. In other words, the t-value should be large enough with the probability coefficient (p) less than .05 to reject the null hypothesis. After getting the mean scores of two posttests, the researcher will use calculator on line to get the effect size of the test as to make sure that the experiment has a strong significance.

The second hypothesis is that there will be no difference in the sustainability of memorization of the pronunciation between using Chinese phonetic system and English phonetic alphabet for older Chinese adult EFL learners. This data comes from the result of delayed posttest. To support the hypothesis, the researcher expects to see little mean difference between the two groups with a 95% confidence interval. It would be positive if the t-value is nearly zero with p-value less than .05.

The researcher also wants to look at the boxplot of the test and hopes to report a normal distribution of the both two posttests. It is believed that the research result will show a nearly equal variance of the two boxplots. There might be a slight skewed median line in the boxplot due to the different aptitude of individual in pronunciation acquisition. However, because the experiment designs a pre-survey for the background checking, the researcher predicts that scores of the number of words participants can pronounce in each pronunciation ability test would not varied much.

## 6. Broader impacts

This study is designed to explore the possibility of using Chinese phonetic system in the acquisition of English pronunciation for older Chinese adult English beginners. It compares the effectiveness and sustainability of learning English pronunciation between using Chinese phonetic system and using English phonetic alphabets. The research gives other researchers implications on the direct use of L1's sounds to learn L2's pronunciation and points a direction for scholars to study the L1 play in L2 pronunciation acquisition in second language classroom. However, there are unsolved problems and research space for future study, such as the speed of acquisition through using this method; the possibility of applying similar strategy to learn English pronunciation for speakers of other languages.

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## Appendix A

Background Survey

1. Personal Information

First Name \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_

The highest degree of education \_\_\_\_\_

2. Can you speak English?

No.

Yes, but only a few words.

Yes, no problems with basic communication.

3. Do you have experience of learning English before?

No.

Yes, but less than a week.

Others

4. Have you ever been to an English-speaking country before? If yes, you have stayed for how many days?

## Appendix B

Treatment 1		Treatment 2	
luggage	la gei ji	food	fu:d
ticket	ti k te	station	'steɪʃn
passport	pa si po te	flight	flaɪt
gate	gei te	board	bɔ:rd
hotel	hou te ou	train	treɪn
enough	ying na fu	clock	klɔ:k
nice	nai si	really	'ri:əli
shopping	shuo ping	evening	'i:vniŋ
price	pu ruai si	cheap	tʃi:p
information	ying fo mei xing	leave	li:v
souvenir	su wen ni er	different	'dɪfrənt
fruit	fu ru te	gift	ɡɪft
delicious	di li xing'er si	check-in	'tʃek ɪn
carry	kai rui	driver	'draɪvə
fly	fu lai	clothes	kloʊðz