

Barriers to communication with 'Chinese English' speakers

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1. Introduction

It was observed in a previous study (Brown & Hirata, 2011) that one element of 'Japanese English' which creates difficulty for Chinese listeners, was more cultural than linguistic. Several Chinese speakers (some Koreans made a similar observation) were critical of Japanese speakers' indirectness, which though they recognised as being related to politeness, could be frustrating in conversation. A more recent survey, conducted in July 2012, provided similar results. One Chinese student commented: "I think maybe Japanese people don't mean to smile all the time... they are just afraid that some negative emotion might hurt others." Another Chinese respondent wrote that in the early stages of her time in Japan, she "felt a little uncomfortable about the politeness of Japanese people." Much of the background to such perception has been covered in previous studies (Brown, 2005 a, 2005 b).

Turning to perceptions from the opposite viewpoint, a recent article in the Japan Times (June 21, 2012) makes somewhat shocking reading. The article, based on the most recent of a series of annual opinion polls by a Japanese Non-profit Organisation and the China Daily (Genron, 2012), reveals that 84% of Japanese respondents revealed a "negative impression" of China. For this reason, this paper examines attitudes towards China among those most likely to mould future generations' views of the world outside Japan, that is prospective teachers of English in primary and secondary education, one of whose roles is designated by the Education Ministry (MEXT, 2009) as the teaching of foreign cultures. The paper then looks at English as it spoken by L1 Chinese speakers from mainland China. Through a review of the literature, and with examples recorded locally, it attempts in particular to identify those aspects of 'Chinese English' which might cause most problems for Japanese listeners.

2. Features of 'Chinese English'

Zang and Ying (2009) point out several specific "problems" that Chinese speakers have with specific English phonemes.

1. Lack of certain vowel sounds such as/æ/
2. No equivalent of consonantal sounds such as/θ/
3. The fact that Chinese is syllable-timed, which, according to the authors, often

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causes speakers to sound rude. For the purposes of this study, this may be less of a “problem”, given its similarity to the mora-timed nature of Japanese.

Jenkins (2000: 38, 149) highlights the problem of consonant deletion as being a major cause for misunderstanding by interlocutors of Chinese English speakers. She identifies these as occurring particularly in consonant clusters, and at the end of words, where they may be replaced with a glottal stop. She highlights lack of nuclear and contrastive stress (*ibid.* 148-151) as another major problem in EIL communication, though this is as much a problem for Japanese as Chinese learners.

Kirkpatrick (2007: 148-149), drawing largely from Xu (2005) lists (among others) the following obstacles to communication:

1. Adjacent default tense
2. Null subject/object utterances
3. Unnecessary use of pronouns
4. Response to yes/no questions (also a problem among Japanese speakers)
5. Word order (especially beginning a sentence, inappropriately with the subject or topic)
6. Nominalisation

Kachru & Nelson (2006) reiterate much of what has been stated above, adding the lack among Chinese speakers of a distinction between strong and lax vowel sounds.

3. Methodology

The data used in this study were drawn largely from three sources.

1. A short survey administered to 392 4th grade students at Fukuoka Jogakuen University, Department of English, and 50 2nd-4th grade students at Nagasaki University, Faculty of Education. All respondents were taking preparation courses to become teachers of English, and all had experience of communicating with Chinese L1 speakers inside and/or outside the classroom. Just over 80% of the respondents were female (Fukuoka Jogakuin is an all-female university), and the average age was 20 years, 7 months. The surveys were carried out in June-July 2011.
2. Spoken data from conversations in small groups of Chinese, Korean and Japanese L1 speakers collected over a period from 2009-2011 (for a fuller description of the methodology used, see Brown & Hirata, 2011).
3. Written accounts by Chinese students of the problems they have come across in living in Japan, collected over a period from 2010-2012.

4. Results and Analysis 1: Attitudinal Factors

Respondents were asked to give their overall impressions of American and Chinese people. Though the main focus of this paper is on communication with Chinese-speaking people, Americans were added as a means of comparison (before it was deposed by China in 2004, the USA was Japan's main trading partner). Respondents could choose from 0 (negative), through 1 and 2 (slightly negative and slightly positive, respectively), to 3 (positive) on a likert scale. As can be seen from figure 1, attitudes towards Chinese people among our sample were fairly positive, though less so than their feelings about Americans.

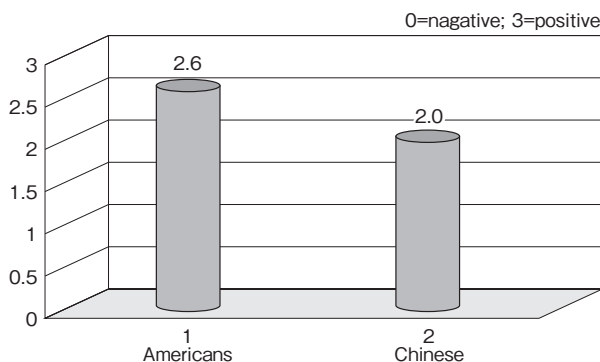


Fig.1 What are your overall impressions of Americans and Chinese?

When respondents were invited to state their overall impressions of China (see fig. 2), again contrasted with the USA, two differences are evident.

1. Japanese students have a higher opinion of the people, compared to the country of their origin. This is perhaps due to the fact that most respondents have met Chinese exchange students, and have found them friendly. One student who expressed a wholly positive attitude to Chinese people, pointed out the improving quality of life in China, perhaps seeing this as some kind of civilising influence. Another student, who had visited China, found that the people were "more kind than I had ever thought". Nevertheless, her score on the likert scale was only "slightly positive". Another commented on the "positive attitude to communicate" of an exchange student he had met. Similarly, a 3rd- year student wrote, "I have [presumably Chinese] ryugakusei friends. They are very kind". Another comment saw Chinese people as "positive and cheerful". One of the few negative opinions expressed was by a respondent who scored both Americans and the USA as wholly positive, while viewing Chinese people in a slightly negative light, and China itself as wholly negative. She added, "I don't feel nervous when I talk with Americans, but with Chinese I sometimes do." More alarming was the following comment: "First impress [sic] come out of my head of Chinese dishonest".

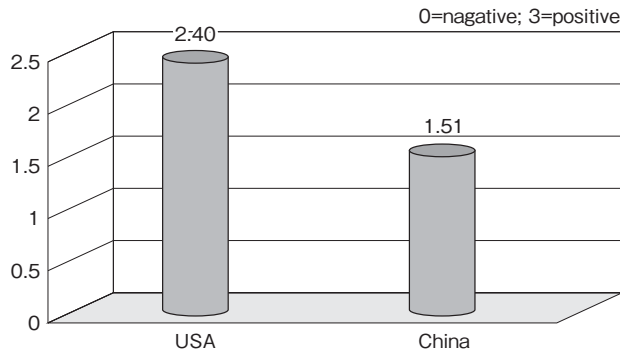


Fig.2 What are your overall impressions of the USA and China

2. The gap between the USA and China is somewhat greater than that between Americans and Chinese. While attitudes towards the USA are still fairly positive, the data reveal an ambivalence towards China. It is possible that the media, and some right-wing politicians have played a part in this (The Standard, October 4th, 2010; Reuters October 16th, 2010; CNN, April 7th, 2012; Japan Times, January 4th, 2012; The Guardian, 19th April, 2012). One student who expressed a somewhat negative attitude to both the country and its people, observed “I am affected on [sic] information on TV news”. Another, more bluntly, stated “I don’t like China”. While his response to China on the scale was “negative”, his response to Chinese people was only “slightly negative”. Another respondent offered the opinion that “Chinese exchange students in X University are good”, making a wholly positive choice for Chinese people on the scale. Nevertheless his choice for China was slightly negative, pointing out that the Japan-China relationship “has some problems”. A similar view was expressed by a student who wrote, “I like Chinese people, but I sometimes disagree with Chinese policy”. Another related comment was “China inversion [sic] part of Japan”, which presumably refers to the disputed Sengoku Islands, a problem dealt with diplomatically several years ago, but which still serves as a rallying point for right wing politicians, as well as certain factions in the media. Other comments mentioned that “(the Chinese government) often complain about Japan”, “I have the image they often copy others’ things”, and that they are “not reliable”. Most telling of all was the simple comment, “I sometimes hear negative news in [sic] China”.

5. Results and Analysis 2: Linguistic Factors

Respondents were asked to rate their perceived level of difficulty when communicating with American and Chinese people (see figure 3). Certain factors play into this response, not least a predilection for modesty. Nevertheless, respondents found Chinese people slightly more difficult to understand than Americans. This may be, at

least in part, the result of 6+ years of studying largely American English. Moreover, many of the students will have been exposed to American English via their school ALT (in 2011, 56% of JET ALTs were from the USA (JET Program: 2011)). Nevertheless, this poses a problem. After graduation it is far more likely that Japanese graduates will need to communicate with Chinese speakers in English than with Americans. For a fuller discussion of this problem, see Brown & Hirata, (2011.)

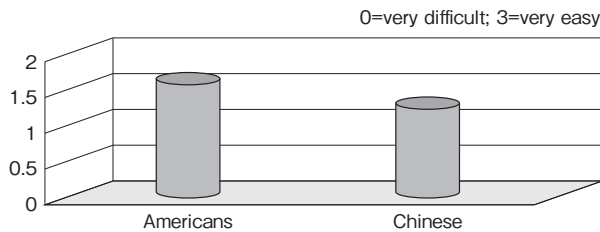


Fig.3 How easy do you Find Communication with American and Chinese People?

Respondents were then asked to identify the areas that caused them the greatest degree of difficulty when communicating with Chinese L1 speakers. The three areas were ranked. In the data analysis the totals for each rank (1-3) were then divided by the number of respondents. For this study, responses relating to communication with Americans have been omitted for space considerations.

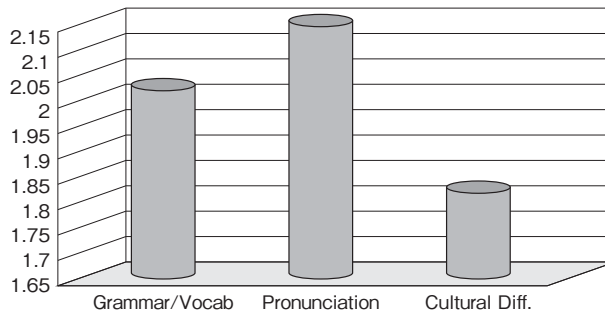


Fig.4 What Causes the Biggest Problems when you Communicate with Chinese Speakers?

It can be seen that pronunciation is identified as the main obstacle to communication with Chinese speakers, though grammar and vocabulary are not far behind. Several respondents also added 'listening', thus strengthening the case for problems with understanding their Chinese-speaking counterparts.

Features of 'Chinese English' were outlined in section 2. This section provides examples drawn from two exchanges between Chinese-speaking students and other Asians. The mark-up format is based on the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE, 2007). Further discussion of the data from such exchanges will be the subject of a future study.

This short exchange is part of a conversation between one Chinese and two Japa-

nese students, discussing their childhood.

CH 1: I just playing with <pvc> arer </pvc> {other} <ipa>arə</ipa> children

JP 2: R children?

The Chinese student, avoiding the unpronounceable/ð/voiced interdental fricative, substituted it with an approximation too extreme for her Japanese interlocutor, who totally failed to understand. The usual Japanese pronunciation of 'other' is usually something like/aza:/. Later in the conversation, describing her first day at university, the same Chinese student uttered the following:

CH 1: I remember is <pvc> rinin </pvc> {raining} <ipa> rɪni?</ipa>, <pvc> santin </pvc> {something} <ipa> santɪn </ipa> <pvc> lakdat </pvc> {like that} <ipa> laʔdaʔ</ipa>

JP 2 Writing a letter?

Here we see a combination of vowel quality and consonant omission forced her Japanese interlocutor to hazard a somewhat wild guess at the meaning, despite the fact that it was totally out of context.

The following exchange took place between a Chinese and Japanese student, who were speaking in a group of four.

CH 2: ours is. have many many. things in it

JP 3: uh. uh.

CH 2: and the soup will be really. <pvc> lat </pvc> {red} <ipa> læt </ipa>

JP 3: what

CH 2: <pvc> raʔ.</pvc> {red} <ipa> ræt </ipa> <pvc> rad.. </pvc> {red} <ipa> ræd </ipa>

JP 3: uh

CH 2: rad.. </pvc> {red} <ipa> ræd </ipa>

JP 3: ah. okay. spicy.

CH 2: spicy or not. but its really rad. </pvc> {red} <ipa> ræd </ipa> the color is very deep.. but the japanese soup is really <pvc> (parent..) </pvc> <ipa>pærənt </ipa> <pvc> (apparent..) </pvc> <ipa> əpærənt </ipa> it dont have many thing in it.

JP 3: okay..

It should be noted that, apart from the obvious pronunciation obstacles, some fairly basic grammatical errors, and the fact that Chinese speaker was unable to recall the word 'transparent', the unusual collocation of 'red' with 'soup' added to the confusion in this exchange.

The authors plan to carry out a fuller phonemic examination of this large body of data (covering Japanese and Korean utterances, as well as Chinese) in a future study, at the same time enlarging the corpus of spoken data.

6. Conclusions and Further Study

Data used in this study are to be used as part of a wider discourse analysis pro-

ject, aimed at identifying obstacles to communication, when English is used as a lingua franca among Asians. Further detailed study, especially at a phonemic level, will be part of a future paper. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this analysis provides some insight towards solving one part of the puzzle, that is, from a Japanese point of view, what are the most common obstacles to communication. The main conclusions are:

1. Certain aspects of Chinese pronunciation can cause serious breakdown in communication with Japanese interlocutors. These are mainly related to vowel quality, consonant clusters, and stress. These are areas which should be addressed more strongly in schools in which Chinese languages are the L1.
2. Japanese students need more exposure to Chinese speakers during all phases of their education. The necessity of being able to communicate with Chinese (as well as Korean) speakers needs greater emphasis, bringing with it less emphasis on aping inner-circle pronunciation. More Japanese exchange students spending extended periods in China would also help achieve this goal.
3. Japan will become increasingly dependent on good relations with China in the future. It is in the interests of all that similarities, rather than differences, between the two countries at a cultural level should be emphasised, and more restraint be exercised in terms of the unedifying and xenophobic "China bashing" that has become far too common in the Japanese media in recent years.

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