

# A Study on the Differences in Middle School English Pronunciation Teaching in Underdeveloped and Developed Areas in China and Their Impact

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**Abstract**—Spoken English is one of the most important parts in English learning. And the footstone of Spoken English is pronunciation, which should have taken pride of educational place in the courses of secondary education anywhere. Differences of pronunciation teaching in middle school exist in the English pronunciation teaching between underdeveloped areas and developed areas, which effects students' further English study. By the methods of interviewing and questionnaire, this paper makes a comparison of current situation of English teaching in middle schools from underdeveloped areas and developed areas in China. This thesis analyzes the causes of differences from teaching idea, teaching contents and teaching faculty, and the impact on the students from students' listening and speaking abilities in the university. Finally, the author presents some constructive suggestions.

**Index Terms**—pronunciation teaching, difference, middle school, underdeveloped areas and developed areas

## I. INTRODUCTION

English is one of the common languages in the world today and it is also one of the most widely used languages today. Our country puts much importance on the English learning all the time. Due to the importance and wide using of English, English courses have been held from primary school to the middle school. Although progress has been made in teaching skills, as far as the actual situation is concerned, these so-called English talents are able to read or write well, but can't speak or understand listening correctly, which is awkward and cannot meet the needs of the future employers.

One of the possible causes of this problem is the English pronunciation teaching in the school. In fact, the problem of "stumped" English has been lasting for a long time in China, and pronunciation has not been paid much attention in English teaching so that students can't speak English correctly and listen to it clearly and then they dare not speak English. To find out more about the English pronunciation teaching, the author intends to do a research on this topic.

## II. ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION TEACHING IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Obviously, pronunciation is of great importance in English teaching and learning. Like Pinyin in Chinese, pronunciation rule is the first step to learn English. Sun (2008) argues that English pronunciation has two different forms and its smallest unit is phoneme. Only when students pronounce the phoneme correctly can they pronounce the words correctly and then pay attention to the pronunciation with stress, liaison and so on. Finally they can have a better listening ability of understanding the listening and have a better spelling ability of remembering every words well.

However, despite its importance, pronunciation isn't paid enough attention to in English teaching in China. Previously, oral test was not included in the college-entering examination, therefore, skills for written tests had been over-emphasized in English classes in many places in China for quite a long time. This so-called "examination-oriented education" has such a great impact on English teaching that English pronunciation teaching is still not satisfying. According to Ji(2013), for example, some teachers spend most of the time teaching vocabulary, grammar, and writing, which are considered to be 'more important than pronunciation'; Jiang(2015) some teachers speak English with an accent or even use Chinese as the classroom language; some teachers simply adopt repetition drills to train the students' pronunciation; and some students, Cheng(2012) says that some students have few chances to open their mouths because of a lack of teaching facilities. All these problems weaken the students' ability to utter correct English pronunciation, which further hinders their understanding because they can't figure out other people's pronunciation well. Finally, when students enter the university or the society, Chen(2008) argues that they will find that they can't apply this foreign language which has been learned for many years.

The negative situation mentioned above appears more in underdeveloped areas, compared to the developed areas.

Therefore, the topic of “English pronunciation teaching” is narrowed down, and this paper really aims to study the differences between the English pronunciation teaching in underdeveloped areas and that in developed areas, with Zhejiang Province, China, as an example.

### III. RESEARCH

#### A. *Research Subjects*

The author chooses middle schools in Zhoushan and Ningbo as research subjects. For one thing, these two cities represent respectively the underdeveloped and developed areas in Zhejiang Province. For the other, according to Piaget’s cognitive development theory, the critical period of learning language is adolescence. Unlike pupils, middle school students already have the initial awareness and ability to learn phonetic symbols, and English learning during this period would lay a foundation for their further study. Therefore, middle school students are suitable as research subjects.

Except for that, the author randomly conducts a survey among the students in university from underdeveloped areas and developed areas. The survey in the university covers not only the students from Zhoushan and Ningbo, but also those from other underdeveloped areas and developed areas, which aims to collect more information about this study and make the results more convincing.

#### B. *Research Instruments*

Interviews and questionnaires were adopted in this research. Questionnaires for middle schools students and teachers are about teacher’s teaching idea, the teaching content, teaching facilities and faculty. To make the result more convincing, interviews were also held for more detailed information about those questions. English teachers and the students cooperated well during the interview. As to the questionnaires for the university students, their performance in English class is added. All the questionnaires are anonymous and 200 valid questionnaires were collected in the total 300.

#### C. *Data Analysis and Results of the Research on Pronunciation Teaching in Middle School*

There were 15 English teachers and 40 students in Zhoushan and 15 English teachers and 40 students in Ningbo who cooperated in this research. By these people, the author collected some information in their schools.

As to teaching idea, All the English teachers in Zhoushan believed that they all wanted to train the students to get better and higher scores in the examination. They also taught students to practice listening and writing to develop the English talent. This result was similar to that in Ningbo.

As to the teaching contents, about 87.50% students in Zhoushan told that a number of exercises in grammar and cloze and reading comprehension were involved in their English classes. About 90.00% students from Zhoushan told that they seldom had competitions like speech contests, while 95.00% students from Ningbo told that their teaching contents were about doing exercises of pronunciation and situational communication. Moreover, all the students from Zhoushan said that they had never been to the language lab while nearly all the students from Ningbo said that they had a good language learning environment, because they had an access to the language labs two times a week to practice listening and speaking. Lots of competitions like English speech were also included in their school.

Except for that, difference also exists in the factor of faculties. 86.67% teachers in Zhoushan believed that lots of teachers didn’t want to work in Zhoushan and the threshold had been lower and lower, which led to the fact that lots of English teachers who were not professional enough to teach English courses were recruited. Finally, the unprofessional English pronunciation would affect the teaching quality. While 80.00% teachers in Ningbo thought that they were under great pressure because many people competed with each other for positions of English teachers. Lots of professional and talented English teachers would stand out in this position. Finally, their excellent English pronunciation and professional teaching skills would have good influence on students.

#### D. *English Performance of University Students from Underdeveloped Areas and Developed Areas*

To see whether the pronunciation teaching in the middle school will have an impact on the English learning in the university, questionnaires were also handed out to university students from underdeveloped areas and developed areas. From the data, difference can be seen in their performance in English.

To the question of ‘your English listening level’, 87.50% students from the underdeveloped areas thought that their English listening levels were B or B-. While 58.75% students from developed areas thought that their English listening levels were B or B-. 41.25% students from developed areas believed that their English listening level were A or A-. The statistics show that students from developed areas have a higher evaluation of their English listening ability.

As to their speaking level in university, 77.67% students from underdeveloped areas thought that their levels were B or B-. However, 61.08% students from developed areas thought that their levels were A or A-. The statistics show that students from developed areas have a higher evaluation of their English speaking ability.

To the question ‘how often do you attend English speech contest’, only 5.18% of the students from underdeveloped area thought that they often attend English speech contest in the university, with 70.52% admitting that they had never attended English contest because they thought that their English pronunciation is almost wrong and their speaking was

not very good. While among the students from developed areas, 21.13% students thought that they often attended the English speech contest, and 25.42% students admitted that they had never attended English speech contest.

Besides their self-evaluation and experience of attending speech contests, students' different performance in the English class is another proof of their listening and speaking abilities. In the university, English teachers almost give their lessons in English. Students from underdeveloped areas told that they could seldom follow the teachers' instructions, and that it's very hard for them to communicate with teachers in English. On the contrary, students from developed areas told that they could understand most of what the teachers said, except for some new words and expressions. These students can communicate with teachers in English and make themselves understood. And in the listening class, it is more difficult for students from underdeveloped areas to understand some news reports and articles well than for the students from developed areas, especially when the listening materials are in standard English.

#### IV. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

From the data, it's obvious that the differences of English pronunciation teaching exist between underdeveloped areas and developed areas, and university students from these two kinds of areas do have different performance in English study. This section will have a discussion on these data from two aspects: the reasons for those differences, which can help to make some targeted improvements, and the impact of pronunciation teaching in English learning, which explains the necessity of making a solution.

##### A. *Reasons for the Differences*

###### 1. **The lack of teaching facilities**

Education has a close connection with economy developments. The schools in underdeveloped areas don't have as many advanced facilities as those in the developed areas. They have few language labs, libraries and multimedia teaching equipment. Teachers can only give their lessons with the textbook and a recorder. This kind of teaching facilities cannot keep pace with the times, which has negative impact on teaching skills and attitudes of English pronunciation teaching.

###### 2. **The lack of teachers**

Because of the poor conditions of the underdeveloped areas, most of people don't want to teach there. Cheng(2012) argues that this kind of area can not attract talents, which gives rise to the lack of the teachers in the underdeveloped area. Lots of schools ask teachers in other fields to teach English. Teachers in other fields don't have professional knowledge. Their wrong English pronunciations lead to the poor teaching effect. Students cannot get the professional education of English.

###### 3. **The lack of the language environment**

As we all know, language learning needs an environment which helps learners form a language-learning habit and continuously get the input of language. However, English speaking isn't included in the classes of middle schools in underdeveloped area. Students would speak fluent Chinese and teachers would teach them almost in Chinese as if it were a Chinese lesson. After class, oral homework should have been an important part in language learning which could consolidate students' learning outcomes. But Tang(2017) shows that in middle school most students have little oral homework when they are in middle school as speaking is paid less attention to than other aspects of English learning. In addition, students don't have activities about English speaking which can train their pronunciation and give them a language environment. Therefore, the language environment is sorely lacking.

###### 4. **Unsatisfying quality of teachers**

Lots of teachers in underdeveloped areas lack up-to-date teaching philosophy. They are not good at reforming their teaching methods but use the traditional philosophy to teach students. They emphasize more on memorizing the grammar, sentences and words but overlook the pronunciation and oral communication. Besides, some teachers in underdeveloped area don't have much professional knowledge. They have no standard English pronunciation. Some of them even have a strong Chinese accent, which leave the bad impression on students and dampens students' interests in English speaking. As a result, students can't learn English skills well.

##### B. *Impact on the English Learning of Students*

Students' further English speaking and listening are influenced by their learning of English pronunciation in middle schools. Most of students defined their English pronunciation level as B and B-. They thought that their pronunciations were not perfect, which can be seen in their performances in English classes and activities.

In the university, all the English majors have English pronunciation class. Students from underdeveloped areas find that their pronunciation is different from that of others and is almost wrong. It's usually late and difficult for them to make a fresh start to learn English pronunciation because have less chance to meet with students and teach them some right pronunciations. In addition, students have got used to speaking English in wrong ways for many years, so it is impossible for them to change their pronunciation in a short time.

There is also a close relationship between pronunciation and listening. When students are used to the wrong pronunciation, they won't be sensitive enough to figure out the correct pronunciation. As a result, they may not be able to well apprehend what they hear. Since listening makes up a crucial proportion of important English tests in China,

such as TEM4, CET4, and CET6, these students are even unlikely to pass the tests, which will have a negative effect on their study.

## V. WAYS TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM

The pronunciation in underdeveloped area has a large and distinct difference from that in developed area. Students in developed area has not only more chances to learn and practise English pronunciation but also gets more attention from the schools, teachers and government. But compared to the education in other elements of English like writing, reading and listening, English pronunciation still needs to be improved. Data from questionnaires show a clear and important thing is that a number of students in the university think that English pronunciation is so important, so there is no hesitation for students and teachers pay more attention to the English pronunciation learning. In the developed area, English pronunciation education can not be improved and enhanced at a short time. It needs a process of accumulation. With the reasons for the differences and the impact on further English study being discussed, some measures are put forward in this section to narrow the gap.

### A. Support for the Government

Education improvement is a huge project, which needs lots of helps from government on schools' expenses and advanced facilities for teaching. Only by this way can the education quality in underdeveloped be hopeful.

#### 1. Improving the teaching facilities

Government and education department should increase the investment in the education of underdeveloped area to improve the teaching facilities. English pronunciation teaching also needs advance facilities like language labs. For example, government can build some language labs and equip schools with lots of advanced multimedia teaching facilities. Therefore, students will be able to have the place and facilities to learn English and practice pronunciation.

#### 2. Optimizing faculty

Basically, education is a progress accomplished by the man. No matter how complete the equipment it is, teaching should only be managed by the man. The government should improve the threshold of being an English teacher and optimize allocation of teachers' resources to solve the problem of weak faculty in underdeveloped cities.

Besides raising the threshold of admission for teachers, it is also necessary to optimize teachers. Firstly, government and education department should strengthen publicity to encourage the ambitious youth to fling themselves into the education in underdeveloped cities. With the powerful teaching level, it can be possible to change the situation of English pronunciation teaching. Secondly, government and education department should organize some English pronunciation training courses for English teachers. With the development of the society, the knowledge and teaching methods should be updated like the procedures of the machines to catch up with the pace of our society. Teachers through the training courses can learn lots of new teaching methods and theories, which can improve the teaching efficiency and result. English belongs to the foreign language and it is also international, which needs teachers to anew the knowledge and learn more about it. Li (2017) argues that English teachers can learn some authentic English pronunciation by watching English original movies and listening to English radio in their spare time. Lastly, government and education department can organize some communication between the teacher in underdeveloped area and the teacher in developed area so that teachers can find their shortcomings and learn from each other. Of course, engaging foreign teacher for teaching English is a useful way to improve the English teaching level. Schools don't have enough money to do this, so the government should be obliged to help. And they should know that it will bring a best and satisfying teaching result. Because foreign teachers know much about their own language, they will give the schools more open teaching methods and theories.

### B. Support from the Teachers

#### 1. Changing teaching belief

Except for urging students to remember lots of words and use the correct grammar, teachers should improve the pronunciation and communicate with students in English. They should update their teaching concept and follow the step of time. They must believe that English pronunciation is as important as the English scores. In class, teachers should often do some pronunciation exercises with students and improve their own teaching abilities.

#### 2. Adjust teaching content

In the class, teachers should be the best English speakers and also advisers to encourage students to speak most of time. They can create a language learning atmosphere for students to develop the students' listening and speaking skills imperceptibly, which not only makes students enjoy English speaking but also test students' pronunciation about some useful but easy words. For example, at the beginning of the class, teachers can use 'Let's begin our class', 'Hello, everyone/boys and girls' to communicate with students and check their English pronunciation. And during the class, teachers can use 'Right?' 'Clear?/Understand?' or 'Follow me please' to encourage students to join in this class and open their mouths to pronounce and speak. When class is over, teachers can use 'Goodbye, class' and 'See you the next time' to finish this class. In addition, adding pronunciation practice to the class is a useful way to make students be familiar with the forty-eight international phonetic alphabet and voiced consonant, voiceless consonant, monophthong and diphthong, which makes up a good English pronunciation. After learning the English pronunciation skills, it is

necessary for teachers to hold some contest like speech, presentation and role play to stimulate students to practice their pronunciation and certainly improve the level of the English pronunciation teaching in the underdeveloped area.

### C. Support from the Students

The biggest problem of students to pronounce English words is afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at. Even if they know the rules of English pronunciation, they are too shy to speak out it. And it seems that speaking less don't affect their scores so much. So teachers and families should often encourage them to speak and praise their pronunciation. Sometimes, they can show the advantages of good pronunciation for a person's development. Little by little, Students should be clear about that language should be spoken often and English pronunciation is so important in English study. And they need to remember that if they enter the society, there will be full of communication but not only the written English. Their action should be included the class learning and also the after-class learning. Good English pronunciation needs to be practised more often. If they only do well in their paper homework, the English can only be dumb English. Students may feel pity about what they have done in their secondary school. So it is significant for students to change their study attitude of English learning and promote the English education in the underdeveloped area.

## VI. CONCLUSION

English speaking lies in an important position today. And the most importantly part of it is English pronunciation, which also becomes more and more important. Nowadays, more and more universities attach importance to it. Although today is the time of being accepted equal education, people didn't accept same extent of education. If you are in the developed cities, you needn't worry much about your English pronunciation, but if you are in the underdeveloped cities, you should be shameful of that. China becomes more and more powerful in the world. As for the education, it also should not be left behind. English has become an important part in international communication. Students representing the big country's cultural strength should show a big country's cultural power. When you communicate with the foreigner, it will be a pleasing and proud thing that you can express yourself in good English pronunciation. There is an old and usual saying that is 'students are the flowers of the country'. Any schools in underdeveloped area or in developed area should know that their education will has a big influence on the students and our country. And their industrious cultivation on students can make this country a big different.

We absolutely need some measures to improve the education in underdeveloped areas. Schools and government in underdeveloped area should take some measures actively and think more about student's further development. This paper mainly studies the current situation of English pronunciation teaching of middle schools in developed areas and underdeveloped areas from the aspects of teaching facilities, contents and faculties. After analyzing the reasons for the differences and the impact on students' English learning of listening and speaking in the university, this paper proposes some suggestions from the aspects of government support and teachers' self-changing, in the hope of narrowing down the gap of English pronunciation teaching between developed areas and underdeveloped areas.

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