

Global Community – A Plain Language Summary by Ryan Tannenbaum

Watch your tone – How Chinese ELL's awareness of tone helps them understand readings

A plain language summary of *Lexical prosody beyond first-language boundary: Chinese lexical tone sensitivity predicts English reading comprehension*

What you need to know:

Chinese is a tonal language, which means that the same syllable will have different meanings if the tone is different. There are some English words that are also affected by tone, for example OBject (a thing – noun) and obJECT (to disagree – verb). Chinese ELLs ability to recognize tone helps them recognize how English words are stressed, which in turn, aids their English reading comprehension.

What is the research about?

Fluency is often overlooked when we consider reading development, but research shows it plays a big role in students' reading comprehension. There are three main contributors to fluency - automaticity, prosody, accuracy.

Automaticity means that students can immediately know what the word means without sounding out the letters – this is sometimes called sight word reading.

Prosody, refers to whether students can identify and use intonation, accent, and pause, in their reading and listening.

Finally, accuracy refers to the accuracy of their reading.

By developing students' prosody, it allows them to separate words better, understand the tone and context, and allow them to focus more on the meaning of the passage, rather than understanding the words in the passage. Researchers believe that prosody is a key part of fluency, and helps students better understand what they have read.

The researchers looked at whether Cantonese bilingual learners showed a transfer between their Chinese lexical (word) tone sensitivity, and their English reading comprehension.

They considered how different skills, such as students' ability to recognize Chinese tonal difference, Chinese phonemic awareness, English word recognition, and their English reading comprehension were related.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers examined 133 second graders from various parts of Hong Kong. Students were tested twice, over a one-year span. All students had had formal English and Cantonese instruction in their primary school.

The first-time researchers met the students, they tested students':

- Cantonese lexical tone sensitivity
- English lexical stress sensitivity
- General auditory sensitivity

- Cantonese segmental phonological awareness (could students recognize and separate different parts of words?)
- English word reading

The second-time the researchers met the students, they tested students' reading comprehension.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that students who were more sensitive to Cantonese tones, were also better English readers.

They found that if students were able to recognize Cantonese tones well, they were also able to recognize stresses in English language. This ability to recognize stresses is related to prosody, and in turn, aids students' reading comprehension.

It is also possible that, because students are more aware of the stresses placed on English words, this then helps them recall the word and its meaning from their memory. However, the researchers note that there are few English words that only differ because of stress, and so there is less of an effect on students' word reading ability, than there is on their general reading comprehension.

Lastly, they suggest that if learners are having difficulty recognizing different tones in Chinese, this could be a sign for weak English reading comprehension.

How can you use this research?

Chinese ELLs are very sensitive to tone due to the nature of the Chinese language. This sensitivity transfers to English, and helps students develop prosody, and important part of English fluency.

Therefore, in the classroom, emphasize tone, stress, and intonation both in terms of students' reading, as well as your own speech.

Repeated reading programs that are designed to develop prosody in learners are valuable tools to help use the skills your Chinese ELL's already have, to develop their growing English abilities.

About the researchers:

William Choi, and Xiuli Tong are from the Division of Speech and Hearing Sciences in the Faculty of Education at The University of Hong Kong.

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Keywords:

Tone, Chinese-English bilingualism, Chinese-English transfer, stress, intonation, fluency, prosody

References:

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