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**CUED SPEECH AS A TOOL TO OVERCOME DIFFICULTIES IN
ENGLISH PHONETICS ACQUISITION BY THE CHINESE STUDENTS
OF PHILOLOGICAL DEPARTMENT**

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Abstract. *The paper argues the possibility of using a special visual mode of communication to improve English phonemic awareness by Chinese students. The analysis of existing techniques to teach word rhythm considering the differences in Chinese and English pronunciation have been made.*

Keywords: *cued speech, phonemic awareness, handshape, visual, phoneme.*

Phonetics is one of the core subjects taught at the philological department of the university during the first year of studying. The acquisition of the sound producing is hampered by the inability to perceive the phoneme due to the peculiarities of the mother language. The students whose first language is Chinese usually demonstrate the lowest results in phonetics. It's caused by many reasons. Some English phonemes do not exist in Chinese; stress and intonation patterns are different. Unlike English, which is an intonational language, Chinese is a tone language. This means that it uses the pitch (highness or lowness) of a phoneme to distinguish word meaning.[2] In English, changes in pitch are used to emphasize or express emotion, not to give a different word meaning to the sound.

English has more vowel sounds than Chinese, resulting in the faulty pronunciation of words like *ship/sheep, it/eat, full/fool*. Diphthongs such as in *weigh, now* or *deer* are often shortened to a single sound.

Chinese learners find it difficult to hear the difference between **l** and **r**, and so may mispronounce *rake* and *rice* as *lake* and *lice*. Southern Chinese speakers have a similar difficulty in distinguishing **l** and **n**.

A major problem is with the common final consonant in English. This feature is much less frequent in Chinese and results in learners either failing to produce the consonant or adding an extra vowel at the end of the word. For example, *hill* may be pronounced as if without the double *ll* but with a drawn out *i*, or as rhyming with *killer*. [5]

The difficulties of pronouncing individual English words, compounded by problems with intonation, result in the heavily accented English of many

Chinese learners, what in some cases can make them sound impossible to understand.

There is a great amount of researches on different techniques in teaching English word rhythm which can be applied to teaching Chinese students. Thus Beisbier B. offers many activities for recognition and discovery of word stress pattern rules with student-generated rule writing.

Examples: (known) (unknown)

1. electric terrific Italic academic

.

Rule: In words ending in -ic, the main stress comes before -ic.

2. baseball · spaceship

high school · instant noodles

Rule: In compound nouns, the main stress is on the first part. [1]

The other type of activity was offered by Gilbert J. B.. The teacher has students pull a wide rubber band between the two thumbs while saying a word. Stretch it out during the stressed syllable but leave it short during other unstressed syllables. It provides a visual image of the variable length of the syllables as well as a kinesthetic tool that mimics the actual effort involved in lengthening a stressed syllable. [3, p. 38] The teaching purpose is to help students avoid pronouncing each syllable at the same length, which appears to be the most common problem for Chinese students. They can usually lengthen a syllable, but cannot shorten a syllable. The key point is to teach students to reduce vowels in unstressed syllables. For example, the vowel “a” in “woman” is reduced to /ə/, not like a full vowel /æ / in “manner.”

But all these and other activities do not serve the purpose of learning to pronounce individual sounds or, to be more precise, to develop the ability to distinguish phonemes. We suppose that cued speech can provide visually clear and visually complete access to the consonant-vowel structure of English which will help students to achieve phonemic awareness. Thus *the aim of the paper* is to investigate the possibility of usage cued speech in order to enhance phonetics acquisition.

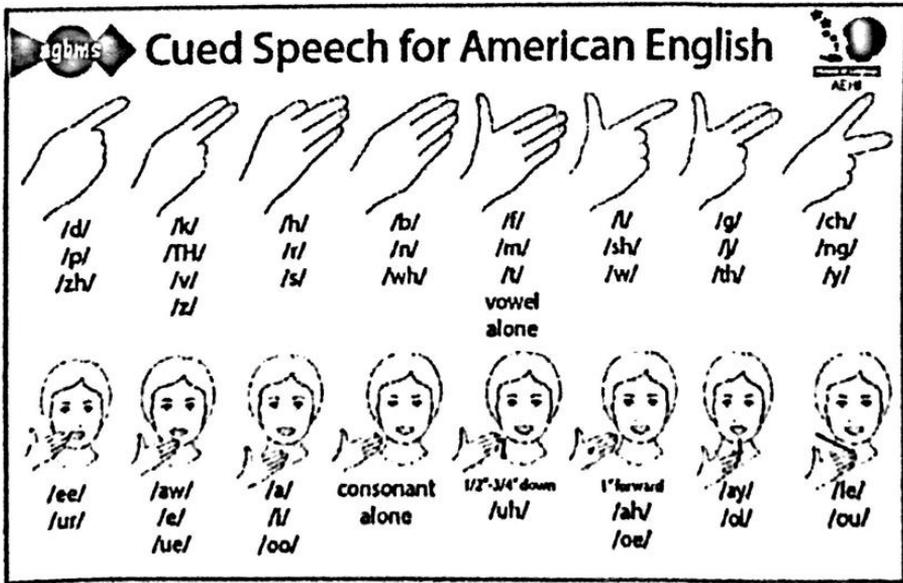
Cued Speech was invented in 1966 by R. Orin Cornett, Ph.D. While working at Gallaudet University as the vice president for long-range planning, Dr. Cornett was surprised to find that the deaf student body had low reading levels. He had assumed that the students would be avid readers because books would give them access to information that they could not get by listening. He came to the realization that many of the students who had grown up using sign language did not read well because they did not have full mastery of English. To read and write a language proficiently, a person must be fluent in its use. Such fluency has been shown to begin with the ability to distinguish the smallest components of the language, the building blocks known as phonemes.

Dr. Cornett proceeded to invent Cued Speech to enable those who cannot hear English to clearly and unambiguously see all of its phonemic components. “If all the phonemes of speech looked clearly different from each other on the speaker’s mouth, just as they sound different from each other to normal ears, a profoundly deaf child could learn language through vision almost as easily as the normal child learns it from hearing.” [4, p.154]

To prove our assumption that the usage of cued speech improves phonemic awareness we need to define the notion «phoneme». Phonemes have historically been defined as an acoustic event, i.e. the sounds of a language, or simply, «speech sounds». The Webster’s dictionary defines a phoneme as «one of the set of the smallest units of speech as the ‘m’ of ‘mat’ and the ‘b’ of ‘bat’ in English, that distinguishes one utterance or word from another in a given language». [6, p. 883] Cueing changes the way we define English phonemes. Phonemes remain the smallest unit of English which distinguishes one word from another, i.e., the consonant and vowel «building blocks» of English but the no longer need to be defined by acoustic characteristics or tied to the speech sounds of the language. Through cueing, the phonemes of English become a purely visual event. English phonemes can be conveyed acoustically through speech or they can be conveyed visually through cueing.

To make the experiment itself clear let us make an overview of the cued system. So eight handshapes represent groups of consonants, four positions represent groups of vowels and four combinations of vowel positions represent diphthongs. Here one should notice that the hand cues are different for sounds that look alike on the lips, e.g. ‘p’, ‘b’ and ‘m’; ‘t’, ‘d’, ‘n’ and ‘l’; and ‘k’, ‘g’ and ‘h’. The hand cues may be the same for sounds that look different on the lips. In other words, the cues separate the look-alike.

When you begin to cue, you place the handshape of the first consonant in the position of the vowel that follows it. There is no need to begin at the side position and you do not need to return to the side position until you read a final consonant. As you cue syllables, you move from one to the other without returning to the side position. You do move to that position when you cue a final consonant. The flat handshape, called the 5 handshape, is used for vowels without consonants and for the second half of a diphthong in addition to its own set of consonant. Picture 1 represents the American English Cue Chart which was used during our experiment.



Picture 1

So we involved 20 Chinese students in the experimental group and 20 Chinese students from the control group into the experiment. The students of the experimental group were taught phonetics during 4 months by applying cued speech. Both the teacher and the students learned how to cue sounds and used this system along with oral reproduction. This tool appeared to be rather useful in identifying the target sound. For example, to distinguish between sound 'r' and 'l' the students used different handshapes (handshape 3 for 'r' and handshape 6 for 'l'). It took them two months to get used to using cued speech and next two months the students just practiced English phonemes using both their visual and acoustic representation.

After-experiment survey showed a considerable progress in achieving phonetic awareness by the Chinese students from the experimental group (85%), whereas the control group got only 45% in the survey on identifying and distinguishing English phonemes.

In summary, cued English allows full, unambiguous, visual access to the phonetic structure of English which in its turn improves students' phonemic awareness skills.

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