Think or Sink:

Chinese Learners' Acquisition of English Voiceless Interdental Fricative

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Abstract

This study investigates the production of the English interdental fricative theta [θ] by Chinese learners of English, using a variationist framework that predicts how a learner's language is influenced by internal and external factors. The participants consist of 23 Chinese learners of English. They were asked to evaluate the acceptability of four possible substitutes for variable (th), and to perform four oral production tasks: (1) read a word list aloud, (2) read a passage aloud, (3) retell the story from the passage, and (4) describe their background and language proficiency in an oral interview. All the production data were tape recorded, transcribed, and entered into the GOLDVARB 2001 program for statistical analysis. The results indicated that immediate phonetic environments and speech style were the best combination of factors to account for accurate production of [θ] among all the Chinese speakers. Learners who had higher accurate production of [θ] used different strategies from those who had lower accurate production of [θ]. Learners that had good control over the pronunciation of (th) used monitoring strategies more than markedness, whereas those who had lower production accuracy depended on markedness more than monitoring. However, contrary to Bybee's prediction (2001, 2002), high token frequencies did not undergo reductive sound change as expected. In addition, speakers from both Taiwan and Mainland China rated [s] as the most acceptable substitute for (th), although they demonstrated allophonic complexity in actual production.

Key Words: interdental fricative, interlanguage variation, Chinese English