A Qualitative Study of Miscues in Pause Placement in Chinese EFL Learners' Read Speech

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Abstract: *Reading is a breakthrough of study of prosodically oral production of English as a second language. It is also the most simplified oral production. The pause is a necessary part of colloquial English and it reflects the internal activities of the speaker in the speech planning process. Wrong or inappropriate pause will cause the semantic ambiguity of speech production, which interferes with listeners' comprehension. In this study a qualitative analysis of Chinese EFL learners' miscues in pause placement is conducted by comparing between the native English speakers and EFL learners on reading the same English story. The results show, EFL learners' miscues in pause placement mainly focuses on: wrong pauses correlated to the noun clauses i.e. that-clauses, what –clauses and the final reporting phrases; Wrong pauses in connection to relative clauses without punctuation mark; i.e., the defining relative clause; Incorrect pauses within the sense group related to the conjunctions i.e., but, and; semantically and physiologically relevant errors-silent juncture pauses co-occur with other hesitation phenomena i.e. Self-correction, repetition and reformulation in Chinese EFL learners' read speech.*

Keywords: *pause; miscues in pause placement; a qualitative study*

1. Introduction

The division of longer utterances into grammatically relevant word groups is one of the roles of intonation (O'Connor & Aronold, 1973; Halliday, 1967; Wells, 2006). The divided parts of connected speech have been called intonation-groups, intonational units or intonational phrases. The criterion frequently mentioned in the demarcation of intonation-groups is that of pause (Cruttenden, 1997, p.30). The importance of pauses in the demarcation of intimation groups is also mentioned in some definitions of groups: groups, or units of intonation, are a passage of discourse separated by perceptible pauses, a continuous stream of speech (Celik 2004: 3). Previous studies have also discussed the close relationship[1-5] between pause placements and intonation phrase boundaries (e.g., Bosˇkovic´ 2001; Nespor & Vogel 1986; Radanovic´-Kocic´ 1988, 1996; Schu¨tze 1994) At the same time, pauses are a pervasive phenomenon in natural speech, and pauses are to spoken language as punctuation is to written language. Researchers generally believe that pause is one of the important prosodic features of the structure of the spoken word that marks it (Brotherton, P. 1979; Rosenfield, B.1987; Swerts, 1997; Oliveira, 2002). In autonomous speech as well in read speech, speakers often use pause strategies to identify their structure. First, Yang Jun and Chen Hua (2005) pointed out that reading is the simplest form of discourse, and choosing reading as a spoken language output task can reduce the interference of pragmatics and other factors. Readers tend to produce similar discourse tone groups, which makes it possible to compare between two-language learners and between second-language learners and native speakers (Brown et al1980: 40; Juffs 1990: 104); second, pause is an important temporal concept and necessary component of read speech. Zeller (1994) points out that wrong pauses can hinder the listener's understanding and sometimes even mislead them. Therefore, the accurate definition of the pause placement in reading and the qualitative study of the wrong pause placement can, on the one hand, help students to implement correct pauses in the spoken language, to achieve more effective communication with the native speakers; on the other hand, it has the significance of enlightening foreign language teachers' teaching, textbook compilation, and students' foreign language learning.[6-9]

2. Significance of this study

2.1 Definition of Pause

The Longman Dictionary of Linguistics defines pauses as "pauses" or "hesitations" when speaking, the former being called "silent pauses" i.e., silent pauses between words, and the latter being called filled pauses, i.e., "um/mm", "Oh" (er) etc. (Richards, 1990: 500). This study focuses on silent pauses in read speech. Different researchers have given different operational definitions of silent pauses. Pause referred to "the silent segment in a person's verbal flow" (O'Connell, D.C. & Kowal, S.1983: 221). Burger (2005) pointed out that pause referred to "a temporary loss of sound signals in natural discourse, which can be defined as a temporary silent hesitation or pause in discourse." Simone (1990) defined pauses as "silent discontinuities of various durations between language units that can be featured as suprasegmental features." In the sonagram of Pratt software, in addition to the pauses as blank segments, there are some silent pause areas that may be accompanied by faint shadows, and the obvious breathing sound can be differentiated. Therefore, Yuan Lan (2009) pointed out that silent pause can be defined as "a silent interruption of various durations in the flow of speech, which may be accompanied by the sound of breathing or swallowing."[9-13]

2.2 Studies of the pause placement

Brotherton (1979) pointed out that pauses often occur at major syntactic boundaries. Researches on pauses have yielded some results in recent decades. The studies of silent pause are conducted mainly among native speakers. Some of them revolved around syntactic factors Cooper & Paccia-Cooper, 1980; Grosjean et al., 1979; Strangert, 1991 for Swedish;waston & Gibson, 2004). Part of them argued that prosodic structures were the best predicted factor of the pause placement (Grosjean et al., 1979; Gee and Grosjean, 1983; Ferreira, 1993; Krivokapic´, 2007a, 2007b); Another studies claimed that the effects of different rates, speech styles, task types and respiratory ventilation on the placement of pauses (Nespor and Vogel, 1986, 2007; Zec and Inkelas, 1990; Ghini, 1993; Selkirk, 2000; Megyesi & Gustafson- Capkova, 2001; Sandalo and Truckenbrodt, 2002; Gustafson- Capkova &Megyesi,2002; Fant et al. ,2003; D'Imperio et al., 2005; Dehe´ , 2009, among others). In addition, studies of pauses in the second language involving EFL learners have been gradually developed, but in limited numbers. In 1980,[14] Deschamps studied 20 French English learners who took spoken English classes from two different levels (semesters two and four). In the study, participants described two sets of images in English and French, comparing the oral production of the two languages. Cenoz (1998) selected 15 Spanish university students as the subjects of the study, and the researchers divided these English learners into two groups-the intermediate and the advanced, who told the same story in English. Only pauses that judged to be hesitant pauses and not appeared at the syntactic junction were studied. Chen Hua & Liang Mao Chen chose 45 Chinese English learners and eight native English speakers as the research object, which was required to read an 820-word story. Mei Li (2006) studied 30 Chinese English learners (10 graduate students, 10 English majors, and 10 non-English majors). Pauses in non-English majors and 2 native speakers read the same article aloud. Zhang Heli (2009) analyzed the pausing problem of 31 non-English majors in the read speech, and proposed solutions such as improving students' awareness of the structure of the sense groups. Liang Yanwen (2010) studied the definition of unnatural pauses in oral monologues of 35 English majors. Yin Nan (2011) chose 40 non-English major freshmen in the same teaching class as an object of study, who were allowed to complete three different narrative tasks: independent answer questions, topics and figure description. Gao Ying (2011) compared pauses difference between the Chinese college students and the American College Students in oral narrative, basing on their self-built corpus. Wu Caixia (2012) selected players participating in CCTV speech contest for the study, and analyzed the internal pause pattern in oral production of foreign language learners. [15]

To conclude, all these studies of pauses in EFL learners have found that there is a certain gap between the pause patterns of Chinese English learners and native speakers, indicating that there are still certain problems in the grasp of syntactic structure and the relationship between the sense group and pause, and they found that the higher the level of learners, the less syntactical pauses there are. This study is a qualitative study that focuses on the wrong pause placement in oral speech by medium level Chinese EFL learners. [16]

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Subjects

25 Chinese EFL learners (20 females and 5 males) from HYIT were chosen to participate in the experiment. They are non-English major sophomores and have no speech disorders. Also, a native speaker's recording was chosen as the control group.

3.2 Experimental materials

Participants were asked to read a short story of 429 words in English. The article is chosen from the second lesson of the third volume of the New Concepts of English. The difficulty of the article is within the lowest level of the subject's comprehension ability, and the content of the article is a small story of life, and there is no content that is difficult to understand. [17]

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The procedure for the entire experiment was to familiarize the subjects with the material for one minute, understood the general content, and then continued to read it aloud. While the subject read, the pronunciation was recorded into Adobe Audition at the same time. Both the audio recordings read by the subjects and the native speaker were transcribed to a computer, where pauses were measured, distinguished and compared on Praat software, and the resulting data was added to the annotation.

3.4 Research results and Discussion

This study mainly focused on the miscues in pause placement on subjects' read speech and made a comparative analysis. It was found that the subjects were most likely to have 4 types of miscues in pause placement in their Read Speech: Wrong pauses correlated to the noun clauses i.e. that-clauses, what –clauses and the final reporting phrases; Wrong pauses in connection to relative clauses without punctuation mark; i.e., the defining relative clause; Incorrect pauses within the sense group related to the conjunctions i.e., but, and; Semantically and physiologically relevant errors-silent juncture pauses co-occur with other hesitation phenomena i.e. Self-correction, repetition and reformulation.[18-23]

(1) Wrong pauses correlated to the noun clauses i.e. that-clauses, what –clauses and the final reporting phrases. Take the following sentences for example.

(a) Looking at his watch, he saw *that* / it was one o'clock…

(b) It's working all right, but I'm afraid that / one o'clock it will strike thirteen times …

(c) "Whatever are you doing up here, Bill?" / *asked the vicar in surprise.*

The subjects read the first two sentences aloud when they mistakenly paused after the two italic *that,* and they paused longer which lasting 0. 35 seconds and 0.38 seconds. In contrasting with the pause pattern of native speaker, they basically paused preceding the introducer *that* in the noun clauses. In addition, in the face of the italic part of sentence C *asked the vicar in surprise,* the subjects incorrectly performed pauses before the italic part. To a large extent, the intonation phrase (IP) signals the presence of a syntactic boundary at the same place. But as to the final reporting phrase, an intonational group is optional or even unlikely.[24-26] Wells (2006) claimed that the final reporting phrase could not form a separate IP. In the present study, the native speaker processed the final reporting phrase and the direct quote part into one intonational group without inserting any pause, while the subjects mostly demarcate them into two groups, resulting in superfluous prosodic structures (Chen Et al., 2010).

(2) Wrong pauses in connection to relative clauses without punctuation mark; i.e., the defining relative clause. Take the following sentences for example.

(a) an unpleasant smell which / convinced him...

(b) The big clock /which use to strike the hours day...

The native speaker processed the defining relative clauses as one separate IP and there was no intonation break before or within the defining relative clause. Opposite to the native speaker, the subjects either performed the wrong pauses after the introducer *which* in sentence d or they made pauses within defining relative clauses in sentence e. Both of which lead to semantic ambiguity.

(3) Incorrect pauses within the sense group related to the conjunctions i.e., but, and.

Pauses in English have close relations with the sense group. The segmentation of a sense group provides space for pauses, while pauses between sense groups are not necessary but possible. Since the demarcation of a sense group is based on both syntactic structure and the communicative consideration. Taking the following sentences related to the conjunctions *but* or *and* for example.[27]

(a) Looking at his watch, he saw that it was one o'clock, *but* /the bell struck thirteen times before it stopped.

(b) Now let's go downstairs /*and* have a cup of tea.

Most subjects paused for a longer period after the conjunction *but* or before *and*. Zhang Heli (2009) pointed out that it was necessary to take the syntactic structure and the communicative consideration into account, when the conjunctions occurred within a sentence, and it was incorrectly to demarcate the conjunctions and related words into two sense groups before and after. This would create communicative difficulties with native speakers. [28-30]

(4) Semantically and physiologically relevant errors-silent juncture pauses co-occur with other hesitation phenomena i.e. Self-correction, repetition and reformulation.

Pauses sometimes occur for a physiological function, i.e., a breathing or a speaker wanting to emphasize a certain part of the content. EFL learners tend to pause in this regard. Especially in some sentences with complex sentence structures. Take the following sentence for example.

(a) Our vicar is always raising money for one cause or another, but he has never managed to get enough money to have the church clock repaired.

The underlined part of the sentence h occurs twice as an infinitive to be the purpose of the adjective, and the sentence pattern is relatively complex. The native speaker treated it into two groups, i.e., pause at the comma boundary, i.e., after *another*. The subjects, on the other hand, made more pauses while reading the sentence: some paused almost every two words; some paused after both *tos*; and others paused after *manager*. In short, the subjects performed unnecessary pauses possibly out of the need to breathe or due to hesitation, which gave the listeners feelings of rigid machinery. Furthermore, the subjects' wrong pauses also produced superfluous prosodic structures. (Chen Hua et al., 2010).

4. Conclusion

Through a qualitative analysis of the erroneous pause placements of 25 EFL learners read speech, it is apparent that the learners' wrong pause placements were mainly concentrated on the first two types, [31]those related to that-clause, what- clause, the final reporting phrases and the defining relative clauses. This is due to the learners' lack of understanding of the effects of syntactic and prosodic structures on pause placement. Then, the wrong pauses within the sense group associated with the conjunctions *and* or *but*, are due to the learner's fuzzy semantic concepts. The incorrect pauses in connection to physiology such as non-juncture pauses i.e. self-correction and repetition, reflects that when encountering complex long sentences, learners often constitute hesitation pauses. It is mainly because they require much time to retrieve elements or plan the next idea and transform these from mental process into verbal sentences, because of their limited English proficiency.[32-38]

In summary, theoretically this study investigated the common miscues in pause placement in the Medium-level Chinese EFL learners' read speech. The learners seemed obscure about the regulations of specific pause placement in connected speech. Practically this research also delivered implications to English teaching in China. In the traditional English class, the oral English often focused on the accuracy of pronunciation and fluency of expression. The results of present study might inspire English teachers to emphasize teaching suprasegmental features in English such as pauses. Meantime, it also encouraged learners to raise awareness of pauses in oral production, which contributed to their smooth communication with native speakers.

In the light of the limitation of time, research condition, and the ability of author, there were some aspects that the author intended to explore, but did not do very well. For example, a small number of subjects; only involved the qualitive study lack of more valid data analysis. Furthermore, it is really believed that pauses and hesitation phenomena can indicate difficulties in language planning and execution and they can be a cue to infer the psycholinguistic processes taking place in second language production. Further research on the relationship between subjects' psycholinguistic process and their

speech production can be a hotspot.

Acknowledgements

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