

Individual Paper Session 19
Phonology
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What Makes English Consonant Clusters Difficult for Cantonese-speaking ESL Learners?

WONG, Cathy S.P.
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
egcathyw@polyu.edu.hk

This paper reports on the difficulties faced by one Cantonese-speaking ESL learner in producing English consonant clusters. Studies on English spoken by Hong Kong Cantonese speakers (Hung 2000, Walmsley 1977) have identified problems in producing syllable-initial consonant clusters. Research findings concerning consonant clusters have identified two major phonological factors: first, the position of the clusters, and second, the length of the cluster (Broselow and Finer 1991; Broselow, Chen and Wang 1998; Carlisle 1991, 1999; Eckman 1991; Lin 2001; Tarone 1980; Weinberger 1987).

In order to better understand the acquisition of consonant clusters by Cantonese-speaking ESL learners, a study was conducted to investigate the above factors. The research questions are:

- (1) What is the effect of the length of the consonant cluster?
- (2) What is the effect of the position of the consonant cluster?
- (3) Which types of consonant clusters pose the most difficulty?
- (4) What are the strategies employed?

The results reported in this paper were based on the analysis of the spoken data collected from one subject. A list of 34 sentences with 112 test words containing all possible types of initial and final consonant clusters in English were used to elicit the data.

It was found that initial clusters were comparatively easier. The accuracy of initial clusters was 64% while that of final clusters was only 21%. Among the initial clusters, the accuracy rates were 66% and 50% for initial two-member and three-member clusters respectively. Similarly, the accuracy of the final clusters deteriorated as the number of consonants increased: 29%, 5%, and 0% respectively for the two-member, three-member, and four-member final clusters.

From the analysis of the problematic cases, it was evident that initial clusters which consisted of the interdental fricative /θ/ as the first member or the sonorant /r/, /l/, or /w/ as the second member caused difficulty. In the final position, a cluster consisting of an /l/ was almost always produced incorrectly.

In terms of strategies, this learner used substitution, deletion, and devoicing but devoicing was found only in final clusters. Epenthesis was rarely found.