

Project: From Speech to Spelling: Improving Chinese Proficiency of Non-Chinese Speaking Students Through Cantonese Speech Learning

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Abstract:

With an increasing number of South Asian (SA) students entering mainstream schools in Hong Kong, there is a dire lack of research investigating their Cantonese speech acquisition. This project had two distinct objectives: 1) a research-oriented object to investigate the speech acquisition of Cantonese by SA students; and 2) a teaching-oriented objective to equip SA students with the practical skills to type Chinese characters effectively through the Cantonese Romanization system (Jyutping). Our research findings suggest that Cantonese phonological contrasts are not uniformly difficult for SA students. They can distinguish the contrasts of onset aspiration, vowel length and vowel rounding better than the contrasts of coda place of articulation contrast and lexical tone. Nevertheless, their better distinction of the three contrasts was still worse than that of Cantonese native speakers. The language background of the SA students is one factor affecting their Cantonese acquisition. These research findings provide useful guidance for teachers of SA students to better help them with Cantonese speech. A series of Jyutping typing workshops were conducted in both secondary and primary schools for SA students. Compared to using handwriting to input Chinese characters in the pre-test, the SA students could input many more Chinese characters using Jyutping spelling in the post-test. Our results demonstrate the ease and usefulness of introducing Jyutping to the SA students as a practical mean to improve their Chinese learning.

Keywords:

Cantonese; Jyutping; speech acquisition; South Asian