Echo from Radio

By Shaoyi Liu

When I was eight years old, I heard the first English phrase from English teacher's black radio. I imagined that a blonde-curly-hair lady in suit sat inside the small black box and greeted us with her hoarse, calm, and highly formal English voice. ‘‘Good morning’’, she said.

Later, by imitating her intonation and pronunciation, we greeted the lady back. ‘‘Good morning,’’ we replied. However, it did not make us realize the weirdness of the voice until our instructor presented the spelling of that phrase, g—o—o—d m—o—r—n—i—n—g. We had never known that letters from alphabet, g, o, d, m, r, n, i, and g, could be combined in such a ridiculous way. The spelling looked similar to a bunch of branches in fireplace stacked casually by a child. And somehow such an abnormal sound was generated. Seeing ‘‘good morning’’ on blackboard, confused by it, every student gazed at the teacher in wonder and scratched their heads.

I still remember that on the same day I heard my first English phrase, I heard a long sentence. When the teacher pressed the start button, numerous words slid out of the radio, joining into a complete sentence. ‘‘Bob goes to hospital today because of his headache’’, the lady inside the black narrated. The sound of that sentence seems like flamenco, a dance in Spanish. When the exotic sound emerged, the lady in the black box was dancing with exuberance. When multi-syllables burst in the radio, the lady changed her gesture with rapidity and fluency. When the plosives from b, t, and d appeared, the lady was using her toes to tap her leather shoes on the stage. Nonetheless, when my turn arrived to attempt to produce the first English sentence in my life, the funny grunting voice that came out from my throat had no difference from the sound of a continuously popped bubble that arose from the bottom of a beef stew. What actually causes confusion for young Chinese students to pronounce

English when noticing a strand of letters in English on blackboard? Why would the sound of oral English from Chinese students enormously differ from the sounds from a recorded tape?

Before learning English during primary school, almost every Chinese child learns spoken Chinese at a very young age. A few years later, they learn Chinese characters by learning pinyin, a phonetic tool to Chinese characters, first. This seems to be mature and fixed Chinese-learning system for most of the Chinese family. In Chinese, the fundamental unit of a sentence is one character with straightforward one sound, or one syllable. However, in English, in the basic unit, words, monosyllabic and polysyllabic, speakers offer multiple sounds. Even in one monosyllabic word of English, there is more than one sound, including plosives endowed with letters t and d. Consequently, even though pinyin shares the same alphabet with English, in Chinese one strand of letters in pinyin frequently corresponds to one or more characters with one same sound while a strand of letters in English reflects multi-sound. In addition, the spelling and pronunciation rule based on a given strand of letters in Chinese characters and English words totally differ. For example 好, means ‘‘good’’ in English, has pinyin *hao* with *h* pronouncing pretty much the same in English while *ao* pronouncing *aw* in English. It is also clear that when you try to pronounce *hao*, only one sound would skip out from your throat, a combined single sound of *hao*, whereas there are three sounds rippled by saying ‘‘good’’. At the beginning of learning English, since Chinese students are exposed to pinyin’s spelling and pronunciation rule at a very young age, they would automatically apply pinyin’s rule of spelling and pronunciation in other languages, such as English, that resemble pinyin. However, this frequently does not work because these distinguished rules between pinyin and English can be hard to mutually apply to each other. As Chinese students notice a spelling of ‘‘ts’’, they would not understand why the combination of ‘‘t’’ and ‘‘s’’ would generate an identical sound of pinyin’s letter ‘‘c’’. Many Chinese students tend to get confused when first encountering English pattern of

combination of letters, likewise, challenges also emerge in people who master rules of English grammar and spelling when pronouncing Chinese based on presented pinyin. My name illustrated on every profile, Shaoyi Liu, is a pinyin-based English spelling. American students and teachers tend to hesitate for a second when they notice the weird spelling of alphabet letters in my name, especially in my last name. However, when I tell them ‘‘maybe try to pronounce my last name as ‘l--i—e—w’, which is a single sound in Chinese’’, they usually make an almost-authentic Chinese sound. For some Chinese American students that I knew who said that they did not learn pinyin until age fifteen or sixteen, pinyin also makes them struggle for its thoroughly different spelling and pronunciation rules from English. Consequently, because the rule of one language has taken root and spread in the soil of people’s mind, it is tough for them to learn a rule from another language and switch between these two languages arbitrarily.

Richard Rodriguez, a Mexican American author who grew up in a Mexican immigrant family, describes the difference of his parents’ oral Spanish and English in his essay ‘‘Aria’’: ‘‘in public, my father and mother spoke a hesitant, accented, and not always grammatical English...at home, they returned to Spanish…the words would come quick, with ease’’ (26). Hearing his parents speaking both Spanish and English, Rodriguez found it difficult for his parents to switch between these two languages. When his parents speak Spanish, the words flow fluently with ease, pleasure and they feel a sense of being soothed. While when they speak English in public, the sounds of colloquial English deriving from his parents’ throats are filled with tension and wariness, with uncertainty, incoherence, and hesitation always presenting in their sentences. Different from his parents, *los gringos* – as Rodriguez referred to English native speakers in the U.S. – speak English in ‘‘exotic polysyllabic sound,’’ with enthusiasm and confidence bursting among their sentences (26). Since experiencing Spanish education at young age and utilizing it for their entire life, his parents mastered Spanish.

While living in a community where the majority of people speak English, his parents found it hard to switch their Spanish to English even though they reside in such surroundings and learn English every day. This situation is exactly what Chinese students fresh to English are encountering each day, and it even mirrors the situation which newly arrived Chinese students face in the US. Such a circumstance resembles pouring oil on the top of water, with water being my first language and oil being English. Experience of learning English will accumulate, but the two languages are hard to switch because inseparable layers, such as pronunciation and spelling, always function as barriers to communication.

Therefore, inevitably, the majority of students who learn a second language after they master their native language's discipline get confused with the additional language. However, do we have strategy to deal with the barrier? Well, immersing in learning a second language along with native language in infancy may help. According to Tracy Trautner, an educator working in the early childhood industry, ‘‘bilingually exposed infants excelled in detecting a switch in language as early as 6 months old. They can learn a second language as easy as they learned to walk and learn their primary language’’. I think when we are young children, our brain is still developing, the neurons are not fixed nor mature yet, and the number of synapses ascends dramatically, which significantly enhances the communication between neurons (Washington). Altogether, our brains may maintain high ability to learn many things and be shaped. Meanwhile, in childhood, rules of a certain language have not restricted us and we have underlying talent to accept or adopt many different ones, so we can learn bilingually. But when we grow older, the brain becomes more rigid with fewer neurons as well as synapses and descending neuron-neuron communication (Washington) and we may feel constrained by the rules of one language, such as Chinese, when trying to learn a second one, English. It is as though you wear a hat in your childhood, the hat is too large for your head to fit in, so you can wear whatever you like, changing the directions of the hat and so on.

However, when your head grows, the hat becomes tight for you; you cannot switch to wear it in different ways.

Having mentioned my experience of first struggling with oral English and the differences in pronunciation and brain flexibility, which make me – and I hope other language learners – feel more at peace and accept their struggles, the image of my valiant ongoing struggle still stays in my mind: on a sultry afternoon after hearing sentences from an English speaking lady, a boy racked his brains in front of the blackboard, trying to figure out how to pronounce English according to the chalk notes.

Works Cited

Rodriguez, Richard. "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood." *The Hunger of Memory.* New York: Bantam, 1983. Print.

Trautner, T. (2019, January 28). "Advantages of a bilingual brain." *MSU Extension Early Childhood Developmen*t. https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/advantages_of_a_bilingual_brain

Washington, J. (n.d.). "The Relationship Between Age & Plasticity." *Sciencing*. https://sciencing.com/the-relationship-between-age-plasticity-12760666.html