

A Preliminary Study on the Problem of Pauses in English Read Speech for Students of Arts in Local Universities

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Abstract: This paper conducts a preliminary study on the problem of pauses in English read speech for students of art in local universities. By analyzing the characteristics and causes of pauses in their English reading, it aims to propose effective strategies to improve their English reading skills and language proficiency. Through effective investigation, this research explores the impact of pauses on the comprehensibility and fluency of English reading, as well as the factors that contribute to inappropriate pauses. The findings of this study can provide valuable insights for English language teaching and learning in local universities.

Keywords: Students of arts; Local universities; English read speech; Pauses

Introduction

In the context of globalization, English has become an essential tool for communication and cooperation. Meanwhile, according to the "College English Curriculum Teaching Requirements" issued in 2004, the teaching goal of college English in China is to cultivate students' comprehensive English application ability, especially listening and speaking ability, so that they can effectively conduct oral and written information exchanges in English^[1]. For the students of arts in local universities, mastering English is not only beneficial for their academic studies but also crucial for their future career development. However, art students often face many challenges in English learning, among which the problem of pause skills in English reading is particularly prominent. Students of arts usually invest a lot of time and energy in the art field. Relatively speaking, the foundation of English learning is relatively weak. When reading in English, they often have difficulty accurately grasping the sense groups and rhythms of sentences, resulting in inappropriate pauses. And improper pauses can affect the comprehensibility and fluency of reading, and reduce the effectiveness of communication. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a study on the problem of pauses in English read speech for the students of arts in local universities.

1. Research Background

1.1 Definition and classification of pauses

According to the dictionary of phonetics and phonology, pause is parsed as a short interruption during the production of an utterance. In speech production, pauses are necessary for a speaker to regain his breath and make time available for the cognitive processes of speech planning. There have been different classifications of pause in studies exploring pause behavior^[2] (Zellner, 1994). According to form criteria, the pause falls into two categories: the filled pause and the silent pause^[3] (Cruttenden, 1997). Silent pauses correspond to silent periods between vocalizations (including breath pauses) and filled pauses to interruptions of speech flow by non-lexical sounds such as ah, mm, er, erm, uh, um. From a functional perspective, Goldman-Eisler (1968) suggested that both filled and silent pauses reflect different internal processes: filled pauses reflect affective states such as anxiety and silent pauses correspond to the cognitive difficulty of the task involved. This study focuses on both two pauses in read speech.

1.2 Significance of pauses in English read speech

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. Proper pauses can enhance the comprehensibility and fluency of English reading. They can help readers understand the structure and meaning of a text, emphasize important information, and create a rhythm and flow in reading. On the other hand, Wrong or inappropriate pause will cause the semantic ambiguity of speech production, which interferes with listeners' comprehension.

1.3 Previous studies on pauses in English read speech

Researches on pauses have yielded some results in recent decades. The studies of silent pause are conducted mainly among native speak-

ers. Many of them revolved around the variability of their pause patterns affected by different factors.^{[4] [5] [6]} (Grosjean et al., 1979; Ferreira, 1993; Krivokapic', 2007a, 2007b) In addition, studies of pauses in the second language involving EFL learners have been gradually developed, but in limited numbers. In 1980, Deschamps studied 20 French English learners who took spoken English classes from two different levels (semesters two and four). In China, previous studies tended to select English majors or students majoring in ordinary undergraduate programs as the subjects of research, and investigated the pausing problems in their read speech. Chen Hua & Liang Mao Chen chose 45 English majors as the research objects, which was required to read an 820-word story^[7]. Zhang Heli (2009) analyzed the pausing problem of 31 non-English majors in ordinary undergraduate in read speech, and proposed solutions such as improving students' awareness of the structure of the sense groups^[8]. However, few studies have focused on the students of arts in local universities, who may have unique characteristics and needs in English reading. Due to these factors, the present study is necessary and significant.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research questions

This research is aimed at investigating the characteristics and causes of pauses of the students of arts in their English reading, and proposing effective strategies to improve their English reading skills and language proficiency. Generally, it aims to answer the following research questions:

- ① What are the characteristics of pauses in English read speech for the students of arts in local universities?
- ② What are the causes of inappropriate pauses in their English reading?
- ③ What strategies can be used to improve their English reading skills and reduce inappropriate pauses?

2.2 Research Design

To answer these research questions, this study employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

2.2.1 Research Subjects

30 students of arts (25 females and 5 males) from HYIT were chosen to participate in the experiment. They are sophomores and have no speech disorders.

2.2.2 Instruments

1) Reading aloud and Case studies: Participants were asked to read same articles in English. The content of the articles involved different types, e.g. poem, essay. The difficulty of these articles is within the lowest level of the subject's comprehension ability, and there is no content that is difficult to understand.

2) Questionnaire survey: Administering a questionnaire to Participants to collect their opinions and experiences regarding pauses in English reading.

Part 1: Reading Habits

- ① How often do you read in English?
 - A. Daily
 - B. Several times a week
 - C. Once a week
 - D. Once a month
 - E. Rarely
- ② What types of materials do you usually read in English? (Check all that apply)
 - A. Novels
 - B. News articles
 - C. Academic papers
 - D. Blogs
 - E. Magazines

Part 2: Pauses in Reading

- ① Do you consciously pause while reading English?
 - A. Always
 - B. Often
 - C. Sometimes
 - D. Rarely

E. Never

② What are the main reasons for your pauses? (Check all that apply)

A. To understand difficult vocabulary

B. To analyze complex sentences

C. To think about the meaning of a passage

D. Due to distractions

E. Other (please specify)

③ How long are your typical pauses?

A. Less than 5 seconds

B. 5-10 seconds

C. 11-20 seconds

D. 21-30 seconds

E. More than 30 seconds

Part 3: Impact of Pauses

① Do you think pauses enhance your understanding of English reading?

A. Strongly agree

B. Agree

C. Neutral

D. Disagree

E. Strongly disagree

② Have you noticed any changes in your reading speed and comprehension after becoming more aware of your pauses?

A. Reading speed and comprehension both improved

B. Reading speed improved but comprehension remained the same

C. Comprehension improved but reading speed decreased

D. Both reading speed and comprehension decreased

E. No noticeable change

2.2.3 Data collection and analysis

First, the data collection will involve recording into Adobe Audition and case studies are made at the same time. And the audio recordings read by the subjects were transcribed to a computer, where pauses were measured, distinguished and compared on Praat software, and the resulting data was added to the annotation. Then, students were asked to finish the questionnaire survey, which included questions about the students' reading habits, difficulties in pauses, and the impact of wrong pauses. Finally, the data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and content analysis to identify patterns and trends.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Characteristics of pauses in English read speech for the students of arts

The results of the questionnaire survey and case studies show that the students of arts in local universities tend to conduct the following types of pauses in their English read speech:

3.1.1 Long pauses

Some subjects make long pauses between words or sentences, which can disrupt the flow of reading and make it difficult for listeners to follow. For example, in a reading of a passage about art history, a student paused for several seconds between each sentence, making the narration seem disjointed and hard to understand.

3.1.2 Inconsistent pauses

Some subjects may make inconsistent pauses within a text, which can lead to confusion and a lack of coherence. As in a reading of an English poem, a subject's pauses were erratic, sometimes very short and sometimes very long, which affected the rhythm and meaning of the poem.

3.1.3 Inappropriate location of pauses

Some participants place pauses at inappropriate locations, such as in the middle of a word or between a subject and a verb, which can change the meaning of a sentence. For instance, when reading "The artist is painting a beautiful landscape.", a subject paused after "is", mak-

ing it sound like "The artist is. Painting a beautiful landscape.", which is grammatically incorrect and changes the intended meaning. Or some of them make wrong pauses in connection to relative clauses without punctuation mark; i.e., the defining relative clause. For example, when reading "The big clock which use to strike the hours day.", several subjects either performed the wrong pauses after the introducer *which*, which lead to semantic ambiguity. Still, some subjects pause for a longer period after the conjunction before *and*, while reading "Now let's go downstairs *and* have a cup of tea." 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^[8].

3.2 Causes of improper pauses in English reading

The analysis of the data reveals several factors that contribute to inappropriate pauses in English reading for the students of arts in local universities:

3.2.1 Limited language proficiency

Students with limited English language proficiency may have difficulty understanding the structure and meaning of a text, which can lead to inappropriate pauses. For example, a student who is not familiar with English grammar or some English phonetic or prosodic rules may pause at incorrect places because they are unsure of how to parse the sentence.

3.2.2 Lack of reading practice

Insufficient reading practice can result in a lack of fluency and rhythm in reading, making it difficult for students to make proper pauses. A student who rarely reads English texts may struggle with pausing appropriately because they haven't developed a sense of the natural flow of the language.

3.2.3 Nervousness and anxiety

Some students may feel nervous or anxious when reading aloud, which can cause them to make excessive or inappropriate pauses. For instance, they frequently place filled pauses to interruptions of speech flow by non-lexical sounds such as ah, mm, er, erm, uh, um, which can affect their performance and confidence.

3.2.4 Influence of native language

The influence of the students' native language can also lead to improper pauses, as they may transfer the reading habits and patterns of their native language to English reading. For instance, students whose native language has a different rhythm or punctuation system may pause in ways that are not appropriate in English.

3.3 Strategies for improving English reading skills and reducing inappropriate pauses

Based on the above findings, the following strategies can be used to improve the English reading skills of art students in local universities and reduce inappropriate pauses. For one thing, students can improve their English language proficiency through regular language learning activities, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This will help them better understand the structure and meaning of a text and make more appropriate pauses. For example, by reading a variety of English texts, students can become more familiar with different sentence structures and grammatical patterns, which will improve their ability to pause correctly, which may improve the students' language competence. For another thing, more reading practice can help students develop fluency and rhythm in reading, enabling them to make proper pauses. Teachers can assign more reading tasks and encourage students to read independently. For instance, students can be asked to read short stories, articles, or poems on a regular basis and discuss their readings in class. In addition, students can reduce nervousness and anxiety by practicing reading aloud in a relaxed environment and receiving positive feedback from teachers and peers. They can also use relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and positive self-talk, before reading aloud. For example, a student can practice reading in front of a small group of friends or family members first to build confidence. Finally, students should be aware of the differences between their native language and English and try to avoid transferring the reading habits and patterns of their native language to English reading. Teachers can also provide guidance for students on grasping necessary phonetic and prosodic rules of English. For instance, teachers can introduce something with phonological rules, such as stress, rhythm, intonational phrase, which may as well reduce some common mistakes that students make due to native language interference and provide strategies for overcoming them.

4. Conclusion

This study presents a preliminary study on the problem of pauses in English reading speech for the students of arts in local universities. The results show that art students in local universities face challenges in making proper pauses in their English reading, which can affect the comprehensibility and fluency of reading. The causes of inappropriate pauses include limited language proficiency, lack of reading practice, nervousness and anxiety, and the influence of native language. To improve their English reading skills and reduce improper pauses, students

can strengthen their language proficiency, increase reading practice, reduce nervousness and anxiety, and be aware of the influence of native language. Teachers can also play an important role in providing guidance and support. Future research can further explore the effectiveness of these strategies and develop more targeted teaching methods for the students of art in local universities.

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