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TEACHING TIP

USING TONGUE TWISTERS TO SUPPLEMENT BEGINNING LEVEL CFL STUDENTS' PRONUNCIATION AND TONE PRACTICE

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Chinese is a tonal language and some sounds in Chinese such as <te>, <te^h>, <e>, <ts^h>, and <ɿ>, do not exist in English. To learn tones and pronunciation well is a very challenging task for adult CFL learners whose native language is English. There are activities for students to train and improve their sensitivity on similar sounds and tones. For example, they can listen to and repeat the recordings of two-syllable words to detect the correct pronunciation or tones after hearing sets of words read out, and to speak in sentences and paragraphs in different contexts such as doing dialogues and performing with a well-written skit. These methods have been found useful, but they sometimes are a little boring. The teaching tip introduced below is an approach that could keep students more motivated to strengthen the accuracy of their pronunciation and tones: using tongue twisters to supplement beginning CFL learners' pronunciation and tone practice. Tongue twisters are phrases or sentences that were constructed to put similar but distinct phonemes and tones together to exercise the jaws, the tongue, and the muscles around the mouth. By purposefully putting the similar but distinct phonemes and different tones together, tongue twisters sometimes achieve comic effects. Because of these features, tongue twisters are challenging and engaging as well. This teaching tip demonstrates how tongue twisters can be used to exercise adult CFL learners' jaw, tongue and muscles around the mouth while enforcing their acquisition of the language structure and vocabulary and motivating students to engage in practicing tones and pronunciation. Although the tip talks about using tongue twisters in improving CFL learners' pronunciation and skills, I also give suggestions for ways that the principles behind the tip may apply to other languages.

Goals of Teaching Tip

1. To demonstrate how to incorporate tongue twisters in the curriculum.
2. To demonstrate how to select and sequence introduction of tongue twisters in a pedagogically appropriate way to improve pronunciation and tones maximally while enhancing learners' understanding of the structure of Chinese and expanding their vocabulary.
3. To demonstrate how to introduce tongue twisters so that students are actively involved.
4. To show how to involve students in creating tongue twisters.

Incorporating Tongue Twisters in the Beginning Level Chinese Curriculum

Tongue twisters are fun. However, if they are used very frequently, students will lose interest in them. In my curriculum for the beginning CFL learners, I introduce eight tongue twisters throughout the first semester. The first week of class focuses on giving learners a big picture of Chinese pronunciation (*pinyin*) and tones. Two tongue twisters are introduced in this week. The

two tongue twisters are very useful in helping students with tone learning and sound distinction. During the last 14 weeks, ten book chapters are learned and each chapter has different themes and introduces different grammar points (see *Integrated Chinese Level 1 Part I* for details.) After every two to three chapters, one or two tongue twisters are introduced based on either the theme of learning or the grammar points of the chapters. With only a few tongue twisters, students can practice each very thoroughly and keep their interest and enthusiasm.

Selecting and Sequencing Tongue Twister Introduction

Tongue twisters should not be selected at random. There are many well-known tongue twisters in Chinese. The selection needs to be based on the progress the students make in their learning so that the use of tongue twisters could not only help students with their pronunciation and tones, but also enhance students' learning of vocabulary and structure. I selected and modified some well known tongue twisters and also used made-up tongue twisters (by myself or my colleagues) to make them fit in what the students are learning at that time. Here I will explain why some tongue twisters are used at a certain time.

The first two tongue twisters introduced in the first week are¹⁴:

1. 妈妈骑马，马慢妈妈骂马；妞妞骑牛，牛拗妞妞扭牛。
Māma qí mǎ, mǎ màn māma mà mǎ; Niūniu qí niú, niú niù niūniu niū niú.
(Mom rides on a horse. She curses the horse because it's slow.
Niuniu rides on a cow. She pinches the cow because it's stubborn.)
2. 四是四，十是十；十四是十四，四十是四十。
sì shì sì, shí shì shí; Shísi shì shísi, sìshí shì sìshí
(4 is 4, 10 is 10; 14 is 14 and 40 is 40.)

Tongue twister #1 is all about tones. When students are starting to learn Chinese without any background in the language, it is very crucial to make them aware of the importance of tones. Many characters are pronounced exactly the same, but they have different meanings with different tones. Tongue twister #1 conveys this message to the students. 妈妈(māma, mom), 马(mǎ, horse), and 骂(mà, to curse) have the same pronunciation, but they mean different things with first tone (mom), third tone (horse), and fourth tone (to curse). 妞妞(niūniu, a girl's name), 牛(niú, cow/ox), 拗(niù, stubborn), and 扭(niǔ, to pinch) all have /niu/ sound, but the tones distinguish them as four different words.

Tongue twister #2 is introduced at this time for three reasons. First, the students learned numbers during the first week of the semester. A tongue twister with numbers in it can enhance students' memorization of numbers. In addition, the tongue twister containing both the number 14 and the number 40 could help students review how the teen numbers and how numbers counting by tens are formed. Second, /si/ and /shi/ are two similar but distinct phonemes that are very hard for some people in some regions of China to distinguish and sometimes create miscommunication in reality. This tongue twister can help students become aware of the diversity of Chinese language and culture. Third, the importance of tones is emphasized again. 十(shí, ten) and 是(shì, to be)

¹⁴ Most of these tongue twisters can be found in huayuworld.com website. See references.

bear the same pronunciation but have two different tones. And the second tone (十shí) and fourth tone (是shì) are also the tones that a lot of students are struggling with. This tongue twister gives students another chance to focus on the 2nd and the 4th tones.

Two new tongue twisters (#3 and #4) are introduced after the students learned measure words and time expressions in the first three chapters. In addition to practicing the similar but distinct phonemes /si/, /shi/, /zhi/, /zhe/, and /qi/, students are reminded of using measure words when numbers or demonstrative pronouns are used with nouns. For example, the measure word 只(zhī) must be used in front of 狮子(shīzi, lions) when a number (四十四, sishísi, 44) is used with the noun in #3. In #4, the measure word 个(ge, the most commonly used measure word) must be used after the demonstrative pronoun 这(zhè, this) and in front of 星期四(xīngqīsi, Thursday). Tongue twister #4 comes at the right time when the students just learned that the time expression must be put in front of the action in Chinese. The time phrase (星期四, Thursday) is in front of the verb phrase (有事, to have commitment). Word order is so important in Chinese that any opportunity to remind students of the word order is valuable, especially right after they learned a new word order.

3. 四十四只石狮子死了。
sishísi zhī shíshīzi sǐ le.
(44 stone lions died.)
4. 石老师这个星期四有事。
shílǎoshī zhège xīngqī sì yǒu shì.
(Teacher Shi has commitment this Thursday.)

After learning about eating and drinking in chapter 5 and chapter 6, I introduce to students a classic tongue twister, tongue twister #5. This one could help expand students' vocabulary related to juice/food (such as 葡萄grapes, 葡萄皮grape skin) while enhancing students' knowledge about tone sandhi when using 不(negation word), that is, when 不(bù) is followed by 吐(tù) as in the first clause, it changes to second tone (bú). However, when it is followed by the first (the word 吃chī in the second clause), the second or the third tone, it should be the fourth tone as /bù/.

5. 吃葡萄不吐葡萄皮, 不吃葡萄倒吐葡萄皮。
Chī pútao bú tù pútao pí, bù chī pútao dào tù pútao pí.
([He] eats grapes but does not spit the skins out. [He] does not eat grapes, but spits out grape skins.)

When practicing tongue twisters #6 and #7 in chapter 9, which introduces colors, students not only can practice the sounds /h/ and /f/ that are very hard to pronounce when being put together with /eng/, /ang/, /ei/, and /hui/, but also can review and expand the color words, such as 粉(pink), 粉红(pinkish red), 灰(gray), and 黑灰(dark gray).

6. 红凤凰, 粉凤凰, 粉红凤凰飞。
Hóng fènghuáng, fěn fènghuáng, fěnhóng fènghuáng fēi.

(Red phoenix, pink phoenix, pinkish red phoenix fly.)

7. 黑蝴蝶飞, 灰蝴蝶飞, 黑灰蝴蝶飞。

Hēi húdié fēi, huī húdié fēi, hēihuī húdié fēi.

(The black butterfly flies, the gray butterfly flies, and the dark gray butterfly flies.)

The last chapter in the book is about transportation. One of the very important grammar point is that means of transportation should be put in front of the verb phrase, as the time expression (see tongue twister #4). Tongue twister #8 is introduced with the grammar point in mind. 坐飞机(zuò fēijī, to take airplane) is the means of transportation and it is put in front of the verbal phrases 去斐济(qù fěiji, to go to Fiji) and 吃肥鸡(chī féijī, to eat fat chicken).

Meanwhile the importance of tones is emphasized for the last time in the semester. 飞机(fēijī, airplane), 斐济(fěiji, Fiji), and 肥鸡(féijī, fat chicken) have the same pronunciation but have totally different meanings with different tones. The meaning of this tongue twister is hilarious and it could make a happy ending when it is used as the last tongue twister for the semester.

8. 坐飞机去斐济吃肥鸡。(created by Dr. Tonglu Li)

zuò fēijī qù fěiji chī féijī.

(Go to Fiji by airplane to eat fat chicken.)

Introducing Tongue Twisters

When introducing tongue twisters to students, the principle I follow is to get involved as much as possible. I usually follow the following three steps. First, I ask the students how to write certain words that appear in the tongue twister. If there are words that they do not know, I will write the characters on the blackboard. I say how they are pronounced and then ask the students to write down the *pinyin* and tones for the characters. The students will pronounce the individual word for a few times making sure they know each word very well.

Once all the words are introduced, I ask the students to make them into meaningful sentence(s). Sometimes I put the words into sentence(s) and ask the students to tell me the meaning. After making sure that the students understand the structure and the meaning of the tongue twister, I ask the students to read it slowly. Funny images illustrating the meaning of the tongue twisters (when PowerPoint is used) are often used to make the activity more interesting.

In class, the students will be given some time to practice. Students can volunteer to record their tongue twister practice (using the instructor provided audio-recorder) and ask the instructor to replay and correct it with the whole class. Outside class, the students will be required or encouraged to practice and record his/her saying of the tongue twister and publish it at Voice Board at Blackboard Learn.

Encouraging Students to Produce Tongue Twisters

Students have occasionally been encouraged to create their own tongue twisters in groups based on the vocabulary and grammar they learned. Each group presents their tongue twister in class

and gets feedback from both the instructor and their peers. Then each group practices and post their recorded tongue twister at Voice Board at Blackboard Learn. Some of them created very interesting ones. See the examples, tongue twisters #9, #10, and #11.

9. 他是老师不是律师。

Tā shì lǎoshī búshì lǚshī.

(He is a teacher, not a lawyer.)

10. 你哪个哥哥喜欢唱歌?

Nǐ nǎge gēge xǐhuān chànggē?

(Which older brother of yours likes singing songs?)

11. 我想坐出租出去吃饭。

Wǒ xiǎng zuò chūzū chūqù chīfàn.

(I want to take a taxi to go eating.)

I suggest that a variety of awards such as the best pronunciation award, the best creation award, the most fun tongue twister award, etc., be given to motivate students to practice the given tongue twisters and create their own.

Final Thoughts about Using Tongue Twisters in Language Teaching

There are two principles for using tongue twisters in language teaching. First, quality is more important than quantity. The best tongue twisters are those that could not only help students practice pronunciation and tones in a fun way but also help them reinforce the grammar, vocabulary, and culture they have just learned. Second, find interesting ways to get students involved, such as using fun images to illustrate the meaning, asking students to put a tongue twister together, and/or giving rewards to encourage creation.

Tongue twisters can be used in teaching other languages. Teaching pronunciation in foreign/second language education can be exhausting. The most commonly used repetition drills could make the lesson monotonous. Using tongue twisters, however, can make the pronunciation teaching and learning fun. Students are less afraid of making mistakes when everyone including the teacher might make mistakes. Besides, tongue twisters can be integrated in teaching other language skills (vocabulary, structure) and culture while teaching pronunciation. For example, the following popular English tongue twister can be used in multiple ways in teaching English.

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

Did Peter Piper pick a peck of pickled peppers?

If Peter Piper Picked a peck of pickled peppers,

Where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?

(Fun-with-words, 2014)

There are a few teaching points when this tongue twister is used. The pronunciation of /p/ followed by different vowels can be exercised. In addition, past tense, attributive clause and the use of the article “the” and “a” can be practiced. Lastly, the tradition of American pickled vegetables can be introduced through this tongue twister.

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