

PECULIARITIES OF TEACHING CHINESE PHONETICS TO ARMENIAN-SPEAKING STUDENTS

Lilit Akopyan

PhD in Philology, Associate Professor,
Brusov State University,
0002, 42 Toumanyanev, Yerevan,
0037493814856, lilit19904@gmail.com,
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5690-3475>

Abstract. This article explores the peculiarities of teaching Chinese phonetics to Armenian-speaking students within the framework of contrastive linguistics and second language phonology. Due to fundamental typological differences between the Armenian and Chinese languages, the phonetic aspect of Chinese presents specific challenges for Armenian learners, particularly in the acquisition of tones, initials, and finals. The study is based on contrastive analysis of the phonetic systems of Armenian and Chinese, as well as pedagogical observation of typical pronunciation errors encountered in classroom practice. Special attention is paid to phonetic interference caused using Chinese Pinyin system and to the role of the native phonological system in shaping learners' articulatory habits. The article argues that systematic phonetic instruction, grounded in contrastive explanation and continuous tone training, significantly improves pronunciation accuracy and prevents fossilization of errors. The findings highlight the importance of developing specialized methodological approaches for teaching Chinese phonetics in the Armenian educational context.

Keywords: Chinese phonetics, Armenian-speaking learners, phonetic interference

Introduction. Teaching of any foreign language that differs typologically from the learners' native language (L1) requires the application of carefully designed pedagogical methods and sustained attention to linguistic detail. In recent decades, interest towards the Chinese language has been steadily growing in Armenia, where Chinese has been taught in higher education institutions for more than fifteen years. Despite this growth, methodological issues related to teaching Chinese phonetics to Armenian-speaking students remain insufficiently studied. Armenian and Chinese belong to different language families and exhibit fundamentally distinct phonetic systems. Armenian is an Indo-European language with a rich consonantal inventory and a predominantly phonemic orthography, while Chinese is a tonal language of the Sino-Tibetan family, which is primarily a tonal and analytic language, featuring a logographic writing system. These differences create both challenges and opportunities in the process of phonetic acquisition. When learners of second language (L2) want to write or speak in the target language, they tend to rely on their first language structures. If the structures are different, then a lot of errors occur in L1 thus this indicates an interference of first language on second language (Decherts & Dllis, as cited in Bhela, 1999, p. 22).

Methods and material. The aim of the present study is to identify the main phonetic difficulties encountered by Armenian-speaking learners of Chinese and to propose effective instructional strategies based on contrastive phonetic analysis and pedagogical observation. The scientific novelty of the article lies in the systematic description of phonetic interference in the acquisition of Chinese by Armenian-speaking students, a topic that has not previously been the focus of specialized research. The study is grounded in the principles of contrastive linguistics and second language phonology, with particular emphasis on the theory of phonetic interference. Contrastive analysis enables the systematic comparison of the native and target language phonological systems and allows researchers to predict areas of potential difficulty in foreign language acquisition, especially when the languages involved are typologically unrelated.

Discussion. The Armenian alphabet differs significantly from for example the Russian and the Latin alphabets. It consists of 39 letters representing 36 sounds and is predominantly phonetic in nature, meaning that, in most cases, each letter corresponds to a single sound. An exception is formed by three letters **և, ո, լ** which may denote combinations of sounds depending on their position within a word (Parsanyan, 1990, 18). The alphabet is characterized by a rich phonetic inventory and includes phonemes that are absent in many other languages, such as **ճ, դ, ձ**, among others. Thus, the well-developed Armenian sound system enables Armenian-speaking students, as a rule, to acquire the pronunciation of sounds in foreign languages more easily, accurately, and with greater articulatory precision. Each letter of the Armenian alphabet generally corresponds to a single sound, which contributes to stable sound–letter associations and accurate pronunciation habits. This characteristic often benefits Armenian-speaking students in foreign language learning. Chinese phonetics, by contrast, is characterized by the functional role of tones and the syllabic structure of speech. In Standard Chinese (Mandarin), four lexical tones are used to distinguish meaning between syllables that are otherwise segmentally identical. For Armenian-speaking learners, who are not accustomed to tonal distinctions, this feature represents a major challenge. At the same time, many Chinese initials and finals can be introduced effectively through comparison with phonetically similar Armenian sounds. Such comparisons help learners develop correct articulatory settings and reduce pronunciation errors at the segmental level.

The analysis is based on 12 years of classroom observation of Armenian-speaking learners at universities and secondary schools in Yerevan, Armenia. Pedagogical observation indicates that one of the most frequent sources of phonetic interference arises from the use of the Chinese *pinyin* system. For example, Armenian-speaking students often associate the Latin letters **b, d, and g** in *pinyin* with their English equivalents, which results in the production of voiced plosives instead of the required unaspirated voiceless consonants of Standard Chinese. Thus, we can observe phonetic interference based on third language. Another difficulty concerns the pronunciation of finals ending in **-ng**, a phonetic feature that is not typical of the Armenian language. To facilitate acquisition, Chinese language instructors sometimes draw parallels with the English Continuous Tense ending **-ing**, using it as an articulatory reference point because Armenian language has no such equivalents or sound combination.

Additional challenges arise from the fact that the final **-i** is not pronounced after the initials **s, z, c, r, sh, zh, ch**, a phenomenon that is also unfamiliar to Armenian learners. In Armenian, almost all

letters are pronounced with their corresponding sounds, which leads students to expect an audible vowel in these positions. As a result, learners tend to insert an extra vowel sound, producing non-standard pronunciations and reinforcing phonetic interference. Certain Chinese sounds, such as **ü**, **r**, **w**, and **y**, also pose challenges due to the absence of direct equivalents in Armenian. However, these difficulties can be mitigated by drawing parallels with sounds from other foreign languages known to the students, such as for example German or English.

Another significant difficulty concerns the acquisition of tones. In Armenian words we can meet stress. Since tone is not a phonemic feature in Armenian, learners may initially perceive tones as secondary or optional. As a result, tonal errors often persist in speech and may cause communicative misunderstandings. Tone sandhi phenomena further complicate tonal acquisition and require explicit instructional attention. The effects of native language interference vary among different language groups, with specific challenges arising from the phonological characteristics of native languages. For instance, speakers of tonal languages like Chinese may encounter difficulties in adapting to Armenian's stress-timed nature. Recognizing these specific areas of interference is essential for developing targeted and effective pronunciation teaching methodologies.

Conclusion. Effective teaching of Chinese phonetics to Armenian-speaking students requires systematic and continuous phonetic instruction. Phonetic training should begin at the earliest stages of learning and remain an integral component of the curriculum. One of the most effective pedagogical strategies is contrastive explanation, which involves comparing Chinese sounds with phonetically similar or contrasting Armenian sounds or even third language sounds. This approach allows instructors to anticipate typical errors and provide targeted corrective feedback. Special emphasis should be placed on tone training through isolated drills, minimal pairs, and contextualized pronunciation exercises. The role of the instructor is crucial in preventing the fossilization of pronunciation errors. Instructors who are familiar with both the native and target phonological systems are better equipped to guide learners toward accurate and natural pronunciation.

The analysis demonstrates that, despite substantial typological differences between Armenian and Chinese, Armenian-speaking learners possess favorable prerequisites for mastering Chinese phonetics. The primary challenges arise from tonal acquisition and phonetic interference related to *pinyin*, rather than from articulatory limitations. The study underscores the importance of a contrastive phonetic approach and systematic tone training in teaching Chinese as a foreign language in the Armenian context. The findings suggest that the development of specialized methodological materials tailored to Armenian-speaking learners would significantly enhance pronunciation outcomes and overall communicative competence.

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