The applicability of the imitation method in teaching Chinese pronunciation to Sri Lankan students

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The Chinese language has become a popular foreign language in the recent times in Sri Lanka. This is evident from the annually rising number of students learning the language at both public and private institutes of the country. Of these students, the ones who learn the Chinese language for professional purposes often complain about the difficulties they encounter in learning the pronunciation of the language. One cause behind these pronunciation difficulties is the lack of familiarity with the tone system. Sometimes, in Chinese language, the tone is the feature that semantically distinguishes one word from another. There are words pronounced alike unless for the difference in the tones, such as the words *mā* (mother)*, má* (hemp)*, mǎ* (horse)*, mà* (scold). The other cause behind these pronunciation difficulties is the availability of similar clusters such as *zhi*, *chi*, *shi*, *zi*, *ci*, *si* which are confusing to Sri Lankan learners. This research was conducted with the experiment on a suitable method for Sri Lankan students to learn and master the pronunciation of the Chinese language. The method experimented in this research, which can be named as the 'Imitation Method', is considerably different from the traditional methods being used for teaching pronunciation. A group of twenty five students were selected for the experiment from the batch of first year students specialising in the Chinese language at the University of Kelaniya. Chinese pronunciation was introduced to them using audio-visual materials containing the speech of native Chinese speakers. The students were encouraged to observe and imitate the speech of the native speakers. At the end of the teaching process, the speech of the students were recorded and compared with the speech of the native Chinese speakers. It was observed that the speech of the students had a great degree of similarity to the speech of the native speakers. The twenty five students who made progress were chosen for the experiment. There was a clear evident that when their pronunciation was compared with that of the students who were not chosen for the experiment, and taught with the traditional methods. Thus, teaching Chinese pronunciation is an area that could be improved with strenuous research.

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