# Mandarin Transfer and Chinese Primary Pupils' Learning of English Connected Speech: From Evidence to Classroom Moves

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**Abstract:**

In the context of globalization, English proficiency constitutes a crucial component of intercultural communication and educational competitiveness. However, Chinese primary English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) classrooms have long disproportionately focused on segmental features at the expense of suprasegmentals such as rhythm, reduction, and connected speech(liaison). This study employs literature analysis and case analysis to explore how Mandarin transfer both facilitates and hinders children's acquisition of English inter-word transitions. Furthermore, it investigates the localization of these theoretical insights into practical pedagogical designs. Findings from previous research indicate that connected speech can be explicitly taught through perception-to-production tasks, and that first language (L1)-based pre-task planning enables learners in allocating cognitive resources to pronunciation and prosody, thereby improving accuracy and fluency. Under the lens of superdiversity, this paper also emphasizes the pedagogical value of translanguaging, which legitimizes the strategic use of Mandarin as a pedagogical scaffold to enhance intelligibility and reduce learner anxiety. Synthesizing the reviewed evidence and case interpretation, a five-step pedagogical framework—contrast, annotate, L1 outline, shadow, and bilingual reflection—is proposed to integrate positive transfer and mitigate negative transfer in primary EFL contexts. The study aims to provide a theoretically grounded yet contextually adaptable framework for teachers seeking to enhance pupils' connected-speech competence, particularly within the constraints of exam-oriented classrooms.

**Keywords:** Mandarin transfer; connected speech; Chinese primary EFL learners; translanguaging pedagogy; superdiversity; pronunciation teaching

# 1. Introduction

In Chinese EFL classrooms, pronunciation teaching has conventionally focused on segmental accuracy, while suprasegmental features such as rhythm, weak forms, and connected speech have received limited attention. This pedagogical imbalance often results in speech that is accurate at the word level yet lacks naturalness and intelligibility in continuous discourse, especially among primary school pupils, whose exposure to authentic English prosody is constrained by exam-oriented curricula and teachers' limited phonological training.

Research increasingly highlights the significance of connected speech for oral intelligibility. Cheng [1] found that Chinese learners' liaison ability can be explicitly trained, leading to measurable improvements in fluency and accuracy. However, most studies have centered on adult or tertiary learners, leaving a research gap regarding how Mandarin transfer influences children's acquisition of English connected speech. Although positive transfer may facilitate the perception of rhythmic contrasts, negative transfer—manifested as over-segmentation and unnecessary pauses—can impede fluency and prosodic smoothness.

Liu and Yeung [2] demonstrated that L1-based pre-task planning can mitigate cognitive load and enhance accuracy and fluency, suggesting that first-language use can serve as a strategic scaffolding tool rather than interference. Similarly, Guo [3] noted that translanguaging practices support pupils' participation and confidence in EFL classrooms. Situated within a superdiversity framework, this study also responds to the critique of the "Zero Point of English" [4], adopting an intelligibility-oriented perspective that reconceptualizes Mandarin influence not as a deficit but as a valuable learning resource.

Employing literature and case analysis, this paper explores how Mandarin transfer influences Chinese primary learners' connected-speech acquisition and how empirical evidence can inform localized pedagogy. This study addresses the following research questions:
(1) How does Mandarin transfer influence Chinese primary learners' acquisition of English connected speech?
(2) How can research-based evidence be localized into feasible classroom practices integrating positive transfer and minimizing negative transfer?
This study contributes to the understanding of early EFL cross-linguistic transfer and offers practical insights for pronunciation pedagogy within Chinese primary education.

# 2. Influence Analysis

## 2.1 Positive Transfer from Mandarin to English

Positive transfer denotes the facilitative influence of learners' L1 on second language (L2) acquisition, whereby similarities between the two linguistic systems support learning and performance [5]. In the context of English connected speech, Mandarin phonological characteristics—including its stable syllable rhythm and clearly defined tonal boundaries—provide a perceptual foundation for learners to recognize rhythmic contrasts between stressed and unstressed syllables. Cheng [1] found that explicit instruction in liaison and rhythm for Mandarin-speaking learners leads to more accurate and fluid production of connected speech, with a corresponding decrease in unnecessary pauses. This suggests that Mandarin's rhythmic regularity can serve as a reference framework that facilitates learners' awareness of English prosody.

Furthermore, L1-based planning and rehearsal prior to English speaking tasks can promote positive transfer in learners' oral production. When students are permitted to think or organize ideas in Mandarin before engaging in English speech, they manage attentional resources more effectively, leading to higher accuracy and fluency. Liu and Yeung [2] reported that such pre-task planning helps learners prioritize articulation and prosody during speech, reducing disfluencies and hesitation. For primary pupils, a brief Mandarin-based outline preceding reading aloud or shadowing English dialogues enables them to concentrate on linking patterns and rhythmic smoothness, rather than being overwhelmed by lexical retrieval.

In summary, Mandarin's rhythmic features and cognitive scaffolding functions jointly contribute to positive transfer in connected-speech learning. When guided through structured perception, annotation, and shadowing tasks, pupils can leverage their L1 rhythmic awareness to internalize English liaison rules, offering teachers with a practical and culturally responsive approach to pronunciation teaching in exam-oriented EFL classrooms.

## 2.2 Negative Transfer from Mandarin to English

Negative transfer stems from the phonological and structural differences between Mandarin and English that impede the acquisition of connected speech. Mandarin is syllable-timed, giving equal duration to each syllable and maintaining full vowel articulation, whereas English is stress-timed, characterized by reductions, weak forms, and consonant clusters. This rhythmic mismatch causes Chinese learners to overarticulate syllables and insert unnatural pauses between words, resulting in choppy and discontinuous speech . Cheng [1] observed that phrases such as get off or turn on were often separated by clear pauses, showing a lack of natural connectedness. Even advanced learners displayed similar segmentation, demonstrating how Mandarin rhythm deeply constrains English fluency. Moreover, Mandarin's absence of consonant clusters and final obstruents leads to the frequent insertion of epenthetic vowels (e.g., inserting /ə/ between /t/ and a following vowel), which obstructs smooth linking.

From a cognitive perspective, Liu and Yeung [2] found that when learners engage in spontaneous communication, attention often shifts toward meaning rather than form. Within Levelt's [5] speech production framework, this cognitive overload drives learners to revert to well-established L1 articulatory routines. As a result, incorrect stress or linking patterns become fossilized through repeated use in real communicative contexts. Without explicit suprasegmental training, learners' awareness of reduction and timing remains superficial, which limits improvement even after years of English study. Cheng [1] thus emphasized that prosodic instruction should be systematic, not incidental.

In addition, sociolinguistic and ideological factors exacerbate negative transfer. Guo [3] highlighted that English-only ideologies in classroom settings tend to stigmatize the use of Mandarin, removing a key cognitive bridge for phonological understanding. Zhang-Wu [4] described this phenomenon as the "Zero Point of English", where native norms are idealized and multilingual competence is devalued. Under such ideology, students may perceive Mandarin-accented English as "incorrect," heightening learning anxiety and discouraging active experimentation with English rhythm. Consequently, pronunciation learning becomes performative rather than communicative.

To counteract these effects, teachers should explicitly contrast English stress timing and Mandarin syllable timing, use visual rhythm marking, and incorporate bilingual explanation to clarify why linking occurs. By framing Mandarin not as a source of interference but as a contrastive linguistic resource, learners can reconstruct their prosodic awareness and gradually internalize the natural rhythmic patterns of English connected speech.

## 3. Pedagogical Implications

### 3.1 Input-Oriented Strategies

Situated within superdiversity and translanguaging pedagogy, input-oriented strategies are designed to heighten learners' awareness of English stress-timed rhythm and connected-speech patterns while using Mandarin as a contrastive scaffold. Rather than avoiding L1 use, teachers should activate learners' existing phonological knowledge to support their perceptual awareness. Cheng [1] emphasized that English liaison requires explicit instruction through guided noticing, as opposed to relying on incidental exposure. This aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, suggesting that comprehensible input combined with low anxiety and sufficient attention promotes internalization. By contrasting Mandarin's syllable-timed rhythm with English's stress-timed rhythm, teachers can assist students in identifying the natural occurrence of reductions, weak forms, and linking phenomena.

In practice, perception-focused tasks should integrate multimodal cues, including auditory and visual ones. For example, learners may listen to two versions of an utterance—one segmented and one fluent—and then annotate stress, weak forms, and linking boundaries. Cheng [1] found that repeated listening and annotation significantly improved learners' awareness of rhythm. Teachers can further enhance noticing through rhythm charts and color coding, highlighting stressed syllables and pauses in short phrases like pick it up or turn off the light. Brief bilingual discussion—such as describing rhythm differences in Mandarin before reformulating in English—enables metalinguistic reflection and effectively reduces cognitive load. Such input-based noticing not only addresses perceptual barriers caused by negative transfer but also prepares learners for productive application. Once students can recognize prosodic contrasts between Mandarin and En-

glish, they become better equipped to reproduce natural connected speech, establishing a theoretically informed and practically solid foundation.

## 3.2 Output-Oriented Strategies

Building on Swain's Output Hypothesis and the documented benefits of L1-based pre-task planning, output-oriented strategies translate perceptual awareness into fluent productive performance [6]. Through structured tasks including shadowing, role-play, and guided oral reading, students practice producing connected speech with smoother linking and more authentic rhythm. These tasks directly address the issue of syllable-timed segmentation and facilitate the development of stress-timed delivery. Liu and Yeung [2] demonstrated that short Mandarin-based planning before oral tasks enhances both articulatory accuracy and speech fluency by allowing learners to allocate attention to articulation and rhythm rather than lexical retrieval.

Teachers can adopt a sysrematic five-step pedagogical cycle—contrast, annotate, L1 outline, shadow, and bilingual reflection—to integrate perception and production. During the "contrast" stage, students analyze cross-linguistic rhythmic differences; in the "annotation," they visually mark stress patterns and linking phenomena; the "L1 outlining" stage enables targeted cognitive preparation; "shadowing" focuses on natural rhythm; and "bilingual reflection" consolidates prosodic awareness. Guo [3] noted that such translanguaging moments foster confidence and classroom participation, while Zhang-Wu [4] argued that recognizing Mandarin influence under a superdiversity framework helps reframe L1 use as a learning resource rather than interference.

In this recursive model, input feeds output, and reflection reinforces both. By combining systematic explicit liaison instruction, strategic L1 planning, and translanguaging-based reflection, teachers can transform transfer—previously viewed as a source of difficulty—into a sustainable tool for targeted pronunciation development that values intelligibility and learner identity.

## 4. Conclusion

This study examined how Mandarin transfer shapes Chinese primary learners' acquisition of English connected speech, by integrating linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural theoretical lenses. The analysis reveals that Mandarin exerts both facilitative and constraining influences on learners' oral production of connected speech. On the positive side, Mandarin's stable rhythmic timing and syllable regularity provide a strong perceptual basis for understanding English stress patterns. When combined with explicit liaison instruction and L1-based pre-task planning, these features contribute to improved attention control, articulatory accuracy, and speech fluency. Moreover, translanguaging practices enable learners to strategically alternate between Mandarin and English for comprehension and reflection, strengthening confidence and metalinguistic awareness.

Conversely, differences in rhythm type, consonant clusters, and vowel reduction can result in negative transfer, manifested as over-segmentation and artificial pauses. These challenges are further reinforced by exam-oriented pedagogical practices and the ideology of the 'Zero Point of English', which prioritizes native-like pronunciation norms while marginalizing bilingual communicative expression. To address these issues, the study proposes a five-step pedagogical framework—contrast, annotate, L1 outline, shadow, and bilingual reflection—that operationalizes perception-to-production learning within a superdiverse and intelligibility-oriented paradigm. By validating learners' multilingual repertoires, this model redefines transfer as a dynamic and productive process rather than a constraint. Overall, the findings underscore the need for a localized, equity-driven approach to pronunciation instruction that connects linguistic theory with authentic classroom realities in China's EFL context.

Despite its theoretical and pedagogical contributions, this study has limitations, primarily its reliance on secondary literature and a single illustrative classroom case study, which restricts empirical generalizability. Future research should adopt longitudinal mixed-methods designs that combine acoustic analyses, classroom observations, and semi-structured learner interviews to track connected-speech development over time. Further exploration of teacher cognition, professional training, and policy alignment will also clarify how translanguaging-based pronunciation pedagogy can be sustainably implemented across diverse Chinese school settings.

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