

Cross-Linguistic Perspectives on Pausing: Chinese EFL and English Native Speakers in Different Speech Contexts

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As an essential part of natural verbal communication, pauses play a vital role in interactive speech. Appropriate pauses help control delivery pace, convey emotion, and facilitate audience comprehension (Cahn, 1990; Campione & Véronis, 2002). Yet, knowing how to pause remains a challenge for many EFL speakers, with pausing behavior varying by proficiency level (Tavakoli, 2011), task complexity (Cenoz, 1998), and cultural background (Kuo & Chiang, 2005). Previous studies have often examined single speech types, leaving unclear how pausing operates across different modes of delivery. This study fills this gap by investigating pauses in three English speech types (readout, prepared, and impromptu) produced by adult Mandarin-Chinese EFL learners and English native speakers. Twenty participants (10 per group) delivered nine speeches each (three per type). Readout materials were selected for B2-level comprehensibility, prepared speeches were based on familiar topics, and impromptu speeches used image-description tasks common in proficiency testing. Linear mixed-effects models were used to examine how pause frequency and duration varied by distribution, juncture, and silence types across speech types and speaker groups.

The results showed significant differences in pausing frequency and duration between groups. Chinese EFL speakers paused more frequently and produced longer pauses than native speakers, particularly in impromptu speech, where their pause frequency nearly doubled that of natives. EFL speakers relied more on non-juncture pauses, especially within phrases and after conjunctions, reflecting greater cognitive and syntactic planning demands. In contrast, readout and prepared speeches showed fewer between-group differences, aligning with findings that rehearsed delivery reduces pausing disparities. Regarding duration, no significant differences were observed between native and non-native speakers in readout and prepared speech, whereas significant disparities emerged primarily in impromptu speech, with Chinese speakers exhibiting longer pauses across all categories of pausing distribution. This pattern resonates with research showing that spontaneous tasks impose higher cognitive load, eliciting disfluencies and extended pauses in L2 speech. Overall, pausing is sensitive to both speech type and speaker background. For Chinese EFL speakers, greater frequency and duration of non-juncture pauses in impromptu speech indicate challenges in real-time language planning and anxiety effects associated with unprepared speaking. These findings highlight the need for fluency training that explicitly targets pause awareness and real-time processing in spontaneous speaking contexts. Integrating pause-focused feedback and controlled practice tasks into pronunciation and speaking courses could help EFL learners develop more native-like timing patterns and communicative rhythm.

References

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