Phonological Aspects Influencing Second Language Learners Ability to Acquire Total Fluency in the English Language

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Is it reasonable to expect a second language learner of English to obtain total fluency of the language? This paper investigates many factors that strongly influence the acquisition of the language but specifically examines the phonological aspects of English in relation to second language learners.

First Language Acquisition versus Second Language Acquistion

Imagine a small child learning to speak his/her native language. How is the chid's language development process learned? What factors are involved? How a 'first' language is learned is a subject of controversy between psychologists, sociologists and linguists. Sociologists and psychologists generally believe that language learning takes place through a process called 'selective reinforcement'. This process rewards a learner for behaving in a way expected by authority figures and punishes learners for behaving contrarily. The linguist, Noam Chomsky, (1972) believed that the acquisition of a first language might be the result of an inborn genetic faculty to grasp a learning process. Assuming that L1 (native language) learners have an inborn faculty to learn their native language, then does this same inborn faculty help learners in an L2 (second language) environment? If so, are there other non-inborn factors which may also influence the acquisition of a second language? The answers to these questions may vary between linguists. However, for the purpose of this paper, I want to explore the non-inborn factors, which this writer believes do indeed have a major influence on the acquisition of a second language and more specifically on the pronunciation of English as a second or foreign language.

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General and Segmental Factors

Learners in an English L2 situation may find it nearly impossible to acquire a 'fluent' pronunciation of the language for reasons totally beyond their control. One such reason may be the individual students' psychological attitude towards learning English as a foreign (or second) language. Should the learner be a perfectionist who is unwilling to take risks and is afraid of mispronouncing the new language, then the said learner may make little progress in learning the pronunciation patterns of the new language. Conversely, learners who are uninhibited compulsive communicators in English may make remarkable gains in their fluency, but grammatical inaccuracies remain more pronounced. Thus, a learners' individual attitude towards learning a fluent English pronunciation is largely dependent on whether the learner wishes to identify with the target language as well as whether or not the learner is really motivated or concerned with improving his/her pronunciation skills.

Another factor strongly influencing the acquisition of fluent English pronunciation is the interference of the students' native language. This factor can be broken down into four specific areas:

1. An Allophone in the Native Language is a Phoneme in the Target Language

Scholes (1968), claimed that all learners find English both difficult to pronounce as well as understand. The reason(s) for this, climed Scholes, is that all non-native speakers of a language probably categorize the phonemes found in the foreign language into the more familiar phonemes of their native language. This in itself may have a profoundly negative affect on L2 learners because the English phonemes that they may be categorizing into their own native language phonemic inventory may actually be variants of the specific phoneme identified. This difficulty, as in the Scholes' study, becomes more pronounced when learners are expected to distinguish between certain vowel sounds. For example, native speakers of English would have little trouble in identifying /e/ from /æ/ (as in the words cane and can). Howerver, native speakers of Russian and Greek, who do not have these particular phoneme contrasts in their native language, have a much more difficult time distinguishing these two particular phonemes in the English language. As a result, these learners may inappropriately transfer sounds from their native

language into the 2L. This then results in an inaccurate pronunciation of an English word.

2. Phonemes with Different Distributions in the Two Language

The English language does not exploit all phonemic possibilities. Native speakers of English would undoubtedly have little difficulty in pronouncing words utilizing a large variety of phonemic possibilities, such as 'lawk' or 'hord'. Unfortunately, these do not happen to be words in the English language. The systematic gaps that appear in the language can be expressed as limitation in the distribution of phonemes especially in consonant plosives. For example, in the Thai language both /l/ and /n/ are recognized in word initial positions. However, only /n/ is found in word final position. As a result Thai learners of English quite often erroneously substitute the familiar /n/ in word final position for the unfamiliar /l/ so that English words ending in /l/ such as 'football' would be pronounced /futbo:n/.

This same phenomenon can also be seen when native speakers of English learn a second language such as Thai. Perhaps the clearest example of this is /ŋ/ in word initial position. Native speakers of English would have great difficulty in pronouncing the word initial sound found in /ŋu:/ (the Thai word for snake). However, /ŋ/ presents little difficulty to these same speakers when it is distributed elsewhere in a word. Consider the following example: /ŋa:mwoŋwa:n/ (the name of a road in Bangkok). In this example, the second/ŋ/ can easily be pronounced by native speakers of English as this phoneme is commonly found in this position in the English language. It is only the word initial /ŋ/ that creates problems for native speakers of English as this feature would be foreign to the normal patterns of English.

The phonological structure of the English language may also be responsible for many misinterpretations of second language learners pronunciation patterns. Considering that English noun plural forms often end in consonant clusters such as those found in *cats, masts, etc.,* learners whose native languages do not utilize these consonant clusters in word final position may inadvertently fail to pronounce the /s/ in English, This consistent failure to pronounce /s/ could, to the uninformed observer, be incorrectly identified as a failure to learn grammatical structure, rather han a problem of pronunciation.

3. Phonemes Occur in Unfamiliar Combinations

The English language utilizes consonant clusters in both word initial position as well as word final position to a far greater extent than some of the worlds' other languages. This exploitation of consonant clusters can cause a great deal of difficulty for L2 learners. For example: In a study completed by Sato (1985), on the phonological development of adolescent Vietnamese learners of English, Sato found evidence that these particular learners had a great deal of difficulty with consonant clusters in the word-final position because consonant clusters do not exist in the Vietnamese language. Sato argued that "if consonant clusters are extremely difficult for Vietnamese learners of English to master in the early stages of acquisition, then in all probability these learners may not be able to alter their performance very much, whatever the communicative task they are engaged in, and however much attention they pay to articulation." This inability of non-native speakers of English to properly articulate consonant clusters generally forces L2 learners to employ two general strategies in dealing with consonant clusters they find difficult to produce. The first is to insert vowels between consonants. This is usually done by Japanese speakers of English because the Japanese language itself follows a CV-CV-CV-CV pattern of four open syllables. These learners when confronted with an initial three-consonant cluster, for example, will generally try to conform to the Japanese patterning and insert a vowel between each consonant. Thus a word like 'street', may often be pronounced as 'sutorito'.

The second strategy L2 learners of English employ in dealing with consonant clusters is to delete one of the consonants when speaking. Like the Japanese language, certain other world languages lack consonant clusters. These learners may often try to simplify the consonant clusters by deleting one of the consonants so that the word conforms to the patterning found in the native language. The result of this may be that the word 'fast', for example, may be pronounced /fæs/, with the /t/ phoneme entirely deleted. It should be noted here that even native speakers of English often delete the last phoneme of certain consonant clusters in informal speech. Consider; "That's the last one." where 'last one' could be phonetically transcribed as /læs wan/ in an informal speech pattern.

4. Lack of the sound in the Native Language

Most learners of English have difficulty with /ð/ 'there' and /θ/ as in 'thaw'. These sounds are not commonly found in other languages around the world. These fricatives often present problems to non-native speakers of English not only because of the learners basic unfamiliarity with the sounds, but also because there exists no way in English to symboilze the difference between /ð/ and /θ/. Both are spelled 'th'. Some learners may substitute a /t/ phoneme for/θɪŋk/, so that 'think' becomes 'tink'. A less often used substitution in certain English dialects is replacing /θ/, with an /f/ phoneme so that 'thirty-three' becomes /θɜrti θri/.

Further difficulties prevail when the learner's native language does not utilize one of the voiced-voiceless members of a set or one of the vowels of English. These learners are generally unable to distinguish a voiceless fricative /s/ from a voiced fricative /z/. The same would be true for vowels. There would be a pronounced inability to hear the difference between /ɒ/ as im 'want' and the /æ/ as in 'wax' for example.

Supra-segmental Features

The acquisition of a 'fluent' pronunciation is not merely a matter of learning phonemes which do not exist in the native language, but also the ability to pick-up an altogether different stress, rhythm and intonation L2 learners have been used to since early childhood. These particular elements of the sound system give the language its characteristic quality so that a listener can identify a language although he may not be able to fully distinguish individual words.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges L2 learners of English have is with the indefinite vowel-schwa. The actual reasons for these difficulties may vary, but a generalized statement can probably be made by saying that a learners' native language may not have short-unstressed vowels. Second language learners of English who lack the assurance of a trained ear are likely to have the "impulse to shun the indefinite vowel in favor of some more definite vowel-most likely the sound suggested by spelling or listed in a dictionary" (Tiffany & Carrel, 1987) Thus, a word such as 'apply' which is normally pronounced by native speakers of English as /əˈplaɪ/, may be incorrectly pronounced by L2 learners as /ˈæplaɪ/ or/ˈɑplaɪ/. These L2 learners who attempt to give a more definite pronunciation to vowels in unaccented syllables, tend to distort the overall rhythm of the spoken language and utilize an unnatural articulation system.

In nearly all the languages in the world certain syllables in an utterance will be spoken with more force or intensity than others. Some languages, French for example, restrict the use of stress—stress automatically falls on the last syllable of an utterance. English does not employ restrictions such as this on an utterance. Instead, English recognizes degrees of stress, primary for the greatest stress and secondary for a lesser degree of stress, with the exact location of stress varying in the spoken language. There are some general points which can help an L2 learner in dealing with the proper placement of word stress. The first is that generally in two-word syllables, "the primary stress is likely to fall on the first syllable if the word is a noun and on the second syllable if the word is a verb" (Tiffany and Carrel, 1987).

Secondly, in three-syllable words, primary stress will usually fall on either the first or second syllable, Consider: '*in*strument' vs. 'com*mer*cial'. In 'instrument' , primary stress falls on the first syllable, but in 'commercial' the primary stress is on the second syllable. In these two examples, the unstressed syllables are pronounced with the schwa. This, however, is not always the case for all three-syllable words. Some three-syllable words, for example, 'hurricane' and 'crocodile', the first syllable will receive the primary stress, and secondary stress is placed on the final syllable. The second syllable is then reduced to the schwa.

A third and final point concerns stress placement on compounds found in the English language. In compound works, stress is quite predictable, primary stress usually falls on the first syllable with secondary stress given to the second. Despite these general points concerning the placement of word stress, it is not always easy for L2 learners to correctly identify the proper placement of primary and secondary stress versus when to use the schwa. Thus, these learners' pronunciation of words often results in an unnatural or even an unintelligible pronunciation, particularly if there is any effort to pronounce the word as it is spelled.

Intonation and Pitch

Second language learners of English who are moving from a tonal-native language to the non-tonal English language often have a great amount of difficulty with the intonation and pitch contrasts used by native speakers of English. Tonal languages use pitch to distinguish the meaning of a word—a rise or fall in pitch can change the meaning of the spoken word. English does not use pitch

in this way. Instead, English uses changes in pitch over an entire clause or sentence which significantly contributes to the meaning of the utterance. Consider the following sentence with the tone being marked differently:

(1) He wants to go \ home. (2) He wants to go / home.

The first sentence signals a definitiveness; whereas the second sentence signals a tentativeness. The actual meaning in both sentences is somewhat different. Native speakers of English would understand from the tone used in sentence one, that the speaker wants to go home. This is confirmed by the definitiveness of the utterance. In the second sentence, native speakers of English would understand this statement as more of a question, perhaps better illustrated by the use of a question mark —He wants to go home?

In the sentences above, the tone was placed on the last foot. This is not always the case. It can be placed elsewhere in an utterance, depending on the effect the speaker wishes to convey. For example, in the sentence above the tone could be placed in different areas, with the effect of varying the actual meaning of the utterance. Consider:

(3) \ He wants to go home. (Who wants to go home?→**HE** does.)
(4) He \ wants to go home. (What does he want to do?→He **wants** to go home.)
(5) He wants to \ go home. (What does he want?→He wants to **go** home.)
(6) He wants to go \ home. (Where does he want to go?→He wants to go **home.**

These examples illustrate just a few ways in which tone is used in English, but it should be clear that intonation plays a very important part in the English language. Secound language learners of English will probably have a great deal of difficulty in properly using intonation in English. Because native-speakers of English vary in their use of intonation to signal "differences of attitude, degrees of politeness, deference, and interpersonal aspects of communication" (Nunan, 1991), it is unreasonable to expect L2 learners to obtain a 'fluent' usage of intonation in English.

Developing a 'fluent' pronunciation of any second language can be extremely difficult. Native-language interferences, the psychological attitude of the learner, age of acquisition, pragmatic features, as well as the various segmental

and supra-segmental features of the target language are all possible 'stumbling blocks' for learners attempting to acquire total fluency in any second language. These factors, which enhance, restrict, or even impede the acquisition of a second language are variables which most L2 learners cannot be expected to completely overcome. Given this, most L2 learners are, therefore, unable to obtain 'total fluency' in the second language.

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