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ADULT- PRONUNCIATION DEVELOPMENT

ABSTRACT

This article sheds light on how adult-learners' pronunciation progresses through two main processes: transfer and developmental processes. However, developing adult learners' pronunciation is challenging because of a phenomenon called fossilization, caused by aging and affected by other physiological and psychological factors. Fossilization hinders adult learner's pronunciation and makes it almost impossible to master the correct phonology. In this study, pronunciation processes are followed in an adult-female native speaker of Arabic learning English as a second language.

Key words: Adult-learner Pronunciation, Foreign language, Second language, Transfer, Developmental processes, Fossilization, Lateralization, Habit formation, Affective argument.

Abbreviation Key: FL: Foreign language, L2: Second language, TL: Target language.

INTRODUCTION

To many foreign language (FL) and second language (L2) adult learners of English, it is frustrating to know it is hard to acquire native-like pronunciation, and it is increasingly difficult as one settles into adulthood. But, what makes it so hard? And how do learners acquire and learn the target language (TL)? Literature of language acquisition shows that the development of a learner's pronunciation goes through two stages: transfer and developmental processes, and it is influenced by a number of factors. However, it is hindered by fossilization. Theories of transfer and developmental processes of FL/L2 learning were observed in a case study of an adult-female Arabic-native speaker, Leila, learning English in United States as a second language for three years.

TRANSFER

Transfer is the first stage of a learner's pronunciation, in which learners apply their first language patterns to the target language. Transfer aims to fill the vacuum of knowledge in the learners' interlanguage. For example, the /p/sound does not exist in the Arabic phonology; therefore, the Arabic-learner learning English, Leila, used, instead, a sound from her L1 phonology, in this case, /b/. This leads to miscommunication as the difference between "pet"/"bet" or "pat"/"bat" and so forth becomes harder to distinguish. Transfer is to blame for most learners' errors.

However, not all transfer lead to errors, for there are three types of transfer: positive, convergent-negative, and divergent-negative transfers (Tarone, 1987).

In the positive transfer, the learner succeeds in pronouncing sounds because the native language and the target language have the same phoneme. The learner is expected to have no difficulty pronouncing a phoneme in TL that exists in the L1. For example, Leila has the /d/ sound in her L1, therefore she does not have any difficulty producing it in English correctly.

In the "convergent- negative transfer," there are two phonemes in the learner's L1 that are considered variants of one phoneme in the target language. In this case, the learner is predicted to have few if any problems. For example, in the Arabic phonology /l/ as in Leila and /l/ as in الله /ʔaʔ'la:h/ are variants of /l/ ; thus, Leila had no problem differentiating and pronouncing the English /l/. She pronounced words like "language" correctly.

The divergent negative transfer is considered the main reason of pronunciation errors where the learner encounters the most difficulty (Tarone, 1987). In this kind of transfer, the learner has only one phoneme in his or her L1, while the target language has two, which both will be considered variants of the phoneme that exists in the learner's L1. For example, since Arabic does not have the /p/ nor /v/ sounds. Leila perceived and pronounced the two English phonemes /p/ and /b/ as variants of /b/. Also, she pronounced

/v/ and /f/ both as /f/ so she pronounced "very" as /firi:/.

DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESSES

The second stage of a learner's pronunciation evolution is the developmental processes. As learning takes place, and the learner's interlanguage is increasingly affected by the L2, the transfer or interference continues as developmental processes. Although it is hard to differentiate between transfer and developmental processes, more substitutions from L2 and modification of interlanguage will occur in the latter (Flege & Davidian, 1984). In the early stages, interference processes predominate and then decrease over time. Simultaneously, the developmental processes at this stage are very infrequent. In the following stage, they increase in frequency, and then decrease over time. Substitution starts as a stage within interference and then becomes a part of the developmental processes. Substitution takes three shapes: phoneme substitution where a phoneme substitutes another in the TL (e.g., Leila, substitutes the English /r/ with a colored /r/ that does not exist in her language), phonological process (e.g., Leila devoices the final consonant /z/), phonotactic modifications, where the learner tries to use special techniques to overcome difficulties in syllables. (e.g., consonant cluster reduction) (Major, 1987).

Developmental sequences are two types: gradual approximation and discrete jumps. In the gradual approximation, a learner proceeds gradually towards the correct form of the targeted language. For instance, Leila pronounced the /ɛ/ sound as /i/, then gradually transitioned to a sound between /i/ and /ɛ/ before finally acquiring the correct form /ɛ/. In discrete jumps, a learner's pronunciation develops in leap-like improvement until producing the correct form. At the early stage, Leila pronounced /dʒ/ as /ʒ/; the word "judge" as /ʒadʒ/. Then, after drawing her attention to the sound /dʒ/ as being two sounds uttered together /d/ and /ʒ/, her pronunciation of "j" became /dʒ/ and she articulated "judge" correctly: /dʒadʒ/. However, she was not consistent and /dʒ/ was infrequent and /ʒ/ was still used on occasion.

Learner's pronunciation changes over time. Dickerson & Dickerson (1977) believe that this change is systematic in nature and controlled by two variants: style and environment. However, there is a correlation between style and both the interference and developmental processes. As style becomes increasingly formal, interference decreases and developmental factors increase. In other words, a learner holds back the interference processes that will re-emerge in inadvertent speech where a speaker pays less attention to content. For example, Leila shows the greatest use of /dʒ/ in word list reading while the least correct use of /dʒ/ occurs in free speech. In addition, the environment affects a learner's pronunciation. That means when the sounds neighboring the sound under scrutiny change, the pronunciation of this sound changes as well. For example, Leila produced an aspirated /p/ in an initial position correctly; however, when the environment changed and /p/

occurred before an unstressed vowel in the same syllable, she pronounced it as /b/.

FOSSILIZATION

The development of an adult learner's pronunciation is hindered by a phenomenon called fossilization. Age is believed to be the critical factor where no adult can achieve native-like pronunciation in L2 after puberty (Major 1987). In addition to age, several factors may play a role in an adult's fossilization, some of them are physiological and some are psychological. Lateralization is an example of the physiological explanation, in which the brain loses its capacity for language. Phonological fossilization may be caused, also, by stiffness of tongue and mouth muscles as a learner gets older (Tarone, 1987).

In psychological factors, psychological habit formation operates to make the interlanguage phonology resistant to change. In other words, adults are exposed to inappropriate learning situations where they form inaccurate phonological patterns of the targeted language. Once formed, those patterns are hard to change. Another psychological explanation "uses the affective argument... [It] focuses on the adult-learners' essential lack of empathy with the native speakers and culture of the L2" (Taron, 1987, p.82). Those learners have no motivation to improve their pronunciation since they disavow the TL and its culture.

CONCLUSION

A learner's pronunciation development is a complicated process that goes through a series of changes. The most dominant processes are the transfer and developmental processes and sequences. However, fossilization is the main factor of adult-learners' incapability to acquire an FL/L2 language. Although it is hard to be positively certain about all of the causes of phonological fossilization, this obstacle might be caused by physiological factors, such as lateralization and stiffness while the psychological factors are like habit formation and lack of empathy with the TL. However, researchers are still exploring all of the processes of phonological development and what might help or hinder them.