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THE INFLUENCE OF NATIVE LANGUAGE ON SECOND LANGUAGE PRONUNCIATION

Xo'jaqulova Feruza Begzod qizi
2nd year bachelor student at English philology faculty
Rennessans ta'lim universiteti.

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Abstract. *The relationship between a speaker's native language (L1) and their pronunciation in a second language (L2) has long been recognized as a critical area of study within second language acquisition. Pronunciation is not merely about producing sounds correctly; it encompasses various phonological elements such as stress, rhythm, intonation, and syllable structure — all of which are deeply shaped by the learner's first language. This paper aims to explore the extent to which L1 interferes with or supports the acquisition of accurate L2 pronunciation. It investigates both segmental (individual sounds) and suprasegmental (prosodic features) aspects of speech, presenting evidence from various language groups to illustrate common patterns of transfer. Moreover, the study discusses how phonological habits from the native language often lead to a foreign accent and reduced intelligibility in the second language, even among otherwise proficient speakers. Emphasis is placed on practical strategies and pedagogical approaches that can be used to address L1-induced difficulties, such as contrastive analysis, phonetic training, and the use of technological tools for self-monitoring and feedback.*

The paper concludes that although native language influence is a natural and often unavoidable aspect of second language learning, its impact on pronunciation can be significantly minimized through targeted instruction and increased learner awareness.

Keywords: *Pronunciation pedagogy, speech learning, native language influence, second language pronunciation, phonological transfer, suprasegmental features, contrastive analysis, intelligibility, accent reduction.*

Introduction.

In this article you may learn about domain of second language acquisition, pronunciation has emerged as a fundamental yet challenging component that directly influences a learner's ability to communicate effectively. While vocabulary, grammar, and reading skills are often emphasized in language classrooms, it is pronunciation that most immediately affects how a speaker is perceived and understood by native listeners. One of the most significant and consistent factors affecting second language pronunciation is the influence of the learner's native language (L1). This influence manifests in a variety of ways, ranging from mispronunciation of unfamiliar sounds to deviations in stress, intonation, and rhythm that lead to accented speech.

The phonological system of a person's L1 serves as a cognitive framework through which all new sounds and speech patterns are processed. When learners encounter sounds in the second language (L2) that do not exist in their L1, they often replace these unfamiliar sounds with the closest equivalents from their native language. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as phonological transfer or interference, has been widely documented in both theoretical and empirical research (as discussed by "Flege, 1995"; "Odlin, 1989"). Such transfer is not limited to individual consonants or vowels; it also extends to syllable structures, word stress patterns, and sentence-level intonation, all of which are essential for natural and intelligible communication.

Moreover, the influence of L1 on L2 pronunciation is not uniform across learners. It is affected by multiple variables, including age of acquisition, length of exposure to the second language, motivation, individual aptitude, and the sociolinguistic context in which the language is learned. According to the "Critical Period Hypothesis" (as cited in "Lenneberg, 1967"), younger learners have greater neuroplasticity, which may allow them to acquire more native-like

pronunciation, whereas adults are more likely to retain a perceptible accent. However, even adults can achieve high levels of pronunciation accuracy with proper training and awareness.

This paper seeks to analyze how native language phonological features shape the development of second language pronunciation. By examining a range of cross-linguistic data, the study aims to identify common pronunciation difficulties faced by learners of English as a second language, based on their L1 background. Furthermore, the paper will discuss evidence-based teaching strategies that can help mitigate the effects of negative transfer and promote more intelligible speech. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of native language influence can lead to more effective pronunciation instruction and better communicative competence for second language learners.

Theoretical Foundations of Phonological Transfer.

The influence of a speaker's native language on second language pronunciation is deeply rooted in theoretical perspectives that explore how previously acquired phonological systems interact with new linguistic input. Several foundational theories provide insights into how and why native language habits persist in L2 speech, often resulting in accented or unintelligible pronunciation. These theories not only explain the mechanisms behind phonological transfer but also offer practical frameworks for language teaching and learning.

Phonological Transfer and Language Learning

Phonological transfer refers to the process by which features of the first language (L1) are carried over into the second language (L2), either facilitating or hindering accurate pronunciation.

According to "Odlin (1989)", transfer is a natural outcome of language learning, as learners rely on known patterns to make sense of unfamiliar linguistic structures. Positive transfer occurs when L1 and L2 share similar features, making it easier for learners to pronounce new words accurately. However, when L1 and L2 differ significantly, negative transfer, or interference, can result in persistent pronunciation errors.

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

One of the earliest and most influential models for understanding L1 influence is the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), developed by "Lado (1957)". This hypothesis posits that by systematically comparing the phonological systems of L1 and L2, one can predict where pronunciation difficulties will arise. The greater the differences between the two languages, the more likely the learner will face obstacles in mastering L2 sounds. Although CAH has faced criticism for its overly deterministic nature, it remains a valuable tool in identifying potential trouble spots for learners.

Speech Learning Model

A more nuanced theory, the Speech Learning Model (SLM), was introduced by "Flege (1995)". It suggests that learners do not simply substitute L1 sounds for L2 sounds but instead attempt to form new phonetic categories based on their perception of the differences between the two languages. When learners perceive an L2 sound as being similar—but not identical—to an L1 sound, they may fail to create a distinct category for the new sound, resulting in accented speech. For instance, a Japanese learner may not distinguish between the English /r/ and /l/ sounds if these are perceived as a single category due to L1 influence.

Markedness Theory and Universal Grammar

Another theoretical framework, Markedness Theory, offers insights into why some phonological elements are more difficult to acquire than others. It argues that certain sounds or structures are more "marked," or less common across languages, and therefore more challenging to learn. Learners are more likely to transfer unmarked or common features from their L1 into L2, while avoiding marked structures.

In a similar vein, theories of Universal Grammar suggest that all human languages share underlying phonological principles, but surface-level variations can pose difficulties for learners depending on the nature of their L1.

The Role of Age and Cognitive Development

Age plays a critical role in phonological acquisition. The "Critical Period Hypothesis", supported by "Lenneberg (1967)", suggests that there is a window during early childhood when the brain is especially receptive to acquiring native-like pronunciation. After this period, the ability to develop new phonological categories diminishes, making it harder for older learners to achieve native-like accents. This explains why adult learners often retain strong L1 influences despite years of exposure to the second language.

In summary, the theoretical foundations of phonological transfer emphasize that pronunciation errors are not simply random mistakes but are often systematic and predictable.

Understanding these theoretical models enables educators to better anticipate learner difficulties and design targeted interventions that address specific pronunciation challenges rooted in the learner's first language.

Influence of Native Language on L2 Pronunciation.

The influence of a learner's native language (L1) on their pronunciation in a second language (L2) is both pervasive and deeply embedded in the cognitive processes of language acquisition. This influence manifests across different levels of speech production — from individual sound articulation to broader prosodic features such as rhythm and intonation. While learners may eventually master grammar and vocabulary, achieving native-like pronunciation remains one of the most challenging aspects of second language learning, largely due to the persistent imprint of the L1 phonological system.

Segmental Features: Sound Substitution and Omission

Segmental errors involve mispronunciations at the level of individual sounds, often as a result of learners substituting unfamiliar L2 phonemes with the closest approximations from their native phonemic inventory. For instance, Japanese speakers frequently replace the English /r/ and /l/ with a single flap-like sound that exists in Japanese, because their L1 does not distinguish between the two. Similarly, Arabic speakers may substitute /p/ with /b/, as the phoneme /p/ is absent in Arabic. According to "Flege (1995)", these errors are systematic and reflect learners' efforts to map unfamiliar sounds onto existing L1 categories.

Moreover, some learners may omit sounds entirely when these do not conform to their native phonotactic constraints. For example, Mandarin Chinese speakers often delete final consonants in English words such as "book" or "cold," since final consonants are rare in Mandarin. Such omissions can severely affect intelligibility, especially in contexts where meaning relies on final consonants (e.g., distinguishing "cap" from "cab").

Suprasegmental Features: Stress, Intonation, and Rhythm

Suprasegmental features play a vital role in conveying meaning, emotion, and grammatical structure. These include stress patterns, pitch contours, and rhythm — all of which differ significantly across languages. Speakers of syllable-timed languages like French or Turkish often transfer their native rhythm into English, a stress-timed language, resulting in speech that may sound flat or unnatural to native listeners. Misplaced stress can also change the perceived meaning of a word; for instance, pronouncing "record" with stress on the second syllable (reCORD) instead of the first (REcord) shifts its grammatical category from noun to verb.

Furthermore, incorrect intonation patterns — such as using rising intonation in statements or failing to apply pitch movement in questions — can signal unintended attitudes or emotions.

As noted by "Celce-Murcia et al. (2010)", suprasegmental errors often reduce comprehensibility more than segmental errors, as they interfere with the natural flow of communication.

Functional Load and Error Severity

Not all pronunciation errors affect intelligibility equally.

The concept of functional load — the importance of a particular sound in distinguishing meaning — plays a role in determining which errors are more serious. For example, confusing /s/ and /ʃ/ (as in "sip" vs. "ship") may not always lead to communication breakdown, while mixing up /p/ and /b/ (as in "pat" vs. "bat") has a higher risk of miscommunication. "Brown (1988)" emphasizes the need for teachers to focus on errors with high functional load when designing pronunciation instruction.

In conclusion, the native language affects L2 pronunciation in complex and predictable ways. Segmental substitutions, suprasegmental mismatches, and syllable structure modifications all stem from the learner's reliance on L1 phonological rules. Recognizing these patterns enables educators to anticipate common difficulties and develop more effective, individualized pronunciation training programs.

Examples

In this article understanding of how native language influences second language pronunciation can be gained by examining real-world examples from various linguistic backgrounds. These case studies provide insights into the systematic nature of phonological transfer and illustrate how learners from different L1 groups face unique challenges when acquiring L2 pronunciation. The following subsections explore pronunciation difficulties commonly encountered by speakers of Uzbek and Chinese when learning English.

Uzbek Learners of English

Uzbek, a Turkic language, has a relatively simple vowel system and lacks certain consonantal features found in English. One of the most persistent issues among Uzbek learners is the mispronunciation of the English dental fricatives /θ/ (as in think) and /ð/ (as in this), which do not exist in the Uzbek phonemic inventory. Learners often replace them with /s/ and /z/, respectively, resulting in substitutions like sink instead of think and zis instead of this.

Furthermore, English vowel length and quality pose difficulties for Uzbek speakers. Uzbek has fewer vowel distinctions, so learners may not clearly differentiate between minimal pairs such as ship and sheep, or full and fool. According to classroom observations and feedback from English language instructors in Uzbekistan, Uzbek learners also tend to apply equal stress to all syllables, ignoring English's variable stress system. This results in monotonous speech patterns that may sound unnatural to native listeners.

Chinese Learners of English

Mandarin Chinese differs significantly from English in both segmental and suprasegmental features. One of the most prominent difficulties lies in final consonant production. Mandarin typically ends syllables with vowels or nasals, which causes learners to omit final consonants in English words.

Words like bad and bat may be pronounced simply as ba, removing distinctions that are critical for intelligibility. Another issue is tone transfer. Since Mandarin is a tonal language, pitch variations are used to distinguish word meaning. When speaking English, learners may inappropriately apply tonal patterns, resulting in speech that sounds overly musical or confusing.

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Summary of Cross-Linguistic Patterns

These examples underscore the predictability of L1 influence across different learner groups. While the specific challenges vary depending on the language background, the underlying patterns — sound substitution, syllable structure interference, and suprasegmental mismatch — are consistent. By recognizing these recurring issues, language instructors can tailor their teaching approaches to suit the needs of specific learner populations

Conclusion.

The influence of a learner's native language on second language pronunciation is profound, multifaceted, and often long-lasting. As explored throughout this paper, L1 shapes not only how learners perceive sounds in the target language but also how they produce them, affecting both segmental (individual phonemes) and suprasegmental (stress, rhythm, intonation) features of speech.

These patterns of influence are systematic and can be anticipated based on phonological differences between the two languages. For instance, learners tend to substitute unfamiliar L2 sounds with the closest equivalents in their L1, simplify complex syllable structures, and apply their native prosody, leading to accented or sometimes unintelligible speech.

While L1 influence is a natural part of second language acquisition, it does not have to be a permanent barrier to effective communication. With the right pedagogical interventions, learners can gradually develop more accurate and intelligible pronunciation. Methods such as contrastive analysis, targeted phonetic training, and the use of modern technological tools (e.g., pronunciation apps, speech visualizers) have proven effective in reducing negative transfer and building new phonological habits.

In conclusion, although native language influence on pronunciation is inevitable, it is not insurmountable. With a deeper understanding of cross-linguistic phonological interaction and a commitment to informed teaching practices, both learners and instructors can work toward achieving clearer, more confident, and more effective spoken communication in the second language.

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