

The fossilized pronunciation of the schwa sound / ə/ in the speech of Advanced Tunisian English learners: problem and causes

Aicha Rahal
University of Kairouan, Tunisia

Abstract

It is probably true to say that most learners of a foreign or a second language fail to achieve their aim of native-like competence. Advanced Tunisian English Learners (ATEL) constitute an example; they faced problems speaking accurately due to the inability to permanently correct persistent errors. This condition has become known as fossilization. This paper focuses on the fossilized pronunciation of the schwa sound in the speech of ATEL. It analyses the problem and propounds the factors behind this phenomenon.

Keywords: schwa phoneme, fossilization, L1 Interference, lack of understanding, and inconsistency of vowels

Introduction

To acquire command of a Second/Foreign language, learners formally learn mainly the basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, a common observation in research into language acquisition shows that adult second language (L2) learners are not inevitably successful in acquiring the target L2. L2 students fail to achieve their aim of native speaker-like proficiency because they confront different problems. This phenomenon is known as Fossilization. One of the problems is the fossilized pronunciation of the schwa sound. Most Advanced Tunisian English Learners mispronounce the schwa phoneme and replace it with other phonemes. This paper is an attempt to analyze the problem and it tries to show the causes of this phenomenon.

Literature Review

The term fossilization was introduced to the field of second language acquisition by Selinker in 1972. Selinker defines fossilization:

...a mechanism...underlies surface linguistic material which speakers will tend to keep in their IL productive performance, no matter what the age of the learner, the amount of instruction he receives in the TL. (Selinker, 1972, p.229)

Thus, fossilization is both a cognitive mechanism known as the fossilization mechanism (1972, p.221), and a performance-related structural phenomenon. The former means that it was a constituent of a latent psychological structure that dictates a learner's acquisition of a second language. The latter means that it denoted specifically the regular reappearance in second-language performance of linguistic phenomena (p.211).

Grammatical Fossilization

A considerable amount of second language acquisition research has focused on grammatical fossilization. Paul Buther-Tanak (2000) studies a group of Japanese adult learners who made grammatical fossilization. He classified their grammatical errors into two groups; errors relating to articles, prepositions, and pronouns, and errors relating to verb usage, including auxiliary and modal verbs. The researcher claims, in his dissertation, that grammatical fossilization can be remedied if a consciousness-raising approach is utilized. Suzanne Gardner (2013) observed a study of an adult fossilized learner. She gave the example of Arthur who was born in Cuba. He went to primary school for only three years. He came to Miami when he was 29 years old and spoke only Spanish. He learnt English from Chinese immigrants when he worked in a Chinese restaurant. At the age of 59, he has been incarcerated for 18 years and he has been in ESL classes. Arthur is a fossilized learner who struggles to progress. He makes grammatical mistakes in English. For instance, he uses the object pronoun "me", when referring to himself as a subject. He uses the progressive without auxiliary. Gardner (2013) shows the factors behind his fossilization such as the lack of attachment emotionally, psychologically, and socially to the mainstream American culture, motivation, and ego permeability. She points out what teaching methodologies have been successful for him. Michael Shroudner (2009) studies fossilization as a state in which a student's grammatical mistakes do not improve despite error correction and teacher-required revision of errors. He concludes that Chinese students showed high usage of dependent

clauses and Brazilian students showed an increase in perfect tense mistakes (p.85). Endang Fauziati (2011) studies the error fossilization of Indonesian students, with a specific focus on grammatical errors. He chooses to collect data four times: prior and after one-semester instruction and two months afterward. This study shows that errors can be classified into a verb, bound morpheme, sentence structure, a noun used as a verb, preposition, pronoun and article. Fauziati (2011) indicates that all of the learners' grammatical errors could be eliminated (p.23).

Phonetic Fossilization

Although many studies have examined grammatical fossilization, very few studies have examined phonetic fossilization. In 2009, Mehmet Demirezen focuses on the mispronunciation of sounds. These sounds /ɔ/, /ɔ:/ are replaced by/ow/.He claims that this problem is due to the absence of such courses in phonetics. He points out that the audio-articulation method can be utilized to rehabilitate pronunciation errors. Demirezen (2010) studies also the causes of the schwa phoneme as a fossilized pronunciation problem for Turks. He claims that the articulation of the schwa phoneme is a serious problem for Turkish English teachers, teacher trainees and students of other fields of study (p.1567). Fachun Zhang and Pengpeng Yin (2009) focus on the study of pronunciation problems of English learners in China. They claim that this problem can be due to the difference between the place and the manner of articulation of both languages. For instance, English /r/ and /ɹ/ are different from the Chinese /sh/ and /r/. Both researchers give other factors behind fossilization such as the interference of the Chinese language, age, attitude, and the insufficient knowledge of phonology and phonetic systems of the English language(p.141). Ayhan Kahraman (2013) studies EFL teachers' fossilized pronunciation problem of dark /l/ and suggests solutions. He claims that one of the pronunciation problems for Turkish adult learners of the English language is the English /l/ consonant sound. He uses the Audio-articulation method by Demirezen (2003) to cure such mistakes in the pronunciation of non-native EL teachers.

None of the studies included in the review examined the phonetic fossilization of Tunisian English Learners. The present study, therefore, tries to show the fossilized pronunciation of the schwa sound in Tunisian L2 learners.

Method

Participants

This study was conducted at a Tunisian University with the participation of 5 students from the English Department of Gafsa. They are enrolled in the first, second, and third years. The participant's ages varied from 20 to 26.

Tools of the study

A hidden word puzzle is used. The students found a word from the puzzle, and they pronounced it, spontaneously. I compiled short videos in which they are speaking, using the sound-editing program Audacity.

The description of the schwa sound

According to Skander and Burleigh (2000), “ the term schwa comes from Hebrew, where it means ‘emptiness’ and designates a Hebrew vowel of the same quality” (cited in Mehmet Demirezen, 2010, p.1568). The schwa represents a mid-central vowel in an unstressed syllable, such as the first syllable of “about”. It is also represented as / ə / in the International Phonetic Alphabet.

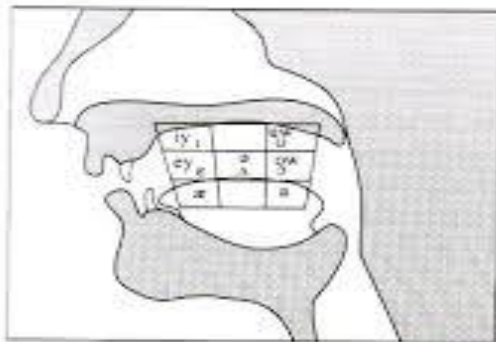


Figure 2.18: The vowel chart in relation to the inside of the mouth

Photocopiable
© Oxford University Press

1-The above–stated figure shows the production of the vowel sounds

The different pronunciations of the schwa sound and the causes

The schwa sound is a common error among Tunisian English Learners. They replace it with other sounds. There are three main different pronunciations of the schwa sound:

1-They pronounce /e/ sound instead of the schwa sound in words like “about”, “ahead”, “ago”...

2-They pronounce /ɔ:/ sound instead of the schwa sound in words like “phonetics”, “phonology”, “forget”...

3-They pronounce /a:/ sound instead of the schwa sound in words like “material”, “machine”, “familiar”...

2-The following table shows the fossilized transcriptions:

Word	transcription	The fossilized transcription
about	/ əbaut/	/ebaut/
ahead	/ əhed/	/ehed/
ago	/ əgəu/	/egəu/
phonetics	/fənetiks/	/fə;netiks/
forget	/f əget/	/f ɔ: get/
phonology	/fənələdʒi/	/fənələdʒi/
material	/mətiəriəl/	/ma : tiəriəl/
machine	/məʃi:n/	/ma:ʃi:n/

There are three main factors behind this problem. First, the use of /e/ and / ɔ: / sounds instead of the schwa sound could be classified as L1 Interference. Thus; the French language has an impact on the pronunciation of ATEL. A particular sound that does not exist in the first language poses a difficulty for second language learners to produce. Second, the inconsistency of English vowels is another factor. Most of TEL, unless they have mastery of the pronunciation of each vowel sound; pronounce /e/ ,/ ɔ: / and /a: / in place of / ə/.This is because of their first background about each sound. So, they picture this thought in their minds as if each sound has only one kind of pronunciation. Learners need to understand that English is a non-phonetic language since there exists no one-to-one correspondence between the graphemes and the sounds actually pronounced. Third, it seems rather clear that TEL lacks an understanding of English phonetics. They need to study the production of English vowels. According to Han, a lack of understanding is a potential cause of fossilization. In her book, she develops the idea of Perdue (1993) who sees that this factor can harm learners' motivation to learn (cited in Han, 2004, p.32).

Conclusion

Pronunciation is very important. It is the first thing people notice when one speaks English or any other language. The study can be significant because it tries to study the fossilized pronunciation of the schwa sound. It points out the causes.L1 Interference, lack of understanding, and the inconsistency of English vowels are the potential factors behind fossilization. Future researchers should pay more attention to the solutions to overcome this phenomenon because these types of replacement of phonemes affect learners' auditory and perceptive abilities and certainly result in huge confusion and misunderstanding.

References

- Demiresen, M. (2005a).The / ə/ and /ow/ contrast: Curing a fossilized pronunciation error of Turkish teacher trainees of English language. *Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 3, 71-84.
- Demiresen, M. (2010b). The cause of the schwa phonemes is fossilized problem pronunciation for Turks.*Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 1, 1567-1571.
- Dolezelova, A. (2008).*Fossilized Pronunciation Errors in Advanced Czech Speakers of English: Analysis and Strategies*.MA dissertation, Masaryk University.
- Fauziati, E. (2011).Interlanguage and Error Fossilization: A Study of Indonesian Students Learning English as a Foreign Language. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 23-38.
- Kahraman, A. (2013).EFL teachers' fossilized pronunciation problem of /l/ and the solution.*Dumlupinar Universitesi Sosayal Bilimler Dergisi*, 35,269-279.
- Han, Z. (2004a).*Fossilization in Adult Second Language Acquisition*. Great Britain: Cromwell Press.
- Han, Z. (2004b).Fossilization: five central issues. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 14(2), 212-242.
- Han, Z. (2013c). Forty years later: Updating the Fossilization Hypothesis. *Language Teaching*, 46, 133-171.
- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 10(3), 209-231.
- Schraudner, M. (2009).The persistence of errors in language immersion. Asian University, pp.78-89.
- Tarone, E. (2006).Interlanguage. *Elsevier Ltd*, 4,747-752.
- Tanaka, P.B. (2000). *Fossilization: A Chronic Condition or is Consciousness-Raising the Cure?* MA dissertation, Birmingham University.
- Zhang, F. & Yin, P. (2009). A Study of Pronunciation Problems of English Learners in China. *Asian Social Science*, 5(6), 141-146.