



The pronunciation of the letter sequence ‘gn’ by the First Year-Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena.

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine the pronunciation of the letter sequence ‘gn’ by the First Year-Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena. Language Transfer is the theoretical approach used to analyse the data. For purpose of collecting data, we asked students to read a text carrying the letter sequence ‘gn’. The results revealed that the students of the first year of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena have poor performance in the pronunciation of the sound sequence ‘gn’. The mispronunciation of this consonant cluster can be traced back to the French language as that very letter sequence is also available in that language in which it is realized /p/. In other words, being Francophone, the population of this research work systematically transfers the pronunciation of the French ‘gn’ into English in which it is pronounced completely different. As a solution, the First Year-Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena are advised to avoid assimilating French to English since these languages do not function phonologically the same way. Furthermore, they are advised to intensively practise English orally.

Keywords: francophone English, language transfer, influence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation has always been perceived as a difficult area by teachers and learners alike. Like listening, pronunciation is sometimes neglected in the process of language teaching in favor of reading and writing, which are rather more likely to lead to success in examination (Ikhsan, 2017).

However, it seems rather pointless to study a (living) foreign language at all if one does not intend to communicate in it with other speakers of that language. To this end, one must learn how to pronounce it in a way which can be understood by a variety of listeners. English, whether by accident of history, foreign policy, or through purposeful educational policy, has arisen as a world lingua franca, and it has, therefore, received a great deal of attention (Ikhsan, 2017).

Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds that we use to make meaning. To speak something, a person has word stress, sentence stress, and intonation. All that is part of pronunciation. Pronunciation is very important in communication. Communication needs understanding between speaker and listener. When someone's pronunciation is wrong, it makes misunderstanding between the speaker and listener although vocabulary and grammar are good. In the same way if the pronunciation is not clear, the communication is not run well. In everyday communication, people do not have to use many complicated words, so limited vocabulary is not a big problem since people can use more simple words. If people have poor pronunciation, other people will call them as bad English speakers and good vocabulary and grammar cannot help people when doing communication (Breitkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Jenkins, 2004; Levis, 2005).

When we talk to other people in English, the first thing they notice, which can create good impression about the quality of our language ability, is our pronunciation. Poor and unintelligible pronunciation will make unpleasant and misunderstanding for both speakers and listeners. In addition, it is clear that limited pronunciation skills will make learners lose their self-confidence and result in negative influence for learners to estimate their credibility and abilities (Ikhsan, 2017).

So in order to have intelligible communication and to estimate their credibility and abilities, English learners at the University of Ndjamenas should make effort to improve their performance in pronunciation.

2. Statement of the problem

Francophone learners of English encounter difficulties in pronouncing English consonant clusters. The 'gn' letter sequence is one of those consonant clusters that are inappropriately pronounced by the First Year- Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamenas.

3. Statement of the purpose

This paper aims at examining the pronunciation of the letter sequence 'gn' by the First Year-Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamenas. It will identify the phonological particularities of the realization of the sound sequence 'gn' along with the factors that can account for the pronunciation of that sound sequence by the First Year-Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamenas.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section deals with previous works that have bearing with this paper and the approach used.

4.1 Literature review

In this section, we will review previous writings that are related to the current paper.

Ngaidandi and Apuge (2020) examined the realization of the grapheme 'er' by Level-One Students of the English Department of the University of Doba along with the factors that are responsible for the performance of those English learners in terms of the pronunciation of that grapheme. Their study revealed that students learning English in the English Department of the University of Doba in their great majority realized the grapheme 'er' by /er/.

Ngaidandi and Apuge (2020) observed that this inappropriate rendition of ‘er’ by /ɛr/ is the expression of the spelling pronunciation system, which is one of the remarkable characteristics of French. For them, in French, phonemes constituting words are pronounced as such, a phenomenon which is completely different from English. Students systematically transfer this style to English, which makes their pronunciation inappropriate.

Besides the influence of French, which negatively affects students’ pronunciation of English, Ngaidandi and Apuge (ibid) noticed that the lack of practice of English is also responsible for wrong pronunciation of the grapheme ‘er’. Doba city is an environment, which is not favourable to English learning in the sense that English learners are not enough exposed to that language because it is scarcely spoken while local languages and French are spoken extensively.

Kouega & Tao (2017), Bouchhioua (2016), Atechi (2015), and Safotso (2012) have also observed the influence of French on the pronunciation of English by the francophone learners of English.

Wheelock (2016) analyses the types of phonological errors that Italian learners of English encounter in her paper titled ‘Phonological difficulties encountered by Italian learners of English: An error analysis.’ She determined six most common consonant mis-formations.

Wheelock (2016) noticed that the majority of the mis-formations of consonants were perhaps due to those English phonemes, which are not available in the Italian phoneme inventory. Indeed, Italian does not have the interdental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/. The other four (4) consonant mis-formations fall in devoicing errors. Wheelock (2016) presented these mispronunciations as follows: /z/ as [s], /v/ as [f], /ð/ as [d], /θ/ as [t], /g/ as [k], and /d/ as [t].

Three mis-formations, /z/ as [s], /v/ as [f], and /ð/ as [d], show an average group error rate above (40 %). /z/ as [s] is the devoicing of the alveolar fricative /z/ while /v/ as [f] is the devoicing of a labiodental fricative /v/; both are final obstruent devoicing mis-formations, i.e. voiced obstruents become voiceless before voiceless consonants. Italian has very few words with final voiced consonants (the vast majority of these are borrowed from English), so final obstruent devoicing errors, especially before voiceless consonants, would be understandable. The pronunciation of /ð/ as [d] represents a voiced dental fricative being mis-formed into a voiced alveolar stop. This is also understandable as /ð/ is not an Italian phoneme and the Italian [d] is a dental-alveolar stop, likely the closest phoneme to the English [ð].

The consonant mis-formation of /z/ as [s], having the highest average group error rate, merits a more detailed discussion. With the exception of ‘Wednesday’, the 12 words in the sample passage containing a /z/ had [z] as the word-final sound (*please, these, things, spoons, peas, slabs, cheese, kids and bags*). In Italian, /s/ is pronounced as [z] only before voiced consonants and between two vowels. For the 11 words with the word-final /z/, the error rate for each word ranged from (33 %) to (81.5 %), the highest error rate was associated with the word ‘these’. In the elicitation passage, the word ‘these’ was followed by the word ‘things’, which has the voiceless [θ] as its initial consonant; thus the high mis-formation rate associated with the word ‘these’ is explicable. Only two speakers devoiced the [z] in *Wednesday*.

As mentioned above, the English interdental fricatives /θ/ (voiceless) and /ð/ (voiced) are not part of the Italian phonemic inventory, and the voiceless [t] and voiced [d], which are both alveolar stops, may be substituted. Speakers seem to have more trouble with /ð/ than with /θ/.

4.2 Theoretical framework

This section presents the theoretical approach adopted in this article and that approach is language transfer.

4.2.1 Language transfer

Language transfer is the theoretical approach used in this paper. According to Ellis (1965), language transfer could be defined as the hypotheses that the learning of task A (L1 for example) will affect the subsequent learning of task 'B' (L2). For Ellis (2008: 351) "Language transfer refers to any instance of learner data where a statistically significant correlation (or probably-based relation) is shown to exist between some feature of the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired."

Learning a second language is a question of increasing a behavioural repertoire, or learning a set of alternatives for some subset of the rules of the language one knows already. The assumption is that one transfers or uses the rules already existing in the production and understanding of the second language. This is known as transfer. Learners transfer what they already know about performing one task to performing another similar task. They use old rules where new ones are needed and this brings about mistakes, this is sometimes called negative transfer or interference (Ogah and Amos, 2009). Where transfer has positive consequence, it is known as 'facilitation' (Corder 1973: 132).

4.2.1.1 Interference

Ervin-Tripp (1975) describes interference as "deviation of learners' output from some ideal/norm, when these deviations can be attributed to some structures in another language".

People who speak more than one language, usually have more mastery over one of the languages (usually the one they learnt first) than the others. Their knowledge of structures of structural units of this language induces errors when they use another language, especially if this other language is different from the first in terms of structure and structural units.

Interference theory holds that if a learner is called upon to produce some L2 form that he has not learnt, he/she will tend to produce an erroneous form having its origin in his L1. Weinreich (1953) defines interference as those instances of deviation from the norms of either language, which occur in the speech of bilinguals as result of their familiarity with more than one language.

Lado (1957) holds that individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture. When transfer is positive, we talk of facilitation but when it is negative, we talk of interference. Corder (1971: 15) puts it thus, "one explanation of L2 errors is that the learner is carrying over the habits of his mother-tongue into the second language.

Trubetzkoy (1937:51-52) succinctly posits it that the phonological system of a language is like a sieve through which everything that is said passes... Each person acquires the system of his/her mother tongue. But, when

he/she hears another language spoken he/she infinitively uses the familiar “phonological sieve” of his/her mother tongue to analyse what has been said. However, this sieve is not suited for the foreign language; numerous mistakes and misinterpretations are the result. The sounds of the foreign language receive an incorrect phonological interpretation since they are strained through the phonological “sieve” of one’s own mother tongue.

Interference could be of three types, i.e. phonological, syntactic, and semantic.

- **Phonological interference**

Weinreich (1953:14) posits that “interference arises when a bilingual identifies a problem of the secondary system with one in the primary system and in reproducing it, subjects it to the phonetic rules of the primary language”. For instance, the loan-word ‘rouge’ phonemically in English /ruz/ and phonetically /ru:z/ in French, will be identified by the French user in terms of the French /ʀ/ being equivalent to the English /r/ and realized normally as /ʀ/. The French /u/ will be identified with the English /u:/ but reproduced with more centralized and lengthened vowel than the French one. The /z/ of French would be equated with the English /z/ but because of the phonotactic rules of English, which exclude it from initial position and often replace it finally in a word, the phoneme may well be replaced by the most common /dʒ/ as in ‘garage’ and ‘beige’.

According to Ogah and Amos (2009), four (4) kinds of phonological interference could be suggested: under differentiation of phonemes, over differentiation of phonemes, reinterpretation of distinctions, and phone substitution.

- **Under differentiation of phonemes**

If L2 contains phonemes, which do not occur in L1, these may not be recognized for what they are. For instance, Italian has no /i/-/i:/ contrast; long and short vowels do occur but only as wholly predictable allophones which do not affect meaning. The Italian user of English may be unable to distinguish in production or reception, the meanings of “He beats his wife” and “He bits his wife” if “beats” and “bits” are used out of context.

- **Over differentiation of phonemes**

This is the reverse of the interference type discussed above, the identification of a phonetic contrast in the L2 with a phoneme distinction of the L1. Example, the existence of written double consonants in such English words as ‘little’, ‘bigger’, ‘banner’, etc. may lead the Italian to pronounce them as /littl/, /biggə/, /bənnə/.

Also the recognition of aspiration in initial voiceless plosives in English leads the Hindi speaker to assume and therefore overemphasize the phonetic differences between the /k/ of ‘kin’ and ‘skin’ on the analogy of /khal/ “akin” and /kal “rare”.

- **Reinterpretation of distinction**

The notion of phonemes may lead a bilingual to seize upon a phonetic feature, in his/her L1 which is an integral part of a phoneme contrast, which/she then uses in attempting to make a distinction in the L2. Though English has, and Italian lacks, the /a:/ -/æ/ distinction as in ‘bard’ and ‘bad’; fronted allophone of /a/ does occur in many dialects in Italian, before “double consonants”. The English speaker of Italian may therefore hear and produce the difference between ‘fato’ and ‘fatto’ in terms, not of the crucial single- double consonant contrast but by using a vowel close to /a:/ in ‘fato’ and one close to /æ/ in ‘fatto’.

- Phone substitution

When the realization of a phoneme in the L2 is recognized as a variant of “the same” phone in the L1, a sound-for-sound substitution may take place. For instance, the English user of French is aided in the recognition of the French /ʁ/ as a realization of the /r/ phoneme by having heard similar realizations in rural North/Eastern English as in ‘range’. Other examples are, Hausa substitution of /p/ with /f/ as in /fifl/ for ‘people’ instead of /pi:pl/; /firinsifa/ instead of /prinsipəl/. Tive speakers’ free use of /l/ where /r/ is supposed to be used, and vice-versa as in ‘radio’ - /leidiəu/ instead of /reidiəu/ (Ogah and Amos, 2009).

4.2.1.2 Transfer arises as result of both differences and similarities between the target language and the L1

The central claim of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis was that differences between the target language and the L1 resulted in learning difficulty and similarities in learning ease. However, this was not substantiated by any research (Ellis, 2008). In fact as Kleinmann (1978) showed, when a target language feature is notably different from an L1 feature a ‘novelty effect’ is evident and acquisition may actually be facilitated. Conversely a close correspondence between two features can result in learning difficulty. Major and Kim (1996), for example, showed that Korean learners of English found it easier to learn dissimilar sounds like /z/ than similar sounds like /ɰ/ (as in ‘Joan’) when acquisition was measured in terms of rate of acquisition. As result of such studies, it is now generally accepted that transfer can take place as a result of both difference between and similarity with the target language and that it is similarity that is the more important (Ringbom 2007). But what is not clear is when differences or similarities will lead to transfer and also on what aspect of acquisition the transfer will impact (for example, production error as in Kleinmann’s study or rate of acquisition as in Major and Kim’s study). In order to resolve these problems it is necessary to consider how similarity/difference interacts with other factors. (Ellis, 2008).

4.2.1.3 Transfer is ultimately a subjective phenomenon

Many years ago, Lado (1957) acknowledged that individual learners respond differently to the problems that arise as result of differences between the target language and their L1. He commented: “Not all the speakers of a language will have exactly the same amount of difficulty with each problem” (72). Odlin (2003:443) also recognized the inevitability of individual differences as result of the subjective nature of L1 transfer in these terms: “Much of what is called cross-linguistic influence depends on the individual judgments of language learners and bilinguals that there exist certain cross-linguistic similarities”.

The nature of learners’ judgments will depend in part on inherent linguistic factors such as those that determine the distance between languages but even then, subjectivity is evident. Kellerman (1978) found individual differences in his Dutch learners’ judgments regarding the translatability of sentences involving ‘breken’. Over and above linguistic factors, a variety of individual learner factors have been found to influence transfer. These include age, motivation, literacy, and social class. As Odlin (2003) pointed out, these ‘combine in myriad ways

that make the learning situations of virtually all individuals unique'. Odlin's comment points to the necessity of incorporating individual difference factors into an account of transfer.

In short, language transfer is an approach that indicates how the L1 affects the learning of a second language or a foreign language in general. The influence of the L1 or the language previously acquired on the learning of the second language or the third language is due to either the similarities or the differences that exist between the former and the latter (Ellis, 2008). As it can be observed in this thesis, it is similarities between French the first official language of the population of this study and the target language, i.e. English that account for language transfer.

5. METHODOLOGY

This research work is a descriptive research aiming at examining the rendition of the sound sequence 'gn' by the First Year- Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena. According to Gay, Mills, & Airasian (2011) descriptive research study determines and describes the way things are. It means that, descriptive research focused on describing phenomena. In this section, we are going to present the setting and the informants of this paper.

5.1 Setting and informants

This investigation has been carried out in the University of Ndjamena, which is located in Ndjamena, the administrative capital city of Chad and the largest city of the country. The number of the population of Ndjamena is 1,532,588 inhabitants in 2022 and its square is 395 km². (cf. World population Review). The University of Ndjamena was established in 1973. It is the oldest of all the universities of the country and it is the first one that has a department of English.

The informants of this research work are made of the students learning English in the first year of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena. They are two hundred in number out of which we drew randomly a sample of fifty (50) students regardless the gender.

5.2 Material and methods

In this paper, the researcher used text reading to collect data about the pronunciation of the letter sequence 'gn' by the First Year-Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena. In fact, we composed a text containing lexical items carrying the group of sounds mentioned above and the population of this research work read it out. Fifty (50) students of the first year of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena were selected to read the passage. In the moment of reading, we recorded the productions of each student by a hand phone. Fifty (50) students were selected randomly out of 200 students, which was the total number of the First Year-Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena. At the end of reading and recording of the text, we transcribed the productions of students and compared them to RP in order to identify the phonological peculiarities of English used by the First Year-Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena.

6. Analysis of data

This section deals with the pronunciation of the letter sequence ‘gn’, which is obtained from the First Year-Students of the University of Ndjamena through a text reading. The productions of English learners are presented in the table below:

Table: Pronunciation of ‘gn’ by learners

Letter sequence	Words	RP Pronunciation	Learners’ pronunciation
‘gn’	champagne	/ʃæm`peɪn/	/ʃampɑŋ/
	ignored	/ɪg`nɔ:d/	/ɪjɔr/
	Agnes	^ægnɛs/	/æjɛs/
	campaign	/kæm`peɪn/	/kampaŋ/
	ignorance	^ɪgnərəns/	/ɪjɔrens/

In Received Pronunciation (RP) the letter sequence ‘gn’ has two (2) possible renditions.

- (i) It is pronounced /n/ when it occurs in word-final position. This can be illustrated by *champagne, campaign sign, design, etc.*
- (ii) ‘gn’ is realized separately, i.e., /g/ and /n/ when the letter ‘g’ and ‘n’ are each part of two different syllables. This phenomenon can be exemplified as follows: *ignored, Agnes, ignorance, dignified, dignity, etc.*

The data presented in the table above show that the English learners of the University of Ndjamena render the letter sequence ‘gn’ by a unique way, i.e., /ɲ/, which is a wrong pronunciation. This happens regardless the position in which it falls.

This inappropriate rendition of ‘gn’ traces back to French. In other words, /ɲ/ is the French pronunciation of the letter group ‘gn’. Being Francophone, the First Year-Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena, systematically transfer the French pronunciation of ‘gn’ to English. Thus, this mispronunciation shows the influence of French on English. This observation echoes Ngaidandi and Apuge (2020) and Capliez (2016).

In recapitulation, six (06) informants rendered ‘gn’ by /ɲ/ in five (05), i.e., all the lexical items proposed for eliciting data. Eleven (11) informants rendered it by /ɲ/ in four (4) words out of five. Sixteen (16) rendered it the same way in three (03) words out of five. Eleven (11) informants pronounced the focus letter group as /ɲ/ in two (02) words out of five. Finally, four (04) pronounced it /ɲ/ in one (01) word out of five. Only two (02) out of five did not realize ‘gn’ by /ɲ/

In synthesis, thirty-three (33) informants, i.e., (66%) out of fifty (50) pronounced ‘gn’ as /ɲ/ in four (04) out of five. These figures indicate that those francophone learners of English have poor performance in the pronunciation of English sounds, which makes their production unintelligible and far from native likeness.

7. Discussion and conclusion

This paper examined the pronunciation of the letter sequence ‘gn’ by the First Year-Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena. The work made use of passage reading as a tool used to collect data. This investigation revealed that the First Year-Students the English Department of the University of Ndjamena have poor performance in terms of pronunciation of the sound sequence ‘gn’. They pronounce this sound sequence as /ɲ/. This inappropriate realization is the influence of French. Clearly speaking, the learners of English in the first year of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena transfer the French sound to English whenever a given letter or letter sequence is the same in the target language, i.e., English. Such an observation was also made by Ngaidandi and Apuge (2020). Ellis (2008) regards this type of error as language transfer. In the same way, these learners of English ‘frenchify’ their pronunciation of English (Atechi, 2015). Learners found it tough to correctly pronounce these sequences of sounds. Therefore, they systematically use similar rendition in French, which makes their pronunciation poor, i.e. the ‘frenchified’ pronunciation, to use the term of Atechi (2015).

We recommend to eventual researchers who are interested in the pronunciation level of language to carry out research on the other English consonant clusters in view to checking whether those consonants also represent a pronunciation difficulty for francophone learners of English in general and for First Year-Students of the English Department of the University of Ndjamena in particular.

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