

Fossilized pronunciation errors and French speakers of English

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1 ► Introduction

1.1 The Problem and Its Setting

This paper is based on an experimental research study which was carried out during the past academic year (1994-1995), at the University of Limerick, in the south west of Ireland. The purpose of the research was to identify and to analyse how effectively fossilized pronunciation errors in speakers of English as a foreign language could be reversed. A selection of French university students of English at an advanced level (over 65 in the Nelson Placement Tests), studying at the University of Limerick, formed the population for the study. These students were in Limerick as part of an ERASMUS or LINGUA exchange programme for a period of one academic year.

The first step in the research was to identify and analyse fossilized pronunciation errors among the French students. The second step was to analyse and to interpret the data so as to evaluate to what extent a reversal had taken place due to the instruction course.

The study focused on segmentals (individual consonant and vowel sounds) but included a brief examination of the suprasegmental areas (rhythm, stress, intonation etc.) of English and it did not attempt to offer a detailed rationale for the existence of fossilized pronunciation errors as has been done in

other studies in this area (Selinker and Lamendella, 1978 and Tollefson and Finn, 1983). The effectiveness of *only one* instruction programme in attempting to remove fossilized pronunciation errors was tested.

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1.2 Importance of the Study

The primary purpose of language is communication, and the primary form of communication in our universe is by oral means whether it be face to face, over the telephone, or even on an audio-visual recording. Incorrect pronunciation may be a large deterrent to native speakers' comprehension of a non-native speaker and is something which needs to be addressed much more in the EFL classroom at all levels.

The study of fossilization has significance at various levels for both teachers and students of EFL or any other foreign language. Firstly, fossilization is a practical problem for many L2 speakers. Many countries receive thousands of immigrants each year, many of whom have to master their new found language to some degree. These immigrants may need to reach a proficient level in all four skills, be it for work or academic progression. Additionally, many countries want to educate their populations to be bilingual or multilingual either for economic or ethnic reasons. Unfortunately, due to fossilization, such

standards are not always attainable and jobs or educational heights to which the L2 speakers aspire may be lost.

Not only are students affected by fossilization, it is also a problem for schools and teachers. It is a strongly held contention that there are serious fossilized pronunciation problems among advanced level speakers of second languages for which there is "no real cure" (Valette 1991).

This study involved university students at an advanced level of English, many of whom will qualify to use English in a professional capacity or indeed to teach English in France. For those who will go on to use English in a professional capacity fossilized pronunciation may lead to huge misunderstandings and perhaps loss of promotional opportunities. And perhaps even more serious are those who will eventually teach English to other French L1 speakers as their fossilized pronunciation may be passed on to their students, who in turn may become fossilized, thus leading to an unbreakable circle of incomprehensible pronunciation.

88 1.3 Previous Experiments

Despite the fact that fossilization has been acknowledged as both a theoretical concept and a practical problem in second language acquisition since the phrase was first coined by Selinker in 1972, very little research has been done to address the problem. There is a lack of theoretical framework behind fossilization, which presents practical problems for the EFL teacher. The most recent studies relevant to the area of fossilized pronunciation were conducted by William Acton (1984) and Ellen Ricard (1986) and to our knowledge no other studies have been carried out since.

1.4 Problems for French speakers

With this target population in mind we adopted the following problematic sounds, as outlined by Michael Swan (1993) and Joanne Kenworthy (1988), in order to test for fossilization :

1. /V/ i: /L/ u/ /u: / /o/ /o: // əu/
/ae/ /ei // q // d / tÚ / / d3 / / h / / r / / l /

2. lengthened vowels in stressed syllables before final consonants

3. velar n

4. words ending in 'ism'

5. final consonant clusters

2 ► Methodology

2.1 The Tests

The population for the study (14 students) underwent three tests during the second academic semester in 1995. They completed two pretests to establish that fossilization existed in their speech - the pretests tests were three weeks apart. The posttest took place at the end of the semester, ten weeks after the first pretest. Each of the tests were the same and the sounds considered to be problematic for French speakers of English (as mentioned above) were tested in isolated words, connected speech and free speech. Each test was evaluated by two judges, both experienced EFL teachers, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 was native like pronunciation.

2.2 The Instruction Course

The population for the study (14 students) divided into two groups of seven. The first group - the Control Group, were tested three times as mentioned and did not participate further. The second group - the Experimental Group were also tested three times and they took part in a specially designed pronunciation instruction course for a period of six weeks. They attended the course for two half hour sessions each week

The first part of the instruction course consisted of a lecture on the points and manner of articulation of vowel and consonant sounds. Following this each half hour session focused on one or two problematic sounds (some stress rules were also dealt with). The classes started with detailed descriptions of how to produce the required sound, progressed to a controlled practice stage, and finally to a free practice stage where the teacher acted as a consultant. Various techniques were adapted from pronunciation activity books (see bibliography) during the instruction course. The primary focus of the course was on isolated words and some connected speech. The students were advised to practise the sounds in free speech outside of the classroom.

3. Results

GROUP ANALYSIS CONTROL GROUP											
Pretest One			Pretest Two			Mean Pretest		Posttest		Mean Posttest	Results
St	Judge One	Judge Two	Mean	Judge One	Judge Two	Mean		Judge One	Judge Two		
1	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.7	3.65	3.6	3.7	3.65	=
2	3.2	3.8	3.5	3	3.4	3.2	3.35	3.5	3.3	3.35	=
3	3.1	2.9	3	3	3.2	3.1	3.05	3	3.2	3.1	+0.05
4	3	3.1	3.05	2.8	3.1	2.95	3	3	3.4	3.2	+2
5	4.1	4.3	4.2	4.1	4.3	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.4	4.3	+1
6	2.7	3.1	2.9	2.7	3	2.85	2.88	2.6	2.7	2.65	-.23
7	3.6	3.4	3.5	3.3	3.4	3.35	3.43	3.4	3.2	3.3	-.13

28.6% maintain the same level of pronunciation over the ten week period.

28.6% disimprove over the ten week period.

42.8% improve over the ten week period

EXPERIMENTAL GROUP											
Pretest One			Pretest Two			Mean Pretest		Posttest		Mean Posttest	Result
St	Judge One	Judge Two	Mean	Judge One	Judge Two	Mean		Judge One	Judge Two		
1	3.4	3.5	3.45	3.4	3.6	3.5	3.48	3.7	3.7	3.7	+22
2	3.6	3.4	3.5	3.6	3.5	3.55	3.53	3.5	3.6	3.55	+0.02
3	2.8	3	2.9	2.9	3.1	3	2.95	3.2	3.5	3.35	+4
4	3.5	3.7	3.6	3.3	3.6	3.45	3.52	3.4	3.3	3.35	-.17
5	2.9	3.2	3.05	2.9	3.2	3.05	3.05	3.2	3.3	3.25	+2
6	3.9	4	3.95	3.9	4	3.95	3.95	4	3.7	3.85	-.1
7	3.7	3.5	3.6	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.7	4.1	4	4.05	+35

71.4% improve their pronunciation over the ten week period.

28.6% disimprove over the ten week period

4 ► Conclusions

4.1 Group Analysis - Conclusions

1. The students in the experimental group showed more improvement than those in the control group. This must have been due in part to the intensive pronunciation course which they attended for a six week period. However it should not be overlooked that 42.8% of the control group showed marginal improvement which leads to the conclusion that living in the L2 environment is a beneficial factor in the pursuit of advanced English pronunciation. It should also be noted that the results of the experimental group were slightly better at the pretest stages, which may perhaps indicate a slightly better language aptitude on their part.
2. It is felt by both the researcher and the experimental group students that even more progress could have been made if the course had been longer than six hours and had time permitted the teaching of all sounds tested. This conclusion is supported by the fact that any of the sounds not dealt with during the course were not improved upon by the students overall.
3. The two students from the experimental group who did not improve, failed to do so because of the lowered scores they attained in the free speech section of the posttest. While both of these students improved on individual sounds and one on connected speech, they did not succeed in translating what they had learned into practical usage. The pronunciation course did not concentrate on free discourse and the onus was on the students themselves to use what had been learned during the course to help them in their every day speech. The fact that two students failed to do this again adds weight to the argument for a longer and more thorough instruction course.
4. Finally, the experiment proves that specialised pronunciation instruction for advanced students of English who seem to have fossilized can indeed be at least partially successful in removing errors. A study with a more longitudinal concentration would decide whether such errors could be completely eradicated.

5 ► Bibliography

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