

Pronunciation Change of French Consonant Groups by Vietnamese Learners

The pronunciation of French consonant groups by second language (L2) learners of French, especially those whose first or native languages (L1s) lack key phonetic features of French, has not received much attention in L2 research. Vietnamese, for example, an isolating CVC language, has consonant sequences only at word boundaries or syllable boundaries in compound words. This monosyllabic language thus lacks the consonant clusters allowed in French in onset and coda positions (C₁)(C₂)(C₃)V(C₄)(C₅)(C₆)(C₇), studied by Rousset (2004). The L1 syllable structure must have an impact on the production of L2 complex syllable structures? In addition, the voiceless stops /p t k/, the first elements of an inter-syllable consonant sequences in Vietnamese, are generally not released in their coda position. This feature must also have consequences on realization of French clusters? The present research aims to yield more insights into the interlanguage phonology of Vietnamese learners of French in these regards.

This study provides new data regarding the production of French consonant groups in two levels of Vietnamese learners: intermediate and advanced. The participants were forty students (twenty per level), enrolled in a Hanoi university. They read a wordlist embedded in a carrier sentence which was recorded, then acoustically and statistically analyzed. The corpus contains all consonant groups present in both languages /p t k m n/ + C, included in three positions of French words #CCV, VC#CV and VCC#.

The results showed that, even after several years of practice, Vietnamese L2 learners of French have real problems pronouncing French consonant groups, even when the specific consonant combinations are found in both languages. In 2562 observed consonant groups, 66.7% were not correctly pronounced by Vietnamese learners. Performance was worse for final consonant clusters than for those in onset or inter-syllabic positions, and stop-initial clusters were significantly worse than those beginning with a nasal. Vietnamese learners more frequently change complex codas than complex onsets. When faced with challenging consonant groups, Vietnamese learners use different strategies for simplification. Modification by non-release and deletion were found to be the most common strategies. In agreement with several previous studies, this work highlights the role of native language syllable structure in the acquisition of second language consonant clusters. Still, while Vietnamese L1 phonetic and phonological factors are involved in errors in the production of French L2 consonant clusters, we found that those factors cannot account for all the errors. Other influences, as typological universal preferences, are needed to explain the learners' difficulties which do not directly relate to the differences between L1 and L2. This work with scientific data confirms the difficulty persistence of the French consonant clusters pronunciation by Vietnamese learners, despite their level of French.