

## **THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE ULTIMATE ATTAINMENT IN PRONUNCIATION: PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS OF ADULT SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

Gulkhayo Abdullaeva

Uzbekistan State World Languages University

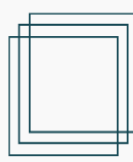
### **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to address the contributory factors in pronunciation problems of adult non-native speakers (NNSs) of English. It reports on the previous studies on SLA into the issue of ultimate attainment by second language learners (SLLs) starting language acquisition after a critical period which is believed to take place between age two and puberty. On the ground of the researches on SLA, it could be concluded that biologic factors including age, influence of a first language (L1), and variations in the phonetic system of learners' L1 and L2 are the leading factors as to why majority of late SLLs fail to acquire native-like pronunciation. In addition to that, some recommendations are also included as to guide language teachers to help students with pronunciation problems.

**Keywords:** Ultimate attainment, critical period hypothesis (CPH), pronunciation problems, L1 interference, and phonetic system.

### **Introduction**

The conventional idea that adults are inferior to children in terms of second language learning has been suggested by Lenneberg (1967). There have been researches to support Critical Period Hypothesis and most scholars agree that learners past a critical period are worse at acquiring a second language than younger learners for both pronunciation and grammar learning ( DeKeyser, 2000, p.500). Many researchers have conducted studies on SLA on pronunciation problems of English learners who commence the learning process after a critical age since correct pronunciation plays the leading role to reach native-like proficiency (ultimate attainment). According to Hornby (2008), "Non-native speakers of English with good pronunciation are more likely to be understood even if they make errors in other aspects, whereas speakers with bad pronunciation may possibly fail to express their ideas. It can be implied that developing correct pronunciation is of great importance and even if a speaker is making errors in terms of grammar, one can be understood by the listener" (p.38). Likewise, good pronunciation is regarded as a "key to good communication" by Ellis (1997). In order to communicate effectively in the target language, adult learners are required to improve both accuracy and fluency, however, there are a number of factors that exert a negative influence over adults' learning pronunciation.



In the present study, the following questions are addressed and through deep analysis of the resources available a clue is provided:

- What kind of challenges do adults have in reaching ultimate-attainment in pronunciation?
- What kind of factors affect adult second language learners' pronunciation?
- What suggestions are recommended to overcome the problems?

In order to find answers to the above-mentioned questions and reach a conclusion, I analyzed the studies by DeKeyser (2000), Ramasari (2017), Anggrarini & Istiqomah (2019), Zhang (2009) and Hassan (2014).

According to the previous studies, it is obvious that many English learners have a tendency to mispronounce English words. Islamiyah (2012) stated "English learners make errors while uttering English speech sounds due to two reasons, namely the influence of their first language and their not having complete understanding of the variation of English sounds" (p.41-42). Other researchers and linguists have come to the conclusion that there are several factors that create barriers for learners including biologic factors, first language interference, differences of the sound system of L1 and L2 and inconsistency of some sounds in the English language.

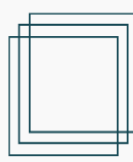
### **Biologic Factors**

It is widely accepted that age is a key factor in SLA and there is a strong relationship between age and ultimate attainment in pronunciation. Miller (2004) states that "the CPH has been suggested as an explanation for why most adults attempting to learn a second language appear to have difficulties in reaching native-like pronunciation. Hence, some researches showed that as few 5 percent, or fewer, adult learners would ever achieve anything like fluency in a second language" (p.39). It is suggested that a child's brain is plastic and therefore they have advantages over adults in picking up new languages. Whereas after puberty, the brain develops and loses its plasticity. This is the reason why adults have difficulty in acquiring native-like pronunciation.

### **The influence of mother tongue**

According to Hassan (2014), adults are mainly influenced by their first language due to over practicing their language and this is known as a process of fossilization. The adult's vocal musculature is set to utter foreign sounds with an accent (p.33).

Naturally, in the English language there are a number of vowel and consonant sounds which do not exist in other foreign languages and therefore there is a high likelihood of mispronouncing them for most adult learners. For instance, some learners have difficulty with articulating the following speech sounds: [θ], [ŋ], [ð], [ə] and so on. Consequently, they try to replace these sounds with those which exist in their first language and are close to them.

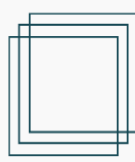


the biggest problem of non-native speakers of English is that they attempt to substitute the sounds that they don't have in their native language, with other sounds which are close to them in the place of articulation" (p.31). For example, they substitute [θ] with [s], [ð] with [z] or [æ] with [e]. Harmer (2000) notes "There is a huge difference between written English and spoken English. When writing English, 5 vowel and 21 consonant letters are used; however, when speaking English, 20 different vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds are used. This brings about some challenges that learners encounter in learning English" (p.42). In the English phonetics system there exist 44 speech sounds, whereas in other foreign languages there are totally different speech sounds. English language learners may not be able to distinguish between them in some cases. Ladefoged (2001); Carter & Nunan (2001) suggested the influence of mother tongue on learning L2 pronunciation. Providing that L1 and L2 rules contradict each other, learners are likely to be influenced by their native language. Additionally, O'Connor (2003) and Yule (2003) made further research on the relationship between pronunciation problems and L1 influence. It has been decided that most learners confuse some sounds and therefore replace them with existing sounds in their L1 (p.33). Differences between the sound system of L1 and L2.

Another research conducted on the issue found that the conflict between L1 and L2 sound systems may lead to difficulties while articulating sounds. Alkhuli (1983) argues that "The main problem in both teaching and learning pronunciation is caused by the differences of sound systems of English and L1". Cruttenden (1994) also supported this statement by his further research. According to these researchers' opinion, lots of practice can be the key solution to develop correct pronunciation of English words. Another research made by Cruttenden (1994) concluded that "In the field of SLA, learners with different linguistic backgrounds would, certainly, face difficulties while uttering English sounds, due to the differences between the two languages. These differences between the sound systems are considered as a barrier against competence in the pronunciation of English, because the new sounds still remain strange for their speech organs especially if they start learning English after a critical period, but this problem is expected to be sorted out after practicing regularly and working hard" (p.p 33-34).

### **Suggested Solutions**

Brown & Lee (2015) noted "Most courses are designed relying on a particular textbook or a preplanned set of materials notwithstanding sufficient materials available for teaching and learning" which brings about a lack of authenticity in the classroom and leads to a gap between language usage outside and inside the classroom (p.232). Tomlinson (2011) suggested the usage of digital media which is today readily available (p.234). Authentic materials such as movies, podcasts, songs and You Tube videos are highly recommended to utilize while learning pronunciation.



Another possible solution is that in-service and prospective teachers have training courses in order that they will improve their knowledge of English phonetics.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, achieving ultimate attainment in pronunciation is crucially important for having a good communication in English and improve communicative competence. Nevertheless, reaching native-like proficiency and being able to utter all English words correctly appear to be challenging for learners who commence the learning process after critical period due to several reasons. Lenneberg (1967) suggested the term CPH which states that the younger learners show better results in L2 learning. Therefore, adults are more likely to be affected by above-mentioned factors. Overall, by analyzing the relevant data, I came to the conclusion that biologic factors, mother tongue interference and the differences between L1 and L2 make it difficult for adults to achieve native-like pronunciation.

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