The Production of the SAE Dark /l/ by Saudi L2 Learners of English

Abstract

The inability to accurately produce a given sound in the target language (TL), but rather replace it with a sound that is found in the native language (NL), is one of the factors influencing the perception of what is known in the literature as a "foreign accent" (see Flege 1981,84,87; Yavas, 2011). One area of difficulty to the L2 learners of Standard American English (SAE) is the accurate production of the SAE dark /l/, specifically when the learner's NL has only the allophonic clear /l/, like Spanish and Arabic.

This current study examines the production of the SAE /l/ by two Saudi Arabian (SA) L2 learners groups, one in United States (SA-US) and one in Saudi Arabia (SA-SA). It examines their production of the SAE /l/ in four environments:

1) Onset position before front vowels as in *"lead, lab, lake"*.
2) Onset position before back vowels as in *"loose, load, lost"*.
3) Coda position after front vowels as in *"feel, canal, mail"*.
4) Coda position after back vowels as in *"tool, soul, fall"*.

The aim is to determine whether or not different vowels in different environments will result in variation in the production when compared to English monolinguals. Also, whether or not the amount of language input will have a significant influence on the accuracy of production between the SA-SA and SA-US groups, given that the SA-SA group has never left Saudi Arabia.

For the current study 30 adult Saudi L2 learners of English (15 SA-SA, 15 SA-US) and 4 English monolingual speakers were measured against each other to compare their production of the SAE /l/. Participants were given sentences containing target words in an intersentential environment and the results were analyzed to obtain the /l/ F1/F2 values to determine the degree of darkness/lightness in their productions. Results showed a considerable variation in the production between the SA-SA group and the SA-US group. In general, the amount of the language input seemed to play a crucial role in the accuracy of SAE /l/ production. The SA-US group performed better than SA-SA group almost in all of the three environments and seemed to acquire the SAE /l/ faster. Participants in the SA-SA group **were able** to accurately produce the SAE /l/ **ONLY** in:

- Onset position before the low back vowel /ɔ/.
- Coda position after the same low back vowel /ɔ/.

Participants in the SA-US group **were able** to accurately produce the SAE /l/ in all positions **EXCEPT** for the following environments:

- Onset position before the front vowel / æ/.
- Onset position before the back vowel /o/.
- Coda position after the high vowel /i/.
- Coda position after the back vowels /u/ and /o/.

The findings of this study illustrate the importance of language input in the L2 acquisition and show a hierarchy in the /l/ production's accuracy based on the degree of darkness in the target word.

Keywords: SAE /l/; phonetics; phonology; second language; production; English; Arabic

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