

# Realization of the Grapheme 'er' by Learners of English as Foreign Language: The Case Study of Level-One Students of English Department, University of Doba in Chad

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## ABSTRACT

This research work sets out to evaluate the spoken productions of foreign learners of English: the case of students in the English Department of the University of Doba, i.e. students of Level One, who were 200 in number. To carry out the investigation, reading activity of a text was used to collect data. Variationism by Labov (1963) was the theory used to guide the analysis of data. The investigation arrived at the results that learners have very poor performance in the pronunciation of English sounds, which is due to the influence of French and lack of English practice. To improve the learning of EFL, students are recommended to practice English intensively and extensively.

**KEYWORDS:** Francophone English, influence, pronunciation

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## I. INTRODUCTION

While the issue of learning English as a second language (L2) has received substantial investigation, learning English as a third language (L3), especially in a multilingual environment has not received much attention. Various factors including typological similarity between second language and third language are believed to influence the process and the product of learning a third language. Typological similarity is said to facilitate learning at the lexico-semantic level. However, its effects on the learning of L3 phonology are not always as such (cf. Bouchhioua, 2016). This work deals with learning of English in Chad in general and in the University of Doba in particular. By nature, it is a phonological investigation that assesses the pronunciation of the grapheme 'er' in view of identifying the factors that affect the pronunciation of English by students learning English at the University of Doba. It is worth noting that this work is one of rare research works that investigate the pronunciation of English by Chadian learners of that language. The other research works on English learning in Chad are focused on issues such as methods and approaches of teaching and learning English, written productions, attitudes and

motivation of learners, grammar teaching, aural and oral teaching to mention some. The absence of interest in the pronunciation aspect of language learning might be explained by the hardship of phonology. This work reveals the interference of French as L2 on the English pronunciation of the participants, i.e. Level-One students in English Department of the University of Doba in Chad Republic.

## II. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Linguistic situation of Chad is complex due to the diversity of languages. Chad is classified among countries that have a great linguistic heterogeneity. In order to locate precisely the languages of Chad in the framework of African languages, one has to consult one of the following materials: *Greenberg's Languages of Africa (1963)* and Tucker and Bryan's *Handbook of African Languages*. Indeed, out of four linguistic phyla which are defined by Greenberg, three are represent in Chad. These are: Afro-asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, and Kongo-Kordofan (or Niger-Congo). Out of this classification, one observes that Chad is a multi-linguistic country.

According to Ethnologue (2017), Chad counts 12,075,000 people and its official languages are French and Modern Standard Arabic. These languages are attested by the Chadian Constitution of 2018 in its Article n<sup>o</sup>9, Title I. French language is left over from the colonial era, when this country was under the control and the administration of France, one of colonial powers. It is the language of both administration and education. In fact, a larger percentage of the population (2 millions) in Chad speaks French. In addition to the official languages and the lingua franca, i.e. Chadian Arabic, Chad is home of at least 134 indigenous languages.

The English speakers first arrived in Chad a little before 1900. They were missionaries. One missionary of note, Peter Cameron Scott of Scotland, arrived in south-eastern Chad in 1895. His goal was to evangelize, yet he brought the English language at the same time. Originally, Chadians were exposed to English through religious texts. As missions grew and more English speaking people came to Chad, they began teaching English in the French schools as well as in the community, yet always with the objective of conversion to Christianity. It was not until the end of colonization in 1961 that English really began to spread in Chad through more American and British missionaries as well as through United States sponsored programs such as Peace Corps. Today, American influence in Chad is highly involved with the oil drilling in Southern Chad. People want oil jobs and see English as a must to get these jobs, which is often true. Many Chadians were (and continue to be) frustrated with French control and therefore looked to English as a brighter future. The English language opens technological doors, educational doors, vocational doors, and even 'locational' doors (cf. Anderson, 2008).

In a nutshell, the English language arrived in Chad before 1900 and it was brought by religious missionaries. It was in 1941 that it entered the school syllabus in this country.

In Chad, English is dominated, in terms of use, by French, Arabic, the two official languages of the country, and a multitude of home languages. The influence of these languages affects the learning of English in higher institutions as well as in secondary ones.

Chadian learners do not give much interest to English. This is due to two (2) main reasons. First, the reluctance of learners towards English is cultural, especially for Chadian Muslims who regard English as the language of Christian people.

The second reason is that young learners do not see any benefit from the English language in terms of professional life. For them, the only career that English as a subject can provide is teaching, which is the career that many Chadian young people dislike. Thus, they lack motivation for English because with this language they cannot do attractive careers like finances, medical sciences, and journalism.

Although the current work seeks for the phonological peculiarities of the English language used by Level-One students of the Department of English in the University of Doba and the factors affecting the pronunciation of those learners of English, it focuses more on the pronunciation of the grapheme 'er' which gives it a phonological nature. In other words, it deals with pronunciation of the sequence of English sounds 'er' by English Department students of the

University of Doba, along with the phenomena that determine the performance of those students. This grapheme was chosen because it is pronounced in the same way by the target population of this research work while it is pronounced in four (4) ways in Standard English.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW AND FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

#### A. Literature Review

In this section, works that are related to the study at hand have been discussed. These works discuss the influence of French on the pronunciation of English as foreign language (EFL). It has been observed that French has obviously its trace on spoken productions of English used by foreign learners.

In his work, entitled 'Acquisition and learning of English phonology by French speakers: on the roles of segments and supra-segments', Capliez (2016) categorizes errors related to segmental features into three (3) groups which are: mispronunciation of vowels, omission and intrusion of the glottal fricative /h/, and phonemic and phonetic mispronunciation of consonants.

Starting with the mispronunciations of vowels, Capliez (2016) points out that because of the absence of some English phonemes in the French sound inventory, EFL learners are bound to mispronounce L2 vowels. He notices the following substitution: the use of French [ɛ] as a substitute for /e/ as in 'hello', [a] for /æ/ as in 'have', /ɔ/ for /ɒ/, as in pot, /œ/ for /ʌ/ as in 'must', [i] for /ɪ/ as in 'think', [u] for /ʊ/ as in 'books', and even [œ] or [ø] for /ə/ as in 'asleep'. In those cases, L1 sound and L2 sound share some characteristics, although IPA symbols are far from accurately representing phonetic realizations. In some other cases, the substitutes show no specific resemblance with the target sound, and they can be ascribed to the influence of spelling. For example, [y] is sometimes used instead of [ʌ] as in 'bus' because it is the standard pronunciation of the letter <u> in French spelling and [o] is perceived in 'forgot' and 'other' as it is the normal value of the letter <o>.

Capliez (ibid) discovered that the neutralisation of lax/tense vowel distinction is also another consequence of L1 transfer from French to English which could be predicted as there is no such dichotomy in the former language. The most typical example is the French sound [i] which is used as a substitute for both the English lax vowel /ɪ/ and the tense vowel /i:/ as in *leaves* and *living*. In the same respects, [o] is the substitute for /əʊ/, as in *hello* or /ɔ:/ as in *saw*.

In terms of diphthongs, Capliez (2016) noted that several patterns can be considered. First, the influence of spelling is an important factor in the production of L2 sounds. This can be observed in the realisations of the English diphthong /eɪ/ as one vowel [a] in the word *hate*.

Second, English diphthongs are sometimes neutralised. For instance, /eɪ/ is produced [ɛ] or [e] as in *afraid* and *today*. Finally on diphthongs, Capliez (2016) notes that some French speakers nasalize the first vowel of a diphthong when it is surrounded by [n], pronouncing 'now' as [nɛw̃].

Analysing the phonemic and phonetic mis-productions of consonants, Capliez (2016) observed that just as it is the case

with mis-productions of English vowels by French speakers, inaccurate realisations of L2 consonants are often due to the influence of spelling. For example, the substitutions of /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ with [ʃ] and [ʒ], respectively in such words as 'church' and 'Jack' are caused by the values of the letters <ch> and <j> which are not affricates in French, except for English loanwords such as 'jeans'.

The difficulty in pronouncing the English dentals fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ which are absent in French phonemics has also drawn Capliez (2016)'s attention. He discovered that these sounds are usually replaced by other sounds that share some of their characteristic features such as voiceless [s], [f], [t] for /θ/ and voiced [z], [v], [d] for /ð/.

Discussing consonants, Walter (2001) discovered that some are absent in French, causing, thus the problem of pronunciation to French learners of English. She observes that /θ, ð/ do not exist in French, and the fact that the spoken French does not require the tip of the tongue, makes these sounds difficult to pronounce. The same situation happens to /tʃ, dʒ, h/ and dark /l/.

Dealing with the influence of spelling on pronunciation, Walter (2001) discovered that in syllables ending with the letter <r>, this letter is pronounced in French. This interference may cause problems for students of British English with words like *hard*, *early*, and *garden*. In words like *sister*, French speakers may pronounce the final <e> as /e/: 'sistair.

The past tense marker, i.e. -ed is pronounced /ɪd/ or /ed/ by French speakers after all consonants, or after all unvoiced consonants, as in 'warned' and 'jumpèd'. In addition, Walter (2001) observes that final written consonants in French, for example plural -s, are often not pronounced. This tends to be carried over into English and leads to mistakes like \*differen, \*she stay, \*four apple.

In "Cross-Linguistic Influence on the Acquisition English Pronunciation by Tunisian EFL Learners" (2016), Bouchhioua tested the pronunciation of the sounds < in, yn, im> that are produced by Tunisian learners of English. These sounds exist in English-French cognates such as *information*, *syntax*, and *important*. Bouchhioua observes that interference from French in the pronunciation of the syllables <in, yn, im > in the 12 English- French cognates in read speech was checked statistically for significance through a one-tailed Wilcoxon Matched-Paired Signed-rank test, which gave a significant value. This significant value shows that Tunisian learners of EFL tend to produce French nasalised vowels instead of the correct English vowels when reading an English text containing English-French cognates, i.e. the graphemes < in, yn, im >. As an illustration of this phenomenon, she noted that words like *information* and *linguistics* were pronounced with the French nasal vowel [ɛ̃], i.e. (82%) and (79%) respectively. She did the same statistical test to check whether the same tendency is also present in spontaneous speech and the results revealed a higher level of significance.

In their work, Kouega and Tao (2017) examined the spoken productions of Chadian learners of English, with a view to identifying the phonological features of English of these learners and the languages which tend to influence their

speech. The results of their work revealed many interesting features including the occurrence of nasal vowel in the speech of these learners and the diphthongisation of monoph-thongs, especially when they are represented by the sequence of vowel letters like EO as in "jeopardy". Their analysis also revealed that consonant letters are pronounced as in French and are left out if they are silent in French. Furthermore, they observe that stress tends to fall on the last syllable of words, especially Latin and French cognates like "photograph" and "professor", which are pronounced photograph and professor. With regard to the language that tends to influence the English of Chadian learners, Kouega and Tao observe that it is French. This has been identified by means of a comparison of sound systems of French and the English of Chadian learners. The same observation has been made by teachers in questionnaire.

Kouega (2017) examined the renderings of the sequence -UI- by Cameroonian, Gabonese, and native French users learning English with the view to finding out whether French users speaking different L1s pronounce this sequence in different or similar ways. He observes that this sequence is rendered in English in at least nine different ways, which may be grouped into four categories: monophthongs (bruise /bru:z/), diphthongs (disguise/disgariz/), and triphthongs (quite /kwaɪət), sequences of consonant + vowel (anguish /æŋgwɪʃ/, or vowel + vowel (bluisth / `blu:ɪʃ / ), and lastly Yod insertion (intuition /ɪntju: ɪʃn).

Finally, Safotso (2012) and Atechi (2015) state that majority of CamFE speakers silence the plural markers, i.e. -s, -es, -ies, as well as the third person singular markers. They add that other peculiarities include the realisation of the simple past and past participle morpheme -ed. In CamFE, the -ed suffix is either silent or pronounced as [ɛt] as in walked [walk] or [walkɛt], allowed [allow] or [allowɛt]. In CamE, it is realized [t] as in walk [t] and allow [t].

## B. Framework of analysis

The theoretical approach adopted in this research is Variationism by Labov (1963). The most fundamental assumptions about the nature of sociolinguistic variation were in the first time stated by Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard, who recognizes that "the point of view of the present study is that one cannot understand the development of a language change apart from the social life of the community in which it occurs" (p. 3).

Defining the "social life of the community" has been always a difficult task as shown by many approaches that sociolinguists have used to operationalize social structure. Nevertheless, one of the first indications of Labov's conception of the connection between "social forces" and individual behavior appears when he has examined the falling status of traditional trades, especially fishing, on the island, and the rise of tourism: "these economic pressures must be clearly delineated in order to assess the heavy psychological pressures operating on the Vineyarders of old family stock" (28). This means that "heavy psychological pressures" have the potential to affect linguistic practice, and Labov gives quantitative evidence for this phenomenon. Importantly, Labov equally also compares raw centralization scores across the six speakers who centralized (ay) to the greatest degree, showing that older, up-island ("traditional") fishermen were the 14 leaders. His use of this simple

comparison that social forces, i.e. social and economic changes that affect the entire island, can have influence on linguistic behaviour and even a comparison across only six speakers is informative.

Labov's primary conclusion is that one's orientation to traditional island culture, as opposed to the encroaching mainland culture, is the only social variable that interacts significantly with centralization. Education, a commonly-used indicator of social class, does not. The implied relationship between social structures and individual choice is one in which the individual has significant autonomy. To understand linguistic variation, Labov (ibid) suggests, one needs to understand the way that community members themselves view the social space, and one needs to assume that individuals can and will shape their linguistic performance to match their social identities (or the social identities they desire). Objective indicators of social status offer no guarantee; instead, it is critical to uncover the kinds of social groups that are most subjectively salient to people, as the nature of those groups can inform our understanding of linguistic practice.

In short, Labov argues for an ethnographic approach to linguistic variation.

Labovian approach is about language variation and this variation is explained by socio-economic classes, i.e. lower class, middle class and upper class. In the current work, this approach was used from another perspective. It was adapted to this study to identify the pronunciation of the grapheme 'er' by Level-One students of the University of Doba and to look for actors that account for students' pronunciation of English sounds.

**IV. METHODOLOGY**

This section provides information about the setting of the present investigation, the involved informants, and the instruments used to collect the data.

**A. Setting, Informants, and Instruments**

This study deals with the pronunciation of the grapheme 'er' by students of the first year of English Department of the University of Doba. Doba, as a city is the headquarters of the Logone Oriental Province and it is located in the southern part of Chad, about six hundred kilometres (600km) from Ndjamena, the capital city of the country. The University of Doba is one the three higher institutions in Chad that have English Department, after the University of Ndjamena and

Higher Teachers' Teaching College. It was established in 2011 by a Presidential Decree.

The population of this investigation was only made of Level-One Students learning English in English Department of the University of Doba. Students of Level Two who have carry-overs, i.e., those who have failed subjects, were disregarded because their productions would influence the real result of this research work. The informants of this study were mixed, i.e. male and female. In total, those who effectively participated in the investigation were one hundred and sixty eight (168).

To collect data in order to evaluate the informants in terms of the pronunciation of grapheme 'er', reading activity was used. Indeed, the researcher composed a text with words containing the focus grapheme, which is 'er'. The choice of 'er' is motivated by the fact that Level-One students of English Department, the University of Doba, pronounced it in a single way while the very grapheme has four (4) possible renditions in Received Pronunciation (RP).

In order to have natural data, students were not informed that the recording aimed at testing their pronunciation of English because if they were aware of this, they would not read freely or they would be hesitant to participate to this activity due to lack of confidence. Students were individually asked to read freely the text composed for the purpose of data collection about students' pronunciation of English. The productions of each student were recorded by a mobile phone during the reading activity. And each student was labelled by a number according to the order in which they have done the activity. At the end of the reading activity, the researcher sat down and listened again and again to the productions of each student involved in the task. Furthermore, the productions of each informant were transcribed. Then, informants' pronunciation was contrasted with Received Pronunciation (RP), which enabled the researcher to rate the English pronunciation of those learners, at the same time allowing him to determine the factors of the perceived pronunciation.

**V. ANALYSIS OF DATA**

This section is devoted to the presentation and the analysis of data collected from Level One -Students of English Department of the University of Doba. Data were presented in tables for better comprehension. Students' productions were contrasted with RP model. A very significant number of informants rendered the grapheme 'er' by /ɛr/ as shown in Table 1 below:

**Table1: Pronunciation of 'er' by learners**

Grapheme	Words	RP Pronunciation	Students' realizations
'er'	Era	/ˈɪərə/	/ɛra/
	Eradicate	/ɪˈrædɪkət/	/ɛradiket/
	Certified	/ˈsɜ:tɪfaɪd/	/sertifaid/
	Fertile	/ˈfɜ:taɪl/	/fertile/
	Desert	/ˈdezət/	/dezer/

The table shows that the grapheme 'er' has four possible renditions in RP. These include /ɪə/ in words like 'era', /ɪr/ in 'eradicate', /ɜ:/ in 'certified' and 'fertile', and finally the schwa vowel /ə/ in 'desert'. These diverse renditions of the same grapheme reveal the complexity of the English language.

In other respects, a glance at the renditions of the focused grapheme by Level-One students of English Department of the University of Doba, tells that those informants have a unique way of pronouncing 'er', i.e. /ɛr/. This means that they pronounced each sound as they appear in the sequence of sounds of the present study, which is 'er'. All the informants are

Francophone, and for this reason, they transferred the French pronunciation style onto English. In fact, the grapheme under investigation exists in French language and it is realized /ɛr/ in all environments (word-initial, medial and final positions). This may be illustrated by the following words: *ermit* /ɛrmit/ (hermit), *fermeture* /fɛrmetyr/ (closing), *fer* /fɛr/ (iron). An exception is made for verbs whereby in final position the grapheme 'er' is realized /e/ as in *parler* /parle/, *sauter* /sote/ (to jump), etc. The pronunciation of 'er' as /ɛr/ by those students of Francophone background is the influence of spelling pronunciation which is the phonological features of French language. In other words, in French, sounds are pronounced individually in words, except for few cases like the combination of 'ph' which is pronounced /f/ as in 'phrase' (sentence), 'rhume' (cold); and plural marker 's' which is silent as in 'mangues' (mangoes), 'chats' (cats).

This phonological error is regarded by Ellis (2012) as sound transfer from French to English.

### Recapitulation of renditions of 'er'

The table below indicates the number of students who pronounced 'er' as /ɛr/ along with the number of words.

**Table2: Recapitulation of rendition of 'er'**

Grapheme	Word number	Students' realizations	Students' number	Percentage (%)
Er	5	/ɛr/	65	38.71
	4	/ɛr/	46	27.38
	3	/ɛr/	45	26.78
	2	/ɛr/	9	5.35
	1	/ɛr/	1	0.59
	None	/ɛr/	2	1.19
Total			168	100%

Based on data collected, it was observed that sixty-five (65), i.e. (38.71%) rendered 'er' of all the five words proposed for reading exercise by /ɛr/. Forty-six (46) informants, i.e. (27.38%) rendered it in the same way in four words out of five. In addition, forty-five (45) i.e. (26.78%) of them realized the grapheme of focus as /ɛr/ in three words out of five. Only nine (9), i.e. (5.35%) and one (1), representing (0.59) rendered it by /ɛr/ in two words and one word respectively. Finally, two (2) learners, i.e. (1.19%) rendered 'er' in different ways.

This table tells that one hundred and fifty-six (156), i.e. (92.87%) Level-One students of English Department in the University of Doba pronounced 'er' as /ɛr/ in average in four (4) words out of five (5). As mentioned earlier, the mispronunciation of the target grapheme is due to the influence of French, i.e. learners transferred the French sound on English as 'er' exists in both languages.

The remaining twelve (12) students representing (7.13%) are inconsistent in the realization of 'er'. For instance, Student 15 rendered it into three different but wrong ways, i.e. /ɪr/, /ə/, and /ɜ:/ in 'era', 'certified' and 'desert'.

### VI. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper assessed the spoken productions of Francophone learners of English in general and the pronunciation of the grapheme 'er' by learners of English in the Department of English in the University of Doba in Chad. The population of this study rendered the grapheme of focus systematically by /ɛr/as shown by in Table1 and Table 2 above.

Based on data elicited by the reading text, students in their great majority pronounced the grapheme 'er' by /ɛr/. The rendition of 'er' by /ɛr/ is the expression of the spelling pronunciation system which is one of the remarkable characteristics of French. In other words, in French, phonemes constituting words are pronounced as such, a phenomenon which is completely different from English, i.e. the target language of the population of this research.

Students systematically transfer this style to English, which makes their pronunciation inappropriate.

In addition to the influence of French which negatively affects students' pronunciation of English, there is also lack of practice that should be taken into account. Indeed, Chad in general and Doba city in particular is an environment which is not favourable for English learning in the sense that in Doba English learners are not enough exposed to that language because it is scarcely spoken while local languages and French are spoken extensively.

Therefore, students of English Department are recommended to create opportunities allowing them to practice English where ever they are, because it is only by means of practice that language learning can be possible, that is why it is commonly said "practice makes perfect"

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