THE DEVELOPMENT OF SYSTEMATIC PHONOLOGICAL RULES IN LEARNER VARIETIES

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Abstract: *This study investigates the emergence of systematic phonological rules in learner English varieties. While phonetic variation accounts for individual sound modifications, it does not fully explain the stability and regularity observed across learners' pronunciation. Drawing on the framework of interlanguage, the study examines how learners internalize recurring phonetic patterns and reorganize them into structured phonological rules. These rules govern segmental and suprasegmental contrasts, reflecting both target language input and constraints imposed by the native language. The analysis highlights the consistency of learner phonologies across speakers sharing similar linguistic backgrounds, illustrating that learner English is a structured, rule-governed system rather than a collection of random errors. The study also discusses pedagogical implications, emphasizing the need to recognize systematic phonological patterns in pronunciation teaching and assessment.*

Keywords: *systematic phonological rules, interlanguage phonology, learner English, language transfer, pronunciation*

Pronunciation in learner English is often analyzed in terms of surface-level phonetic variation, yet such an approach fails to capture the systematicity inherent in learner speech. Research has shown that learners do not merely produce random deviations from the target language; rather, they reorganize the phonological system of English, forming rule-based structures that govern pronunciation in consistent ways (Selinker, 1972). Over time, recurring patterns, such as neutralizations of unstable vowel or consonant contrasts, become internalized as phonological rules, resulting in the stabilization of learner varieties.

The interlanguage framework provides a theoretical lens to understand this phenomenon. Interlanguage treats learner language as an independent linguistic system, shaped by the interaction of native language influence and exposure to the target language. Within this system, phonological restructuring enables learners to simplify complex contrasts, regularize sound patterns, and establish internal consistency. As a result, learner English varieties often display predictable and stable phonological features across speakers with similar first-language backgrounds, suggesting that learner pronunciation is systematic rather than arbitrary.

Understanding the emergence of systematic phonological rules has both theoretical and practical significance. From a linguistic perspective, it aligns with universal processes observed in language change and dialect formation. Pedagogically, recognizing these rules allows educators to approach pronunciation instruction in a way that respects learners' developing phonological competence, focusing on intelligibility and communicative function rather than solely on imitation of native norms.

This study therefore aims to analyze the mechanisms by which learners internalize phonological rules and to explore the implications of these findings for English language teaching in EFL contexts.To understand this stability, it is necessary to move beyond surface-level pronunciation features and examine how learners reorganize English sounds at the phonological level. Over time, recurring phonetic patterns become internalized as rules, forming a structured phonological system that governs learner speech.

This process is commonly described within the framework of interlanguage, which views learner language as an independent linguistic system rather than an imperfect version of the target language. Within interlanguage phonology, learners gradually construct rule-based sound systems that reflect both the target language input and the constraints of their first language (Selinker, 1972). As a result, learner English varieties often display consistency across speakers from similar linguistic backgrounds, reinforcing the idea that these varieties are systematic rather than accidental.

One manifestation of phonological restructuring is the regularization of sound contrasts. Learners may neutralize distinctions that are unstable or difficult to perceive, such as vowel length or voicing contrasts in final position. Once these neutralizations become consistent, they function as phonological rules within the learner variety. From a linguistic standpoint, this mirrors natural processes found in language change and dialect formation, suggesting that learner English varieties follow universal principles of phonological organization (Odlin, 1989).

Invernizzi and Worthy (1989) and Moats (1983) investigated the types of phonological errors made by children with learning disabilities, matched with spelling level-matched normally achieving children. Invernizzi and Worthy (1989) investigated the prevalence of error types such as long vowel patterns, ambiguous consonants, and consonant digraphs.

Moats' error scheme included variables such as consonant doubling and positional constraints. Consistent with the findings of Bruck (1988), Bruck and Treiman (1990), and Rohl and Tunmer (1988) in terms of word type, both Invernizzi and Worthy (1989) and Moats (1983) found no differences between groups. Nelson (1980) also investigated the kinds of errors made by good and poor spellers matched according to spelling level. She also found no differences between the groups in her broad classification scheme.

It should be noted that the analyses used in these studies measure different phonological skills.

The earlier studies and the studies of error types (Invernizzi & Worthy, 1989; Moats, 1983; Nelson, 1980) focused on the use of higher-order phonological and orthographic rules involving letter combinations and letter order. These studies have found that children with learning disabilities and normally achieving children produce similar phonological error types.

However, the studies by Bruck (1988), Bruck and Treiman (1990), and Rohl and Tunmer (1988) focused on the use of individual grapheme–phoneme conversion rules. They found that poor spellers, in comparison with good spellers, show poorer ability to use spelling-sound information in their spelling.

The models of spelling development earlier discussed (Brown, 1990; Frith, 1985; Marsh, 1980) outline the development of various skills that are involved in learning to spell. Two somewhat different phonological skills are discussed in these models. Earlier contradictory results concerning the development of phonological skills may be attributed to measuring different components of these skills (Bruck & Waters, 1988; Finucci et al., 1983; Frith, 1980; Nelson, 1980; Waters et al., 1988).

The present study therefore included a measure of rudimentary sound–symbol associations ("unconstrained system"), referred to by Brown (1990) as the semiphonetic and phonetic stage, by Frith (1985) as the beginning alphabetic stage, and by Marsh et al. (1980) as sequential coding. A second measure of phonological awareness was also included ("constrained system") and this concerns how well the child was able to incorporate conditional rules into his/her choice of appropriate grapheme(s). This is similar to Marsh et al.'s (1980) hierarchical encoding and reflects application of orthographic rules and conventions. As well, both an age and a spelling level match were included in the present study to examine the spelling errors of average and poor spellers.

The question concerning delay or deviance concerns whether older poor spellers display a similar error pattern to younger average spellers (in which case the poor spellers display a similar sequence of learning and a developmental delay can be posited) or whether older poor spellers display a different pattern from younger average spellers (in which case poor spellers are more than just delayed; rather, they show a different sequence of learning). The spelling level match was included to compare older poor spellers with younger average spellers on the same corpus of words to evaluate the delay vs deviance issue.

The age and spelling level matches were also included to extend the results of previous studies that have included a spelling level match at a more limited number of spelling levels or that investigated spelling only within the context of reading. It was hypothesized that the knowledge of phonological rules and orthographic spelling patterns would increase with age for both average and poor spellers. Because of the importance, for spelling, of children's application of phonological rules, it was expected that children with average spelling scores at all age levels would make more phonologically accurate spelling errors (spelling errors that correctly use sound–symbol association rules) than would children with poor spelling scores.

As good visual/orthographic skills are necessary for orthographic knowledge of English spellings, it was also hypothesised that average spellers would produce more errors that were close visual matches to the target word than would poor spellers.

Hypotheses pertaining to phonological skills of average and poor spellers matched according to spelling level were based on the research evidence. It was hypothesized, based on the research pertaining to the use of grapheme–phoneme correspondence rules (Bruck, 1988; Bruck & Treiman, 1990; Rohl & Tunmer, 1988), that poor spellers would produce fewer rudimentary phonologically accurate errors than average spellers. Based on the research pertaining to the relatively good orthographic skills of dyslexic children (Beech & Awaida, 1992; Rack, 1985), it was hypothesized that poor spellers would produce more errors that were close visual matches than average spellers. Since the production of more complex phonological errors including conditional rules may be dependent on broader orthographic knowledge, and since earlier research findings indicated that average and poor spellers displayed similar patterns of phonological error types (Invernizzi & Worthy, 1989; Moats, 1983; Nelson, 1980), It was expected that average and poor spellers, matched according to spelling grade, would show a similar proportion of more complex phonological errors.

A direct investigation of the relative use of phonological cues and visual memory strategies in average and poor spellers was also conducted in the present study. Based on the research concerning the preponderance of phonologically accurate errors in average spellers, and on the evidence concerning relatively good orthographic skills of dyslexic children, it was hypothesized that average spellers would more frequently use phonological cues rather than visual memory skills, while poor spellers would more frequently use visual memory skills rather than phonological cues .

The emergence of stable learner phonologies also aligns with research on World Englishes, which recognizes non-native varieties as legitimate systems shaped by historical, social, and linguistic factors. Scholars argue that when large groups of speakers share similar phonological features over time, these features contribute to the formation of localized or regional English varieties (Kachru, 1992).

Although learner English varieties differ from established New Englishes, they demonstrate similar processes of rule formation and stabilization, particularly in educational and EFL contexts.

Conclusion

The analysis of learner English demonstrates that pronunciation deviations are not random but reflect the emergence of systematic phonological rules. Through repeated exposure to English input and interaction with native language constraints, learners gradually internalize recurring patterns and reorganize them into structured phonological systems.

These systems govern both segmental and suprasegmental features, including vowel and consonant contrasts, stress, and intonation, resulting in predictable and stable learner varieties.

Viewing learner pronunciation through the lens of interlanguage phonology highlights the functional and adaptive nature of these systems. Rather than treating non-native forms as mere errors, they can be understood as rule-governed strategies that allow learners to communicate effectively within their developmental stage.

The consistency of phonological patterns across learners from similar linguistic backgrounds further confirms that learner English is a coherent and systematic linguistic variety.

From a pedagogical perspective, recognizing the existence of systematic phonological rules has critical implications. Pronunciation teaching should emphasize intelligibility and functional use, incorporating learners' emerging rules into instructional strategies rather than focusing solely on target-language imitation.

By aligning teaching methods with the learners' phonological system, educators can foster more effective and confident communication while respecting the developmental reality of learner English. In conclusion, learner English varieties represent structured, rule-governed systems, reflecting both the influence of the first language and the internalization of target-language input.

Understanding these systematic phonological rules not only enriches theoretical insights into second language acquisition but also provides a foundation for more informed and effective pronunciation instruction in EFL contexts.

Understanding phonological restructuring allows researchers to reconceptualize learner pronunciation. Instead of viewing it as a transitional stage that must always lead toward native norms, it can be seen as a functional system adapted to learners' communicative needs. This perspective provides a theoretical bridge between phonetic variation and the broader sociolinguistic reality of global English use.

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