

## The Difficulties Faced by Myanmar Students in Learning French Pronunciation

Hnin Hnin Nwe<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Nowadays, in the transitional period, Myanmar has the relation with other countries in the sectors such as political sector, economic sector and social sector. In this context, with the need of foreign languages skills, foreign language learning play a vital role. Concerning with foreign language learning, five Oriental languages and five European languages including French are taught at the Yangon University of Foreign Languages. This study focuses on the pronunciation which plays the crucial role for learning a language. It was found that some Myanmar students who are learning French are in need of pronouncing French words correctly. The aim of this study is to find out the difficulties that Myanmar students encounter in the French pronunciation. This study was done by analyzing the problems faced by Myanmar students. The data were collected by means of questionnaire with the closed-ended questions from the BA second year students who are specializing French at the Yangon University of Foreign Languages (90 students). The quantitative and qualitative methods were used for this paper. As the result of the analysis, the difficulties in pronouncing French that Myanmar students encountered are related to phonological problems such as the liquid consonant [R], the fricative [ʒ], the oral vowel [œ], [ø] and the nasalized vowel [ã], [õ], [ẽ]. Moreover, certain Myanmar students have the problems in liaison and rhythm. It can be also seen that Myanmar language negatively influences French language. This study will help Myanmar students solve the problems of French pronunciation and will contribute to find out the appropriate ways to pronounce French words correctly.

**Keywords:** *Myanmar students, phonological problems, appropriate ways*

### Introduction

Nowadays, in the transition period, the developing country Myanmar has the relation with other countries in the sectors such as political sector, economic sector, cultural sector and social sector. Besides, Myanmar has been cooperating with the international organizations. In this situation, with the need of proficiency in foreign languages, foreign languages learning has come to play a vital role.

Concerning with foreign language learning, five Oriental languages and five European languages, including French are taught at the Yangon University of foreign languages.

In foreign language learning, it is crucial to learn four language skills, grammar rules, vocabulary and suitable knowledge. Moreover it is considered that appropriate pronunciation is also fundamental. Producing the correct pronunciation enables a foreign language learner to communicate well with the native speakers. In this situation, for the one who is learning a foreign language, there would be difficulties to pronounce well the target language at the beginning.

Here, it was found that some Myanmar students who learn French are also in need of pronouncing French correctly. In Yangon University of foreign languages, for four language skills, First year and Second year French major students have to learn “Latitudes I and II” as textbooks in which the basic phonetic lessons are included. Besides, in Second year, the students have to learn “Phonetics” as one of the modules. However, it was observed that the students still face problems in pronunciation. That is why, it is crucial to investigate the reasons of the problems in French pronunciation for Myanmar students.

---

<sup>1</sup> Daw, Associate professor, Department of French, Mandalay University of Foreign Languages

### Aim

This paper aims to find out the difficulties faced by Myanmar students in learning French pronunciation and the effective ways to pronounce French pronunciation accurately.

### Research questions

In this context, the following research questions appeared.

1. What are the difficulties that Myanmar students faced in learning French pronunciation?
2. Why do Myanmar students have the difficulties in French pronunciation?
3. How can these difficulties be solved?

### Literature Review

#### Pronunciation

'The way in which a word or a letter is said, or said correctly, or the way in which a language is spoken.' According to (Cambridge Dictionary)

'The pronunciation of a word or language is the way in which it is pronounced.' According to (Collins Dictionary)

Accurate pronunciation has to be achieved in speaking a language. As a language is a system of communicating with other people, intelligible pronunciation will contribute to the general language communication. Zahir Adam Daff-Alla Ahmed (2017) presented that "The communicative approach originated in 1980s, suggested that using language to communicate should be central in all classrooms language instructions. Intelligible pronunciation is necessary for communication to take place." Yule (2006) stated that "This might suggest that some features of an L<sub>2</sub>, such as vocabulary and grammar, are easier to learn than others such as pronunciation."

In this situation, for those who learn a foreign language as a second language (L<sub>2</sub>), it might be difficult to produce the accurate pronunciation in the beginning.

#### Phonology

"Phonology is essentially the description of the systems and patterns of speech sound in a language".

Yule (2006) stated that "For most people, the experience with an L<sub>2</sub> is fundamentally different from their L<sub>1</sub> experience and it is hardly conducive to acquisition." In this context, mother tongue can interfere in the second language. As a second language learner, there would be phonological problems and other difficulties.

In this context, for Myanmar students as well, there would be the phonological problems in learning French because of the differences between Myanmar vowels and consonants and French vowels and consonants.

#### Rhythm, intonation and syllabication

In addition, in the way of learning pronunciation, the features such as rhythm, intonation and syllabication also play important roles. According to Schaetzel (2009), "There is important factors that one person must notice in the way of learning pronunciation which are accent, stress, intonation, and rhythm." Besides, Crystal (2003) stated that "Rhythm is organized according to regulation in timing of the stressed syllables. Rhythm is useful in communicating and enables the learners to divide speech into words or other units."

Example for rhythm :        \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ \_\_\_ \_\_\_ /  
  Oui, C'est là, C'est par là.

  \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ \_\_\_ /  
  Je vis /à Nice.

Example for intonation : → → ↗ → → ↘

Il fait froid, / cet hiver.

Example for syllabication :      2 syllables                      5 syllables

un bar
les mathéma tiques

### Liaisons

In French, when a word ending in a normally silent consonant is followed by a vowel or h *muet*, that consonant might be transferred onto the next word. This euphonic technique is called a liaison and it's one of the aspects of French pronunciation that can make it difficult to determine where one word ends and the next begins. Liaisons are the important features for French language.

For Example: un ami

Il attend ses amis.

However, as Myanmar language is tonal language, there would be problems for the students who are not familiar with rhythm, syllabication and liaison.

### Brief descriptions of the Myanmar language and the French language

Myanmar language is the tonal language and there are three tones and a glottal stop [ʔ]. (Tun Myint,U, 2007). French language is known as melody of language. In the Myanmar vocalic system, there are (7) pure vowels and (4) Myanmar diphthongs. Myanmar pure vowels contain [i], [e], [ɛ], [a], [ɔ], [o], [u] and Myanmar diphthongs contain [ei], [ai], [au], [ou]. Furthermore, Myanmar diphthongs are divided into two kinds: short diphthongs and long diphthongs. [ei] and [ou] are short diphthongs and [ai] and [au] are long diphthongs.

The French vocalic system is composed of (11) oral vowels and (4) nasal vowels. The (11) oral vowels are [i], [y], [u], [e], [ɛ], [ø], [œ], [ə], [o], [ɔ], [a] and (4) nasals vowels are [ɛ̃], [œ̃], [ã], [ɔ̃]. The French consonants consist of the plosives [p], [b], [t], [d], [k], [g], [ŋ], the fricatives [f], [v], [s], [z], [ʃ], [ʒ], [l], the liquid [R] and the semi-consonants [j], [w].

In the paper “A Comparative Study of vocal quality of Consonants in French and Myanmar” Myint Myat Soe stated that “ Myanmar Language has 33 consonants and French Language has 17 consonants and 3 schwas.” It was found out that the numbers of consonants in Myanmar are more than that of French. When the vocal quality of Myanmar and French is compared, although Myanmar has aspirated, voiceless, voiced and devoiced consonants, French has only voiceless and voiced consonants. It is observed that in Myanmar and French, 10 of the voiced consonants are the same. There are /b/, /d/, /g/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/, /z/, /j/, /w/. But there are also different voiced consonants. Although Myanmar has voiced consonants such as /ð/, /dʒ/, /ŋ/, French does not. French has voiced consonants such as /v/, /ʒ/, /R/ while Myanmar lacks those. It is studied that in Myanmar and French, 4 voiceless consonants are the same. They are /p/, /t/, /k/, /s/. Moreover, there are also different voiceless consonants. Myanmar has voiceless consonants such as /θ/, /h/, /tç/ but French does not. Although French has voiceless consonants /f/, Myanmar does not.’(Yangon University of Foreign Languages Research Journal 2019, Vol.10, No.1)

The Myanmar consonants are divided into seven groups which are the plosives, the affricates, the fricatives the nasalized consonants, the glottal stop, the literal approximants and the approximants. The plosives are [p], [ph], [b], [t], [th], [d], [k], [kh], [g] and the affricates are [tç], [tçh], [dʒ]. The fricatives are [θ], [ð], [s], [sh], [z], [ç], [h] and the nasalized consonants are [hm], [m], [hn], [n], [hŋ], [ŋ], [hŋ], [ŋ]. The glottal stop [ʔ] is a significant

consonant in the Myanmar sound system. [hl], [l], are the lateral approximants and [w], [hw], [j] are approximants.

In the paper “ A comparative Study of Consonants in Myanmar and French in terms of the Places of Articulation and Manners of Articulation” written by Daw Nway Nway Ei and U Aung Myat Hlaing from French Department in Mandalay University of Foreign Languages, there are only seven places of articulation of consonants in Myanmar. These seven places are (1) Bilabial (2) Dental (3) Alveolar (4) Post-alveolar (5) Palatal (6) Velar and (7) Glottal. In French, there are (1) Bilabial (2) Bilabial-Dental (3) Dental (4) Alveolar (5) Post-Alveolar (6) Palatal (7) Velar and (8) Uvula.

According to the comparison of the places of articulation in Myanmar language and the places of articulation in French language, it is observed that in Myanmar [f] and [v] are not found because there is no bilabial-dental consonant. Moreover, since there is no uvula consonant in Myanmar, [R] is not found. On the other hand, [h] cannot be found in French because there is no glottal consonant in French.

### Research Methodology

#### Research problem

By teaching French language in YUFL, it was found that some Myanmar students are in need of pronouncing French well. Furthermore, according to the observation, the causes of the problems of students in pronouncing French are related to phonological problems and the negative influence of mother tongue. Therefore, it is considered that the difficulties encountered by Myanmar students will be investigated to know distinctly and clearly what are the difficulties.

#### Data and method

The students who passed the Matriculation exam (2017) were observed during (2017-2018) academic year (BA first year) and during (2018-2019) academic year (BA second year) in learning French pronunciation. After two academic years, the data were collected by means of a questionnaire from (90) students of BA second year French specialization students. The students had to answer the questions related to the difficulties in pronouncing French. This research paper was done using the quantitative and qualitative methods.

#### Data Analysis

According to the observation of teaching and learning French pronunciation, it is remarked that some Myanmar students are still in need of accurate French pronunciation although they learn the fundamental phonetic lessons in BA first year and BA second year. Furthermore, in second year, they have to learn “Phonetics” as one of the modules. Besides, the causes of the problems of students in pronouncing French are concerned with phonological problems and the negative influence of mother tongue. Therefore, to know distinctly and clearly the facts which cause the problems, the questionnaire were distributed to (90) students of BA second year students and the data were collected.

According to the result of the questionnaire, the difficulties encountered by Myanmar students are presented in table 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Table 1: Difficulties in pronouncing

|            |        |        |       |       |       |       |       |  |
|------------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--|
| Plosives   | [p]    | [g]    | [t]   | [b]   | [k]   | [p]   | [d]   |  |
|            | 17.77% | 8.88%  | 4.44% | 3.33% | 2.22% | 1.11% | 1.11% |  |
| Fricatives | [ʒ]    | [z]    | [ʃ]   | [v]   | [f]   | [s]   |       |  |
|            | 66.66% | 13.33% | 8.88% | 2.22% | 1.11% | 1.11% |       |  |

|                 |                |               |                |              |              |              |              |              |
|-----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Liquid          | [R]<br>72.22%  |               |                |              |              |              |              |              |
| Semi-Consonants | [ɥ]<br>16.66%  | [j]<br>15.55% | [w]<br>1.11%   |              |              |              |              |              |
| Oral Vowels     | [œ]<br>91.11%  | [ø]<br>80%    | [ɛ]<br>6.66%   | [ə]<br>4.44% | [ɔ]<br>4.44% | [y]<br>3.33% | [u]<br>2.22% | [e]<br>2.22% |
| Nasal Vowels    | [ɔ̃]<br>34.44% | [ã]<br>25.55% | [ɛ̃]<br>24.44% |              |              |              |              |              |

In order to know the distinct phonological problems, the students had to answer the questions concerning the French vocalic system which is composed of (11) oral vowels [i], [y], [u], [e], [ɛ], [ø], [œ], [ə], [o], [ɔ], [a] and (4) nasal vowel [ɛ̃], [œ̃], [ã], [ɔ̃]. Moreover, the plosives [p], [b], [t], [d], [k], [g], [ŋ], the fricatives [f], [v], [s], [z], [ʃ], [ʒ], [l], the liquid [R] and the semi-consonants [j], [ɥ], [w] are also included in the questions.

According to table (1), most of the Myanmar students have the problems to pronounce the French words carried by the fricatives [ʒ] (66.66%), the liquid [R] (72.22%), the oral vowels [œ] (91.11%), [ø] (80%) and the nasal vowels [ɔ̃] (34.44%), [ã] (25.55%).

Table 2: Problems in syllabication, rhythm, liaison and intonation

|                   |                  |                      |                        |
|-------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Liaison<br>71.11% | Rhythm<br>62.22% | Intonation<br>12.22% | Syllabication<br>8.88% |
|-------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------------|

In Table (2), 71.11% of the students have the problem in the articulation of liaison, 62.22% in rhythm, 12.22% in intonation and 8.88% in syllabication.

Table 3: Difficulties in pronouncing final consonant sound/arresting consonant sound

| Questionnaire item  | Strongly agree | Agree  | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|----------------|--------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| Difficulties in pronouncing the final consonant sound/arresting consonant sound | -              | 18.88% | 20%     | 36.66%   | 17.77%            |

In table (3), 18.88% agreed with the difficulties in pronouncing final consonant sound/arresting consonant sound and 20% are neutral. And then, 36.66% and 17.77% of the students stated that they do not encounter the difficulties to pronounce the final consonant sound/arresting consonant sound.

Table 4: Careless in pronouncing the final consonant sound /arresting consonant sound

| Questionnaire item   | Strongly agree | Agree  | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--|----------------|--------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| Carelessness in pronouncing the final consonant sound/arresting consonant sound) | 67.77%         | 45.55% | 8.88%   | 1.11%    | -                 |

In table (4), 67.77% of the students strongly agreed and 45.55% agreed that they are careless about pronouncing the final consonant sound/arresting consonant). 8.88% are neutral and 1.11% disagreed.

Table 5: Negative influence of mother tongue on French pronunciation

| Questionnaire item  | Strongly agree | Agree  | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|----------------|--------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| Negative influence of mother tongue on French pronunciation | 7.77%          | 36.66% | 23.33%  | 11.11%   | 6.66%             |

According to table (5), 7.77% of Myanmar students strongly agreed and 37.66% agreed that mother tongue influences French negatively. However, 11.11% disagreed and 6.66% strongly disagreed with the negative influence of mother tongue on French language. 23.33% are neutral.

### Findings and Discussion

As the result of the data analysis, Table (1) shows that the difficulties encountered in pronouncing French by Myanmar students are related to phonological problems. It was found that Myanmar students have the problems to pronounce the fricative [ʒ], the liquid consonant [R], the oral vowels [œ], [ø] and the nasalized vowels [ã], [õ], [ẽ].

Concerning the difficulties in pronouncing the fricative [ʒ], it was found that [ʒ] does not exist in Myanmar fricatives. Therefore, instead of the fricative [ʒ], they pronounce Myanmar semi-consonant [j] which is also similar to pronunciation of French semi-consonant [j].

For example: French word                      correct pronunciation                      student's pronunciation  
Manger    [mãʒe]    [mãje]

Besides, as the French liquid [R] does not exist in Myanmar sound, it is difficult to pronounce and thus Myanmar students here pronounce English phoneme[r]. Moreover, it was found that the oral vowels [œ], [ø] and the nasalized vowels [ã], [õ], [ẽ] make Myanmar students difficult to articulate correctly because these sounds do not exist in Myanmar. According to the observation, when the students pronounce these French sounds presented above, it can be seen the influence of mother tongue and English pronunciation.

In this situation, it will be better to teach the students to know how organs and muscles are used to articulate the accurate pronunciation. Therefore, the teacher should explain the places of articulation and the manners of articulation to produce a sound. For example: [ʒ]. To produce the sound [ʒ], the manner of articulation involves nearly blocking the airstream and it needs to push the air through the very narrow opening. The places of articulation are the front of the tongue and hard palate. After explaining the places and the manner of articulation, the students have to pronounce several times the sounds and the words they have the problems with. And then, comparing Myanmar pronunciation and that of French and English will also be more effective.

Furthermore, another suitable approach is to choose the correct consonant, vowel, word by differentiating the sounds. The teacher writes down a consonant (or) a vowel (or) a word that the students have the difficulty and then pronounces 2 or 3 sounds which make the students confused in pronouncing. After that, the students have to choose the correct pronunciation.

In addition, listening to a word by consulting the French audio dictionary and repeating it will be also the appropriate approaches for the pronunciation problems of students. After consulting the audio dictionary, the students should record themselves pronouncing the words they have learned and reading a short paragraph and then listen to them. In order to understand the mistakes and the lack of pronunciation, the students need to hear how they speak.

According to Table (2) it can be seen that most of the students encounter the difficulties in articulation of liaison and rhythm. In this context, it is assumed that Myanmar language is tone language and thus Myanmar students are not used to articulation of liaison and rhythm. At this point, for the improvement in articulation in liaison and rhythm, the students are advised to watch French films to be capable to imitate the speech sounds and also learn body language of French speakers.

Table (3) shows that 18.88 % of the students agreed the difficulties in pronouncing final consonant/ arresting consonant. 20% are neutral. And then, 36.66% and 17.77% of the students stated that they do not encounter the difficulties to pronounce the final consonant sound/arresting consonant sound.

Besides, in table (4), it can be clearly seen that the students strongly agreed with their careless about pronouncing the final consonant sound/arresting consonant sound. Here, according to Myanmar language, it needs not to pronounce the final consonant sound/arresting consonant sound. Therefore, it can be assumed that the students have the difficulties and the carelessness of pronouncing the final consonant sound/arresting consonant sound.

| For example: French word | correct pronunciation | student's pronunciation |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| chambre<br>(room)        | [ʃābR]                | [ʃā]                    |
| plante<br>(plant)        | [plāt]                | [plā]                   |

Actually, missing to pronounce the final consonant sound/ arresting consonant sound causes misunderstanding on the meaning of the word. In this situation, when Myanmar students speak with native speakers, if they pronounce *champ*[ʃā] (field) instead of *chambre* [ʃbR] (room) native speakers will understand that it means *champ* (field). It shows that how it is important to pronounce the final arresting consonant sound of a word. Here, some words that Myanmar students produce the same pronunciation are presented.

| For example: French word | correct pronunciation | student's pronunciation |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| vie<br>(life)            | [vi]                  | [vi]                    |
| ville<br>(town)          | [vil]                 | [vi]                    |
| plante<br>(plant)        | [plāt]                | [plā]                   |
| plan<br>(plan)           | [plā]                 | [plā]                   |

However, according to the observation, although most of the students lack attention to articulate the final consonant/arresting consonant sound, when the teacher reminds them about it, they emphasize and can articulate it. Therefore, in this situation, when the students are careless to produce the final consonant/ arresting consonant sound and they neglect to pronounce it, they are asked to consult the audio dictionary and to repeat it several times. This approach will be more effective for those who neglect to articulate the arresting consonant sound.

As the statement of table (5), the students have the influence of mother tongue. At that point, the fact that the students are not familiar with pronouncing the final consonant sound/arresting consonant sound states the influence of mother tongue on French pronunciation. Moreover, certain Myanmar students have the problems in liaison and rhythm.

The different phonological systems cause the influence of Myanmar pronunciation on that of French. That is why, it can also be seen that Myanmar language negatively influences French language.

### **Conclusion**

This study intends to improve French pronunciation of Myanmar students by investigating the reasons which cause the difficulties in pronunciation. To know evidently the difficulties and the weakness of the students, and the needs in teaching methods, the teacher noted down the student's mistakes by observing class work and presentations during two academic years. Besides, the questionnaire was distributed to the second year BA students and the data were analyzed. As the result of findings, it is evidently found that most of Myanmar students have the phonological problems and difficulties in articulation of liaison and rhythm. In addition, there is the influence of mother tongue. In this context, the effective ways for Myanmar students will be suggested. Listening to the correct pronunciation from the audio dictionary and choosing the correct pronunciation by differentiating between the appropriate and inappropriate pronunciation will be the crucial approaches. Moreover, it will be efficient to repeat consonant, vowel, syllabic, rhythm, melodic schema, liaison and word several times. To record one's voice and listen it to get the right pronunciation will contribute also one of the supporting ways to teaching and learning French pronunciation for Myanmar students. Furthermore, to learn correctly the articulation of organs plays also the crucial role. Listening to French songs and watching French films to imitate the speech sounds and learning body language of French speakers will also help Myanmar students achieve the intelligible pronunciation. In conclusion, these approaches could enable Myanmar students to pronounce French accurately. Moreover, the deep linguistic study or the effective ways to learn French language for Myanmar students will be continued as the future study.

### **References**

- Cocton, M., Mérieux, R., Loiseau, Y. et Lainé, E. (2009). *Latitudes I*. Paris : DIDIER.
- Dominique ARBY, Marie-Laure CHALARON. (2010). *Les 500 exercices de phonétique*. Paris : HACHETTE.
- Department of Linguistics. (2011). *A Course in Linguistics & Phonetics for Postgraduate Students*. Yangon University of Foreign Languages.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *A dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Myat soe, Myint. "A comparative Study of vocal quality of Consonants in French and Myanmar. Yangon University of Foreign Languages; Research Journal 2019, Vol.10, No.1.
- Tun Myint, U. (2007). *Phonetics*. Yangon: Yar pyae.
- Schaetzel, K. (2009). *Teaching Pronunciation to Adult English Language Learners*. Washington, DC: CAELA Network Brief.
- YULE, G. (2006). *The Study of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### **References from Internet**

- Zahir Adam Daff-Alla Ahmed. "Difficulties Encountered by EFL Students in Learning Pronunciation: A Case Study of Sudanese Higher Secondary Schools." *International Journal of English Linguistics*; Vol.7, No.4; 2017. (Retrieved September, 2019)
- Lewis, Benny. "French Pronunciation Guide: How to Sound More Like a Native French Speaker". Retrieved September, 2019, from <https://www.Fluentin3months.com>.
- Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved September, 2019, from [https:// dictionary.cambridge.org](https://dictionary.cambridge.org).
- Collins Dictionary. Retrieved September, 2019, from [https:// www.collinsdictionary.com](https://www.collinsdictionary.com)