

**Title** – The Tug of War Between Phonetic Saliency and Language Interference:

A Case Study of English /ɹ/

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### Abstract

The English rhotic phoneme /ɹ/, as in *rain*, is a cross-linguistically rare speech sound. [ɹ] poses a great challenge for second language learners (L2 speakers) to distinguish and articulate. The challenge that [ɹ] poses to L2 speakers is influenced by language interference; an L2 speaker's native language (L1) may contain a different rhotic phoneme or lack it entirely. L2 speakers' articulatory errors can be grouped into two sub-types: [ɹ]-dropping and [ɹ]-substitution, both of which are found word-initially, word-medially, and word-finally. It is interesting to note that both sub-types of /ɹ/-variation are also found as dialectal variations. Both forms of /ɹ/-variation are found word-medially and word-finally among L1 speakers. However, word-initial /ɹ/-variation is never found. L1 speakers' lack of word-initial /ɹ/-variation suggests the importance of the word-initial position in word perception. This study examines these phenomena in light of the position-based phonetic saliency of [ɹ]: word-initial [ɹ] is most phonetically salient, followed by word-medial [ɹ], and then word-final [ɹ]. While many pedagogical methods stress word-final [ɹ] drills, this study suggests that word-initial [ɹ] poses the greatest challenge for L2 speakers. In terms of phonetic saliency, it should be the easiest for L2 speakers to learn. Nevertheless, language interference from a speaker's L1 overpowers the positional saliency of word-initial [ɹ],

hindering speech sound acquisition. Pedagogically, word-initial [ɹ] mastery is paramount. Word-initial [ɹ] drills must be emphasized more than any other position-based drills. In order to be understood by an L1 listener, an L2 speaker must pronounce word-initial [ɹ] correctly, while word-medial and word-final /ɹ/-variation do not impede word perception. This study has been conducted for the purpose of researching why [ɹ] poses such a difficulty for L2 speakers and suggesting effective pedagogical strategies for teaching [ɹ] to L2 speakers while incorporating a fuller understanding of the tension between position-based phonetic saliency and language interference.