RESEARCH TITLE

THE PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS FACED BY EFL YEMENI LEARNERS AT SANA'A UNIVERSITY, THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION AS A STUDY CASE

Dr. Ali Ali Ahmed Motair[1]   Khalid Mhamed[2]

[1] English instructor, Ministry of education, Yemen

[2] Ibn Tofail University, Morocco

Abstract

This article investigates the problems in English pronunciation experienced by EFL Yemeni learners. The main aim of the present study is to figure out the problematic sounds and the factors that cause these problems. The subjects for the study were forty students from the first and third level of the faculty of education at Sana'a university. The instrument used in this study for collecting data is interviews. The findings reveal that the participants have problems to pronounce some specific consonants. The findings also show that participants tend to insert sound vowels in English syllable to separate clusters. The findings of this study provide some pedagogical implications. It reveals that Yemeni EFL learners have problems with the pronunciation of some English consonants. Based on the findings, the study concludes that factors such as mother tongue interference and their unawareness of the Phonotactics constraints of English language contribute to the pronunciation difficulties among EFL Learners.

Key Words: English pronunciation, Yemeni EFL learners, Phonotactic constraints,

1. Introduction

Our Analysis aims at investigating the pronunciation difficulties faced by Yemeni learners of English. The recordings are seen as a case study which evaluates the speaking performance of many Yemeni students. Our case study shows that Yemeni EFL learners face many difficulties in pronouncing some English sounds appropriately and correctly. The analysis of the Yemeni learner's performance displays that the major reasons behind these difficulties stem from the mother tongue interference either by confusing sounds of both L1 and L2 or by the inexistence of those sounds in Yemeni language. Our analysis is vital because consciousness and awareness of these difficulties and their reasons would contribute and lead to a better way of managing convenient teaching and learning strategies of tackling them and promoting the Yemeni learners' speaking proficiency.

1.1.   Statement of the Problem

The problems in English pronunciation stem out among EFL Yemeni students from the fact that the sound systems of Yemeni Arabic and English are different in many ways. For instance, some English consonants are different in place and manner of articulation, while some English consonants don't exist in Yemeni Arabic system such as /v/ in "very", /p/ in "people", etc. English and Arabic phonological systems vary not only in the range of sounds used but also in the relative importance of consonants and vowels conveying meaning. While Arabic has eight vowels and diphthongs to thirty-two consonants, English has nearly about twenty-two vowels and diphthongs to twenty-four consonants. Another point to mention is that some shared consonants between the two languages differ in the manner and in the place of articulation. For example, the Arabic /t/ is dental and non-aspirated in word initial position followed by a vowel /ti:n/ while the English /t/ is alveolar and aspirated in the same position like "tea" /ti:/ (cf. Abdulwahab, 2015). Another common phenomenon is that EFL Yemeni learners insert vowels in English consonants to break clusters. A basic fact is that English has far more consonant clusters than Arabic. For example, the three-segment initial consonant clusters are entirely absent in Arabic language. EFL Arabic learners often insert short vowels in order to assist pronunciation. The onset which consists of three consonants clusters poses difficulties for EFL Yemeni Learners as their language does not allow clusters of the type CCC. Therefore, they tend to insert the front short vowel /I/ to break the hiatus. As a result, insertion is a rule governed process as all learners insert the high front vowel /I/ in monosyllabic words. For illustration, consider these examples: /sItreit/ 'straight", /sIblIt/ "split", /sItrIkt/ "strict". Dobrovolsky and Katamba (1996: 84) argue that "native speakers of any language intuitively know that certain words that come from other languages sound unusual and they often adjust the segment sequences of these words to conform to the pronunciation requirements of their own language". Al-Hattami (2000: 84) in his study states that phonological differences are "likely to create problems of pronunciation to native speakers of Arabic learning English as a foreign language". In the same vein, Salim Abu-Rabia and Simana Kehat (2004: 77) argue that "although some adult learners of a second language may attain a relatively high or even a complete mastery of the language, they do not seem to be able to get rid of their native accent".

Generally speaking, Arab learners' inefficacy in pronouncing English is supposed to be due to many factors such as the content to be studied, the methodology of teaching to be applied, nature of the English language and interference of L1 (see Mohammed abdulgalil (2018)).

It is challenging for EFL Yemeni learners to speak English with native like accent. Thus, this study aims to shed light on the problematic areas of pronunciation and to figure out the precise reasons behind these difficulties and to come up with some recommendations for EFL teachers.

1.1.   Objective of the Study

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To identify, classify and to analyze pronunciation problems made by EFL Yemeni learners at the first and third level of the faculty of education at Sana'a university.
2. To figure out the possible sources of these pronunciation problems.
3. To suggest some teaching procedures that would promote the performance of EFL Yemeni learners and teachers in learning English.

1.2.   Questions of the Study:

Trying to tap on the problem this work traces which is pronunciation problems encountered by EFL Yemeni learners, three main questions should be raised to guide this study:

1. Do Yemeni EFL learners of the first and third level of the faculty of education at Sana'a university have problems in pronouncing English correctly?
2. What are the common errors and repair strategies the EFL Yemeni learners employ?
3. What are the main factors giving rise to these pronunciation errors?

1.3.   Setting of The Study

The study was carried out in Sana'a University. There is an English department in this university. The population if the study is the first and third level students of the faculty of education. The selection of these participants is based on snowball sampling to conduct this research (Bobbie, 2005). The interviews were held in a quite classroom. The reason is to avoid any kind of distractions that could affect the recording in one way or in another. The researchers selected the accessible subjects of the study from the university of Sana'a. They were considered as a representative sample of Yemeni speakers of English and as native speakers of Yemeni Arabic language as well.

1.4.   Tool of Data Collection

The researchers rely on recordings. The reason is that samples of pronunciation can be repeated and therefore we were able to identify the pronunciation difficulties. We followed (Malin, 1994) who used recordings to investigate to what extent native speakers of Mandarin Chinese learning English as a second language could pronounce five front vowels of English. All data were collected and designed by the researchers.

2. Literature Review

Bell (1995) argues that difference between first language and second language is a

problem in learning pronunciation. As have been mentioned earlier, English has 22 vowel phonemes and 24 consonant sounds. Ajami and Hussain (2010) state that vowel sound duration is phonemic in Arabic language. With four more consonant phonemes and fourteen fewer vowel phonemes, Arabic is a consonant-heavy language, English use many more consonant clusters to form words (cf. Majeed, 1999). Celce-Murcia et all (2003:83) have discussed the strategy of epenthesis. It is the insertion of a vowel or a consonant segment within an existing string of segments. This may occur as word-internal epenthesis in words like "film" /filəm/; "please" /pəli:z/ or word external epenthesis as in "sport" /əsport/ by speakers of Arabic. Roach (2001) maintains that the English syllable coda can consist of four consonant sounds while that of Arabic has only two consonant sounds maximum to be found in paucity either such as /bInt/ "girl" (cf. Kharma and Hajjaj, 1998). Arabic language is very restrictive in combination in both the onset and coda is far less than that of English. In sum, the learners adjust the target language constraints of the first language constraint in non-casual and casual speech to meet the phonotactics patterns of their language.

According to Kharma and Hajjaj (1998), the structure of Arabic syllable consists of one consonant only in the onset. It cannot be more than one consonant phoneme, while it consists of one or two in the codas. According to Watson (2002), the following consonants /p/- /b/, /f/-/v/,/tʃ/-/dz/-/ʃ/, seem to be problematic for Arab speakers learning English. This is because of these oppositions in Arabic. As mentioned earlier, other consonants exist in Arabic, but they have different phonetic realizations. Waengler (2009) argues that although /n/ and /ŋ/ exist in Arabic, they are both allophones of the same phoneme /n/. Moreover, /ŋ/ never appears at the end of words in Arabic. As a result, Arabic speakers have a tendency to add /k/ to the end of words in /ŋ/, /stʌdiŋk/ "studying". Additionally, The other problem was the consonant sound /ð/. This sound is replaced by its plosive equivalent /d/. Therefore, words such as "their", "they", would respectively sound like 'dare', "day' (Val Baross, 2003).

In phonology, vowels are described in terms of two phonetic parameters: vowel quality and vowel quantity. Here, vowel quality refers to differences in the place of articulation of the vowels, including the position of the tongue in the vocal tract, the size of the stricture, the shape of the lips, and whether the vowel is nasalized or not. Quality differences are seen in the acoustic signal in different spectral patterns for different vowels. On the other hand, vowel quantity refers to the duration of the phonetic segment which is considered an essential part of its phonemic identity (cf. Elshek Hago and Waquar, 2015).

Elshek Hago and Waquar (ibid) state that English and Arabic are languages with phonological contrasts based on vowel quality and quantity. English is classified as a centripetal vowel system. This means that vowels have the tendency to move to the centre of the vowel space. Other languages, however, are described as a centri-fugal vowel system where vowels are located at the periphery of the acoustic space. The Arabic vowel system falls in between centripetal and centrifugal patterns. These differences along with major distinctions in vowel quality and quantity allow studies to describe English and Arabic as languages that have notably distinct vowel system.

Following Fatihi (2001), the Arabic vowels are categorized into short and long vowels. Short vowels are further divided into fatha, kasra, and damma. Fatha is indicaed by a

small diagonal stroke above the preceding consonantal speech sound. Kasra is the similar stroke below the preceding consonantal speech sound. Damma is like a miniature 'waw' above the preceding consonantal speech sound e.g short vowels "i, u, a" and long vowels "i:, u:, a:" (see also Salemh and Abu-Melhim, 2014).

Generally speaking, many researches in the field of SLA discussed the factors that cease achieving native like pronunciation among EFL learners in general and among EFL Yemeni learners in particular (O'Connor, 2003; Yule 2003). Many researchers have pointed out that some main linguistic factors such as the mother tongue interference, the differences of sound system between the L1 and the L2 and the inconsistency of some sounds in English language. As we have been mentioned earlier, many studies have been conducted on the influence on L1 in learning English language (Catford, 1977; Moosa, 1979, Smith (2001). They all pointed out that /p/ and /b/ phonemes are two different consonants and each one is distinguished by English native speakers. However, the situation is different in Arabic. There is only the phoneme /b/ and that is the reason why most Arabic speakers mispronounce words with the phoneme /p/. Brown (2002) finds that second language learners meet some difficulties because their L1 affects their L2 especially in adulthood, and this effect is a result of L1 transfer. Ladefoged (2001), Carter and Nunan (2001) show that mother tongue has clear influence on learning L2 pronunciation. Where L1 and L2 rules are in conflict, therefore errors are expected to be committed by EFL learners. Another issue is that sound system differences between L1 and L2. Moosa (1972) noted that Arab learners of English form habits of their mother tongue, so they strongly build the phonological features of Arabic. As a result, this makes them encounter many difficulties in distinguishing sound systems between their native language and the second language.

The differences between L1 and L2 sound systems are seen as a barrier against reaching native like pronunciation. The reason is that the new sound still remains strange for organs of speech. However, this difficulty is expected to be solved after a long time of regular practice and hard work. Another issue is the inconsistency of English vowels. One of the important problems faced by the Arab students of English in general and EFL Yemeni students in particular is that each English vowel has more than just one pronunciation. O'Connor (2003) reports that it is not simple to know the exact sounds the letters stand for or represent in a certain word. For example, in words women /wimin/, busy /bizi/, pretty /briti/, village /vilidʒ/, the letters e,a,o,u,y all of them stand for the same vowel sound /i/. He adds that in words like banana /bən:nə/, bather /beiðər/, man /mæn/ the sound "a" stands for five different vowels sound. As a result, the learners who do not have sufficient knowledge of different pronunciation of the vowels face some problems.

3. **Findings:**

The difficulties in English pronunciation arise amongst EFL Arab students from the fact that the sound systems of Arabic and English are different in many aspects. As a common fact that English consonant sounds are different in number, as well as in place and manner of articulation. Some English consonants do not exist in the Arabic sound system like /p/, /ŋ/. The difficulties in English pronunciation arise amongst EFL Arab students from the fact that the sound systems of Arabic and English are different in many aspects.

As we have been mentioned, the difficulties in pronunciation emerge amongst EFL Yemeni students from the verity that sounds systems of Yemeni Arabic and English are different in many ways. First, as a well-known fact, the English consonant sounds are different in number, as well as in place and manner of articulation. English language contains 24 consonants, while Arabic, and therefore, Yemeni Arabic contains 28 consonants. Hence, some English consonants do not exist in The Yemeni Arabic system such as /v/, /p/, /ŋ/. Following Rogerson-Revell (2011), the Arabic /t/ and /k/ are not identical with their English counterparts. He states that they are different in the manner and in the place of articulation. Moreover, he argues that the English /t/ is alveolar and aspirated in word initial position followed by a vowel like "time" /taim/, while the Arabic /t/ is dental and non-aspirated in the same word position.

3. 1. Insertion of vowels:

EFL Yemeni learners insert vowels between two clusters. The cause why the learners have a strong desire to insert vowel sounds to break up the consonant clusters is in order to harmonize with the pronunciation requirements of Yemeni Arabic (henceforth, YA), and therefore comes out with unacceptable consonant sequences in English syllables. For example, Yemeni learners of English insert vowel sounds in two syllable-initial consonants e.g. "speak"/spi:k/ becomes /ispi:k/, and three syllable – initial consonants clusters e.g. "strategy" /strætədʒi/ becomes /istirætədʒi / or /sitrætədʒi /. The syllable medial consonant clusters e.g., anxious /æŋkʃəs/ becomes /æŋikʃəs/. The syllable final consonant clusters made up of three clusters e.g., acted /ækt/ becomes /ækid/.

3.2. Problems with /r/

The /r/ is classified as an approximant, palate-alveolar sound. In YA, the /r/ exists, but it is Sometimes pronounced as a trill. The approximant sound is unfamiliar to Yemeni learners, and as a result they have the tendency to pronounce it the same way they produce it in YA.

3.3. Problems with /dʒ/

It is clear that Yemeni EFL learners have difficulties with the sound /dʒ/. The /dʒ/ sound in Arabic is a cluster of /d/ sound and /ʒ/ and never pronounced together as one diphthong sound as in English. In YA, the sound /dʒ/ is replaced by /ʒ/, such as "job" would respectively sound like /ʒa:b/. Generally speaking, Many learners mispronounce the /dʒ/ sound as /ʒ/ , most learners pronounce the word 'just' as /ʒʌst/. This difficulty is subject to fossilization. If learners do not recognize this from the early stages, they will find difficulty to avoid it later.

3. 4. Problems with /ð/

Another problem that is revealed by the case study above is the sound /ð/. This sound is replaced by its plosive equivalent /d/. Thus, words such as "they", "then", "that", "the", "them", "thing", would respectively sound like /dei/, /den/, /dæt/, /di:/, /dem/, ect.

3.5. Problems with /P/ vs /b/ and /f/ vs /v/

Zimmermann (2004) comes with the table of words using the minimal pairs /b/ and /p/

explaining that Arabic does not exhibit the voiceless stop consonant /p/, whereas English does. Hence, the EFL Yemeni learners face some difficulties because certain phonemic segments, as we have been mentioned earlier, encountered in English are not found in Yemeni Arabic. For instance, the English language has two distinctive sounds /p/ and /b/, whereas YA has only the sound /b/. There are some examples which illustrate these consonant sounds, /bi:pl/ for /pi:pl/ "people", /bræktis/ for /præktis/ "practice", /əbinjən/ for /əpinjən/ "opinion", and so forth. Similarly, Smith (2007, p. 197) explains the minimal pairs /f/ and /v/, he argues that the Arabic language does not exhibit the phoneme /v/, but unlike the /p/ case, Arabic does not exhibit the voiced phoneme. In our case study, the EFL Yemeni speakers pronounce the /f/ sound instead of the /v/ sound; for example, pronouncing /feri/ for /veri/ "very". Therefore, these unintelligible sounds cause barriers and boundaries to effective communication amongst EFL Yemeni learners.

4. Conclusion

EFL learners are confronted with a lot of problems that negatively affect mastering English skills (Sadisghi and Dastpark, 2017). The results of this study reveal that the participants made a variety of errors in pronouncing certain English phonemes. We come up with a result that native language influences one's English pronunciation. Another factor is the lack of listening practicing. Some of EFL Yemeni learners do not use the various kinds of audio and video aids to improve their speaking skill.

5. Pedagogical Implications

This part attempts to suggest some pedagogical solutions to help cater for pronunciation difficulties that EFL Yemeni learners face as well as to provide some tips for teachers. First, EFL teachers should have extensive phonology and phonetics courses in order to raise their awareness of the English phonetic system. Teachers also need to be trained in ICT in order to use different kinds of technology tools in an effective way. Students need to listen to a proper pronunciation input especially in early stages of learning. More attention should be given to IPA so as to equip learners with necessary knowledge to look at the phonetic transcription of words and therefore, to promote pronunciation. Moreover, listening to native speakers on YouTube helps to ameliorate the listening skills and result in promoting good pronunciation. Teachers can suggest a variety of interesting activities to raise pronunciation awareness such as presentations, posts descriptions, interviews, having situational dialogues and discussions in or outside classroom.

References:

Abdulghani M.A. Al-Shuaibi. (2009). Phonological Analysis of English Phonotactics of Syllable Initial and Final Consonant Clusters by Yemeni Speakers of English.

Abdulwaahab, H.A. (2015) Difficulty of English Pronunciation Encountered by Saudi Learners, unpublished M.A thesis, Open University of Sudan, Khartoum, Sudan.

AbiSamra, Nada. An Analysis of Errors in Arabic Speakers' English Writings. American University of Beirut. Beirut, 2003.

Al-Hottaami. A. A.D (2000). A phonetic and phonological study of consonant of English and Arabic. MED Thesis. Hodeida university.

Australian Government (1918). English and a New Language: English Pronunciation for Arab Speakers.

Babbie, E. (2005) The Basics of Social Research (3rd ed). Chapman University Canada.

Bell. J. S. (1905) The Relationship between L1 and L2 Literacy: same complicating factors. TESOL Quarterly,29(4), 687-104.

Celce-Murcia.M. Briton.D and Goodwin, J. (1996). Teaching Pronunciation: A Reference for Teachers of English to Speakers of L2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Corner, J.D. (2003) Better English Pronunciation (2nd ed.) Cambridge University Press.

Dobrovlsky and Katamba. (1996) Phonology: The Function and Pottering of Sounds in. w. Obrody (Ed). Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction. Edinburgh: Copp Clark Pitmon.

El Shekh Hago. O. and Waquar. K.(2015). The Pronunciation Problems Faced by Suadi EFL learnersof Secondary Schools. Taibah University, KSA.

Khalid.M.2017. Some Dissimilatory processes in Dades Tamazight: An OT Approach. MA; Ibn Tofail University Morocco.

Lode Foged, P. (2001). A course in Phonetics, 4th ed. Heinle and Heinle. Los Angles: university of California.

Majeed, 2. (1999). English phonetics and phonology for Arab students, (leeds,UK).

Mohammed Abdulgalil Abugohar*, (2018). Difficulties Encountered by Arab Students in Pronouncing English Correctly. Faculty of Languages and Communication, Sultan Zainal Abidin University, Kuala Nerus, Terengganu, Malaysia.

Moosa, M. H (1979). Difficulties of fearing the pronunciation and structural differences between Arabic and English. MA Dissertation, Library of Saudi Arabia, Educational Mission, Texas.

Moair A A. (2014). The syntax of *kalla* in Classical Arabic. Unpublished MA Thesis; Cadi Ayad University, Morocco.

Rababah, G. (2003). Communication Problems facing Arab Learners of English: A Personal perspective. TEFL Web Journal. Vol 2. No 1.

Sadighi, F., & Dastpak, M. (2017). The sources of foreign language speaking anxiety of Iranian English language learners. International Journal of Education & Literary Studies, 5(4), 11-115.

Sahu, R. (1999). Improving English Language Competence of Yemeni Learners. Yemen times. Selinker, L. (1969). Language transfer. General Linguistics, 9, 67-92.

Swan, M, and Smith, B. (2001). Learner English: A Teacher Guide to Interference and Other Problems. (Cambridge: Cambridge university press).

Yule, G. (2003). The Study of Language (2nd ed.). Cambridge University press.