

FACTORS THAT AFFECT ARAB EFL LEARNERS' ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

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Abstract

Majority of Arab EFL students reach the university with generally poor English and bad pronunciation in particular. Students in Arab countries have little opportunities to speak English where Arabic is their native language. Since correct pronunciation is very important to avoid misunderstanding when communicating with others and to build self-confidence when trying to speak in front of other people, the current paper investigates the reasons for Arab EFL students to face problems in English pronunciation. The participants were 10 Preparatory Intensive English (PIE) students of University Malaysia Pahang (UMP). Using an in-depth qualitative methodology which is individual interviews, all interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The participants were undergraduate Arab EFL students who completed their high school and they do not have exposure to English language. All recorded interviews were analyzed manually. From the data analyzed some emergent themes were found. For instance, students confessed that the lack of using media such as listening to English songs and watching English news and movies affected their pronunciation competence. Furthermore, little emphasis on English pronunciation in formal classroom also contributes to students' mispronunciation in English language. It was claimed that teachers do not correct students' mispronunciation and there were no pronunciation activities conducted inside classrooms. Moreover, some social factors affect the students' ability to speak in English with correct pronunciation, for instance, they speak English just inside the class during their lectures but whenever they leave their class, they use their own mother tongue. This paper attempts to shed some light on the impediments that Arab EFL students face in English pronunciation and to give recommendations on Pronunciation Language Strategies (PLS) that could be applied by the students to improve their English language pronunciation. Some other pedagogical recommendations are also included.

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Introduction

Importance of Teaching English Pronunciation

Since pronunciation has become well-known as an essential part for language learners (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Rossiter, Derwing, Manimtim, & Thomson, 2010), the process of teaching and learning pronunciation should be paid more attention by both teachers and learners whether English is learnt as a foreign language or as a second language, (Ha, 2013). Yet teaching English pronunciation is granted the least attention in the classroom Abbas (2011). Many learners rank pronunciation one of the most difficult aspects in acquiring English. Moreover, “the process of learning English is interconnected” (Varasarin, 2007, p.11), which means that the acquirement of one language aspect might be a support for mastering other aspects. For instance, according to Gilbert (1984), the improvement in English pronunciation is of great importance to enhance students’ listening and speaking skills.

The process of teaching and learning pronunciation should be paid more attention by both teachers and learners whether English is learnt as a foreign language or as a second language, (Ha, 2013). Many people around the world have strong desire to learn and speak English with correct pronunciation since an English learner with a limited pronunciation performance may lose his self-confidence in social interactions, which “negatively affects estimations of a speaker’s credibility and abilities” (Gilakjani, 2012, p. 119). In other words, learners with good English pronunciation tend to be understood despite their grammatical mistakes in the speech. In contrast, good knowledge of English grammar is not an insurance of intelligibility, meaning “how much of the speech is actually understood by interlocutors” (Munro, 2011, p.9).

Majority of Arab EFL students reach the university with generally poor English and bad pronunciation in particular. Students in Arab countries have little opportunities to speak English where Arabic is their native language.

Pronunciation includes the segmental and suprasegmental features of the language. The segments are the sounds of the consonants and vowels that are known as phonemes. While suprasegmental aspects concentrate on intonation, stress, and timing. How much time is allotted in class for pronunciation activities is left to the concern of the language teachers who are rather focusing on teaching the skills and sub-skills of English, the

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target language. The various features that make up the production of sounds in English are illustrated in figure 1. 1.

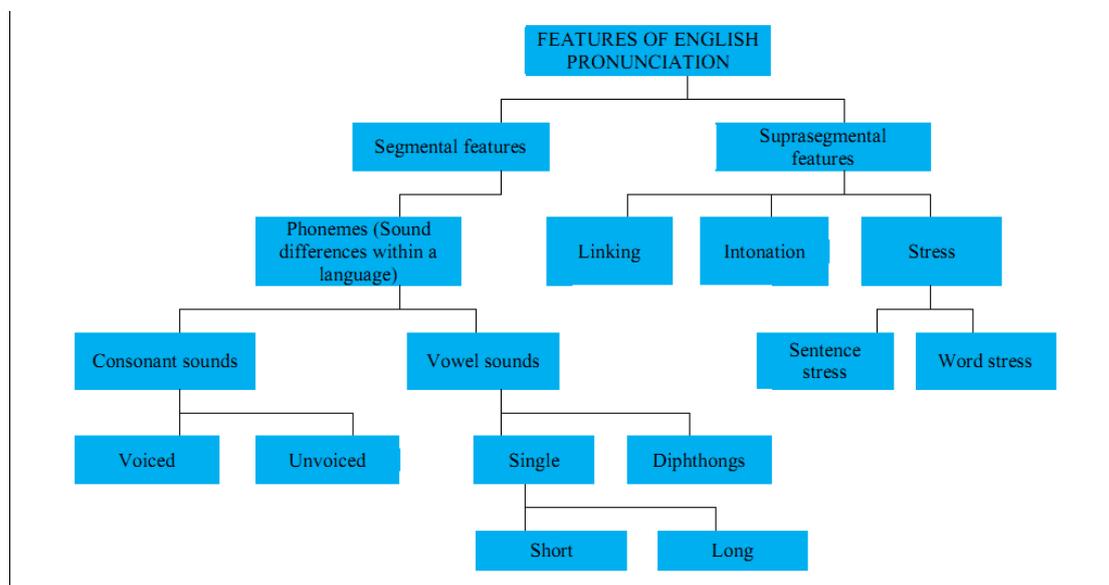


Figure 1.1 Various Features of English Pronunciation adapted from Gilakjani (2012)

Purpose of the Study

The current paper aims to investigate the reasons for Arab EFL learners to face problems in English pronunciation. It is significant to find out the factors that affect the learning of English pronunciation among Arab EFL learners and much and very important to find effective learning strategies and solution to overcome these problems. Mispronunciation is an important issue facing many Arab EFL learners in different Arab countries. If this kind of problem can be overcome, Arab EFL learners will be able to pronounce words correctly and will avoid misunderstanding by others. This study provides some recommendations on Pronunciation Language Strategies (PLS) that could be applied by the students to improve their English language pronunciation. Some other pedagogical recommendations are also included.

Literature Review

This area discusses previous studies on learning and teaching pronunciation.

Factors Affecting Pronunciation

There are many factors that influence the pronunciation of the target language L2 learners. These factors are the first language L1 interference by interference of mother

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language, learner's attitude, learner's age, earlier pronunciation instruction, and the inadequate language knowledge of English phonetics and phonology. Influence of L2 in learning English language, most researchers agree that the learner's first language influences the pronunciation of the target language and is an important factor in acquiring foreign accents Zhang and Yin (2009). Catford (1977) and Swan; Smith (2001) stated that /b/ and /p/ sounds are two different phonemes and each one is distinguished by a native speaker. In Arabic Language, the situation is totally different; because the phoneme /p/ is not existed in the Arabic system while there is only phoneme /b/ for this reason; most Arabic speakers mispronounce words with these distinctive sounds /p/ and /b/. The main reason for shifting /p/ to /b/ is the fact that the two sounds are regarded as two allophones of one phoneme (Hassa, 2014).

Learners' Attitude and motivation

Another factor that can influence achievement in pronunciation is the attitude towards the target language learning. Many researchers claimed that working on pronunciation should be tied in with individual's attitude, value set and socio-schemata (Pennington, 1994).

In his study on pronunciation accuracy of university students studying intermediate Spanish as a foreign language, Elliot (1995) found that the participants' attitude towards learning native or near-native pronunciation was the principal variable in relation to target language pronunciation. In other words, if the students were more concerned about their pronunciation of the target language, they tended to have better pronunciation of the target allophones (Elliot, 1995). The result of this study echoed a previous research conducted by Suter (1976), in which he found that students who were —more concerned about their pronunciation (p.249) had better pronunciation of English as a Second Language (Elliot, 1995). Along with the attitude factor at acquiring a new language, the learner's motivation for learning the language determines whether the learner will develop native-like pronunciation.

A number of research found that having a personal or professional goal for learning English can influence the need and desire for native-like pronunciation (Marinova-Todd et al., 2000; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Bernaus, Masgoret, Gardner, & Reyes, 2004; Gatbonton et al., 2005). Marinova- Todd et al. (2000) in his study of adult acquisition of English, found that if the adults are motivated they can become highly proficient, even native- like speakers of second language.

Learner's Age

An additional factor that affects the pronunciation is age. The debate over the impact of age on language acquisition and specifically on pronunciation is varied. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) and Florez (1998) explore the impact of age on pronunciation. Some researchers argue that, after puberty, lateralization (the assigning of linguistic functions to the different brain hemisphere) is completed and adults' ability to distinguish and produce native-like sounds is more limited than children. Others argue that various sensitive periods for language learning exist and that "adults need to re-adjust existing neural networks to accommodate new sounds" (Florez, 1998, p.1). Many scholars nominate children to acquire accent very quickly and are better than adults in learning English. Considering the age of the children as a major factor in the process of language acquisition; which means, younger learners are much better than adults in acquiring a new language (Abello-Contesse, 2009). He indicated that according to the learners' age, they vary in acquiring language skills. However many still asking the question; Why is it that younger learners are better to learn the foreign language? The only significant reason is that, younger learners are able to learn the sound system more effectively, while the learning process of adult learners may be more likely to be hindered because of their age (Zhang and Yin, 2009).

Prior Pronunciation Instruction

Instructions in foreign language focus in general on four main areas: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The curricula in foreign languages introduce pronunciation in the first year of study as the target language's alphabet and sound system, but rarely continue this focus past the introductory level (Elliot, Harlow & Muyskens, 1994). Lack of emphasis on pronunciation development may be due to a general lack of fervor on the part of the second language acquisition researchers, second language teachers and students, that pronunciation of a second language is not very important (Tarone, 1978). Additionally, Pennington and Richards (1986) maintain that pronunciation, which is typically viewed as a component of linguistic rather than conversational fluency, is often regarded with little importance in a communicatively oriented classroom (Elliot, 1995). According to Elliot (1995), teachers tend to view pronunciation as the least useful of the basic language skills and therefore they generally sacrifice teaching pronunciation in order to spend valuable class time on other areas of language. Or maybe, teachers feel justified neglecting pronunciation believing that for adult foreign language learners, it is more difficult to attain target language pronunciation skills than other facets of second language acquisition. Possibly, teachers just do not have the background or tools to properly teach pronunciation and therefore it is disregarded

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(Elliot, 1995).

Traditionally, teachers have taught what they thought was pronunciation via repetition drills on both a discrete word or phrase level, or give the students the rules of pronunciation like the vowel in a CVC pattern, when given an *e* at the end, says its name. For example, when an *e* is added to the word *bit* (CVC) the pronunciation of the “short i”, becomes long and therefore “says its name”. This type of instruction is meant to help students with decoding words for the purpose of reading rather than pronunciation. This type of instruction is meant to help students with decoding words for the purpose of reading, rather than pronunciation. For example, students are rarely given information about the differences between fricatives and non-fricative continuants, or the subtleties between the trilled or flapped /r/ between 29 Spanish and English (Elliot, 1995). This particular information is often left up to the students to attain on their own.

Researchers have explored the question of whether explicit instruction helps these second language learners. Such studies have generated inconsistent results. Suter (1976) reported an insignificant relationship between formal pronunciation and students’ pronunciation of English as a Second Language. Murakawa (1981) found that, with 12 weeks of phonetic instruction, adult L2 learners of English can improve their allophonic articulation. Nuefield and Scheiderman (1980) reported that adults are able to achieve near native fluency and it can be developed in a relatively short time without serious disruption to the second language teaching program with adequate pronunciation instruction (Elliot, 1995). It is necessary to note at this point that even though there seems to be quite a contradiction in the range of results presented, the diversity of those results may be due to the differing designs of the particular experiments.

Some pronunciation studies focus specifically on the instruction of suprasegmentals. Derwing, Munro and Wiebe (1997) conducted research in which ESL learners, who had been studying for an average of ten years, participated in a speaking improvement course that focused on the suprasegmental features of pronunciation (e.g. stress, rhythm, intonation). Thirty-seven native listeners transcribed speech samples (true/false sentences) taken at the beginning of a 12-week course in order to assess the learners’ intelligibility. Each sample was rated in order of comprehensibility and degree of accentedness. In the end, there was a significant improvement in the intelligibility, and better ratings over time of comprehensibility and accentedness. They showed that long-30 term language learners could alter their pronunciation in a reading task (Derwing & FACTORS THAT AFFECT ARAB EFL LEARNERS’ ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION Fatima Ali Salah Lardhi, Noor Raha Mohd Radzuan, Abdelmadjid Benraghda

Rossiter, 2003).

Pronunciation Learning Strategies (PLS)

Acquiring English pronunciation was considered as a very difficult skill by many adult learners; therefore, they need the help of the teachers as well as pronunciation practice in L2 classes (Fang, 2012).

In the last three decades, the language learning strategies (LLS) have been widely utilized to improve the learners' English skills and sub-skills in ESL classrooms; however, LLS were not mostly used to improve the pronunciation of the learners in the target language (Eckstein, 2007). On the contrary, a few researches have been done to study the pronunciation of speakers of English as a foreign language (Martínez, 1995).

Oxford (1990) has developed taxonomy for pronunciation learning strategies (PLS) aiming at helping learners improve proper pronunciation of L2. This taxonomy was classified into two groups: the direct and the indirect strategies. The direct strategies involve memory strategies (Representing sounds in memory such as remembering words by making auditory rather than visual representations of sounds), cognitive strategies (including actions that are directly involved in studying and practicing the target language pronunciation such as repeating after the teacher), and compensation strategies (helping facial muscles to become accustomed to moving in new ways to accommodate the target language pronunciation by producing approximate sounds). On the other hand, the indirect strategies, include the affective strategies (evaluating one's own pronunciation by praising oneself for correct pronunciation), metacognitive strategies (searching for practice and trying new sounds), and social strategies (practicing with others and correcting others' pronunciation mistakes).

To Oxford (1990), the two most frequently utilized strategies are the cognitive from the direct group and the metacognitive strategies pertaining to the indirect category. Recently, many conducted studies have used Oxford's taxonomy of PLS to examine pronunciation in L2 classes (Pawlak, 2010; Eckstein, 2007).

Methodology

This section of the paper focuses on the research design and provides descriptions of the participants involved, instruments utilized and procedures performed in the study. One research instrument was employed and the processes involved are detailed in the sub-sections below.

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Respondents

The present study was conducted at Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP), Malaysia. The participants of this study were 10 UMP undergraduate Arab EFL students enrolled in the Preparatory Intensive English (PIE) which is an English language course offered by Centre for Modern Languages and Human Sciences (CMHLS). It provides a foundation course for international students with low English proficiency level. The program covers reading, writing, speaking, listening and grammar. All the participants were from different Arab countries such as Tunisia, Sudan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. The latter do not have any exposure to English language.

Instrument

The current study used the qualitative research approach where the main instrument utilized in this study to collect data was an individual interviews protocol. A semi-structured interview was carried out to identify the mispronunciation among Arab EFL learners, the reasons that hinder their correct pronunciation and the factors that influence their learning of English pronunciation. Random sampling method was used to choose the 10 respondents. The interview in the study consists of 8 questions. After the interviewees gave the consent to record their voice, all interviews were audio-recorded. Each interview lasted for 10-15 minutes.

Data Analysis

All the transcribed interviews were analyzed manually. From the data analysis, there were several emergent themes like the lack of using media to improve English pronunciation, little emphasis on English pronunciation in formal class rooms and lack of pronunciation activities inside the class rooms. Coding has been given to each interviewee. For instance, I1 refers to Interviewee number one, and I2 refers to interviewee number two.

Findings and Discussion

Findings of the current study revealed that Arab EFL learners encounter many problems in learning English pronunciation especially with unfamiliar sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue. From the interviews, the respondents confessed that the lack of using media such as listening to English songs, watching English news and movies affected their pronunciation competence. For example, I3, I5 and I7 mentioned that they do not neither listen to English songs nor watching English movies which potentially improve their pronunciations when they hearing the correct pronunciation from native speakers. For instance, little emphasis on English pronunciation in formal classroom

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also contributes to students' mispronunciation in English language. It was claimed that teachers do not correct students' mispronunciation and there were no pronunciation activities conducted inside classrooms, I1, I3 and I8 claimed that when they traveled to foreign countries, most of the time they could not be understood by others due to their wrong pronunciation which had been ignored by their teachers in the school. Moreover, some social factors affect the students' ability to speak in English with correct pronunciation, for instance, they speak English just inside the class during their lectures but whenever they leave their class, they use their own mother tongue, I6 said that "I just speak English inside my class only, because I don't care about English and I don't take it seriously, I just care about my marks", likewise I7 said " In our society we speak Arabic all the time, inside class our opportunity to speak is very little, so we use our mother tongue to speak with our friends".

Majority of Arab EFL learners confessed that they noticed some improvements in their English pronunciation when they joined English courses at some institutes while those who did not join any institutes they noted that their English pronunciation was very bad since there was no strong base in their English curriculum. Arab EFL learners showed their willing to have pronunciation classes in their English curricula at least once a week, they blame their teachers for not correcting their wrong pronunciation during their classes, so the problems continued with them until they graduate from the school.

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Limitation

There will be some limitations of this study in terms of certain features in how it will be conducted. The first limitation is the respondents of the study. It is only limited to the Arab EFL students who are in the first level of Preparatory Intensive English (PIE) course. Furthermore, the second limitation is the sample size. The size of the sample in this study is 10 PIE Arab EFL learners. The third limitation is the place where this study is conducted. The interviewees of this study are from Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP). The sample of this research cannot represent the overall population of EFL Arab students because they derive from different academic backgrounds and settings of the Arab context.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of the research, some suggestions and strategies are given below which may help students and teachers in reducing students' difficulties in pronunciation.

- Students should be taught phonetics and phonology in their earlier stage of studying English.
- Students should be provided with more pronunciation practices to improve their pronunciation performances.
- Special attention should be paid to the unfamiliar sounds (which do not exist in the learners' mother tongue).
- Students should be asked to read aloud the text with the teacher's support. If the student commits any mistakes while reading aloud, the teacher should correct.
- Students should be given enough instructions or opportunities to learn pronunciation within English language courses.
- Students should be encouraged to watch some English programs on TV or other visual media, such as BBC English, CNN, etc.
- Students should use the pronunciation learning strategies (PLS) to help them in improving their pronunciation.

Conclusion

The present study has investigated the English mispronunciation that occurs among UMP Arab undergraduates, the reasons that hinder the correct pronunciation and the factors that contribute to the mispronunciation. The findings of this study point out the importance of teaching pronunciation in schools and increase the teachers' awareness of English phonetic system. Since teachers are the first source of input for the students, they must have strong phonetics and phonology base as the students can acquire proper pronunciation from them.

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