

Pronunciation Errors Identified in the Classroom Lectures of Arab and non-Arab EFL Instructors at Jazan University

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Abstract

This paper is an investigation into the pronunciation errors made by Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors at Jazan University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Data was collected from 60 male instructors and the method used to collect such data was the classroom observations conducted by the researcher in the academic year 2011-2012. Findings reveal that certain pronunciation peculiarities were detected in the oral performance of Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors. To illustrate, articulating the English consonant clusters, especially the ones that do not exist in Modern Standard Arabic, are considered problematic for some of the Arab EFL instructors. Monophthongization is the process that some Arab EFL instructors employed to articulate some of the English diphthongs. Likewise, defective pronunciation of certain English vowels and consonants was also identified in the language production of some non-Arab EFL instructors speaking Hindi, Urdu and Bengali, South Asian languages, as their L1s. The paper concludes with some recommendations and suggestions to improve English Language Education at the tertiary level in KSA.

Keywords: second language acquisition, pronunciation errors, nonnative EFL instructors, Saudi EFL learners

1.0 Introduction

Undoubtedly, fluency and accuracy in English are considered fundamental factors for teaching English as a foreign language. Fluency necessarily means that nonnative instructors teaching English as a foreign language should have the ability to communicate and convey their ideas easily and competently to their audiences. Accuracy, on the other hand, has to do with the ability of EFL instructors to not only create grammatically correct sentences but also to articulate English sounds relatively accurately. Further, Jenkins (1998) asserts that

All teachers, native and nonnative, will need to be well educated in the three core phonological areas, i.e. sounds, nuclear stress, and articulatory setting. They will need a thorough grounding in how and where sounds and stress are produced, in the rules for elision as they relate to acceptable and non-acceptable consonant deletion, and in the nuclear placement system. They will also need to be well informed as to how their learners do these things in their L1s, so that they can introduce contrastive work into the classroom as a means of enhancing productive competence. (p.125)

Apparently the purpose of the present paper is to shed light on the importance of accuracy in producing the sounds of English in the foreign language context. Its ultimate goal is to provide some insight into the pronunciation peculiarities of Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors at Jazan University (henceforth JU). The EFL instructors in question are PhD and MA holders, majoring in Linguistics, Literature and TESOL. Coming from different language backgrounds, their pronunciation of English is likely to exhibit certain idiosyncrasies.

The pronunciation problems of the recruited nonnative English instructors in KSA and in other similar contexts inevitably affect the clarity of their oral performance and eventually their communication with the learners. Arab learners of English in general and Saudi learners in particular join college with low proficiency levels in English and this might be due to the fact that their pre-college language education is not up to the mark. In fact, the majority of the learners can hardly utter or write a few sentences in English, yet they, strangely enough, pass their high school English exams. To avoid making this situation worse, the difficulties faced by these learners should be tackled by qualified EFL instructors, who are able to deal with the language problems encountered by these learners. In other words, if the sounds of English are not produced reasonably accurately by EFL instructors, learners might end up making the same errors made by their teachers. Thus, this paper stresses the importance of pronunciation accuracy in teaching English as a foreign language to Arab learners of English.

2.0 Literature Review

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), developed by Lado (1957), received considerable attention in the sixties and early seventies and aimed to identify and explain why L2 learners make certain errors. The ultimate goal of CAH was to make certain predictions about the phonological, syntactic, lexical and morphological errors that L2 learners make. According to Gass and Selinker (1994), CAH basically postulates that elements that are similar in L1 and L2 would be easy to learn, and those that are dissimilar would be difficult to learn. In short, contrastive analysis is a way of comparing and contrasting languages in order to determine potential errors that L2 learners are liable to make. Put differently, the ultimate goal of contrastive analysis studies was to predict areas that would

be either easy or difficult to learn. According to CAH, pedagogical decisions ought to be made so as to deal with the difficulties encountered by L2 learners.

Failure of CAH to make accurate predictions about the errors made by L2 learners led to the emergence of Error Analysis (EA). EA focuses on the erroneous use of the second/foreign language made by L2 learners. It is those errors that give a significantly clear idea about the evolving language system that L2 learners develop. That is to say, a thorough examination of the errors made by L2 learners assists language teachers and practitioners in describing and explaining the language-related errors or deviations made by L2 learners. Based on such systematic descriptions and explanations of learner language, suggestions and remedial work as to how to deal with these L2 problems could be pointed out (Corder, 1967; Gass and Selinker, 1994). The following section is meant to briefly touch on *Inter-language*, a term widely used in SLA research.

Inter-language is a term that refers to the language system that is created by L2 learners. Gass & Selinker (1994) assert that "the basic assumption in SLA research is that learners create a language system known as inter-language (IL). This system is composed of numerous elements, not the least of which are elements from the NL and the TL" (p. 11). Furthermore, Crystal (1997, p.200) defines the term as "the linguistic SYSTEM created by someone in the course of learning a foreign LANGUAGE, different from either the speaker's first language or the target language to be acquired."

Briefly outlined above are the main tenets of CAH, EA and IL, respectively. It is generally agreed that acquiring native like or even near native competence in English is only possible for a handful of learners. Such successful learners of English usually begin learning English at an early age,

before puberty. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) point out that these successful learners tend to have a high aptitude for learning languages in addition to their being motivated and notably extroverted. Therefore, the language acquisition process for those instructors will never end and there will always be something new to learn about this very dynamic language. Learning English as a foreign language is a lifelong process, in other words.

Given the fact that this paper is mainly concerned with the pronunciation deviations detected in the language produced by Arab EFL instructors at JU, the section to follow sheds light on the phonological problems encountered by Arab EFL learners. It is devoted to briefly discussing some of the studies that have dealt with the phonological problems faced by Arab learners of English.

To begin with, Al-Saidat (2010) conducted a study which essentially aimed to examine the pronunciation difficulties encountered by 20 Ammani speakers of Jordanian Arabic majoring in English and Literature at two public universities. Results of this study revealed that the major problem faced by these Arab learners of English was the insertion of 'anaptyctic' vowel in the onset as well as in the coda of certain English syllables. According to Al-Saidat (2010), the major source of 'declusterization' processes is the learners' mother tongue.

In a similar vein, Al-Shuaibi (2009) looked into the inter-language of 30 Yemeni learners of English as a foreign language. He found that the learners had difficulty in articulating English initial consonant clusters having three members and final consonant clusters of three and four members. The processes utilized by these Yemeni learners of English to simplify such clusters, he ascertained, are reduction, substitution and deletion.

In an attempt to find out about the phonological difficulties that Arab learners of English face, Kharma & Hajjaj (1989) (as cited in Al-Saidat, 2010, p.124) pinpointed four areas of difficulty. As far as vowels are concerned, two areas of difficulty are identified. First, certain diphthongs get replaced by other sounds due to mother tongue interference, for instance, /ʊə/ → /u:/; /ɪə/ → /ɪ:/; /əʊ/ → /ɔ:/ and /eə/ → /eɪ/. Second, learners faced some difficulty distinguishing between certain pairs of vowels such as /ɪ/ and /e/ as in bit and bet; /ʌ/ and /ɒ/ as in hut and hot; /əʊ/ and /ɔ:/ as in goat and caught. As far as consonants are concerned, attention was concentrated on two crucial issues. First, certain pairs can be problematic for learners such as /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ as in cheap and sheep; /v/ and /f/ as in fast and vast; /s/ and /θ/ as in sin and thin. Second, learners have the tendency to insert a short vowel to simplify the long consonant clusters that do not seem to exist in the sound system of their L1.

Likewise, Tushyeh (1996) investigated errors made by Arab learners of English. At the phonological level, the following pairs: /p/ and /b/, /f/ and /v/, and /ɪ/ and /e/ were rather problematic for these learners as they failed to distinguish between them. Furthermore, Wahba's (1998) study focused on problems encountered by Egyptian learners of English as a foreign language and came to the conclusion that certain phonological errors are related to some prosodic factors such as stress and intonation. These errors, he argued, are inter-lingual ones and are triggered by the phonological differences between English and Arabic.

A similar study was conducted by Alaha (1995) in which he investigated the problems encountered by Saudi students learning English pronunciation. The participants in this study began learning English at the age of 13. And the data was gathered by tape-recording and analyzing the verbally produced language of the participants in different situations. As for

consonants, he found that the participants encountered problems with some pairs of consonant sounds (/tʃ/ and /ʃ/ as in chop and shop; /v/ and /f/ as in van and fan; /p/ and /b/ as in pig and big).

Keeping in mind that there is a dearth of research studies that have specifically addressed the pronunciation deviations and idiosyncrasies of Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors, this paper is meant to fill this gap in this particular area of SLA research. It is also hoped that it would draw attention to the importance of pronunciation accuracy in teaching English as a foreign language in this part of the world.

3.0 Research Objective

This paper aims to explore the pronunciation idiosyncrasies of Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors at Jazan University. It thus seeks to answer the following question:

(1) What is the nature of the pronunciation errors identified in the oral performance of Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors at Jazan University?

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Method

This paper is qualitative in nature as it is based on the classroom observations conducted by the researcher at JU in the academic year 2011-2012. By way of illustration, Dornyei (2007, p.179) argues that two dichotomies can be used to observe classrooms, namely 'participant' versus 'non-participant' or 'structured versus unstructured observation'. He further asserts that "classroom research ... is striving for a situated understanding of learning, documenting, and analyzing the dynamic interplay of various classroom processes and conditions that contribute to variation in learning outcomes (p.179)." Further, classroom observation provides direct information and helps researchers to find out more about the factors that promote or inhibit learning (Dornyei, 2007). Adopting the non-participant

observation, the researcher used the observation scheme prepared by the English Language Centre at JU to evaluate the performance of the teachers, with a special focus on the clarity of their pronunciation.

4.2 Participants

The EFL instructors recruited by Jazan University usually come from countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan and, quite recently, Yemen. The data collected to serve the purpose of this paper was based on 60 classroom observations conducted by the researcher. The 60 Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors are all males, and are between 27 and 50 years of age. They are also believed to be linguistically, educationally and culturally heterogeneous. They speak Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali, South Asian languages, and Arabic as their native languages.

4.3 Instrument

The Evaluation Scheme used to evaluate the classroom performance of the nonnative EFL instructors at JU comprised the following criteria: punctuality, objectives, preparation, organization, *clarity*, expertise, teaching strategies, comprehension, responsiveness and classroom management. On a scale from 1 to 5, the evaluator is to check one of these options (excellent, above average, average, below average, or very poor). Paying special attention to the pronunciation of the EFL instructors in question, the researcher noted down the words and sounds that were particularly mispronounced.

Classroom observations, as a data collection tool, were therefore used to obtain pronunciation related data from the teachers involved in teaching English as a foreign language at JU. As indicated above, the teacher evaluation project initiated by the English Language Centre of JU and conducted by one Saudi MA holder in Linguistics, prep year coordinator, and two Yemeni PhD holders. The researcher was one of the

two Yemeni professors involved in this very rewarding experience. Among many other important issues, clarity of teachers' pronunciation was given some considerable weight and viewed as a crucial factor in evaluating the performance of the non-native teachers in question. The following section provides a clearer picture of how the data was collected from the classroom observations conducted by the researcher.

While conducting their classes, the researcher visited each of the 60 EFL instructors only once for about 40 minutes and this gave him the chance to focus on the sounds that were mispronounced over and over again by the instructors. Hence, he was able to keep a detailed record of the pronunciation deviations made by the EFL instructors. For convenience, the pronunciation deviations detected in the performance of the EFL instructors have been classified into two categories: (1) those that are made by native speakers of Hindi, Urdu and Bengali and (2) those made by Arabic-speaking EFL instructors.

5.0 Results and Discussion

Before discussing the pronunciation errors or deviations made by Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors recruited by JU, it is important to briefly touch on the sound system of English. As far as the RP variety of English is concerned, this particular variety has 20 vowels, 5 short vowels, 7 long vowels and 8 diphthongs and 24 consonants. The total number of phonemes found in English is 44. Further, English is not a tone language, that is, unlike Thai and many African languages, the meaning of the word *cat*, for instance, will not change whether you say it with a rising or falling tone. However, English and Arabic are intonational languages. For a more elaborate discussion on these issues, you may consult Comrie (1990).

5.1 Arab EFL instructors

In general, English vowels are considered problematic for native speakers of Arabic. Arabic, unlike English, has three short vowels, symbolized by diacritics, three long vowels and two diphthongs /au/ /ai/. Data gathered from the native speakers of Arabic reveal that some English diphthongs are sometimes monophthongized by such EFL instructors. To illustrate, an Arab teacher of English at JU mispronounced the word **gold** by using a long vowel for a diphthong. Another Arab EFL teacher erroneously pronounced the word **most** by using a short vowel for a diphthong. The word **great** was also pronounced with /e/ vowel sound and not a diphthong.

An Arab EFL instructor pronounced the word **difference** as /diffə'ræns/, replacing the schwa sound in the third syllable with æ sound. The same problem occurred when the same teacher attempted to pronounce the word **different**. Replacement of the schwa sound with /æ/ sound has led to a notably awkward pronunciation of the word.

The voiced sound /b/ and its voiceless counterpart /p/ exist in English, but only the voiced bilabial stop exists in Arabic. So some native speakers of Arabic seem to use /b/ for /p/ and this may lead to possible communication breakdowns. The /v/ sound can also be problematic for some speakers of Arabic learning English as a FL because it is not a part of the sound system of Arabic. Despite the fact that these pronunciation errors can be predicted to occur in the language production of Arab EFL teachers, such deviations have not been noticed in the language produced by those particular instructors of English at JU.

Some Arab EFL instructors, Sudanese and Egyptians, did experience some difficulty in using the /ə/ sound. They basically used /s/ sound for /ə

/. For example, based on the collected data, one of them uttered the word third as /s3:rd/. Further, one can infer that speakers of Sudanese and Egyptian Arabic encounter some difficulty in using/ θ / and /ð/ sounds. To clarify more, one of the observed teachers pronounced the word *then* as /zen/ and *this* as /zes/. The words *breath* and *breathe* are pronounced alike.

Before discussing the problems native speakers of Arabic encounter in producing English consonant clusters, it is important to have a look at the syllable structures permissible in both Modern Standard Arabic and English language, RP variety. In Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the following syllable types are admissible (Al-Saidat, 2010, p.125).

- a. CV
- b. CVV
- c. CVC
- d. CVVC
- e. CVCC
- f. CVVCC

Compared with Arabic, the following syllable structures exist in English:

- a. V
- b. CV
- c. VC
- d. CVC
- e. CCV
- f. VCC

- g. CCVC
- h. CCVCC
- i. CCCV
- j. CCCVCC
- k. CCCVCCC
- l. CVCCCC

Some Arab EFL instructors made certain pronunciation errors by inserting a vowel to simplify the articulation of the consonant clusters that are peculiar to English. The words given in *italics* below were mispronounced by some Arab instructors of English (*simple, for example, participle, table*). Influenced by the sound system of their L1, they basically inserted a schwa between /p/ and /l/ sounds. These pronunciation problems seem to have stemmed from the fact that there are certain syllable structures that exist in English but not in Arabic. Simply put, difficulty in properly articulating such sounds can be due to the fact that some of the consonant clusters given above do not seem to exist in Arabic language.

Additionally, the word *clothes* was pronounced in such a way that the Arab teacher inserted a vowel between /ð/ and /s/ and this is a common pronunciation problem faced by many Arab learners of English. Likewise, the word *next* is also mispronounced by some Arab learners of English as they inset a vowel sound, usually the schwa sound, between /k/ and /st/. This pronunciation error was particularly made by an Arab EFL teacher at JU.

The past tense ending -ed was not pronounced correctly by some Arab EFL instructors. The two words *asked* and *turned* were mispronounced, that is, the -ed in both words was pronounced as /id/. The

examples (1-6) given below have been extracted from Al-Saidat's (2010) study, and they give further support to what is outlined above. Nonetheless, the thing that deserves mention is that the pronunciation errors shown in the examples below are made by Ammani speakers of Jordanian Arabic.

1. /stʊbɪd/ stopped
2. /dɪvɪlʊbɪd/ developed
3. /la:fɪd/ laughed
4. /ɑ:skɪd/ asked
5. /wɔ:kɪd/ walked
6. /gru:bɪz/ groups

One can thus infer that the pronunciation problems encountered by Arab learners of English are likely to vary considerably depending on the regional dialect spoken in each of the Arab countries. For instance, the pronunciation errors made by Jordanian or Egyptian learners of English will differ, in many ways, from the errors made by Yemeni learners of English.

5.2 Indian, Bengali and Pakistani EFL instructors

Despite the fact that there are many regional dialects and languages in the Indian subcontinent, the present paper will primarily focus on the pronunciation errors made by EFL instructors speaking Hindi, Urdu and Bengali languages. According to Shackle (1987, p.229), consonant sounds found in South Asian languages including Hindi, Urdu and Bengali are characterized by 'aspiration' and 'retroflexion'. Aspirated and unaspirated voiced and voiceless consonants do exist in those languages and this makes them different from the other European languages.

Below is a list of the words that were mispronounced by some instructors speaking the three South Asian languages mentioned above.

injured: the long vowel found in the second syllable was replaced by /u/ sound

customers : the schwa in the second syllable was replaced by /u/ sound

plane as plan: the diphthong /eɪ/ was pronounced as /æ/

great as gret : Likewise, the diphthong /eɪ / in great was replaced by /e/ vowel

interest : the word interest is harshly pronounced and instead of inserting a schwa in the last syllable, the short vowel /e/ was used instead.

first : the long vowel sound in this monosyllabic word was replaced by /a:/ sound

social : The /ʃ/ sound was replaced by the /s/ sound

well : the /w/ sound was awkwardly pronounced as /v/

machines : the /ʃ/ sound was replaced by /s/

religion : the /dʒ/ sound was replaced by /z/ sound

Since the sound systems of English and the three South Asian languages mentioned above differ in many respects, speakers of these languages appear to have some difficulty articulating some English vowels and consonants. Absence of certain consonant and vowel sounds from the sound systems of the three languages in question gives rise to a South Asian accent (Shackle, 2001). As far as the RP vowel sounds are concerned, /eɪ/ and /əʊ/, for instance, do not exist in these languages and they are usually replaced by /e/ and /ɔ:/. It is worth pointing out that the two diphthongs mentioned above seem to be problematic for some Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors. As for consonants, the /w/ sound in the word *well* given above is pronounced as /v/ and this is due to the fact that there is only one phoneme in those languages in the area of /v/ and /w/. Further, consonant sounds that do not exist in those languages are also considered problematic for some of the instructors belonging to this category.

As indicated above, some of these pronunciation deviations could be safely attributed to their L1, and other deviations can be due to factors that have to do with the fact that certain features of their English pronunciation get fossilized. Fossilization (Selinker, 1972) is the term that is used to describe the situation in which certain phonological or other linguistic features of the acquired system of some L2 learners get fossilized. Thus the pronunciation errors made by the two groups of EFL instructors can be attributed to their L1 or to fossilization related factors. Another explanation can be related to the fact that some of these EFL instructors began learning English as a foreign/second language after the age of puberty (Lenneberg, 1967).

One might notice that the pronunciation peculiarities of the non-Arab EFL instructors outlined above have not been sufficiently addressed and this might be due to the fact that the researcher is a native speaker of Arabic and it was relatively easier for him to detect and pinpoint the defective pronunciation of the Arab EFL instructors. This explains why a greater proportion of this paper is devoted to exploring the idiosyncratic pronunciation of Arab EFL instructors. Thus, further research is still needed to adequately address the pronunciation idiosyncrasies of the EFL instructors in question. It should also be stressed here that the persistence of such phonological problems in the oral performance of the instructors of the two categories indicate that certain aspects of L2 such as syntax and vocabulary can be easily acquired, but fully acquiring the phonology of L2 is not an easy task.

6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

The present paper aimed to explore the pronunciation idiosyncrasies of Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors at Jazan University, KSA. The researcher, a native speaker of Yemeni Arabic, made use of the classroom

observations that he conducted to obtain relevant data to serve the purpose of this paper. Though the observed nonnative EFL instructors demonstrated a remarkably good repertoire of teaching skills, some pronunciation errors were identified in their oral performance. These deviations can be attributed to their L1 and some of those pronunciation errors are made subconsciously and it is assumed that such phonological problems would continue to occur, and this might be due to fossilization-related factors. Another explanation of such errors can be related to the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) which postulates that learning an L2 after the age of puberty is difficult if not impossible. Further, developing near native competence in L2 is not easily attained and few learners can actually achieve near native proficiency in L2.

Analysis of the data collected from both Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors show that they experience some difficulty in articulating certain vowels and consonants. More specifically, some English diphthongs that are not part of their L1 sound systems are believed to be problematic for the two groups of EFL instructors. There are also other problems that are related to the prosodic features of English such as stress and intonation, but discussing them is, in fact, beyond the scope of this paper.

Recruited lecturers or instructors should demonstrate clear and intelligible pronunciation, and EFL instructors who seem to have a strong foreign accent should not be considered for recruitment because their accented speech would have serious consequences on the clarity and intelligibility of what they utter in English. It should be stressed here; once again, that clear pronunciation is an essential part of a teacher's overall communicative competence and without good and accurate pronunciation, communication in English is likely to suffer. Finally, if these EFL

instructors are selected carefully, they can do much to help English learners in this part of the world to achieve higher proficiency levels in English.

Since this paper mainly focused on the pronunciation errors made by some Arab and non-Arab EFL instructors, further research is still needed to find out more about the mastery of the suprasegmental features of English by EFL instructors. It is also recommended that EFL instructors need to be aware of the fact that since fully acquiring the phonological aspects of English is not easily attained, it is advisable to start thinking of certain practical ways to overcome such pronunciation-related difficulties. In a word, the idiosyncratic pronunciation of the EFL instructors gives further support to the fact that in-service training is vital, and, most importantly, EFL instructors should be aware of the fact that they need to refurbish their language skills from time to time.

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Appendix

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Ministry of Higher Education
Jazan University
Preparatory Year Deanship



لكة العربية السعودية
وزارة التعللج العال
جامعة جازان
عمادة السنة التحضلرلرلة

Classroom Observation Form for Teaching Faculty

Teacher:..... Course: Group Number:

Date: Time: Room#:

Evaluator: Student registered: Student Present:

On a scale of 1 to 5, please indicate the extent to which the instructor meets the teaching criteria listed below. Please include comments in the column on the right. Attach additional comments as necessary.

N	Concerns	Rating				
		(A) Excellent	(B) Above average	(C) Average	(D) Below average	(E) Poor
1	Punctuality: The professor started and finished class on time.					
2	Objectives: The professor made a clear statement of the objectives of the session at the beginning of class or at another appropriate time.					
3	Preparation: The professor was well-prepared for class with necessary materials.					
4	Organization: The professor presented the material in an organized manner.					
5	Clarity: The professor presented instructional material clearly. (voice, pronunciation, etc)					
6	Expertise: The professor displayed expertise in the subject.					
7	Teaching Strategies: When appropriate, the professor combined methods of instruction (visual, auditory, etc.) to accommodate various student learning styles.					
8	Comprehension: The professor periodically checked student understanding and modified teaching strategies as necessary.					
9	Responsiveness: The professor was attentive to student questions and comments and provided clear explanations and examples.					
10	Classroom Management: The professor demonstrated effective classroom management skills.					