Macrothink Institute™

Education and Linguistics Research
ISSN 2377-1356
2015, Vol. 1, No. 2

The Pronunciation Problems Faced by Saudi EFL Learners at Secondary Schools

Omer Elshekh Hago

Taibah University KSA E-mail: Ohago65@gmail.com

Waquar Ahmad Khan

Taibah University KSA E-mail: waquarammcl@gmail.com

Received: June 10, 2015 Accepted: October 5, 2015 Published: October 8, 2015

doi:10.5296/10.5296/elr.v1i2.7783 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/elr.v1i2.7783

Abstract

This study investigates the difficulties of English pronunciation encountered by Saudi secondary school learners when pronouncing English consonants. It also aims to shed light on the area of English consonant clusters system. The instruments used for collecting data and information included were questionnaires, classroom observations and document collections. The results show that the participants had difficulties to pronounce eleven consonant sounds. The results also demonstrate that a great number of the participants, unintentionally insert a vowel sound in English syllable to break up consonant clusters. This study provides some useful pedagogical implications to prevent and cure English pronunciation problems.

Keywords: English pronunciation, Pronunciation errors, EFL, Arabic language, Phonetics, and phonemes

1. Introduction

The most important part of learning English as a second language rests on pronunciation. Speaking is an important factor in learning and using English appropriately (Gussenhoven & Jacobs, 1998). This means that studying errors of English pronunciation is a valuable source to which provides information on students' errors. These help teachers to correct errors and improve the effectiveness in teaching English pronunciation.

2. Statement of the Problem

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/

and /v/ and even these consonants, which seem similar to some Arabic consonants like /t/ or /k/, are not identical but different in the manner and even in the place of articulation. For example, English /t/ is alveolar and aspirated in word initial position followed by a vowel like tea /ti:/where as the Arabic /t/ is dental and non-aspirated in the same word position like in /ti:n/. Abdulwahab (2015).

According to these observations and examples, this study attempts to investigate the difficulties that Saudi students encounter while pronouncing certain English sounds. Particularly, they find it difficult to pronounce e.g. /ʒ/, /ŋ/, /tʃ/, and even some English sounds can be substituted for other sounds e.g. /v/ can be substituted for /f/. The subjects also, mispronounce some English consonant clusters, e.g. the word 'stand' should be pronounced as /ɪstand/ and 'street' be pronounced as /ɪstiriːt/.

2.1 Review of Studies and Previous Evidence

2.1.1 Differences in the Sound Systems of Arabic and English

The difference between first language and second language is a problem in learning pronunciation Bell, (1995). Accordingly, one of the obstacles to achieve acceptable English pronunciation for most Arab students is to know the differences between the sound structure of English and Arabic.

In English, there are twenty-two vowel phonemes and twenty-four consonant phonemes. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) has 36 phonemes. These are divided in six vowels, two diphthongs, and 28 consonants. In addition to the two diphthongs, the six vowels are /a, i, u, a:, i:, u:/ where the first three ones are short vowels and the last three are their corresponding longer versions, (three short vowels are /a, i, u /, and their three long counterparts are /a:, i:, u:/). As a result, vowel sound duration is phonemic in Arabic language (Ajami &Hussain, 2010). With four more consonant phonemes and fourteen fewer vowel phonemes, Arabic is a consonant-heavy language compared to English. Even though Arabic is a consonant-heavy language, English use many more consonant clusters to form words (Majeed, 1999).

Consonant clusters refer to phoneme groupings, not alphabet letters. There is no initial consonant cluster allowed in Classical Arabic and no syllable begins with a vowel Emad, (2010). Consonant clusters are often pronounced with a short vowel inserted to aid in pronunciation. Other clusters contain sounds that are not in the Arabic consonant inventory or have different pronunciations; for example, /sp/, /gr/, /spl/, and /str/. These clusters will be problematic for the Arabic learners of English. Again, a short vowel may be inserted between segments, Bauman-Waengler, (2000). English has numerous three-and four-consonant clusters at the ends of words, whereas Arabic does not. To compensate for this difference, Arabic speakers often insert a short vowel sound to break up consonant clusters when speaking English. For example, they might say 'nexist' instead of 'next'. (Murcia, 1996).

In English, the essential factors or features to be included when describing English consonants are voicing, point of articulation and manner of articulation. English consonants are, for example, different in number as well as in place and manner of articulation. Eide, (2012)

Some English consonants do not exist in the Arabic sound system like /p/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /ʃ/, /ŋ/, and /v/ and even those consonants, which seem similar to some Arabic consonants like /t/ or

/k/, are not identical, but different in manner and in place of articulation (Majeed, 1999). For example, English /t/ is an alveolar and aspirated in word initial position followed by a vowel like tea /ti:/ whereas the Arabic /t/ is dental and non-aspirated in the same word position like in /ti:n/ (fig). In addition, Arabic /t/ and /d/ have pharyngeal zed productions that have phonemic value. Pharyngealization involves a secondary approximation of the back and root of the tongue into the pharyngeal area. These pharyngealized consonants are categorized as emphatic consonants (Waengler, 2009).

There are discussions as to whether these sounds are pharyngeal or epiglottal in their production. Ladefoged, (1975) maintains that: Based on recent possibilities to observe the laryngeal area, where there is epiglottal activity.

According to (Watson, 2002) the following consonants /p/-/b/, /f/-/v/, /tʃ/-/dʒ/-/ʃ/, seem to be problematic for Arab speakers learning English. This is due to the absence of these oppositions in Arabic. For example, /p/, /v/, and /tʃ/ do not exist in Arabic. Other consonants exist in Arabic, but they have different phonetic realizations.

Although /n/ and /ŋ/ exist in Arabic, they are both allophones of the same phoneme /n/ (Waengler, 2009). In English (put it at the end of the following statement)…on the other hand, they are distinct phonemes. In addition, /ŋ/ never occurs at the end of a word in Arabic, thus, Arabic speakers have a tendency to add /k/ to the end of words that end in /ŋ/, such as [baɪɪŋk] for 'buying' or [sɪŋk] for 'sing'.

The phonotactics (check it) of /l/ are quite different in Arabic, and have a tendency to use the light /l/ in all word positions. In Arabic, the 'd' is always unreleased and voiceless in word-final position. Words such as 'bad', 'rod', and 'mad', will often be pronounced as 'bat', 'rot', and 'mat' (Waengler, 2009).

Although the phoneme /r/ exists in Arabic, it is always pronounced as a trill. The English approximant is unfamiliar to Arabic speakers, and they are having a strong tendency to produce this sound the way they know it in Arabic. Speakers from Egypt are having these difficulties with /dʒ/ and /ð/. In modern spoken varieties of Egyptian Arabic, /dʒ/ replaces by /ʒ/, such as "job" and "jam" would respectively sound like [ʒab] and [ʒæm]. The other problem was the consonant sound /ð/. This sound replaces by its plosive equivalent /d/. Consequently, words such as 'their', 'they', 'then', and 'though', would respectively sound like 'dare,' 'day,' 'den,' and 'dough'. (Val Barros, 2003).

Arabic has far fewer consonant clusters both in the word-initial and word-final positions. There are three segment consonant clusters which do not exist in Arabic. In contrast to English, which has 78 phonograms, three-segment clusters and 14 phonograms, four-segment clusters occurring at the end of words, Arabic has none. Other clusters contain sounds that are not in the Arabic consonant inventory or have different pronunciations, for example, /sp/, /gr/, /spl/, and /str/. Eide, (2012: 25-31)

2.2 Vowels

In terms of speaking, Arabic is the largest living member of the Semitic language family, Badr (2010). Typically, Modern Standard Arabic is the language of the media and education whereas multiple variants are used in the Arabic world. Linguistic differences between the Standard language and various dialects (which vary geographically) are found in terms of

phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexical choice. Vowels are phonemes that are produced without any appreciable blockage of airflow in the vocal tract. As we know, English has many more vowel sounds than those represented by the five Roman alphabet letters, a, e, i, o, and u (Small, 2012). There are three vowels in Arabic -/i/, /u/, and /a/- that appears in long and short variations. The tongue position for the short forms is somewhat lower for /i/ and /u/, resembling /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ respectively, while the short /a/ vowel qualitatively approaches /æ/. Arabic also has two diphthongs, /aj/ and /aw/ (Fathi, 2001). In similar studies that describe vowel systems, vowels according to (Saadah, 2011):

Vowels described in terms of two phonetic parameters: vowel quality and vowel quantity. Quality refers to differences in the place of articulation of the vowel, including the position of the tongue in the vocal tract, the size of the stricture, the shape of 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 (i.e., the vowel), which is considered an essential part of its phonemic identity.

English and Arabic are languages with phonological contrasts based on vowel quality and quantity, respectively. 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 centrifugal 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.

The Arabic vowels are categorized into short and long vowels. Short vowels are further divided into: *fatha: kasra and damma. Fatha is* indicated by a small diagonal stroke above the preceding consonantal speech sound. Kasra is the similar stroke below the 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:'. (Fatihi, 2001) in Salameh and Abu-Melhim (2014)

English is a 12-vowel system that contrasts tense long vowels and lax short vowels whereas Arabic is a 6-vowel system that contrasts long and short vowels. English and Arabic are, not only differentiated in terms of the size of their vowel systems but also in the phonetic qualities of the vowels (Power 2003). In figure 1, there is a schematic representation of all six Arabic vowels plotted in the vowel space, whereas figure 2 shows English vowels. These figures are presented as a means of comparing the vowel inventories for the two systems.

3. Difficulties for Arabic Speakers Learning English

3.1 Vowel Problems

In quick review, vowels are produced with a relatively open vocal tract; no significant constriction of the oral (and pharyngeal) cavities exists. The air stream from the vocal folds to the lips is relatively unimpeded. Therefore, vowels are considered open sounds.

(Waengler 2009) provides information regarding the English vowels that is likely to present the greatest problems in articulation and perception by Arabic-speakers: vowels, or near equivalents, that are not found in modern Arabic, the vowels are [e], [ɔ], and [ʌ].The central

vowels with and without /r/ coloring do not exist in Arabic. Therefore, the /a/-/æ/ variation (typically /æ/) or /u/ is substituted for /ʌ/. The Arabic r-sound with probably replace the central vowels with /r/ coloring, which might lead to some differences in the quality of these r-sounds (Val Barros, 2003).

The distinction between specific vowels, especially open, lax, short vowels such as /ɪ/, /ɜ/, and /ʊ/ will be problematic for the Arabic speakers. According to Power (2003), the /ɪ/ vowel be lengthened and lowered to /e/, whereas /ɜ/ may be produced as /i/ or /æ/.

In vowels, two types of difficulty are identified. First, certain diphthongs are replaced by other sounds due to L1 interference for example, /eə/ becomes /eɪ/; /ʊə/ becomes /u:/; /ɪə/ becomes /iː/; and /aʊ/ becomes /ɔː/. Second, the distinctions between certain pairs of vowels as in /ɪ/ and /e/ as in 'sit' and 'set'; /ʌ/ and /ɒ/ as in 'luck' and 'lock'; /ɔː/ as in 'coat' and 'caught'. Kharma and Hajjaj (1989).

3.2 Consonant Problems

There is little research done regarding the difficulties that Arabic speakers face when learning English pronunciation. (Altaha 1995).His research is one of the few attempts to address this issue. He carried out a research study, which has been investigated the problems of Saudi Arabian students learning English and learning pronunciation. The participants in his study started learning English at age 13 and never left their native country to acquire English. Altaha collected the data by recording and analyzing the spoken English of the participants in different conditions and situations. His participants had problems with some pairs of consonant sounds (i.e. /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ as in 'chair' and 'share'; /v/ and /f/ as in 'van' and 'fan'; /p/ and /b/ as in 'pat' and 'bat').

Kharma and Hajjaj (1989), wrote a book attempting to identify problems faced by Arab learners of English. The authors identified some consonants (i.e. /p/, /v/, /ŋ/, /θ/, /ð/, /r/, /l/) as problematic for Arabs to pronounce.

The Australian Government (1978) published an article about the likely difficulties of English pronunciation Arabic speakers encounter when learning English. It was reported that Arabic speakers have difficulties with consonant clusters (pronouncing, 'espy' for 'spy'), and consonants /tʃ/, /p/, /v/, /ŋ/, /θ/, /ð/, /r/, /l/, /gl/, and /dʒ/).

Avery and Ehrlich (1992) wrote a book about how to teach American English pronunciation to selected groups, and the difficulties listed regarding English consonants, for Arabic speakers' pronunciation were /θ/, /ð/, /tʃ/, /ŋ/, /dʒ/, /r/, and consonant clusters. However, the difficulties listed were generalized to Arabic learners of all learning levels.

(Val Barros, 2003) investigated in her study the difficulties of pronunciation in the consonant system produced by Arabic speakers when learning English.

Arabic has twenty-nine consonants, whereas English has twenty-four. Most of the consonants are found in both languages, however, some of them are found in one language but not in the other. This situation may cause pronunciation problems for Arabic speakers, especially with those sounds which are absent in the Standard Arabic. According to Val Barros, Arabic has emphatic consonants, and two of the English consonants, /p/ and /v/ are not present in the Standard Arabic inventory of phonemes. Other consonants (i.e. /n/, /r/, /d/) although present in both inventories, may have a different phonetic realization (i.e. while Arabic /r/ is an

alveolar trill, the English /r/ is a frictionless retroflex continuant).

According to Tushyeh (1996), some of the pronunciation problems may be attributed to the learners' misconception that English consonant sounds have equivalents in Arabic. This misconception leads them to substitute the assumed similar Arabic consonant sounds for English ones.

4. An Overview of Research Methodology

4.1 Participants of the Study

The participants of this study were all the students of El-Ehsan Secondary School, the first, the second and the third year students. They were students with different English pronunciation abilities who have never been to any of the English speaking countries, so they do not have any kind of exposure to a native English environment. The participants are Al-Ehsan secondary school students (a private school) in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. The participants of this study contained two parts; the first part was a group of 60 students of three different levels of El-Ehsan Secondary (ranging from 16 to 18 years old) divided equally to these years and the second part was the English (EFL or ESL) teachers of the same school. The students were randomly selected (various pronunciation abilities) for recording samples of English sounds. The words were chosen to represent each problematic sound for the students in various word positions (initially-medially-finally).

These words were put in meaningful sentences. The recording samples are carefully analyzed and compared with a tape-recorded of English native speech. The second part of the samples was 30 of the English teachers of El-Ehsan Secondary School. The teachers represented to a structured questionnaire, which contains various stimulations of English consonant sounds and consonant clusters.

The descriptive and statistic method was chosen in this research to describe, classify, analyze, and explain the data of the research as it is, then to offer the relevant recommendations.

5. Instruments

5.1 Students' Tape –recorded Test

In order to obtain rich information, the study employs both questionnaire and structured familiar sentences to read. These sentences were given to the students to read individually, and they were told that their pronunciation would be recorded and their recordings would be used in the research study. The recordings were conducted in the classroom of El-Ehsan Secondary School. All the subjects who were waiting in the classroom, had three minutes to prepare the reading and three minutes to read out the structured familiar sentences for recording.

All the recordings for Saudi learners were done at the beginning of the second term 2012. The data was collected in classrooms which were prepared to be quite at Al-Ehsan secondary school. The researcher, in this study used a recorder and cassettes for recording sample consonant speech sounds. The reason for that was the lack of good and conductive laboratories for this purpose. However, before starting to collect data, a letter of request for permission to do that in Al-Ehsan school was sent to the principal of the school and later the researcher got the agreement to use all the equipments, the tools and the classrooms of the school for this job. In addition, the students were informed and selected for recording samples

of consonant sounds. All data were collected and designed by the researcher himself. Eleven consonant phonemes and three areas of consonant clusters were identified as problematic.

Next, a list of thirty-one words containing the problematic sounds was created. Seventy-two out of these words were selected for each problematic consonant sound in all three positions -initial, medial, and final word positions. The rest of the words were four which represented the three areas of consonant clusters.

At the beginning of this study process, the participants were informed of the objectives of this research and that their identity would be kept confidential in the research report. Each participant was given an information sheet and a consent form that they were required to read and sign. Furthermore, the process of data collection was explained clearly in detail to all the participants.

Adequate reading time was given to all subjects so that they could producareful pronunciation rather than informal speech. When the subjects had a false start or mispronounced the word, they were allowed to start the sentence again and correct the pronunciation by themselves. The recordings for each level were made on the same day for the convenience of the students and the consistency of the study. Using IPA symbols, utterances were phonemically transcribed and then compared with the target language in order to decide what is correct and what is not.

(A)Teachers' Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained 33 items, reflected the objectives of the research about the English pronunciation problems of the learners of English. In the questionnaire each responder was asked to choose one answer according to the Tri Regression Measurement**,** which contains five levels (strongly agree-agree-uncertain or unsure-disagree-strongly disagree).

On the other side, a structured questionnaire was responded by English teachers to collect data from English educators. According to (Welman 2005), we may use questionnaires to obtain the following types of information from the respondents:

To establish their professional qualifications experience, level at which English was studied, academic qualifications of the educators and types of errors found from the learners.

(B) Classroom Observation

(Hopkins 1996) described classroom observation as a 'pivotal activity,' which played crucial role in classroom research.

Researcher's own experience of teaching English in El-Ehsan Secondary School for 10 years, he observes pronunciation in the classes at all levels. There is a problem in pronunciation. He use to take notes about some particular sounds that were problematic for students which were replaced by the equivalent sounds.

In other words, classroom observation gave the researcher reasons for doing this research and then it helped him to test the validity of the data collected in the questionnaire.

5.2 Questionnaire

To collect quantitative primary data, a researcher must design a questionnaire or an observational form. In this study, a structured questionnaire was prepared and used in

collaboration with some English language experts. The questionnaire translated the information needed into a set of specific questions. These structured questions include multiple-choice questions and scales. Determining the wording of each question involves defining the issue, using ordinary words, using unambiguous words, and using clear statements. The questionnaire was designed to collect the data that support the study and to confirm the findings of this research. The questionnaires were given to a number of 30 English teachers of Al-Ehsan School. All the teachers answered the questions easily. Then these questionnaires were taken as a sample and were analyzed.

6. Findings and Analysis

This section discusses the results of the investigation and gives a detailed analysis and interpretation of data. The observed errors would be compared with the pronunciation of native English speech, which was already recorded in a tape.

6.1 Categories of Pronunciation Errors

According to this research, the first five consonant sounds out of twenty- nine sounds, which show a considerable percentage of mispronunciation in order of difficulty were; /p/ at all positions, /ʒ/ in word final position, /r/ in word final position, /tʃ/ in word medial position, /ŋ/ in word medial position. However, the last five consonant sounds that show a less percentage of mispronunciation, in this study were /d/ in final position, the light /l/ sound in medial position, /k/ in final position, and /k/ in medial position. Nevertheless, the least mispronounced sound by the participants of this study was the sound /d/, especially when it occurs in word medial position.

For the sound /p/, more than 85% of the total of the participants experienced problems when pronouncing this sound in all word positions e.g. in word initial position, e.g. 'part' /pa:t/ with which more than 89% of the total of the participants experienced problems. In word medial position, 86.65% of the participants had trouble as the word 'happy' /hæpi/. In final position, 81, 65% of the participants committed errors in pronouncing this sound when it is in final position e.g. the word 'stop' /stɔp/.

The sound /ʒ/ caused problems for the participants when it is in final position e.g. the word 'beige' /beiʒ/, with which 80.65% of the total of the students experienced problems. The consonant sound /r/ as in 'ever' /evə/ represented a problem for 77.45% of the total of the participants.

The consonant sound /tʃ/, in medial position, was mispronounced by 75.8 of the total of the participants e.g. 'child' /tʃaild/ which was higher mispronunciation than the two other positions of this sound.

The tables above show that the participants had considerable difficulty in pronouncing correctly, according to (IPA) in various different positions of English consonant sounds. Consonant sounds are displayed in different percentage of mispronunciation.

The phonetic representation according to IPA and the phonetic representation according to the participants' speech are presented along with the percentage of error occurrence. The percentage of error reflected the number of errors that occurred for each level of participants in all possible occurrences of those phonemes. Consequently, if a participant pronounced a particular problem consonant consistently wrong, his percentage would be 100%. If, on the

other hand, he consistently pronounced the phoneme correctly, the percentage would be 0%.

6.2 Problems of Consonant Clusters

After mentioning the errors about consonants, the pronunciation problems with consonant clusters are now, investigated. Besides, the consonant sounds, this present study was conducted to investigate the phonological phonotactics in English syllable-initial, syllable-medial and syllable-final consonant clusters by Saudi secondary school learners of English.

Arabic has far fewer consonant clusters both in the word-initial and word-final positions and three-segment consonant clusters do not exist in Arabic. In contrast to English, which has 78 three-segment clusters and 14 four-segment clusters occurring at the end of words, Arabic has none (Waengller, 2009).

Standard Arabic has no sequence of more than two consonants, whereas English has as many consonants as four (Majeed, 1999). This situation causes problems to Arab learners of English.

The results of this study demonstrate that Saudi learners of English unintentionally insert a vowel sound in the onset as well as in the coda of certain English syllables. The results also show that the major reason for declusterization process is the mother tongue influence.

In this study, the subjects seem to have difficulties in pronouncing English syllable-initial, syllable-medial and syllable-final consonant clusters, particularly the three consonant in the syllable-initial.

6.3 Categories of Errors

The following categories show the mispronunciation results of four consonant cluster areas, which classified and arranged below.

6.4 Initial Two Consonant Clusters

The category shows that 71.65% of the total percentage of all participants faces difficulty to pronounce the initial-consonant clusters made up of two consonants as shownin the table (4.26). They pronounced it with inserting the short vowel /i/ as in 'sport', /spɔːt/, they pronounce it as /ispɔːt/, and they generalize the strategy of epenthesis where the learner makes an insertion of a vowel within an existing string of segments. (Murci,a 1996).

6.5 Initial Three Consonant Clusters

The results show that 57.45% of the total percentages of the participants were unable to pronounce this initial-consonant clusters appropriately and properly. They also tend to insert the vowel /i/ in words as 'street', /striːt/, they pronounce it as /istiriːt/. This aspect of pronunciation which is the initial-consonant clusters made up of three consonants are completely absent in Arabic.

In a study conducted by (Abdullmanan, 2005) which found that, Arab learners put a short vowel before and after the first consonant in the initial-consonant clusters made up of three consonants. He attributed this insertion of a vowel to students' endeavors to facilitating the difficult pronunciation of initial-consonant clusters. This difficulty in this type of errors could be attributed to mother tongue interference (inter-lingual errors).

6.6 Medial Three Consonant Clusters

According to the category of medial-consonant clusters made up of three consonants, the participants, in this study record a higher degree of mispronunciation which is 75.8% of the total percentage of the participants, for example the word children /tʃildrən/, that the participants pronounce it as /tʃildirin/.

6.7 Final Three Consonant Clusters

According to the final-consonant clusters which made up of three consonants, it is observed that 72.45% of the total percentage of the participants find difficulties in this type of consonant clusters e.g. the word 'asked' /ɑ:skt/, be pronounced by the participants as /ɑ:skid/. This type of consonant clusters is common in English, but it is not familiar in Arabic at all. This, support Lado's theory that most errors will occur in the phonological aspects when the two languages differ from each other (Lado, 1957).

7. Results and Discussions

As shown in this research, certain English consonant sounds are difficult to pronounce for Saudi secondary school learners. The above tables, in the previous chapter, show that most of the participants faced problems while pronouncing the consonant sounds, /p/, /ʒ/, /ŋ/, /r/, /tʃ/, /t/, /ɬ/, /v/, /k/, /l/, /d/. They also encountered errors by inserting vowels to break up the consonant clusters in syllable-initial consonant clusters or in syllable-medial or final positions.

The consonant sounds mispronounced by the participants, these consonants from phonemes are not present in Arabic they are /p/, /ŋ/, /ʒ/, and /tʃ/, because of this reason, many consonants which causes trouble for the learners. As we can see in chapter 3, Arabic does not have the voiceless bilabial stop /p/, but the voiced counterpart /b/ is present in the phoneme inventory.

All participants in this study, at some point experienced problems with the phoneme /p/. There were 85% who failed to pronounce it correctly in all positions and this result is consistent with previous researches. e.g. Tushyeh, (1996), says: The major cause of such errors is inter-lingual, i.e. interference from the first language of the learner.

(Richards, 1974) also found that 36% of errors could be attributed to the first language. The second sound that caused problems for the participants, according to this study, was the sound /ʒ/ in final position, e.g. the word 'beige' /beiʒ/, which was pronounced by the participants as /beidʒ/.

Saudi learners, in this study used to replace the sound /ʒ/ by /ʃ/, /s/ or /z/, when it is in medial position, and when it is in final position, it is pronounced as /g/. In English, this sound never occurs in initial position.

In order of mispronunciation, the consonant sound that comes after the previous sound /ʒ/ is the consonant sound /r/. Although it is found in Arabic and English inventories, it may have a different phonetic realization (i.e. while Arabic /r/ is an alveolar trill, the English /r/ is a frictionless retroflex continuant). The findings of this study show that the /r/ sound becomes more difficult when it occurs at the end of a word e.g. father, teacher etc...

According to the sound /tʃ/, it comes in the fourth class of difficulty, according to this research. The total percentage of mispronunciation displays that 70.3% of all participants are

unable to pronounce this sound correctly. Most of the participants pronounce /tʃ/ as /ʃ/, when it appears in the medial or final position.

One of the sounds that cause a big problem for our participants, in this study is the sound /ŋ/, especially when it occurs at the end of a word. In this finding, 64% of the subjects fail to pronounce this sound in final position, while 59.95% of them unable to pronounce it perfectly when it occurs in medial position.

According to Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) although the sounds /n/ and /ŋ/ exist in Arabic, they are both allophones of the same phoneme /n/. In English on the other hand, /n/ and /ŋ/ are distinct phonemes differentiated by minimal pairs such as sin/sing. The velar nasal /ŋ/ never occurs at the end of a word in Arabic, but only occurs before a velar stop. This may explain why all of the participants added the sound /k/ or /g/ at the end of words finishing with /ŋ/, e.g. the word monkey /mʌŋki/ becomes / mʌnki/ and tongue /tʌŋ/ becomes /tʌng/.

One of the sounds represents a major difficulty for more than half of the participants in this study, is the dark (velarized) sound /ɬ/, which is an allophone of the voiced alveolar lateral sound /l/.

According to an article published by the Australian Government (1978), in Arabic, this sound has two allophones: the light /l/ occurs before vowels and the semi-vowel /j/ and only in initial and medial position. The dark /ɬ/ occurs before consonants and at the end of words in medial and final position only. In Arabic, the dark /ɬ/ only occurs before a following emphatic (emphatic consonants refer to a set of obstruent's with a secondary articulation usually velarization, pharyngealization or glottalization). As in English, there are no [emphatics]. Arabic speakers will have the strong tendency to use the light /l/ for every occurrence of the phoneme /l/. Therefore, the pronunciation of these words will often sound foreign. In this study, the majority of the errors describe the difficulty for the participants when pronouncing the velarized /ɬ/, especially when the sound occurs in final position e.g. people /piːpɬ/.

According to these three phonemes, /d/, /k/, and /t/, they seem to be similar to Arabic counterpart sounds, but they are not identical, they are different in the manner and even the place of articulation.

This study presents the findings which show that the initial /t/ and /k/ sounds in the words 'tea' and 'cry' cause problems for the learners comparing with the other positions of the sounds /t/ and /k/. The reason is that, these sounds are aspirated in word initial positions followed by a vowel, in English language, whereas the Arabic counterpart sounds are non-aspirated in the same word positions, for example in the word /tiːn/ (fig). The sound /d/ is present in English and Arabic. However, its manner of articulation is different. In English, the consonant /d/ at the end of words is often unreleased but retains its voicing. However, in Arabic language, the /d/ always released in word final position and it is voiceless in this position. This allophonic difference may cause the native speakers of Arabic to mispronounce the /d/ sound as a /t/ sound such as 'bed', 'head', 'mad'...etc. Native speakers of Arabic often are pronouncing them as bet, heat, and mat. The result of this study shows that 41.65% of the total percentage of the participants had trouble in the pronunciation of this consonant at word final position.

The problem with the sound /v/, which is a voiced labio-dental fricative is very similar to that

of /p/. In Arabic, this phoneme is absent, but it has a voiceless counterpart, it is the sound /f/. The phoneme /v/ sometimes occurs in loan words. Therefore, it may take sometimes for learners of English to overcome this tendency. Words such as 'very', 'never', and 'leave' will often be mispronounced for /fery/, /nefer/ and /leafe/. However, the sound /v/ does not seem to be a big problem for the participants in this study, especially when this sound occurs medially and finally. Participants in studies conducted by (Tushyeh, 1996), (Altaha, 1995), (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992) and (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989) had difficulties in pronouncing this phoneme.

However, in initial position, according to this study there are only less than half of the participants face difficulties in pronouncing this sound.

Accordingly, while some of the English consonant sounds are not present in the standard Arabic inventory of phonemes, others are present. However, they have a different phonetic realization. According to (Tushyeh, 1996), some of the pronunciation problems may be attributed to the learners' pronunciation that English consonant sounds have equivalents in Arabic. This mispronunciation leads them to substitute the assumed similar Arabic consonant sounds for English ones. The failure to realize that English consonant phonemes have a particular phonetic realization can be the cause of the foreign pronunciation accent. According to the patterns of phonological phonotactics produced by the participants in the production of English syllable-initial, medial and final consonant clusters, which are among the most difficult aspects in pronunciation that Saudi students face. The phonological part is the third element of the hypotheses of this study. The categories of errors, according to the findings of this research, the total percentage show that the medial consonant clusters of the words that made up of three consonants has the higher degree of errors, that 75.8% of the participants in this study have failed to overcome this difficulty. Therefore, Saudi secondary school learners of English have the tendency to invest vowel sounds in the two syllable-initial consonant clusters e.g. sport /spɔ:t/ becomes /ispɔ:t/ and the three syllable-initial consonant clusters e.g. street /stri:t/ becomes /istiri:t/ or /sitri:t/. The syllable medial consonant clusters e.g. children /ʧildrən/ becomes /ʧildirin/. The syllable-final consonant clusters, made up of three consonant clusters e.g. asked /ɑ:skt/ becomes /ɑskid/.

The reason why the learners have the tendency to insert vowel sounds to break up the consonant clusters is in order to harmonize with the pronunciation requirements of their own source language Arabic, which results in unacceptable consonant sequences in English syllables. (Al-Hattaami, 2000) contended that phonological differences between Arabic and English systems are 'likely to create problems of pronunciation to native speakers of Arabic learning English as a foreign language'. Moreover, Dobrovolsky and Katamba (1996) state 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 requirement of their own language'. (Rababah, 2003) asserts that many Arab learners have certain difficulties in speaking, especially in pronunciation and phonological errors.

7. Conclusion

The aim of the study is to investigate the English pronunciation difficulties experienced by Saudi learners at secondary schools. The analysis and its findings are classified into a

questionnaire and thirty-three words for the participants to read. From the data analysis, it has been found that there is an error concerning consonants and consonant clusters where some of them appeared most frequently. Namely, they are the substitution of /p/ by /b/ in all word positions, the substitution of /ŋ/ sometimes by /n-k/ and sometimes by /n-g/, the substitution of final /ʒ/ by /dʒ/, /v/ replaced by /f/ and the confusion of /ɬ/, the dark with /l/ the light. Interference from the mother tongue seems to be the major factor contributing to pronunciation problems.

In fact, not all the pronunciation errors listed will probably match all the errors that will be made by the Arabic learners of English in Saudi Arabia.

This study has also illustrated the common characteristics of pronunciation errors of Arabic Saudi learners of English by analyzing their native linguistic background, which illustrates how one's native language influences one's English pronunciation.

8. Recommendations

Whereas, native language interference, reason behind students made pronunciation errors in English is due to inappropriate knowledge of the English phonemes, Luo, (2002). Therefore, the awareness of English pronunciation within English language learning programs can be the first step of learning English. English teachers can integrate pronunciation practice into lessons so that students can have more opportunities to practice pronunciation in some meaningful context.

Some drilling exercises related to errors with high frequency can be given to students so that they can be more aware of their mouth, lips and teeth positions and shape. Moreover, teachers can also help students to develop strategies that are more independent: such as learning the phonetic alphabets and using computer software in learning pronunciation. (Underhill, 1994) suggests various sound production activities that require the learners to discover their sound production capacity, and place the new sounds of L2 in their biological sound production device such as the use of vocal cord, vertical and horizontal position of the tongue etc.

The frequent use of various listening aids is very important in improving the students' standard of pronunciation learning English as a foreign language. Due to the difficulties in English consonant-clusters, students have to listen to cassettes more and more to realize and distinguish the nature of English consonant-clusters. Students should be motivated to watch some English programs on TV, radio or visual media, such as BBC English channels, CNN, and others.

These programs may offer live exposure to English pronunciation learners. Teachers can provide a variety of exercises and activities, such as Having situational dialogues, paragraph readings, short presentations, picture descriptions, and interview exercises in or outside classroom. The students should be given systematic exercises and activities from word, phrase, to sentence level.

Tongue twisters are also an interesting way to practice and contrast similar sounds and have fun at the same time, e.g. 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper'. In addition, teachers can ask students to read some popular song lyrics aloud to practice final consonants.

Finally, the knowledge and practice cannot be enough. Therefore, it is important that teachers of English should make their students aware of their pronunciation and provide resources as

well as clear guides to help them constantly correct and self-study to improve their pronunciation.

References

Abdulwahab, H. A. (2015). Difficulties of English Pronunciation Encountered by Saudi Learners, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Open University of Sudan, Khartoum, Sudan.

Al-Hattaami, A., A., D. (2000). A Phonetic and Phonological Study of the Consonants of English and Arabic. M Ed Thesis. Hodeidah University. Yemen: Hodeidah. (Unpublished Work).

Ashby, M., & Maidment, J. (2005). Introducing Phonetics Science.Cambridge University Press. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511808852

Australian Government. (1978). *English a new language: English pronunciation for Arab speakers*.

Avery, P., & Ehrlich, S. (1992). Teaching American English pronunciation.

Bader, S. S. I. (2010). Issues in the Characterisation of Phonological Speech Impairment vs. Delayed Acquisition in Jordanian Arabic-Speaking Children. Universitat Bielefeld Fakultat fur Linguistik und Literaturwissenschaft. Unpublished Thesis.

Bauman-Waengler, J. (2000). *Articulatory and phonological Impairments: A clinical Focus*. Boston: Allan and Bacon.

Bell, J. S. (1995). The relationship between L1 & L2 Literacy: Some complicating factors. *TESOL Quarterly,* 29(4), 687-704. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3588170

Bauman-Waengler, J. (2000). Articulatory and phonological Impairments: A clinical Focus. Boston: Allan and Bacon.

Dobrovolsky, M., & Katamba, F. (1996). Phonology: The Function and Patterning of Sounds. In W. O'Grady (Ed). Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction. Edinburgh: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd..

Eide, D. (2012). Uncovering the Logic of English. Pedia Learning Inc. Minneapolis, MN 55420 USA

Emad, M. Al-Saidat. (2010). Phonological Analysis of English phonotactics: A Case Study of Arab Learners of English. *The Buckingham Journal of Language and Linguistics, 3*.

Gussenhoven, C., & Jacobs, H. (1998). Understanding Phonology.Co-published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press.Inc., 198 Madison Avenue, New York NY 10016.

Hajjaj, A. (1989). *Errors in English Among Arabic Speakers: Analysis and remedy*. London: Longman International Education.

Hopkins, D. (1996). Making Good Schools.Linking school effectiveness and school improvement.Published by Routledge.11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE.

Kharma, N., & Hajjaj, A. (1989). *Errors of English among Arabic speakers*. Alfred Place, London.

Ladefoged, P. (1975). Course in Phonetics. Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 74-9390. Printed in the United States of America.

Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics across cultures*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Lenneberg, E. (1976). *Biological Foundations of Language*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Luo, J. (2014). A Study of Mother Tongue Interference in Pronunciation of College English Learning in China. Guangdong University of Petrochemical Technology, China.Academy Publisher. http://dx.doi.org/10.4304/tpls.4.8.1702-1706

Majeed, Z. (1999). English Phonetics and Phonology for Arab Students, (Leeds, UK).

Power, T. (2003). Practice for Arabic Language Background. Retrieved September 15, 2007, from http :// www.btinternet. com.

Rababah, G. (2003). Communication Problems facing Arab Learners of English: A Personal perspective. *TEFL Web Journal, 2*(1).

Richards, J. C. (1974). Social factors, Interlanguage and Language Learning. In J. C. Richards, (Ed.), *Error analysis. Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition*. London: Longman.

Saadah, E. (2011). The Production of Arabic Vowels by English L2 Learners and Heritage Speakers of Arabic. Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Salameh, M. Y. B., & Abdel-Rahman, A. (2014). The Phonetic Nature of Vowels in Modern Standard Arabic 60-67. Advances in Language and Literary Studies.

Small, L. H. (2012). *Fundamentals of phonetics, a practical guide for students*. Library of Congress Cataloging-in- Publication Data.

Tushyeh, H. (1996). Linguistic problems facing Arab learners of English. *ITL: Review of applied linguistic, 111*, 109-117.

Underhill, A. (1994). *Sound Foundation*. Oxford: Macmillan Education.

Val Barros, A. (2003). *Pronunciation Difficulties In The Consonant System Experienced By Arabic Speakers When Learning English After The Age of Puberty*. M A Thesis, Morgantown, West Virginia.

Waengller, J. (2009). Introduction to Phonetics and Phonology, from concepts to transcription.Printed in the United States of America. Editorial Production Service: Publisher's Design and Production Services, Inc.

Watson, J. (2002). *The Phonology and Morphology of Arabic*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Copyright Disclaimer