

Production of English Consonants: Bilabial Voiced /P/ and the Voiced Labiodental Fricative /V/ by Saudi ESL/EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

The language systems and the production of letter sounds seem to be different among people who speak different languages. Non-native speakers of English have some variations in language production and sound when they speak English due to the differences between the native language and the target language. This paper explores the issues related to the absence of the bilabial stop /p/ and the voiced labiodental fricative /v/ in Arabic speakers. It also presents some recommendations to overcome pronunciation problems.

Keywords: English consonant, Saudi ESL Learners, Arabic Sound

INTRODUCTION

Although most second language learners want to sound like natives, many do not achieve this goal. Moreover, many ESL learners are under the impression that they speak intelligible English, but the reality is that a significant number make many errors. Indeed, ESL learners produce pronunciation, intonation and rhythm errors, in addition to lexical, phonological and spelling mistakes (Messiha, 1985).

Arabic is considered a Semitic language, whereas English is an Indo-European language, which presupposes a dissimilarity between the two languages with respect to morphology, phonology and syntax (Na'ama, 2011). The representations of the phonetic systems of both languages are also different (Al-Ani, 1970). Some studies have explored specific pronunciation issues of Arabic ESL learners. Generally, these studies investigated common problems with the pronunciation of consonants by ESL learners. This paper explains two aspects of English phonetics/phonology that are problematic for Saudi EFL learners. The aim of this examination is to explore how the absence of the bilabial stop /p/ and the voiced labiodental fricative /v/ in Arabic reflects on native Arabic speaking ESL learners' pronunciation of English words. Also, it presents some suggestions and practical classroom activities to help Saudi learners overcome these pronunciation challenges.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Many factors contribute to errors produced by second language learners when they apply their second language skills, especially in the field of pronunciation. The differences between the learner's target language and native language are the primary cause of these difficulties; in addition, other factors directly contribute to errors in pronunciation for these second language learners. Language transfer, which plays a crucial role in the language acquisition process,

along with differences in the phonemic inventory of both languages, present challenges to the learners Mukattash(1981). He also reported that on the phonological and lexical levels, L1 transfer played a more important role than on the syntactic and morphological levels.

The language transfer theory (Gass & Selinker, 1994) suggests that second language learners heavily rely on their mother tongue in the language learning process, and this dependence can result in either a negative or positive transfer. If the sound is similar or the same between the two languages, positive transfer is likely to occur, and the sound is likely to be pronounced correctly by the learner. On the other hand, if the sound between the two languages is different, negative transition is highly likely, as the learner would attempt to use a sound similar to one that exists in the L1 to produce the target sound in L2.

Barros (2003) analysed the difficulties faced by Arabic speakers when pronouncing English consonants in order to determine the effect of one's L1 on the learning of L2 pronunciation. The participants comprised a group of native Arabic speakers from different Arab countries with various colloquial Arabic backgrounds. All participants were in communication with the cultural target language group for a minimum of four years. The findings indicated that eight English consonants, namely, /ŋ/, /v/, /p/, /l/, /d/, /ð/, /ð/, and /r/, were problematic for Arabic speakers. The researcher also noted that L1 interfering tended to be the main factor leading to pronunciation difficulties.

ENGLISH CONSONANTS

English consonants are categorised by the place where and manner in which they are articulated. Consonants are created by forcing out airflow and can be voiced or voiceless (Cruttenden, 2008). Richard et al. (1985) asserted that the air can be partially or completely blocked or allowed to flow with a small amount of friction or over the nose. Consonants can also be distinguished by the air energy used to make voiced or voiceless sounds of the consonants and pairs of consonants.

Several research studies have been conducted on Saudi ESL/EFL learners regarding their ability to learn certain English consonants and the challenges they encounter in maintaining the necessary precision when uttering certain consonants.

For instance, some Saudi learners' English pronunciation problems have been studied by Altaha (1995), who noticed that the study participants had difficulty pronouncing some consonant pairs, such as /ʃ/ and /tʃ/, as in *share* and *chair*; /f/ and /v/, as in *fan* and *van*; and /b/ and /p/, as in *bat* and *pat*. The study concluded that the pronunciation problems encountered by the participants were due to differences between phonemic inventories and orthographic structures in the Arab and English languages. Weaknesses in the teaching of English consonant pronunciation were also deemed responsible for pronunciation difficulties of the subjects.

A related study was conducted by Ahmad (2011), who explored pronunciation issues in learning certain English consonants faced by Saudi college students. The examined consonants were /v/, /p/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/, and /ŋ/. Ahmad concluded that the participants regularly substituted the sound /p/ with the sound /b/ and the sound /v/ with the sound /f/. He argued that the pronunciation difficulties were due to the influence of the learners' native language,

phonological variations and linguistic deficiencies. The following sections explain the two consonants that cause major problems for Saudi Arabian learners.

THE VOICELESS BILABIAL STOP /P/

Some errors are committed by language learners in every area of linguistics. Tushyeh (1996) illustrated many errors committed by Arab learners of English in several linguistic areas. On the phonological level, Arab learners of English confuse the /p/ and /b/ sounds. In fact, Barros asserted that many participants in her study experienced difficulties with the phoneme /p/. She explained that the mispronunciation of the /p/ sound was caused by the lack of the sound in the Arabic phonemic inventory, which resulted in the sound being replaced with the voiced /b/. Comparing the English to the Arabic sound system, Flege (1981) found that /p/ is voiceless due to the absence of glottal pulsing on articulation. The Arabic sound system includes no equivalent to the /p/ sound (Yeni-komshian et al., 1977), making it an unusual sound among its related Semitic language (Newman, 2002). The nearest Arabic sound to the English /p/ is [ڤ], which is articulated with a vocal fold vibration and a very brief obstruction of air flow as the two lips are squeezed together but the velum is closed, blocking access to the nasal cavity. The pressure builds up behind the blockage created by the two lips, and the lips disintegrate as the air escapes in a rush through the mouth (Newman, 2002).

For ESL/EFL learners, the alternating production of the /p/ - /b/ sounds is important because misunderstanding between the two phonemes can hinder communication and cause embarrassment (e.g. *park* instead *bark*, *pray* instead of *bray*).

THE VOICED FRICATIVE /V/

The existence of the voiced labiodental fricative /v/ and the voiceless labiodental fricative /f/ in the world languages varies; the voiced labiodental fricative /v/ is less often present in languages around the world, and it is difficult to pronounce for learners who are missing it in their first language (Maddieson, 1984). These two sounds exist as separate phonemes in the English phonemic inventory, distinguished by the presence or absence of voicing (+or-voicing) (Rogers, 2000). These sounds form minimal pairs because of their position as different phonemes. In other words, using /v/ vs. /f/ and vice versa can lead to different meanings in words that are differentiated by only one sound, such as in the minimal pair *ferry* /fer.i/ and *very* /ver.i/. For instance, the voicing contrast between /f/ and /v/ is a cue to distinguishing between the different words for English native speakers. For example, replacing one sound with the other can lead to meaning changes, such as *belief* vs. *believe* and *safe* vs. *save*.

Unlike English, the voiced labiodental fricative /v/ sound is missing in the Arabic phonemic inventory, and only its equivalent, which is in the voiceless labiodental fricative /f/, is found (Huthaily, 2008). This might be one of the reasons why these learners replace the voiced labiodental fricative /v/ with its voiceless equal /f/. If this is the reason, Arabic learners will not properly pronounce /v/ until they learn to recognise the difference and create /v/ as a separate phoneme from /f/. The next section describes activities that might help Saudi learners to overcome these pronunciation difficulties.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Intelligibility is the main aim for second language pronunciation, as poor pronunciation may affect successful communication. Therefore, teachers should set realistic goals that are

reasonable, applicable and suitable for the communication needs of learners. Teachers should be aware that pronunciation difficulties can hinder communication, particularly if the meaning of an expression or a word can be misunderstood because of the wrong pronunciation, such as when one says *pat* for *bat* or *van* for *fan*. As mentioned previously, consonants cause major problems for ESL learners due to the absence of certain consonants in their native language, which causes Saudi learners to substitute some consonant sounds with sounds from the Arabic language that are similar to the target English sound. Teachers should increase students' awareness of the importance of consonant sounds and the importance of learning to articulate them. The primary goal and knowledge in teaching pronunciation should focus on "IPA" symbols, phonology and phonetics. The regular practice of using an IPA symbols chart will help learners to gradually master the correct pronunciation.

In this paper, I focus on using minimal pair drills in teaching the pronunciation of consonants such as /p/ and /v/, which are problematic for Saudi ESL learners. Minimal pairs are two similar words with different meanings that have similar sounds but differ in one phonological sound. Teaching students these pairs will help them to recognise differences between similar sounds. For example, in Alotaibi's (2013) study, it was noticed that Saudi learners struggled with the /v/ sound in words where it held the final position, such as *save*, rather than when it held the word initial position. Minimal pairs is a practical activity suggested by Hewings (2004) for leaning and teaching consonants through listening and identifying the differences between the sounds.

Following is an example of an activity suggested for intermediate learners for practising the differences between the consonants sounds /p/-/b/ and /v/-/f/ using minimal pair exercises, which is adapted from the ESOL NEXUS website. First, the teacher demonstrates the manner and the place of articulation of the two consonants /p/ and /v/. For the /p/ and /b/ sound differences, the teacher holds the paper in front of his or her mouth when pronouncing words starting with /p/ and /b/, such as *pat* and *bat*, to illustrate the manner of articulation. The teacher then explains that the big puff of air forces the paper to move when the /p/ sound is pronounced and verse versa with the /b/ sound. To examine the voiced and voiceless sounds, the teacher then asks the students to touch their vocal cards to examine the vibration of the vocal folds when they pronounce voiced and voiceless sounds. For the place of articulation, the teacher demonstrates the lips and tongue movements using the "IPA" charts to illustrate the place and the function of the speech organs when pronouncing the consonants. After that, the teacher uses a list of minimal pairs focusing on the two sounds, which do not exist in Arabic, such as /p/ and /v/. Then the teacher asks the students to listen and identify which sound the word contains of the two alternatives. The students must apply their knowledge of the place and manner of articulation for pronouncing the consonants in order to identify the correct sound. Following is an outline of an exercise that can be used for students to identify the sounds in minimal pairs.

p/b Column 1	Column 2	v/f	Column 1	Column 2
fan	van		pig	big
fine	vine		bath	path
fault	vault		bear	pear
safe	save		bin	pin

The teacher will lead the students in more listening activities, which mainly focus on using minimal pairs for practicing the differences between the consonants in the initial and final position to make sure the students master their perception and production of these sounds. Teachers should monitor the students' pronunciation and give feedback on their mistakes.

CONCLUSION

As noted previously, this paper explores the difficulties facing ESL learners regarding specific consonants. These sounds were the voiceless bilabial stop /p/ and the voiced labiodentals fricative /v/, which are problematic for Saudi ESL due to their absence in the Arabic consonant inventory. Native language interference and the absence of some English consonants are the major reasons for the difficulties Saudi ESL learners face in pronouncing certain sounds in the English language. Messiha (1985) asserted that it is a basic linguistic truth that the English phonemes that do not exist in Arabic are the main cause of the phonetic difficulties faced by Arab-speaking English learners. The teacher plays an important role in providing students with strategies to overcome these difficulties by analysing their needs and designing activities accordingly. Since most EFL learners have a unified goal, which is to speak and communicate like a native, I usually encourage my students to practise listening to different English accents so they can understand other speakers and communicate effectively.

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