PRONUNCIATION DIFFICULTIES FOR ARAB LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

The area of this study is Applied Linguistics: Phonology. It aims at exploring the pronunciation difficulties faced by Arab learners of English. The research is a case study which evaluates the speaking performance of two Arab students by investigating the deviations they make from the native speaker's model pronunciation, Received Pronunciation. The study shows that Arab learners face several difficulties in pronouncing some English sounds appropriately and correctly. The analysis of the speakers' performance indicates that the main reasons behind these difficulties stem from the mother tongue interference either by confusing sounds of both L1 and L2 or by the inexistence of those sounds in either language. Other difficulties are due to the lack of the learner's phonological metacognitive knowledge. The study is important because awareness of those difficulties and their reasons would probably lead to a better way of finding appropriate teaching and learning strategies of tackling them and enhancing the learners' speaking proficiency.

Contents

1   Introduction

Although, the main aim of learning English as a second language is to be able to communicate effectively in the target language, the prospected language proficiency intended by learners and instructors depends on the purpose lying behind learning that language. In the Arab countries in general and the Gulf particularly, English is not only a means of communication. It has set itself as the main medium of instruction. Almost all subjects in the Gulf are taught in English and therefore students have to obtain an English language proficiency that allows them to continue their tertiary education successfully. Many learners tend to achieve a native-like pronunciation while speaking. However, this does not seem an easy task for Arab learners as they seem to face several pronunciation difficulties. Based on a case study, this paper delves into the pronunciation difficulties which Arab learners face in speaking English and the deviations they make from the native Received Pronunciation (RP) model by describing and analyzing a speaking performance of two Arab learners on both segmental and supra-segmental levels. The paper investigates the pronunciation difficulties faced, and the reasons for the occurrence of those deviations and states the teaching implications behind exploring this area.

2   Speakers' Performance

2.1   Speakers' Profile

The two speakers performing the dialogue are Omani with Arabic as their mother tongue. English is the sole foreign language they speak and they have been learning it for eight years in Omani schools. They have been taught by teachers from different countries and with different accents: Omani, Egyptian, Tunisian, Indian, and few native speakers. The boy is from an interior region where opportunities of speaking English outside classroom are almost inexistent, and there is high consideration to local identity. The girl is from a big town where contact with English speaking nationalities is possible, but not frequent.

2.2   The Dialogue

1_ A: *Did you have a good journey yesterday?*

2_ B*: Not too bad, just one short delay waiting in Manchester.*

3_ A: *Good. Would you like something to drink? Tea? Coffee…?*

5_ B: *Tea would be lovely. Thank you.*

6_ A: *It's great that we could meet today.*

7_ B: *It's a real pleasure and it's not out of my way at all.*

8_ A: *Oh, let me put the kettle on*.

9_B: *Yes, then we can catch up on what's been happening since last time.*

2.3   Dialogue Transcription in Received Pronunciation

Received Pronunciation is the term used to identify the *"prestigious accent of British English"*, (Collins, B. and Mees, M. L. 2003). It is considered as Standard English and used as a model pronunciation for teaching of English, and is also referred to as BBC English, (Thornbury, 2006).

1_ A: dɪdʒʊ v ə gʊ ˈdʒɜːni ˈjestədeɪ//

2_ B: nɒ(t) tʊː bæd// dʒʌs(t) wʌn ˈʃɔː ˈdɪleɪ weɪtɪŋ ɪˈmænʃstə//

3_ A: ˈgʊd // wədʒʊ laɪk ˈsʌmθɪŋ tə ˈdrɪŋk//

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4_ ˈtiː// ˈkɒfi//

5_ B: ˈtiː ə (d) bɪ ˈlʌvlɪ// ˈθæŋk jʊ//

6_ A: ɪts ˈgreɪ(t) ðə(t) wɪ kə b ˈmiː (t) təˈdeɪ//

7_ B: ɪts ə ˈriːl pˈleʒə r ən ɪ(t)s nə(t) ˈaʊt əv maɪ ˈweɪ j ət ɔːl//

8_ A: əʊ// ˈle(t) mɪ ˈpʊ(t) ðə ˈketl̩ ən//

9_ B: jes// ðe ŋ wɪ kən ˈkætʃ əp əŋ wɒts bɪn ˈhæpnŋ sɪŋs ˈl ɑːs (t) ˈtaɪm//

2.4 Transcription of the Speakers' Performance

1_A: dɪd jʊː ˈhæv ə ˈgʊ (d) ˈdʒɜːrnɪ ˈjestɪr ˈdeɪ//

2_B: ˈnɒt tʊː ˈ bʌd// ˈgʌst ˈwʌn ˈʃɔːr(t) dɪˈleɪ ˈweɪtɪŋ ɪn mænˈʃɪstɪr//

3_A: ˈgʊd// ˈwʊd jʊː ˈlaɪk sʌmˈθɪŋ tʊ ˈdrɪŋk//

4_ ˈtiː ˈkɒfɪ//

5_B: ˈtiː wʊd bɪ ˈlʌvlɪ// ˈθæŋk ˈjʊː//

6_A: ɪts ˈgriːt ðæt wiː kʊd ˈmiːt tʊˈdeɪ//

7_B: ɪts ə ˈriːl pleˈʒɪr //ˈæn ɪts nɒt ˈaʊt ˈɒf maɪ ˈweɪ ʌt ˈɔːl//

8_A: ɔːh// ˈlet mɪ ˈpʊt ðə ˈkɪtl̩ ˈɒn//

9_B: jes// ðen wiː ˈkæn ˈkʌtʃ ˈʌp ɒn wʌts biːn hʌpˈənɪŋ sɪns ˈlʌs(t) ˈtaɪm//

3   Learners' Performance Analysis

At first glance to the speakers' performance, it is apparent that they are non-native speakers, and would be easy for those familiar with Arabic accent to recognize that they are Arab speakers. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) point out that the learners' L1 sound patterns are transferred to L2, resulting in a foreign accent similar in some ways to their native language.

The following is an analysis of the speech performed by these two Arab speakers on both segmental and supra-segmental levels.

3.1 Segmental Analysis

3.1.1 Vowels

According to Collins and Mees (2003), a vowel is a sound made by a stricture of open approximation, by narrowing part of the vocal tract above the larynx. All vowels are formed by a free airflow from the lungs to the lips without clear air obstruction. They are distinguished by the lips' shape and the tongue position, (Thornbury, 2006). Comparatively, English has far more vowels than Arabic, (Kennworthy 1987 and Rogerson,-Revell, 20011). In Arabic there are three short vowels /e/ /ʊ/ and /ɪ/ plus a stop sound. They do not have morphemic orthographic transcript and are not pronounced separately. They accompany a consonant and are marked by corresponding signs to be distinguished. For example, the Arabic consonant   د   (d) is pronounced as دَ /de/ دُ /dʊ/ دِ /dɪ/. These three vowels turn into long vowels if they are lengthened: /de:/,   /dʊ:/ and /di:/. Vowel lengthening in Arabic is marked by suffixing consonants by /ا/ for /e:/, /و/for/ʊ:/ and /ي/   for /i:/. On the other side, English contains 20 vowels; 12 long and short vowels and 8 diphthongs, (Roach, 2009 and Rogerson-Revell, 20011). In Arabic, vowels like /æ/, /ʌ/, and /e/ are all allophones; they do not make any difference neither in meaning nor in morphemic transcription and do not at all impede intelligibility. The schwa /ə/ and the diphthongs do not exist in Arabic pronunciation as individual vowels.

3.1.1.1   /æ/ versus /ʌ/ and /e/

The vowel **/æ/** is a short front, open vowel formed by slightly spreading the lips, (Rogerson-Revell, 2011). **/æ/** exists in Arabic and always occurs with only one single consonant letter. The speakers' performance indicates some confusion between /æ/ and /ʌ/. This is clear with speaker B when, the word /bæd/ is pronounced as /bʌd/ and /ˈkætʃ/ as /ˈkʌtʃ/.This is because in Arabic these sounds are allophones and are interchangeable to the same vowel letter. If, for example, we have the Arabic consonant   ذ , it can be pronounced as /de/, /dæ/, and /dʌ / depending on the degree of voice of the following letter without being restricted to any phonological rule, and might differ from area to another depending on each accent, without leading to any word or meaning confusion.

3.1.1.2   The schwa /ə/

The schwa is the most occurring vowel in English, and its role in the English stress system is considerable. It is a central vowel formed by free air flow without lip rounding and occurs in all positions of the syllable: initial, middle or final, (Roach, 2009 and Rogerson-Revell, 2011). The schwa is a reduced vowel in unstressed syllables and appears in weak forms where vowels are

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pronounced /ə/. Although the schwa vowel does not exist in Arabic, and hence it is strange, the speakers do not find much difficulty pronouncing it. Both speakers pronounced the article 'a' in line 1 and 7 correctly (/ə/)**.**

However, in many cases the speakers failed to use the schwa sound in words like *have, can, the, at,* and *can*. This failure is not due to the lack of this schwa vowel in L1, but it is confusing and problematic to students because in English it can be represented by many vowel letters and the learners do not know the sound combining rules or the phonotactics, (Avery and Ehrlich, 1992), whereas Arabic pronunciation is highly consistent by giving one sound to one letter, (Kenworthy, J.1987). Hence, in many cases, Arab learners' failure to pronounce the schwa is mainly attributed to their unawareness of the mechanisms of weak and strong forms of English in connected speech, as will be discussed later.

3.1.1.3   /ɪ/ Insertion

This insertion is very often with Arab learners who face difficulty pronouncing long clusters, mainly because sequence of three or more consonants do not occur in their L1, (O'Connor, 1980) and (Kenworthy, J.1987), and consequently speakers tend to break clusters by inserting the vowel sound /ɪ/. For example, speaker B inserts /ɪ/ in /hæpnŋ/, breaking the cluster /pnŋ/into two syllables, /pɪnɪŋg/; and the same is done previously with/mænʃstə/ which is pronounced as /mænʃɪstɪr/.

3.1.1.4   /i:/ instead of /eɪ/ in '*great*'

Although diphthongs do not exist in Arabic as separate vowels, they do not represent a major problem for Arab learners because they occur in a combination of two consonants or more. However, confusion comes from the orthographic transcript of diphthongs, which is not consistent. For example, the vowel letters '*ea*' can be pronounced as /æ / in '*head*' /i:/ in '*leave*', and as /eɪ/ in '*great*' . Bearing that in mind that the speakers are reading a written conversation, this inconsistency can lead to learner confusion like in line 6 when speaker A pronounced the diphthong /eɪ/ as /i:/, /gri:t/ , in '*great'.*

3.1.2   Consonants

English language contains 24 consonants, while Arabic contains 28. English consonants are classified according to the place and manner of their articulation. Contrary to vowels in which air flows out freely from the lungs through the mouth, consonants are produced by forcing the airstream out, and can be voiced or devoiced, (Cruttenden, 2008). Richards et al., (1985), add that the air can be completely or partially blocked or allowed to go with a narrow friction or through the nose. Consonants can also be distinguished by the energy exerted to produce

voiced or devoiced consonants, making majority of voiced and voiceless pairs of consonants, (Collins, B. and Mees, M. L, 2003).

The following chart by Rogerson-Revell,(2011 p. 49), classifies the English consonant phonemes.

Place of articulation		Bilabial	Labiodental	dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveola	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Manner of articulation	PLOSIVE	P b			t d			k g	
	FRICATIVE		f v	θ ð	s z	∫ ʒ			h
	AFFRICATE					t∫ dʒ			
	NASAL	m			n			ŋ	
	LATERAL				l				
	APPROXIMANT	w				r	j		

3.1.2.1   The /r/ Sound

Generally, the /r/ is classified as an approximant, palato-alveolar sound. However, it is pronounced differently in many accents and dialects, (Roach 2009). In RP, the /r/ is a post alveolar approximant where the tip of the tongue comes close to the alveolar ridge without touching it, making a quick smooth frictionless glide sound. It is also described as a frictionless continuant, (Rogerson-Revell, 2011). It is clear that both speakers pronounce the /r/ with a rolled sound by tapping the tongue quickly at the alveolar ridge, (O'Connor, 1980). In Arabic the /r/ is voiced and strongly pronounced. There is no situation in Arabic where the /r/ is not pronounced. Consequently, the speakers do pronounce the /r/ even in final positions in the words *'Manchester'* and *'pleasure'*.

3.1.2.2   /ŋg/ instead of /ŋ/

Although the nasal velar /ŋ/ consonant does not exist as an independent consonant in their mother tongue, Arab learners can pronounce it when it is before the /k/ sound like /drɪŋk/ and /θæŋk/ in lines 3 and 5. However, they find difficulty pronouncing it alone when it is in the final

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position *'ing'* syllable. They often relate it with clearly pronouncing the /g/ as in: weɪtɪŋg/, /hæpnɪŋg/, and /sʌmθɪŋg/.

3.1.2.3   /dʒ/ and /g/

This is a common problem with many Arab learners from Egypt and Arabia, although research does not say much about it. Contrary to what is illustrated by Rogerson-Revell, (2011.p: 270), the /dʒ/ and /g/ do not exist in standard Arabic as consonants. The /dʒ/ sound in Arabic is a cluster of /d/ sound and /ʒ/ and never pronounced together as one diphthong sound as in English. However, the /g/ sound occurs in some dialects. In these dialects the sounds /g/ and /ʒ/ are allophones to the Arabic one consonant letter (ج), equivalent to the English sound /ʒ/. Many learners from these areas often mispronounce the **/**dʒ/ sound as /g/ which is the case here with speaker B pronouncing the word '*just'* as /gʌst/. This difficulty is subject to fossilization. If a learner does not recognize this from the early stages, he will find difficulty to avoid it later. Many learners also pronounce the letter 'g' as /g/ in words like *'agent'* and *'technology'*. Confusion between /g/ and /dʒ/ might stem from L1 interference seeing them as interchangeable sounds and letters. They also confuse pronouncing between 'g', **/**dʒiː/ and 'j', **/**dʒei/ letters.

They strangely do not mispronounce the phoneme /ʒ/ as /g/ in *"pleasure"* while reading it, but they might misspell it as such depending on the sound they hear. This is probably because the word *"pleasure"* is a very common word for them. In other situations, they might mispronounce the /ʒ/ sound of the letter 's' with either /s/ or /z/ sounds.

Although this difficulty of confusing the pronunciation of /g/ and /ʒ/ is very recurrent and common to arab learners, it is overlooked and not included among the problems and difficulties facing Arab learners by Kenworthy, (1987), Rogerson-Revell, (2011), and Collins and Mees (2003). Apparently, more research is needed to explore this.

3.2   Supra-segmental Analysis

3.2.1   Stress

Thornbury (2006) defines stress as the effect giving prominence to certain syllables by increasing their loudness, length or pitch. Gimson, (1970) and Cruttenden (2008) call stress *'accent'* and relate syllable prominence with the muscular energy amount used to produce that syllable. Stress is attributed to four factors: loudness, pitch change, quality and length of sound; with pitch change and sound length being the most important ones, (Rogerson-Revell, 2011).

Unlike English which has no fixed stress rules and stress varies from word to word, Arabic has a regular stress, which tends to be slightly on either final syllables or on the syllable containing a long vowel, (Rogerson-Revell, 2011) and (Aziz, 1974). That's why the speakers here stress the final syllable of the words, "*yesterˈday" and "Manˈchester".*

3.2.2 Weak and Strong Forms

It is evident that the speakers are not aware of connected speech stress. They pronounce both functional and lexical words equally in their strong forms. For example, speaker B in line 7 and 9 pronounces the words *of, at,* and *can* in their strong form /ɒf/ /ʌt/ /kæn/; and similarly does speaker A in lines 1 and 6 with /hæv/, /ðæt/, and /kʊd/. Normally these words take the unstressed schwa sound /ə/.

3.2.3 Assimilation

According to Thornbury (2006) assimilation is when a sound is affected by the pronunciation of the neighboring sound so that it takes another sound. It often occurs in rapid casual speech, (Roach 2009). A clear case here is when speaker A does not assimilate /j/ to /ʒ/ in /dɪd jʊ:/ instead of /dɪdʒʊ/ and / wəd ju:/ instead of / wədʒu/. Also, when /n/ is followed by /k/ in connected speech, it is pronounced **/**ŋ/. However, speaker B pronounces it a clear /n/ in *'can catch.* Similarly, speaker A does not assimilate /d/ to /b/ with the adjacent sound /m/ in *'could meet'* and said / kʊd ˈmi:t/, instead of /kə b ˈmi: (t)/.

3.2.4 Elision

Elision is the deletion of a sound in connected speech. This usually happens when two plosive sounds occur together, (Rogerson-Revell, 2011 and Roach, 2009). Speaker A, in line 1, managed to join the two successive /d/ sounds in *'good journey'*, and only the /d/ sound of *'journey'*: /gʊ (d) ˈdʒɜ:rnɪ/is heard. Similarly, speaker B, in line 2 and 9, elided the /t/ sound in *'short delay'* and *'last time'* and pronounced them /ʃɔ:r (t) dɪˈleɪ/ and /lʌs (t) ˈtaɪm/. The speakers success in this assimilation is not attributed to their awareness of phonotactics, but to the nature of the articulation of the plosive sounds /t/ and /d/, because they do not recognise this in many other cases, like: /greɪ(t) ðə(t) wi/ and for /d/ in /ˈti: ə(d) bɪ/.

3.2.5 Intonation

Intonation is the pitch pattern of speech. It is called the music of speech, and also referred to as the prosody of speech combining patterns like stress, rhythm, and tunes. Rogerson-Revell (2011) and O'Connor (1980) point out that languages have their own intonation patterns and the change in pitch level might lead to a change in meaning. Hence, intonation can carry additional meaning to that conveyed by the phonemic segments. Kenworthy (1987) indicates that Arabic speakers do not have much difficulty with intonation, and contrary to English

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intonation in which pitch changes and wavers on syllables, Arabic has a sustained pitch where the voice remains steady on each syllable, and then the pitch jumps up or down for the following syllable.

There are many cases where the speakers missed the native speaker's intonation. For example, in line 2 when speaker B says // ˈNot ˈtoo ˎbad // as if the journey were bad, which is not true. The intonation here should take a rise //ˈNot ˈtoo ˏbad // denoting that the journey was not good, but OK. Speaker A says // ˈTea? ˏCoffee…? // with a low rise, while it should be fall and rise // ᵛTea? ᵛCoffee…?//. This is a questioning by listing more than one option and the list can be extended. Also //ˈThank ˏyou // and //ˈkettle ˏon// are pronounced with low rise on *'you'* and *'on'* while they should take a fall: // ˈThank ˎyou //, //ˈkettle ˎon//.

Probably, one factor affecting intonation performance here is the fact that the speakers are reading a conversation and are not speaking naturally, which affected substantially tone groups.

4 Teaching Implications

Both Kenworthy, (1987) and Poedjosoedarmo, (2003) agree that the main aim of language learning is intelligibility. It goes without saying that teaching pronunciation remains essential because it enhances intelligibility and improves success opportunities in situations where English is a requirement like job interviews, (Poedjosoedarmo 2003). If pronunciation rules are detected since early learning stages and problems tackled on their occurrence, they might, by time, fossilize as is the case with speaker B in /g/ and /dʒ/. It is integral that a teacher should be aware of the learners' L1 phonology and the problems they face in L2 to help them minimize those difficulties and provide them with appropriate effective learning activities that help them improve their pronunciation performance and proficiency.

5 Conclusion

Being the main medium of communication across the globe, there are far more opportunities that English learners would use it with other non-native speakers where intelligibility is their main aim. Even though, many Arab learners of English as a second language tend to achieve a high level of speaking proficiency by attempting to sound like native speakers. However this seems to be unachievable due to many reasonable and natural factors. Arab learners, like many other L2 learners, have difficulty distinguishing some vowels and some consonants as well. Even if the deviations they make from RP do not hinder intelligibility, it is desirable to cope with those problems for the purpose of enhancing understandability. To teach English pronunciation effectively, teachers, apart from their full grasp of the L2 speech mechanism, need to be aware of their learners' L1phonological system and capable to identify its interference.

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