

Investigating the Common Errors in Pronunciation Pertaining to Consonants among Yemeni EFL Undergraduates

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Abstract

The current study investigated the common errors in pronunciation pertaining to consonants among thirty-three first year undergraduates, at the Department of English, Faculty of Education - Shabwah, University of Aden. It adopted Corder's theory as a frame work to account for the pronunciation problems of Yemeni EFL learners under investigation. The data were collected using the two tasks of Labovian model (word list task and passage reading task) by means of recorded sessions. There are also supportive and complementary data which have been obtained from the teachers through a semi-structured questionnaire. This study manifested that the participants encountered huge difficulties in pronouncing the twenty-four English consonants particularly the sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue such as /p/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/, and /v/. The phonological errors revealed by the study have been classified into sixteen types: substitution, pronunciation of silent sounds, commutation, epenthesis, velarization and de velarization, anaptyxis, voicing and devoicing, spirantization, trilling, prosthesis, elision, flapping, metathesis, and paragoge.

Keywords: pronunciation, consonants, EFL

Introduction:

Many second / foreign language learners encounter challenges and difficulties in significant language branches including pronunciation intelligibility problems that need special instructional attention (Morley, 1991, p. 492). Yemeni EFL learners do not represent an exception; they face many problems in their pronunciation performance, which can be attributed to their mother tongue (MT) intervention, on the one hand, and English phonological Phonotactics, on the other hand (Al-Shuaibi, 2009, p. 227).

Common pronunciation errors especially those pertaining to consonants made by Arab students learning English are inescapable due to discrepancy in the phonemic systems of the two languages. According to Saville and Troike (1971), the phonemic system of a language acts as a kind of filter through which the native speaker hears the sounds of another language, assigns it to the nearest equivalent phoneme in the MT, (p. 34). Problems of pronunciation can be attributed to different factors such as the nationality of the instructors, lack of real use of the language, lack of materials and equipments, lack of corrective feedback, lack of effective correctness, inconsistency between L1 and L2 rules, and the number of sounds in each language. In addition, students learn English only through formal instructions, and they do not use English outside the classroom. Moreover, we should not forget the age factor which plays a significant role in pronunciation problems, where they officially start learning English as L2 in the basic schools in the age of fourteen. In addition, the level of absenteeism in oral language classes is also very high, and the lack of practice in spoken English may well lead them to fall in errors, nevertheless, teachers and learners have to cope with such problems and do their best to achieve their objectives (Derwing, 2008, p.349-351).

Unfortunately, Yemeni EFL learners find a lot of challenges and difficulties to pronounce some English words correctly. Since the researchers have been teachers at the Department of English, Faculty of Education - Shabwah, University of Aden, they have encountered a lot of students who have many errors in pronunciation especially in consonants, some of which persist for the whole bachelor stage in spite of endeavours for correction. Therefore, the researchers believe that these pronunciation errors pose a problem that is worth investigation.

Errors in consonants have been the focus of many works in the literature. For example, Al-Saidat (2010) investigated errors in cluster consonants made by Jordanian university students. He defined, analysed, and attributed these errors to different factors, such as the influence of the MT on the process of declusterization. Similarly, Hjølum (2011) studied the phonological problems of consonants made by Faroe Islands inhabitants; he summed up three areas of errors which are (phonemic, allophonic, and distributional errors). Moreover, Al-Shuaibi (2009) pointed out some processes involved in the pronunciation of initial clusters, namely, reduction, substitution and deletion. However, the literature lacks the studies that investigate these problems in depth in Yemeni context in general and at the Faculty of Education - Shabwah, University of Aden in particular. This lack makes it difficult for both Yemeni learners and teachers in the intended college to deal with these errors and eradicate them. Therefore, the researchers strongly believe that investigating this problem in Yemeni EFL context is one of the urgent exigencies. To this end, the study aims at answering the following questions: a) What are the common pronunciation errors pertaining to consonants made by Yemeni EFL first level undergraduates? b) To what extent there is a difference between consonant pronunciation errors made by male students and female students? and c) What are the perspectives of the instructors of English at the Department of English, Faculty of Education – Shabwah, on their learners' errors in the pronunciation of consonants?

Literature review

Learners are liable to make errors during their learning marathon. They are part of their learning process, therefore the researchers and linguists should respect them because they are not something to be escaped from, but they are inevitable features of learning process for every L2 learner during the IL stage (Ellis, 1994, p.70). In relation to phonological errors, Johansson (1978) found that the errors pertaining to mispronouncing consonants in isolated words registered higher rate than the mingled words in texts and connected speech. Mispronunciation of consonant was also judged more seriously by natives than vowel errors, (p.940). On the other hand, Johansson (1978) confirmed that the non-segmental errors (prosody) should be taken into account more than segmental. He also assured that foreign-accented speech is more sensitive to be distorted. Moreover foreigners can understand foreigners' speech better than native speech, possibly because it seems dilatory, (p.940).

Definition of pronunciation

According to Adult Migrant English Program Research Centre [AMEP] (2002), pronunciation is the production of sounds that the speaker uses to transmit and convey the meaning. It includes segmental and supra-segmental aspects of a language. Segmental features are speech sounds of a particular language and it is important for learners to know accurately how those sounds are uttered. They also have to know the supra-segmental features of the language, such as stress, intonation, and voice quality. These features are distinctive. Therefore they can change the meaning. Consequently, when they are not well mastered, they lead to mispronunciation and subsequently misunderstanding which in turn lead to misinterpretation, (p.1)

Nunan (2003) also described pronunciation as more than mere enunciation of individual consonants and vowels but includes widespread proportions of spoken language, such as speed of speech, pausing patterns, intonation, and even the use of body expressions as a complementary tool for illustrating the message, (p. 126).

Although the majority of EFL learners seek to speak native-like English (Derwing, 2003, p. 551; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011, P.76), many of English language learners (ELLs) encounter acute difficulties in learning and performing English pronunciation as it is (Gilakjani, 2011, p.2). In order to accomplish successful communication with native speakers, it is necessary to master intelligible pronunciation (Morley, 1991, p. 488). Intelligibility assists EFL students to reach the required success. On the contrary, poor proficiency of English pronunciation influences the communicative competence development which is recommended for establishing the communicative channel between speakers and listeners. It is more grievous that many L2 learners still display insufficient proficiency in pronunciation even if they have learned English courses, or even they may resort to imitating native speakers (Lin, 2014, p.16). In fact, it is understandable that EFL students utilize a nonstandard variety of English that might negatively affect their acquisition because they are not familiar with standardized English (Charity & Mallinson, 2011, p.1). Consequently, helping EFL students to acquire standardized English must begin with understanding pronunciation variations that EFL students obtain while acquiring English (Lin, 2014, p. 16).

The importance of pronunciation

One of the most important factors to ensure effective communication is a good pronunciation, without which communication is hard or even impossible. Having good knowledge of grammar and lexis is important, but a good pronunciation is essential and can even cover gaps in other aspects of language such as grammar (Harmer, 2005, p.183). Seidlhofer (2001) confirmed the importance of having good and clear pronunciation in that it plays a significant role in our personal and social lives; the way we speak reflects our identities, and indicates our association with particular community, (p.56). In addition, it is obvious that pronunciation which does not disturb the listeners' ears and yet can be understood easily by any ordinary person is called *intelligible pronunciation* (Isaac, 2008, p. 557).

Methodology

Participants

Two different groups of participants took part in this study. The first group consisted of thirty-three students who had been conveniently selected to participate in this study; twenty-six of them were male students and only seven were female students. The second group of participants consisted of twenty teachers from the college of Education - Shabwah, University of Aden. Nineteen of them were male teachers and only one participant was a female teacher.

Research Design

This study is designed by the use of a mixed methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative data to investigate the common pronunciation errors pertaining to consonants made by Yemini EFL undergraduates in the first level, Department of English, Faculty of Education - Shabwah, University of Aden during the first semester of the Academic Year 2018/2019. It adopted and adapted the Corder's (1981) theory that has recently been expanded and explained by Ellis (1994) as a framework. The first four steps of this theory were adopted for the study since they present persuasive interpretation for the learners' language and provide methodology to investigate their errors (Ellis, 1994, p. 48). Pit Corder suggested the following five steps to deal with learners' language: a)

collection of samples of learner's language, b) identification of the errors, c) description of the errors, d) explanation of the errors, and e) evaluation of the errors.

The study followed the practice of many researchers who excluded the fifth step because it constitutes a separate issue (Ellis, 1994, p. 48), selecting only the first four steps of this theory to deal with the students' pronunciation errors with no need for evaluating them. A systematic method was used to go through these steps and clarify how they were applied in relation to the purpose of this study. This method is basically based on the sociolinguistic model, developed by William Labov (1968), which employed four different tasks that the participant has to go through completely or partly. These tasks are:

1. Word list reading
2. Passage reading
3. Spontaneous speech
4. Minimal pairs reading

The current study used only the first two steps of the Labovian model for the purpose of collecting data of the study.

Data Collection Instruments

The most two instruments typically used by researchers are the interview and the questionnaire (Creswell, 2012, p. 382). Therefore, the researcher has selected these two data collection instruments for the current study.

Results and discussion

Analysis process has shown that the total number of words uttered by the participants while doing the required tasks is 5247 among which there are 1735 erroneous utterances. As can be seen in table 1, the most erroneous utterances are linked to English sounds that have no exact equivalents in Arabic; namely: /p/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/, and /v/. Conversely, sounds that are similar in both languages, like: /m/, /t/, /d/, and /w/, are likely to be much less problematic. This is attributed to the familiarity factor. In other words, when learners are familiar with a particular sound in their MT, they find it easy to pronounce a similar sound in the TL. And the rarer the sound is in the MT, the more problematic it is when learners encounter it in other languages.

Table 1

The number of errors with percentage in the four tasks for all consonant sounds.

No	Sound	No. of errors	No. of uttered words	%	No	Sound	No. of errors	No. of uttered words	%
1	/p/	214	231	93%	13	/ʃ/	73	264	28%
2	/ʒ/	112	132	85%	14	/s/	80	297	27%
3	/dʒ/	149	198	75%	15	/z/	67	264	25%
4	/v/	148	198	75%	16	/tʃ/	60	264	23%
5	/l/	114	231	49%	17	/f/	59	297	20%
6	/g/	86	198	43%	18	/r/	33	198	17%
7	/ŋ/	55	132	42%	19	/b/	34	231	15%
8	/θ/	78	198	39%	20	/n/	31	231	13%
9	/j/	50	132	38%	21	/m/	29	231	13%
10	/k/	111	330	34%	22	/t/	14	231	6%
11	/ð/	67	198	34%	23	/d/	9	198	5%
12	/h/	59	198	30%	24	/w/	3	165	2%
Total no. of uttered words		5247			Total no. of errors		1735		

After detailed analysis, the errors made by the participants were classified into different types. Substitution was the type with the highest number of errors; 958 error with a percentage of more than 55% from the total number of errors. The participants made this type of error in many sounds like: /p, ʒ, v, and ð/. The second most common type was the pronunciation of silent sounds like: /p, k, w, and m/. In a total of 223 utterances (12.85%), the participants pronounced a sound which is always silent in correct pronunciation. Commutation was third in the list with a total number of 184 errors (10.61%) which were found in sounds like: /b, f, t, and ʃ/. (See table 2).

If we look at the bottom of this table, we will find the metathesis and paragoge are the least common types of errors made by the participants, only one error (0.06%) was reported for each one of these two types. Flapping and elision were next with only two errors (0.12%) and three errors (0.17%) respectively. Table 2 summarizes the distribution of all reported errors according to their types. It is worth noting here that this table shows only sample examples for all of these types. (For a more detailed account see Abdulsamad, 2020). Here are brief definitions of the categories of these errors:

Substitution: "A term used in linguistics to refer to the process or result of replacing one item by another at a particular place in a structure" (Crystal, 2008, p.463).

Anaptyxis: inserting a vowel between two sounds (Trask, 1996, p. 24).

Commutation: replacing a sound by another sound that yields another word or morpheme (Trask, 1996, p.80).

Devoicing: "any phonological process in which a segment which is historically or underlyingly voiced loses its voicing" (Trask, 1996, p.110)

Voicing: "any phonological process in which a formerly or underlyingly segment becomes voiced" (Trask, 1996, p.110)

Elision: leaving out of sound(s) during speech. For example, in rapid speech in English, the word *suppose* is often pronounced as /spəʊz/ (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.176).

Flapping: replacing /t/ by /d/. It occurs in many varieties of English and American pronunciation, but the use of 'flapping' in this sense is inaccurate and should be avoided (Trask, 1996, p.351)

Intrusion: adding a segment into a word without etymological justification. It is divided into three kinds; **Prothesis:** adding a segment to the beginning of a word,

Epenthesis: adding a segment to the middle of a word, and **Paragoge:** adding a segment to the end of a word. (Trask, 1996, p.256)

Metathesis: swabbing the positions between two sounds in the word, e.g. /flɪm/ for /film/ *film*. It sometimes occurs in the speech of language learners, but it may also occur with native speakers. When a metathesized form becomes commonly and regularly used by most native speakers of a language, it may lead to a change in the word. For example, Modern English *bird* developed by metathesis from Old English *brid* "young bird" (Richard & Schmidt, 2002, pp.329-330).

Spirantization: converting a plosive into a fricative (Trask, 1996, p.332).

Trilling: pronouncing /r/ clearly in case of pausing. It happens when the active articulator (the blade or the tip of the tongue) vibrates against the alveolar ridge (Laver, 1994, p.219).

Velarization: distorting clear /ɹ/ by dark /ɹ/, **Develarization:** distorting dark /ɹ/ by clear /ɹ/ (Laver, 1994, p.325).

Pronunciation of the silent sounds: uttering the sound despite of its silence.

Table 2
Distribution of errors according to their type

Type of error	No. Of errors	Overall percent age	Examples		
			Sound	Correct pronunciation	Erroneous pronunciation
Substitution	958	55.22%	/p/ for /b/	pen /pen/	/ben/
Pronouncing a silent	223	12.85%	/k/	knee /ni:/	/kni:/
Commutation	184	10.61%	/f/ for /v/	van /væn/	/fæn/
Epenthesis	62	3.57%	adding /de/	grudges /grʌdʒɪs/	/grʌdedʒɪs/
Develarization	61	3.52%	/ɪ/ for /ɪ/	newhill /nju:hl/	/nju:hl/
Anaptyxis	39	2.25%	inserting /i/	soldier /səʊldʒə/	/səʊlidə/
Devoicing	39	2.25%	/z/ as /s/	muisik /'mju:zɪk/	/'mju:sɪk/
Spirantization	37	2.13%	/k/ into /ʃ/	archive /'ɑ:kərv/	/ɑ:ʃɪf/
Velarization	33	1.90%	/ɪ/ for /ɪ/	light /laɪt/	/laɪt/
Trilling	33	1.90%	displaying /r/	care /keə/	/keər/
Prothesis	31	1.79%	adding /iks/	xerox /zɪərɒks/	/ɪksɪərɒks/
Voicing	28	1.61%	/s/ as /z/	use(n) /ju:s/	/ju:z/
Elision	3	0.17%	leaving out /h/	behind /br'hænd/	/br'ænd/
Flapping	2	0.12%	/t/ by /d/	button /'bʌtn/	/'bʌdn/
Metathesis	1	0.06%	/ʃ/ for /t/	Hatchman /'hætʃmæn/	/'hæftmæn/
Paragoge	1	0.06%	adding /r/	chocolate /'tʃɒklət/	/'tʃɒklətr/
Total	1735	100%			

As for the second research question, table 3 shows the analysis of the final results using the SPSS particularly the t-test for equality of means shows that the two tailed significant values for both the male students and female students are well above the prescribed significant number (0.05). Therefore, research question two can be answered by stating that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female students with respect to errors in pronunciation of English consonant sounds. See histogram 1, for the percentage of pronunciation errors of male and female students.

Table 3
The differences of errors frequencies between male and female students

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	MD	SE D	95% CI	
								LL	UL
Equal variances assumed	2.789	0.105	0.784	31	0.44	0.027	0.03	-0.04	0.10
Equal variances not assumed			1.141	20.66	0.27	0.027	0.02	-0.02	0.08

Figure 1 also shows the percentage of errors made by male students and female students. It pictures the difference between them in the four different tasks that they were asked to do during the study. These tasks are: normal-consonant list, reading passage, silent-consonant list, and inconsistent-consonant list.

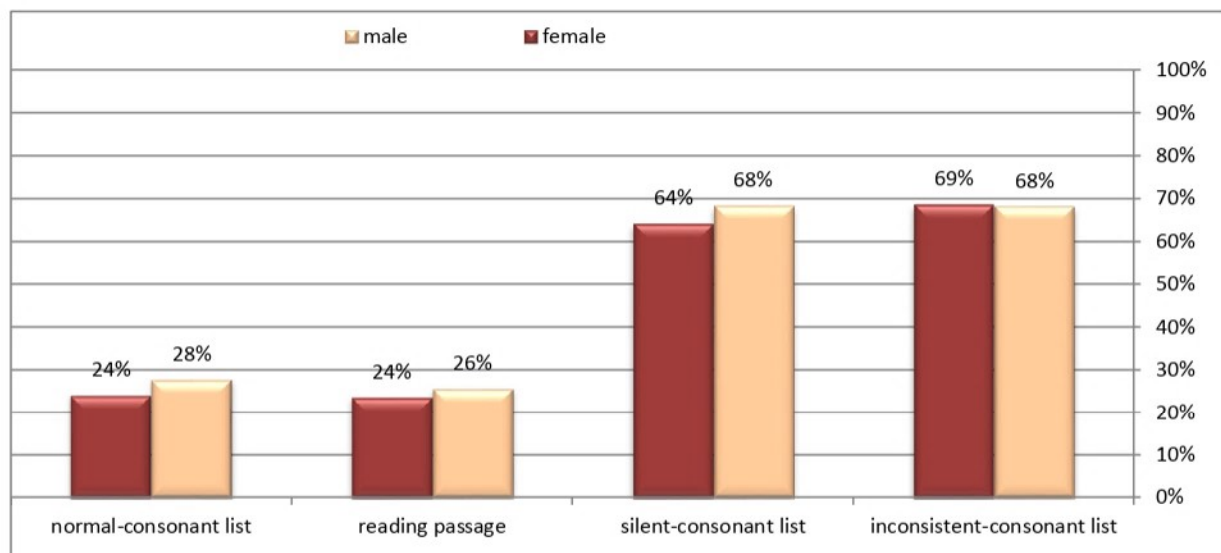


Figure 1: Percentage of errors according to tasks and participants' gender

This study also investigated teachers' perspectives on students' pronunciation errors. Twenty teachers from the college under investigation were asked to fill in a semi-structured questionnaire. Among the reasons they think stand behind students' errors in pronunciation were: inconsistency of sounds between English and Arabic, students' insufficient knowledge of sounds' symbols of English, and short time allotted to teach pronunciation. For proper remedies, they listed many solutions like: listening to native speakers through different channels of learning like radio, TV, YouTube, etc.; practicing language in campus; increasing the time allocated to teach pronunciation; and establishing audio laboratories.

Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the common pronunciation errors made by Yemeni EFL learners. It revealed that learners tend to make pronunciation errors in sounds that are not found in their MT more than they do in sounds similar in both their MT and the TL. Those errors were of different types like: substitution, commutation and metathesis. The study showed also that there is no significant difference between male students and female students with regard to pronunciation errors. In addition, teachers stated their opinions, in addition to their suggestions for the solutions, on the causes of these students' erroneous pronunciation.

As long as this study was conducted to investigate the common errors in pronunciation pertaining to consonants among the first year undergraduates, at the Department of English, Faculty of Education - Shabwah, University of Aden, and has found that there are numerous errors that reach 93% in pronouncing some English consonant sounds, there is an exigency for a similar study pertaining to common errors in vowels even in the same context.

This study stood on the threshold of fossilization. Therefore, there must be a similar study to be implemented in the same context to find out which of these errors will persist and which of them will melt away after learners' sufficient exposure to the correct pronunciation.

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استقصاء الأخطاء الشائعة في النطق المتعلقة بالأصوات الساكنة لدى الطلبة اليمنيين في المرحلة الأولى الجامعية

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الملخص:

استقصت الدراسة الحالية الأخطاء الشائعة في النطق، المتعلقة بالأصوات الساكنة عند ثلاثة وثلاثين من طلبة السنة الأولى ، في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، بكلية التربية - شبوة ، في جامعة عدن. وقد تبنت الدراسة نظرية كوردر، إطاراً عاماً لتفسير مشكلات النطق في اللغة الإنجليزية عند الطلاب اليمنيين الذين شملتهم الدراسة، إذ تم تجميع البيانات عن طريق مقابلة مسجلة لمهملتين من نموذج لابوف وهما قائمة من الكلمات وقطعة للقراءة. إضافة إلى ذلك كانت هناك بيانات داعمة وتكميلية تم الحصول عليها من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في الكلية نفسها، وذلك عبر استبيان قام به الباحثون. وقد أظهرت هذه الدراسة أن المشاركين واجهوا الكثير من الصعوبات في نطق الأصوات الساكنة الإنجليزية الأربعة والعشرين، ولا سيما الأصوات التي لا وجود لها في لغتهم الأم (العربية) مثل /p/ ، /t/ ، /dʒ/ و /v/. كما تم تصنيف الأخطاء التي خلصت إليها الدراسة على ستة عشر نوعاً، هي: استبدال صوت بآخر، نطق الأصوات الصامتة، الاستبدال الناتج عنه كلمة مختلفة شكلاً ومعنى، إضافة صوت في وسط الكلمة، استبدال /l/ المفخمة بـ /l/ المرققة ، والعكس ، إدراج صوت علة بين ساكنين، استبدال الصوت الصائت بغير الصائت، والعكس ، استبدال صوت انفجاري بآخر احتكاكي ، نطق /r/ بوضوح حال الوقف ، إضافة صوت في بداية الكلمة ، حذف الأصوات ، استبدال /t/ بـ /d/ ، مبادلة موقع صوت بموقع صوت آخر في الكلمة نفسها ، إضافة صوت إلى آخر الكلمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النطق ، الأصوات الساكنة ، تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.