



## An investigation into the obstacles and Problems Faced by Libyan Learners in mastering English Pronunciation at the Intermediate Level

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تحقيق في العقبات والمشاكل التي يواجهها المتعلمون الليبيون في إتقان النطق باللغة الإنجليزية في  
المستوى المتوسط

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Received: January 14, 2025

Accepted: March 21, 2025

Published: March 26, 2025

### Abstract:

Recently, it's been observed that understanding a language's phonological system significantly enhances learners' speaking abilities. Moreover, this knowledge greatly assists teachers in addressing many of their students' pronunciation challenges.

This study emphasizes the importance of pronunciation learning and reviews relevant research and studies. It also discusses the factors that affect pronunciation. Additionally, the study examines specific pronunciation issues faced by Libyan learners at the intermediate level in private language centers. Although these learners work hard to improve their English proficiency, many struggle to achieve accurate pronunciation, which negatively impacts their communication skills and self-confidence.

The research highlights several key obstacles, including interference from the Arabic sound system, limited exposure to native English pronunciation, and insufficient practice opportunities. Other problems relate to social and psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, anxiety, self-confidence, motivation, and attitudes.

The data for this investigation were gathered through a questionnaire specifically designed and administered to twenty-four intermediate-level Libyan learners. None of the participants had ever visited an English-speaking country. The collected data were subsequently analyzed to identify and understand the pronunciation challenges these learners face.

**Keywords:** Learning Pronunciation, Factors, Mother Tongue, Target Language.

### الملخص

في الآونة الأخيرة، لوحظ أن فهم النظام الصوتي للغة يمكن أن يعزز بشكل كبير قدرات المتعلمين على التحدث. علاوة على ذلك، يمكن لهذه المعرفة أن تساعد المعلمين بشكل كبير في معالجة العديد من تحديات النطق لدى طلابهم.

تؤكد هذه الدراسة على أهمية تعلم النطق وتعرض الأبحاث والدراسات ذات الصلة. كما تناقش العوامل التي تؤثر على النطق، خاصة تأثير اللغة الأم على اكتساب اللغة الهدف. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تبحث الدراسة في قضايا النطق المحددة التي يواجهها المتعلمون الليبيون في المستوى المتوسط في مراكز اللغة الخاصة. على الرغم من أن المتعلمين يعملون بجد لتحسين كفاءتهم في اللغة الإنجليزية، إلا أن العديد منهم يواجهون صعوبات في تحقيق النطق الدقيق، مما يؤثر سلبًا على مهارات التواصل لديهم وثقتهم بأنفسهم.

يسلط البحث الضوء على عدة عقبات رئيسية، بما في ذلك التداخل من النظام الصوتي العربي، ومحدودية التعرض للنطق الإنجليزي الأصلي، ونقص فرص الممارسة الكافية. تتصل مشاكل أخرى بعوامل اجتماعية ونفسية مثل الخوف من ارتكاب الأخطاء، والقلق، والثقة بالنفس، والتحفيز، والمواقف. جمعت البيانات لهذه الدراسة من خلال استبيان صُمم خصيصًا وطُبق على أربعة وعشرين متعلمًا ليبيًا في المستوى المتوسط. لم يزر أي من المشاركين البلدان الناطقة باللغة الإنجليزية قط. ثم خُللت البيانات التي جُمعت لتحديد وفهم تحديات النطق التي يواجهها هؤلاء المتعلمون.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تعلم النطق، العوامل، اللغة الأم، اللغة الهدف.

## Overview of the research

Pronunciation is one of the basic skills required for EFL learners and it is very important skill to develop their communicative efficiency. Despite pronunciation is an essential aspect of language learning, it continues to be one of the most challenging skills for Libyan learners to acquire.

Many Libyan learners face significant challenges in mastering English pronunciation, even after years of studying the English language. This study examines the pronunciation difficulties experienced by Libyan learners who have passed beginner, elementary, and pre-intermediate levels and are now enrolled in an intermediate level course. It also seeks to pinpoint particular pronunciation issues, explore the factors that contribute to these challenges, and assess their impact on the overall language development of learners. Mastering pronunciation can be challenging for various reasons. Firstly, English is not the native language of Libyan learners, which means that their first language can influence how they learn pronunciation. In other words, the linguistic systems of English and Arabic differ significantly, complicating the pronunciation learning process for Libyan students.

## Introduction:

Naunan and Carter (2001) defines that pronunciation is the production and reception of the significant sounds of a specific language to convey meaning within the contexts of language use. Good pronunciation is fundamental for both speaking and comprehending spoken English. It should be prioritized as the first component of learning a foreign language. The ability to speak English involves correct pronunciation and intonation, which directly impacts effective communication in conversation. Ellis (1997) points out that one of the essential aspects of effective speaking is proper pronunciation. However, Saylor (2005) states that poor pronunciation can lead to a negative first impression. The issues with English pronunciation have also affected students' performance in classroom activities, as well as their midterm and final exams, ultimately influencing their grades. This essay aims to explore the causes and factors contributing to the English pronunciation difficulties faced by students.

Learning pronunciation can be difficult for several reasons. Firstly, English is not the native language of Libyan learners, which means that their first language can influence their pronunciation skills. In other words, the linguistic systems of both languages (English and Arabic) are different and that makes learning pronunciation difficult for Libyan learners. Kenworthy (1996) asserts that the more differences there are, the more difficulties the learners will have in pronouncing English." Secondly, limited exposure to the target language as spoken by native speakers can significantly contribute to poor English pronunciation. Lastly, a lack of personal motivation among Libyan learners may hinder their ability to master correct English pronunciation.

It has been noticed that learners when learn the pronunciation of English language, they face some challenges in learning sounds, intonation or stress. Hence, the learners should be aware of the phonological system of the language when they produce the sounds which are closest to the sounds in their mother tongue.

Many learners struggle with mispronouncing certain sounds, which makes it challenging for them to produce specific English sounds that do not exist in the Arabic language. For instance, learners frequently encounter difficulties with voiceless consonants, which are often replacing them with their voiced equivalents. such as /p/ replaced by /b/, /f/ by /v/, and /s/ by /z/. Al-Saidat (2013: 122) identifies the importance of understanding these pronunciation challenges because incorrect pronunciation can obstruct clear communication, especially when it changes the meaning of words or phrases, such as confusing 'pin' with 'pen' or 'ship' with 'chip'.

In many English classes, teachers do not give sufficient attention to integrating pronunciation components into their lessons, even though these elements, such as sounds, syllables, stress, and intonation, can significantly aid learners. Consequently, learners cannot be able to recognize the functions of these pronunciation elements and find it challenging to pronounce English correctly. Although some studies have been conducted in the area of pronunciation, they primarily focus on sounds, stress, and intonation. According to Newton (2009: 75), the amount of attention dedicated to teaching pronunciation in language courses varies greatly, influenced partly by teachers' attitudes towards errors and the learners' language learning objectives. This study focuses on common pronunciation issues faced by Libyan learners at the intermediate level.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to achieve three primary objectives:

- To highlight the significance of learning pronunciation for Libyan learners and to offer some factors that affect their pronunciation.
- To focus on the common obstacles and issues that face by Libyan Learners in mastering English Pronunciation at the Intermediate Level.
- To identify the problematic areas in learning English pronunciation by Libyan learners at the Intermediate level.

The following questions were explored in conducting this study:

- How can Libyan learners perceive the importance of learning pronunciation in their overall English language learning process?
- What are the obstacles that Libyan learners have in learning English pronunciation? Are they aware of their pronunciation problems?
- How can the teacher help the learners to overcome their pronunciation difficulties?

The main hypothesis of this study is that the most Libyan learners encounter serious challenges in mastering English pronunciation correctly. This study supposes that the main causes of poor English language pronunciation are: lack of motivation, insufficient exposure to the target language, negative attitudes towards pronunciation, a shortage of well-trained teachers, and lack of facilities.

### **Significance of the study**

This study is an attempt to investigate the learning pronunciation problems and tries to find suitable solutions for them in one hand and address the factors that contribute these problems on the other. This paper also focuses on the challenges which are still facing many Libyan learners when they learn English pronunciation whether these problems in learning such as (sounds, stress and intonation) or in psychological area like (fears of making pronunciation mistakes, anxiety and motivation). It is hoped that the findings of this study will give valuable and useful information on the implementation of learning pronunciation. It is also hoped that it will help the learners to understand the phonological system differences between their mother tongue and the target language.

### **The importance of learning pronunciation**

The learners should know that pronunciation has a positive effect on learning foreign languages and then they can obtain the skills they need for effective communication in English. Many books and studies have highlighted the importance of teaching and learning English pronunciation. For instance, Miller (2004) points out that the significance of pronunciation instruction should be balanced with the instruction of the other language skills. The first thing that can create good impression about the quality of the speakers' language ability is their pronunciation when they talk to others, Morley (1998: 22). In addition, the significance of pronunciation becomes highly considerable in the process of verbal communication. However; Gilbert (2010) defines pronunciation as "something of an orphan in English programs around the world". Wong (1987: 17) states that the teaching of pronunciation "is not exclusively a linguistic matter". Bad and incomprehensible pronunciation will make misunderstanding for both speakers and listeners. Nation & Newton (2009: 75) believe that "when some teachers and learners complain about difficulties in speaking, they are often talking about pronunciation".

pronunciation plays a crucial role in the process of communication. Yates & Zielinski (2009) point out that pronunciation in English plays a vital role in the process of learning the language. According to Morely (1998: 20-23) the pronunciation plays an important role in overall communicative competence and it helps the learners to become an intelligible speaker.

### **Factors affecting learning pronunciation**

There are many factors affecting English learning pronunciation. The native language or the mother tongue plays an important role in learning pronunciation. The age of learners, the attitude and the motivation. Finally, the exposure to the target language. According to Barker and Abdullah (2015) the pronunciation was associated with investigation and was seen as a way to meet the needs of non-native speakers.

In this paper, the researcher mentions some of the important factors that affect the learning of pronunciation. They are as follows:

### **1. Mother tongue influence**

It is widely acknowledged that the extent of differences between a learner's native language and the target language can increase the probability of encountering difficulties in language acquisition. Generally, the pronunciation of non-native speakers is significantly affected by their mother tongue. Many researches have attempted to predict the potential challenges learners may face in acquiring accurate English pronunciation by analyzing and comparing the sound systems of English and the learners' native languages. Ellis (1994) indicates that "The learner's first language has a significant influence on the acquisition of a second language, especially in the early stages. Errors made in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary often reflect patterns from the mother tongue." Due to the role of the native language, considerable researches have been conducted on the linguistic differences between English and Arabic, along with the specific problems and difficulties faced by Arabic-speaking learners when learning English. Flege and Port (1981:125) claim that "the most important interference from 1L to 2L occurs at the level of phonetic implementation rather than at an abstract level of organization based on features.

### **2. Attitude and Motivation**

Learners should have a self-motivation for improving their English language pronunciation. Their pronunciation abilities are significantly influenced by their personal motivation and attitudes. Each learner enters the language-learning process with unique experiences and perceptions about the target language, which can either facilitate or obstruct their progress in pronunciation. Jones (2002) highlights that enhancing learners' motivation and addressing limited input can be achieved by promoting awareness of accurate pronunciation and increasing their exposure to native speaker models.

Motivation is widely recognized as a key factor influencing learners' success in acquiring accurate pronunciation in a second language. Gardner and Lambert (1972) argue that motivation is the most important predictor of second language learning outcomes, particularly in pronunciation development. In addition, Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) emphasize that both instrumental and integrative forms of motivation play a vital role in enhancing language acquisition. Similarly, Elliot (1995) finds that learners' attitudes—specifically their interest in achieving native-like pronunciation—were strongly linked to how well they pronounced the target language sounds. This was measured through the Pronunciation Attitude Inventory, which revealed that those who prioritized correct pronunciation tended to perform better. As Gardner (1985) highlights, motivation and attitude are central elements that shape how effectively individuals learn a language.

### **3. Exposure to Target Language**

Another crucial factor in developing accurate pronunciation is exposure to the target language. Learners' exposure to the target language depends more on how often they use English in their daily lives than on where they live. Regular use of English, especially in speaking and listening, helps improve pronunciation. Research indicates that both the quantity and quality of exposure significantly influence learners' oral proficiency. Flege, Yeni-Komshian, & Liu (1999) asserted that "The degree of exposure to the target language is a crucial predictor of pronunciation accuracy in second language learners". However; Shumin (1997) explained that "Learning to speak a foreign language is very difficult for adult learners, because it requires not only knowledge of the language but also the ability to use it appropriately in real interactions.". He also highlighted that mastering spoken language is especially challenging for foreign language learners because it requires not only linguistic knowledge, but also the ability to use the language effectively in various communicative situations.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and Procedure of the study**

Participants in this study were 24 adult learners (18 males, 6 females) enrolled in the intermediate level and they have learned English language at least for seven months. Their age range was from 19 to 40.

In this study, a questionnaire was a method for data collection. It was distributed among participants at the private English language center and they were asked to fill it. 18 items were grouped into three groups; each of which deals with one of the three research questions. Items from 1 to 3 deal with "How can Libyan learners perceive the importance of learning pronunciation?" Items from 4 to 6 deal with "The teacher's role and how he can help the learners to overcome their pronunciation difficulties?". Items from 7 to 20 "What are the obstacles that Libyan learners have in learning English pronunciation? Are they aware of their pronunciation problems?". The data collected have been analyzed by using percentage rate to obtain the results and findings.

### **Data analysis from learners' questionnaire**

The collected data from the questionnaire were classified. The questionnaire items are focused on learning pronunciation in general and some pronunciation difficulties that encountered by Libyan learners after seven months of learning English language.

Questions	Options	No. of Learners	Percentage
1. Is learning pronunciation important as any other English language skills?	a. Very important b. Important c. Quite important d. Not very important	16 4 2 2	66.6 16.6 8.3 8.3
2. Is learning English pronunciation complicated?	a. Yes b. To some extent c. No	17 5 2	70.8 20.8 8.3
3. The time which is given to learn the correct English pronunciation is...	a. Sufficient b. In sufficient	4 20	16.6 83.3
4. Does your teacher have knowledge of good pronunciation?	a. Yes b. To some extent c. No	2 17 5	8.3 70.8 20.8
5. How often does your teacher correct your pronunciation mistakes?	a. Always b. Sometimes c. Rarely d. Never	7 5 4 8	29.1 20.8 16.6 33.3
6. How often does your teacher encourage you to exposure to the target language?	a. Always b. Sometimes c. Rarely	5 7 12	20.8 29.1 50
7. Does complexity of English sounds, stress or intonation affect the acquiring correct pronunciation?	a. Yes b. To some extent c. No	13 9 2	54.1 37.5 8.3
8. What do you think of your level in pronunciation skill?	a. Very good b. Good	2 4	8.3 16.6

	c. Satisfactory	8	33.3
	d. Poor	10	41.6
9. How confident do you feel about English pronunciation?	a. Very confident	1	4.1
	b. Confident	5	20.8
	C. Quite confident	5	20.8
	d. Not very confident	5	20.8
	e. Not confident at all	8	33.3
10. Do you think you will be able to speak like native speakers?	a. Yes	9	37.5
	b. To some extent	11	45.8
	c. No	4	16.6
11. Do you think that English sounds which do not exist in Arabic are hard to pronounce?	a. Yes	15	62
	b. To some extent	5	20.8
	c. No	4	16.6
12. What do you think of these topics are most difficult for learners when they learn pronunciation?	a. Sounds	4	16.6
	b. Stress	12	50
	c. Intonation	6	25
	d. Other..... Name it.	2	8.3
13. Does the lack of good pronunciation of learners impact their speaking skills?	a. Yes	20	83.3
	b. To some extent	3	12.5
	c. No	1	4.1
14. What do you think the main causes of poor English language pronunciation?	a. Lack of facilities	6	25
	b. Lack of well-trained teachers	8	33.3
	c. Lack of exposure to the target language	7	29.1
	d. Other.....Name it.	3	12.5
15. Does the mother tongue affect learning pronunciation?	a. Yes	10	41.6
	b. To some extent	12	50
	c. No	2	8.3
16. Do you think that English sounds which do not exist in Arabic are hard to pronounce?	a. Yes	15	62
	b. To some extent	5	20.8
	c. No	4	16.6
17. How often do you use the dictionary of phonetics system for the improvement of your pronunciation?	a. Always	11	45.8
	b. Sometimes	6	25
	c. Rarely	7	29.1



18. Are you motivated in learning pronunciation classes?	a. Highly motivated	11	45.8
	b. Quite motivated	7	29.1
	d. Not motivated	6	25

### Findings of the study:

**Considering questions 1, 2 and 3,** the learners were asked about how can they perceive the importance of learning pronunciation. The answers to these questions were:

- 67% of the learners believed that learning pronunciation is very important as any other English language skills. 17% believed that learning pronunciation is important and 8% asserted that is quite important, while 8% believe that is not very important and no one of them thought that learning pronunciation is not important at all.
- Approximately 71% of the Libyan learners said that learning English pronunciation is complicated, and only 21% said that this skill is complicated and difficult to some extent, while 8% denied that learning pronunciation is too hard and complicated. The researcher believes that learning pronunciation skill is complicated as any other skills, it needs well-trained teacher who can use the activities and the techniques effectively to teach it.
- About 17% of the learners stated that the time which is given to learn English pronunciation skills is sufficient, but 83% of them asserted that the time which is devoted to this skill is not enough and some hours on pronunciation classes should be offered. In fact, teaching and learning the correct pronunciation needs much time to be taught and learned properly.
- **Regarding questions from 4 to 6,** the learners were asked about what is the teacher's role and how he can help the learners to overcome their pronunciation difficulties.
- About 8% of the learners pointed out that their teacher has knowledge of good pronunciation. However; 71% said that their teacher has knowledge of good pronunciation and 21% asserted that their teacher doesn't have knowledge of good pronunciation.
- 29% of the learners stated that the teacher always corrects their mistakes when they pronounce incorrectly, 21% said that sometimes the teacher corrects and follows up their mistakes. However ;17% pointed out that teacher rarely corrects their mistakes, and 33%of them asserted that the teacher never corrects any of their mistakes.
- Nearly 21%of the learners indicated that the teacher always encourages them to exposure to the target language, 29% of them said that sometimes their teacher encourages them, and 50% asserted that the teacher rarely encourages them to exposure to the target language.
- **The answer to the 7<sup>th</sup> question** shows that the learners were asked if the complexity of English sounds, stress or intonation affect the acquiring correct pronunciation, 54% of the learners said that can affect acquiring pronunciation, 38% of them said the complexity of English sounds, stress or intonation affect acquiring pronunciation to some extent, about 8% indicated that cannot be affect the pronunciation.
- **In the question 8,** 8% of the learners indicated that their level in pronunciation skills is very good, and 17% of them pointed their level is good. 33% of learners were satisfied by their level and 42% thought that their level is poor towards this skill.
- Only 4% of the learners stated that they feel very confident about their pronunciation. However; in the other cases the percentage of the learners is the same, 21% of them pronounce English confidently, 21% were quite confident, 21% were not very confident, but 33% were not confident at all.
- About 37% of the learners asserted that they will be able to speak like native speakers, 46% thought to some extent they will be able to speak like native speakers, while 17% of them denied that.
- **In the question 11** the learners were asked if the English sounds which do not exist in Arabic is hard to pronounce or not. Nearly 62% agreed that is hard and 21% agreed that to some extent is hard. About 17% pointed out that English sounds which do not exist in Arabic is not hard to pronounce.
- **In reply to the 12<sup>th</sup> question,** approximately 17% of the learners believed that learning sounds is the most difficult topic, while 50% asserted that learning stress is the most difficult. 25% said learning the correct intonation is one of the most difficult topics and 8% of the learners added when they want to learn pronunciation, understanding the syllables is more difficult than what the researcher mentioned above.
- **With regard to the 13<sup>th</sup> question,** 83% of the learners pointed out that the lack of good pronunciation impacts their speaking skills, while 13% of them said that their speaking skills cannot be affected by the poor pronunciation. Only 4% of the learners denied that.

- **As regards to the 14<sup>th</sup> question**, according to the researcher's thinking, there are four main causes of poor English language pronunciation. These causes were given to the learners and the researcher asked them to choose the main cause according to their opinion. 25% of the learners stated that lack of classroom facilities is the main reason, nearly 33% asserted the reason is lack of well-trained teachers, 29% of them confirmed that lack of exposure to the target language could be the main reason, and 13% supposed other reasons like the insufficient time and the crowded classes.
- **The answer to the 15<sup>th</sup> question** was 42% of the learners said that learners' mother tongue affects their pronunciation, 50% of them said that is the mother tongue can be affected to some extent, about 7% indicated that the learner's pronunciation is never affected by the mother tongue.
- Approximately 62% of the learners said that English sounds which do not exist in Arabic are hard to pronounce, while 21% of them asserted that to some extent and 17% pointed out that that English sounds which do not exist in Arabic are not hard to pronounce.
- **In the question 17** the learners were asked How often do you use the dictionary of phonetics system for improvement of your pronunciation, 46% said that they always use the dictionary, 25% indicated that sometimes they use it, and 29% they rarely use the dictionary of phonetics system for improvement of your pronunciation.
- **The 18<sup>th</sup> question** reveals that 46% of learners are highly motivated in learning pronunciation classes, and 29% are quite motivated. However; 25% are not motivated in learning pronunciation at all.

### Conclusion:

This study highlights the essential importance of precise pronunciation as a fundamental aspect of English language learning among Libyan intermediate learners. The findings indicate that a considerable number of learners struggle with accurate production of English sounds, mainly due to interference from their Arabic phonetic system, inadequate exposure to native English speech, and limited practice opportunities. Furthermore, affective factors such as fear of making errors and diminished self-confidence further impede their progress. The study emphasizes the crucial role of teachers and the need for supportive learning environments that promote effective pronunciation skills. Accordingly, it is recommended that pronunciation pedagogy be enhanced through specialized teacher training, increased learner motivation, and expanded access to authentic linguistic input and practice.

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