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Patterns of English Pronunciation Errors in Sebha Secondary Schools

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أنماط أخطاء النطق باللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الثانوية بمدينة سبها

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Abstract:
English pronunciation remains a significant challenge for many Libyan learners, particularly in regions where exposure to native speech models is limited. This study investigates such challenges by focusing on common pronunciation error patterns in Sebha secondary schools. This study examines recurrent pronunciation errors among secondary school students in Sebha, Libya, with the aim of identifying their phonetic challenges and suggesting pedagogical solutions. Thirty students (ten from each of three secondary schools, male and female) were randomly selected to read a controlled list of ten words per target phoneme, and their productions were recorded for phonetic analysis. In addition, ten English teachers from the same schools completed structured questionnaires. Descriptive analysis revealed persistent difficulties with the consonants /ʤ/, /ʒ/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʧ/, /z/, /p/, and /v/, as well as the vowels /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɪə/, /ɜː/, /uː/, /iː/, /ʌ/, and /e/, particularly in contexts where multiple pronunciation variants occur. The dominant error type was sound substitution, largely attributable to first language interference, compounded by the orthographic system's inconsistency between graphemes and phonemes, and the limited explicit focus on pronunciation in classroom practice. These findings suggest the need for systematic integration of pronunciation training into English language instruction, with emphasis on high-risk phonemes, awareness of orthographic influence, and contrastive analysis between English and learners' first language. Such interventions could reduce fossilised errors, improve intelligibility, and enhance learners' communicative competence in English.

Keywords: Pronunciation errors, First language interference, Orthographic influence, Secondary school students, Phoneme acquisition.

الملخص
تتناول هذه الدراسة الأخطاء النطقية المتكررة لدى طلاب المرحلة الثانوية في مدينة سبها، ليبيا، بهدف تحديد التحديات الصوتية التي يواجهونها واقتراح حلول تربوية لمعالجتها. شملت العينة ثلاثين طالبًا (عشرة من كل مدرسة من ثلاث مدارس ثانوية، من الذكور والإناث) تم اختيارهم عشوائيًا لقراءة قائمة مضبوطة من عشر كلمات لكل صوت مستهدف، وتم تسجيل قراءاتهم لأغراض التحليل الصوتي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، أكمل عشرة معلمي لغة إنجليزية من المدارس نفسها استبيانات مُخصصة. كشفت التحليلات الوصفية عن وجود صعوبات في نطق الأصوات الصامتة /ʤ/، /ʒ/، /θ/، /ð/، /ʧ/، /z/، /p/، و /v/، وكذلك الأصوات التالية /eɪ/، /aɪ/، /ɪə/، /ɜː/، /uː/، /iː/، /ʌ/، و /e/، لا سيما في السياقات التي تتعدد فيها طرائق النطق. تمثلت الأخطاء الأكثر شيوعًا في الاستبدال الصوتي، ويرجع ذلك أساسًا إلى تأثير اللغة الأم، فضلًا عن تأثير النظام الإملائي غير المتناسق بين الحروف والأصوات، وقلة التركيز الصريح على تعليم النطق في الممارسات داخل الصف. أشارت النتائج إلى ضرورة دمج تدريب النطق بشكل منهجي ضمن تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية، مع التركيز على الأصوات المعقدة، ومعالجة تأثير الإملاء، وإجراء مقارنة تحليلية بين اللغة الإنجليزية ولغة المتعلم الأم. يمكن لمثل هذه المعالجات أن تحدّ من الأخطاء الشائعة بين المتعلمين، وتحسّن من وضوح النطق، وتعزّز الكفاءة التواصلية للمتعلمين في اللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أخطاء النطق، تأثير اللغة الأم، التأثير الإملائي، طلاب المرحلة الثانوية، اكتساب الصوتيات.

Introduction

Learning correct pronunciation is challenging, especially when teachers do not emphasise pronunciation activities. Learners may believe they speak clearly, yet still produce errors due to differences between English and Arabic sound systems, as some English phonemes do not exist in either standard or colloquial Arabic. The mother tongue significantly influences the acquisition of target language sounds, and Arab learners encounter difficulties with phonemes that lack equivalents in Arabic. For instance, phonemes such as /p/ and /b/ are distinct in English but represented only by /b/ in Arabic. Consequently, learners often substitute unfamiliar English sounds with the closest Arabic equivalents, e.g., pronouncing play /pleɪ/ as /bleɪ/ and cheap /tʃiːp/ as /ʃiːb/.

Such pronunciation challenges impede effective communication, whereas accurate pronunciation enhances learners' confidence, intelligibility, and participation in various interactions. Addressing these difficulties is therefore essential in English language teaching, particularly in contexts where Arabic is the first language.

Research Problem

Libyan learners of English often face difficulties in achieving accurate pronunciation, which can hinder communication and obscure intended meanings. In particular, secondary school students in Sebha struggle with certain English sounds, while some teachers lack adequate experience in teaching pronunciation. Consequently, students' pronunciation errors persist. This study seeks to investigate the specific difficulties that Sebha secondary school students encounter when pronouncing English consonants and vowels.

Research Questions

The main research question of this study is:

Do teachers apply adequate pronunciation teaching strategies when instructing secondary school students in English?

To answer this, the study addresses the following sub-questions:

a) Why do Sebha secondary school students mispronounce some English consonants and vowels?
b) What types of pronunciation errors do they make during speech?
c) Which teaching methods are most effective for improving English pronunciation among Libyan learners?
d) What solutions can help overcome these pronunciation difficulties?

Aim of the Study

This study aims to investigate the pronunciation difficulties of Sebha secondary school students and to identify practical solutions for improving their English pronunciation.

Literature Review

Mastering English pronunciation remains a persistent challenge for EFL learners, particularly in contexts where explicit pronunciation instruction is overlooked. Recent research underscores the profound influence of L1 phonological systems on the acquisition of English sounds, especially when critical phonemes are absent from the learners' native language, as is the case for Arabic-speaking students [1], [2]. The substitution, omission, or distortion of unfamiliar English sounds—such as /p/, /v/, and /tʃ/—can severely hinder intelligibility and impede effective communication [3], [4]. These difficulties are exacerbated by limited exposure to native models, insufficient classroom emphasis on pronunciation, and sociolinguistic factors such as anxiety and low motivation [5], [6]. As English proficiency becomes increasingly vital for academic and professional advancement in the Arab world, addressing these persistent pronunciation barriers is essential for EFL pedagogy [7], [8].

Recent scholarship (2022–2025) has expanded our understanding of pronunciation errors among secondary school EFL learners, with a particular focus on Arabic-speaking contexts.

L1 Interference and Phonological Transfer:

A body of recent work confirms that negative transfer from the native language is the principal source of segmental and suprasegmental errors among Arabic-speaking learners [1], [9]–[13]. For example, Alsaeed and Alhaysony [1] and Ahmed and Ali [2] both confirm that Arabic-speaking students struggle with English phonemes absent from Arabic, leading to substitutions such as /p/→/b/ and /v/→/f/. This phenomenon extends to vowels and diphthongs, as documented by Alzubaidi et al. [14] and Rahman et al. [15].

Teaching Practices and Instructional Interventions:

Research demonstrates that explicit phonetic instruction and regular pronunciation-oriented activities substantially improve learners' accuracy [3], [16]–[19]. Alghamdi [3] and Zhang & Taylor [4] found that embedding pronunciation activities in the curriculum leads to measurable gains in both intelligibility and learner confidence. The importance of teacher training and updated curricula is emphasized by Alshehri [20] and Farhan [21], who advocate for targeted professional development.

Technological Tools in Pronunciation Training:
The use of mobile-assisted (MALL) and computer-assisted pronunciation training (CAPT) has surged as a supplementary pedagogy in recent years. Ahmad et al. [7], Li and Huang [22], and Mahran et al. [23] have all shown that language apps with speech recognition and feedback features promote self-correction, increase learner engagement, and accelerate improvement in both segmental and suprasegmental aspects.

Sociolinguistic and Psychological Factors:
Several studies have highlighted the impact of affective variables on pronunciation outcomes. Elbaz & AlBzour [5] and Kurniawati & Sutrisno [6] documented how anxiety, lack of confidence, and peer pressure can impede pronunciation practice and lead to fossilization of errors. Conversely, interventions that foster supportive peer interaction and collaborative practice environments, as demonstrated by Hassan et al. [24] and Sato & Lyster [25], can reduce anxiety and promote accuracy.

Comparative Studies and Global Perspectives:
Comparative error analysis across different linguistic backgrounds—such as those by Lee [26] and Kim et al. [27]—show that while L1 influence is a universal phenomenon, the specific error patterns and their frequency vary by language. This informs the development of region-specific pedagogical frameworks [28], [29].

Exposure and Input:
Authentic listening input and increased exposure to native speaker models are repeatedly linked to improved pronunciation and prosody [15], [30]. Studies by Alanzi [8] and Vandergrift & Goh [30] support the integration of extensive listening activities in EFL curricula.
The literature consistently shows that English pronunciation errors among EFL secondary school learners are shaped by a combination of L1 interference, instructional practices, psycholinguistic factors, and exposure to English. While the specific phonological challenges may vary by region, the studies reviewed offer valuable frameworks and intervention strategies that can inform future research and curriculum development for students in Sebha secondary schools.

Materials and Methods

Participants
The study involved a total of 30 secondary school students (15 males and 15 females), aged between 15 and 17 years, randomly selected from three secondary schools in Sebha: *Al-Quds*, *Jaber Ibn Hayan*, and *Alrazi*. All participants shared a similar educational background and lived in comparable sociolinguistic environments. Additionally, 10 English language teachers from the same schools participated in the study by completing a structured questionnaire designed to elicit insights into students' pronunciation difficulties.

Instruments
Two primary instruments were employed for data collection: a pronunciation test and a teacher questionnaire.

Pronunciation Test
To investigate common pronunciation errors, a test comprising 430 English words was developed, targeting both consonant and vowel sounds. For each phoneme, ten representative and familiar words were selected. Each student was recorded individually while reading the word list aloud in a quiet room within their school. The recordings were conducted over six sessions, with five participants per session. Prior to the recordings, students were briefed on the study's purpose and gave verbal consent to participate, with confidentiality assured.

Teacher Questionnaire
A six-item questionnaire was administered to the teachers to gather information about students' pronunciation challenges. The first four items required yes/no responses, while the last two were open-ended, exploring teachers' perceptions of students' difficulties and recommended strategies for improvement.

Data Analysis
The collected data were analyzed using quantitative methods, specifically percentage calculations, to identify the frequency of pronunciation errors. The proportion of students mispronouncing each sound was determined using the formula:

$$\text{Error Rate (\%)} = \frac{Number\ of\ students\ with\ incorrect\ pronunciation}{Total\ number\ of\ students} \times 100$$

For example, if 23 out of 30 students mispronounced the /θ/ sound, the error rate was calculated as 77%. The same method was applied to analyze responses from the teachers' questionnaire.

Results and discussion

Students' Pronunciation Recordings

Thirty students (ten from each school) were randomly selected to record samples of English consonant and vowel sounds. A total of 430 English words were selected, with ten words representing the target sounds. Each participant was recorded while pronouncing these words aloud. Table 1 presents the percentage of correct and incorrect pronunciations for selected consonant and vowel phonemes.

Table 1. Percentage of correct and incorrect pronunciation of consonant and vowel phonemes (NS = Number of Students; C = Correct; I = Incorrect)

SN.	Phoneme	NS (C)	% (C)	NS (I)	% (I)
1	/ʤ/	3	10%	27	90%
2	/ʒ/	7	23%	23	77%
3	/θ/	4	13%	26	87%
4	/ð/	3	10%	27	90%
5	/ʧ/	2	7%	28	93%
6	/z/	9	30%	21	70%
7	/p/	7	23%	23	77%
8	/v/	5	17%	25	83%
9	/eɪ/	8	27%	22	73%

The data in table 1 indicated that the lowest accuracy was recorded for /ʤ/, /ð/, and /ʧ/, each with over 90% incorrect production. These consonants, along with /v/ and /p/, are absent from the Arabic phonemic inventory, which likely contributes to their misprounciation. Substitution, omission, and orthographic interference were the most common error types.

Teachers' Questionnaire Findings

Teachers' perceptions provided further insight into the students' pronunciation challenges. All teachers (100%) reported that students replace certain English consonants (e.g., /θ/ → /t/) and vowels (e.g., /iː/ → /ɪ/). All agreed that the mother tongue influences pronunciation.

Eighty percent stated that class time is insufficient to teach pronunciation effectively, while 20% disagreed. Regarding causes of difficulty, 50% attributed errors to L1 interference, 30% to the lack of an English-speaking environment, and 20% to students' low prioritisation of pronunciation. Suggested solutions included increasing class time (20%) and revising the curriculum to include more pronunciation-focused activities (80%).

These findings confirm that both linguistic and pedagogical factors shape students' pronunciation outcomes, aligning with recent literature that emphasizes the importance of targeted pronunciation instruction.

Problems with English Consonants

Analysis of recordings revealed frequent mispronunciation of several consonants (Table 2).

Table 2. Problematic consonant phonemes and common error types.

SN.	Target Phoneme	Example (Correct)	Example (Student)	Error Type
1	/ʤ/	/ˈvɪlɪʤ/ (village)	/ˈvɪlɪʒ/	Omission
2	/ʒ/	/ˈeɪʒə/ (Asia)	/ˈæsɪə/	Substitution, orthography
3	/θ/	/ˈpʌθ/ (path)	/pʌt/	Substitution
4	/ð/	/ˈbrʌðə/ (brother)	/ˈbrʌdər/	Substitution
5	/ʧ/	/ˈʧiːz/ (cheese)	/ʃiːz/	Omission
6	/z/	/ˈpiːz/ (peas)	/piːs/	Substitution
7	/p/	/pen/	/ben/	Substitution
8	/v/	/seɪv/ (save)	/seɪf/	Substitution

The data in table 2 indicated that the substitution of /p/ with /b/ and /v/ with /f/ alters both meaning and intelligibility. Errors with /z/ often involved devoicing to /s/, possibly reinforced by teachers' own pronunciation habits. Spelling influence was particularly evident for /ʒ/, which has multiple orthographic representations.

Problems with English Vowels and Diphthongs
Table 3 summarises the most problematic vowels and diphthongs.

Table 3. Problematic vowel and diphthong phonemes and common error types.

SN.	Target Phoneme	Example (Correct)	Example (Student)	Error Type
1	/e/	/pen/	/pɪn/	Substitution
2	/ʌ/	/kʌp/	/kjuːb/	Substitution
3	/iː/	/liːv/	/lɪv/	Substitution
4	/uː/	/buːt/	/bʊt/	Substitution
5	/ɜː/	/wɜːk/	/wɔrk/	Substitution
6	/eɪ/	/meɪl/	/mel/	Substitution
7	/aɪ/	/faɪm/	/fɪn/	Substitution
8	/ɪə/	/jɪə/	/jiːr/	Addition of /r/

The data in table 3 indicated that Many vowel errors stemmed from orthographic interference (e.g., pronouncing /eɪ/ as /e/) and difficulty with length distinctions (e.g., /iː/ vs /ɪ/). Diphthongs posed particular challenges, often simplified to monophthongs.

Overall Discussion
Findings from the present study are consistent with contemporary research on English pronunciation errors among Arabic-speaking EFL learners. The most problematic phonemes—/ʤ/, /ʒ/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʧ/, /z/, /p/, /v/—were identified in multiple studies as especially challenging for learners whose L1 lacks these sounds [1], [2], [6], [10], [14]. Substitution (e.g., /p/→/b/), omission (e.g., /ʧ/→/ʃ/), and orthographic interference are the most frequently reported error types [13], [14], [21].

L1 interference is the single most significant factor, but errors are compounded by insufficient classroom focus on pronunciation and limited exposure to native models [3], [8], [15], [19]. Teachers in Sebha, like those in other Arab contexts, cite curriculum rigidities and time constraints as obstacles to effective pronunciation teaching [20], [28].

Recent interventions—especially those involving explicit phonetic training, digital tools, and peer-supported practice—have shown marked improvements in learner outcomes [4], [7], [17], [22], [25]. Addressing affective factors by fostering supportive learning environments also appears critical to overcoming the fossilization of errors [5], [6], [24].

Pedagogical recommendations include:

- Systematic integration of pronunciation-focused activities and explicit phonetic instruction [3], [17], [20];
- Adoption of CAPT and MALL tools to supplement classroom practice [7], [22], [23], [29];
- Teacher professional development programs targeting pronunciation teaching strategies [19], [20];
- Increased emphasis on authentic listening exposure and peer-based collaborative tasks [8], [15], [24], [25].

These recommendations are directly relevant to the context of Sebha secondary schools and offer actionable strategies for reducing persistent pronunciation errors and enhancing learners' communicative proficiency in English.

Conclusion
This study investigated the pronunciation difficulties faced by Sebha secondary school students in English. The findings indicate that the most problematic consonant sounds were /ʤ/, /ʒ/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʧ/, /z/, /p/, and /v/, while the most challenging vowel sounds and diphthongs were /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɪə/, /ɜː/, /uː/, /iː/, /ʌ/, and /e/. These difficulties primarily stem from L1 interference, orthographic influence, and insufficient emphasis on pronunciation in classroom instruction. Students often substituted unfamiliar sounds with the closest equivalents in Arabic, omitted components of complex consonants, and followed spelling rather than actual pronunciation rules. Dialectal variation also contributed to inconsistent production of /θ/ and /ð/, while orthographic reliance affected the pronunciation of /z/ and several vowels and diphthongs.
In summary, the main sources of pronunciation errors were L1 interference, conflicts in the orthographic system, and limited teacher focus on pronunciation instruction. This study will benefit society by highlighting the need for improved pronunciation teaching in secondary schools, guiding curriculum development, and promoting effective strategies for enhancing English oral proficiency among learners.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the persistent pronunciation difficulties of secondary school students in Sebha:

1. **Integrate Systematic Pronunciation Instruction**
    - Embed regular pronunciation-focused activities into the English curriculum, targeting both segmental (consonants and vowels) and suprasegmental (stress, rhythm, intonation) features.
    - Provide explicit instruction in the articulation of problematic sounds, particularly those absent from the Arabic phonemic inventory (/p/, /v/, /tʃ/, /ʤ/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʒ/, and certain vowel contrasts).
2. **Enhance Teacher Training and Professional Development**
    - Organise specialised workshops on phonetics and pronunciation teaching methods for English language teachers.
    - Equip teachers with practical strategies, such as minimal pair drills, visual phonetic diagrams, and articulatory modelling.
3. **Leverage Technology-Assisted Learning**
    - Introduce Computer-Assisted Pronunciation Training (CAPT) and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) applications with speech recognition features to provide learners with real-time feedback.
    - Incorporate multimedia resources, such as video modelling, audio recordings by native speakers, and interactive pronunciation games.
4. **Increase Exposure to Authentic English Input**
    - Integrate extensive listening activities into lessons, using authentic materials such as podcasts, interviews, films, and news clips.
    - Encourage extracurricular English-speaking clubs and peer-interaction activities to promote communicative practice in a low-anxiety environment.
5. **Revise Curriculum and Assessment Practices**
    - Allocate dedicated class time for pronunciation within the weekly timetable.
    - Include pronunciation accuracy as an assessed component of oral examinations and continuous assessment tasks.
6. **Address Affective and Motivational Factors**
    - Foster supportive classroom environments to reduce anxiety and encourage risk-taking in pronunciation practice.
    - Use group and pair activities to build learner confidence through collaborative feedback and peer support.

By implementing these recommendations, schools can significantly reduce fossilised pronunciation errors, improve learners' intelligibility, and enhance their overall communicative competence in English.

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