



Problems of pronouncing English Vowels Encountered by Libyan Studentes of First and Second Semester of English Language Department at Sebha University

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مشاكل نطق الأصوات المتحركة في اللغة الإنجليزية لدى الطلاب الليبيين في الفصلين الدراسيين الأول والثاني بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة سبها

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Abstract:

The aim of this study was to investigate the nature of the vowel production errors observed among EFL students Libyan students (first and second semester students) of English Language Department at Sebha University as well as to discover reasons behind these problems in order to find out suitable solutions and pedagogical suggestions that may help the students in overcoming these problems. A descriptive quantitative method was used to analyze students' pronunciation errors. The participants of this study were twenty students from first and second semester and ten teachers from English language department at Sebha university. This study was based on a pronunciation test for students in order to identify students' problems when pronouncing some English vowel sounds and a structured interview for teachers to find out reasons behind these problems and to offer to offer some solutions for these problems. The findings of this study revealed that students' pronunciation problems with the English vowel sounds were mainly ; the substitution of the sounds /ɜ:/, /e/, /ə/, /ɔ:/, /u/, and the insertion of the vowel sound /ɪ/ between consonant clusters as well as the omission of the vowel sounds /ə/ and /ɪ/ from initial, medial or final position. The study also found that such problems are due to the differences in the sound systems of the two languages, lack of knowledge and time.

Keywords: pronunciation errors, English as a Foreign Language, Error analysis, Language transfer, EFL students.

المخلص

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء طبيعة أخطاء نطق أصوات العلة (الحركات الصوتية) لدى الطلبة الليبيين في الفصلين الدراسيين الأول والثاني بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة سبها، وكذلك الكشف عن الأسباب الكامنة وراء هذه المشكلات من أجل التوصل إلى حلول مناسبة واقتراحات تربوية يمكن أن تساعد الطلبة على التغلب عليها. أُستخدم المنهج الوصفي الكمي لتحليل أخطاء النطق لدى الطلبة. وتكونت عينة الدراسة من عشرين طالباً من طلبة الفصلين الأول والثاني، بالإضافة إلى عشرة أعضاء هيئة تدريس من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة سبها. واعتمدت الدراسة على اختبار في النطق وُجّه إلى الطلبة بهدف تحديد المشكلات التي يواجهونها عند نطق بعض أصوات العلة في اللغة الإنجليزية، كما استُخدمت مقابلة منظمة مع أعضاء هيئة التدريس للكشف عن الأسباب الكامنة وراء هذه المشكلات واقتراح بعض الحلول المناسبة لها. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن أبرز مشكلات الطلبة في نطق أصوات العلة الإنجليزية تمثلت في استبدال الأصوات /ɜ:/ و /e/ و /ə/ و /ɔ:/ و /u/ بأصوات أخرى، وإدراج صوت العلة /ɪ/ بين التجمعات الساكنة، بالإضافة إلى حذف صوتي العلة /ə/ و /ɪ/ من المواقع

الأولية أو الوسطية أو النهائية في الكلمات. كما خلصت الدراسة إلى أن هذه المشكلات تعود أساساً إلى الاختلافات بين النظامين الصوتيين للغتين العربية والإنجليزية، إضافة إلى نقص المعرفة اللغوية وضيق الوقت المتاح للتدريب والتعلم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مشكلات النطق، اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تحليل الأخطاء، تأثير اللغة الأم، طلاب اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

Introduction

The introduction s English language has four skills; reading, speaking, listening and writing. The general aim of teaching English language in Libya is to master these four skills as well as to enable learners to communicate effectively in the target language.

In terms of speaking, it is considered an important factor in learning and using English appropriately (Gussenhoven and Jacobs, 1998). The majority of EFL learners try to speak native-like English (Derwing, 2003), and pronunciation is the most important skill of spoken English (Gilakjani, 2011). Developing students' pronunciation is one of the important tasks for English language teachers. Kriedler (1989) mentions that without correct and accurate pronunciation learners may not sound intelligible and may be less understood by other English speakers.

Pronunciation is one of the important sources which help in providing information about students' errors. These will help teachers to discover errors that led to improve teaching and learning English pronunciation. More precisely, contrastive analysis (CA) plays a major role in identifying learners' errors. Error Analysis also (EA) is a useful method that may help teachers to predict and understand pronunciation difficulties faced by their students. According to Corder (1967), analyzing errors made by language learners may help teachers to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching.

Producing English vowels is one of the most challenging tasks for the Libyan university EFL students. Arguably, such students have difficulties in distinguishing between English vowels like /a:/ and /æ/ in words like cart /ka:t/, cat /kæt/, and /ʌ/ and /ɒ/ as in cut /kʌt/ and cot /kɒt/. According to Flege (1981) and Gilbert (1984) segmental errors like these due to differences between L1 and L2. Further, most EFL classes focus on teaching language aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, and morphology to help learners command the structure of English sentences and pronunciation teaching is not given that much attention because of two reasons. First, teachers are lack interest to teach pronunciation. Second, teachers do not know how to teach pronunciation due to the lack of knowledge of pronunciation (Kelly, 2000). Linguistic differences often lead to pronunciation difficulties among the ESL/EFL learners. Many learners whose L1 lacks contrastive sounds of L2 tend to substitute L2 sounds for the nearest sound available in their L1 (Cruttenden, 2008). One more related example is the unfamiliarity of the learners with a large number of vowel sounds that maybe present another factor that slows down English vowel learning.

It is clear that producing English vowel sounds is one of the most difficult areas that Libyan students will face from the very beginning; if these difficulties are not taken into account, they are likely to become fossilized and very difficult to eradicate (Littlewood, 1984). Therefore, the study is conducted to investigate pronunciation problems of English vowel sounds encountered by First and Second semester students of English Language Department at Sebha University.

The objective of this study is to investigate the nature of the vowel production errors observed among first and second semester students when pronouncing some English vowel sounds. The questions of the study are as the following: (1) What is the nature of the vowel production errors which are observed among First and Second semester students of English Department at Sebha University? (2) What are the reasons behind the difficulties of pronouncing English vowel sounds by First and Second semester students of English Department? (3) What are the suitable solutions that may help First and Second semester students to improve their pronunciation?

Literature

The vowel is one of the two general categories used for the classification of speech sounds of the English language. Crystal (2008) "it can be defined in terms of both phonetics and phonology. Phonetically, vowels are sounds that articulated without a complete closure in the mouth or a degree of narrowing which would produce audible friction, the air escapes evenly over the center of the tongue. In addition to this, in a phonetic classification of vowels would generally be made to two variables: (a) the position of the lips whether rounded, spread or neutral; (b) the part of the tongue raised, and the height to which it moves". Vowels are commonly described in terms of phonetic parameters: the position of the tongue (i.e. high, mid or low), the part of the tongue that involved during the articulation (i.e. front, central or back) and the shape of the lips (i.e. spread, rounded or neutral) (Shriberg & Kent, 2003).

Arabic Vowels VS English Vowels

Arabic is one of the Semitic languages. According to Alkhouli (1990) Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) includes thirty-six phonemes; twenty-eight consonants, six vowels and two diphthongs. English has twenty vowel sounds: twelve monophthongs (i.e. seven short vowels and six long vowels) beside eight diphthongs (Crystal, 2008; Roach, 2009). All of them are voiced and they are described according to tongue position, highest or the shape of lips. Based on the previous definitions of Arabic and English vowel systems, it can be said that both the vowel structures of the two languages are quite different (Catford et al., 1974). The following table will explain more about the vowel system of both English and Arabic languages.

Table 1. Arabic and English Vowel Sounds

	Long Vowels	Short Vowels	Diphthongs
Arabic Vowels	/a:/, /i:/, /u:/	/a/, /ɪ/, /u/	/aj/, /aw/
English Vowels	/a:/, /i:/, /u:/, /ɜ:/, /ɔ:/	/ɪ/, /e/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ʊ/, /ɒ/, /ə/	/eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/, /ɪə/, /eə/, /ʊə/

From the above table, it is clear that the vowel system of Arabic is different from the vowel system of English (Scott, 1962). English has more vowels than Arabic. English has twenty vowels. They are divided into twelve single vowels or pure vowels (monophthongs) which are /ɪ/, /e/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ʊ/, /ɒ/, /ə/, /i:/, /a:/, /ɜ:/, /u:/, /ɔ:/, and eight diphthongs /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/, /ɪə/, /eə/, /ʊə/. Arabic has only eight vowels. They include three short vowels (/a/, /ɪ/, /u/), and three long vowels (/a:/, /i:/, /u:/), beside two diphthongs (/aj/, /aw/). As a result, Arab learners among them Libyans have difficulty in pronouncing some English vowel sounds especially those vowels that do not exist in their mother tongue (Arabic). For instance, the sounds /ɜ:/, /ɔ:/, /ʊ/, /ɒ/, /e/ and /æ/ are difficult for Arab learners to pronounce because they do not exist in Arabic language. Thus, they may substitute or replace these sounds with similar ones in their mother tongue.

Importance of Teaching English Pronunciation

Many definitions of pronunciation have been proposed by different scholars and researchers (Dalton et al., 1994; Roach, 2001). According to Dalton et al. (1994) pronunciation is the production of significant sound in two sense. First, sound is significant because it is used as part of a code of a particular language. Second, it is used to achieve meaning in contexts of use. Besides, Roach (2001) refers to pronunciation as a combination of individual sounds, sound segments and supra segmental features. Burns (2012) mentioned that pronunciation is an essential element of communicative competence. It helps language learners to communicate effectively. Thus, students need to master good pronunciation (i.e., students have to be able to use pronunciation which is good enough to be always understood). Therefore, when it comes for teaching English as a foreign language, teachers have to bear in mind the need for making sure that students can always be understood and understood.

It is widely recognized that acquiring good pronunciation is very important either in first language acquisition or when learning a foreign one because good pronunciation makes the communication easier, relaxed and more successful (Dan, 2006). Therefore, incorrect pronunciation creates difficulties in communication with others in both social and academic settings (Fraser, 2000 & Miler, 2004). Harmer (2001) and Hewings (2004) believe that pronunciation teaching is fundamental and this is not only makes learners aware of the differences between sounds and sound features, but also can improve their speaking skill considerably. Therefore, pronunciation need to be balanced with all other communication skills. Zimmermann (2004) stated that "Pronunciation is crucially important, as it is usually the first thing people notice about a language learner's English". Thus, Pronunciation is considered as one of the main concerns of second language teaching.

General Approaches for Pronunciation Teaching

When teaching and learning pronunciation, researchers and teachers utilize different approaches, strategies and techniques in order to achieve intelligible pronunciation. Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994) focused on two approaches

aimed at teaching pronunciation which are: the bottom-up approach and top-down approach. Bottom-up approach means that learners start with learning how to pronounce phonemes and then they work their way to intonation. While top-down approach starts with patterns of intonation, stress, tone and rhythm then works up towards individual sounds or phonemes. Morely (1991) and Levis (2005) support teaching pronunciation through emphasizing on supra segmental level rather than segmental level.

From the above lines, it is clear that researchers have different opinions about which level to teach pronunciation segmental, supra segmental or both. However, teaching English pronunciation should take into account all levels. Another general approaches concerning pronunciation teaching elaborated by (Celce-Murcia, 1996, Marianne, Brinto & Goodwin). They include analytic linguistic approach and intuitive-imitative approach. Analytic approach utilizes information and tools such as chart of vocal apparatus, phonetic alphabet, articulatory descriptions and other aids to support listening, imitation and production. Analytic approach informs and focuses learner's attention on the sounds and rhythms of the target language. Intuitive-imitative approach, on the other hand, conveys learner's ability to listen and imitate the sounds and rhythms of the target language without the intervention of any explicit information.

Communicative language is another approach for pronunciation teaching that explained by Fraser (2001) as a set of principles by which practices, materials and curriculums can be devised to fit any particular pronunciation teaching. In addition, it judging on the usefulness of the existing materials which are applied for teaching pronunciation in a particular context. Pronunciation teaching according to Schumann (1976) should emphasize on the importance of creating a target language environment in which the students are exposed to the target language outside the classroom. Also Miller (2004) focuses on providing ESL/EFL teachers with effective courses and materials to help them improving their students' pronunciation. Some other researchers come up with a completely different views of teaching pronunciation. Kelly (2000) suggests chaining and drilling. Brown (1974) and Alatis (1981) encourage improving pronunciation through media, visual, audio visual,etc.

In Libya, the process of teaching and learning English language focuses on paying greater attention to grammar, vocabulary, reading as well as writing and ignoring the oral skills (i.e., listening, speaking and pronunciation). Only less time is given to students for practicing English pronunciation as well as few lessons with poor exercises.

Error Analysis

The study of EA is essential to describe and explain errors that committed by L2 learners as well as for improving the process of second language learning. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), "Error analysis is the study of errors made by L2 learners, with the purpose of identifying the causes of these errors". James (1998) defines EA "as the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences on unsuccessful language". Errors are essential for the learner, the teacher and also for the researcher. Corder (1967) mentioned that they help the learner to form and test hypothesis about the nature of the new language which he is learning. Errors are important because they tell the teacher what to teach as well as provide the researcher with information about learners progress in acquiring target language (TL). In error analysis, it is important to distinguish between mistakes and errors. According to Corder (1999) "a mistake is a problem not of knowing but of application." Khammash and Roos (2002) add that "mistakes or performance errors are slip of the tongue". It can be said that a mistake is a failure in utilizing a known structure correctly as a result of several factors including emotional strain, memory limitation or tiredness. Gass and Selinker (2008) also mention that mistakes can be self-corrected, because the learners know the right form, but they commit these mistakes due to tiredness, slip of the tongue or nervousness. Errors also defined by Edge (1989) as wrong forms of language that learners cannot correct by themselves even though they have been taught. Therefore, only teachers would notice them in order to assist them in overcoming these errors.

Various stages of errors have been proposed by different researchers (Corder, 1975; James, 1998; Ellis, 1994). They suggest that error analysis (EA) need to apply three stages: classification of errors, evaluation of errors and explanation of errors. Further, Keshavarz (2003) divided EA into two branches: theoretical and applied error analysis. Theoretical analysis of errors tries to find out difficulties and issues related to language learning and teaching as well as investigating the reasons of these errors. Applied error analysis on the other hand, focuses on designing remedial courses and materials for resolving those difficulties that are highlighted by the theoretical analysis of errors.

Language Transfer (LT)

There are always similarities and differences in sound systems between the native and the target language. Therefore, interference will always occur from the native language to the target one. According to Odlin (1989) transfer "is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language (TL) and any other language that has been previously acquired". For instance, interference from Arabic to English occurs when the differences between the two languages exist. In the same line, Crystal (2003) mentions that, transfer is "peculiar to foreign language learning and can be manifested notably as the influence of the person's first language on the language being acquired". He adds " yet, the influence of the L1 on the performance of L2 is mostly considered negative as it makes learners transfer L1 features which is different from L2 and this is why such

transfer is negative and it may makes L2 expressions difficult to understand". This means the case of negative transfer occurs when the patterns of the two languages are not the same. (Dually, Burt and Krashen, 1982; Sabbah, 2015) state that transfer can be of two types: positive and negative. The positive transfer refers to "the process of using rules from L1 which facilitate or has positive influence on L2 learning due to similarities between L1 and L2" Sabbah (2015). Whereas the negative transfer according to Oline (1997) is "... Divergences from the norms in the target language". As a result, learners produce responses that are similar to their native language and different from the target language.

Previous Studied

Braik (1982) carried out a study which investigated the sound systems of Arabic and English. He found that there were similarities and differences between Arabic and English sound systems. He stated that, „when learning English, Arabic speakers face some difficulties in mastering the English pronunciation. These difficulties are due to the differences in the sound system of both languages,. Therefore, the strong influence of speakers' first language is one of the main reasons behind these difficulties.

Dulay (1974), Milton (1985) and Botagga, (1991) conducted a study aims at investigating the areas of pronunciation difficulty for Libyan speakers of English as well as to compare and contrast English and Arabic vowel systems. The sample of this study were consist of forty-five volunteer subjects (male and female) divided into three groups. The researchers used a similar test devised which of those used by that show a series of pictures in order to generate free spontaneous speech in English by the subjects. The test results showed that learners acquire new language items systematically. The comparison of the sequences of the new phonological items and speed of learning indicated that they were closely related to each other. It appeared that first language phonology constituted the back bone of second language phonology. The results also showed that the teaching methods and techniques by some drills and habit formation proven to be unsuccessful. The natural order for the theory of learning can give great help in acquiring L2pronunciation.

Riadi (2013) conducted a study that aimed to find out the students' problems in pronouncing short and long English vowels. The subjects of this research were the second semester students of English Education Study Program. The data were derived through students' performance test by using minimal pair test. There were 15 sentences with 900 phonetic transcription produced by the overall students. The data revealed that, most of the students have problems in pronouncing short and long English vowels. It was found that there were 483 correct pronunciations out of 900 totals with the mean score were 54. The total numbers for incorrect pronunciation of short vowels were 79 and long vowels were 338. Furthermore, from 30 students, only 6 students scored over 60 and only 1 student scored over 75.

Latifah (2017) conducted a similar study which aims to identify errors in pronouncing English of the first semester students of English Education Department in Indonesia. The required data was collected through conducting two pronunciation tests. The data obtained were analyzed by using error analysis procedure (i.e. , identify the error and describing it). It was found that the most problematic vowel sounds for the first semester students are /æ/, /ʌ/, /əʊ/, /eɪə/, /əʊə/ and /aʊə/. The study also showed that the students performed three types of errors which are substitution, omission and insertion.

Shamallakh (2018) investigated errors committed by Palestinian English language students in pronouncing some English vowels (monophthongs and diphthongs). The participants of this research were seventy-one male students from Gaza university. Two instruments were used in this research; a questionnaire in order to investigate students' attitude towards pronouncing English vowels and interviews which include words list with 8 diphthongs and 12 monophthongs in word initial, medial and final positions to be pronounced by the interviewed students. It was found that the most problematic monophthong sounds are: /i:/, /ɜ:/, /ɔ:/, /u:/, /æ/ and /ɒ/ such sounds are the ones that did not exceed 50 % of correct pronunciation. This research recommended to attribute additional attention to develop speaking skill, especially pronunciation component from the early stages of learning English.

Researches above and this research have some similarities and some differences. The similarities are that researches above and this research are conducted in the same field which is English language pronunciation and all of them aim at studying learners pronunciation errors when they pronounce some English words. The difference between this research and researches above is that this research analyzes pronunciation errors with the focus only on the monophthongs which are /i:/, /ɪ/, /e/, /a:/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /u:/, /ʊ/, /ɒ/, /ə/, /ɜ:/, and /ɔ:/. This research is confined to first and second semester students of English Language Department. Faculty of Arts-Sebha University.

Materials and Methods

Design of the Study

The design of this study refers to select samples, study sites, and data collection procedures for answering the research question(s) MacMillan & Schumacher (2001). The primary concern of this study is to investigate the problems of pronouncing English vowel sounds encountered by First and Second semester students of English Language Department at Sebha university. A descriptive quantitative method were employed in order to gain deeper understanding of the sounds that are difficult for the students. Besides, determining the reasons behind these difficulties.

Participants of the Study and Sampling

The participants of this study were 20 students first and second semester in English Language Department. They were chosen randomly. Their ages range between nineteen and twenty-two years old. They are seven males and thirteen females. All of them are Libyans. They have the same English background and they are in the same area. The reason behind choosing first and second semester students is that they are considered to be at early stages of the university. Additionally, because of their problems in pronunciation. Therefore, this study aimed at improving their abilities in pronunciation, especially in pronouncing the English vowel sounds. The teachers of this research are those of English Language Department at Sebha University who teach some English courses including pronunciation, i.e, listening, speaking skills. Besides, phonetics and phonology courses. Most of the teachers at English Language Department have been teaching English more than five years.

Instruments and Data Collection

Two instruments were used; an oral test for the students and structured interviews for the teachers. The students were asked to read a story text and a list of words that contains some English vowel sounds (**See Appendix-A**). Each participant is required to read aloud and at a normal speech. The recordings were conducted individually and in quite place. It took almost five to seven minutes for each participant to complete the test. After that, the repeated many times in order to be carefully analyzed. Recordings The study also designed a structured interview which includes five questions (**See Appendix-B**). The interviews were recorded individually and within their permission. The gathered data were transcribed and analyzed carefully.

Results and discussion

In this study, the collected data from students and teachers were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The overall findings were summarized, tabulated, arranged using percentages and graphic presentations in order to provide useful information for this study. Table (2) below shows the results of pronouncing some of English vowel sounds. (**See appendix-C**).

Table 2. Results of Students' Pronunciation Test

No.	V	NS	NSC	Percen.%	NSI	Percen.%	M	Std Deviation
1	/I/	20	19	95%	1	5%	1.05	.224
2	/^/	20	16	80%	4	20%	1.20	.410
3	/e/	20	1	5%	19	95%	1.95	.224
4	/æ/	20	20	10%	0	0%	1.00	.000
5	/a/	20	3	15%	17	85%	1.85	.366
6	/u/	20	1	5%	19	95%	1.95	.224
7	/i:/	20	20	100%	0	0%	1.00	.000
8	/a:/	20	17	85%	3	15%	1.15	.366
9	/c:/	20	8	40%	12	60%	1.60	.503
10	/u:/	20	12	60%	8	40%	1.40	1.8
11	/3:/	20	4	20%	16	80%	.503	.410

Note. NO. = Number; V = Vowel; NS = Number of Students; NSC = Number of Students with Correct Pronunciation; NSI = Number of Students with Incorrect Pronunciation; Percen. = Percentage; The Most Problematic Vowel Sounds.

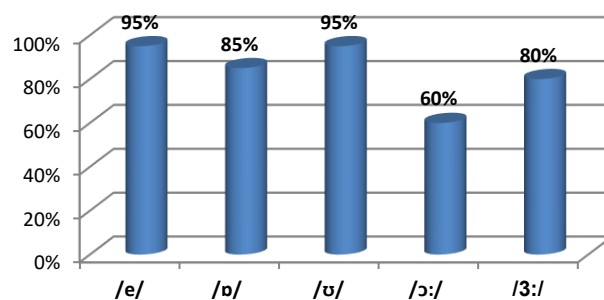


Figure 1. Figure caption should be of font size 10pt, Times New Roman, Centre align

Based on the findings, it seems that most of the students make different types of errors including substitution, omission and insertion. Moreover, that was confirmed earlier from students' pronunciation test.

Table 3. Substitution Errors

NS	The substituted vowel	Phonetic Transcription	Students' pronunciation
2, 4, 5, 9, 11, 13, 17, 18	/ɜ:/ substituted with /ɪ/ /ɜ:/ substituted with /i:/	her /hɜ:(r)/ and herd /hɜ:d/ herd /hɜ:d/ and early/ɜ:rlɪ/	her /hɪ(r)/ and herd /hɪd/ herd /hi:d/ and early /i:rlɪ/
1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 10, 19, 4, 6, 7, 14, 16, 20	e/ substituted with /ɪ/ /e/ substituted with /æ/	felt /felt/, wet /wet/ and head /hed/ 'fell, fetch, never and deafning' then /ɪn/, /anymore /'enɪmɔ:(r)/ and parents /perənts send and help	felt /fɪlt/, wet /, /wɪt/ and head /hɪd/ then / æn/, /anymore /æɪnɪmɔ:(r)/ and parents /pærənts/
7, 8, 9, 11, 16	/ʊ/ substituted with /ɔ:/	o'clock /ə'klɒk/ and got /gɒt/ was, not, of and followed	o'clock /ə'klɔ:k/ and got /gɔ:t/
6, 11, 13, 15, 16	/ɔ:/ substituted with /u:/	anymore /enɪmɔ:(r)/, and strong /strɔ:'ŋ/ across	anymore /enɪmu:(r)/, and strong /stru'ŋ/
2, 5, 8, 9, 12, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20	/ʊ/ substituted with /ɔ:/	could /kʊd/, would /wʊd/ and eventful /'entfʊl/	could /kɔ:d/, would /wɔ:d/ and eventful /'entfɔ:l/

According to the above table, the sound /ɜ:/ causes a problem for student No. (2, 4, 5, 9, 11, 13, 17 and 18), because it does not exist in their mother language. They tend to substitute it either by the short sound /ɪ/ or the long vowel /i:/ in words like her /hɜ:(r)/, herd /hɜ:d/ and early /ɜ:rlɪ/, which are pronounced as */hɪ(r)/, */hɪd/ and */i:rlɪ/. Furthermore, the absence of sound like /e/ confuses the students No. (1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 19, 10, 4, 6, 7, 14, 16 and 20) and makes them pronounce it as /ɪ/ in words like felt /felt/ */fɪlt/, wet /wet/ */wɪt/ and head /hed/ */hɪd/. Moreover, some students pronounce it as /æ/ in words such as then /ɪn/ */æn/, /any more /'enɪmɔ:(r)/ */ænimɔ:(r)/ and parents /perənts/ */pærənts/.

The above table also shows that students have problems in differentiating between pronunciation and spelling. If we take for instance the letter 'o' or 'ou' in the words got, could and strong. In each word it has different pronunciation. The letter 'o' should be pronounced as /ɒ/ in words like o'clock and got, but students No. (7, 8, 9, 11 and 16) substitute the /ɒ/ sound by the back rounded sound /ɔ:/, which means 'o'clock' becomes */ə'klɔ:k/ and 'got' becomes */gɔ:t/, and also the sound /ɔ:/ has been changed by the back sound /u:/ in the words 'any more' which becomes */enɪmu:(r)/, and 'strong' which mispronounced as */stru'ŋ/. This shows that the students depend on spelling to help them in pronouncing the new English words.

In relation to the back rounded vowel /ʊ/, nearly all the students replaced it with the long rounded vowel /ɔ:/ in the words could /kʊd/, would /wʊd/ and eventful /ɪ'ventfʊl/. As a result, the students mispronounced the words */kɔ:d/, */wɔ:d/ and */ɪ'ventfɔ:l/. These errors confirm that students do not have sufficient knowledge about the English vowel sounds.

Table 4. Insertion Errors

NS	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
2, 11, 13, 15, 18, 20	started /sta:tɪd/ VS /ɪsta:tɪd/	eventful /ɪ'ventfʊl/ VS /ɪ'ventfɔ:l/	hands /hænds/ VS /hændɪs/
	clap /klæp/ VS /ɪklæp/	lightning /laɪtnɪŋ/ VS /laɪtɪnɪŋ/	parent /perənts/ VS /perəntɪs/

The proper pronunciation of the words started, eventful and hands are /sta:tɪd/, /ɪ'ventfʊl/ and /hænds/, while students No. (2, 11, 13, 15, 18 and 20) as explained in table 4 above pronounce them as */ɪsta:tɪd/, */ɪ'ventfɔ:l/ and */hændɪs/ by adding the vowel /ɪ/ as a repair strategy to split the initial, middle or final clusters of the English words. Simply, this is because their native language does not have initial or final clusters. Thus, students insert extra sound when there is no sound.

Table 5. Omission Errors

NS	The Omitted Vowel	Examples
6, 13, 15, 17, 18	omission of ə	'o'clock' /ə'klɒk/ VS /klɒk/
	omission of /ɪ/	decide /dɪsaɪd/ VS /dsɑɪd/

The above table shows that students No. (6, 13, 15, 17 and 18) omit the unstressed vowel ə from the word 'o'clock' /ə'klɒk/ and pronounce it as */klɒk/, also the word 'across' and which was mispronounced as */krɒs/. Furthermore, the word 'decide' was pronounced as */dsɑɪd/ instead of /dɪsaɪd/.

Conclusion

This study investigated the problems of pronouncing English vowel sounds encountered by First and Second semester students of English Language Department Faculty of Arts at Sebha University. This study also investigated the reasons behind these problems in order to provide some solutions to overcome these problems. Twenty students were involved in this study. A quantitative descriptive study was applied. The findings of this

study revealed that First and Second semester students have problems in pronouncing the vowel sounds /e/, /v/, /u/, /ɔ:/, /ɜ:/ and /ə/. They pronounce /e/ as /i/ or /æ/. The vowel sound /ɜ:/ is sometimes replaced by /i/ or /i:/ .Most of the students replace /v/ and /u/ with /ɔ:/.Some students insert or even omit the vowel sound /i/ when it appears in the initial, middle and final positions. Therefore, first and second semester students commit different types of errors including substitution, insertion and omission. These errors due to the differences in sound systems between English and Arabic language, inconsistency of English vowel sounds, lack of pronunciation knowledge, time and practice.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Teachers should make students aware of the importance of English pronunciation, not only in university degree courses, but also at the early stages of learning.
- Teachers have to know when and how to correct students' errors as well as they should give more attention to students' needs and requirements while teaching pronunciation in the classroom.
- Teachers need to improve their practical skills in teaching pronunciation by using authentic materials (TV, films, cassettes, video-players, games, etc) which will increase students' motivation and interests.
- Teachers should familiarize their students' with the similarities and differences between the sound systems of both Arabic and English languages to avoid L1 interference as well as to facilitate the process of teaching and learning English pronunciation.
- Teachers need to focus on developing listening and speaking skills in order to reduce problems that students might encounter when pronouncing English vowel sounds.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Appendix I
Students' Test
Serina's Bad Day

Serina had just finished her tuition. It was a 9 o'clock. She hurried home as she felt it was going to rain. Halfway, it started pouring. Serina was bot wet and cold. Just then, lightning flashed across the sky followed by a deafening clap of thunder. Serina placed her hands to her ears as she was very scared. She decided to make a run for it. The strong wind however, slowed her down.

Suddenly, lightning struck a tree ahead of her. A branch snapped and fell across her path. Serina could not stand it anymore and started to cry. She wished her parents would come to fetch her as usual but they were at a dinner in another town.

The rain blew stronger and Serina began to sneeze. Then she herd a care coming her way. It was a police car. The policemen asked Serina what had happened. Serina explained the situation for them and they decided to send her home.

When Serina got home, her parents were at the gate. They were surprised to see Serina coming back in a police car. After listening to Serina's explanation, her parents thanked the policemen for going out of their way to help. Their dinner had finished early and they were just going to fetch Serina when they saw the police car.

Serina was sent to bed. She knew that she would never forget that eventful night.

Part two: Read the following words very carefully

finished	run	pat
o'clock	strong	could
hurried	ahead	not
felt	snapped	anymore
wet	fell	wished
flashed	blew	parents
across	stronger	come
deafening	began	fetch
clap	sneeze	got
thunder	herd	gate
her	police	early
hands	asked	knew
decided	send	eventful

Appendix II
Teachers' Interview questions

Q1- According to your experience, what problems that your students face when learning English pronunciation, especially in pronouncing the vowel sounds?

Q2- In your opinion, what are the causes which are responsible for the pronunciation problems of the Libyan students?

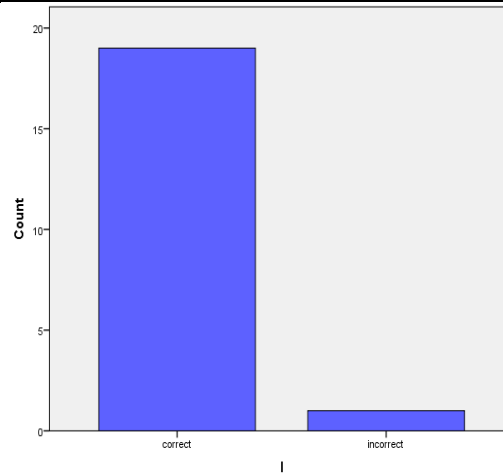
Q3- Do you have enough class time and sufficient materials to enhance pronunciation teaching?

Q4- Do the department offers specific courses or devotes extra classes for pronunciation teaching?

Q5- What can be done to improve pronunciation skills of first and second semester students of English department of Sebha university?

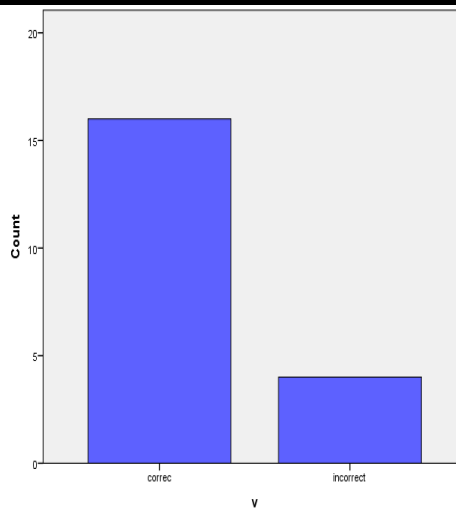
Appendix III
The Most Problematic Vowel Sounds
The vowel sound /I/

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Correct	19	95.0	95.0	95.0
	Incorrect	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	



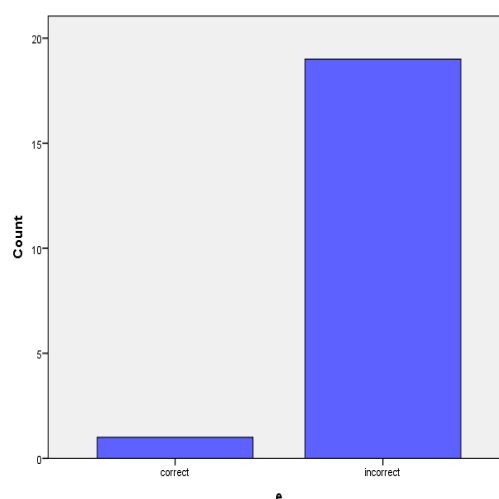
The vowel sound /^/

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Correct	16	80.0	80.0	80.0
	Incorrect	4	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	



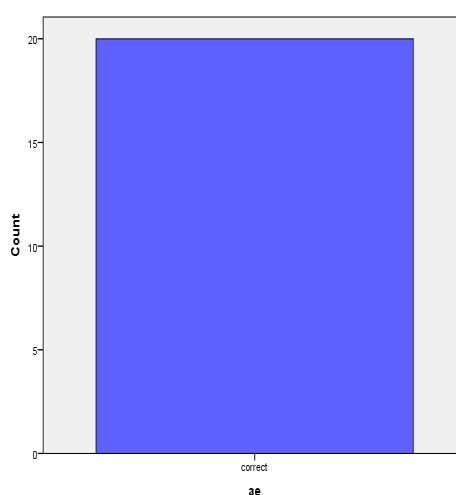
The vowel sound /e/

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Correct	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Incorrect	19	95.0	95.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	



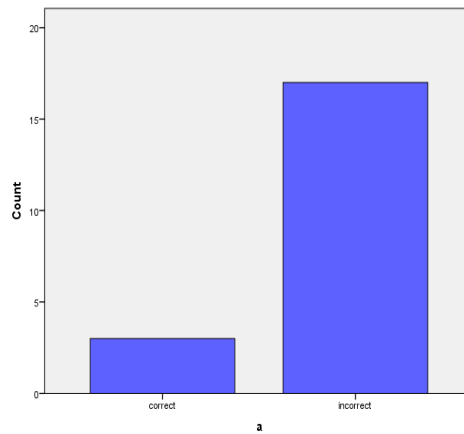
The vowel sound / æ /

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Correct	20	100.0	100.0	100.0



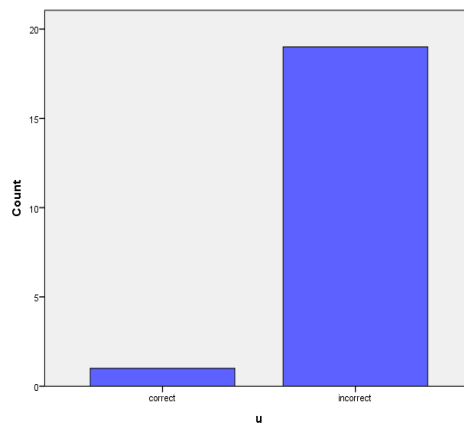
The vowel sound /a/

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Correct	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
	Incorrect	17	85.0	85.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	



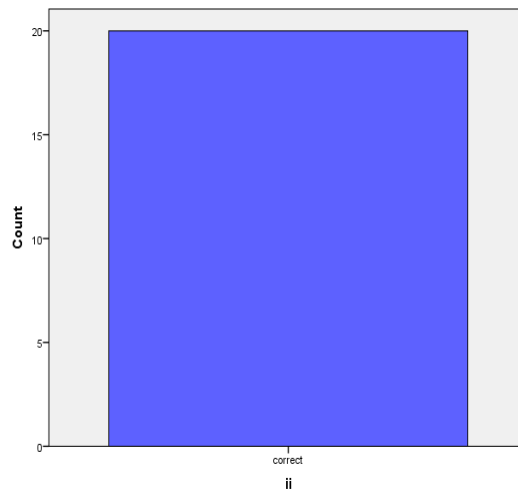
The vowel sound /u/

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Correct	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Incorrect	19	95.0	95.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	



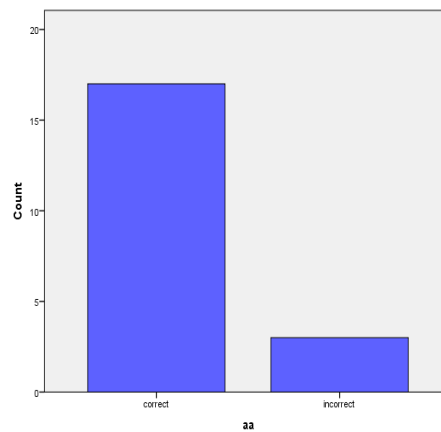
The vowel sound /i:/

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Correct	20	100.0	100.0	100.0



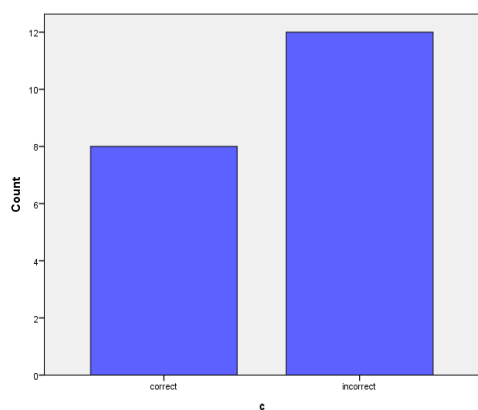
The vowel sound /a:/

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Correct	17	85.0	85.0	85.0
	Incorrect	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	



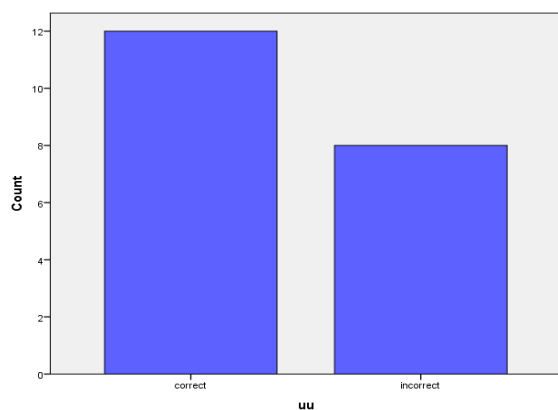
The vowel sound /c:/

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Correct	8	40.0	40.0	40.0
	Incorrect	12	60.0	60.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	



The vowel sound /u:/

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Correct	12	60.0	60.0	60.0
	Incorrect	8	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	



The vowel sound /3:/

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Correct	4	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Incorrect	16	80.0	80.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

