

Pronunciation Problems English Language Students Encounter at University Level and Their Effect on The Students` Performance

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Abstract

Speaking the English language has become very important nowadays because it helps communication in any place around the world and increases the chance of getting better job opportunities. Learning correct pronunciation is not less important than learning any of the other skills of the language, and students seem to have plenty of words which are wrongly pronounced at any level of learning the target language.

The current study intended to explore pronunciation problems of English university students in Nalut. This study attempted to underline the most common pronunciation mistakes and the factors triggering those mistakes and how they affect students` performance. Classroom observation and follow up interviews were chosen to collect data for the study. Students were observed and recorded while reading a passage, and their reading mistakes were then analyzed. One of the main findings of the research revealed that English language students have a problem of not correctly articulating the sounds / θ / , / $dʒ$ / , / $tʃ$ / and / p / and inserting a vowel sound between consonants in some words and also pronouncing the silent letters. Finally, students show difficulties related to pronouncing vowels and diphthongs. These problems seemed to affect their speaking significantly.

Keywords: English language, pronunciation, students` performance

المخلص:

أصبح التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية أمرًا مهمًا جدًا في الوقت الحاضر لأنه يساعد على التواصل في أي مكان حول العالم ويزيد من فرصة الحصول على فرص عمل أفضل. إن تعلم النطق الصحيح لا يقل أهمية عن تعلم أي من مهارات اللغة الأخرى، ويبدو أن الطلاب لديهم الكثير من الكلمات التي يتم نطقها بشكل خاطئ

في أي مستوى من مستويات تعلم اللغة. هدفت الدراسة الحالية إلى التعرف على مشكلات النطق لدى طلاب جامعة اللغة الإنجليزية بمدينة نالوت. حاولت هذه الدراسة تسليط الضوء على أخطاء النطق الأكثر شيوعاً والعوامل المسببة لتلك الأخطاء وكيفية تأثيرها على أداء الطلاب. وقد تم اختيار المراقبة الصفية ومقابلات المتابعة لجمع البيانات للدراسة. تمت ملاحظة الطلاب وتسجيلهم أثناء قراءة مقطع ما، ثم تم تحليل أخطاء القراءة لديهم. ومن أهم النتائج التي توصل إليها البحث أن طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية لديهم مشكلة في عدم نطق الأصوات / ɒ / و / dʒ / و / tʃ / و / p / بشكل صحيح وإدخال حرف العلة بين الحروف الساكنة في بعض الكلمات وكذلك النطق بالحروف الصامتة. وأخيراً، يُظهر الطلاب صعوبات تتعلق بنطق حروف العلة والإدغامات، يبدو أن هذه المشاكل تؤثر على تحدثهم بشكل كبير.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الإنجليزية، النطق، حروف العلة والإدغامات

1.Introduction

1.1 Background

Learning English language has become very important in most countries whose people's first spoken language is not English because speaking English language helps communication in any place or situation a person faces, in addition to increasing the chance of getting better job opportunities to those who are graduating newly with a good level of English proficiency. Being a proficient speaker of English does not mean that it is necessary to have a native like accent but it is more important to have a good grammar, a good stock of vocabulary and most importantly a correct pronunciation. This makes understanding easier in combination to the other phonetic issues like correct place of stress and intonation.

Students who are learning English as a foreign language have a lot of words which are mispronounced in any age, stage or any level of learning the language and causes problems in understanding. English teachers

should take this pronunciation problems in their account because the number of these mispronounced words might increase as soon as students get exposed to many new words during the different stages of learning English.

1.2 Importance of teaching pronunciation

Learning correct pronunciation is not less important than learning any of the other's skills of the language like speaking, writing, reading or grammar. This idea should be taken seriously in any class of learning the target language. Students who are learning English as a foreign language have a lot of words which are wrongly pronounced in any stage of learning the target language. Some of these mispronunciation mistakes seem to be crucially resulted from teacher ignorance of teaching correct pronunciation. One more reason for the importance of teaching pronunciation is that the English language has become the primary language for oral communication globally (Crystal ,2003as cited in Jahara &Abbdelrady (2021).

1.3 Research Problem

Learning correct pronunciation of English is not an easy task for learners of this Language to be achieved. This seems to be problematic in any class of learning English because most students still make pronunciation mistakes when they speak the language and this can be seen common among all English learners. The current research attempts to find out the most common pronunciation mistakes that students have and how these could effect on the students' performance.

1.4 Objectives of the Research

Students at English language department are expected to face pronunciation problems and mispronounce a lot of morphemes when they speak English or read any written materials in English .According to my experience in teaching English to university students , students have a lot of words which are mispronounced and need to be corrected .This study helps to provide evidence why correct pronunciation is necessary to be learned and to show that Speaking without mistakes make communication easy and understood .Additionally it helps students to be self-confident and more motivated to participate in class.

The study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the most common pronunciation problems encountered by English language students at college of education in Nalut ?
- 2- What are the main reasons for students ' pronunciation mistakes?
- 3- Do student's mistakes in pronunciation and other pronunciation problems affect their performance when speaking?

1.5 Significance of the research

The current study is significant because it sheds light on the most common pronunciation mistakes made by undergraduate students. It also tries to help English language teachers to give more importance to pronunciation when teaching the different skills of the language at university. This study highlights the most common pronunciation mistakes of students at university level in Nalut which could be compared to mispronunciation mistakes of primary and secondary school students. This can help teachers to work on these mistakes from the early stages before students move to university levels. Pronunciation cannot be taught as a separate subject according the Libyan English curriculum so teachers should focus more in teaching pronunciation.

2.Literature Review

The idea of teaching correct pronunciation from the early stages of learning English should be taken seriously in any class of learning the target language. Students who are learning English as a foreign language have a lot of words which they un correctly pronounce during the different levels of learning the target language. One more reason for the importance of pronunciation is that English has become the primary language for oral communication globally (Crystal ,2003 as cited in Jahara &Abdelrady(2021) .English teachers should establish a good knowledge about the elements that pronunciation include .According to Gerald (2000) , The features of pronunciation can be classified into phonemes which include the study of consonants and vowels of the English language and suprasegmental features such as intonation and stress.

All learners of English language have the obstacle of mispronouncing certain sounds and words. This might be differed from one learner to another depending on their native language and some other factors but some of these pronunciation mistakes seems to be common among all L2

learners. Pesce (2018) in her article has stated the worst pronunciation mistakes ESL students make around the world as follows:

The problem of mispronouncing the (th) sound as one of the hardest consonant sounds to produce and it can be pronounced as (d) , (ð) as in this and that, and as the voiceless /θ/ in three and thing or as a /t/ as in [thia] and [thames] .Pronouncing the /schwa/ it was noticed that students had a problem in pronouncing it in long words like [mem(o)ry] and [choc(o)late] and shorter ones like in t(o) .Another problem listed by Claudia was confusing the (L) and the (R) which seemed to be common among Japanese students .The mispronunciation of the short (I) in addition to confusing the (W) and (v) sounds .One more problem was pronouncing the silent consonants which was to be found more common with Native Spanish speakers like pronouncing the (N) in Wednesday and(G). Alfahaid , Mohammad(2015) also in his article titled , Pronunciation Problems Arab Speakers Encounter While Learning English made an attempt to list the most common pronunciation problems for Arab speakers as follows:

Differentiating between the sound /b/ and /p /,which are voiced and voiceless sounds .The aspirated /p / does not exist in the Arabic which sometimes change the meaning as in words /bæ t / and / pæt / .The voiced (ð)and the voiceless (θ) seems to be difficult in pronunciation for Arabic students .Another problem that Arab speakers have is differentiating between the /v/ and /f/ sounds because students are not aware of the way to pronounce the /v/ sound which does not exist in Arabic Language . The problem of mispronunciation the /r/ sound for Arab Learners because it has two ways of pronunciation like in the words (peter) and (rain). Learners of the English language always face difficulties during the different levels or stages of learning the language. These difficulties vary and change according to the level reached by the learners. One of these common problems faced by most students especially Arabic learners and all other non-native students is mispronunciation issues.Arta,Toci (2020). When learners of English language reach a higher levels of learning English, they face more complex forms of morphology and syntax and apparently will be most contacted with problems related to pronunciation. This is primarily the problem occur with learners whose first language is

rather than English. These problems might be related to the learners themselves like factors of lack of confidence to speak and participate, lack of practice during class time and outside the class and sometimes the problems are related to the teachers such as pronouncing words without the use of dictionary and not using the effective ways of teaching correct pronunciation. Some other factors that results in students bad or incorrect pronunciation problems are related to the Language for instance the differences between English language and students' native language. According to Mohamed, Suliman (2009) one of the main causes of students' errors in pronunciation is that English has more consonant clusters than Arabic. Arabic does not have their corresponding equivalents. This results in students inserting a vowel sound (I) between consonants and making pronunciation mistakes.

One of the differences between Arabic and English is the lack of one-to-one relationship between spelling and pronunciation. Gerald, (2000) claims that the lack of one-to-one relationship between spelling and pronunciation in English while by no means being unique, presents learners with many problems. The difficulties that individual learners have may stem from one or more of the following:

- 1-The learner's first language may have a one-to-one relationship between sounds and spelling.
- 2-There may be sounds and combinations of sounds used in English which do not occur in L1.

Regarding the absence of one-to-one relationship between spelling and pronunciation, Omani learners of the English language commit pronunciation mistakes with words which have the same spelling but different phonemic representation (O'Grady cited in Al-dilaimy (2012) Omani students also experience pronunciation problems related to letters that are written and should not be pronounced like the (b) sound in doubt / Dayt / and (g) sound in sign /sain /. It has been also observed that vowels, diphthongs and other sequences of vowels are the most difficult sounds for Omani learners of English. Omani students had a problem with pronouncing sequences of consonants and they insert a vowel sound breaker in words like spring and street and pronounced /sipiring / and /sitiri:t /. Jahara, S and Abdelrady, A (2021) conducted a study to recognize

the pronunciation problems of female undergraduate learners in Saudi Arabia .The study showed that Saudi Arabia learners of English at Qassim university have a lot of issues associating with pronunciation skills. Participants of the research showed confusion in distinguishing between the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/ with voiced bilabial plosive /b/ sound and that is because only /b/ sound is found in the Arabic language and /p/ sound is not available and these students did not learn how to differentiate between /p/ and /b/ during school. The voiced dental /ð/ and voiceless dental /θ/ seemed to be problematic and students substituted these sounds by /t/ and /d/. Similarly these students showed difficulties in pronouncing the sounds s, tʃ, g, dʒ .the researchers also observed that nasals also were problematic to participants of the study ,the voiced alveolar nasal /n/ and the Voiced velar /ŋ/. They also were confused to distinguish between short vowels. long vowels and diphthongs when they speak. Another study conducted by Ibrahim and Ahmed (2020) to investigate pronunciation problems of English diphthongs that Saudi Arabia Students face at university level .This study revealed that Saudi Students face problems in pronouncing centering diphthongs sounds ending in /Iə/, /eə/ and /uə/ sounds .They also mispronounce diphthong words contain closing diphthongs sound ending in /ei/, /ai/ and /ɔɪ/ sounds and students did not have enough ability to pronounce closing diphthongs sounds ending in /əu/ and /au/ sound.

3 .Methodology

This chapter presents the main sources of the data, participants of the research and the instruments for collecting the data for the research.

3.1 Main source of the data

The main source of the data were the English language students at college of education in Nalut. first, second- and third-year students participated in the research. Teachers of English language teaching at the same college were also a source of the data.

3.2 Participants

Fifteen BA undergraduate female students took part in our research from first year to third year.

Fifteen female English students took part in the Observation and accepted their voice to be recorded by the researcher and seven students of English

language participated in the interviews. An interview has been made with teachers and students to gather information about the most common pronunciation problems and how this affects their performance. The primary reason for concentrating on undergraduate learners was based on the researcher's experience in teaching students at college of education in Nalut struggling a lot of pronunciation mistakes. Teachers teaching phonetics and speaking also participated and interviewed by the researcher and observation and recording of students used to collect data for the research.

3.3 Instruments for collecting data

In achieving this goal, qualitative method was used to collect the data for the research, an observation, a recording passage and an interview with both teachers and students.

Students were observed during their normal classes and recorded using a reading passage to find out the common pronunciation difficulties and mistakes.

A number of seven students were chosen randomly and interviewed to find out these difficulties in pronunciation and how they may have an effect on their speaking. an attempt also made to find the main reasons for the mistakes. An interview also made with one teacher who has been teaching phonetic for six years at the college of education in Nalut to collect data since she was the only experienced teacher who has been teaching phonetic for a long time and can notice the phonetic problems more than teachers teaching other subjects such as reading, writing or grammar. one of the teachers teaching Speaking at the same college was interviewed also by the researcher to collect the data. The current study intended to find out pronunciation problems of English university students in Nalut and how these difficulties effect on their performance and attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1-What are the most common pronunciation problems of English language students studying at university?
- 2-How do students pronunciation mistakes affect their performance?
- 3-What are the main reasons for students' pronunciation problems at university level?

Results:

4. Data analysis

4.1 Analysis of Students' interview

Participants' responses to questions in the interview.

Table (1) Participants answer to the second question.

place of study	Number of students
Faculty of Education in Nalut	8

Table (2) presents the participants answer to the second question from the interview

Table (2) Answers to the third question.

Year of study	First year	Second year	Third year
Number of students	5	2	1

Answers to the third question of the interview (How many years have you been studying English? are presented in table 3.

Table (3) Answer to the fourth question.

Years of Studying English	Eight Years	Nine Years	More than Ten Years
Number of students	2	5	1

The answer to the fourth question of the interview which is: Do you have problems in pronunciations? was as follows:

One student' answer was no, I do not have problems in pronunciation.

Eight participants of the research answered that they have pronunciation problems. The answer the fifth question that is: Have you studied phonetics in secondary school? All the interviewed students mentioned that they have not studied phonetics in secondary school and they seem to lack the knowledge about how sounds are articulated.

According to students' answer to the sixth question of the interview that is: What are the sounds that you have problems when you pronounce them? the most common sounds of the English language that students have problems with are consonants like s, z,t, d .ts, s, short vowels and

long vowels, the (schwa) sound and diphthongs. Answers to the seventh question: Do you use dictionary to look for correct pronunciation of difficult words? seven students said that they never use dictionaries to look for the correct pronunciation and two participants said that they use the dictionary to find the correct pronunciation.

Regarding the answer to the last question that is; do you think that these difficulties in pronunciation affect negatively on you speaking How? All the participated students in the interview who were nine in number said that these difficulties in pronunciation affect negatively on their speaking and some students said these mistakes in pronunciation make them feel less motivated to communicate and talk in class. Other students said that these mistakes in pronunciation make them feel less self-confident to speak and participate because they are afraid of teacher's correction of their mistakes.

4.2 Analyses of Teachers' interview

The researcher in this study has chosen to conduct an interview with phonetics teacher who has been teaching phonetics for six years to English language students at college of education in Nalut. The first interviewed teacher said regarding the question Do your students have problems in pronunciation? The teacher said that students have a lot of pronunciation problems such as mispronouncing of short vowels and long vowels because they do not use dictionaries to look for the correct pronunciation. Also, the teacher mentioned that students face difficulties in pronouncing diphthongs and some consonant sounds such as / θ / and / $t\theta$ /, / d / and / $d\theta$ / and they also confuse between pronouncing / t / and / θ / sounds.

The second question in the interview was: What are the sounds that your students have more difficulties with? The teacher answered that students have difficulties with / $t\theta$ / and / θ / sounds, / s / and / z / sounds, / t / and / θ / sounds. they also mispronounce diphthongs and the / ∂ / sound.

The last question in the interview was: Do you think that these difficulties in pronunciation affect negatively on students speaking? how?

The interviewed teacher said that of course pronunciation mistakes could affect negatively on students' performance because these mistakes could lend to be misunderstood by the listener.

4.3 Analyses of an observation:

One of the main findings from an observation is that English language students have a problem of mispronouncing the sound / $\square\Theta$ / because they pronounce it like / t / because (11) students of the total participated number of students in the research about 75% showed a difficulty in pronouncing words such as thing, health and healthy.

One more finding of the research is the mispronunciation of the letter / p / which was pronounced as / b /. According to the recorder voice of student 10 of the total number of students participated in the research about 66.6 % mispronounced this sound in words such as perfect, people, important and paid with no clear aspiration as it should be.

Another finding is that English students showed a problem with pronouncing the / dʒ / sound

As observed by the researcher and according to the recorder voice of students (14) students showed mispronunciation of this sound about 93%. The students mispronounced it in words like job / dʒɔb / and enjoy / IndʒɔI / and this may be because the Arabic language does not have the / dʒ / sound. In addition, they mispronounce the / tʃ / sound. (6) students mispronounce the sound / tʃ / about 40% because they pronounce it like / ʃ / in words like search because this sound cannot be found in the Arabic language too.

Another finding of the research observation is that English language students insert a vowel sound in between consonants in some words .5 of the total number of students about 33% inserted a vowel sound between consonants and they mispronounce words like stressful and stress.

Students also tended to pronounce the silent letters in some words. 5 of the total number of participants tend to insert a vowel sound between consonants about 33%. They mispronounce words like should. A final finding of the research from the recordings is that students have difficulties in pronouncing vowels and diphthongs in some words. About 13 that is 86.6% students showed a difficulty in pronouncing English vowels and diphthongs. Words containing vowels and diphthong like salary, time, may, paid, most and always.

5- Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate the pronunciation problems encountered by Libyan English language students at university level and how these problems effect on the students` performance. The current study mainly tries to identify the most common pronunciation mistakes made by English language students. An attempt also has been made to address the main reason underlying mispronunciation mistakes of students and if these mistakes affect student`s performance.

Based on the analysis of the data collected during the research, students at English language department in college of Education Nalut ,have a lot pronunciation problem. Despite the fact that they have been learning English for more than eight years in primary and secondary school, they still face a lot pronunciation problems and most learners of English language cannot engage in Day – to –Day conversations using English. These problems may be resulted from bad teaching experience because all teachers at primary and secondary level are non –native teachers and students tend to imitate their teachers `pronunciation and do not use dictionaries to check the correct pronunciation. Another factor that might result in students ` pronunciation mistakes is teachers` lack of knowledge about the elements on pronunciation which seems to be important. According to Gerald (2000), The features of pronunciation can be classified into phonemes which include the study of consonants and vowels of the English language and suprasegmental features such as intonation and stress.

The findings also showed that students mispronounce a lot of English sounds such as / □ /, /d/ and

/ to /. Students mispronounce the sound (th) and the sound / p /. The sound / p / seemed to be problematic to most English language students and Arabic students. this sound does not exist in the Arabic language which make words people, paid and perfect difficult to produce by Arabic students. According to previously done research, this sound seemed to be difficult to pronounce by most Learners of the English language which their native language is rather than English Such as Saudi Arabia students according to a research done by Toci,A (2020)face the same difficulty .The difficulty of pronouncing the / p / sound has been listed down by

Pesce as one of the worst pronunciation mistakes of EFL students and by Ibrahim and Ahmed (2020) as one of the difficult sounds for Arabic students to pronounce.

The findings of the current research revealed that students have the problem of inserting avowel sound between consonants in words such as Stressful and sometimes pronouncing the silent sounds in words like (often). This problem is also listed by Pesce (2018) as one of the common worst pronunciation mistakes of English language learners around the world. This is caused by the of the one – to - one relationship between sounds and spelling because in the Arabic language words are written exactly as they spelled. This problem also seemed to be common among Omani students because they face a problem with words such as doubt and sign. They pronounce the letters(B) in doubt and (G) in sign which should not be pronounced.

Students participated in this research also have a problem with short and long vowels and diphthongs as stated by their teacher in the interview and according to the findings of the observation. This seems to be depending on the length and complicity of words as this seen to be common among all English learners. Saudi Arabia students at university level also face problems with centering diphthongs and closing Diphthongs which has been found in research done by Ibrahim and Ahmed (2020).

A final finding is that he (schwa) sound seemed to be problematic to students at University of Nalut. They showed mispronunciation of schwa sound in words such as stressful /stresf l / and salary /salri/.

This sound also is listed down as one of the worst pronunciation mistakes of EFL learners by Pesce,C.(2018) especially in long words like mem(o)ry and choc(o)late.

The difficulties encountered by Libyan University students may be caused by their lack of knowledge of the correct way of articulating the different English sounds, it is also possible that they have that knowledge about how to produce sounds, but they are not able to practice them orally. and these could affect negatively on their participation and performance by making them less confident and not motivated to use the language in class.

6. Conclusion

Reaching a higher level or stage in learning the English language does not mean that a student can speak the target language perfectly without any Mistakes. A lot of research has been done in the field of learning pronunciation and problems associated with pronouncing the English sounds and words showed that EFL learners of English language may face many difficulties. Most of the students at English language department are aware of the fact that they commit a lot of pronunciation mistakes but they don't make any attempts to correct or decrease their mistakes. the current research was conducted to find out pronunciation problems of Libyan students at university level and how these problems could affect their performance when speaking the English language.

According to the analysis of the data collected during the research, students at English language department face a lot pronunciation problems and these could affect negatively on their participation and performance by making them less confident and not motivated to use the language in class. The study showed that students mispronounce a lot of English sounds such as /ts /, /θ/, / ð/ and / dʒ /. the sound / p / seemed to be problematic to English language students which does not exist in the Arabic.

The difficulties encountered by Libyan University students may be caused by their lack of knowledge of the correct way of articulating the different English sounds, it is also possible that they have that knowledge about how to produce sounds, but they are not able to practice them orally.

The discussed information and findings prepared answers to research questions and hypotheses of the research and proofed that students have a lot of common pronunciation mistakes such as vowels, consonants and diphthongs. Bad teaching experience and the lack of using personal dictionaries and teachers lacking knowledge about phonetics resulted in a lot of pronunciations errors.

These mistakes affect negatively in their participation and performance in class

6.1 Limitations of the study.

One of the main factors which may have influenced the research and limited the findings was the time limit. If more time was allocated for

the research, then it would be possible to do an experimental study or a case study on other universities and different samples and to compare the results and the findings to this research findings.

Another limitation of the study was the small sample size of teachers and students who participated in the research because of the difficulty of getting them all interviewed and participated in the research and most of the teachers at this university were teachers of writing and literature.

6.2 Recommendations:

Related to the pronunciation problems of the students of English department ,I would like to recommend English teachers at college of education in Nalut to optimize their teaching of pronunciation and to concentrate more on teaching correct pronouncing in every subject they teach reading , speaking or writing and not only focusing on comprehension because pronunciation is an integrated part of language to help students minimize their pronunciation problems .More research needs to be done to investigate the other phonetic elements of the language such as stress ,pitch and intonation

More attention and time for pronunciation practice should be given by teachers especially in the early stages) (primary and secondary)) schools by doing a lot of listening and repetition of drills.

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