The Use of Linguistics in Teaching Pronunciation to Saudi Students

Fahad Alfallaj*

Department of English language at the College of Technology in Buraydah-Saudi Arabia. Fh77d@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

Linguists see that the knowledge of linguistics، especially، phonology، would help teachers a lot overcome most of their students' problems in pronunciation. The present study aims at investigating this fact in one hand and the difficulties that the Saudi students have in pronunciation on the other.

Data were collected by means of questionnaire. Three language institutes in Buraydah، Saudi Arabia were involved in this study. Sixty-seven students were asked through a questionnaire. The findings indicate that teachers with background knowledge of linguistics would help their students overcome most of their pronunciation problems. Along with the students' answers، the results also show that sounds، whether vowels or consonants، which do not exist in Arabic are difficult for Saudi students. Some alternative solutions from the linguistics point of view will be proposed in this paper too. Therefore، it is hoped that this study will focus on the learners' views in one hand and the researcher's experience on the other.

**KEYWORDS :** Pronunciation Problems/difficulties، Linguistics and Pronunciation، English Exposure، Development of teaching strategies،

المستخلص :

يرى اللغويين أن علم اللغويات خصوصاً الصوتيات سيساعد الاساتذة كثيراً على التغلب لأكثر مشاكل النطق لدى طلابهم والدراسة الحالية تهدف إلى اكتشاف هذه الحقيقة من جهة والصعوبات في النطق التي يواجهها الطلاب السعوديون من جهة اخرى. تم جمع البيانات من خلال استبانة ومن خلال ثلاث معاهد تعليم اللغة الانجليزية في بريدة المملكة العربية السعودية ثم سؤال 67 طالب من خلال الاستبيان واظهرت النتائج إلى ان الأساتذة اللذين لديهم خلفية في اللغويات سيكونون قادرين على مساعدة طلابهم لتجاوز مشكلات النطق بالإضافة إلى اجابات الطلاب تظهر النتائج أن الاصوات سواء كانت ساكنة او متحركة والتي لا توجد في اللغة العربية تعد صعبة بالنسبة للطلاب السعوديين. حلول اضافية من وجهة نظر لغوية ستطرح من خلال هذه الدراسة لذا فإنه من المأمول ان تركز هذه الدراسة على وجهة نظر المتعلمين من جهة وخبرة الباحث من جهة أخرى.

INTRODUCTION

In Saudi Arabia، English is the only foreign language taught from elementary school through the first year in college. Hence، all Saudi students would have studied English for at least six years. This lengthy experience in English made the students able to demonstrate grammatical knowledge on a discrete-point grammar examination very well، but most of them lack the ability to speak English accurately and fluently. As Rao (2002) reports، students who have studied English for several years have gained knowledge of grammar and vocabulary، can read well، and get high marks in English exams. However، they lack good training in English listening and speaking skills; and they are unable to use English for communication in their daily lives.

Students' poor level of English proficiency has raised many concerns about English education in Saudi Arabia. A lot of attempts to promote students' communicative competence should be considered. These attempts have led to a real change in the methods of teaching to shift from a focus on receptive skills and knowledge، such as grammar and reading comprehension، to an

emphasis on productive skills، such as speaking and writing. What makes me deal with pronouncing is its importance. In other words، "Most of our linguistic experience comes from encounters with spoken language" (Gemsbacher 1994، p. 33). Therefore، I feel that EFL students should try hard to perform a native-like pronunciation. However، I am in doubt that any EFL student will perform a native-like pronunciation after the age of puberty. Strozer(1994) states that "It appears to be a fact that adults، as a rule، fail to achieve speaker-competence in a new language. whereas children seem to be generally able to develop full command of either a first or a second language" (Strozer 1994. p. 204). This research helps teachers to become aware of the use of linguistics in teaching ESL/EFL students، especially Arab students. Teachers with a better background in the field of linguistics can overcome some of their students' problems by practicing different ways.However، the study here attempts to (1) investigate the importance of the use of linguistics، (2) the difficulties that the Saudi students have in pronunciation، and (3) give some recommendations to English teachers and decision makers.

Research Questions The current study seeks to answer the following questions:

1- "Would the use of linguistics help in teaching pronunciation to Saudi learners?"
2- "What are the difficulties that Saudi learners have in pronunciation?"
3- "What recommendations could be made to English teachers and decision makers?"

Review of Literature:

Before presenting a real case study that shows the phonological Interference between two languages: English and Arabic، the researcher will discuss somerelatedstudies.Strozer (1994) talks about the importance of language comparative. She says "A possible bonus of the type of language study that takes advantage of some of the results of comparative language research now available is that it may shed considerable light on one's own language" (Strozer، 1994 p. 189). Therefore، I would like to point out some of the contrasts between English and Arabic (the standard) sounds before discussing relative studies. However، it is beyond the scope of this paper to talk in details about the Arabic-English contrasts. Thus، here is a summary of what Alkuli(1989) states regarding the Arabic-English phonemic contrasts:

1) /p/ is a phoneme in English but does not exist in Arabic.
2) /t/ is alveolar in English but dental in Arabic.
3) /d/ is alveolar in English but dental in Arabic.
4) /^c/ is a phoneme in English but does not exist in Arabic.
5) /v/ is phoneme in English but does not exist in Arabic.
6) /^z/ is phoneme in English but does not exist in Arabic.
7) /η/ is phoneme in English but does not exists in Arabic.
8) /ɛ/ exists in English but not in Arabic.
9) /aI/ exists in English but not in Arabic.
10) /ɔ/ exists in English but not in Arabic.
11) /r/ is retroflexive in American English، while trill in Arabic.
12) In English two or more consonants may cluster in the same syllable، but this cannot occur in Arabic.

Thus، the problems appear in consonants، vowels، and consonant clusters . A short discussion to each of them will follow:

1. Consonants:

Now، mispronouncing the [p، d، l، v، η، and r] soundsby Arab students reveals that the native language (NL) has influenced the target language (TL). In other words، it is expected that Saudi students will makea negative transfer from the NL to the TL Ahmad (2011). All in all،

these errors are not global but rather local، because native speakers will be able to understand the speaker، (Corder، 1974).

2. Vowels:

Alkhuli (1989) mentions that "/ɛ/، /ɔ/ and /a**I**/ do not have equivalents in Arabic"، (Alkhuli، 1989، p.31). Thus، the Saudi students would mispronounce the /ɛ/ sound in "develop and spend." They will shift the front mid lax /ɛ/ to the front high lax /I/. The interesting point here is that /ɛ/ does not exist in Arabic and /I/ does، so it is likely that first language interference is involved here، (Dulay& Burt، 1974).

The /ɔ/ sound is usually replaced with /au/ because /au/ exists in Arabic but /ɔ/ does not، (Swan & Smith، 1987). Therefore، "bought" would likely bepronouncedas /baut/ instead of /bɔt/. This is true with the diphthong /aI/ in saying "day & drive". with another diphthong that does not exist in English.

3. Consonant clusters:

Swan & Smith (1987) and Alkhuli (1989) state that in English، two or more consonants may cluster in the same syllable، but in Arabic this cannot occur. For example، a Saudi student will pronounce "first" with two vowels، i.e. /firist/. "There is a tendency among Saudi speakers to insert short vowels to 'assist' pronunciation"، (Swan & Smith، 1987، p. 144). So، the word 'first' consists of : CVCCC:: and what Saudi Students do is adding a vowel، so the word 'first' becomes like : CVCVCC :. Also، we can consider this as a negative transfer from NL.

In conclusion، I think such errors are typical to most of the Arab students studying English language. In the book of Swan & Smith (1987) and that of Alkhuli (1989)، such errors have been discussed in details. Yet، this is not disappointing to the Arab students، it is rather a step forward to make self correction and to learn from our own mistakes (Corder، 1974).

Another issue is the "Overgeneralization in pronouncing the suffix [ed] of the past tense as /əd/ though the {ed} is only pronounced as /əd/ when the verb ends with /t/ or /d/، (Finegan 1994). It is almost the same thing with the plural suffix {s}. It is mostly pronounced as /s/. But the plural suffix {s} is only pronounced as /s/ when it occurs after a voiceless sound.

The studyofAhmad(2011) attempts to investigate the difficulties that Saudi students have in pronouncing English consonants.The participants are adults who have just joined the Najran University. His results show that the Saudi students have difficulties in pronouncing sounds like: /p/، /d/، /v/، /tʃ/، /ʒ/، and /ŋ/. Some suggestions for English teachers are entailed. He also states that ،Al-Shuaibi (2009) focuses on the phonology of phonotactics، and he finds that learners have difficulty in pronouncing English initial consonant clusters having three members and final consonant clusters of three and four members.

Mohamed (2005) in his study attempts also to investigate some of the difficulties in pronouncing some English words by Sudanese students. The phonological systems of both English and Arabic are discussed. The study aimed at comparing the phonemes in English and Sudanese. He concludes that there are some phonemes present in the phonological system of English but not in Sudanese.The results of the study show that the participants experienced great difficulty in pronouncing the majority of the Englishphonemes which had no equivalences in Sudanese. Lastly، the students have problem pronouncing consonant clusters consisting of three elements. Some pedagogical solutions and recommendations were mentioned in his study.

Port andMitleb (1983) conducted a study on Jordanian students. They ended up with the fact that Jordanian students have a major problem in pronouncing /p/.

Odisho (2005) believe that pronunciation is the function of the brain rather than exercises. In order to develop pronunciation for adults، "..teachers should aim at building up

cognitive habits of articulation rather than mechanical ones. Consequently، the extremely common procedure of teaching pronunciation known as 'repeat-after-me' often fails to connect with adult learners and is ineffective because it does not invoke any cognitive simulation and involvement.." (Odisho، 2005،p.7).

Data Collection

1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study was a learner self-reportonthe use of linguistics in teaching English to Arab students. Miles and Huberman (1994) state that items on the list should be selected carefully in order to assure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire consists of 26 items. The items were grouped into three groups; each of which deals with one of the three research questions. Items: 1-12 deal with "would the use of linguistics help in teaching pronunciation to Saudi learners? Items:13-17 deal with "what are the difficulties that Saudi learners have in pronunciation?" Items: 18-26 deal with "what recommendations could be made to English teachers?"

All the items in the questionnaire were simply and concisely stated so as to avoid any misunderstanding. To each item in the questionnaire، only two responses were given "agree or disagree" in Likert's scale.

2. Data Analysis and Results

Data analysis does not consist of a simple description of the data collected but rather it is a process by which the researcher interprets the data. The completed questionnaire was first subjected to descriptive statistics utilizing frequency and percentage. The descriptive statistics is followed by discussion of the results. In the process of data analysis، the researcher adopted analytic induction. By reading through the completed 26questionnaire items، the researcher discovered the students' perceptions of the importance of Linguistics.

These findings provide us with answers to the first research question: **"Would the use of linguistics help in teaching pronunciation to Saudi learners?"**

The replies of participants are shown in Table 1. The results of the questionnaire clearly show that the participating students preferteachers with a good background in Linguistics. This reflects that the students are willing tospeak English clearly. In other words، pronunciation is as important to them as the other language skills. The results are similar to that reached by the studyofAhmed (2011) and Mohammd (2005).

Table (1) Percentages of students' views .

Number	Statements	Frequency		Percentage	
		Agree	disagree	agree	disagree
1	I would like to be taught only by native speakers.	52	15	77.7	22.3
2	I would like to be taught by Arab teachers	30	37	44.8	55.2
3	I prefer that my teacher uses only English.	48	19	71.7	28.3
4	I like to perform a native–like pronunciation.	61	6	91.1	8.9
5	1 think، I will be able to speak like native speakers.	35	32	52.3	47.7
6	More hours on listening and speaking classes should be given to students.	49	18	73.2	26.8
7	Some hours on pronunciation should be offered.	62	5	92.6	7.4
8	pronunciation is as important as the other language skills.	60	7	89.56	10.4
9	Pronouncing native-like is not important for learning English.	38	29	56.8	43.2
10	I like that my teacher makes a comparison between sounds in Arabic and sounds in English?	57	10	85.1	14.9
11	I prefer that my teacher pronounce words in the Arabic intonation.	38	29	56.8	43.2
12	I prefer that my teacher pronounce words in the Arabic cluster.	39	28	58.3	41.7
13	The suffix (ed) for the past tense is always pronounced as /əd/.	54	13	80.6	19.4
14	The suffix {s} plural is always pronounced as /s/	52	15	77.7	22.3
15	The most difficult sound in English is /p/.	65	2	97.1	2.9
16	The vowel sounds in English are difficult.	51	16	76.2	23.8
17	The sounds that do not exist in Arabic are hard to pronounce.	30	37	44.8	55.2
18	I prefer that my teacher uses the listening lab a lot.	47	20	70.2	29.8

19	I like to watch English movies to develop my pronunciation.	43	24	64.2	35.8
20	I always use my electronic dictionary for pronunciation.	46	27	59.8	40.2
21	My teacher gives emphasis on pronunciation.	27	40	40.3	59.7
22	I prefer that my teacher speaks slowly.	50	17	74.7	25.3
23	I prefer that my teacher exaggerates when pronouncing new words.	59	8	88.1	11.9
24	Repeating new words after a teacher is a good way for mastering pronunciation.	40	27	59.8	40.2
25	I would like to learn pronunciation through imitation of a native speaker under my teacher's supervision.	56	11	83.6	16.4
26	I like to make an oral presentation to my classmates.	59	8	88.1	11.9

Here، I will discuss the items of the questionnaire according to the research questions. For research question one، three groups are discussed. Each group presents a theme.

Group 1: (Items1،2،3) Teacher's Background: Native vs. Non-Native:
The three items here deal with the teacher's background، whether a native speaker of English or not. It is noticeable that the majority of students، 77.7% prefer to be taught by native speakers. Even though، half of the students like to be taught by Arab teachers، however، 48%students still want their teachers to speak only English in Class.

Group 2: (Items 4، 5، 6، 7، 8، 9) Importance of Pronunciation:
It is noticeable through these items that Saudi students are so concerned about pronunciation. Therefore، 61 students، 91%، like to perform a native-like pronunciation. Just 9% of the students who are not so concerned about the mastery of pronunciation as it is in item4. In addition، more than half of the students 52.3% believe that they will be able to speak like native speakers as in item 5. This is actually an encouraging behavior to teachers. For item 6، we notice that the majority of students، 73.2% suggest that the institute should increase the number of hours for listening and speaking. The students' replies to item 7 show that 72.6% of the students want the institute to offer classes on pronunciation. Item 8 strengthens this fact. Also، 89.6% of the students see that pronunciation is as important as other language skills. In both items، about 90% of students want more attention to be given to pronunciation. This goes along with the study made be Mohamed (2005). However، 56.8% see that one can learn English even that he/she could not pronounce words like native speakers.

Group 3: (Items 10، 11، 12) Arabic/English Contrastive:
85.1% of the students want their teachers to make a comparison between Arabic sounds and English sounds as in item 10. In other words، the participants want the teacher to use a contrastive analysis between the two languages. This is almost the belief that Odisho (2005) has in his book. As stated in his book، adult students need to be introduced to contrastive analysis of English and Arabic. Here it appears the importance of the knowledge of linguistics.

It seems that the Saudi students feel that they will learn how to pronounce new words easily when they take it in the Arabic intonation and in the Arabic cluster. Hence، 56.8% of students want their teacher to pronounce the new words in the Arabic intonation as in item 11. It is also true in item 12 where 58.3% of the students want their teacher to pronounce new words in the Arabic cluster. In this case، as if the student is adding a new word in Arabic. However، this is not accepted in learning a language. It is part of learning a language to learn the intonation and the cluster of that language.

For Research Question Two، "What are the difficulties that Saudi students have in pronunciation? To answer this research question، three groups are discussed. Each group presents a theme.

Group 1: (Items13، 14) Overgeneralization:

It is interesting to notice that 54 of students; i.e. 80.6% are sure that the suffix {ed} is always pronounced as/əd/. ThisOvergeneralizationof the past tense suffix {ed} is one of the problems of Saudi students. However، as we know that the suffix {ed} is pronounced as /əd/ only when the verb ends with /t/ or /d/. Thus، a Saudi student is expected to pronounce 'worked'as work/əd/ instead of work/t/ and 'involved'as involve/əd/ instead of /d/. Now I can conclude that the past tense suffix : {ed} is over generalized in pronunciation to /əd/ by 80.6% of the students. Finegan(1994) states that the past tense suffix {ed} is only pronounced as/əd/ when the verb ends with {t or d}. It is almost the same; i.e. 52 students، 77.7%، pronounce the plural suffix {s} as /s/. But the plural suffix {s} is only pronounced as /s/ when it occurs after a voiceless sound. However، it is pronounced as /z/ when it occurs after a voiced sound and as /əz/ after a /^c/، /^z/، or /^s/ sound.

This overgeneralization is caused by the spelling. Because the past tense suffix /əd/is written as {ed}، and the plural suffix /s/ is written as {s}، they are pronounced as they are written by most of the Saudi Student as we see in item 13 and item 14. This is caused by the first language interference. Again a teacher with the knowledge of linguistics، "phonology" will be able to deal with this problem proficiently.

Group 2: (Items 15، 16، 17) Problematic Sounds:

It is a consensus among the Saudi students that the /p/ sound is the most difficult one. 97.1% of the students agree that the /p/ sound is the most difficult sound to them. The reasons are: 1. It does not exist in Arabic; and 2. There is the /b/ sound in Arabic. This finding is also reached by Port and Mitleb (1983)، Odisho (2005)، Mohamed (2005)، and Ahmad (2011).In regard to the vowel sounds، the majority of the students 76.2% feel that they are difficult to pronounce. The reason is that some of them do not exist in Arabic. Alkhuli(1989) mentions that "/ɛ/، /ɔ/ and /aI/ do not have equivalents in Arabic"، (Alkhuli، 1989، p.31). Thus، the Saudi students would mispronounce the /ɛ/ sound in "develop and spend." They will shift the front mid lax /ɛ/ to the front high lax /I/. So، theywould say، */dIfIlɔb/ instead of /dIvɛlɔp/، and */sbInd/ instead of /spɛnd/. The interesting point here is that the /ɛ/ sound does not exist in Arabic and /I/ does، so it is likely that first language interference is involved here، (Dulay& Burt، 1974).Item 17 asks about the difficulty in pronouncing sounds that do not exist in Arabic. 55.2% of the students say that sounds which do not exist in Arabic are not difficult to pronounce. Such students may have considered sounds which do not exist in standard Arabic، but exist in the Arabic slang. These sounds are: /^c/، /^z/، /^s/،and /v/ sounds. For the rest of the students،44.8% who feel that the sounds which do not exist in Arabic are difficult to pronounce have considered the following sounds: /ŋ/، /p/، and /r/.Thisfinding is strengthened by the study made by Mohamed (2005)، which has been discussed above. Hence، a teacher with a good background in phonology would overcome such problems.

For Research Question Three، **"What recommendations could be made to English teachers?"**
To answer this question، two groups are discussed. Each group presents a theme.
Group 1: (Items 18، 19، 20) Use of Media:
70.2% of the students are willing that their teachers use the listening lab more than usual. It is clear that the students see the benefits of using the listening lab for improving their pronunciation. Another recommendation mentioned by 64.2% of the students as in item 19 is watching English movies. Another media that the students use to help them in pronunciation isanelectronic dictionary. 59.8% of the students use electronic dictionary not only for meaning but also for pronunciation.

From the above items، it is clear hat the media is important for Saudi students in order to develop their pronunciation in English. The listening lab comes first، and then comes watching English movies، and last comes the electronic dictionary.**Group 2: (Items 21، 22، 23، 24، 25، 26)**
Recommendations:

In this group، the researcher is trying to see the reaction of the students to some recommendations thought to be excellent for improving pronunciation. Item 21shows that 59.7% of the students believe that their teachers should give emphasis on pronunciation. Ahmad's study (2005) reached to the same conclusion. Here comes the importance of linguistics where teachers with a good background in phonology would defiantly do better.

For item 22، we see about two thirds of the students want their teachers to speak slowly in order to develop their pronunciation. Another strong suggestion stated by 88.1% of the students is requesting the teacher to exaggerate when pronouncing new words. The students here think that by exaggerating they can learn pronunciation better.

59.8% of the students see that repeating new words after the teacher is a good way for mastering pronunciation. That is why we see 88.1% of the students in the previous item want their teachers to exaggerate when pronouncing new words. However، Odisho (2005) does not believe in this at all. He is against that idea of 'repeat-after-me.'

Again، it appears the importance of the teacher in item 25، where 83.6% of the participants like to learn pronunciation through imitation of a native speaker under the teacher's supervision. Most of the students، 88.1% are willing to make oral presentation to their classmates. This، as they think، will give them a chance to develop their pronunciation.

In general، we notice that the students have recommended the followings in order to improve their pronunciation:
1. Teachers should give more emphasis on pronunciation on class (59.7%).
2. Teachers should utter new words slowly (74.7%)with exaggeration (88.1%).
3. Repeating after the teacher (59.8%).
4. Imitation of native speakers (83.6).
5. Making oral presentation (88.1).
6. Using the media more than usual(70.2%).
7. Using contrastive analysis (85.1%).
8. Some hours on pronunciation should be offered (92.6%).

CONCLUSION
Alfallaj (1012) states that teaching English in Saudi Arabia goes mostly in the following way. The first thing a teacher will do is reading the passage to the students loudly one time. The second time he/she reads the passage، he/she would translate the new words in the new passage which is given to the students at the beginning of the class. Thus، the teacher will read the first

sentence and give the meaning of the new words in Arabic، or the meaning of any word that a student asks for. For most of the time، this type of activity takes one-third of the class period. When the teacher is done with the first activity، he/she will go to the next activity which is the drill. In this activity، the teacher will pronounce the new words and the students will repeat after him/her. He/she will do this twice; that is، he/she will pronounce each word two times. This activity takes almost ten minutes. The next step will be the grammar translation. In this activity، the teacher will explain one of the rules in grammar (according to the syllabus). The most dangerous thing is that the teacher explains that rule in Arabic.The grammar activity takes minimum of 15 minutes (one-third of the class period). Then، the teacher will ask the students to open their books for doing the exercises in the book. Even in this activity، the teacher will do most of the work. He/she is going to be the one to read each item in the exercises. The students will only say: "the correct answer/choice is "a، b، c، or d." The time left for this activity is five to ten minutes; it depends on explaining the grammatical rule taken in that class. So، the teacher will ask the students to do the rest of that exercise as homework.

Thus، pronunciation has almost no place in the teaching activities in most of our schools and institutes. Now، by this paper، we noticed how the knowledge of linguistics helps EFL teachers overcome their students' problems. Therefore، I would like to advise all EFL teachers to take at least 12 hours in the field of linguistics before teaching EFL students. The reason is that "A superb language teacher could aim at an even higher goal" (Strozer 1994، p. 191). Therefore، the benefits behind taking such courses are more than to be mentioned in this research; however، the study which I discussed is an evidence of the importance of the knowledge of linguistics.

For this study، a teacher with a good background in linguistics will overcome many of the Saudistudents problems. Here are some suggested solutions from the linguistics point of view:

1. I، personally، think that one of the activities that will remedy this problem is practicing minimal pairs in order to show the difference between the two problematic consonants or vowels. For example:

    /ɛ/ develop   /I/ sit
    /b/ book   /p/ peg

2. Drawing the cross-section of the vocal tract، so the teacher can point to the place of articulation of each sound. (the teacher should not go in details).
3. Put more emphasis on pronunciation، by assigning them to go to the listening lab.
4. Encourage your students to communicate with native speakers as much as possible.
5. Encourage your students to listen to the radio، theEnglishnews channels.
6. Encourage your students to watch English TVchannals.
7. Encourage your students to imitate native speakers.
8. Make a communication activity in the classroom for the fact that the students there are leaning English in a non-English environment (EFL).
9. Use various media as suggested by the students earlier; (listening lab، TV، Radio، VCR، computer software، electronic dictionaries، and mobile software).

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