

Analysing the Difficulties Encountered by Basic Schools in some English Consonant Sounds and Clusters: Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study aims at analysing the difficulties encountered by Sudanese government schools' pupils in pronouncing some consonant sounds and clusters. The participants of the study are 20 teachers at Al Izba Basic School for Girls-Al-Amlak-Khartoum North. The study pursues descriptive analytical method. A questionnaire was used as tools to obtain data from teachers. The results show that the majority of Sudanese EFL basic school pupils mispronounce the consonant sounds and clusters which do not exist in Sudanese spoken Arabic. Based on the findings, the study revealed that some factors have negative impact on pronunciation, such as the sound systems differences between English and Arabic, inadequacy training in phonetics and phonology, in addition to irrelevancy of the syllabus to the Sudanese pupils' needs. Accordingly, the study concludes with some recommendations.

المستخلص:

هدفت الدراسة إلى تقصي الصعوبات التي تواجه تلاميذ مدارس الأساس الحكومية في نطق بعض الأصوات الصامتة للغة الانجليزية من وجهة نظر أساتذة مرحلة الأساس . استخدمت الدراسة أسلوب الوصف التحليلي منهجاً للبحث. وُزع الاستبيان للحصول علي البيانات من المعلمين حيث شارك عشرون معلماً من معلمي اللغة الانجليزية: منهم أربعة معلمين بمدرسة العزبة الاساسية الحكومية بنات بحي الاملاك - الخرطوم بحري و ستة عشرة آخرون من أربع مدارس مجاورة أخرى بالمنطقة. أظهرت نتائج البحث أن معظم التلميذات السودانيات اللاتي يدرسن الانجليزية لغة اجنبية يجدن صعوبة في نطق الأصوات الصامتة التي ليس لها نظير في اللغة العربية الدارجة التي يتحدثها السودانيون. كشفت الدراسة عن بعض العوامل التي تؤثر سلبا علي عملية النطق مثل الاختلافات في الأنظمة الصوتية بين العربية و الانجليزية، و عدم كفاية التدريب علي مادة علم الصوتيات وعدم علاقة الأصوات ببعضها، بالإضافة إلى عدم ملائمة المنهج الدراسي لاحتياجات التلاميذ. بناء علي ذلك ، خلصت الدراسة لبعض للتوصيات.

1.0 Introduction

Broadly speaking, articulation or pronunciation is a key term to any language acquisition. This linguistic term, which refers to pronunciation and talking is the ability to physically move the tongue, lips, teeth and jaw to produce sequences of speech sounds, which make up words and sentences. There are also different sounds to be pronounced.

Pronunciation is the way in which language spoken; the way in which a word is

pronounced; the way a person speaks the words of language (Hornby, 1987). Gilakjani (2012:119) assumes that pronunciation is a set of habits of producing sounds. Speaking is an important factor in learning and using English appropriately (Gussenhoven & Jacobs, 1998). Burns and Claire (1994:5) emphasize pronunciation refers to the phonology of the language –or the meaningful perception and production of the sounds of that language and how they impact on the listener.

While pronunciation refers to the manner in which we make speech sounds, Articulation refers to the usage of speech organs such as tongue, jaws, lips, etc. According to vocabulary .com. Articulation is the act of expressing something in a coherent verbal form, or an aspect of pronunciation involving the articulatory organs. The pronunciation of English involves the ability to pronounce both vowels and consonants. In our case, Bussmann (2006) defined consonants as “phonetically, a speech sound that is not an approximant, and therefore, is either a stop or fricative.”

1.1 Statement of The Problem

A close observation of Sudanese EFL pupils at 6th level Basic Government Schools disclosed that many learners encountered difficulties in articulating some English consonants, hence mispronouncing some words with /p/ sounds as /b/, others use /b/ for /v/ and (face/faith), (very/berry) as well as mother –tongue interference (Arabic language) which hardens the pronunciation of some English consonant sounds .

1.2 Questions of the Study

4. Why do basic school pupils encounter some difficulties in pronouncing consonant sounds and clusters/?

1.3 Hypotheses of the Study

This study has the following hypotheses:

1. Lack of exposure to an English-speaking environment leads to mispronunciation of some English consonant sounds.
2. Teachers do not have opportunity for enough training in phonetics and phonology.
3. Pupils pay less attention to English Pronunciation in the classroom.
4. Curriculum design neglected teaching of Pronunciation.
5. English consonants and clusters which

do not exist in the Arabic sound system seem to be problematic when being pronounced by Arabic speakers learning English

1.4 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to achieve the following:

4. Identify Difficulties encounter Sudanese Basic Schools pupils in pronouncing some English Consonant Sounds.
5. Explore the most Consonant Sounds that constitute Difficulties to Sudanese Basic School teachers in pronunciation.

1.5 Limits of the Study

This study is limited to investigating the difficulties encountered by English Language pupils at Basic Schools in pronouncing some English consonant sounds and clusters. It is carried out in the academic year 2018-2019 in Khartoum State.

2.0 Literature Review and Previous Studies

This section comprises of two parts. part one reviews the literature relates to the research topic ,such as a historical brief of English and Arabic languages in the Sudan, Basic education and the English language in Sudan ,definition of pronunciation and English consonants . Part two deals with the previous studies on the difficulties of pronunciation of some English consonants.

2.1 Basic Education in Sudan

Children are admitted to basic education school at the age of 6. Basic education lasts eight years (grades 1 to 8) and is compulsory since 1998. In 1992, the former 6-3-3 system (adopted in the 1970s) with admission to school at age 7, was replaced by eight years of basic education followed by three years of secondary education , lowering the school entry age to 6 years .

Basic education is divided into three stages: grades 1-3, grades 4-6, and grades 7-8. At the end of grade 8 pupils sit the final exams and if successful receive the basic education certificate. The government is the largest provider of basic education. The Arabic language is the main medium of instruction. The use of local languages, if needed, is allowed.

In Sudan, English is introduced as a compulsory subject in class 5. To provide high quality reading materials to pupils, national curriculum development Centre, Federal Ministry of General Education, has brought out the Sudan Practical Integrated National English (SPINE) series with the support of British Council Khartoum. SPINE 1 is taught in class 5 and 6, SPINE 2 and 3 are meant for class 7 and 8 respectively and SPINE 4-6 is taught at the secondary stage. The books aim at development of language skills through communicative approach. (Arora 2003: 16-17).

2.2 Definitions of Pronunciation

The term pronunciation is defined by Richards & Schmidt (2010) as “the way a certain sound is produced ... and often relates the spoken word to its written form” Oxford World Power (2006) pronunciation is seemed to be “the way in which a language or a word is pronounced or a person’s way of speaking a language.”

Cook (1996 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016) defined pronunciation as the production of English sounds. Pronunciation is learnt by repeating sounds and correcting them when produced in accurately. When learners start learning pronunciation they make new habits and overcome the difficulties resulting from the first language. According to Yates (2002 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani 2016), pronunciation is the production of sounds that is used for making meaning.

2.3 Differences between Consonants Sound Systems in Modern Standard Arabic and English

The difference between first language and second language is a source of problems in learning pronunciation. Accordingly, Bell (1955:15) claims that “it is one of the obstacles to achieve acceptable level of English pronunciation for most EFL learners is to know the differences between the sound structure of English and Arabic.” Lado (1957:2) claimed that “...those elements which are similar to (the learner’s) native language will be simple for him/her, and those elements that are different will be difficult.”

Arabic sound system comprises a total of thirty-two consonants, while that of English has only twenty-four. There are quite a number of common consonant sounds in both the languages. However, there is also a considerable set of consonants restricted to each language.

Another major difference is that Arabic does not differentiate between a lot of voiceless and voiced sound pairs. For example, /p/, /b/, /g/, /k/ (plosives or stops) and /f/, /v/ (fricatives). Unlike English, they are not distinct phonemes but allophones in Arabic.

Arabic is a (consonant-heavy) language in compare to English, even though, the latter use many more constant clusters to form words (Majeed, 1999:20-24). This indicates that learners face some difficulties due to the influence of LI sounds, thus make it problematic for them to master their L2.

Some English consonants do not exist in the Arabic sound system like /p/ and /v/ and even these consonants, which seem similar to some Arabic consonants like /t/ or /k/, are not identical but different in the manner and even in the place of articulation (Majeed, 1999:85).

2.4 Mother- Tongue Interference

It is observed that making some pronunciation errors in the second language can be explained by the notion of “transfer”, which is defined by Oldin (1989:25), cited in Fawzi (2010) as “the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired.

Several studies have been conducted on the influence of first language (L I) on learning English language. Mossa (1972:44) reported that “/p/ and /b/ sounds are two different phonemes and each one is distinguished by native speakers. “In Arabic, the situation is different; mainly there is only one phoneme /b/ for this; which is the reason why most of Sudanese EFL learners mispronounce words with /p/ sounds. Learners are confused between /p/ and /b/ as in words like (park, bark), (pen, ben). Even if teachers ask learners to pronounce these words, seemingly, they pronounce /b/ instead of /p/ and sometimes /p/ is used in place of /b/ which rarely happens. Many other sounds are influenced by the mother-tongue of foreign learners.

2.5 Previous Studies

A study carried out by Sawsan Mohamed Ali Mabyou, Sudan University of Science and Technology, College of Graduate Studies and published in 2017, under the title: Investigating Pronunciation Problems among 8th Level Basic Schools. The study investigated the problems of pronunciation for 8th level of basic schools’ students in Khartoum locality, Sahafa Basic Schools. The study employed test research method to investigate difficulties encountered by the experimental group in pronouncing some English vowels and consonants. The

findings of the research support the hypothesis that mother tongue interference, spelling and sound system differences between L1 and L2 affect pronunciation and lead the learners of other languages to mispronunciation.

A study entitled: “Pronunciation Problems: A case Study of English Language Students at Sudan University of Science and technology”. This study was conducted by Elkhair Muhammad Idris Hassan, English Language Department, Al-Farabi Private College, Riyadh, KSA and published in 2014. This study investigated the problems in English pronunciation experienced by learners whose first language is Sudanese Spoken Arabic. Samples comprise 50 students and 30 teachers from (SUST). The data was collected through observation, recordings and a questionnaire, and then analyzed both statistically and descriptively. The findings revealed that Sudanese Students of English whose language background is Sudanese Spoken Arabic, had problems with the pronunciation of some English vowels and consonants such as /z/, /s/, /b/ and /p/. The study concluded that factors such as interference, the differences in the sound systems between L1 and L2, inconsistency of English sounds and spelling are behind many pronunciation errors. The study recommended some helpful teaching strategies to reduce future pronunciation problems.

3. Methodology

This part outlines the research methodology of the study. It introduces the design of the study, participants and characteristics of the samples, tools of data collection, validity and reliability of the test and questionnaire.

3.1 Design of the Study

This study employs the quantitative research methodology with a use of a questionnaire as instruments to collect data. The researcher also adopts the descriptive-analytic method for describing and analyzing data.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study involves 20 English teachers of 6th level at Al Izba Basic School for Girls – Al-Amlak, Khartoum North and the neighborhoods.

3.3 Teachers' Questionnaire

The purpose of this structured questionnaire for teachers is threefold: firstly, to obtain basic information from participant English teachers regarding their academic credentials and actual levels of phonological knowledge and training, secondly, to obtain data on English curriculum as with regard to pronunciation teaching and thirdly, in order to support the researchers' observations, the questionnaire also explores the English teachers' perception of the difficulties encountered by Sudanese Basic schools' pupils in pronouncing some consonant sounds. The questionnaire comprises three sections, A, B and C. Section A consists of four items inquiring the participant's background information which are; gender, age, qualification and professional training in phonetics and phonology. They are

structured questions with options for the participants to choose in collecting the essential information. There are five items in Section B inquiring the opinions and ideas of the teachers about the position of pronunciation in the school curriculum. Section C comprises five phrases with pairs of some consonant sounds, the purpose of which is to explore the English teachers 'opinions on which of the consonant sounds are the most mispronounced by the learners. /p/-/b/, /v/-/f/, /tʃ/-/j/, /θ/-/θ/, /ð/-/z/, were chosen for this activity. In both sections, B and C, items 1 and 5 are a five-point Likert type scale ranging from 1=agree to 5=strongly disagree.

3.4 Research Procedures

For the structured questionnaire, copies of same were distributed to 20 English teachers from AL Izba Basic School and the neighborhood. The teachers were informed in advance of the academic purpose of the research.

3.5 Validity and Reliability of the Research Tools

The questionnaire is validated first by three scholars of the field from Sudan University of Science and Technology, namely: Dr. Sami Balla, Dr. Naglaa Taha Bashary and Dr. Abdul-Rahman Awad-Allah. The reliability of questionnaire is checked according to the criteria of judging and refereeing by the same panel of experts.

4.0 Data Analysis

Teacher Questionnaire - Section (A): Background information able No (1) Gender Identity

Frequency Distribution for the Respondents 'Answers

Category	Frequency	Percent
Male	12	60%
Female	8	40%
Total	20	100

From the above table, male teachers constituted 60% of the participants and 40% were female. Male dominance may be attributed to the Sudanese culture and

tradition, as well as the fact that men are regarded as the main breadwinner for most of the Sudanese families.

Table No (4.2.1.2) Teaching experience

Years	Frequency	Percent
1-5 years	2	10%
6-10 years	3	15%
11-15 years	8	40%
more than 15 years	7	35%
Total	20	100

This table shows that 10 percent of Basic school teachers had 1 to 5 years of teaching experience, 15 percent had 6 to 10 years of experience, 40 percent had 11 to 15 years of experience, and 35 percent had more than 15 years of experience. In education, teacher experience matters, but more is not always better as the simple assumption suggests: that experience promotes effectiveness and whether pupils attain higher levels of achievement when taught by more experienced teachers. A number of CALDER studies reveal that the impact of experience is strongest during the first few years of teaching, after that marginal return diminish. On average, brand new teachers are less effective than those with some experience under their belts, according to Glotfelter et al. Teachers show the greatest productivity gains during their first few years on the job, after which their

performance tends to level off. According to (Ladd2008) : on average, teachers with more than 20years of experience are more effective than teachers with no experience, but are not much more effective than those with 5 years of experience. Of course, teachers with one or two years of experience are more effective, on average, than teachers with no experience at all. Years of experience produce different types of teachers having traditional or contemporary methods for teaching English. In case of the Sudan, the more experienced/ regular teachers constitute the educational personnel who have no active teaching duties (e.g. headmasters, headmistresses or principals who do not teach) and persons who work occasionally, volunteers, national service or in a part-time capacity in educational institutions.

Table No (2) Qualifications

Category	Frequency	Percent
(4.2.1.3)-a English graduate	19	95%
(4.2.1.3)-b Graduate of other disciplines	1	5%
Total	20	100

From the above table, 95% of the respondents are English graduate, while only one is a graduate of other disciplines which constitutes the remaining 5 percent.

Table No (3) English Graduate's degree or level of Education.

Degree/ Level of Education	Frequency	Percent
Sudan Certificate	2	10%
SUNACEL/SELTI) Diploma	2	10%
Higher Diploma	3	15%
BA degree	5	25%
P-graduate Diploma	3	15%
Master's degree	3	15%
PhD degree	1	5%
None	1	5%
Total	20	100

Regarding the degree or level of education for English graduates, the above table shows that 10% of the teachers had Sudan Certificate, 10% had Diploma from SUNACEL/SELTI, 15% had Higher Diploma and 25% with BA degree. P-graduate Diploma 15%, Master's degree 15%, only one teacher had PhD degree with 5% and 5% of only one who had none. In Sudan, teaching staff were directly recruited from secondary after 11 years of

education; and who were allowed to teach at the basic school age (5-13). The other group came directly from university as an English graduate with BA or B.Sc. degree in any academic discipline from geography to chemistry. They immediately got into classroom with no teaching background in the profession. It is worthy to observe that one respondent by either omission or perhaps commission, opted not to mention his degree or level of education.

Table No (4) Professional Training/courses in phonetics and phonology.

Type of Training	Frequency	Percent
In-service training – Sudan	14	70%
Training abroad	6	30%
Total	20	100

As far as professional training or courses in phonetics and phonology are concerned, the results above show that 70% of the participants had got in-service-training in the required field inside Sudan, while 30 per cent of them had enjoyed it abroad. The

outcome shows that all participants had obtained the chance to get some sort of training in phonetics and phonology. Section (B): The situation of pronunciation in government Basic school.

Table No (5) Teachers do not have opportunity for enough training in phonetics and phonology.

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	6	30%
Agree	9	45%
Neutral	0	0%
Disagree	5	25%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Total	20	100

The above table shows the results obtained from the participants with regards to their responses to the assumption that they did not get an opportunity to have enough training in phonetics and phonology. 30% strongly agreed, 45% agreed and 25% disagreed. It is noticed from the previous results that although teachers have had

training in phonetics and phonology, but it was not sufficient enough as illustrated in this current result. Normally the teacher education curriculum include academic courses, professional training in educational and developmental psychology, teaching methods and lesson planning, and practical training among others.

Table No (6) Lack of exposure to an English-speaking environment leads to mispronunciation of some English consonant sounds.

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	7	35%
Agree	11	55%
Neutral	0	0%
Disagree	2	10%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Total	20	100

The table shows that 35% of the participants had strongly agreed that " lack of exposure to an English-speaking environment leads to mispronunciation of some English consonant sounds", 55% agreed and 10% disagreed with the statement. The results reflect that since the pupils are learning English in a country that Arabic language is their mother tongue or first language for the majority of Sudanese people, then their learning is restricted to the books, texts and other classroom activities. In addition, there are little or

even no opportunities for the pupils to use and practice English outside the classroom. Pupils are not given the suitable exposure or opportunity to practice the language with their teachers outside the classroom; accordingly, most of them also prefer to use Arabic after the English period. Various technologies such as audio devices are non-existent out door or outside the class room, and if any, physical and social environment is poor and dull. There is no room even for non-verbal activities outside their class room.

Table No (7) pupils pay less attention to English Pronunciation in the classroom.

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	5	25%
Agree	5	25%
Neutral	2	10%
Disagree	7	35%
Strongly disagree	1	5%
Total	20	100

The table above shows the respondents' reaction to the statement; "pupils pay less attention to English pronunciation in the classroom". 25% of the teachers had strongly agreed, 25% agreed, 35% of them disagreed, 10% were undecided and only

5% strongly disagreed. According to these results, pronunciation has always been perceived as difficult area by both teachers and pupils. Like listening, pronunciation is sometimes neglected in favor of reading, grammar, vocabulary and writing.

Table No (8) Curriculum design neglected teaching of Pronunciation.

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	6	30%
Agree	9	45%
Neutral	1	5%
Disagree	4	20%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Total	20	100

As with regards to the statement that : " curriculum design neglected teaching of pronunciation" , the above table and figure show that 30% of the teachers had strongly agreed, 45% had agreed, 55 were not sure and 20% disagreed. Historically, the English language syllabus has witnessed several developments from the Readers, Nile Course, up to Spine Series to date. Despite these developments, pronunciation is not yet to be accommodated in such

textbooks like reading and writing.

Table No (9) English consonants and clusters which do not exist in the Arabic sound system seem to be problematic when being pronounced by Arabic speakers learning English like: /p/ as in pile, /v/ as in save, /ʒ/ as in vision, /tʃ/ as in child, /dʒ/ as in judge, /sp/ as in speak, /spl/ as in split, /str/ as in star, /spr/ as in spring, /skr/ as in scratch.

Table No (9) Frequency Distribution for the Respondents' Answers

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	1	5%
Agree	17	85%
Neutral	0	0%
Disagree	1	5%
Strongly disagree	1	5%
Total	20	100

The table above illustrates the participants' reaction to the statement that: "English consonants which have no equivalence in the Arabic sound system seem to be problematic when being pronounced by Arabic speakers". The responses show that 5% had strongly agreed, 85% agreed, 5% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed. The results prove that the majority of Sudanese EFL learners who speak Arabic, mispronounce the English consonants and consonant clusters that do not exist in their mother tongue such as: /p/, /v/, /z/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /sp/, /spl/, /str/ and /skr/. For instance, the sound /p/ of the English language do not have counterpart in the phonemic system of the Arabic language, so it is not easily recognized by the Sudanese pupils. This sound is always replaced by /b/, a sound which exists in the Arabic phonemic system. This can similarly be applied to the sounds /v/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /sp/ and /skr/, which do not have similar sounds in the Arabic consonantal system. For example, the sound /v/ as in the word (Five) is replaced by /faif/, the sound /tʃ/ as in cheap is replaced by the sound /ʃ/ as in sheep, /g/ instead of /dʒ/ as in (geography). Consonant clusters with their different positions, are also problematic in pronunciation for Sudanese Arabic speakers. In initial position, they insert the vowel /i/ so as to break up the initial consonant clusters as in the words (spread) /ispred/ and (scratch) /iskratsh/. Arabic/Sudanese EFL learners have difficulty in pronouncing certain English language sounds especially these which are absent in standard or colloquial Arabic. Most Arabic/Sudanese EFL learners start learning English between the ages of seven and ten, after years of learning Arabic at home and at school. Accordingly, it is likely that pupils have some sort of mother-tongue interference due to the influence of L1 on English language

pronunciation learning.

Section (C)

5.0 Findings and Conclusion

This part presents the conclusion of the study. It includes a summary of the study, main findings, recommendations and suggestions for further studies.

5.1 Summary of the study

This study investigates the difficulties encountered by Sudanese EFL basic school pupils in pronouncing some consonant sounds, as well as to identify the most mispronounced ones by the pupils. It also explores the impact of some factors which lead to pronunciation problems, such as: differences in the phonological systems between Arabic / Sudanese Spoken Arabic and English, teachers' insufficient training in phonetics and phonology, lack of exposure to the target language, pupils' attitude towards English and curriculum design. The descriptive and statistic method was used in this study in order to describe, classify and analyze the data collected. The instruments used for data collection was teacher questionnaire.

5.2 The Main Findings

Based on the analysis and results of the teachers' responses to the questionnaire, the main findings of this study reveal that the most common pronunciation difficulties-encountered by Sudanese basic school pupils-and which embodied in the consonant sounds of /θ/, /tʃ/, /ð/, /tʃ/and /v/, were usually replaced by /s/, /z/, /z/, /ʃ/ and /f/ respectively. The widespread of this substitution is mainly attributed to the phonological differences between Arabic and English language. Also mother-tongue interference plays an important part to consonants pronunciation problems. These findings agree with some previous related studies such as Elkhair, M. (2014).



Other factors contributing to mispronunciation are non-exposure to English –speaking environment, teachers' insufficient training in phonetics and phonology, and pupils' lack of motivation and inflexibility of the curriculum.

5.3 Recommendations

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

1. Unfamiliar sounds or sounds which do not exist in the learners 'first language should be identified by teachers and systematically practiced in the classroom.
2. Teachers should recognize the pronunciation errors and correct them and expose pupils to basic knowledge of standard pronunciation.
3. Listen-and-imitate techniques should be adopted to improve pupils' pronunciation.
4. Teachers can provide suitable activities outside the classroom to improve pronunciation skills.
5. Textbooks should include lessons and other activities relevant to pronunciation, same as with other skills such as reading and writing.
6. Teachers should be given the opportunity to obtain enough training in phonetics and phonology.
7. Pupils should be provided with a simplified version like (Michael West Dictionary).

5.4 Suggestions for Further Studies

Based on the findings of this research, the following suggestions may help teachers and pupils in reducing the latter difficulties in pronouncing problematic English sounds;

5. A similar study can be adopted to cover 7th and 8th level Basic schools.
6. A further study can also be extended to investigate difficulties in pronouncing consonant clusters.

7. A similar study can be conducted to investigate the possibility of introducing language laboratory equipped with audio devices like sound dictionaries, computers and smart phones.

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