

**ENGLISH CONSONANT PRONUNCIATION
DIFFICULTIES OF ADULT EFL ARAB
LEARNERS IN MALAYSIA**

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Abstract

This study investigated the difficulties encountered by English as a foreign language (EFL) Arab learners in pronouncing English consonants. It also attempted to answer the question of why they mispronounce such consonants in English. To achieve these objectives, the study was carried out among four EFL learners joining University Putra Malaysia. The data was collected through reading-aloud tasks and self-reflection interviews. The participants' pronunciation recorded was also rated and evaluated by two teachers who are native speakers of English. Then, their mispronounced sounds were identified and quantified using instances of occurrence of such mispronounced sounds in English words. For the interviews, we analyzed them thematically. The results show that the learners mispronounce these consonants: /ŋ/, /t/, /p/, /d/, /z/ and /v/ with different instances of occurrences. Based on learners' self-reflection from the interviews, Arabic interference, the different sound systems in both languages, the lack of effective instruction and exposure to accurate English pronunciation at school and the age of learners are all reasons behind such mispronunciation of English consonants among EFL Arab learners. The study is concluded by stating several useful suggestions for teachers, learners and researchers.

Key Words: Pronunciation, EFL Arab learners, English consonants mispronounce.

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1.0. Introduction

English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' good phonological awareness and mastery of accurate pronunciation significantly contribute to their intelligible and fluent communication in English (Tuan, 2010). However, many EFL learners encounter difficulties and struggle to accurately or correctly pronounce sounds in English words. According to Avery & Ehrlich (2012), it is believed that learners' first language (L1) directly affects their ability to pronounce speech sounds of the target language correctly. Learners often fail to pronounce particular sounds which are not available in the sound or phonological system of their L1 (O'Connor, 1980). This is also applicable for EFL Arab learners whose L1 (Arabic) does not have certain sounds that exist in English (Hassan, 2014). Previous research points to EFL Arab learners' L1 interference and differences in the sound systems of L1 and English as two crucial factors that hinder them to master correct pronunciation in English (Barros, 2003; Flege & Port, 1981; Hassan, 2014, P.33).

In investigating why EFL learners struggle with English pronunciation, some previous researchers emphasized the role of comprehensible input and exposure to English that renders them unable to correctly pronounce in English when it is lacking or insufficient in EFL context, both inside and outside the classroom (Asassfeh et al., 2011; Moyer, 2007; Shively, 2008, P.84). According to Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis, it is important for learners to be exposed to incomprehensible input in the target language through understanding messages received by the learner. In this regard, in the EFL context, lacks of exposure to English suggests that learners should be exposed to English pronunciation through effective and explicit instruction in the classroom. Yet, current EFL teaching and learning practices, including those in the Arab world imply that pronunciation is viewed as the least important language skills or almost neglected (Bouchhioua, 2014, p. ?). Moreover, learners' age is argued to be an important factor affecting their mastery of pronunciation in the target language.

1.1 Problem Statement

Several studies have reported difficulties or problems faced by EFL Arab learners in their English pronunciation (e.g. Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Barros, 2003; Altaha, 1995). Some studies investigated pronunciation of vowel sounds among Arabs who never left their countries in order to learn English, or who were recently immersed in English-speaking countries (Altaha, 1995). As stated by Moosa (1972) and Homeidan (1984), EFL Arab learners face problems in pronunciation of sounds that they are not familiar with in their L1. For example, in the Arabic sound system, these consonant sounds: /p/, /v/, /t/, /d/, /f/, /dʒ/ as well as vowels such as /ə/, /v/, /ɜ:/, including diphthongs such as /eI/, /aI/, /aʊ/, /əʊ/, /eə/, /ʊə/, /Iə/ do not exist. So, EFL Arab learners resort to replacing such unfamiliar English sounds with their nearest equivalent in the Arabic language (e.g., pronouncing /p/ as /b/) (Pathan et al. 2014).

Besides the L1 interference and the differences between learners' L1 sound system and that of English, pronunciation in English represents one of the problematic areas or aspects for EFL Arab learners due to the lack of insufficient exposure and effective instruction in English pronunciation in the EFL Arab context. For example, Al-Ahdal et al. (2015) pointed out that although, ironically, pronunciation is claimed to be one of the important skills in English teaching and learning today, it is one of the most neglected area in EFL teaching and learning in the Arab world. Similarly, Bouchhioua (2016) reported that instruction in English pronunciation is almost neglected in EFL classrooms in most of the Arab countries. This is because it is associated with the traditional

approach to teaching, the audio-lingual method, that is regarded incompatible with the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Another part of the problems faced by EFL Arab learners in English pronunciation could be their age. Since EFL Arab learners are not well exposed to English at schools, they find it difficult to pronounce English sounds correctly though they are later exposed to English at university. In this regard, there are also several studies (e.g. Towell & Hawkins, 1992; Singleton & Lengyel, 1995) which claim that it is not easy for learners to master accurate pronunciation after adulthood.

Finally, although there are several studies which examined EFL Arab learners' pronunciation and identified various problems in such area, to our best of knowledge, most of these studies approached learners' errors and problems in pronunciation from error analysis and contrastive analysis perspectives, thus attributing such problems to learners' L1 interference. Therefore, in this study, we assume that L1 interference alone is not sufficient to explain EFL Arab learners' problems in English pronunciation since age in conjunction with the lack of exposure to the target language and instruction can contribute to such problems.

1.3. Research Objectives

This study aimed to:

1. To identify the difficulties experienced by EFL Arab learners in pronunciation of English consonants in Malaysia.
2. To identify the causes of the problems in pronunciation of English consonants as voiced by the participating EFL Arab learners in Malaysia.

1.4. Research Questions

In order to achieve the above stated objectives, the study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the difficulties experienced by EFL Arab learners in pronunciation of English consonants in Malaysia?
2. Why do Arab learners face such problems in pronunciation of English consonants?

2.0. Theoretical Framework

Several theories of second language acquisition (SLA) place an emphasis on the role of developing speaking skills and competency among language learners. However, in this project, we used only two most related theories: the Critical Period Hypothesis and the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis. They are discussed as follows:

2.2. The Critical Period Hypothesis:

Lenneberg (1967) wrote a book called *Biological Foundations of Language* where he named the belief in the superiority of young learners as the —Critical Period Hypothesis. This hypothesis claims that there is a biological or neurological period, which ends around the age of 12, beyond which it becomes extremely difficult to attain the complete mastery (grammar, pronunciation, syntax, etc...) of a second language. Lenneberg emphasizes the relationship between language acquisition and the progressive specialization of the cerebral hemispheres from birth until adulthood. Singleton and Lengyel (1995) agree about the relationship between language acquisition and the specialization of the cerebral

hemispheres with the following statement: *“During this period the dominant hemisphere becomes more and more specialized for language, and, at puberty, all language functions are concentrated in that part of the brain. This process of interhemispheric specialization, and the concomitant loss of cerebral plasticity, is held responsible for the alleged fact that after the onset of puberty languages have to be taught and learned through a conscious and labored effort and that foreign accents cannot be overcome easily”.* (Singleton & Lengyel, 1995, p.31).

Asher and Garcia (1969) believe in the existence of an optimal period (before puberty) when language is acquired easily. After this period, due to the change in the cellular plasticity, language acquisition becomes more difficult. However, according to the following quotation, it is not impossible: *“Young child’s brain has a cellular receptivity to language acquisition. This receptivity may be a function of cellular plasticity or elasticity which is controlled by a sort of biological clock. With age, the biological clock changes the cellular plasticity, which reduces the organism’s capacity to learn language”.* (Asher & Garcia, 1969, p.7). So far, according to the literature reviewed, it was believed that there existed a critical period for language acquisition. However, language has different components (morphology, syntax, phonology) and the critical period for acquisition of each one of these components has not been specified.

2.3. Krashen’s (1984) Comprehensible Input Hypothesis

Another most relevant theory or hypothesis in this project is Krashen’s Hypothesis of Comprehensible Input (1984). According to this hypothesis, the learner can acquire speaking capability as a result of his/her exposure to the target language or what is called as “comprehensible input” of the target language in the surrounding environment. In other words, speaking proficiency can be an indirect aid to assisting with the second language acquisition process. Wright, (2010) states:

“Speaking results in conversation, and what the other person says can provide an excellent source of comprehensible input for a learner. Speaking can also help by making the learner feel more like a user of the second language, and this feeling helps to lower the affective filter” (p.40).

In brief, this hypothesis assumes that language learning is achieved through learners’ understanding of the messages they receive in their communication or interaction with others, including teachers and peers in the classroom.

3.0. Literature Review

3.1. Studies on EFL Arab Learners’ Problems in English Pronunciation

There is number of researches done regarding the difficulties that Arabic speakers have when learning English pronunciation. For instance, Avery and Ehrlich (1992) presented the following examples of the most common pronunciation problems for most Arab students of English:

1- /p/ vs. /b/: Arabic does not have /p/, and students may substitute /b/ for /p/.

2- /v/ vs. /f/: Arabic does not have /v/, and students may substitute /f/ for /v/.

/r/: may be pronounced as a trill.

Avery and Ehrlich (1992) mentioned that Arab students who learn English have many problems in relations with the English vowels because these sounds lack counterparts in the Arabic language. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) found that students do not distinguish

between certain vowels, such as / e / vs. / I / as in “set” and “sit”. In the same vein, Abu Seileek (2007) found that Arabic speakers have difficulty in producing stress patterns due to the differences between English and Arabic in terms of stress. By the same token, Al-Shuaibi (2009) found that EFL learners face difficulty in pronouncing English initial consonant clusters. He also indicated some processes involved in the pronunciation of these clusters, namely, reduction, substitution and deletion. Similarly, Wahba (1998) investigated the problems faced by Egyptian learners of English as a foreign language. His study revealed that certain phonological errors committed by the EFL learners are related to stress and intonation.

There are many empirical studies that have focused on the difficulties of EFL and the reasons for these difficulties. Abu Ghararah (1992) studied the factors that affect Taibah University students in English. He used a survey containing open-ended questions, and two structured interviews to collect the data. He found that the students failed to converse in English accurately and fluently. The students tended to make several errors in their daily utterances. Moreover, they were found to be hesitant to speak the target language because “they were unable to keep the utterances flowing” (p. 1).

Barros (2003) has studied the Arabic pronunciation difficulties that may occur during learning English consonants after the age of puberty. He found that the Arabic language speakers had difficulties with regard to pronouncing some English consonants such as /ŋ/, / p /, / v /, / d /, / t /, / ð /, / d / and / r /. As noted by Barros, the differences between English and Arabic lead to these problems of pronunciation.

3.2. Factors Influencing English Pronunciation

Several previous related studies identified several factors that influence EFL learners’ English pronunciation in general and in particular, pronunciation of English consonants among EFL Arab learners. These factors that cause problems to learners in pronouncing English consonants are linguistic and non-linguistic factors, such as the L1 interference, the differences in the sound systems of both L1 and English, the exposure to English, age and so on.

3.3. L1interference

For the L1 interference, which is also linked to the differences in the sound systems of both languages, Moosa (1972) found that most of the Arab EFL learners’ problems in pronouncing English consonants, such as /p/ and /b/ sounds are attributed to the interference of Arabic in their English pronunciation. Similarly, Alkhuli (1983) noticed that EFL Arab learners find it difficult to accurately pronounce /p/ and /b/, which is caused by their L1 influence. According to Tushyeh (1996), most of the errors made by EFL Arab learners at the phonological level are represented by the difficulties in pronouncing these pairs of English consonants: /p/ and /b/, /f/ and /v/. Moreover, as reported by Wahba (1998), Egyptian EFL learners have difficulty pronouncing English sounds, particularly consonants. Such pronunciation-related errors are called interlingual ones because they are caused by the differences in the sound systems of Arabic and English.

In a study by Barros (2003), the researcher focused on the problems arising from English consonant pronunciation among a group of EFL Arab learners coming from different Arabic countries and with different Arabic dialects. Although the study participants were in contact with native speakers of English for at least four years after the age of puberty, they encountered problems in pronouncing these consonants in English: /ŋ/, /p/, /v/,

/d/, /l/, /dʒ/ and /r/. Therefore, the researcher mostly attributed such mispronunciation to the interference of Arabic into learners' pronunciation of English consonant sounds. However, it is interesting that this interference varies depending on the learners' dialect or colloquial variety of Arabic spoken. Hassan (2014) conducted a study among fifty EFL Arab (Sudanese) learners. It was found that besides many English vowel sounds, English consonant sounds like /z/ and /ð/, /s/ and /θ/, /b/ and /p/, /f/ and /tʃ/ were all pronounced by the participants incorrectly. The researcher attributed such mispronunciation to learners' L1 interference.

4.0 Differences in the sound systems of English and Arabic

In English, there are forty four speech sounds: twenty-four are consonants and twenty sounds are vowels. This suggests that English has forty-four phonemes that EFL learners should be able to pronounce correctly. Moreover, learners of English with different L1 backgrounds may have difficulty pronouncing some sounds in English (O'Connor, 1980). On the other hand, the Arabic sound system comprises twenty eight sounds, a number which is less than that of the English speech sounds. This means that since there are twenty-eight letters in Arabic, each letter represents one single speech sound. In addition, in Arabic, there is no silent sound or a sound that is pronounced silently, while in English, there are silent sounds. As stated by Nunan (2001), the larger the differences in the sound systems of two languages, the more errors in pronunciation learners of one language will make. The Arabic language does not have sounds such as /p/, /v/, /t/, /d/, /ʃ/, /dʒ/, vowels such as /ə/, /ɒ/, /ɜ:/ and diphthongs such as /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /aʊ/, /əʊ/, /eə/, /ʊə/, /ɪə/. Arab learners may pronounce the /p/ sound as /b/ sound due to its being the nearest equivalent in the Arabic language (Pathan et al. 2014). By the same token, the /v/ sound may be replaced by its nearest Arabic equivalent that is /f/.

The differences in the sound systems of Arabic and English were also empirically supported by an earlier study by Flege and Port (1981) among Arab (Saudi) learners of English. The researchers found that the participants produced both voiced stops /d/ and /g/ with glottal pulsing far more frequently than producing voiceless consonants /t/ and /k/. However, sometimes they pronounced /b/ as /p/ and vice versa. It was concluded that phonetic implementation of stop voicing in Arabic directly influenced the learners' production of English stop voicing. The researchers emphasized the differences in the sound systems of both languages with more emphasis on the absence or lack of p in Arabic sound system. The same study by Hassan (2014) among EFL Arab (Sudanese) learners revealed that another crucial factor that causes such difficulties in English pronunciation is the differences in the sound systems of both Arabic and English. Moreover, for Arabic speakers of Sudanese dialect, they also find it difficult to pronounce /ð/, /s/ and /θ/.

5.0 Exposure to the target language and instruction

Input to the target language refers to whatever is available to learners in the environment, or the language spoken and written that the learner is exposed to in his/her daily life situations. For ESL/EFL learners, it is important for them to be exposed to the target language, English at the early stage of their learning. Otherwise, the lack of exposure to the target language means that learners may have an exceedingly restricted access to the comprehensible input, which is an essential component of learning according to Krashen. It refers to the necessary condition for language acquisition to be achieved.

When talking about the exposure to the target language, what it may come to one's mind in the EFL context, like in Arab countries, is the idea of prior instruction that a given

learner has received in pronunciation. In this regard, studies among EFL learners rather than Arab EFL learners (e.g., Moyer, 2007; Shively, 2008) revealed that accurate oral production or pronunciation is significantly related to the exposure to the target language and formal instruction at their early stages of learning. The researchers suggested that classroom instruction should encourage learners to listen and speak in the target language outside the classroom. In a study by Asassfeh et al. (2011) among EFL Arab learners in Jordan, it was found that one of the main factors causing problems for Arab EFL learners in English speaking in general and in particular, pronunciation of sounds is the lack of sufficient exposure to English. In such EFL context, learners rarely listen to English outside the university context.

Regarding pronunciation instruction in the EFL Arab context, several recent studies (e.g., Al-Ahdal et al., 2015; Hassan, 2014; Bouchhioua, 2016) have pointed to the absence/negligence of instruction in pronunciation in English. It is added that while EFL instruction places an emphasis on the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, it ignores pronunciation. This is attributed to both teachers' and learners' weak interests in English pronunciation. There are only a very few studies reporting cases in which explicit instruction in English pronunciation in the EFL Arab context has been applied. For instance, in an experimental study, Bouchhioua (2016) examined the effectiveness of explicit instruction on EFL Arab learners' (Tunisians) pronunciation in English. The findings indicated that the group which received explicit pronunciation instruction improved their English pronunciation better than the group which received only traditional pronunciation instruction based on the Audio lingual method. This suggests that such explicit instruction plays a significant role in raising learners' awareness of the areas of potential problems or errors in their pronunciation as well as their awareness of the importance of accurate or correct pronunciation in tangible communication in English.

6.0. Age

The factor of learners' age has received little attention from researchers who investigated problems in EFL learners' pronunciation in English. This factor is grounded on the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which is irrelevant to the investigation reported in the current project. According to Shumin (1997), while children who are exposed to the target language in school may be able to acquire a native-like level of pronunciation, their counterparts, adults, may encounter the problem of linguistic ghettos, which means that they are exposed to insufficient meaningful exposure to the target language that inhibits their language learning, particularly speaking and accurate pronunciation.

In his hypothesis, Lenneberg (1967) did not specify whether there is a different critical period for different language skills (morphology, phonology, syntax), thus generalizing all language functions. However, if someone takes a closer look at the language acquisition process, he/she may find that there is only one critical period for pronunciation but not for other language skills.

According to Scovel (1981), there is no critical period for the acquisition of any aspect of the language, except pronunciation. Pronunciation acquisition differs from the other aspects of the language performance because it is the only one which depends on physical reality. It has a neuromuscular basis. Learning how to pronounce words and morphological and syntactic structures of the language is a totally different process. He claims that the critical period for acquiring a native-like pronunciation in the second language is around the age of 12, and those who start learning the second language after this period will never be able to acquire accurate pronunciation. Moreover, Thompson

(1991) conducted a study on immigrants in the United States and concluded that “age on arrival was the best indicator of the accuracy of pronunciation in English“ (p. 195). Those with the age of arrival before 10 had the best ratings.

However, a few other researchers posited a view that contradicts the CPH. For instance Kallkvist (1995), in a review of recent research on age-related differences in Second Language Acquisition, points out that research carried out in order to demonstrate that learners exposed to the second language environment well after the closure of the hypothesized critical period can attain native-like proficiency. She reviews research conducted by Ioup et al. (1994) in which a British woman who was exposed to and immersed into the Egyptian culture at the age of twenty-one successfully acquired native-like spoken Arabic. Her performance was later judged by native speakers in terms of Arabic phonology, auditory perception and syntax. The results showed that adults can also acquire the phonology of a second language to the level of native speakers.

7.0. Methodology:

7.1. Research Design

This study falls under the qualitative paradigm, which is considered appropriate for this study for many reasons. First, the research focuses on a complex detailed understanding of an issue sought, and thus the quantitative measurements and analyses do not fit the research problem (Creswell, 2007). In addition, this approach allows the approach allows a researcher to describe and interpret events instead of controlling them (Higgs & Cherry, 2009).

7.2. The participants

Four students from UPM University were purposively selected to address the objectives of this study. To control for the different variables such as age, motivation and exposure, all of the participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. All the participants were Arab learners who came to Malaysia as adult learners. In Arab countries and Arabic is their native language.
2. All of them were adult learners who reached the puberty age while staying in their home countries. Their age ranges from 28 to 31.
3. All of them have been staying in Malaysia for more than 5 years, with almost the same amount of exposure to learning English as all of them have been studying Master of Applied linguistics in UPM.
4. All of the participants have an overall band score of 6 in IELTS.
5. All of the participants showed strong motivation to speak and pronounce English like native speakers.

7.3. Data Collection Methods

A read-aloud task was the instrument of the study. The participants were asked to read a word list and a short text. The list contained 116 words with the target consonant sounds. The subjects were asked to read the word list spontaneously. They were also asked to read a short text. The word list and the text were adopted from Thao (2007) and Conway (2008). For ethical reasons, the participants were told that their speech would be recorded by a smart phone mobile. The second instrument for data collection is self-reflection on recorded pronunciation in English. For this, we interviewed the four

participants after we asked each one of them to listen to examples of sounds mispronounced by him/her in the earlier read-aloud task. Then, we asked them to compare such words in which the sounds were mispronounced to these pronounced by the dictionary or native speakers. Finally, we asked them to think of the main reasons behind their mispronunciation of such consonants in English.

7.4. Data Analysis

The recordings were played back and an English native speaker was asked to identify the problematic sounds in the participants utterances. The English native speaker, who is the assessor of the utterances, was asked to pay more attention to the consonant sounds. The mispronounced consonant sounds were underlined and rewritten by the English native speaker in the way they were sounded. i.e. If the word "Five" sounded like "Fayf", the native speaker would write a "f" on the top of the "v" on the paper where the speech were transcribed. For the self-reflective statements obtained from the interviews, they were listened to by us. Then, they were transcribed and analyzed thematically (See Appendix A).

7.5. Results and Discussion

The aim of the current project was to identify and analyze the difficulties experienced by Arabic speakers in pronouncing English consonants. The results of the study indicated that three of the participants experienced problems in producing: /ŋ/ at word final position as in "buying" [bayŋ], /t/ as in "civil" [sivɪt], /d/ in word final position as in "bed" [bɛd], /p/ as in "play" [pley], and /ɹ/ as in "risk" [ɹɪsk]. In comparing the instances of occurrence of these mispronounced sounds in English, overall, the results show that the sound /ŋ/ which occurs at the final position of English words. This sound was challenging for learners when it is pronounced word final position, especially if they pause between two words, such as "writing well". It was most frequently mispronounced by the Arabic speakers in this study (n=236). In terms of the occurrence of this mispronounced sound made by each individual speaker, the results of the study indicate that speaker D committed the highest number of errors related to this English sound (n=77), followed by speaker B (N=72), speaker A (n=65) and finally, speaker C (n=22).

The second consonant sound that was most frequently mispronounced by the EFL Arab learners in this study is /t/. This sound was mispronounced by the participants (n=192) times overall. In comparing mispronunciation of this sound among the four participants, it is evident that the highest number of errors in pronouncing this sound was made by speaker A (n=75). This is followed by speaker D (n=47), speaker B (n=40) and speaker C (n=30).

Table 1: Results of the instances of occurrence of mispronounced consonants

Participant	Problematic consonant	Phonetic representation	How it is mispronounced	Instances of occurrence
A	NG (in final position)	/ŋ/	/ ŋk/	65
B				72
C				22
D				77
Overall				236
A	L (in any Position)	/t/	/l/	75
B				40

C				30
D				47
Overall				192
A	D (in phrase final position)	/d/	/t/	5
B				57
C				52
D				2
Overall				116
A	P (in any Position)	/p/	/b/	36
B				39
C				60
D				25
Overall				160
A	su(middlePosition)	/ʒ/	/ʃ/& /z/	66
B				26
C				45
D				1
Overall				138
A	V (in any Position)	/v/	/f/	44
B				0
C				0
D				0
Overall				44

The above results also indicate that the English consonant /p/ was the third consonant that was most frequently mispronounced by the Arab EFL learners. This is because this sound represented overall instances (n=160) of occurrences of mispronunciation among the four speakers. This suggests that /p/ represents the third most challenging sound in English to be accurately pronounced by EFL Arab learners. It was also mispronounced by the four speakers in any word-positions as in park, surprise and map. Regarding the instances of occurrences of this mispronounced sound for each learner, it is evident that this sound was the most challenging sound for speaker C because he made the highest number of errors related to this sound (n=60). Speaker B committed a number of (n=39) times of /P/ mispronunciation, followed by speaker A (n=36). However, speaker D made the lowest number of /P/mispronunciation.

It is also surprising that Arab EFL learners have problems in pronouncing the English sound /d/ because they pronounce as /t/. If they say, for example, “studied hard” without any pause between the two words, the right pronunciation of the consonant /d/ is more likely to occur. However, it is pronounced as /t/ in case when Arabic speakers make a pause between these two words or similar words (e.g., “studied (pause) hard”). This is mispronounced by speaker B with the highest instances of occurrence (n=57), followed by speaker C (n=52). However, speaker A and Speaker D had the lowest instances of occurrence of this mispronounced sound (n=5 & 2, respectively).

The English consonant /ʒ/ also represents a challenging issue for EFL Arab learners (n=138). In this regard, the learners tended to mispronounce this sound incorrectly in mid-word positions. It is pronounced either as /ʃ/ in words, such as “pleasure” or as /z/ in words like “usually”. This sound was most frequently mispronounced by speaker A

(N=66) and C (N=45), followed by speaker B (n=26), while speaker D had only one instance of committing such consonant related error (n=1).

Finally, based on the above quantified instances of occurrences mispronounced consonants in English, we can say that the English consonant which is found to be the least challenging sound in this study is the sound /v/. This was even associated with one participant, speaker A (n=44) who tended to pronounce it as /f/ in all word-positions, such as value, survive and save.

The above results are consistent with results of previous studies conducted among EFL Arab learners' difficulties in English pronunciation (Abu Ghararah, 1992; Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Al-Shuaibi, 2009; Barros, 2003). It is also interesting that the most challenging and problematic sound in English is the consonant /ŋ/, thus supporting what exactly was reported by Avery and Ehrlich (1992) and Barros (2003) especially because this sound does not exist in Arabic.

The findings obtained from the EFL learners' self-reflection on their pronunciation problems support the above results. As the four learners were asked to listen to their words pronounced by them containing these sounds and compare their pronunciation to the native speaker or dictionary, they all admitted that their pronunciation was deviant from that of native speakers or erroneous. This is illustrated by what stated by C and D:

C: "Yes, there are totally differences in my pronunciation, when I listened to the native speaker's pronunciation".

D: Yes of course is deferent, the mispronunciation of often as a "speaking".

This means that the participants are aware of their problems in pronunciation in English. The participants also seemed to be aware of the reasons behind these problems or difficulties in English pronunciation. In this regard, as they reflected on their problems in pronunciation of the abovementioned consonants, the learners pointed to various reasons. The first main reason behind these problems in English pronunciation is the L1 interference in their pronunciation of consonant sounds in English. This is what was stated by speaker C in a direct and explicit way:

C: "I think the main reason of that different is the influence of my mother tongue".

Similarly, speaker A's statement underlies the negative effect of L1 interference in EFL Arab learners' pronunciation of consonants. In this respect, he referred to the society, which means how Arab learners of English are influenced by their society in terms of English pronunciation as they pronounce some sounds, such as /s/ as /z/ based on their Arabic dialects:

A: "From the society, some people pronounce s like z according to their accent of first language and this effect the pronunciation of the word".

The second main reason for such mispronunciation of consonants is the differences in the sound systems of Arabic and English. Some learners highlighted this reason as a crucial factor that negatively affects their English pronunciation of consonants in English. For instance, according to speaker C:

C: "As we know there are differences among languages especially in the phonetics system"

Moreover, for the above differences, speaker D's statement clearly explains this factor by pointing out at the different sound systems in both languages and illustrating this by a clear example of /p/ and /b/:

D: "As for me Students confuse for example between /p/ and /b/ words like ('park', 'bark'), ('pen', 'ben'), if we ask the students to say these words, they pronounce /b/ instead of /p/ in each pair of the words and sometimes /p/ is used in the place of /b/ but this rarely happens. The reason for shifting from /p/ to /b/ is the fact that the two sounds are regarded, as they are two allophones of one phoneme".

It is interesting that the learners are also aware of these English consonants which are not available in the Arabic sound system. For this, speaker A referred to the differences between the two languages in relation to the English sounds which do not exist in Arabic by giving an example of the English consonant /ŋ/:

A: "and this sound doesn't have in Arabic language so we are facing difficult with pronounce this sound".

The L1 interference was also reported by earlier researchers (Alkhuli, 1983; Barros, 2003; Hassan, 2014; Moosa, 1972; Tushyeh, 1996). All these researchers attributed many of the EFL Arab learners' errors to their Arabic interference in their English pronunciation. Moreover, the above findings of this project underlie the role of the differences in the sound systems between the two languages in having negative influence on learners' English pronunciation of consonants. This corroborates the results of some studies, including Flege and Port (1981), Hassan (2014), O'Connor (1980) and Nunan (2001) as these researchers enriched our understanding of the differences between Arabic and English sound systems when interpreting the reasons why EFL Arab learners make errors in pronouncing certain sounds such as /P/ and other consonants that are lacking in Arabic.

The findings of the project also indicate that teaching or instruction in English pronunciation in the EFL Arab context could be an important reason why most of EFL Arab learners encounter such difficulties in English pronunciation. Partly, this is referred to by some participants as the way teachers, especially at schools, pronounce such sounds in English and their feedback provided to learners:

A: "From the knowledge of the teacher because if teacher have good knowledge will pronounce the word property and students will acquire it without any problems".

D: "Unfortunately, it seems that many school teachers pronounce "speakink", and have been for a while".

B: "Sometimes the word sound became very strange like u listen to the new word with different pronunciation that reflects our feedback in learning English, maybe this refers to my teacher feedback too".

The above findings highlight the importance of teachers' instruction in English pronunciation, particularly at school. Researchers (e.g., Moyer, 2007; Shively, 2008) found that that accurate oral production or pronunciation is significantly related to the exposure to the target language and formal instruction at their early stages of learning. Moreover, the instruction seems to be ineffective or almost lacking in the EFL Arab classroom at schools, which confirmed what was reported by Asassfeh et al. (2011) and other recent Arab researchers (e.g., Al-Ahdal et al., 2015; Hassan, 2014; Bouchhioua, 2016). In addition, such above statements are indicative of the lack of exposure to accurate pronunciation in English at school in the EFL Arab context. This implies that input is very important for learners of any language at this early stage as hypothesized by earlier theorists, such as Krashen.

It is also evident the participants emphasized the importance of this exposure to accurate pronunciation at school, which means that age is an important factor in their mastery of correct pronunciation of English. This is one strong reason that supports our claim that goes in line with the Critical Period Hypothesis (Asher & Garcia, 1969; Singleton & Lengyel, 1995). Another evidence that supports the role of age in acquiring accurate pronunciation in English is learners' actual age because all the four participants in this study reached the puberty age. This means that even if they were all exposed to English in Malaysia for some years, they would find it difficult to pronounce such sounds in English accurately.

Due to the last reason stated above by the three participants, which is the wrong pronunciation of teachers during schools in addition to learners' lack of exposure to accurate pronunciation in their school education, it seems that they pursue pronouncing such sounds wrongly. As a result, such errors in pronunciation of English are fossilized. This can be evidenced by what speaker D:

D: "We use new ways of hearing and new ways of using our organs of speech. So it is too difficult to change such habits which a learner has obtained since his childhood or at least it needs very long years to be changed and after also very long time and regular practice, and all that is linked to a certain age of the learner".

Based on the above findings of the project, several useful recommendations are advocated for EFL teachers, learners and researchers. First, EFL Arab learners especially those at school need to be taught English pronunciation. For this, pronunciation should be one of the language skills that is necessary to be integrated in the school curriculum rather than being the least important skill. Teachers should also train learners on how to pronounce in English through effective instruction and using teaching aids like audio tapes or technologies where learners can listen and watch how native speakers of English pronounce sounds. Learners should also continue or pursue practicing speaking in English because this will help them to alleviate the difficulties in English pronunciation. Finally, researchers should further investigate the difficulties in English pronunciation among EFL Arab learners through experimental studies, taking into account the effect of training, instruction and age on learners' improvement in English pronunciation.

8.0. Conclusion

This research illustrates that EFL learners face difficulties in English pronunciation of consonant sounds in English. This is due to various factors. First, the Arabic interferes in their pronunciation of such sounds, thus making them mispronounce consonants in English. Secondly, the differences in both sound systems result into such mispronunciation as there are some English sounds which do not exist in Arabic. This results into learners' either replacing such sounds with ones in Arabic that are not phonetically different. Moreover, the lack of effective pronunciation structure, which means that learners lack sufficient exposure to correct pronunciation in English, contributes to these difficulties in English pronunciation. Finally, the age plays an important role in hindering learners' mastery of correct pronunciation. Therefore, teachers should raise learners' awareness of correct pronunciation through effective instruction and training.

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