

Investigating the Challenges of Acquiring /ð/ and /v/ English sounds by Yemeni EFL Learners

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Abstract: Reaching a near-native speaker pronunciation is essential for EFL students. However, several factors contribute to the challenges faced by EFL learners, mainly due to the interference of mother tongue as well as the age factor. This paper analyzes the pronunciation of English /ð/ and /v/ sounds by Yemeni EFL learners in Malaysia. A seven-week intervention was carried out with two groups of learners; young and adult learners to identify the pronunciation errors made. The learners were provided a reading task sheet and their reading was recorded before and after the pronunciation test. The data showed that the learners' age factor and their ignorance of the phonological phonetics systems of the English language, contribute to the pronunciation problem. The group of older learners displayed difficulties in pronouncing the sounds /v/ and /ð/ compared to the younger ones. The main factor that caused the pronunciation problems of English /ð/ and /v/ by Yemeni learners was due to the absence of /v/ and /ð/ in the Yemeni dialect. This study provides pedagogical implications on EFL teaching and learning. Learners need to be given ample knowledge and practice L2 language for correct English pronunciation, if not near-native, spoken proficiency.

Keywords: Interference, Yemeni dialect, pronunciation, EFL, phonetics.

1. Introduction

Although second language learners ultimately aim to attain native-like fluency, the pronunciation aspect always poses a challenge. That is based on the learners' dialect interference, as native speakers usually identify individuals as non-native speakers. Many studies of English as a second language proved that learners accounted the difficulties in English pronunciation amongst Arab learners arise from the fact that the sound systems of Arabic and English are different in many aspects (Hago, 2015). According to Watson (2007) English has a different number of consonant sounds compared to other languages. This is particularly factual in the Arabic language, whereby the place and manner of articulation

contrast in various ways. For instance, the Arabic sound system does not permit English sounds like /p/, /ŋ/ and /v/ and even these consonants, which are like some Arabic consonants like /t/, /k/, or /ð/, are not identical but different in the manner and in the place of articulation. (Abdulwahab, 2015; Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin, 1996; Kharmā and Hajjaj 1989), attempted to identify problems faced by Arab learners of English and found that some consonants, mainly /p/, /v/, /ŋ/, /θ/, /ð/, /r/, /l/ posed problems in pronunciation for Arab learners of English

Based on these observations and the literature, this study attempts to investigate the difficulties that Yemeni learners encounter while pronouncing certain English sounds. As the literature shows, they have difficulties to pronounce /v/ and /ð/. Yemeni EFL learners have the tendency to incorrectly pronounce English words such as: investigation /in_ˌvɛstə'gɑːʃ(ə)n/ becomes /in_ˌfɛstə'gɑːʃ(ə)n/ and this /ðis/ is pronounced as /ˌdis/.

1.1 Nonexistence of some English sounds

First language L1 interference has been widely held as factor affects the acquisition of the second language sound system (Kranke and Christison, 1983). Each language consists of a limited number of phonemes in which the sounds of a language that are distinguished from each other in a systematic way (Cook, 2001). In English, there are 24 sounds as shown in Table (2.1) and 44 phonemes (Ladefoged, 1982). Phonemes of English language differ from its letters, conducting interpretations that some letters can present more than one phoneme (Cook, 2001). e.g.:- 'c' presents two phonemes, which are /k/ as *cat* and /s/ as in *nice*. The combination of two letters require a presence of another phoneme, e.g.:- /t/ and /h/ can present two phonemes, /θ/ as in *three* or /ð/ as in *there*.

The Yemeni dialect consists of 26 fixed phoneme sounds (Watson, 2007), as shown in Table (2.2). In some cities in Yemen such as Mukalla city, /θ/ and /ð/ sounds are replaced by /t/ and /d/ (Mahfouz, 2013).

English consonant phonemes (Table 2.1)

	Bilabial	labiodental	Dental	alveolar	Palato-alveolar	palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d			k g	
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
Affricate					tʃ dʒ			
Nasal	m			n			ŋ	
Lateral				l				
Approximant	w				r	j		

English consonant phonemes (Table 2.1)

	labial	labiodental	Inter - Dental	Dental-alveolar	Palato-alveolar	velar	Pharyngeal	Laryngeal
Plosive	b			t d		k g		ʔ
Fricative		f	t d	s z	s	ħ x		h
Affricate					dʒ			
Nasal	m			n				
Lateral				l				
Tap				r				
Approximant					j	w		

The two tables above show that English has the sounds /v/ and /ð/, which are absent in the Yemeni dialect. For instance, the English sounds /v/ and /f/ exist in the fricative, labiodental manner of articulation, while only /f/ sound in Yemeni dialect, is placed in the fricative, labiodental manner of articulation. The phoneme /d/ in English is a dental plosive, and /ð/ is a dental fricative. In the Yemeni dialect, /ð/ is not found and the phoneme /d/ is an alveolar plosive. As such, the Yemeni mother tongue is one of the basic factors that affect the pronunciation of English words (Al-Shuaibi, 2009).

1.2 The Consonants /ð/ and /v/ and age factor interference

Mahfouz (2013) noted that many Yemeni people pronounce /ð/ as /t/ because these consonants are articulated in a closed place, based on the phonology of their own accents. This phenomenon is dominant in Yemen only, for instance; ثوب، تمار واستثناء.

The consonant /v/ is another English sound that is difficult to pronounce correctly by Yemeni and Arab learners. It is difficult for them to pronounce it; therefore they tend to replace /v/, which is not found in the Yemeni phonology, to /f/. This process happens frequently with words that they have been acknowledged and unfamiliar words to them. For example: ‘festifal’ for festival, ‘fan’ for van, and ‘fery’ for ‘very’. The incorrect pronunciation of this sound leads to difficulties in understanding the meaning of what Yemeni and Arab learners want to say. Besides, it leads to the occurrence of spelling mistakes in writing (Mahfouz 2013).

Mahfouz’s findings were been approved by (Schwabe, 1978) previously. Schwabe (1978) wrote an article that compiled data on the contrastive features of the English and Arabic sound systems. He focused on those features with words that are confused semantically; such as phoneme substitution in the following words: bath and path, brood and prude, and van and fan. Error data were collected from intermediate and advanced-level Arabic speaking learners learning English at the University of California Davis. Schwabe’s description of the difficulties, along with several examples and possible explanations, showed that Arabic learners’ pronunciation errors with English consonant phonemes, are most likely to impede understanding occur within three manners of articulation: 1) Stops, /p, b, t, d, k, g/, 2) Fricatives /f, v, θ, ð, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, h/, 3) Affricates /tʃ, dʒ/ (Schwabe, 1978).

With consideration to the age factor, Lenneberg (1967) proposed the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), suggesting that there is a period of time when learning language is easier than any other time in

one's life. He links the close of the critical period to when the cerebral lateralization is completed of language function which takes place at puberty. However, Singleton and Lengyel (1995) studied different accounts regarding the interference of age as a contributing factor towards the errors of second language acquisition; some have asserted that children are more efficient and effective second language learners than adults, while others claimed that adolescents and adults in all respects, can acquire second language easily than children. A study by Service and Craik (1993) examined the capacity of 20 young adults (mean age 25), and 20 older adults (mean age 70), to test their ability of acquiring a foreign language. The result of the study favored the younger group. Kotake and Kurusu (1980) conducted a constrictive study where the subjects were 30 Japanese students, whose ages were between 7 to 11 years old. The findings of the study indicated there was no relation to age when acquiring another language.

The production of English language by Yemeni learners has not attracted the attention of many researchers however, a few studies were carried out recently (Al-Shuaibi, 2009, Algeeli, 2013 and Na'ama, 2011). These studies investigated the difficulties of pronouncing English language by Yemen learners with regard to the negative transfer of the Arabic language. The age factor was given little attention in the studies of Yemeni learners. Therefore, this paper is designed to expand on the age factor, besides investigating if age factor interferes during the acquisition of /v/ and / ð/ English sounds.

2. The objectives of the study:

The salient objectives of the study are summarized as following:

2.1- Investigating the difficulties of pronouncing /v/ sound by Yemeni learners.

2.2- Investigating the difficulties of pronouncing / ð/ sound by Yemeni learners.

2.3 Identifying the contributors of the incorrect pronunciation of /v/ and / ð/ made by Yemeni learners.

3. The methodology

This study employed a case study with a qualitative design. According to Nunan (2003), researcher, who conducts a case study, observes the characteristics of an individual unit, as a child, a class, or a community to give deep analyzation. It is also factual and can represent a multiplicity of viewpoints. It can offer support to alternative interpretation. While the observations act as mental 'blinkers' on the user.

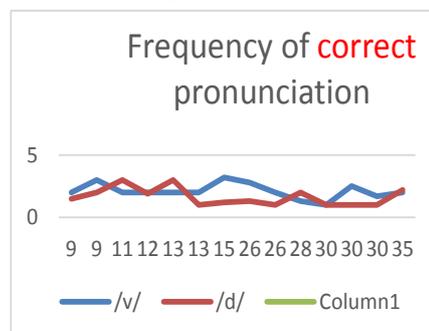
The study was carried out in the Yemeni international school (elite school center), in Selangor, Malaysia. There were a total of 14 learners (male and female); seven of them aged from 9 to 15, while the others ranged between 26 -35 years old. The study was divided into three stages, which have been conducted within two months. In each stage, the participants were given a reading task. The researcher observed the way the participants pronounced the consonants /v/, /ð/ and the researcher also observed any improvements the participants showed during each stage.

In the first week, the participants were asked to read a paragraph from their English curriculum. The researcher recorded how participants pronounced /v/ and / ð/ English sounds. In the second stage, the participants were taught how to pronounce the phonic sounds accurately, especially /v/ and / ð/. This was followed by the same reading task. The researcher checked for improvements in pronunciation and recorded them. This stage was carried out in the 4th, 5th and 6th weeks. After seven weeks, the participants were given a final speaking task in the third stage. The researcher observed the final improvements by the participants and recorded them.

5. Results and discussion of the study

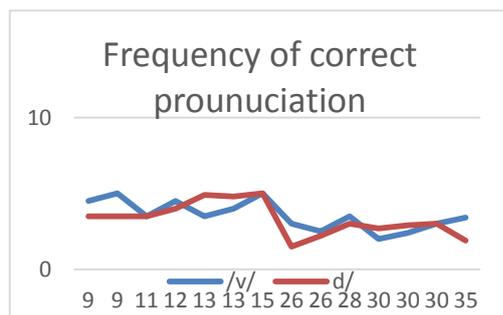
The first stage investigated the pronunciation accuracy of the learners before enrolling them in an English phonology course. It was identified that all the learners had a mean result in making incorrect pronunciation of /v/ and / ð/; as illustrated in Figure 5.1. In the second stage, the participants were motivated to learn how to pronounce English sounds correctly; in the third stage, the researcher observed that varied results were apparent in the subjects' pronunciation of the two consonants. Mostly, learners of 9 to 15 years age group acquired the sounds easily; compared to the learners who aged from 26 to 35. The different results are shown in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.1



Note: d refers to /ð/

Figure 5.2



Note: d refers to /ð/

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show the frequent percentage of the correct pronunciation of English /v/ and /ð/ sounds by Yemeni learners. The study tracks two groups of learners, whose age is from 9 to 15 years and 26 to 35 years. It is observed that the younger learners' percentage gradually raised from the first week until the eighth week after attending the phonics course. In contrast to the younger learners, the older learners obtained a lower percentage in acquiring the two sounds. The percentages of pronouncing /v/ correctly are shown to be more problematic target than pronouncing /ð/. For example the percentage of pronouncing /d/ varied from 1.5 % to 3% as shown in Figure 5.2.

The younger learners achieved better scores; thus, percentage increased respectively after the phonics course. For example, the percentage for accurate pronunciation of /v/ increased from 2% to 5% while the percentage for accurate pronunciation of /ð/ increased to 5% in the last week of observation. To conclude, all learners achieved equal percentage before attending the phonic course; this result changed after seven weeks with the younger participants scoring significantly higher percentages than the older students.

6. Conclusion

The results of the present study show some pedagogical implications in the pronunciation of the English language by Yemeni learners. The learners of the study had difficulties in the correct production of certain consonants in particular /v/ and /ð/. This difficulty is due to the nonexistence of the sound /v/, and the dialectal influence of /ð/ Yemeni dialect, which create some problems made by Yemeni learners. Moreover, the study showed that the younger learners had better pronunciation and articulation compared to the older learners. Hence, this study gives an insight into the early exposure to English phonetics. Learners should begin these lessons from an earlier age, as the study shows that children are more successful in acquiring English sounds compared to the older students. The

distinctions between Yemeni and English phonological systems help to acknowledge English difficult areas to avoid errors in pronunciation in order to master the English language.

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8. References

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