Challenges in Teaching English Pronunciation to Arab Learners

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TESOL Module 4 Part 1 Question 3: Describe the specific difficulties in English pronunciation met by a group of learners known to you. Did they overcome these difficulties? If so, how? Or, is it possible to overcome the problems?

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Teaching English to native Arabic speakers poses different challenges. Although Arabic is regarded as one the hardest languages in the world to learn, English is quite difficult to learn and pronounce for Arabic learners, especially adults. These challenges arise from the unique and distinct natures of both languages.

The first challenge that faces the learners of English is that some of the phonemes of English language do not match written letters. A letter does not always have the same sound in English. For example, the letter c is pronounced as /s/ in cellar and as /k/ in cup. Also, the same sound can be produced using different letters. For example, the sound /k/ can be produced using the spelling form *c* as in *cat*, the spelling form *k* as in *kite*, the spelling form *ch* as in *chemist*, the spelling form *ck* as in *clock* and the spelling form *cc* as in *occur* (Umera-Okeke, N. 2008).

The second difficulty that faces Arab learners of English is consonant clusters. Arabic has 28 consonant sounds, whereas English has 21 consonant letters and 24 consonant sounds. Despite the fact the number of consonants in Arabic exceeds that of English, the occurrence of two or more consecutive consonant in an English word is quite challenging for Arab learners. Arab learners are not accustomed to the absence of vowel sounds in between consonants, so they tend to add an extra vowel (a schwa) before or in between the sounds constituting a consonant cluster. An example of that would be the /st/ in *star*, /spr/ in *spring* and /dr/ in *draw*.

Other issues that face Arab learners is the difference between the vowels in Arabic and English languages. Short vowels are generally not written in Arabic texts. Also, there are 20 vowel sounds in British English in contrast to only 5 vowel letters. A famous example would be the mix-up in pronunciation between *soup* and *soap*. Also, some vowels might be especially difficult to produce for some Arab learners, like the ‘schwa’ sound.

In addition to trouble with vowels, some of the sounds of English language are non-existent in Arabic. Learners find it perplexing to distinguish between /f/ and /v/ so *very* becomes *ferry,* as well as between /p/ and /b/ so *pin* becomes *bin*. The sound /ŋ/ might exist in Arabic but nevertheless Arabic learners have a tendency to substitute /k/ for /ŋ/ when it occurs at the end of a word; so *buying* becomes /baɪɪŋk/ and *sing* becomes /sɪŋk/.

Moreover, it is almost impossible for beginners to recognize the silent letters in a word; like the *w* in *wrist*, the *p* in *coup* and the *t* in *listen*.

Besides the challenges posed by phonemic inconsistencies, Arab learners are faced with the dilemma of stress. In contrast to Arabic stress in every aspect, English stress rules are non-predictable and can change the meaning and the grammar of the utterances in many ways (Ashour, H.M. 2017). In addition to that, mastering sentence stress is crucial for effective communication. Failure of properly applying the rules of stress may cause the utterance to be convey unwanted messages or to be perceived as rude or contextually inappropriate.

One more conundrum is elision; the complete disappearance of some sounds to simplify the pronunciation of some words or phrases. Leaners can easily detect the elision in isolated words through applying pre-studied rules, but upon encountering phrases in connected speech, this may not be as easily tackled. The most commonly encountered elision would be /t/ and /d/ and how they tend to be dropped when they occur within consonant clusters. On the other hand, intrusion is another peculiarity of English. Its most familiar example is the intrusive *r* that is phonologically inserted between two words to solve the problem of a vowel at the end of a word followed by a vowel at the beginning of the next word. Elision and intrusion are puzzling to Arab leaners because in Arabic, what you write is what you read.

Overall, the compilation of the above-mentioned challenges opposes Arab learners when attempting to study English.

In face of these difficulties, Arab learners of English need to frequently attempt to phonologically produce the unique vowel sounds of English. Mastering English demands grasping the technique and method of English pronunciation.

According to Harmer, J. (2001), it is acceptable to introduce sounds to learners without their symbols. However, to highlight the sound and letter inconsistencies, awareness of phonemic symbols might be introduced, in terms of recognition rather than production of phonemic transcriptions.

For commonly encountered pronunciation errors that challenge the whole group or class, drilling might be of value, followed by regular correction. Intensive repetition of hearing and saying difficult words or phrases can help learners get their tongues around confusing sounds or master intonation, stress and weak forms that are unfamiliar in their mother tongue. Choral drilling allows learners a safe opportunity for practice without fear of embarrassment. Also, exposing leaners to authentic listening material is of utmost importance.

When tackling new vocabulary, the teacher has to show the mouth shape and movement associated with each phoneme, and to introduce the sound of a new word and its stress alongside its spelling.

Also, when students are encouraged to record and listen to their own speaking activities, they form a healthy habit of distinguishing between correct and incorrect pronunciation.

For younger learners, using songs, rhymes, listening to stories and tongue twisters is of tremendous value. Teachers can play a game where learners try to guess the word by the movement of the teacher’s mouth. Introducing minimal pairs helps to distinguish different vowels. This can be done through a game like minimal pairs bingo and asking students to spot the odd one out.

Running dictation is another fun way to practice pronunciation and transforming phonological utterances to written words, where one steam member runs to the front of a classroom to read a word or a phrase and go back to dictate it to the other team members.

To teach word stress, the teacher can ask learners to categorize the vocabulary of a new lesson into stress tables according to their stress patterns.

When the teacher does not have the luxury of time for independent pronunciation practice, integrating chunks of it whenever possible is a necessity. For example, after completing a listening activity, learners can be handed a printed script and asked to complete the gaps. The omitted phrases should include aspects of connected speech. This will improve the students’ decoding abilities.

Finally, yet importantly, the teacher should pay close attention to the errors of his students and view them as opportunities for further development. Addressing pronunciation issues early on is crucial to intercept the emergence of fossilized errors.

References:

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