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Consonant Pronunciation Errors Made by Saudi EFL Students

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***Abstract*—The acquisition of accurate pronunciation is crucial for ensuring precise delivery of messages in the English language. The aim of the current study is to identify and analyze consonant pronunciation errors made by Saudi EFL beginners. These errors can significantly impact their overall communication skills and comprehension. Therefore, forty-five female students in the third level of intermediate school participated in the study. A performance test was designed to elicit students' spontaneous pronunciation of all consonants in various positions. The students' spontaneous utterances were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The results revealed that 14 English consonants pose challenges to Saudi female beginners in spontaneous pronunciation. These problematic sounds are, respectively, /p/, /ŋ/, /r/, /ʒ/, /ʤ/, /t/, /ɬ/, /v/, /d/, /Θ/, /ʧ/, /b/, /ʃ/, and /f/. The findings drawn from this study provide insights that may assist policymakers and material designers in supporting young Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) beginners during their early stages of learning English. By addressing these specific consonantal challenges, targeted phonetic training programs can be developed to enhance pronunciation skills. Additionally, incorporating interactive and immersive activities into the curriculum may further support learners in overcoming these obstacles more effectively.**

***Index Terms*—English consonants, beginners, EFL, Saudi learners, error analysis**

I. Introduction

Effective communication necessitates proficiency in language. In the current technological era, English serves as a lingua franca understood by many. Consequently, individuals eagerly begin learning English to communicate effectively. Most English learners aspire to have native in pronunciation; however, this rarely turns into reality since accurate pronunciation acquisition is a complex process. In fact, developing good pronunciation in a second language is often the most challenging aspect of language learning (Al-Arishi, 1992; Al-Seghayer, 2019).

Similar to their struggles with grammar and vocabulary, Arabic speakers of English also face difficulties with pronunciation. Vowel pronunciation is a significant issue for many Arabic EFL students due to its inconsistency in the written form of the language. While certain consonants may present similar difficulties, pronouncing them is generally not perceived as a challenge. In fact, vowel variations contribute to differences in English accents, whereas consonants are pronounced more uniformly among English speakers. According to O'Conner (1980), "a great risk of misunderstanding" arises if consonants are "imperfect," however understanding will not be hindered if inaccurate vowel pronunciation occurs (p. 24). Therefore. since consonants are more critical for comprehensibility in English, learning to pronounce them correctly should be prioritized.

II. Literature Review

The present study relies on Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), a framework in linguistics that emerged in the mid-20th century, focusing on understanding the challenges faced by learners of a second language. Proposed mainly by Robert Lado, it suggests that the differences between a learner's native language and the target language influence the acquisition process (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014). By contrasting linguistic structures such as phonetics, grammar, and syntax, educators can identify areas likely to cause interference or negative transfer, aiding in the development of effective teaching strategies. The historical evolution of CAH has also seen critiques that led to a more comprehensive understanding of language interaction, integrating cognitive and sociolinguistic perspectives. The hypothesis posits that the differences between a learner's native language and the target language directly influence the ease or difficulty of acquiring the new language. Systematic comparisons of linguistic structures can highlight potential areas of interference, where features of the native language may negatively affect learning. By identifying contrasting elements in phonetics, grammar, and syntax, educators can develop targeted pedagogical strategies to address specific learner challenge. The CAH serves both as a theoretical framework within linguistics and as a practical tool for enhancing language teaching methodologies (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014).

Languages derived from different origins possess distinct phonological systems. In the context of this study, it is important to note that English belongs to the Indo-European West Germanic language family, while Arabic descends from the Afro-Asiatic Central South Semitic language family (Al-Huri, 2015). This difference complicates English pronunciation for Arabic speakers, particularly when it comes to consonants. Furthermore, English has 25 consonants,

while Arabic has 28 ones. Some consonants are unique to one language, but the majority are the same (Alzinaidi & Abdel Latif, 2019). In addition, the consonant clusters in the phonological systems of the two languages differ (Al-Seghayer, 2019). Consequently, learners of second languages may easily acquire common sounds, but often struggle with those unique to one of the languages.

The improvement of pronunciation among learners of English as a second language has garnered interest from many researchers across various languages. Several studies have been conducted to identify consonant pronunciation errors, explore their causes, and provide recommendations. Chang (2002) and Ohata (2004) discuss errors in English pronunciation by Chinese and Japanese EFL learners, highlighting negative transfer and syllable structure differences and problematic pronunciation areas. Phattaratunya et al. (2007) investigate the most problematic English consonant sounds at the initial position among 30 graduate students in an international program at Naresuan University, Bangkok Campus. The findings of their pilot study and the performance test show that the 10 problematic sounds were /z/, /θ/, /ʃ/, /v/, /ð/, /ʧ/, /ʤ/, /r/, /j/, and /l/.

Other studies have investigated the phonological errors made by Arabic learners of English. Karama and Hajjaj (1989) identify the difficulties faced by Arab students learning English and attempt to explain them. Their work covered problems based on real mistakes made by students at all levels. Mistakes related to pronunciation, word formation and meaning, grammatical structure and usage, and sentence construction and development were all addressed. Their book aims to assist current and future teachers of English, regardless of their native language by offering several practical teaching suggestions.

Barros (2003) investigates the difficulties Arabic speakers encounter when pronouncing English consonants. All participants in her study were adults who had spent at least four years interacting with the American culture. The results indicate that Arabic speakers in this study faced challenges in pronouncing eight English consonants depending on their country of origin. Likewise, Ahmed's (2020) study aimed to identify the pronunciation problems Sudanese English language learners encounter when producing English vowels and consonants. In his case study, he utilized a questionnaire and an oral test to collect data. The study revealed that learners struggled with English sound production caused by negative interference. He suggested that language laboratories with different materials could enhance the process of pronunciation learning. On the same vein, the study of Na'ama (2011) examined errors made by 45 Yemeni university students in pronouncing English consonant clusters. The results indicate that nearly half of the participants could correctly pronounce initial two-consonant clusters. Most errors involved the insertion of the short vowel /i/ within existing strings of segments in three- and four-consonant clusters in various positions. Also, Al- Shuaibi's (2007) study at University Science Malaysia explored the phonological phonotactics of English syllable-initial and syllable-final consonant clusters among 30 Yemeni students. The study revealed that Yemeni speakers struggle with the pronunciation of these clusters and often insert vowel sounds. The study also uncovered interesting phenomena such as reduction, substitution, and deletion.

In the context of Saudi Arabia, several studies have aimed to identify problematic English sounds for Saudi learners. Al-Arishi (1992) investigated the relationship between position and production of /p/ and /b/ phonemes among adult learners of English in Saudi Arabia. Contrastive analysts have assumed that Arab learners of English will uniformly substitute the /b/ phoneme in all positions until the divergent negative transfer is corrected. However, recent studies in second language acquisition suggest that other factors, including the position of the phoneme, affect pronunciation in the target language. The findings of the study highlight the importance of position as a determinant of phonological competence. Arabic EFL subjects of this study at all levels showed minimal problems with final-position /p/. Beginners exhibited a higher incidence of error when medial-position /p/ occurred before either a consonant or a vowel, and if the initial position /p/ occurred before a vowel, although this incidence declined steadily at higher levels. When the initial-position /p/ phoneme occurred before a consonant, beginners showed a relatively small incidence of errors, which also declined slowly at higher levels.

Similarly, Alzinaidi and Abdel Latif (2019) diagnosed English pronunciation errors among Saudi university students. They administered a pronunciation test that constitutes of a word list to identify the participants' errors in pronouncing specific consonants and morphemes. The results revealed six problematic consonant sounds; i.e. voiced postalveolar fricative /ʒ/, voiced velar nasal /ŋ/, voiceless bilabial plosive /p/, voiced alveolar approximant /ɹ/, voiced interdental fricative /ð/, and voiceless postalveolar affricate /ʧ/.

The present study focuses on pre-secondary students in Saudi Arabia who do not receive English education outside of school. It aims to analyze errors in English consonant pronunciation, which can lead to foreign accents or misinterpretation of meaning by native English speakers. This study is unique in its investigation of consonant pronunciation errors made by Saudi EFL learners, as it targets spontaneous production of young learners. The findings will be significant for EFL students and teachers, as early detection and prevention of these problems will improve students' English learning and bridge the gap between studying and practicing. The study will also enhance students' listening skills, as speaking and listening are closely related. Additionally, the findings will attract the attention of book publishers, education supervisors, and decision-makers at the Ministry of Education. Ultimately, it would improve the quality of teaching English in Saudi Arabia and other Arabic countries. Therefore, this study aims to identify and analyze consonant pronunciation errors made by Saudi EFL beginners and seeks to answer the following question: What errors do Saudi intermediate school learners make in pronouncing English consonants?

III. Methodology

Using a qualitative approach, the present study investigates the pronunciation errors made by Saudi EFL learners. Forty-five out of 93 Saudi female EFL students aged 14-15 years, and studying in the third grade of intermediate school, completed a performance test. The participants have been studying English in Saudi governmental schools since the fourth grade and did not receive any additional English learning elsewhere. The participants are all females due to gender separation in Saudi governmental institutions.

To elicit spontaneous data, the performance test was intentionally designed as a grammar test comprised of 10 sentences with two grammatical choices. The literature demonstrates a tendency to use word lists to examine pronunciation errors. The researcher believes that direct elicitation of data encourages the participants to focus on their performance allowing for inaccurate assessment of their competence. Therefore, the test items were carefully designed to target all English consonants in various positions. The performance test was face-validated by three experts in the field, and their feedback was considered and addressed in the final version of the test.

The study was conducted in a quiet classroom setting. The participants' consent was obtained before data collection. They were informed that the test was simply assessing their knowledge of English for research purposes. They were instructed to read the sentences aloud along with the choices and choose the suitable grammatical option for each sentence. The correctness of the participants' choices was not counted in the present study; rather, the focus was on correct pronunciation. It is important to note that students' mispronunciations were not corrected during their performance of the test.

The recorded performances of the students were analyzed using descriptive analysis. The frequency and types of consonant pronunciation errors were calculated for each participant, and overall trends were identified in terms of frequency and percentage. An expert in the field verified the evaluation for reliability, yielding 90% agreement rate.

Consequently, this study investigated a single existing case among female intermediate students. The instrument was primarily used to explore the phenomenon in spontaneous form. Based on the results drawn from the data, recommendations were subsequently made to improve current English language teaching practices in KSA, specifically regarding English pronunciation.

IV. Results and Discussion

The study explores common errors made by Saudi-learners in pronouncing consonants, their causes, and the implications of these errors, comparing them to related literature. Therefore, 45 students at the third-intermediate level were asked to read aloud 10 sentences that represent all English consonants in various positions. To elicit natural production of English consonants, the sentences were structured with multiple choices to make participants believe that it was a grammar test. The students' utterances were recorded, evaluated, analyzed and presented as percentiles. According to the performance test, the findings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Frequency and Percentage of Problematic Consonant Sounds in Spontaneous Speech

Consonant Sound	Frequency		Percentage	
	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect
/p/	0	20	0%	100%
/ɒ/	1	19	5%	95%
/r/	4	16	20%	80%
/ʒ/	6	14	30%	70%
/ʤ/	8	12	40%	60%
/t/	9	11	45%	55%
/1/	11	9	55%	45%
/d/	15	5	75%	25%
/v/	15	5	75%	25%
/ʧ/	17	3	85%	15%
/Θ/	17	3	85%	15%
/b/	19	1	95%	5%
/f/	19	1	95%	5%
/ʃ/	19	1	95%	5%

According to the data from this study, the table above lists the challenging sounds in order from the most to the least. The remaining consonants (i.e., /w/, /J/, /m/, /n/, /s/, /z/, /g/, /ð/, and /h/) did not present any difficulties for the participants.

At the top of the list of problematic sounds is the /p/ sound, which was the most challenging as 100% of participants were unable to pronounce it correctly in spontaneous speech. The /ɒ/ sound follows as the second most problematic, mispronounced by 95% of participants. Regarding the /r/ sound, the results revealed that 80% of participants were unable to pronounce it correctly, while only 20% managed to do so. Additionally, 70% of participants incorrectly pronounced the /ʒ/ sound, and 60% mispronounced the /ʤ/ sound. Similarly, 55% of participants struggles with the pronunciation of the /t/ sound. In contrast, 55% of participants were able to pronounce the /l/ sound correctly.

As for the least problematic sounds, they were divided into three groups based on the frequency of incorrect pronunciation. The first group consists of /d/ and /v/, which were mispronounced by 25% of participants. The second group includes /ʧ/ and /Θ/, with only 15% of participants mispronouncing these sounds. The third group comprising the least problematic sounds, consists of /b/, /f/, and /ʃ/, which were found to be mispronounced by 5 % of participants.

The following table shows the total occurrences of incorrect pronunciation and the transcription of mispronounced consonants.

TABLE 2
THE PERCENTAGES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF CHALLENGING CONSONANTS

Problematic consonants	Correct Phonetic representation	Phonetic representation of the mispronounced sound	Percentage of mispronunciation
P (in any position)	/p/	/b/	100
NG (in final position)	/ŋ/	/ ŋk/	95
R (in any position)	/ɹ/	/r/	80
Ge (in any position)	/ ʒ/	/g/ or / ʤ /	70
Dg (in any position)	/ ʤ /	/dig/ or /g/	60
T (in final position)	/t/	/d/	55
L (in any position)	/ɬ/	/l/	45
V (in any position)	/v/	/f/	25
D (in any position)	/d/	/d/ released and voiceless	25
Th (in any position)	/Θ/	/ð/	15
Ch (in any position)	/ʧ/	/ʃ/	15
B (in any position)	/b/	/p/	10
Sh (in any position)	/ʃ/	/ʧ/	5
F (in any position)	/f/	/v/	5

Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) assert that when learning an L2, it is very crucial to become familiar with the consonant sound system of the targeted language. If the learners have difficulties in producing the correct phonetic realization of a consonant phoneme, it may result in misunderstanding by the listener (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989). This can be exemplified by minimal pairs such as “pray” and “bray.” Therefore, identifying the errors in the pronunciation of the target language made by nonnative speakers is essential to help them overcome these challenges.

Yangklang (2006) and Alzinaidi and Abdel Latif (2019) point out that researchers have sought to compare the sounds system of English and the learners’ native languages using Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis aiming to demonstrate that differences between the native language and the target language can explain the occurrence of errors during the process of second language acquisition. Negative transfer, which refers to the influence of the first language on the learners’ performance on the target language (L2), is a well-known factor responsible for learners’ errors (Alzinaidi & Abdel Latif, 2019). To provide context for the findings of this study, it is necessary to present tables that show the sound inventory in Standard American English and Standard Arabic consonants.

TABLE 3
PHONEMIC INVENTORY OF CONSONANTS IN AMERICAN ENGLISH

	bilabial	labiodental	dental	alveolar	alveopalatal	retroflex	palatal	velar	glottal
plosive	p b			t d				k g	
fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ				h
affricate					ʧ ʤ				
nasal	m			n				ŋ	
liquid				l ɹ					
glide	w						j		

TABLE 4
PHONEMIC INVENTORY OF THE STANDARD ARABIC CONSONANTS

	bilabial	labiodental	dental	alveolar	alveopalatal	palatal	velar	pharyngeal	glottal
plosive	b		t d				k g		ʔ
fricative		f	θ ð	s z	ʃ			ħ ʕ	h
affricate					ʤ		x ɣ		
nasal	m		n						
liquid				l r					
glide	w					j			
emphatic			tˤ dˤ	sˤ zˤ lˤ					

As the above tables illustrate, each language has its own set of consonants. Some sounds are unique to one language, while others are shared. For instance, two English consonants, /p/ and /v/, are absent in the Standard Arabic inventory of phonemes. Other consonants (i.e., /r/ and /d/) are present in both inventories but may have different phonetic realizations (e.g., Arabic /r/ is an alveolar trill, while English /r/ is a frictionless retroflex continuant). This discrepancy can lead to pronunciation challenges for Arabic speakers, particularly with sounds that are absent in the Standard Arabic Alphabet. This fact helps explain the origin of such errors.

Among all the problematic consonant sounds mispronounced by the participants, only two are phonemes missing in Arabic i.e. /p/ and /v/, making them particularly challenging. Arabic lacks have the voiceless bilabial stop /p/, but the voiced counterpart /b/ is present in its phoneme inventory. All participants in the present study struggled with the phoneme /p/. Words such as “playing” “stopped,” and “cheap” were pronounced as “blaying”, “stobbed”, and “cheab”. The results of this study align with the findings of Al-Arishi (1992) which indicated that the /b/ sound is present in Arabic and is often pronounced correctly. However, it is noted that when /b/ and /p/ occur in the same word or in adjacent words, participants may confuse the two sounds and mispronounce them interchangeably. The issue with the phoneme /v/ is similar to that of /p/. This phoneme is absent in Arabic, while its voiceless pair /f/ exists. Words such as “favorite,” “of,” and “five” were often mispronounced as “faforite,” “of,” and “fife.” However, /v/ does not appear to be a significant problem for all participants in this study; only five participants had difficulties pronouncing the phoneme /v/. Participants in studies conducted by Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) and Barros (2003) also face challenges in pronouncing this phoneme.

Other consonant sounds mispronounced by the Arabic speakers in this study are present in the Arabic phonetic inventory but have different phonetic realizations. According to Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) and Barros (2003), although the sounds “n” and “ŋ” exist in Arabic, they are both allophones of the same phoneme /n/. In English, however, /n/ and /ŋ/ are distinct phonemes. The velar nasal /ŋ/ never occurs at the end of a word in Arabic, only before a velar stop. This may explain why nearly all participants added the sound /k/ at the end of words ending with /ŋ/. For example, “playing” [playɪŋ] was mispronounced as [playɪŋk].

Another sound that posed a major challenge for half of the participants in this study was the /l/ sound. According to Barros (2003), there are two allophones for this sound in Arabic: the plain /l/ [l], and the velarized /l/ [ɬ], while the dark /l/ [ɬ] is used in every position in American English. Most Arabic speakers tend to use the plain [l] for every occurrence of the phoneme /l/, resulting in a foreign-sounding pronunciation of these words.

The phoneme /d/ is present in both languages, but its manner of articulation differs. In English, the consonant “d” at the end of words is often unreleased and voicing. However, in Arabic, “d” is released and voiceless in word-final position (Barros, 2003). According to Barros (2003), this allophonic difference may lead Arabic speakers to mispronounce the “d” sound as a “t” sound. Consequently, words such as “friends” may be pronounced as “frients” by native speakers of Arabic. The results of this study indicate that every participant, at some point, experienced difficulties with the pronunciation of this consonant. Participants were found to mispronounce the /t/ sound in the final position as /d/; for example, “stopped” was mispronounced as /stobid/.

The phoneme /r/ is present in both Arabic and English. However, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) noted that the English /r/ is a frictionless retroflex continuant, while in Arabic it is an alveolar trill. The phonetic representation of the English sound /r/ (i.e., /ɻ/), is unfamiliar to Arabic speakers, who have strong tendency to produce this sound in the same manner in Arabic. This mispronunciation may not cause misunderstanding among English speakers; however, it significantly contributes to a foreign accent.

Upon examining the findings, it is evident that over half of the participants in the current study experienced difficulties with the consonant sound /ʤ/, particularly those from the southern region of Saudi Arabia. This can be attributed to regional colloquial dialects that differ from classical Arabic and may lead to varied English pronunciation challenges among Saudi students from different regional origins. In classical Arabic, the consonant sound /ʤ/ exists, while in modern spoken varieties in southern Saudi Arabia, /ʒ/ is often the substitution. This results in words like

"Japan" and "bridge" being pronounced as [ʒaban] and [briʒ] by southern Saudi Arabian students. Additionally, recognizing the /ʒ/ sound is difficult due to its written form as /g/.

Although the degree and order of difficulty for each sound may vary somewhat across studies, the findings of the current study provide further evidence for the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and concur the results of the earlier research suggesting that Arab and Saudi English learners struggle to pronounce certain consonant sounds and clusters due to differences between the phonetic systems of the two languages (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; AlArishi, 1992; Barros, 2003; Al-Shuaibi, 2006; Yangklang, 2006; Alzinaidi & Abdel Latif, 2019; Al-Seghayer, 2019; Ahmed, 2020). However, as the participants in this study are beginners, a higher frequency of errors in consonant pronunciation is expected.

V. Conclusion and Implications

This study demonstrated that pre-secondary students in Saudi Arabia who do not receive any further English education outside of school experience challenges in the spontaneous pronunciation of 14 English consonants. Mispronunciation of certain consonant phonemes may lead to the misunderstanding of meaning by native English speakers or even the presence of a foreign accent (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; O'Conner, 2002; Barros, 2003). There is limited research investigating the pronunciation problems encountered by Arabic speakers when learning English (Flege, 1980; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Al-Arishi, 1992; Barros, 2003; Al-Shuaibi, 2007). Moreover, these researchers primarily focused on Arabic post-secondary students pronouncing specific sounds.

The findings of the present research revealed that most mispronounced consonants occur in both Arabic and English. However, some sounds are unique to English, such as /p/ and /v/ in "pill" [bɪł] and "five" [fayv]. As their counterparts exist in Arabic, Arabic speakers tend to substitute voiced bilabial /b/ for the voiceless /p/, and the voiceless /f/ for the voiced /v/. Some sounds that occur in both languages differ in their inventory from one language to another, such as /ŋ/ in phrase-final position as in "playing" [pleyɪŋ], /ł/ as in "Bill" [bɪł], /d/ in word final position as in "and" [aend], and /r/ (/ɻ/) as in "rang" [ɻaŋ]. Incorrect pronunciation of these phonemes, except /ŋ/ and /d/, is unlikely to cause misunderstanding by the native speakers of English, but they will result in a foreign accent (Barros, 2003). It is important to note that although all participants in this study share the same nationality and speak the same language, they come from different regions and, therefore, speak different regional varieties of Arabic. Consequently, Arabic speakers from various areas may experience different challenges with English pronunciation (Barros, 2003). Some participants in this study were from southern Saudi Arabia. Therefore, they have mispronounced consonant segments /ʤ/ and /ʒ/. For instance, words such as "Japan" were pronounced as [ʒapan]. The mispronunciation of the /ð/, /Θ/, /ʧ/, and /ʃ/ sounds can be confusing due to their similar written representations.

The findings of this study provide insights that may help EFL students improve their English pronunciation and listening skills. They will be beneficial to textbook designers and publisher, supervisors, and decision-makers at the Ministry of Education, ultimately enhancing the quality of teaching in Saudi Arabia. By addressing these specific pronunciation challenges, educators can develop targeted strategies and materials that enhance learners' phonetic awareness and fluency. Furthermore, implementing focused training sessions that emphasize these problematic consonants could significantly improve the overall communicative competence of Saudi female learners in English.

Considering the limitations of the study, this study is restricted to consonant pronunciation only. Therefore, an investigation of the errors made by pre-secondary Saudi students in pronouncing English vowel segments and analysis of the stress patterns in Saudi English speech will complement this study. Furthermore, given that this research included only 45 female participants, further research is suggested involving a larger number of participants, including male students. Lastly, examining pronunciation difficulties in relation to L1 dialectical variation is worth investigating.

Appendix

Read the sentences aloud and to choose the correct choice:

1- Playing baseball is (he –his) favorite hobby
2- Bill (rang \ rings) the bell and took the pill at five o'clock.
3- Food (supply \ supplies) our bodies with energy.
4- Three of my friends fast (in \ at) the month of Ramadan every year.
5- He speaks English very (well \ good).
6- There (is \ are) a long bridge in Japan.
7- The shoes and the bag (was \ were) cheap.
8- The driver (stopped \ stop) the car in the garage.
9- My brother's teacher of science (say\ said) that he spent four hours in the zoo.
   Her sister (has \ have) to take another fashion course.

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