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Pronunciation Patterns of Omani EFL Learners

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Abstract
The focus of this paper is in the area of pronunciation of Omani EFL learners and the influence of L1 on the acquisition of the target language. It is found incumbent to explore the common errors of Omani EFL learners in their pronunciation of the target language, which might have an impact on intelligibility and conveyance of the message. Understanding the types of errors and how this can be handled may assist in the teaching and learning process. Using phonological pattern of the target language by teachers and exposing learners to authentic English pronunciation may assist in eliminating the errors learners might make when conversing in the target language.

Keywords: consonants, vowels, stress, rhythm, intonation, interference
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1. Introduction

Although Received Pronunciation (RP) is used in most tertiary educational institutions in Oman, including the college where I work, Omani English as foreign language (EFL) learners encounter difficulties in using RP in individual words, phrases and sentences. This paper will explore the phonetic patterns of Omani EFL learners via reviewing the profile of two Omani learners with whom an interview was conducted and recorded. An analysis of the learner's performance in relation to RP will be conducted to consider the segmental and supra-segmental features. The paper will be concluded by analysing the implications for teaching pronunciation to Omani EFL learners.

2. Oman's English Language Profile

English is widely used by Omanis when they communicate with other non-Arabic speaking communities in Oman. [1] argues that English is commonly used as the lingua franca in work between Omanis and other expatriates. Besides, English in Oman has an institutionalised domain, as it is taught in schools starting from Grade One in schools and the only medium of instruction in higher education organisations in the Sultanate. According to [2] English has been used as the medium of instruction in the tertiary sector since the first university, Sultan Qaboos University, was opened in 1986. The two learners that performed the recorded dialogue are 20-year-old female Omani learners. They have finished their education in public schools, their foundation programme and are proceeding to their higher education programmes. The two subjects have the ability to communicate in the target language probably.

3. Analysis of Learners' Performance of Dialogue: Segmental Features

I have requested the two students to perform the dialogue based on Received Pronunciation (RP) phonemically transcribed hereinafter (please refer to Appendix I). According to [3], it is commonly noticed that RP has been the model of pronunciation in some Arab regions and other British varieties because of the relations with Britain on the political, economic and cultural level since the turn of the 20th century. In Oman, RP is widely used in public schools and the tertiary sector institutions. On the other hand, Omani EFL learners' pronunciation is different from RP. Thus, I will analyse the performance of the two learners of segmental features based on the RP phonemic transcription.

3.1. Vowels

Vowels are sounds produced with a free passage of air in the vocal tract. Unlike Arabic which has six vowels and two diphthongs, English has six long vowels: /ɪ:/, /æ/, /ɑ:/, /u:/, /ɜ:/, and /ɔ:/ and six short vowels: /e/, /ɒ/, /ʊ/, /ɪ/, /ə/ and /ʌ/, eight diphthongs: /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /eə/, /aʊ/, /eɪ/, /ɪə/, /ʊə/ and /əʊ/ and five triphthongs (a combination of three vowels) /eɪə/, /aɪə/, /ɔɪə/, /əuə/ and /auə/. [4] stressed that with vowels, unlike with consonants, the air stream is not interrupted by any of the articulators in the vocal tract. [5] argues that sometimes the boundaries between one vowel and another are not evident. Therefore, learners may use a middle pronunciation between vowels like /ɑ:/ and /æ/ to evade the differences of pronunciation, such as hat / hæt/ and heart /hɑ:rt/.

It has been observed by [6] that vowels, diphthongs and other sequences of vowels are the most problematic sounds to Omanis due to the differences of (mother tongue) L1 vowel systems in English and Omani Arabic reflected in English which could cause intelligibility problems.

Based on the recording, the two learners tend to use /ɔː/ instead of /əʊ/. For instance, when speaker B said, 'Well I hope it didn't make you late for your appointment', she pronounced *hope* /həʊp/ as /hɔːb/. She pronounced '*No'* as /nɔː/ instead of /*n*əʊ/. Also, Speaker B pronounced *go as* /gɔː/ instead of /gəʊ/ when she said, 'I'll go and order, shall I?' Similarly, I have noticed that my Omani EFL learners do not differentiate between the /əʊ/ and /ɔː/ in words like *called* and *cold*, *horse* and *hose, know* and *nor, load* and *lord, etc.* [3] also noted that as Omani learners use the monophthong /ɔː / instead of /əʊ/ due to the interference of the syllable structure in their L1. In addition, Learner B did not differentiate between the vowel /e/ and the diphthong /eɪ/ when she said, 'Great thanks. Well, apart from a bit of a delay on the Manchester train'. She monophthongised the diphthong when she pronounced /greɪt/ as /gret/. [3] in his study attributed the monophthongisation of the diphthong to a non-exposure of model of English which uses diphthong, such as RP.

In addition, the pronunciation of vowels, according to [7], seemed to be produced more fronted than in British English. This was evident in /iː/, /æ/, /ɑː/, /ʌ/ and especially /ɪ/, /ɜː/, /ʊ/ and /ɔː/. For example, when Learner B said, 'Well, apart from a bit of a delay on the Manchester train', she fronted /ɑː/, which is a back vowel, in /əˈpɑːt/, may be because the realisation of *r* when Learner B pronounced /əˈbɑrt/. In another instance, Learner A shifted /e/ to /ɪ/ when she pronounced *well* /wel/ as /wɪl/ in 'Well I hope it didn't make you late for your appointment.' [8] noted that the Arabic speakers tend to produce back vowels in similar manner to their analogous Arabic vowels.

3.2. Consonants

Consonants, according to [9], are produced when the air flow is more or less obstructed and are always classified by voicing, place and manner. Voiced consonants are made when the edge of the vocal cords vibrate while there is no vocal cords vibration in voiceless consonants. Regarding the place of articulation, consonants consist of bilabial, labiodental, dental, alveolar, palatoaveolar, palatal, velar and glottal while in manner of articulation, they comprise of plosives, affricates, fricatives, nasals, and oral approximants. In addition to analysing the articulation of vowels of the two the learners, I will analyse their articulation of consonants.

Based on the recording, Learner A did not differentiate between /p/ and /b/ when she said, 'How was your trip yesterday?' and 'Well I hope it didn't make you late for your appointment' She pronounced the voiceless plosive /p/ in /trɪp/, /həʊp/ and /əˈpɔɪntmənt/ as voiced plosive /b/, /trɪb/, /hɔːb/ and /əˈbɔɪntmənt/. Similarly, Learner B did the same with /əˈpɑːt/ and /prɒbləm/ when she said, 'Well, apart from a bit of a delay on the Manchester train' and 'Sure, no problem, I'll be back in a minute'. [10] found that due to the fact that some phonemes which existed in English are absent in Arabic, some pronunciation problems might arise. Therefore, Arab EFL learners substitute the sound /p/, which is absent in Arabic, with the sound /b/.

Another instance is that Learner B substitutes the labio-dental voiced fricative /v/ with the labio-dental voiceless sibilant /f/ when she said, 'Well, apart from a bit of a delay on the Manchester train'. She pronounced '*of' /*əv/ as /əf/. This, according to [10], can be attributed to the fact that the sounds /f/ and /v/ are often confused by Omani speakers who are unable to say /v/ mainly because the sound/v/ does not exist in Arabic. As a result, this confusion between */v/ and /f/* can create misunderstanding between the speaker and listener, as *of* /əv/ can be understood as *off* /əf/ which carries a different meaning.

To sum up, I noted that the learners monophthongise the diphthong and they did not differentiate between two long and short vowels, /e/ and /eɪ/. Also, they used a voiced bilabial plosives /b/ in place of a voiceless bilabial one, /p/. Moreover, there was a problem in differentiating between the two fricatives /v/ and /f/.

4. Analysis of learners' performance of dialogue: suprasegmental features

In this section I will analyse the learners' performance of suprasegmental features regarding the weak and strong forms, stress and rhythm, as well as intonation.

4.1. Weak and Strong Forms

[9] states that when a word is emphasized or pronounced separately, we use the strong form, e.g. *can* is pronounced as /kæn/. On the other hand, weak forms are used in connected speech and words are realised in their words either with a schwa such as in /ə/ ***a,*** */ðə/ the,* /ən/ an, /məst/ must, /əz/ as, /həv/ have, /əs/ us, /ðən/ than, /bət/ but, /əv/ of, /ən/, or with shortening a long vowel such as in /ʃi/ she, / ju/ you, /bi/ be; they can also be formed by dropping their initial /h/ such as in /ə/ her, /i/ he, /iz/ his.

These words which are weakened or shortened in connected speech, according to [11], may result in intelligibility problems by EFL learners as they are under-deployed by most of them. Moreover, a great number of EFL learners consider using weak forms as *unnatural*. [12] mentions that EFL learners should learn how to use weak forms because native speakers consider using strong forms of some words as 'unnatural' and 'foreign sounding' and EFL learners find it challenging to fully comprehend speakers who use weak forms. Learning how to use weak forms can help EFL learners solve their intelligibility problems.

Based on the recording, both learners used strong forms of all words. For instance, when Learner A said, 'Hi how was your trip yesterday?' she pronounced *was* as / wɒz/ instead of /wəz/, and *your* as /jɔːʳ/ instead of /jə/. Also, when learner B said, 'Anyway, what should we have to drink?' she pronounced *should* as /ʃʊd/ instead of / /ʃəd/, *we* as /wiː/ instead of /wi/ and the modal auxiliary *have to* as /hæv tuː/ instead of /həv tə/. [10] in his study noted that Arab learners found difficulty in identifying and pronouncing weak form words in context and attributed this to the absence of these weak form items in Arabic and lack of formal and informal training on how to use weak form words in context.

4.2. Stress and Rhythm

According to [13], it is rather difficult to define stress. A stressed syllable, according to [12], occurs when the

speaker pushes more air out of the lungs than the amount of air pushed out to pronounce an unstressed syllable in the same word. In English every word has a definite place for stress and the place of stress is unpredictable and because English is a stress-timed language and has a 'variable word stress' [13], p. 224), all dictionaries indicate the stress place on each word. In addition to word stress, there is sentence stress in which the stress that can occur in words can be sometimes changed when they are part of a sentence. For example, when we say, 'The tickets for the show arrived this morning,' *we notice that tickets*, *show*, *arrived* and *morning* are likely to be stressed because they are important for the message. Thus, nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are more often stressed while function words such as auxiliaries, conjunctions, determiners, pronouns, prepositions are more likely to be unstressed.

Stres has several functions in English including giving special emphasis to a word, contrasting one word to another, e.g. 'You **and/or** your brother should attend the meeting', or indicate a syntactic category of some words, e.g., ˈpresent and to preˈsent, ˈreport and reˈport, ˈsubject and subˈject where the noun has stress on the first syllable, but the verb has it on the second syllable ([13], p.116).

Based on the recording, it was difficult for the two learners to place stress in the correct syllable. For example, when Learner A said, 'Well, apart from a bit of a delay on the Manchester train,' she placed stress on the second syllable in *Manchester* /mænˈtʃɪstə/ instead of the first syllable /ˈmæntʃɪstə/. On the level of sentence stress, it seemed that the two learners place stress on all the words. [14] points out to the fact that among the difficulties which Arab EFL learners encounter in their acquisition of the target language is the predictability of word-level and sentence level stress. All this is because, according to [15] and [16] word stress in Arabic is predictable and therefore non-phonemic. In addition, due to the unpredictable nature of word and sentence stress in English and the phonemic value which the word stress has deter the English stress pattern acquisition. [17] quotes, ″Although English and Arabic are both strongly stressed languages, they show marked differences with regard to the place and function of stress″ (p. 104).

4.3. Intonation

Intonation can be broadly defined as the patterns of fluctuation of pitches which characterise a specific language to form a 'special phonological system' [18], p. 34). Also, it can be defined as the variations or the movements of the pitch in which there are (high and low level) and tone such as rising and falling tones. Intonation is very important and completes the purpose of communication quantitatively and qualitatively. Six functions of intonation are identified by [19], p. 249); emotional, grammatical, informational, textual, psychological and indexical, yet [14], p. 163) refers to four functions; attitudinal, accentual, grammatical and discourse.

Based on the recording, the learners seemed to use rising intonation to indicate the end of an utterance in all questions. For example, when Learner B said, 'What should we have to drink?', she used rising tone on *drink* to indicate the end of his utterance. Also, when she said, 'Hi how was your trip yesterday?', she also used rising intonation on *yesterday* to denote the end of the question. Moreover, when Learner B said, 'Mm I think I'll have green tea. I'll go and order, shall I? she used the rising tone on *you* to indicate the agreement of the listener. This was noted by [6] who stated the fact that Arab learners use rising intonation to 'denote questions, suggestions and offers far more frequently than English-speakers, and this practice is often carried over into the spoken English of Arabic speakers' (p.32). Also, [6] found out that Arabic learners tend to use the rising tone in question tags whether the speaker denotes an agreement or expects an agreement from a listener.

5. Implications for the Teaching of Pronunciation

Based on the above analysis on the recording of two Omani learners, it is important to take into consideration the factors which lead to the difficulties in their English phonological system in order to overcome these problems. A lot of researchers have concluded some factors which impede students' proper pronunciation including age, influence of L1 and personality. I will explore these three factors as they are much pertinent to the phonological problems my learners have.

5.1. Age

Although this factor is still disputed among researchers as to the effect of age on the language acquisition, studies have shown that Critical Period Hypothesis, as called by [20], indicates that there is a biological and neurological age, which finishes round the age of twelve, where it is difficult after this period to achieve the full mastery of pronunciation. Although other researchers such as [21] disagree on this theory stressing that adults can achieve native-like in the target language, the degree of accuracy differs from one learner to another even if they are at the same age. I tend to agree on Lenneberg's theory, as adult students in the college where I work encounter difficulties in changing the pronunciation which they previously learnt either from workplace or school.

5.2. Interference of L1

One may argue that one of the main problems faced by Omani EFL learners' pronunciation is predominantly affected by their L1. [22] stresses the fact that L1 is present in EFL learners' minds, whether their instructors want it to be there or not. Learners, according to Avery and Ehrlich, tend to transfer the sound pattern of their L1 into the target language which causes foreign accents. This is apparent in the problems encountered by Omani EFL learners in sound/p/ and /b/, /v/ and /f/, /dʒ/ and /g/, /ɪ/ and /e/, /əʊ/ and /ɔ:/.

5.3. Personality

According to [23], learners who are confident, outgoing and communicate with English native speakers are likely to speak like them. Sometimes, when I request my students to pronounce words which sound weird to them, they feel uncomfortable. Some learners find it odd to learn English using RP deciding it is impossible to speak like British English native speakers. Moreover, speaking native-like English depends on the learners' readiness and integration in the target language culture.

6. Suggestions

Based on the difficulties and the factors mentioned above, teachers can make comparisons between the phonological patterns of the mother tongue and target language pinpointing the differences. [24] suggests that teachers should focus on the phonological pattern of the target language so as to eliminate the errors learners might make. One may not encourage using L1 in teaching of the pronunciation of the target language. [3] suggests using Arabic phonemes so as to overcome the difficulties students face in pronunciation of English phonemes. However, students should be exposed to an authentic English pronunciation either by a teacher who speaks native-like English who can be a good model for RP or via recordings of English native speakers used in the classrooms. [25] states that learners' pronunciation can be improved by slowing down their articulation, especially on stressed syllables. This can help their rhythm and intelligibility as well as master difficult consonants.

7. Conclusion

Omani EFL learners use English as lingua franca, which hugely differs from RP regarding the Segmental and suprasegmental features. There are difficulties encountered by students in pronouncing some English vowels and consonants. They have an accent, and all words have the same stress and there is no weak form used in their utterance as all words are strong. Age, interference of mother tongue and personality cause these difficulties. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of the phonological system of the learners' mother tongue and target language and focus on the phonological differences between the two languages, be a proper model for learners by having native-like English and use authentic audios in the classroom and slow down students' articulation. Since teachers are the Omani EFL learners' main source of language, they need to be aware of the factors which cause these impediments so as to overcome the pronunciation difficulties faced by the Omani EFL learners.

Appendix I: Phonemic Transcription of Dialogue

The dialogue is transcribed based on Received Pronunciation (RP), and it includes primary stress, secondary stress (where applicable), as well as weak and strong forms.

A: Hi how was your trip yesterday?

| haɪ ˈhaʊ wəz jə trɪp ˈjestədi |

B: Great thanks. Well, apart from a bit of a delay on the Manchester train.

| ˈgreɪt θæŋks | wel | əˈpɑːt frəm ə bɪt əv ə dɪˈleɪ ɒn ðə ˈmæntʃɪstə treɪn |

A: Well, I hope it didn't make you late for your appointment?

| wel ˈaɪ həʊp ɪt ˈdɪdnt ˈmeɪk ju leɪt fə jər əˈpɔɪntmənt |

B: No, it was fine. Anyway, what should we have to drink?

| nəʊ | ɪt wəz faɪn | ˈeniweɪ | ˈwɒt ʃəd wi həv tə drɪŋk |

A: I quite fancy a hot chocolate. What about you?

| ˈaɪ kwaɪt ˈfænsi ə hɒt ˈtʃɒklət | ˈwɒt əˈbaʊt ju |

B: Mm I think I'll have green tea. I'll go and order, shall I?

| ˈmɪlɪmiːtəz ˈaɪ ˈθɪŋk aɪl həv griːn tiː | aɪl gəʊ ənd ˈɔːdə | ʃəl ˈaɪ |

A: Thanks. Actually, I think I'll just have a coffee instead.

| θæŋks | ˈæktʃuəli | ˈaɪ ˈθɪŋk aɪl dʒəst həv ə ˈkɒfi ɪnˈsted |

B: Sure, no problem, I'll be back in a minute.

| ʃʊə | nəʊ ˈprɒbləm | aɪl bi ˈbæk ɪn ə ˈmɪnɪt|

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