EFL COLLEGE STUDENTS’ PHONOLOGICAL PROBLEMS: A CASE OF ERROR ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Oral communication problems can be major challenges to effective foreign language use and communication in all its types. Significantly, errors are worth studying. Recently, language errors predict the difficulties involved in acquiring a foreign language a lot of studies have tended to focus on learner’s errors. This paper identifies, classifies, and explains, the negative effects of bad practices of mother tongue mispronounced sounds in the second language pronunciation through the contrastive analysis of mother language mispronounced sounds and how they work to formulate a source of errors in EFL pronunciation. The current paper focuses on pronunciation errors made by fourth year Egyptian English language department students, faculty of education, Damanhour University during the academic year 2012-2013. The paper proved that errors transferred through mother tongue are more detrimental and basically affect second language speaking acquisition; especially individuals’ social communication during class time.

KEYWORDS: Error Analysis, Code Switching, Mother Tongue Interference, Communication Negative Transfer & Communication Positive Transfer

INTRODUCTION

For most people, oral communication is seen to be much more important than reading and writing a forging language. Technology now had made the world a small world and EFL speakers are no longer restricted to learning context or learning interactive situations in academic discourse. The importance of language comes from being the first and perhaps the only effective way of communication and culture transfer among people around the world especially with technology recently connecting the whole world. Now students are obliged to deal with the external audience for other purposes like exchanging cultures and ideas. So, the idea of using English in studying context is no longer the base and they have to arise with the language even in the ordinary daily life to keep in touch with community. However still, face to face speaking form the most effective way of communication and interaction. Bad habits or non-appropriate pronunciation in mother tongue may transfer errors in foreign language performance. The spoken language is a more complex spontaneous skill which is more sensitive and complex for non-native individuals. Oral problems can be major restrictions of effective foreign language use and communication in all its types; for speaking as a skill is seen to be much more important than other skills (Ya-ni, 2007). The ways in which individuals of a particular situation formulate their experience, encode it into a linguistic form, and then reuse that code in their communication is very important to find out language problems and improve its performance. Language as a vital tool of interaction powerfully controls all our ideas about social interaction and processes. This explains reasons behind the systematic continuous study of language in relation to two points; how language structures ideas and thoughts in human mind, and how language is used in interaction.
Indeed, as we acquire language during childhood, language codes are early formed, and individuals, when learning a new language, students use their mother language codes to form new ones related to L2. If they are not able to switch their codes to L2, mother language codes will replace L1s and hence the emergence of L1 interference in L2 they never resist that because it is easier to understand L2 through L1 till it goes like a habit that never stop. This view is clear in a study by Sert (2005) where he pointed out that:

The tendency to repeat the instruction in native language may lead to some undesired student behaviors. A learner who is sure that the instruction in foreign language will be followed by a native language translation may lose interest in listening to the former instruction which will have negative academic consequences; as the student is exposed to foreign language discourse limitedly.

This means; the speakers continue to use L1 codes to be understood and to understand others and finally the result will be having the opportunity to continue communication by bridging the gaps resulting from foreign language incompetence by mother tongue as a tool. We also form and discover: our identity as individuals (when we use it to express ourselves and ideas) and also our identity as social beings (when we contact with other people) Chomsky (1965) indicated that

An innate Language Acquisition Device (LAD) genetically is programmed in the human brain. The LAD provides a series of common grammatical principles and their realizations as variable parameters to be adapted to the varying ‘settings’ of the different languages. The presence of the LAD in the human brain would explain why language development in children occurs so easily and spontaneously, and does not require any explicit teaching of the grammar rules on the part of the adults especially talking.

Students simply use their language, as they can say and understand words and sentences that they have never heard before without thinking about its correctness or its rules. Additionally, Chomsky’s perspective (1975) indicated that language is exclusively a cognitive, abstract knowledge developed in the human mind completely detached from the contexts in which it is used in. This, in fact, highlights the idea of language as a socially motivated system developed to; allow social communication and culture to be transferred, and affects the way we think, especially our classification of the experienced world.

One of the best ways to describe and explain errors committed by learners is to conduct an error analysis for their language use. This can reveal the sources of errors and the causes of frequent occurrence in their language performance. For, the sources and causes are revealed, one can determine the remedy as well as the emphasis and sequence of future instructions to improve or even reveal all the errors. As indicated by Corder (1981), error analysis can be also a means of defining the learner’s knowledge of the target language at any particular point to relate this knowledge to the method of teaching he received. The researcher adopted Crystal’s (2003) definition of error analysis as “a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the mistakes made by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics”.

Pedagogically, for learners, a study of their errors could provide devices which could be used to fulfil progress in the learning process. The advantages of using error analysis in ELT, then, are two. First, it gives information concerning learners’ difficulties at different stages in their L2 acquisition. Such information is important so that appropriate courses can be devised and new teaching materials constructed. Second, error analysis provides knowledge of the way a learner
learns and what his built-in syllabus is (i.e. what patterns and rules of the L2 each individual learner acquires when and in what order). Furthermore, pioneers of contrastive analysis believe that by making cross linguistic comparisons one could predict learning difficulty (Odline 1989). Lado (1957) assumes that a student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some of its features quite easy and others extremely difficult. Elements similar to his native language are simple for him, and the different ones are difficult. For Lado (1957) and in the light of the notions of cross linguistic influence, learners' errors were seen as falling into two possible types: 'interlingual' confusions, caused by interference or transfer from the mother tongue, and 'intralingual' confusions, caused by complexities in the second language itself (p.2). The first type of error occurs when a learner of a foreign language carries over the habits of his mother – tongue into the foreign language. First type of interference means that his L1 habits (patterns, systems or rules) replace or prevent him, to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language (i.e. in our case English). Thus, the main problem seems that learners of a foreign language, even in their very first lesson, do not start learning that language from zero or a neutral point. They, instead, produce any new phonological patterns through those of their native language.

**Aim of the Study**

The main aim of this study is to find out main phonological problems resulting from mother tongue interference and mispronounced L2 sounds related to this interference. In addition, suggesting some ideas to help in reducing or minimizing this phenomenon and led to better L2 pronunciation.

**Significance of the Study**

A lot of students are graduated after studying English for at least 12 years and having a great background about the language but are unable to use it in daily life speaking or even short dialogs fluently. This study after diagnosing the causes helps teachers and even students to concentrate on their mispronounced sounds. In short practises sessions, they practised the problematic sounds which helped in getting them better.

**METHODOLOGY**

Speaking as a productive skill can be produced by learners in two kinds: spontaneous production (free talk) and controlled production (reading texts). So, the present paper has four main questions to be investigated:

- Do learners’ unconsciously commit pronunciation errors?
- What are the reasons behind such mispronunciation or errors?
- Do the contrasts/similarities between Arabic and English have an influence on the L2 learners’ phonological features?
- What do the L2 data tell us about phonological transfer?

Answering these questions, the analysis focused on identifying these errors, then classifying them into categories like: errors of omission, substitution and addition); Omission of sounds; substitution of sounds and addition of sounds. Ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete applications of rules, and transfer of L1 within L2 are basic reasons for mispronunciation. Further, interlingual errors are due to mother tongue interference (MTI) that has occurred because students used to depend on Arabic even when they think and speak other languages. Other concepts about this point will be explained later in the following few lines. To make the analysis as accurate as possible, a sample of (100 students) EFL
fourth year studying language lab (a course designed for fourth year basic education) in the faculty of education English department were selected to define errors facing them in speaking the English language. They were not informed about being a source for diagnosing pronunciation errors, to avoid shame or any other reasons that may prevent them from telling their problems. Open discussion was used to let them practise free talk first, and then they used their reading skill loudly to record their voices and send them back in soft files. Errors in pronunciation have been identified and classified as follows:

**Collecting Errors in Sound Pronunciation**

The diagnostic test in Accurate English course for Rebecca Dauer (1992) is used with students to analyze their problems and find out the sounds that form errors in pronunciation for them. They speak up and record their sounds and also gave free speaking two minutes in different topics (appendix A). The number of the incorrect Sounds is 8 out of 24 consonant sounds. Most of the vowels are incorrect especially the diphthongs. 143 words were used. The percentage of errors to the total use of these sounds is 19.58% (see Table 1. and Figure 1. below):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>% Correct</th>
<th>Incorrect</th>
<th>% Incorrect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>143</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>80.41</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 1: Percentage of Errors in Pronounced Words](chart.png)

The repeated errors are limited to the use of /h/ sound as confused with /n/ sound. The /s/ is totally absent in their pronunciation. Similar or closed pronounced sounds in Arabic are confused like /s/ and /θ/ and /ʃ/ and /θ/ and /ʃ/ and /ʃ/ and /θ/ and /ʃ/ and /θ/ and /ʃ/. Other errors like the long and short vowels and omission of final consonant are also clear in their pronunciation. Regarding misarticulation of consonants, 60% of the sample substituted the voiced bilabial /b/ for the bilabial voiceless /p/ in the initial position and 45% substituted it in the medial position. Misarticulating of consonants was clear in their talk. This misarticulation of sounds arises from mother tongue in case of consonants. In contrast to misarticulation of consonants, such misarticulation of vowels arises from lack of knowledge of the vowel system of English rather than L1 interference.

**GROUPING ERRORS**

Similar errors were classified to count frequencies in each different error. The aim was to group similar errors together, so as to clarify the most common ones in pronunciation. Consequently, these errors have been listed and identified. These errors indicate that the learners’ are unable to think in English. Spontaneously, students use their L1 as a means to understand English. Pronunciation errors are cumulative. They are mistakes that started with the first face with the language and were not corrected to continue with the individual from his mother language and transferred to the new
language. The spoken word should be connected to a written or read word. Knowing a language starts with the ear as O’Connor (1980) said that learning starts with the ear. The mother tongue starts the basics of language in the individual’s mind; thus if it is not correct it stays along his life with him. There is a systematic relationship between listening as a first skill and speaking as a second skill; they are cognitively interrelated where bad pronunciation may cause misunderstanding to the listener then confusion and finally bad communication. Mother tongue proved to be sufficient to account for the whole L2 acquisition process. Based on Stemberger (1985) “interactive activation model for bilingual speech production” in Riehl (2005) where he pointed out that “similar items are closely associated” the closed sounds or language features emerge together, some phonological sounds like (th)/ð/ and/ z/ or (th)/θ/and/s/ are used alternatively; which may cause confusion as in (sink) and (think) unless the listener is aware of the sentence structure. In this respect, it appears that correct L1 forms could also reveal interesting facts about the L2 acquisition process. Researchers like (Gass & Selinker 1983, Odlin 1989) recognized that the L1 does play a part in the L2 learning process and that its influence can take forms of positive and negative transfer at the same time. They can recognize other forms of influences through contrastive analysis too. Second Language (L2) learners will tend to transfer the formal features of their First language (L1) to their L2 utterances as Lado (1957:2) said:

—individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives.

People use language as a purposeful activity and this makes language accessible to a child learning a foreign language but the classroom situation is not that meaningful. In defining the reasons for oral restriction for younger individuals, Gass & Selinker (1983) and Odlin (1989) indicated many reasons for that. They referred to the fact that they depend more on written context for their daily use of language and they may not use even phone calls only in limited situations. Hence, the written mistakes can be transferred easily in their oral communication. Researches like Rasier & Hiligsmann (2007) indicated that the negative transfer of bad language structure in using prepositions lead to oral language misuse like when you use prepositions like ‘from and with’ (i.e.: I came from Egypt = I live with my kids) at the same time this transfer may be negative like saying “some from my friends” or I will thank him on his advice. Getting used to this incorrect structure led them to pronounce the same incorrect sentences or words which mean incorrect communication when using oral language even if the accent or sounds are correct. Individuals make what we can call “inter-language pronunciation” or mistakes while learning a second language through the first language; but these mistakes are not random. These mistakes seem to be as rule governed though they may not be found in their mother tongue. Speakers are spontaneously resetting their mother tongue parameters in their minds to easily go on accessing the new language used. They go on the steps showed in the following diagram.

One of the causes for language problems as a whole, in the researcher point of view, is that people believe that language components are only vocabulary and grammar rules. However a lot of them although they perfect the syntax and know a background vocabulary by heart, They are unable to orally use the language fluently because they used to think in the mother language first, then they switch to the other foreign language which means a lot of process inside the mind before producing the response in the target language. They should think or even try to think in the target language to get used.
Figure 2: Steps of Giving Oral Response for Arab Learners

The figure means slow in response besides more relying on mother language. Learners have to learn what phonological type(s) of accent(s) can be used in a given context in order to convey a given meaning, and of course, this should be done through listening for alternates from natives. Lado (1960) says that when a person hears a foreign language, he hears his native language. (p. 11). This overstatement of Lado’s may mean that the learner matches the foreign message against his native model by Perception of internal pattern of language that may match the stimulus pattern of L2. Unconsciously learners are applying first language features (in this case phonological features) onto the target language in what is called “learning transfer knowledge” which may be of good or bad effect in the context; they try to transfer the form and meanings of their native language while they are attempting to communicate with others not of their language. This application surely causes linguistic problems according to their language cultural background. For example, in Arabic we have the sound (ق) which has closed three sounds in English; /g/, /ʒ/ and /ʒ/ and applicably speakers use them alternately. Consequently individuals use these mistakes in their oral performance and hence easily one can diagnose errors in their language or even define their identity from their mistakes too. Hence, individuals who know correct Arabic pronunciation may pronounce similar English sounds correctly like /θ/ and /ð/ but rarely use correct /n/ and /ŋ/. That’s why the transfer of linguistic patterns from the mother tongue (L1) to the second/foreign language (L2) has long been a controversial issue in applied linguistics (Ellis 1994, Odlin 1989. Rasier&Hiligsmann, 2007).

Figure 3: Integrated Transfer Model
Weinreich (1953:1) discusses how two language systems relate to each other in the mind of the learner and provides the definition of interference as follows:

— Those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language, i.e. as a result of language contact.

So, naturally the degree of interference will depend on the degree of difference between the native language and the target language. The greater the difference between languages, the higher the degree of interference is. But this may not be true because similarity between the rules of the foreign and the native language does not mean ease of transfer. Learning new language depends basically on mother tongue for comprehension. Sounds like /س/ and /ث/ or /ظ/ and /ذ/ are always problematical areas even in Arabic sound system. When performing these sounds in Arabic, they may mispronounce or use them alternately and unconsciously this may be transferred to their new language. Speaking and pronunciation reveal this problem, but for the sake of communication, they continue without any intention to correct. Thus, deterioration on their oral performance may happen. In Arabic though there is more time spent in practice they don’t care about speaking only in formal situations. So, the practice is always wrong and benefits the wrong direction of language use. At the same time, foreign language lack practice at all, mother tongue with this case of applying wrong oral practice is used to communicate (Bond & small, 1983). Language learning depends on listening, since it provides the aural input that serves as the basis for language acquisition and enables learners to interact in spoken communication. Listening, being the first language skill acquired, provides the foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development, and it plays a life-long role in the processes of communication. Listening as a medium through which people gain a large portion of education, information, understanding of the world and of human affairs, ideals, sense of values, and appreciation plays a role in transferring mispronunciation to speakers. Krashen (1985) argues that people acquire language by understanding the linguistic information they hear. When students’ pronunciation knowledge is inadequate their capacity to discriminate will be weak and will affect listening comprehension focusing on slang; which ignores the right performance of language speaking. At the same time, speaking English in national discourse all pronunciations are acceptable and the focus is not on right or wrong performance of speaking which means errors may be deepened and became uncorrectable. Arabic songs deepen mispronunciation of these sounds while English songs are very good way to learn real appropriate sounds. Although all factors conclude that there is a way or another to reform errors depending on mother tongue learning and understanding led to what we call transferee of mother tongue errors to EFL. Bad habits in Arabic deepen errors in EFL pronunciations. The misuse of a dictionary as we always look up for meaning only and we never looked at transcription; may be because of inability of making transcription.

Sound system of Arabic is different, as what we say and write is mostly affected by parsing (in Arabic Irrab or Tashkeel), whereas this is different in English where every sound is controlled by the context where it is used in. So, the relationship between the phonic sign (significant) and the content (signify) is always found to be of a somewhat gliding nature (Malcolm, 1989). As Danes (1964) outlined, there is always a kind of tension between the two:

The sentence structure is based on that kind of relations that is sometimes called 'logical'; these relations are derived from nature and society and appear to be essential for the social activities of man (p.226).

However, we don’t abide by the linguistic rules in common speech so; spontaneous natural mistakes are also spontaneously transferred to L2 (in our case English). Verma et al. (1989:348) outlined the mistakes committed in Second Language (L2) in the following:
- The gravitational pull of the first language/mother tongue;
- Internal analogy and overgeneralization (e.g., children’s, furniture’s, teached, bringed, a milk, etc., are _created 'on the basis of other items like boys, tables, walked, worked, a man, etc.);
- Pronunciation according to spelling;
- Bad teaching;
- Exposure to the non-standard variety used outside the classroom;
- The attitudes of community, those in power, the policy of the government and such other factors;
- Failure to understand the nature of the second language;

Technology now has made the world a small one, and EFL speakers are no longer restricted to learning context or interactive learning situations. They now are obliged to deal with the external audience for other purposes like exchanging information, cultures and ideas. They can now attend conferences and discuss their ideas and thoughts using electronic tools with other people in the other side of the world using online communication tools. This means, they should care more about their fluency and speaking skill. At the same time, if they have any problems with talking they can solve by modify by imitating natives which in turn may reduce the percentage of mistakes or mispronunciation in L2. But this will never happen unless they use oral communication too not only written text like messaging or commenting; consequently, correcting and improving their speaking skills. With recent technologies the world is open to everyone to contact. This is may be of bad effect in getting used to errors and be a negative transfer tool to deepen errors not to correct; as the main target is not to practice but other ideas are represented like information and commercial targets especially if this happen locally with colleagues. Achieving proficiency in oral communication (i.e. speaking) is the main dream and the main motivation which a large percentage of learners bring to language classes. Orally, perfect talk is an indication of language perfection, students of second/foreign language education programs are considered successful if they have oral effective communication in English. False concept in their mind is that fluency means quickness in speaking speed not corrects performance. The result is as quoted by Jamshidnejad (2010):

Thus, foreign language learners, despite spending years developing their semantic and syntactic competences, have all probably, at some point, experience the frustrating feeling of not being able to participate effectively in L2 oral communication.

They are not seeking correctness as seeking perfection in grammar rules or knowing vocabulary. They may listen and understand but giving response is too difficult for them as they always receptive side in contact. Rarely, they do interact and this may be related to the way they handle language as a mean of learning only and never get a chance to use it daily as their mother tongue.

Behaviourist psychology researchers like Rasier & Hiligsmann (2007) regarded L2 learning as a process of linguistic habit formation that was systematically influenced by the learners’ L1. For them, Individuals acquire their mother language from the surrounded environment where they practise language as a habit. Since they are learning about it at first then applying when they start using it in their social context ( Simpson, 2011). Transfer may be positive or negative. Positive transfer occurs when the linguistic features meet in both languages and the same form functions similarly in the two languages. Negative occurs when there is a difference between both. Interference (or negative transfer) occurs because
the native language forms cannot be used in the target language and as a result cause restructuring in the system of the target language.

![Figure 4: Root for Speech Production is Syntactic Production Harley (2005 p.395)](image)

Difficulty of pronunciation may be based on syntactical root, which is caused by the unawareness of target language rules (as shown in the figure), which means that ignorance of language syntactic performance may cause incorrect speech production. Consequently, incorrect mother tongue syntactic rules led to transfer of incorrect syntactic L2 rules and finally incorrect pronunciation.

**Findings**

Oral performance of L2 English speaker’s is influenced by the L1 (Arabic) interference, and some mispronounced sounds may be due to speakers applying their L1 speech processing strategies, rules and sound system (Cutler, Mehler, Norris & Segui 1986; Cutler & Norris, 1988; Cutler & Van Donselaar, 2001; Field, 2005; Munro, 2008; Otake, Hatano, Cutler & Mehler 1993; Strange, 1995; Tyler & Cutler, 2009; Zielinski, 2008). This result confirms El-Hibir and Althaha’s (1995) finding regarding the widespread substitution of /f/ for /v/ and for both El-Hibir and Althaha’s and Barros’s (2003) findings regarding that of /b/ for /p/ among native Arabic-speaking learners of English. Such misarticulating can be attributed to the absence of /v/, /dz/, /z/ and /p/ in the Arabic phonological system and /غ, ح, خ/ in English leading L2 learners to substitute Arabic equivalents for them that are imperfect in that they have a different manner of articulation. In contrast, L2 learners cannot substitute Arabic equivalents for English vowels that are absent from the Arabic phonological system, because no such vowels are available, and must thus rely on their often-imperfect knowledge of English vowels to keep communicating with others.

**CONCLUSIONS**

From the previous discussion it can be concluded that most mistakes that are transferred to be errors after a period of time are due to simple reasons that can be avoided throughout the early years of acquiring the language. Learners’ unconsciously commit pronunciation errors due to the similarity between English and Arabic sounds, that unconsciously replace L2 sounds in new context. The data presented here help to change or improve learners’ misarticulating of sounds, if they already knew and got a lot of practising about it.
REFERENCES


2. Barros, A. (2003) “Pronunciation difficulties in the consonant system experienced by Arabic speakers when learning English after the age of the puberty,” West Virginia University, Morgantown, USA.


**APPENDIX (A)**

Underlined letters are the mispronounced ones

Diagnostic speech sample:

Name:

**Part (1)**

Learning to speak a foreign language fluently and without an accent isn’t easy. In most educational systems, students spend many years studying grammatical rules, but they don’t get much of a chance to speak. Although they may be able to read and write very well, they often find that they can’t understand what people say to them. English is especially difficult because the pronunciation of words is not clearly shown by how they’re written. But the major problem is being able to listen, think, and respond in another language at a natural speed. This takes time and practice.

**Part (2)**

- Hi, Bob. Gee, I haven’t seen you in a while how are you going?
- Not so good. Unfortunately, I’ve had a bad cold for the last three or four days, and I feel a little tired. How about
you? What have you been up to recently?

Questions

Give a short two minutes speech about one of the following topics. Tell a story about what happened to you. Two minutes is a very short time so, please describe the most important details.

- An interesting or humorous situation that you had with the English language or culture.
- An interesting or unusual experience that you had over vacation.
- Your first day at this faculty.
- Your problems speaking English.