TEACHING ENGLISH VOWELS TO ARAB STUDENTS: A SEARCH FOR A MODEL AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Arabic and English are the two languages that differ from each other in various linguistic aspects, whether it be phonology, syntax or the writing system. Teachers of English in the Arab world face many challenges in teaching English due to these differences. The most noticeable feature in the English pronunciation of an Arab student is the poor mastery of English vowels. This paper aims at providing a suitable model of teaching English vowels to Arabic speaking students. The researchers therefore, confined themselves to contrasting the vowel system of Arabic and some of varieties of English, mainly Received Pronunciation, General American, some other established varieties. Data of eight of speakers of English from various countries of the Gulf were collected and analyzed. Based on the data analysis, the researchers tried to suggest a model of English that is viable to teach Arab learners. Some pedagogical implications were also offered to the teachers of English.

KEYWORDS: Personality Development, English, Arabic Students , Soft skills.

INTRODUCTION

In most writings on the teaching of English as a foreign language, reference is normally made to one of the major varieties like Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American (GA). For decades, most teaching materials used either of these models. It was customary to teach RP for students in Europe, Anglophone and Francophone Africa and some parts of Asia. The GA model was taught in Latin America and some other parts of the world where economic or military relations with the United States are stronger.

It is quite common to notice that the model of pronunciation in some Arab regions has been RP and other British varieties and this was due the political, economic and cultural relations with Britain at the turn of the 20th century.

In the course of time, many Arab countries like countries of the Arabian Peninsula and the North Africa developed relations with the United States and the General American (GA) model became more widespread. One should also mention that the historical relations with the Indian subcontinent were quite strong, especially with the Gulf region and the other countries of the Arabian Peninsula. In turn, this made the variety of Standard Indian English (SIE) widely known especially in some Arab schools and colleges that hired teachers form the Indian subcontinent. So, nowadays, students in the Arab world have become familiar with different models of English.

AIM

In this paper, we will try to examine the teachability of an English vowel system taught to foreign students as was recommended in Gimson's proposal (Gimson:1980:299 ff.). This is not far from the model recommended by Abercrombie for teaching the vowel system of Standard Scottish English (SSE) (Abercrombie (1977). The most noticeable feature in the English pronunciation of an Arab student is the poor mastery of English vowels. We will, therefore, confine ourselves here to contrasting the vowel system of Arabic and some of varieties of English, mainly RP, GA, SSE and some occasional reference to Standard Indian English (SIE)(see table 1 below) .The variety of Arabic adopted here is Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) as elicited here from a number of native speakers of Omani, Jordanian, Palestinian, Syrian, Lebanese, Sudanese, and Tunisian Arabics. This paper also aims at providing teachers of English solutions to teaching the English vowel system to the Arabic speaking students.

Table- 1 Vowels: Standard Scottish English, Received Pronunciation, General American, General Indian English and Arabic English

	SSE	RP	GenAm	GIE	Ar. Eng.
bead	i	iː	iː	iː	iː
bid	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	i [ɪ]
bay	e	eɪ	eɪ	eː	eː
bed	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ	i [ɛ]
bad	a	a	æ	æ	aː[æː]
balm		ɑ:	ɑ:	aː	aː[ɑ:]
not	ɔ	ɒ		ɒ	u [o ~ ɒ]
nought		ɔː	ɔː	ɒː	oː [ɔː]
no	o	əʊ	oʊ	oː	oː [oː]
pull	u	ʊ	ʊ	ʊ	u
pool		uː	uː	uː	uː
bud	ʌ	ʌ	ʌ	ə	a[ʌ ~ ɑ]
side	əi	aɪ	aɪ	aɪ	aːj [ɑːj]

sighed	ae				aːj [ɑːj]
now	əu	aʊ	aʊ	aʊ	aːu [ɑːw]
boy	ɔe	ɪc	ɪc	ɔɪ	aːj [ɔːj]

Note: Adapted from Robert McColl Miller(2007) and Bansal and Harrisson(1972). Arabic English vowels are added by the authors.

THE PROBLEM

English vowels constitute the most serious phonological problems that Arab students face. Arabic dialects have a more limited number of vowel phonemes. Some of these have a number of allophones that have equivalents in English, but because of their restricted phonetic environment, Arab learners of English fail to equate them to their English counterparts. For example, many Arab students find difficulty in using the right vowel quality in a minimal pair like *ant* /ænt/ and *aunt* /ɑːnt/ although both [æ(ː)] and [ɑː] exist in Arabic. This is due to the fact that both vowels are considered by speakers of Arabic as phonologically *one* vowel phoneme, i.e. /aː/ which has allophones varying between [æː] and [ɑː](See example 1 and 2 below). Similarly, Arab learners find some difficulty in distinguishing between English /ɪ/[ɪ] and / ɛ /[ɛ] in *sit* and *set* although both vowels exist in Arabic as allophones of /i/ in /bint/ [bɪnt] (girl) and /qif/ [qɛf] (stand up!). The most significant allophonic variations in Arabic vowels occur as a result of juxtaposed "emphatic" consonants together with /r/ and the velar/uvular consonants (see, *inter alia,* Gairdner: 1925, Al-Ani: 1970, Mitchell: 1990 and Watson: 2002). They modify the neighboring vowels to a great extent making these vowels retracted and/or lowered in quality, depending upon the original vowel quality and the degree of emphasis of the consonants. Thus the Arabic /aː/ is

(1) [æː] in /saːm/ "poisonous" or

(2) [ɑː] in /sˤaːm/ "he fasted"

This means that an Arab student will be able to pronounce the [ɑː] in the English word 'bath' or the [æ] in the English word 'bad' if he were instructed to 'velarize' the /b/ in 'bath' and keep it 'plain' in 'bad'.

This is demonstrated in the following examples from Cairene. Before a syllable-final pharyngeal, /i/ is lowered to [ɛ]. (Examples (3) and (4) are from Woidich 1999: 27–8, cited in Watson 2002: 271

(3)   /tiʕmil/ [tɛʕmil] 'she does, makes'

/tˤiliʕ/ [tˤɨlɛʕ] 'he went up'

/iħna/ [ɛħnɐ] 'we'

When tautosyllabic with a pharyngeal, /u/ is lowered to [o]:

(4)   /jikuħħ/ [jikoħː] 'he coughs'

/ħubb/ [ħobː] 'love'

Adjacent to /q/, and within the same phonological word as a pharyngealized coronal,

/i(ː)/ is realized as a slightly lowered, centralized vowel [ɨ(ː)]—and, and /u/ as a slightly lowered,

centralized, rounded vowel [ʉ]. (Watson, *ibid.*)

LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE

The study samples were eight subjects from various countries in the middle east. Further research can be done using larger data. Since the study is only on the vowels of English and Arabic, research can be done on analyzing other segmental and supra-segmental features of Arabic English.

METHODOLOGY

The data comprised a list of common words that contained all the vowels of English. The subjects were Arabic speakers of English from various parts of the middle-east such as Lebanon, Syria, Oman, Palestine, Yemen, Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt. They were asked to read out the words in the word list and their speech was recorded on a very good quality Sony cassette recorder. Before reading, the subjects were given some time to go through the word list for better quality recording.

The data thus collected was transcribed phonetically by both the researchers individually and then collectively in order to be most accurate. A phonemic inventory of vowels used by the subjects was then prepared and deviations, if any, were noted. A majority pattern for each vowel was also found. After looking at the majority pattern, the researchers looked at the phonological and phonetic differences in the vowels produced by Arabic speakers of English. In order to be able to contrast Arabic and English vowels, we have the phonological statuses of the Arabic vowels and their allophonic variations. This will help us in bringing together the features of similarity of both the Mother Tongue (MT) and the Target Language (TL). Sometimes a pair of vowel phonemes of the MT and TL may not look qualitatively the same at first sight, but some similarity may appear if we examine some allophonic versions of one of them. The vowels of Arabic and the three accents of English are contrasted in order to arrive at the differences and similarities.

Table- 2: Phonemic inventory of vowels spoken by the subjects

Word list	British	American	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	MP
still	/stɪl/	/stɪl/	e	ɪ	e˖	ɪ	ɪ	i	e˖	ɪ	ɪ
step	/stɛp/	/stɛp/	e	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ	e	ɪ	e	e	ɛ
stamp	/stæmp/	/stæmp/	a˖	a˖	æ	aː	æ	æː	æː	æ˖	æː
but	/bʌt/	/bʌt/	ʌ˖	ə	ʌ	ʌ	ɑ	ɑ	ɑ	ɑ	ɑ
cotton	/ˈkɒtn/	/ˈkɑːtən/	ɔ	ɒ	ɑ	ɒ	o	ʊ	ʌ	ɒ	ɒ
stood	/stʊd/	/stʊd/	uː	uː	ʊ˖	ʊ	ʊ	ʊ˖	ʊ	ʊ	ʊ
alone	/əˈləʊn/	/əˈloʊn/	ə	ə	ə	ə	ɛ	ə	ə	ə	ə
steel	/stiːl/	/stiːl/	iː	iː	iː	iː	iː	iː	iː	iː	iː
father	/fɑːðə/	/fɑːðər/	aː	aː	ɑː	aː	aː	aː	ɑː	aː	aː
law	/lɔː/	/l ɑː/	ɔː	ɔː˖	ɒʔ	oːʔ	oʊ	oː	oː	ɔʊ	ʊə
Zoo	/zuː/	/zuː/	uː	uː	uː	uː	u	oː	uː	uː	uː
work	/wɜːk/	/wɜːrk/	ɔː	ɜː	ɜ	ɔː	ʌː	ɔː	ɛː	əː	ɔː
late	/leɪt/	/leɪt/	eɪ	eɪ	eː	eː	eː	eː	eɪ	eː	eː
fight	/faɪt/	/faɪt/	aɪ	aɪ	aɪ	a:jɪ	ajɪ	a:jɪ	a:j	a:j	a:j
boy	/bɔɪ/	/bɔɪ/	ɔɪ	ɔɪ	oːɪ	oːj	oːj	ɔːj	ɔːj	ɔːj	ɔːj
alone	/əˈləʊn/	/əˈloʊn/	oː	əʊ	oːʊ	oː	oː	oː	oː	oː	oː
how	/haʊ/	/haʊ/	aʊ	aʊ	aʊ	aːw	æːw	ɑːw	aːw	aːw	aːw
dear	/dɪə/	/dɪr/	ɪə	ɪə	iː	iː	iː	iː	jə	jə	iː
dare	/deə/	/der/	eː	ɛː	ɛː	ɛː	ɛː	ɛː	ɛː	ɛː	ɛː

poor	/pɔː/	/pʊr/	oə	ʊə	uː	ʊə	uː	uː	ʊː	ʊə	ʊə

S1-S8 =speakers 1-8, MP= majority pattern

DATA ANALYSIS

/ɪ/ and /ɛ/: These two phonemes are allophones in Arabic . Due to this reason, three of the eight speakers pronounced the word 'still' as 'stell'. A majority of speakers used a more open variety of / ɛ / and this shows that the models of English the subjects were exposed to are either British or American.

/æ/ and /ɑː/: The quality of the vowel in the word 'stamp has been approximated with RP by majority of the speakers and any variation is very minor. For example some used a slightly raised [æ] or some speakers used extra length. The extra lengthening must have happened due to mother tongue influence since this vowel in Arabic occurs as a long vowel. The short vowel is non-existent in Arabic. If we look at the production of /ɑː/ by the speakers, only two speakers used the back variety. Those who maintained the back vowel perceived the back quality of the vowel and possibly velarised the /ð/ making it nearer to Arabic [ðˤ]. A majority of the speakers used the fronted variety [aː].

/ə/: The schwa was not a problem to all of the speakers except one. The subject who had variation had tried to accentuate the first syllable and in this process, he produced [ɛ].

/iː/: Since this phoneme is the nearest allophone of the long vowel / iː/ in Arabic, all the speakers pronounced it correctly.

/ʌ/: A majority of the speakers produced [a] since it occurs only in an 'emaphatic environment' and also because it occurs in juxtaposition of a velarised consonant. The degree of backness determines the quality of the vowel.

/ɒ/: Four speakers approximated with R.P. Two speakers used back unrounded vowels [a] and [ʌ] which indicated that the model of English they had was American. Two of the speakers used [o] and [ʊ] which could be spelling pronunciation, or they were under the influence of the fact that the word was a loan from Arabic /qutˤn /~ /qutˤun/ "cotton".

/ ʊ/ : Only two of the speakers lengthened the vowel, possibly due to the influence of the word 'food' since the word given to read was 'stood'. The majority of speakers approximated the R.P., because phonologically there is no problem as they used the nearest allophone daˤmma /u/.

/ɔː/: Speakers 1 and 2 maintained the correct pronunciation. Speakers 3 and 4 used a glottal stop. Syllabically, in Arabic, if there is an open syllable(CV), it should be closed (CVC). In this case, the two speakers closed the syllable with a glottal stop which is in conformity with Arabic syllable structure.

Speakers 5 and 8 diphthongized the vowel which seems to be over correction. Speakers 6 and 7 used [oː]. This may be because they were confused between law and low. In Arabic [ɔː] and [oː] are allophones.

/uː/: Six of the eight speakers approximated the vowel sound with R.P. Speakers 2 and 3 used a fronted variety of the vowel, which is an affected style. This shows that, perhaps, these speakers were exposed to younger generation pronunciation of modern varieties of English pronunciation.

/ɜː/: Since the vowel doesn't exist in Arabic, the speakers used a kind of spelling pronunciation. We find that each speaker had a different way of pronouncing this vowel. Only speakers 2 and 8 approximated R.P.

/eɪ/ : Three speakers approximated R.P and five speakers monophthongized the diphthong. It is interesting to note that the diphthong / eɪ/ exists in standard Arabic, but the first element is slightly more open and extra short [ă]. The reason for using a monophthong could be non-exposure to a model of English that uses a diphthong like R.P. However, some speakers who may aim at the diphthong / eɪ/ may use the mother tongue equivalent /ăɪ/. This type of pronunciation my even sound like cockney pronunciation of the word 'late'.

/aɪ/: The majority of speakers approximated R.P. and those who did not, had only lengthened the first element with a few considering the second element the onset of another syllable. In Arabic syllable structure, it would be a long vowel [aː] and the glide /j/. They transferred the Arabic syllable structure to English.

/ɔɪ/: Only two speakers approximated the R.P. One of the speakers closed the syllable with a glide and pronounced it as [oːj]. The rest of the speakers lengthened the first element and closed the syllable with a glide which goes with the syllable structure of Arabic.

/əʊ/: Only one speaker approximated the R.P. 6 pf the 8 speakers used a monophthong [oː]. One of the speakers ended the syllable with a glide which is in conformity with the syllable structure of Arabic. This must have happened because he wanted to aim at a diphthong.

/aʊ/: Three speakers approximated R.P. The others lenghthened the first element. One of the speakers used [aː] and the other used [ɑː]. All the five speakers ended the syllable with a glide/w/ in conformity with the Arabic syllable structure.

/eə/: All the speakers used a monophthong while seven of them used a more open variety [ɛ]. This shows that when learnt English, they were exposure to rhotic variety of English.

/ʊə/: Three of them used a diphthong approximating R.P. Four speakers used a long vowel / uː/ which shows that they are exposed to a model that uses a monophthong. One of the speakers used a more open variety because [u] and [o] are allophones in Arabic.

Nearly all the English vowels undergo certain phonological and phonetic changes when pronounced by Arab learners of English. Based on the data analysis, we came to the following conclusions which are summarized in the table below.

Table: 3

English Vowel	RP pronunciation	Arabic equivalent	Arabic English pronunciation
/e/	/bɪg bɛn/ *Big Ben*	/i/[ɪ] ~ /a/ [ǎ]	/big bin/ [bɪg bɪn] or /big ban/ [bɪg bǎn]
/æ/	/bæt/ *bat*	/aː/ [æː] ~ [aː]	/baːt/ [bæːt] ~ [baːt]
/ɑː/	/ʃɑː/ *Shah*	/aː/ [æː] ~ [aː]	/ʃaːh/[ʃæːħ] ~ [ʃaːħ]
/ɜː/	/bɜːd/ *bird*	/eː/ + /r/	/beːrd/ [beːrd]
	/wɜːd/ *word*	/oː/ + /r/	/woːrd/ [wɔːrd]
	/hɜːt/ *hurt*	/eː/or /a/[ʌ] +/r/	/heːrt/ [heːrt] ~ /hart/ [hʌrt]
/ɔː/	/bɔːt/ *baught*	/oː/ [oː]	/boːt/ [boːt]
/ɪə/	/hɪə/ *here*	/iː/ or /eː/ + /r/	/hiːr/ [hiːr] or/heːr/ [heːr]
/eə/	/heə/ *hair*	/eː/ +r/	/heːr/ [heːr]
/ʊə/	/tʊə/	/uː/	/tuːr/ [tuːr]
/əʊ/	/bəʊt/ *boat*	/oː/ [oː]	/boːt/ [boːt]
/aɪ/	/faɪn/ *fine*	/aː/ + /j/ (+/i/)	/faːjn/ [faːɪn] or /faːjin/ [faːjɪn]
/aʊ/	/aʊt/ *out*	/aː/ + /w/ (+/i/)	/ʔaːwt/[ʔaːʊt] or /ʔaːwit/[ʔaːwɪt]

VOWEL QUALITY

Velarised consonants in Arabic affect the quality of vowels (they are front with plain consonants and back with velarised consonants). When Arab students start learning English, this leads to a failure in recognising the difference in the phonemic status of pairs like English /æ/ and /ɑː/.

VOWEL LENGTH

Arabic *fatħah* /a/ [ɐ̆]~[ɐ̃] is shorter than English /æ/. Therefore, Arab learners use the Arabic equivalent /aː/[æː]~[aː]. Thus they pronounce English *hat* /hæt/ [hæt] as [hæːt] (to rhyme with Arabic word /haːt/ 'give!'). Arab learners of English do not render reduction in length of English vowels when these are closed by voiceless consonants (as in *beat* when in contrast with *bead* and *bee*).

DIPHTHONG BREAKING

If the Arabic learner of English aims at the length of the first element of the English diphthong /aɪ/ in the word *fine*, the result will be the Arabic long /aː/. This leads to adding a new syllable beginning with /j/ in order to maintain the gliding element [ɪ] of the English /aɪ/. The result will be splitting the diphthong (syllabically v) into /aː -ji/ (syllabically cvː-cv). Thus English *fine* /faɪn/ will be /ˈfaːjin/.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Awareness of phonological system of the mother tongue will enable the teacher of English to teach the English vowels more effectively. Speakers of Arabic as a mother tongue find difficulties in distinguishing certain English vowels as far as quality and length are concerned so, bringing Arabic phonology in this context in order to highlight the similarities and differences between the two languages will make the process of teaching more effective.

Although the number of vowel phonemes in Arabic is less than the vowel systems of any of the four varieties of English (see chart in the appendix), the allophonic variants of Arabic vowel phonemes can be used for approximating the English vowel phonemes. Thus, an example from Arabic can be used to draw the learner's attention to the fact that his or her mother tongue has some *phones* that sound similar to the target language. Normally, native speakers are not aware to the allophonic variation in their speech. But it is the role of the teacher who has some basic knowledge of general phonetic theory to draw their attention to such existence of such "exotic" sounds. To take a simple example from English, the native speaker, is usually not aware of the fact that sounds like /p,b,k,g/ are realized [φ], [β], [x] or [ɣ] respectively in styles of rapid speech and in certain phonetic environment (Brown, 1977: 53 ff). Examples can be found in the second /p/ in *pepper,* the second /b/ in *baby*, the /k/ in *knocking* or the /g/ in *logging*, where such plosives undergo a process of lenition due to the occurrence of the sound in unstressed syllable in rapid speech. If the native speaker of English is learning a foreign language that has such "exotic" sounds, he will be surprised to know that such sounds are possible to pronounce if they

are "extracted" from their own allophonic environment in his mother tongue and used in his target language. Thus [β] in the Spanish name [aβa:na] "Havana" when taught to native speakers of English can be "extracted' from the second /b/ in the English word *baby* when pronounced in rapid casual style. Similarly, such a technique can be used for teaching English to native speakers of Arabic, thus the English vowel distinction between /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ can be maintained if we give the student the two variants of Arabic *kasra* /i/ in

(5) /liff/ [lɪfː] "turn!" and in

(6) /qif/ [qɛf] "stand up!"

So when the learner confuses English /ɪ ~ ɛ/ in *pin* and *pen,* we ask him or her to aim at the Arabic (5) for *pin* and (6) for *pen*

Below is an Arabic list read by the same native speakers of Arabic who read the English wordlist discussed above. It can be used as reference examples, so whenever the teacher faces some difficulty in teaching English vowels, reference can be made to the Arabic example to approximate the pronunciation.

1. [ɪ] as in /sitt/ [sɪtː] "six", to approximate the English /ɪ/ in *sit.*

2. [ɛ] as in /qif/ [qef ~qɛf] "stand up!"and /milħ/ [melħ ~ mɛlħ] "Salt" to approximate the English /ɛ/ in *kept.*

3. [æ] as in /haːt/ [hæːt] "give!", but needs to shorten the vowel to approximate English *hat.*

4. [æ] as in /kaːn/ [kæːn] "he was" (Egyptian and some other pronunciation), to approximate English *can.*

5. [ɑː] as in /faːr/ [fɑːr] "fugetive", to approximate English *far.*

6. [ɑː] as in /faaðˤa/ [fɑːðˤə] "It (the river) flooded", to approximate the English *father.* (In Standard or Classical Arabic pronunciation, the word is pronounced /faːdˤa/ [fɑːdˤə]).

7. [ɒ] as in /xubz/ [χɒbz] "bread" to approximate the English /ɒ/ *jobs.*

8. [ʌ] as in /batˤ/ [bɑtˤ ~ bʌtˤ] "ducks", to approximate English *but.*

9. [ʌ] as in /dˤann/ [dɑnː ~ dˤʌnː] "to be sparing or stingy", to approximate the English *done.*

10. [ə] as /fa/ [fə] in /ˈdaxala ˈzajd fa `saːlim/ [ˈdaχələ ˈzaɪd fə `saːlim] "Zaid entered, followed by Salem", to approximate /fə/ in English *for* in the phrase *this is for Salem.*

11. [eː] (as in SSE or GIE varieties of English) as in /seːf/ [seːf] "sword" to approximate the

English *safe.*

12. [oː] as in /loːn/ [loːn] "colour" to approximate the English *loan.*

13. [ɔː] as in /sˤoːt/ [sˤɔːtˤ] "voice" to approximate English *sort.*

14. [aːj] as in (Iraqi or Gulf Arabic pronunciation) /ˈfaːjit/ [ˈfaːjit] "last, past" but needs to shorten the first element of the diphthong and pronounced the word as monosyllabic to approximate the English *fight.*

15. [aːw] as in /ˈhaːwin/ [ˈhaːwin] "mortar" but needs to shorten the first element of the diphthong and pronounced the word as monosyllabic to approximate the English *town.*

16. [ɔː] as in /sˤoːja/ [sˤɔːjə] "soya" and /boːja/ [bɔːjə] "paint" to approximate English *boy.*

CONCLUSIONS

Contrastive analysis has been under scrutiny for quite some time. Some theoreticians and practitioners do not validate the use of contrastive analysis in foreign language teaching. However, most of them agree that at the level of phonology, contrastive analysis would help both the syllabus designer and the teacher in the class room in pin pointing the areas of difficulty in pronunciation of the target language. (see Richards, J. *et al*, 1972). So, we hope that this study will draw attention of teachers on the role of mother tongue in teaching the sounds of English to Arab students.

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