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The Elimination of Pronunciation Problems of English Vowels of Saudi Students of English Resulting from Complex Letter-Sound Relationship

Dr. Ezzeldin Mahmoud Tajeldin Ali[1]

Abstract

This study attempts to measure the influence of a language course on the elimination of pronunciation problems of English vowels that are experienced by Saudi students as a result of a complex letter-sound relationship. The course was intended to boost the students' awareness of the letter-sound relation of English vowels. The course comprised language items such the nature, classification and letter-sound relationship of vowels reinforced by practice activities. Test material comprised three lists of English monosyllabic, disyllabic and multi syllabic words that were arranged into pre-and–post tests for comparison purpose. The participants of the study included the students of English, at Al Baha University who do not have any kind of exposure to native English. In the tests, students were asked to pronounce words making advantage of deciphering and pronunciation abilities they developed after the course. Results revealed that the pronunciation of English vowels of Saudi students improved with respect to English vowel on monosyllabic and disyllabic words probably due to the language course. However, they have difficulty pronouncing deciphering vowel sounds in multi syllabic words. Although the course delivered is crucial for the improvement of learners' vowels pronunciation, listening practice will probably form a robust strategy in accomplishing the learners' awareness of pronunciation.

Keyword: Decipher, letter-sound relation, awareness, vowel names, vowel sounds

1. Introduction

The pronunciation of English vowels has recently received more attention from language teachers and researchers who are interested in the learning and teaching of English as a second or a foreign language (ESL/EFL). The purpose behind their studies is probably to find interpretation of many learning problems of vowel sounds and discover ways to teach English vowels more effectively. In fact, correct pronunciation of words is largely dependent on the pronunciation of vowel sounds. This fact suggests that pronunciation problems of English vowels can affect the meaning of words leading to intelligibility problems. One of the most important factors affecting the learning of pronunciation of English vowels is the irregular relationship that exists between English vowel alphabets and vowel phonemes of English influences (Ali 2011). In fact, the letter-sound relationship of English is irregular. That is, a direct phoneme-grapheme correspondence is rare in English orthography system. This fact is due to historical reasons where the vocabulary items of English developed from different languages including Celtic, German, French, Latin and Greek that might have different orthography systems (Baugh, Cabole 1993 and Venezky 1967). Moreover, according to Ali (2011) if we assume that the relationship between letters and sounds was clear and direct to first speech members, it might not remain the same as time passes for the following speech members. They will have difficulty understanding the relationship between letters and sounds. An example of this is clear in English words such as knight that descends from German; presenting a cognate of knecht. English conservative orthography writes it as knight and it pronounces it as gnat /nat/, or / night /ναIτ/.

[1] Dept. of English, Al Baha University, Saudi Arabia.

There are many similar English words: e.g. column, obstacle, enough, weight etc. which do not show any letter sound relation. Thus, English orthography is inadequate in comparison to orthographic systems of other languages. This study will focus on studying poor performance of English vowels produced by Saudi university students as result of the lack of correspondence between letters and sounds of English. The topic of EFL learners has been a priority in many studies that have been carried out in the past. Many scholars have been interested in the particular problems that EFL learners face in pronunciation and writing of the English language. Rajab (2013) carried out a study that was published in his article "Developing Speaking and Writing Skills of L1 Arabic EFL Learners through Teaching of IPA Phonetic Codes." The study was aimed at finding out the problems that Arabic EFL learners faced in speaking and writing the English language. There were 169 male Saudi EFL learners who took part in the study. They were all from a University-level Preparatory Year Program (PYP). They were put into five groups, and two tests were done to each group. The tests were both oral and written because in many cases the learners will write what they pronounce. The results of the study showed that the learners faced major challenges when they used bi-lingual dictionaries (Arabic-English). Therefore, it was encouraged that EFL learners should use monolingual dictionaries (English-English). The vowels and consonants in English are not the same ones in Arabic (Rajab, 2013. They vary in numbers and in their pronunciation. In Arabic, there are 32 consonants and eight vowels. In the pronunciation of consonants, many of the learners scored above 50 percent. They faced a major challenge in pronunciation of /p/ and /b/ (Rajab, 2013; Lev-Ari & Peperkamp, 2013). They also had problems with the pronunciation of letters g, c, and k. This study addresses vowel pronunciation problems made by Saudi university students of English as result of the complex letter-sound relationship of English. The study attempts to examine the effect of explicit knowledge of English letter-sound and practice on the improvement of the learners' performance.

2. Background of English and Arabic Sound Letter Relation

There is no direct relation between letter and sounds of English. Phoneme-grapheme relationship in English is highly unconstrained (Perry, Ziegler and Coltheart, 2002). English language continues to grow as the primary language for international communication. The learning environment is also changing as all learners are changing to international students (Vitanova & Miller, 2012). EFL teachers have an enormous responsibility to ensure that they help EFL learners increase their competence in English pronunciation. English is very much different from some languages like Arabic with regard to letter-sound relationship of vowel letters and sounds. For the Arabic speakers EFL learners, it becomes a significant challenge to produce proper pronunciation of English words (Liu, 2011; Lev-Ari & Peperkamp, 2013). From the study, the researcher recommended that in future more studies should be carried out on the topic. However, the way the studies are carried out should be changed so that the results can be from different groups such as Chinese EFL learners and Korean EFL learners (Rajab, 2013). The researcher also recommended on the need for a larger number of participants. When the research group is large, the data collected becomes more reliable and valid. In another study carried out by Saadeh & Ezza (2011), the researchers wanted to find out the problems that Arabic speakers EFL learners faced in terms of resources. Although pronunciation and writing skills are more dependent on the learner, the researchers argued that the resources that the learners have also influenced their learning of the English language. The authors found out that many schools that taught English to Arabic learners relied on textbooks that were irrelevant compared to the needs of the learners. The textbooks focused more on phonetic information rather than pronunciation. In Arabic language, students are not taught phonetics. Therefore, many educators tend to believe that when they teach phonetics to the Arabic EFL learners they will become competent first (Vitanova & Miller, 2012). This is not the case, because in many cases the learners get more phonetic information and fail to pronounce words properly (Saadeh & Ezza, 2011). Therefore, the researchers recommend that more attention should be given to pronunciation rather than phonetics. They also identify the dictionary as the best resource for the learners rather than the textbooks that mislead them (Liu, 2011). They term it as the dictionary-based instruction.

Haifa Al-Buainain, an associate professor at Qatar University, also carried out a study related to the problems that Arabic EFL learners faced. It was the first survey to be carried out in Qatar University and in specific the department of foreign languages concerning Arabic EFL learners. The participants were given 40 scripts to write. From the scripts different errors were identified. The main one was grammatical errors that mainly arose because of first language influence. This is what researchers term as interlingual errors (Haifa, 2013; Vitanova & Miller, 2012). There are also intralingual errors that arose mainly because of the difficulty in the English language. This happens to any foreign language speaker because they find the second language difficult from their native language. To overcome these errors, the author proposed more involvement of the teacher.

The issue should bring together the learners, the teachers, and administrators. In this kind of environment, the learners are more likely to get motivated (Haifa, 2013). Through motivation, it becomes easier to master the second language. At the end of the study, the researcher encouraged EFL teachers to focus more on written work. In the past, teachers assumed that pronunciation perfection is the main teaching approach instead of incorporating writing (Haifa, 2013). However, the study found out that written work also plays a key role in shaping the pronunciation of the learners. Therefore, the Arabic EFL learners need more remedial work so that they can practice more how to write in English (Vitanova & Miller, 2012). In conclusion, the three studies that have discussed have implied that there are problems that Arabic EFL learners face. This is primarily because of the differences in their language and the English language. The letter-sound relation between the two languages becomes a big confusion and challenge to the learners. However, with more involvement of the EFL teachers and administrators, the problems can be addressed because there are known solutions. For instance, there is a need for textbooks that are more relevant to the needs of the Arabic EFL learners. There is also a need for dictionary-based instruction as proposed by Saadeh & Ezza (2011).

3. Study Design of the Study

3.1 Participants

Participants include thirty Saudi students preparing for BA degree in English language and Literature at Al Baha University in Saudi Arabia. Importantly, the participants studied for three semesters at the time when they participated in these experiments. English is learnt as a foreign language (not a second and language), the learning of which starts in the fourth year of primary school and continues at secondary schools for three years. Moreover, in Saudi Arabia, English language is largely used for communication purpose, particularly, when they travel abroad to English speaking countries. This opportunity provides space for further practice real interactions.

3.2 The Content of Language Course Taught

The content of language course targeted the nature, classification and syllabification of English vowels. The purpose behind the course was to provide students with full background on the pronunciation of English vowels together with the underlying relationship existing between vowel letters and vowel sounds. During the course students studied a course phonetics of English in 8 weeks which is reinforced by listening practice on the same subject. Moreover, students did some exercises on how distinguish between the different types of English vowels and types of syllables practicing the encoding process of letter-sounds. For example, students were given unfamiliar words of different syllable types and they were asked to assign their pronunciation by chunking the letter patterns into manageable syllables ([boy- boy], [ten, - ten], [attend– at. tend], [public- pub.lic], [truly- tru.ly], etc.). This strategy is seen as an effective method learning words pronunciations.

3.3 Test Materials

Test material encompasses three list of short, long and diphthong vowel of English embedded in meaningful, clear and predictable monosyllabic, disyllabic and multi-syllabic words. Each list includes 30 words. Moreover, the choice procedure of these words was based on letter-sound prediction method for measurement the letter-sounds correspondence in English words. Short vowels were presented in closed monosyllabic words /hvd/ template: e.g. *sit, pen, lad, not*, etc. The second list included short and long vowels embedded in open and closed monosyllabic, two-syllabic, syllabic words; e.g., *look, poor, seed, seal, city, field, physics, fee, poo, blood, good, calm, far, cast,* etc. The purpose of this combination strategy is that (i) to examine how participants distinguish between short and long vowels on the light of spelling and (ii) to add a degree of complexity to the list mixing both single cluster vowels. The last list of words is more complex which includes diphthong vowels embedded in syllabic words. Vowels are distributed in front, middle and final positions of words. List includes words such as *comfortable, amateur, enough, bail, bead, bread, fierce*, etc.

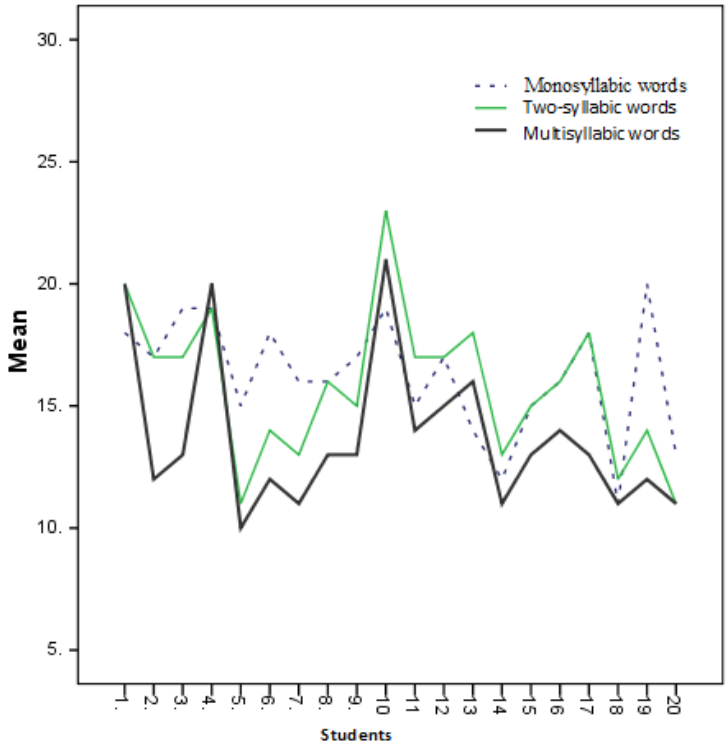
3.4 Testing Procedure

The study involved pretest and posttest (Shuttle worth 2009) where the students were asked to read a list of short, long and diphthong vowels embedded in English words (Section 3.2). The pretest was operated to provide information about students' knowledge of alphabetical order, letters, and phonemes which help us recognize the concepts which need to be given more attention during training. Importantly, the students received no treatment or training before the pretest, but after that they attended a course of the English vowels that continued for eight weeks.

In this period students had sufficient knowledge of English vowels which covered facets such as the nature of English vowels, classification, distinctive categories, relationship between vowel (names) letters and vowel sounds alongside with exercises. After training the students were asked to perform the same test. The objective behind this training was to enhance the students' awareness of English vowels' pronunciation.

4. Results

Figure 1: The Performance of 20 Saudi Students of English in a Pretest Assessed for the Knowledge of the Relationship between English Vowel Letters and Vowel Sounds



As results in Figure (1) shows Saudi students of English obtained low scores in the pretest. The highest total mean of students performance appear in the monosyllabic followed by disyllabic and complex words; 52%, 50% and 43%. The results suggest that students find the pronunciation of English vowels in monosyllabic words easier than in disyllabic and multisyllabic words. Reason of this will be discussed later.

Figure 2: The Performance of 20 Saudi Students of English in a Posttest Assessed for the Knowledge of the Relationship between English Vowel Letters and Vowel Sounds

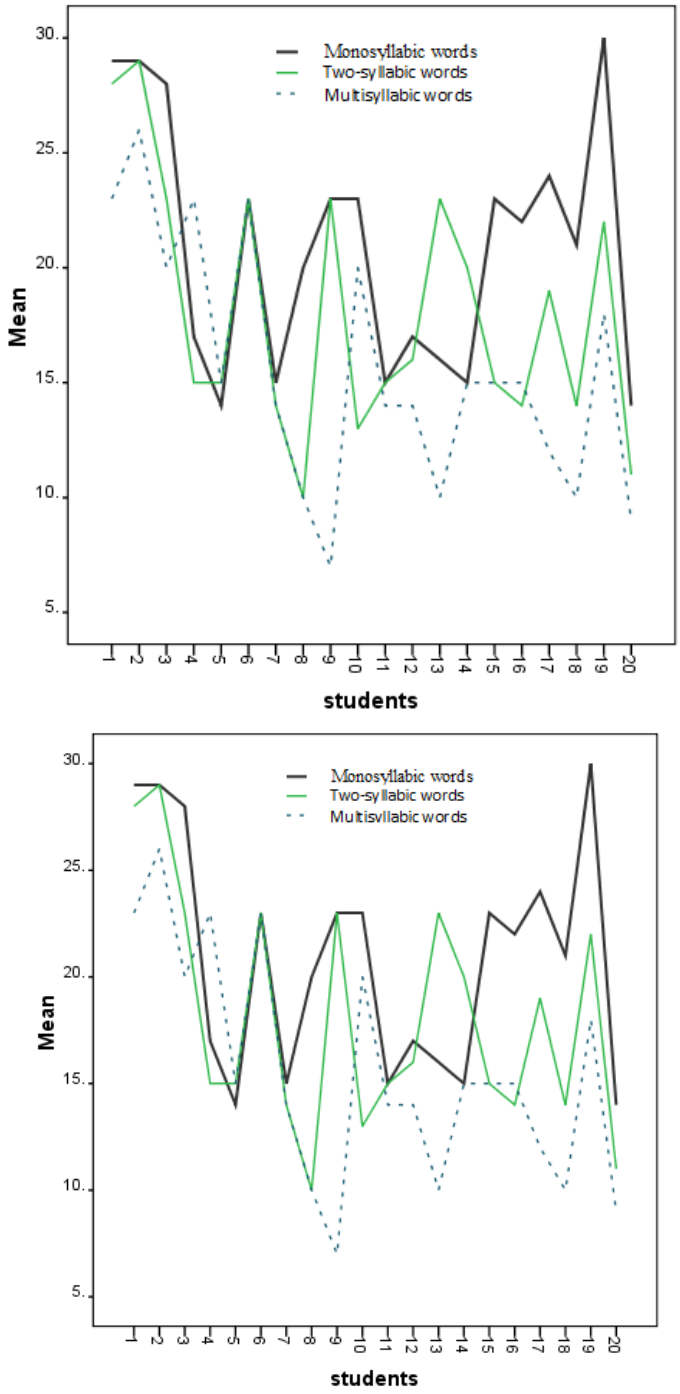


Figure (2) shows Saudi students of English obtained relatively higher scores in the posttest in comparison to the results obtained in the pretest. The highest total mean of students performance appear in the monosyllabic followed by disyllabic and complex words; 67%, 60% and 50%. This implies that students benefit from the training they received in the pronunciation of English vowels in monosyllabic, disyllabic and multi syllabic words. Reason of this will be discussed later.

5. Discussion

Difference in the pretest and the posttest results point to improvement, which occurs in the students' performance. It is possible to refer this improvement to the training course they received in the reduction of the effect of letter-sound relation on pronunciation of English vowels. This conclusion implies that training can boost the learners' performance pronouncing English vowels. Previous studies support our findings where the awareness of letter names and letter sounds among EFL/ESL children helps them learn the basic letter-sound relation (Share 2003). Moreover, variations in terms of lexical structure, orthographic redundancy, consistency of spelling-sound correspondences, and number of syllables-have little influence. This is because skilled readers are able to identify and pronounce common words with little effect of these properties. This fact suggests that the size of the pool of items that are processed appears to be related to level of reading skill (Debra and Seidenberg McGill 1990)

Pretest	Posttest		
	Monosyllabic	Disyllabic	Multi
Monosyllabic	.599**		
Disyllabic		.515*	
Multi			.387

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Generally, the computation of the Spearman's Correlation coefficient reveals positive correlations between the students' performance in the pretest and posttest. In detail, there is statistically a significant positive correlation between the performance of students in monosyllabic words in the pretest and posttest where r-value= .559 ($p < 0.01$). Similarly, there is statistically a positive correlation between the performance of students in pretest and posttest of disyllabic words where $r = .515$ ($p < .05$). There is also statistically positive correlation between the performance of students in pretest and posttest on multi syllabic words' level in which r= .387. These correlations suggest that when students' scores' increase in monosyllabic, disyllabic and multi syllabic pretests level; their scores increase in posttests level. The results of the correlation coefficient imply that develop abilities deciphering the letter-sound relation between vowel names and vowel sounds in monosyllabic words and disyllabic words, however, they have difficulties to decode vowel sounds in multi syllabic words.

7. Conclusions

Training on the knowledge of sounds and orthography of English vowels eliminates the learners' pronunciation problems of English vowels in monosyllabic and disyllabic words. Saudi students of English have difficulty deciphering the relationship between vowel names and vowel sounds in multi syllabic words. Training on a course can work well if it is accompanied by listening practice. Listening provides students with background on how to decode the relationship between vowel letters and vowel sounds.

8. Pedagogical Implications

Teaching English vowels in a EFL classroom should carefully consider correct vowels' articulation is from the first time. Teachers and students have to understand how the mouth and tongue positions manipulated to make different vowel sounds. More attention should be given to teach-practice strategies involving the letter-sound associations. That is, we can teach students to produce the sound vowels when they are shown the vowel letter/s and vice versa. The present experimental study contributes to the identification of English vowel areas of which will facilitate communication and so provides a basis for future material planning, design and production.

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Appendix (1): Pre and Post Tests Version

	Spelling	**Examples**	**sound**
1	A	bad, arid, dictionary, April, add, aft, alp*, practical, precaution*	/ɛ/ Θ /↔
2	U	Put, should, numb, nutrition	
	O	Pool, fool, poo, poor, proclaim, comfortable	
	I	Pit, hit, city, isle, island, ignore, arrive, airport precipice, prejudice	
	E, ee, EA	Peat, meet, head, mere, enter, entertainments,	
3	E	pet red, enter, he, metre, feel, here, elephant,	ɛ / ɪ⌉/I↔,
4	O	phone, pot, not, do, over, done , moor, people, computer,	, ʊ⌉ ɪ⌉
	O	Pole, low, only, open, our, odd, telephone	
5	U	Put, but, full, current, up, butterfly, umbrella	Y,℘,↔,
6	I	Sit, isle, guide, ski	♦,αI,
7	Ee,ie, ea, ei, eo	Feed, piece, head, meal, receipt, people, build	ɪ⌉
8	Ow	Power, low, cow	Yα, αY
8	Uy, ai, I, ly,	Guy, paid, bait	αI
9	Ue, u, o	Do, blue, argue	ʊ⌉
10	Oi, oy	Boil, toy, joy	♦
11	Ou	Boul, bough, out, soul, court	αY, ʊ⌉
12	Oo	Pool, blood, poor,	ʊ⌉, ℘,Y↔
13	Oa	Boat, coarse, broad	↔Y, ⌉
14	ur, ir, er, ear,	Nurse, Bird, alert,	∈⌉
15	Ar	Bar, hard,	A⌉