

Mispronunciation of English Consonant Sounds by Yemeni EFL Learners at Secondary Schools: An Analysis of the Problems and Some Remedies

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the pronunciation problems faced by Yemeni EFL learners at secondary schools when pronouncing English consonants. It also aims to shed light on the area of English consonant clusters system. It deals with the importance of teaching pronunciation of the English language at secondary schools. In addition, it aims at finding out some of the ways which can make an improvement in terms of teaching pronunciation in English lessons. For this purpose, two instruments were used to collect the data. These tools were a questionnaire and a recording test. Thirty (30) copies of English language questionnaires were distributed to the teachers. They were selected randomly from 10 secondary schools. The recording test has also been conducted at the same schools. 100 students (50 boys and 50 girls) were randomly chosen from the same schools. The results showed that the subjects had difficulties to pronounce certain English consonant sounds. The results also showed that the subjects unintentionally insert a vowel sound in English syllable to break up consonant clusters. The study ended by discussing the findings of the study and the recommendations required to be taken into consideration by the Yemeni learners, English teachers, and curriculum designers.

Keywords: Yemeni EFL Learners at Secondary Schools, EFL-English Consonant Sounds, Consonant Clusters System, Intelligibility.

Introduction

English is a global language. For Crystal (2003) a language is considered to have gained a global role when its worldwide character is recognized in every country. Its significance is being noted in almost every sphere of everyday life and its knowledge is becoming more and more essential. And correct pronunciation of English is very important to avoid misunderstanding when communicating with others. Morley (1991) points out that “intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence p.513”. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) also claiming that “intelligible pronunciation is one of the necessary components of oral communication p.8”. Yates (2002) adds, “learners with good pronunciation in English are more likely to be understood even if

they make errors in other areas, whereas learners whose pronunciation is difficult to understand will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect p.1”. Similarly, Burns (2003) argues that clear pronunciation is essential in spoken communication, even where learners produce minor inaccuracies in vocabulary and grammar; they are more likely to communicate effectively when they have good pronunciation and intonation. Hewings (2004) has also underlined the importance of pronunciation in effective communication. He states that “difficulties with pronunciation might mean that students fail to get their message across, even when the correct words are being used, or they might fail to understand what is said to them (p.11)”. More specifically, Kenworthy (1987) states that "intelligibility is being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation. So, it is the same as understandability (p.13)". This consideration suggests that teaching pronunciation is crucial to help the students develop the skills that are necessary to communicate in the target language. Harmer (2001) argues that “pronunciation teaching not only makes students aware of different sounds and sound features (and what these mean) but can also improve their speaking immeasurably” and consequently “help them achieve the goal of improved comprehension and intelligibility p.183”. Kelly (2000) also insists on “pronunciation work can, and should, be planned p.13”. He adds “the fact that pronunciation tends to suffer from neglect may not be due to teachers lacking interest in the subject but rather to a feeling of doubts as to how to teach it (p.13)”.

Statement of the Problem

It is widely thought that pronunciation is one of the most neglected aspects of English language teaching in schools. More specifically, a great number of Yemeni teachers neglect teaching pronunciation and they rather focus on grammar and vocabulary. And For that reason, most of the secondary school students in Yemen produced incorrect pronunciation for many of English words. Therefore, majority of Yemeni EFL students reach the university with generally poor English and bad pronunciation in particular. According to Harmer (2001) almost all English language teachers get students to study grammar and vocabulary, practice functional dialogues, take part in productive skill activities and become competent in listening and reading. Yet some of these same teachers make little attempt to teach pronunciation in any overt way and only give attention to it in passing. The result of this is that teachers are often left to rely on their own ‘feeling’ with little direction in the pronunciation classroom. Although some instructors can successfully assist their students under these conditions, many others are reluctant to teach pronunciation. With regard to the competence of teachers “many experienced teachers would admit to a lack of knowledge of the theory of pronunciation and they may therefore feel the need to improve their practical skills in pronunciation teaching” (Kelly, 2000, p. 13).

Significance of the Study

The importance of this study is to discover the problematic area of pronunciation and identifies the exact sounds that Yemeni EFL learners mispronounce and find the most useful solutions for it. This study also aims at arriving at some conclusions, and pedagogical suggestions that may help instructors understand and correct their students’ errors in a more systematic way.

Research Questions

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Fahmi Abdo Mohamed Al Mafalees, Ph.D.

Mispronunciation of English Consonant Sounds by Yemeni EFL Learners at Secondary Schools: An Analysis of the Problems and Some Remedies 109

- 1) What are the problems that face Yemeni EFL learners in learning English pronunciation?
- 2) What are the difficulties that face Yemeni EFL learners in pronouncing English Consonants?
- 3) What are the difficulties that face Yemeni EFL learners in pronouncing English Consonant-clusters?
- 4) What are the causes of the pronunciation problems of Yemeni EFL learners?

Literature Review

Pronunciation plays a very important role in learning a language, as Derwing & Munro (2005) claim that, "having good pronunciation of the language can help in normal communication, particularly intelligibility." It is proved by Gilakjani (2012) that speakers whose pronunciation is intelligible able to lead a successful conversation. Pronunciation for Yates and Zielinski (2009) refers to how we produce the sounds that we use to make meaning when we speak. It includes the particular consonants and vowels of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual segments, such as stress, timing, rhythm, intonation, phrasing, (suprasegmental aspects), and how the voice is projected (voice quality). Although we often talk about these as if they were separate, they all work together in combination when we speak, so that difficulties in one area may impact on another. Fraser (2001, p.6) also states that pronunciation "includes all those aspects of speech which make for an easily intelligible flow of speech, including segmental articulation, rhythm, intonation and phrasing, and more peripherally even gesture, body language and eye contact. Pronunciation is an essential ingredient of oral communication. Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994, p. 4) define pronunciation in general terms as "the production of significant sound in two senses. First, sound is significant because it is used as part of a code of a particular language; and so, we can talk about the distinctive sounds in English, French, Thai and other languages. In this sense, we can talk about pronunciation as the production and perception of sounds of speech. Second, sound is significant because it is used to achieve meaning in contexts of use. Here, the code combines with other factors in ensuring that communication becomes possible. In this sense, we can talk about pronunciation with reference to acts of speaking."

Pronunciation teaching proves to be an essential part in every English lesson. Pronunciation activities do not only help students to be confident of different sounds and sound features, but it most importantly helps students to improve their spoken skills. Focusing on where the sounds are in the mouth and which syllables are stressed in the words fortifies students' comprehension and intelligibility (Harmer 2005, p. 183). In connection with this, Gilakjani (2012, p.8) claims that teaching pronunciation should be more than just training individual sounds or isolated words. Pronunciation needs to be viewed as an essential part of communication. Therefore, in order to consolidate pronunciation skills (both comprehension and production), it is crucial to incorporate pronunciation activities into classroom through various materials and tests. Good pronunciation skills make speakers more confident to and improve their listening comprehension.

There are many difficulties and challenges that affect English language teaching in secondary schools in Yemen. The low level of English proficiency among Yemeni learners is noticeable. At the secondary schools in Yemen many difficulties and challenges are reported in learning and teaching

pronunciation. English is taught as a foreign language at schools and universities in Yemen and this complicated the problem. Many studies conducted in the Yemeni context have reported that Yemeni learners face problems in acquiring the required English skills at the university level. Al-Mehwari (2005) identified that the most significant problems faced by both students and teachers in teaching English at the university level were the course teaching methods, the course content, and the course assessment methods. Al-Refa'ai (2001) found that teaching methods, the courses adopted, teaching materials, and the assessment used by teachers were the main factors that influenced students' achievement in the English language. Further, one of the most significant problems faced by Yemeni universities is the lack of competent teachers.

According to Weshah and Tomok (2011), the vast majority of university students graduate from secondary schools with low levels of communicative ability in English. The results of previous studies have revealed that EFL university students in many EFL countries appear to have many difficulties despite the long period of preparation at secondary school. In a study in Yemen, many university students were poor speakers and writers despite the six years of preparation in primary and secondary school. Abbad (1988) suggested that the students' problems were due to the inappropriate methods of language instruction and the learning environment which may be unsuitable for learning a foreign language.

It can be noted that secondary English curriculum has long been a compulsory subject taught for six years before university. According to Al Aqeeli (2007), the attainment of Yemeni students in learning English is quite poor and this is shown when they face real life situations in which they have to communicate and interact. A number of researchers, such as Al Mushriquee (2004) and Al-Shuaibi (2009), have reported that students do not have enough knowledge of how to communicate by using appropriate social language. That is why they are not able to communicate in the target language they study as well as expected. While they are supposed to use the language communicatively, Yemeni students show quite poor proficiency in the English language. Investigating the preparation process in the secondary stages, which is the most important stage for students to move to higher education, will directly affect their performance at the university level. It is clear that the English language teaching process faces many problems and challenges. Another possible reason for the lack of English proficiency among students relates to the instruction methods. The way English is taught in Yemeni schools today is responsible, to a great extent, for the low levels of English language proficiency in the country. This may be due to the absence of a systematic approach in Yemeni schools leading to a gap between the curriculum and the techniques used in teaching the communicative approach.

As for the problems which have been encountered by secondary school students when they try to learn English pronunciation Moosa (1972) and Homidan (1984) argue that Arab students encounter problems in the pronunciation of sounds which the students are not familiar with e.g., /v/, /p/, /ŋ/. Nation (2009) adds, "When some teachers and students complain about difficulties in speaking, they are often talking about pronunciation" (p. 75). Furthermore, Watson (2002) argues that the following consonants /p/-/b/, /f/-/v/, /tʃ/-/dʒ/-/ʃ/, seem to be problematic for Arab speakers

learning English. This is due to the absence of these oppositions in Arabic. For example, /p/, /v/, and /tʃ/ do not exist in Arabic. Other consonants exist in Arabic, but they have different phonetic realizations. Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) also identify the problems faced by Arab learners of English in their book. They identified some consonants (i.e. /p/, /v/, /ŋ/, /θ/, /ð/, /r/, /l/) as problematic for Arabs to pronounce.

Kenworthy (1987) argues that non-native speakers may add sounds. For example, many learners when pronouncing words like 'speak', 'spoon', or 'Spain' add a short vowel sound at the beginning of these words. So 'speak' may sound like 'a-speak', a two-syllable word (p.17).

As for consonant-clusters system, Verma & Krishnaswamy (1996), Balasabramanian (2000) and Roach (2004) argue that clusters are sequences of two or more consonants at the beginning or end of syllable. The nature of English consonant clusters is initial consonant clusters and final consonant clusters. Kenworthy (1987, p.125) points out that English permits longer consonant clusters and sequences than Arabic does. The main difficulty for learners is three-element clusters initially and finally, as in 'street' and 'against'. Although two-element clusters at the beginning of words seem to cause fewer problems, those beginning with 's' are particularly difficult ('speak', 'state'). The learner will tend to insert a vowel to break up the groups of consonants. For example, instead of pronouncing s-k-t in 'asked', this will be pronounced as a two-syllable word (as-ked) and, similarly, 'against' will become (again-est).

Factors That Affect Pronunciation Learning

Kenworthy (1987) argues that there are many factors that influence the pronunciation of the target language L2 learners. These factors are the native language, the age factor, the amount of exposure, phonetic ability or aptitude, attitude and identity, motivation and concern for good pronunciation.

Native Language

The native language is an important factor that affects the learning of pronunciation. Avery and Ehrlich (1987) state that “learners of a language speak the target language in a different way: sometimes slightly different and sometimes highly different than the native speakers do, which we call foreign accent, the nature of which is determined to a large extent by a learner’s native language p.9”. Cook (2008) explain that as “a person who knows two languages transfers some aspect from one language to another”, and “what can be transferred depends, among other things, on the relationship between the two languages (p. 76)”. This phenomenon for Kenworthy (1990) does not concern only individual sounds but also combinations of sounds and features such as rhythm and intonation. Kenworthy also claims that “there has been a great deal of research in which the sound systems of English and other languages are compared, and the problems and difficulties of learners predicted p.4.”. She adds “the more differences there are, the more difficulties the learner will have in pronouncing English (p.4)”.

Age

Many researchers proved that children are the most talented ones in terms of acquiring EFL. However, adults can achieve a reasonable progress in obtaining pronunciation skills successfully if they are well motivated and determined. Abello-Contesse (2009) considers the age of the children as a major factor in the process of language acquisition; which means, younger learners are much better than adults in acquiring a new language. He indicated that according to the learners' age, they vary in acquiring language skills. On the other hand Zhang and Yin (2009) argue that younger learners are able to learn the sound system more effectively, while the learning process of adult learners may be more likely to be hindered because of their age.

Exposure

The amount of exposure to the target language is very important factor. Learners who have already been exposed to some foreign language have greater chances to acquire a new language easier than students who have never encountered one. According to Krashen (1982) learners acquire a second language primarily from the input they receive, which has to be in large amounts and, most importantly, comprehensible. In English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, since the students have very limited or no English native input outside the classroom, "the burden will fall more on the teacher to provide an adequate model of the target language", and "to ascertain that students have opportunities to experience samples of the authentic oral discourse of native speakers" (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996, p. 17). However, as Kenworthy (1990) argues "it is not merely exposure that matters, but how the learner responds to the opportunities to listen to and use English", therefore, "the amount of exposure, though clearly a contributory factor, is not a necessary factor for the development of pronunciation skills (p.6)."

Motivation and Attitude

Balboni (2012) argues that motivation constitutes the energy responsible for the memorization of new information and it is vital for the acquisition of a second language. In fact, there is a very strong link between motivation and attitude. Kenworthy (1990) states "in many studies of attitude and motivation in language learning, it has been shown that those learners who show positive feelings towards the speakers of the new language tend to develop more accurate, native-like accents (p.8)."

This happens because learners demonstrate *integrative motivation*, which means that they are "willing to be integrated into the new speech community" and "are genuinely interested both in the speakers and in their culture" (Kenworthy, 1990, p. 8).

Methodology

This research was carried out during the second semester of the academic year 2018/2019. This study used two tools to collect data. These tools were a questionnaire and a recording test; they were designed to give accurate evaluation of the problems that face Yemeni EFL learners in pronunciation. Thirty (30) copies of English language questionnaires were distributed to the teachers, which served to answer the research questions and achieve the objectives of the study. All the teachers were native Arab speakers, and none of them was a native English speaker. About

half of the teachers (55%) held a University Degree or an equivalent qualification, whereas the other half (45%) held a Diploma. Their years of experience range from 5-25 years. They were selected randomly from 10 secondary schools in Aden and Lahj governorates in Yemen. The questionnaire was handed out by the researcher to the participants. Then gathered and analyzed.

The recording test has also been conducted at the same schools. 100 students (50 boys and 50 girls) were randomly chosen from the same schools. Their age range was approximately from 15 to 18 years. In testing the pronunciation errors, the researcher prepared (7) sentences written on a paper in each sentence there was a target sound, each of the students read the whole sentences a loud and the researcher was recording the pronunciation.

Data Analysis Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was prepared and used in collaboration with some English language experts. The questionnaire was analyzed and displayed by means of tabulation. It was chosen because a quick look at it gives the reader full information about the items analysis. The questionnaire translated the information needed into a set of specific questions. These structured questions include multiple-choice questions and scales. Determining the wording of each question involves defining the issue, using ordinary words, using unambiguous words, and using clear statements. The questionnaire was designed to collect the data that support the study and to confirm the findings of this research. All the thirty teachers answered the questions easily.

Regarding the teachers' perception about the pronunciation skills of the students, the majority of the teachers (65%) think that the students have a poor or a very poor level of English pronunciation. About (30%) of them believe they have an acceptable level of English pronunciation, whereas only (5%) of the teachers thinks they have a good level of English pronunciation. None of the teachers believes their pupils have excellent level of English pronunciation. The teacher's perception about the problems that facing students in pronunciation is that the vast majority of the teachers (94%) have noticed that the students have problems mainly with new words. A small number (6%) claimed that their students have problems even with words that they already know. Concerning the amount of time spent on developing pronunciation, on average, 85% of the time is spent on developing vocabulary and grammar, 15% of the time is spent on developing pronunciation skills. Furthermore, the amount of time spent on developing pronunciation skills ranges between 15% and 30%; this means that there is a significant variety in the opinions of the teachers regarding the amount of time that should be spent on pronunciation teaching.

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
When your students learn English pronunciation: Mother tongue affect negatively on EFL learning pronunciation.	70%	20%	5%	5%	0%
They have a lack of pronunciation practice inside and outside classroom.	65%	10%	10%	10%	5%
They would like to speak fluent English and to learn how to pronounce correctly in English.	65%	5%	15%	5%	10%
The syllabus requires many changes to suit learning pronunciation.	50%	15%	20%	10%	5%
The lack of trained teachers affects negatively on teaching pronunciation.	35%	30%	5%	30%	0%
Using of attractive strategies of teaching motivate learning pronunciation.	55%	40%	0%	5%	0%

The table above indicated that 70% of the teachers agreed that the mother tongue influence negatively on pronunciation process, whereas 5% of the respondents were uncertain and 5% were disagreed that the mother tongue influence negatively on pronunciation process. Also 65% of the respondents indicated that the students have a lack of pronunciation practice inside and outside classroom. Over 65% of the teachers totally agreed that learning how to pronounce English correctly is important and agreed that the students would like to speak English fluently. This means that the students have positive attitude to learn correct English pronunciation in order to speak fluently. 50% of the teachers totally agreed and 15% agreed that the syllabus may require many changes to suit learning pronunciation. It is worth mentioning that the textbook also plays an important role in course material design. It may function as a safe base for other activities. A textbook can serve different purposes for teachers: as a core resource, as a source of supplemental material, as an inspiration for classroom activities, even as the curriculum itself (Garinger, 2002). However, the English textbooks used in Yemeni secondary schools suffer from shortcomings in the sequence of presentation of materials, text selection, pronunciation exercises, etc.

In order to remove this problem, it is advised that the material designers move along with the newest theories and methods of teaching a language knowing that the idea of language learning also might be culture-specific. That is, considering topic familiarity in discourse analysis, the materials could be designed based on the students' culture, quietly moving towards the "color purple" which is the boundary between the learners' culture and that of the target language. The teaching of pronunciation programs must be included in the students' training, yet that training must be country specific, and materials and research must now stop focusing on the 'general' and start considering the 'specific' (Robertson, 2003).

35% totally agreed and 30% agreed that the lack of trained teachers affect negatively on teaching pronunciation. 55% totally agreed and 40% agreed that using of attractive strategies of teaching motivate learning pronunciation. This percentage insured that motivation is very important in learning pronunciation since the students consider pronunciation as a very difficult for them.

The Recording Test

A lap top computer was used to record the subjects' pronunciation. The program which was used for recording is called VLC media player. Listening to the recordings, it has been detected that all the students have mispronounced seven consonant sounds. the following consonants /p/-/b/, /f/-/v/, /tʃ/-/dʒ/-/ʃ/, seem to be problematic for Arab speakers learning English. This is due to the absence of these oppositions in Arabic according to Watson (2002). For example, /p/, /v/, and /tʃ/ do not exist in Arabic. Other consonants exist in Arabic, but they have different phonetic realizations.

The recorded sounds were counted to see the total number of the correct and incorrect answers. The collected speech data were basically transcribed in narrow phonetic transcription based on the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). The formula which was used for finding out the percentage score and mean score was as follows:

The number of accurate pronunciation produced by the subjects X 100

The total number of tested pronunciation

For example, in the test of /p / sound in word 'pen' the whole number of students who pronounced the sound were (100), the number of students with correct pronunciation was (20). However, 80% of the total of the students experienced problems when pronouncing the sound /p/ in all word positions. They pronounced it as the sound /b/. The same thing happened for the sound /v/. The majority of the participants 85% mispronounced this sound in all word positions. They pronounced it as the sound /f/. The consonant sound /tʃ/ was mispronounced by 84% of the total of the participants. They pronounced it as the sound /ʃ/ especially in medial position.

Problems of Consonant Clusters

A vowel insertion in English consonant clusters by EFL Arab learners is a very common phenomenon. Kharma and Hajjaj (1989, p. 17) state that 'consonant sequences in Arabic and English differ greatly' since Arabic consonant clusters sequence cannot be more than two consonant sounds while that of English can have up to four consonant sounds. Al-Hattaami (2000, p.84) also stated that phonological differences are 'likely to create problems of pronunciation to native speakers of Arabic learning English as a foreign language'. He pointed out that Yemeni speakers of English 'break the cluster by inserting a vowel between the consonants' (ibid).

The students were asked to read certain words that include two-initial-consonant clusters like (*play*, *sport*, *slay*), three-initial-consonant clusters as in (*spread*, *street*, *strategy*, *scream*, *spring*, *splendid*); two final-consonant clusters as in (*wicked*); and three and four-final consonant clusters as in (*asked*, *next*, *sixths*). Then, error analysis has been conducted to identify, classify, and explain errors made.

The results show that only 28 students out of 100 students were able to pronounce the initial-consonant clusters made up of two consonants. They pronounced it with inserting the short vowel /i/ as in (play, slay) ----/ pilei/, /sili/. The results of this study demonstrate that Yemeni learners of English unintentionally insert a vowel sound in the onset. The results also show that the major reason for these mispronunciations is the mother tongue influence. As for the three-initial-consonant clusters as in (*spread, street, strategy, scream, spring, splendid*), the results show that no one pronounces them appropriately and properly 100%. They fail to pronounce them correctly. They also tend to insert the vowel /i/ in words as “*spread*”, *splendid*” --/ispired/, /splendid/.

As for the final-consonant clusters which made up of, two, three and four consonants, the results showed that 100 % of the total percentage of the participants find difficulties in this type of consonant clusters e.g. the word 'asked' /ɑ:skt/, be pronounced by the participants as /ɑ:skid/. They are the most difficult consonant clusters for Yemeni students. This type of consonant clusters is common in English, but it is not familiar in Arabic at all. This, support Lado's theory that most errors will occur in the phonological aspects when the two languages differ from each other (Lado, 1957).

Results and Findings

The main results of their studies can be summarized as follows:

1. The majority of the Yemeni students cannot acquire correct English pronunciation. One of the most important reasons is that the traditional teaching laid the emphasis on grammar, which led to this problem, and the teachers themselves participate in this problem. Many students cannot pronounce English words and sentences correctly. Thus, English pronunciation has become the most serious problem that students meet when they learn English.
2. There is a lack of exposure to English outside the classroom; moreover, students have few opportunities to practice this language outside their EFL lessons.
3. The results of this study showed that certain English consonant sounds are difficult to pronounce for Yemeni secondary school learners. These consonants /p/-/b/, /f/-/v/, /tʃ/-/dʒ/-/ʃ/ seem to be problematic for Yemeni students. This is due to the absence of these oppositions in Arabic. Tushyeh, (1996) states that the major cause of such errors is inter-lingual, i.e. interference from the first language of the learner.
4. Yemeni students also encountered errors by inserting vowels to break up the consonant clusters in syllable-initial consonant clusters or in syllable- final positions. The reason why the learners have the tendency to insert vowel sounds to break up the consonant clusters is explained by Al-Hattaami (2000) who contended that phonological differences between Arabic and English systems are 'likely to create problems of pronunciation to native speakers of Arabic learning English as a foreign language'.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research, some suggestions and strategies are given below which may help students and teachers in reducing students' difficulties in pronunciation.

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Fahmi Abdo Mohamed Al Mafalees, Ph.D.

Mispronunciation of English Consonant Sounds by Yemeni EFL Learners at Secondary Schools: An Analysis of the Problems and Some Remedies 117

- 1- Students should be taught phonetics and phonology in their earlier stage of studying English.
- 2- Students should be provided with more pronunciation practices to improve their pronunciation performances.
- 3- Special attention should be paid to the unfamiliar sounds (which do not exist in the learners' mother tongue).
- 4- Students should be asked to read aloud the text with the teacher's support. If the student commits any mistakes while reading aloud, the teacher should correct.
- 5- Students should be given enough instructions or opportunities to learn pronunciation within English language courses.
- 6- Students should be encouraged to watch some English programs on TV or other visual media, such as BBC English, CNN, etc.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study aimed at investigating the pronunciation problems faced by Yemeni EFL learners at secondary schools when pronouncing English consonants. However, in order to generalize such a conclusion to all English sounds, more vowel sounds need to be investigated.

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Mispronunciation of English Consonant Sounds by Yemeni EFL Learners at Secondary Schools: An Analysis of the Problems and Some Remedies 121