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Graphophonemic Analysis as a Sound Identification Strategy for Arab EFL Learners

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Abstract

Graphophonemic issues are a common hindrance for children in the early stages of literacy development. The Arabic language has consistent letters (graphemes) to sounds (phonemes) correlation, except what Kharma & Hajjaj (1989) called "irritating irregularities" such as the so-called *hamza* and *allam al-shamsiah*. In other words, the grapheme-to-sound rules are one-to-one in the Arabic language. It has been found that Arab EFL learners encounter major difficulties in pronouncing English words while learning the language (Ibid). This study examines the pronunciation problems by Arab EFL learners with regard to interlanguage graphophonemic and the errors they are likely to commit in the pronunciation of English words. The present study adopts the five cognitive processes of the interlanguage theory by Selinker (1972) to account for these difficulties and the errors they may commit in the English pronunciation. The participants are native speakers of Arabic from different countries, namely Yemen, Jordan, Sudan, Egypt and Palestine. The salient goals of the present paper are (i) to explore the articulation of English silent graphemes by Arab EFL learners and (ii) to establish some strategic guidelines as to help these learners while pronouncing these mute graphemes of English. Consequently, it is hoped that the results and corrective feedback can help them to be competent in pronouncing accurately and correctly in the English language.

1.0 Introduction

Unlike English, the Arabic system of writing is very regular in spelling-to sound consistency. On the other hand, the English system of writing is inconsistent in spelling-to sound in many of its words. El-Imam (2003: 369) argues in his conclusion that "complex systems like English or French are characterized by lack of correspondence between the spellings and their phonetic realizations". To date, there have been no reports on such an issue of the present study. In this regard, El-Imam (2003: 341) points out that "research on Arabic speech is relatively new". Consequently, the researchers attempt to provide some initial investigation in the field of Arabic Phonetics and Phonology. English

graphophonemic constitutes difficulties for Arab EFL learners as Arabic language has consistent letters (graphemes) to sounds (phonemes) correlation, except what Kharma & Hajjaj (1989) called "irritating irregularities" such as the so-called *hamza* and *allam al-shamsiah*. In other words, the grapheme-to-sound rules are one-to-one in the Arabic language. Arab EFL learners constantly face major difficulties in pronouncing English words while learning the English language. The present study investigates the pronunciation problems by Arab EFL learners of English, utilizing interlanguage theory to account for graphophonemic errors they are likely to commit in pronunciation of English words. The present study adopts the five cognitive processes of the interlanguage theory by Selinker (1972) which has been extended in 1994.

2.0 Background of the Study

The English pronunciation is a common hurdle amongst Arab EFL learners (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Rababah, 2003; Shaker, 2004; Al-Shaebi, 2006) whilst learning English as a foreign language. Several researchers describe the low proficiency level in the English language of Arab EFL learners (Abbad, 1988; Sahu, 1999; Al-Quyadi, 2000; Al-Fattah, 2003; Rababah, 2003; Al-Haddad, 2005). Sahu (1999) cited in Al-Shaebi (2006:7), for instance, states '…most of their utterances are phonologically flawed, they are, to a considerable extent, unintelligible as well'. On the other hand, Al-Fattah (2003:7) claims that Yemeni EFL learners 'complete their secondary education without any benefits from all the courses they study'. Similarly, Al-Haddad (2005: 5) shares the same contentions of these researchers. He contends that 'the overall proficiency in English for the Yemeni students in all levels is very weak'.

The Arabic language phonology system plays an important role in the production of second language phonology by Arab EFL learners, particularly with regard to language transfer. This phenomenon was assumed by Ellis (1994: 316) who suggests that 'there is a widespread recognition that transfer is more pronounced at the level of the sound system than at the level of syntax'. Yet, Nemser (1960) cited in Selinker (1992: 177), on the other hand, concludes in his study that 'in terms of the learning of phonological units, classical CA (contrastive analysis) predictions can sometimes lead to correct results and sometimes to incorrect results'. However, the present study adopts Selinker's 'interlanguage' (IL) theory since it 'offers a general account of how L2 acquisition takes place' (Ellis, 1997: 34). This is based on the five cognitive processes as postulated by Selinker in his argument in 1972 and elaborated in 1994.

2.1 Interlanguage Theory

2.1.1 Definition

According to Selinker (1972) interlanguage is a temporary grammar which is systematic and composed of rules. Tingstad (1999: 2) describes interlanguage as 'the first major attempt to provide an explanation of L2 acquisition, and many later theories were developments of it'. According to Richards et al (1992:186) interlanguage is

> the type of language produced by second- and foreign-language learners who are in the process of learning a language. In language learning, learners' errors are caused by several different processes. These include:
>
> a) borrowing patterns from the mother tongue.
> b) extending patterns from the target language, e.g. by analogy.
> c) expressing meanings using the words and grammar which are already known. Since the language which the learner produces using these processes differs from both the mother tongue and the TARGET LANGUAGE, it is sometimes called an interlanguage, or said to result from the learner's interlanguage system or approximative system.

2.1.2 Stages of Interlanguage

This theory is based on the five cognitive processes as demonstrated by Selinker. In 1972, Selinker postulated five stages of second-language learning (McLaughlin, 1991: 61). These stages are as follows:

1) Language transfer: some items, rules, and subsystems of the interlanguage may result from transfer from the first language.
2) Transfer of training: some elements of the interlanguage may result from specific features of the training process used to teach the second language.
3) Strategies of second-language learning: some elements of the interlanguage may result from a specific approach to the material to be learned.
4) Strategies of second-language communication: some elements of the interlanguage may result from specific ways people learn to communicate with native speakers of the target language.

5) Overgeneralization of the target language linguistic material: some elements of the interlanguage may be the product of overgeneralization of the rules and semantic features of the target language.

2.2 Arabic Language

The Arabic language belongs to the Semitic language family spoken by more than 200 million people around the world (Huthaily, 2003; De Young, 1999). It is the official language in all Arab countries as it is the language of the sacred book, the Holy Qur'an; and the official language for all Muslims to practice their religion. Chejne (1969:9) described the Arabic language as a language given by God. He said 'Muslims in general and Arabs in particular have long regarded Arabic as a God-given language, unique in beauty and majesty, and the most eloquent of all languages for expressing thought and emotions'. In addition, Awde & Samano (1986:13) added the following:

> its unbroken literary tradition goes back about thirteen centuries, it is the language of one of the world's major religious – Islam – and it is the written and spoken means of communication in a region of steadily rising importance in international affairs: the Middle East. The numerical, geographical, political, and cultural status of the language was formally recognized by the United Nations in 1973, when Arabic was made the sixth official language of that body (the others are English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese).

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is an adaptation form of the Classical Arabic Language (CAL). According to Khoja (2002), Arab people adapted MSA as it is a simplified form. There are several dialects of MSA spoken by Arab people. These dialects are not only spoken in one country to another, but in one area to another in the same country. They are used in the mass media and daily official communications such as in schools, academic institutions, trade, etc.

Furthermore, MSA is also deemed as an official language in the United Nations (Huthaily, 2003) and the medium of instruction in most, if not all, Arab countries (Waston, 2004). In short, the Arabic language can be defined as the substantial and static language of 21 countries. That is to say, changes, in the passage of time, might take place in the adapted MSA but not in the CAL; since the

latter is the language of the Sacred Book and the purest form amongst all the other adapted forms. The Arabic language provides a prime instance of the linguistic phenomenon of diglossia – the normal use of two separate varieties of the same language, usually in different social situations. Accordingly, educated Arabs of any nationality can be assumed to speak both their local dialect (MAS) and their school-taught literary Arabic (CAL).

3.0 Objectives of the Study

This paper aims at discussing graphophonemic issues. It attempts to help Arab EFL learners achieve competence in pronouncing English graphophonemic words. The main goals of the present paper are (i) to explore the articulation of English silent graphemes by Arab EFL learners and (ii) to establish some strategic guidelines as to help these learners pronounce these mute graphemes of English.

4.0 Literature Review

Before reviewing the past studies of graphophonemic issues, it is of the utmost importance to mention the role of the influence of the first language (L1) on the learning of a second language (see also Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957). James (1980) & Odlin (1989) considered the influence of the first language on the learning of a second language the most significant reality of second language acquisition. Yet, some other researchers (e.g., Burt & Dulay, 1975) were skeptical about the role that learner's L1 plays in the process of second language acquisition. In fact, to date, it seems that there is still no consensus among linguists in this regard.

As far as language transfer is concerned, it is defined by Odlin (1989: 27) as 'the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired'. Richards et al (1992: 205), on the other hand, define it as 'the effect of one language on the learning of another'. Moreover, Selinker (1988: 39) defines it as 'the apparent application of NL rules to TL forms'. He goes on to say that it is 'the process by which the learner constructs a sentence (or part of a sentence) in the TL in the same way as he would if he were to express the same meaning in his NL' (Ibid).

Many studies were conducted to investigate the English graphophonemic issues (e.g, Kessler & Treiman 2001, 2003; Connelly, 2002) from different angles. For instance, the results of Connelly

(2002: 647) showed that 'adults' ability to match sounds in words with their requisite letters is poor'. Ehri & Soffer (1999: 1) defined graphophonemic awareness as 'the ability to match up letters or graphemes in the spellings of words to sounds or phonemes' which is difficult to learners whose L1 is consistent in spelling-to sound; e.g., Arabic language. Yet, past studies have not found solutions for such problematic issues which almost always cause difficulties in pronunciation for EFL/ESL learners.

Regarding Arabic, Arab EFL learners constantly could not realize the final grapheme ***r*** as the sound /ə/ in British English; attempting to articulate it as /r/, since there is no definite symbol or sign to represent the sound /ə/ (see Kenworthy, 1990). As stated by Kenworthy (1990: 51), this is due to the fact that "there is no letter that only represents schwa in the alphabet" on the one hand, and "every vowel letter in English can represent schwa" on the other hand. Thus, most, if not all, English letters represented by schwa could be problematic for Arab EFL learners. Rather, these letters are always articulated as they are; especially the words that end with the grapheme "e". In this respect, El-Imam (2004) discussed the concept of elision in English and French as well. He illustrated how Arab learners are constantly concerned with the articulation of the grapheme "e" as in the words tak**e**, tal**e**, mal**e**, creat**e**, stat**e**, tast**e**, to name but a few.

Another hurdle that Arab EFL learners face is the pronunciation of the grapheme ***c***, especially for beginner learners (Post, 2003). Accordingly, Post (2003) discussed the concept of "litereme" to show how orthographic and phonological information is combined creating a hurdle in front of the learners. He further showed that the grapheme ***c*** is well-known in the English language to have two variants of phonological pronunciation - one is pronounced as [s] and the other is as [k]. It is pronounced as [s] when it is followed immediately with three letters ***e***, ***i*** and ***y***, whereas, it is pronounced as [k] elsewhere. For instance, the grapheme ***c*** is pronounced as [s] in words such as **c**enter, **c**ell, **c**ircle, **c**inema, **c**ycle and **c**ynic; and it is pronounced as [k] in words that followed with letters other than the three letters ***e***, ***i*** and ***y*** such as **c**ar, **c**ompany, **c**ream, **c**lever, **c**ute, etc. It has, however, found some rare exceptional cases that the grapheme ***c*** pronounced as [k] when it is followed with the letter ***e*** such as ***sceptic*** [skeptic]. Yet, the grapheme ***c*** is still very hard for Arab EFL learners to grasp its representation and realize its pronunciation since it has other possibilities in pronunciation. It is, for instance, pronounced as /ʃ/ when it is followed by ***e*** or ***i*** as in o**c**ean and spe**c**ial. By this time, one conclusion which can be drawn from illustrations and instances given above of the grapheme ***c*** is that it is almost impossible to have a clear cut rule due to the complexity of the description of the

pronunciation of the grapheme ***c***. As a result, Arab EFL learners of English find it hard to realize the phonological pronunciation of the grapheme ***c***.

Shaker (2004) pointed out one example of common errors of pronunciation caused by phonetic interference that occurs with the phoneme [p]. The English voiceless bilabial phoneme [p] is totally absent in the Arabic language. Therefore, this is the most difficult consonant sound for Arab learners. They tend to pronounce it with the same pronunciation as [b], since this sound is familiar and exists in their language system (Ibid). To recognize the absent phoneme [p] in their language, Arab EFL learners use well-known words, especially in spelling, such as pen, paper, and pencil. Besides, they use their own special strategic way as to be safe and able to differentiate the problematic phoneme [p] from [b]. For example, they say "with upper stick" to indicate the voiced sound [b] and say "with lower stick" to indicate the voiceless sound [p]. In fact, it seems that they find in such special style they use a clear representation for identifying the two phonemes.

El-Imam (2003) demonstrated some problems concerning graphophonemic words, which are deemed problematic for Arab EFL learners. For example, si**gh**, ni**gh**t, fi**gh**t, ei**gh**t, eno**ugh**, ro**ugh**, stra**igh**t, ne**igh**bour, da**ugh**ter, altho**ugh**, to name but a few. The letters written in bold are basically silent constituting difficulties in pronunciation. The complexity of English words especially in pronunciation is clearly seen in the earlier examples and the next ones. The fact that complicates English words to be pronounced correctly by Arab EFL learners is that some words such as ***chemistry*** are pronounced as [kemıstrı] rather than [tʃemstri] but others are pronounced differently such as the word ***check*** [tʃeck]. Another example is in the word ***chic*** pronounced as [ʃi:k] rather than [tʃi:k] and the likes.

5.0 Methodology

As mentioned earlier, the main aim of this study was to detect the difficulties and the possible errors committed by Arab EFL learners in the English pronunciation, specifically in graphophonemic words. In order to do this, the best method to follow is that of Labov (1966). This method is basically based on the sociolinguistic model developed by William Labov (1966) and extended by Lorna Dickerson (1974). It is widely employed by many researchers on second language acquisition such as Schmidt (1977); Dickerson (1974); Archibald (1992, 1993); Alias Abd Ghani (1995, 2003); Su-Yin (2001); Al-Fakhri (2003); Shaker (2004) and Al-Shaebi (2006). Tarone (1988) and Abd Ghani (2003)

stated that Labov employed four different tasks for obtaining good data. These tasks are: passage reading, word list reading, casual speech, and minimal pairs reading. The present study utilized only one of the four tasks namely "passage reading".

5.1 Participants

The participants were 150 in number from different Arab-speaking backgrounds namely Yemen, Jordan, Sudan, Egypt and Palestine. They are all native speakers of Arabic. None of the subjects is bilingual. The participants have good knowledge of the English language. They received their education of English language in their respective countries.

5.2 Materials

The stimuli consisted of a corpus of 20 English words included in the sentences of the "passage reading" to be read by the participants. The sentences were chosen carefully and constructed simply so that they are easy to read. The stimuli varied from each other in the all sentences. Each one consisted of different mute graphemes.

5.3 Procedures

The participants were asked to read some sentences in the "passage reading" which included the English graphophonemic words, designed by the researchers. A tape recorder was used for recording speech data. The interview sessions were held and administered by the researchers. The participants were tested individually. They were given sufficient time to read the stimuli in order to attain good speech data.

6.0 Results and Discussion

The findings presented here are based on primary and secondary analyses and observations while teaching as well as communicating with Yemeni and other Arab EFL learners. The collected data includes not only one particular nationality of Arab learners but many others. Based on the primary data the results demonstrate that Arab EFL learners have problems in pronouncing English graphophonemic words. This is due to the fact that 'Native speakers of any language intuitively know that certain words that come from other languages sound unusual and they often adjust the segment sequences of these words to conform to the pronunciation requirements of their own language' Dobrovolsky and Katamba (1996: 84). Therefore, Arab EFL learners attempt to follow the system of

their first language since Arabic language has consistent letters (graphemes) to sounds (phonemes). In other words, the grapheme-to-sound rules are one-to-one in Arabic language. This suggests that the first stage of the interlanguage theory namely, language transfer, takes place from the first language, Arabic.

The findings further demonstrate that graphophonemic issues are problematic for Arab EFL learners especially for children in the early stages of literacy development. Analysis of the stimuli show that some elements of the interlanguage may result from specific features of the training process used to teach the target language, English. This proposes the second stage of the interlanguage theory, vis-à-vis transfer of training. Moreover, the fourth and fifth stages of the interlanguage theory take place as well. The findings underpin Connelly's results that there is a relationship between age and performance. Ultimately, the findings show the more irregular letters to sounds the more difficult this phenomenon would be. Therefore, Arab EFL learners have problems in the pronunciation of the English words which contain mute graphemes. Such problems are deemed potential ones.

The present study reveals how Arab EFL learners are very much concerned in articulating mute graphemes in the English language. For instance, they articulate some mute English graphemes in words like lis**t**en, ca**l**m, pa**l**m, wa**l**k, almond, apos**t**le, cas**t**le, etc, since every letter is pronounced in their language system, Arabic. This might be due to the fact that there is no straightforward illustration or rule, in English through which they can follow to avoid mispronunciation in these graphophonemic words. However, the following illustrations could be taken as guidelines, if not solutions, for correct pronunciation while articulating English graphophonemic words. These illustrations are theoretically attempted by the researchers as initial guidelines/rules to be followed by second/foreign learners and perhaps by native speakers of English.

If the diphthong sound / əʊ / and/or / ɔ: / precede(s) the grapheme **L** when it is followed by the grapheme **K** in any English words; the grapheme **L** becomes mute and should not be articulated. On the other hand, if the vowel sound / ɑ: / precedes the grapheme **L** when it is followed by the grapheme **F** in any English words; the grapheme **L** becomes mute and should not be articulated. These rules can be seen in the following examples:

L – K **L – K** **L – F**

/ əʊ /	/ ɔ: /	/ ɑ: /
Folk	Talk	Calf
yolk	Walk	Half
	Chalk	

Again, if the vowel sound / ɑ: / precedes the grapheme **L** when it is followed by the grapheme **M** in any English words; the **L** becomes mute and should not be articulated. This is clearly illustrated in the following examples:

L – M

/ ɑ: /

Palm

Calm

Almond

If the *initial* grapheme **K** is followed by the grapheme **N** in a word; the grapheme **N** becomes mute and should not be articulated. For instance:

Knight	Know
Knell	Knee
Knock	Knot
Knife	knead
Knickers	Knit

If the diphthong sound / aɪ / and/or vowel sounds / ʌ / and / əʊ / precede the grapheme **M** when it is followed by the *final* grapheme **B** in a word; the grapheme **B** becomes mute and should not be articulated. This is shown in the following:

/ ʌ /	/ əʊ /	/ aɪ /
Numb	Tomb	Climb
Plumb	Comb	
Thumb		

Crumb

If the grapheme **G** is followed by the *final* grapheme **N** in a word; the grapheme **G** becomes mute and should not be articulated. For example:

Sign

Foreign

Reign

Design

Campaign

If the *initial* grapheme **G** is followed by the grapheme **N** in a word; the grapheme **G** becomes mute and should not be articulated. For example:

Gnat

Gnaw

Gnome

7.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the above illustrations can be constructive guidelines to follow as a **graphophonemic rule** of English when EFL/ESL learners face new graphophonemic words. Furthermore, this rule could even be applied for absorbed and borrowed words when getting into English lexicons. These graphophonemic rules, therefore, contravene the claims of earlier studies that consider these words irregular. Conversely, the present study shows evidences with some examples that some of such irregular words can have rules. Perhaps graphophonemic words have no significance for being limited in number per se; nevertheless, the present study has attempted some initial illustrations to be followed by EFL/ESL learners. So, the significance might be in carrying out the present study and achieving its goals.

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