THE PRONUNCIATION OF DIPHTHONGS BY IRAQI LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract: This study examines the phonetic problems that Iraqi speakers encounter when learning and speaking English. The analysis of the data collected reveals that Iraqi learners face difficulty in the production of most English diphthongs. The comparative analysis between Iraqi English (IE) and Standard British English (BE) helps in determining which similarities and differences either facilitate or hinder communication. The study offers a phonetic description and analysis of IE as spoken by five Iraqis. First, the study explores the problems that these speakers face in the pronunciation of English. Second, it compares their spoken English with Standard British English (BE). Third, it reveals the pedagogical implications that result from the comparison.

Keywords: English diphthongs, Iraqi English, pronunciation errors, cross-linguistic interference

1. Introduction

Learning English as a second language may be difficult in various respects (Dejica-Cartis, A & D. Dejica-Cartis, 2013), pronunciation included. Therefore, studying English non-standard pronunciation is an important resource that provides information on the mistakes that learners of English as a foreign language tend to make and on what causes may lie at their basis. This helps learners to correct mistakes and improve their pronunciation of English. On the other hand, it may be useful for teachers in the choice of teaching topics, materials and methods (Dejica-Cartis, 2012).

Pronunciation problems occur amongst Arab learners of English mainly due to the fact that the phonetic systems of English and Arabic are different in that the phonemes are not the same in the two languages, in terms of number and manner and place of articulation. Some English consonant phonemes do not exist in the sound system of Arabic: this is the case of /p/, /v/ and /ŋ/; and even some English consonant phonemes which look like some Arabic consonant phonemes are not actually identical: for instance /t/ or /k/, in whose case there are differences in the place and in the manner of articulation. The Arabic phoneme /t/ is dental and not aspirated in word initial position, as in /ti:n/ 'fig', whereas the English phoneme /t/ is alveolar and aspirated in word-initial position followed by a vowel, as in 'top' /tɒp/ (Abdulwahab 2015). Val Barros (2003) states that the English phoneme /r/ is problematic for Arab learners of English to pronounce too, as, even if it exists in Arabic, it is always articulated as a voiced alveolar trill. Arabs are unfamiliar with the English approximant /r/, and they tend to articulate this phoneme the way they know it in Arabic.

It is difficult for L2 learners to pronounce phonemes as a native speaker does. Therefore, this research explores the problems of English pronunciation faced by a

selected group of learners when pronouncing English diphthong phonemes. The identification of the reasons behind them is also among the objectives of this small scale research.

2. Pronunciation difficulties related to differences between the phonetic systems of English and Arabic

Arabic is the largest living member of the family of Semitic languages (Bader 2010). Typically, Modern Standard Arabic is the written language of all Arab lands, used in newspapers, on television and the radio as well as the language of the public education systems. The Arab world in general uses a number of varieties of Arabic. Distinctions between the standard language and varieties could be found in terms of phonology, syntax, morphology, and lexical choice.

One of the main problems in learning pronunciation is the difference between L1 and L2 (Bell 1995), especially when, as I mentioned, L1 is a language that is used in different ways by different speakers. Accordingly, some difficulties that Arab learners may face when trying to achieve acceptable pronunciation in English may spring from their not being aware of the sound structure differences between English and Arabic.

2.1. Vowel-related difficulties

In Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), there are 36 phonemes, out of which twenty-eight are consonants, six are vowels (three short and three long): /a/, /i/, /u/, /a:/, /i:/, /u:/, and two are diphthongs: /aj/ and /aw/. English has twenty vowel phonemes, of which eight are diphthongs: /I/, /ɪː/, /ɛ/, /{/, /ʌː/, /ɵ/, /ɔː/, /Y/, /ʊː/, /≅/, /ç/, /ɜː/, /I≅/, /ɛ≅/, /Y≅/, /ɛI/, /ɑI/, /OI/, /≅Y/ and /ɑY/.

The short vowels in Arabic are further subdivided into fatha, kasra and damma. Fatha, designating a short /æ/, is always written above the preceding consonant phoneme. Kasra, designating a short /ɪ/, appears as a small diagonal line placed below a consonant. Damma, designating a short /ʊ/, appears above the preceding consonant (Fatihi 2001).

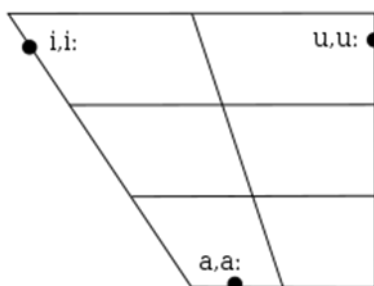Figure 1 is a representation of Arabic vowels, whereas Figure 2 displays the English vowels.

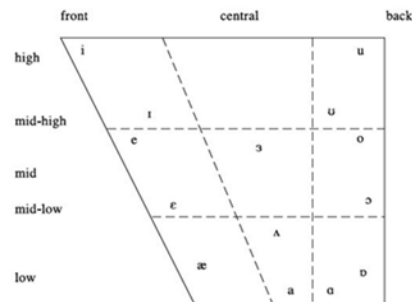**Figure 1**. Arabic vowels: adapted from Thelwall (1990: 38)

Figure 2. English vowels: adapted from Ladefoged and Johnson (2001: 44)

Certain English vowels are likely to cause uneasiness when Arabic learners of English articulate and perceive them, especially if they are not found in MSA; this is the case of the vowels [ɔ], [ʌ] and [e], for example. Central vowels do not exist in the vowel system of Arabic. As a result, the phoneme /ʌ/ is often replaced by /æ/ or /u/. Power (2003) noticed that the vowel phoneme /ɪ/ may also be problematic - it may be produced as /e/, whereas /ɜ:/ may be articulated as /ɪ/ or /æ/. /O:/ may take the place of the diphthong /≅u/ in, for example, "coat" and be uttered as in "caught"; /ʌ/ may be mistaken for /ϴ/ so that words such as "luck" and "lock" cannot be told apart; /ɪ/ and /ɛ/, as in "sit" and "set" may also pose difficulties (Kharma and Hajjaj 1989).

Diphthongs may also sometimes be mispronounced. They may be substituted by other phonemes largely as a consequence of mother tongue interference: for instance, the phoneme /ɛ≅/ may be substituted by /ɛɪ/; the phoneme /Y≅/ may be substituted by /u:/; the phoneme /ɪ≅/ may be substituted by /i:/; and the phoneme /αY/ may be replaced by /O:/.

2.2. Consonant-related difficulties

English has twenty-four, whereas Arabic has twenty-nine consonants. The vast majority of consonants exist in both languages, however, some exist in one language, but they are not present in the other. Because of this, Arab speakers could encounter pronunciation problems particularly with phonemes that do not exist in the sound inventory of Standard Arabic, such as /v/ and /p/. But difficulties may also arise in cases when, although apparently similar consonants exist in the two languages, there are differences in their manner of articulation. The latter case is that of consonant phonemes such as /d/, /n/, /r/; the last of these, Val Barros (2003) explains, is an alveolar trill in Arabic, while the English phoneme /r/ is a voiced post-alveolar approximant. Negative transfer from the speakers' mother-tongue often triggers mispronunciation of this sound, as speakers tend to produce it in the way they are used to in Arabic (Tushyeh 1996).

English consonant clusters may also pose problems to Arab learners, as Avery and Ehrlich (1992) noted. Of these, /gl/ seems to stand out as one of the most difficult.

3. Difficulties in the pronunciation of English diphthongs by Iraqi speakers

3.1. Preliminaries

The analysis of the pronunciation of English diphthongs was carried out based on the recorded speeches of ten speakers who are teachers at schools in Fallujah, Iraq. Some of them have visited English-speaking countries, so they have been exposed to English as a native language. All of them are males and they volunteered to take part in my project.

The material based on which pronunciation was tested is a one-minute long free speech that the speakers were asked to produce and that I recorded at the speakers' homes, so as to minimize stress. Noise interference was reduced as much as possible.

The recordings were transcribed phonemically, on an auditory basis, using earphones for clarity. Then, the phonemic inventory of all the respondents was worked out and the diphthongs were selected to be analyzed in detail.

3.2. Findings

Based on comparison with Standard British English, as provided by Oxford English Dictionary (online at www.oed.com), the following articulations of the English diphthong phonemes were identified (some of the articulations were always in conformity with SBE, others were inconsistent, meaning that the sounds were uttered incorrectly in some instances, but correctly in others):

Speaker	Test sound	Used in IE	IE phonetic transcription	BE phonetic transcription	Words
2, 3, 4, 5	I≅	I	[vi:r]	[nɪə]	near
			[ηɪρ]	[ηɪə≤]	here
1, 2, 3, 4, 5	≅Y	O:	[γO:], [t□əmɒrɔ:]	[γ≅Y], [t□əmɒ≤≅Y]	go, tomorrow
			[φ5O:τ]	[φ5≅Yτ]	float
			[nO:], [ðɔ:s]	[n≅Y], [ð≅Yz]	no, those
			[dɔ:nt], [a:5sɔ:]	[d≅Ynt], [a:5s≅Y]	don't, also
3, 4, 5	≅Y	Θ	[nɒ], [ɒvər]	[n≅Y], [≅Yvər]	no, over
			[gɒ], [mɒst]	[g≅Y], [m≅Yst]	go, most
			[sɒ], [hɒp]	[s≅Y], [h≅Yp]	so, hope
			[ɪmɒʃən], [fɒkəs]	[ɪməʊʃən],[fəʊkəs]	emotion, focus
1, 2, 3, 4, 5	Y≅	ʊ:	[τʊ:r]	[tʊə]	tour
3	e≅	e	[ðer]	[ðeə]	there
1	ε≅	≅	[ər]	[eə]	air
5	ε≅	I	[ðIr]	[ðeə]	there
5	ε≅	εI≅	[εI≅]	[eə]	air
1, 2, 3, 4, 5	αY	αY	[ηαY]	[ηαY]	how
1, 2, 3, 4, 5	OI	OI	[δZOI]	[δZOI]	joy
1, 2, 3, 4, 5	aI	aI	[maI]	[maI]	my
1, 2, 3, 4, 5	eɪ	eɪ	[heɪt]	[heɪt]	hate

Table 1. Pronunciation of English diphthongs by Iraqi speakers

- The diphthong phoneme /I≅/ was articulated as the short monophthong phoneme /I/ or as the long monophthong /I:/; for example, words such as 'near', 'here' were articulated as [vi:r], and [ηɪρ] respectively, by speakers 2, 3, 4, and 5;
- The diphthong phoneme /≅Y/ was articulated as the long monophthong phoneme /O:/, in words such as 'go', 'tomorrow', 'float', 'no', 'those', 'don't', 'also', which were uttered as [γO:], [t□əmɒr<u>ɔ:</u>], [φ5O:τ], [nO:], [ðɔ:s], [dɔ:nt], [a:5sɔ:] by all five speakers. The same phoneme was articulated as the short monophthong /Θ/ in the words 'no', 'over', 'go', 'most', 'so', 'hope', 'emotion', and 'focus', which were articulated as [nɒ], [ɒvər], [gɒ], [mɒst], [sɒ], [hɒp], [ɪmɒʃən], [fɒkəs] by speakers 3, 4 and 5;

- The diphthong phoneme /Y≅/ was articulated as the long monophthong phoneme /u:/, so that the word 'tour' sounded like [τυ:r] in all speakers' free speeches;
- The diphthong phoneme /ɛ≅/ was articulated as either one or the other of its vowel components. Thus, it took the form of the monophthong phoneme /e/, in the word "there", which was articulated as [ðer] by speaker 3, and that of the monophthong phoneme /≅/, in the word "air", which was articulated as [ər] by speaker 1. There was one instance when the diphthong /ɛ≅/ was replaced by a monophthong without any connection with those in its structure: it was articulated as the short monophthong phoneme /I/, in the word "there", which speaker 5 produced as [ðIr]. In one situation, it was expanded instead of being contracted: it was articulated as the triphthong /ɛI≅/, in the word "air", which was articulated as [ɛI≅] by speaker 5, too;
- The phonemes /αY/, /OI/, /αI/ and /ɛI/ were articulated correctly by all speakers. The words they used and that contained these diphthongs are 'how', 'joy', 'my', 'hate', which were articulated as [ηαY],[δZOI], [maI], and [heɪt], respectively, as indicated by the *OED* as standard for British English.

2. Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it may be concluded that Iraqi Arabic learners of English have problems with the pronunciation of at least some English diphthongs, even if they have gone through years of formal instruction during which they have had the opportunity to improve their foreign language skills. Not all diphthongs are equally problematic, though. As the results of this small-scale research indicate, the diphthongs /αY/, /OI/, /αI/ and /ɛI/ seem easy to produce, most probably because of the speakers' being familiar with them, as they exist in their mother tongue. At the opposite end, there are the diphthongs /I≅/, /≅Y/, /Y≅/, /e≅/, which were uttered differently as compared to Standard British English, this time, most probably because they are absent from Arabic. Divergence from the standard took various forms: replacement of the sound under scrutiny by another sound with no connection to it, reduction of the sound by one that is close to its initial components and extension of the sound to a triphthong.

Especially if confirmed by further, more extensive analyses, the outcome of this research may have implications for the teaching of English as a foreign language, in the particular case of Iraqi learners. It "may be used as a starting point in adapting the materials used in the foreign language teaching to a group of learners with well-defined needs (the influence of the learners' mother tongue on how they acquire and use the foreign language plays an important role in defining these needs)" (Pungă 2017, 84). It goes without saying that teachers themselves should serve as examples to follow as far as their pronunciation of English is concerned.

On the learners' side, "if students become aware of what kind of mother-tongue induced errors they are inclined to make, there are better chances that they may exert a higher degree of self-control on their foreign language use, which may lead to improved language performance and to increased confidence in their learning abilities" (Pungă 2017, 84).

One of the things that future research in the area tackled by this study will have to clarify is whether the divergent pronunciations of the kind discussed here constitute occasional mistakes or represent a characteristic phenomenon that turns them into errors. If a quantitative analysis justifies their inclusion in the category of errors, pointing them out in the way I have done here "may play a role not only in teaching, but also in the evaluation process. As long as their typology and frequency are familiar to teachers, they will know the best way to approach such errors when designing assessment grids. Once they are able to make a difference between a trend characteristic of a larger group of learners and isolated cases of faulty language performance, their marking system and the feedback they provide their students with would be more relevant" (Pungă and Pârlog 2015, 174).

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