**Exploring fluency impediment encountering EFL students in Uttering English vowel sounds at Salahaddin University college of Education**

**Abstract**

English pronunciation is one of the most difficult skills for EFL learners. This paper aims at analyzing the problems concerning pronouncing English vowel sounds by English department students at Salahaddin University/ college of Education during their pronunciation improvement at the university levels. Recording tape and a structured questionnaire are the method of data collection. The sample of the study involved 40 Kurdish students, 10 students at a stage, in another word, 10 students at first stage, 10 students at second stage, 10 students at third stage and also 10 students at fourth stage, for each stage 5 males and 5 females were taken as a sample. The collected data were discussed descriptively and statically. The result shows that the most common errors were a mispronouncing of /ə/, and /æ/ as the result of not having the same vowels in Kurdish language, and through practicing , which fourth stage students have, vowel mispronunciation would be overcame.

**Key words**: pronunciation, Kurdish vowel, English vowel

**Introduction**

Communication in second language (L2) is mainly dependent on correct pronunciation, because correct pronunciation makes our speech understandable and comprehensible to our interlocutors. Even with a wide variety of vocabulary and mastering in grammar of the target language, our messages cannot be uttered correctly without correct pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation (Varol, 2012). So Intelligibility and understanding of the second langue would hardly depend on one's correct pronunciation similar to that of native speaker (Derwing& Munro, 2005).

Derwing & Munro (2005) concurred that “the study of pronunciation has been marginalized within the field of applied linguistics” (p. 379). Graddol, Leith, Swan, Rhys and Gillen (2007) revealed that the English language has become one of the most popular languages in the world; people are making a great effort to learn it, and they face problems in mastering it. Brown (2000) clarified that one of the difficulties that make learners get stuck in their communications with others is the difficulty of pronunciation and the ability to pronounce the sounds of the target language in an appropriate and right way. Neglecting pronunciation skill is one of the reasons that make learners have such problems in learning languages. In addition, Kelly (2000) believes that teachers’ hesitation about how to teach pronunciation is another factor that has let it be overlooked.

The vowel sounds can be particularly important, as consonants, both from the point of view of intelligibility (correct identification of the vowel) and perceived “naturalness” or “native quality” of speech. However, different languages vary considerably in the set of phonetic vowels they use, English has 20 vowels sounds while in Kurdish there are only 8 vowels.

**Question of the study:**

This research will answer the following questions:

1. What are those vowels that Kurdish students find them difficult to be pronounced
2. What solution can be suggested to improve and well pronouncing vowels by Kurdish English language learners?
3. Do their pronunciations improve through studying four years levels at college?

**Objective of the study:**

The study aims at:

1. Finding the obstacles that Kurdish learners encounter in vowel pronunciation.
2. Trying to find fundamental solutions for errors, which are the reason behind on pronouncing the vowels well, and a significant way for vowel pronounce improvement.
3. Revealing how practicing through four years of studying English will help them to have master in vowel uttering.

**Limitation**

1. This paper limited to deals with vowel pronunciation not consonants.
2. And it also deals with all four levels students at college of Education at Salahaddin University.

**Hypothesis**

It is hypothesized that:

1. Kurdish student's incorrect vowel pronunciation is because of the not existing of some vowels of English language vowels system in Kurdish language vowel system.
2. Vowel sounds as: /æ/ and /ə/ are the major vowels that students made mistake form their uttering
3. Through practicing four years by students mispronouncing can be overcome.

**Significance of the study:**

1. This study will be a helpful guide for those teachers who teach pronunciation at any level of English language and stages of study (primary, secondary, and college).
2. It is also a significant guiding for those whom they want to improve themselves without others guidance, by giving them the main problems with their solutions during vowel pronunciation obstacles, i.e, how to overcome vowel problems

**Literature review**

Many studies have been conducted on pronunciation, but most of them deal with consonants and vowels together even those that have done on Kurdish and English languages as a comparison. Here are some previous researches on related topic:

Othman (2018) conducted her dissertation on (the impact phonetic training course on pronunciation performance of Kurdish EFL university students), its aim is to accomplish the effectiveness of phonetic training. She concluded that using phonetic training improve Kurdish EFL students with English pronunciation.

Rahimpour (2011), his research is, (a phonological contrastive analysis of Kurdish and English), his objective to compare and contrast the sound system of Kurdish and English for pedagogical aims, in which he concluded that both languages are described using the same model-taxonomic phonology.

Idris Elkhair (2014), his aim on his research, (pronunciation problems: a case study of English language students at Sudan university of science and technology), was investigating pronunciation problems Sudanese students face. His result is that, factors such as interference, the differences in the sound system in the two languages, inconsistency of English sounds and spelling militate against Sudanese students of English competence in pronunciation.

Muhammed Areen (2014), his master thesis, which is entitled (segmental and suprasegmental difficulties in English pronunciation to English as a foreign students (EFS) of English department at Koya university), objective was experienced problems that are facing Kurdish students when developing their pronunciation at the university level. His result is in the difficulty of assimilation and also using mother tongue in the class are reasons behind problems with pronunciation.

**Kurdish Language Sound System**

The Kurdish language is spoken nearly by forty million people living mainly in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Kurdish is a member of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European languages (Rahimpour & Dovaise, 2011). Kurdish language is based on the Arabic alphabet. The number of phonemes is equal to its letters, so it is a phonetic language, excluding the /i/ sound (Mc Carus, 1992). Some Arabic phonemes are absent in Kurdish, and there are some unique phonemes which are special to the Kurdish language. There are 37 phonemes which have been divided into two parts: 29 consonants ( nebzwen), and 8 vowels (bzwen) (khosnaw ( 2013). Although, the Kurdish sound system has its own characteristics due to its absence in the Handbook of International Phonetic Association, it has not been highlighted and investigated by international researchers. However, some Kurdish writers have worked in this field; for instance, Wais (1984) in his book “Phonetics” described the Kurdish sound system, which is the only existing academic book about it.

***Simple vowels***

There are eight simple vowels in Kurdish, four inherently long (. / î /, / â/, / û /, / ô /) and four short vowels (/ e /, / i /, / a/, / u /). For example:

1. / î / as in žîr ( wise ). It is equal to /i:/ English vowel sound.

2. / e / as in žer ( under )

3. / i / as in žin ( woman ), it is somehow equal to /ə/ English vowel.

4. / a/ as in dast ( hand )

5. / â/ as in dâs ( sickle ), it is equal to /a:/ English vowel sound.

6. / û / as in kûř ( bent ), it is equal /u:/ English vowel sound.

7. / u / as in kuř ( boy )

 8. / ô / as in kôř ( forum ), it is equal /o:/ English vowel sound.

Khoshnaw (2013) states that all the Kurdish sounds have their individual phonemes except the / I/ vowel in the Arabic alphabet; but in the Latin alphabet it appears, and in the occurrence of this vowel, for instance in the word /mIn/, the blockage of air in the sound /m/ is via closing the lips, but for the sound /n/ the air blockage is via touching the front tongue to the front palate; during this process some air comes out from the mouth, and it produces this vowel called “bzroka” (hidden). So the vowel /i/ is almost like schwa in English and it can be represented as /ə / as well.

 Long vowels are shortened when they occur in a final position and are unstressed; this can be seen in the differences between the last /û/ in hât û čû (he came and went) versus hât û čû (to come and go). The last /û/ in the latter example is shortened since it is word-final: it is even pronounced as hât û čô by most speakers. The high vowels specially /î/ and / û / are also shortened when they occur before two consonants: anûm (I sleep), but nustim (I slept) (Mc Carus, 1992). Vowels never occur in an initial position. /u/ and /i/ never occur in a final position.

Figure 1 shows the map of Kurdish vowel distribution



As shown in Figure1, the tongue’s movement in the mouth produces vowels in the Kurdish language: the vowels /î, e, I, â/ are made with the front part of the tongue, and the vowels /a, û, u, ô/ are made with the back part of the tongue. Furthermore, the vowels / î, I, u, û/ are labeled as high vowels, the vowels/ a, â/ are called lower vowels, and the vowels / e, ô/ are named central vowels. However, the vowels in the Kurdish system does not cause any trouble, except for / I/, because its system is normal, and there are no diphthongs in the Kurdish language, with the exception of the / u/ and / î / vowels which are named semi vowels in some words, even though, several Kurdish linguistics have called the combination of these semi consonants “diphthongs” (Wais, 1984). So, characteristic of the Kurdish language makes Kurdish learners have difficulties in learning other languages, especially English, because it is incompatible with the Kurdish language, as its Arabic phoneme based, (Ibrahim : 2015).

***Diphthongs***

The sounds that are sometimes called diphthongs in Kurdish are really a simple vowel coming with one of the semi-vowels: / w, y /. In other words there is no glide from one vowel to another vowel in Kurdish. There are six diphthongs:

[ ey ] as in peynja ( ladder ) [ ôy ] as in birôyn ( let’s go )

[ ây ] as in čây ( tea ) [ aw ] as in šaw ( night )

[ ûy ] as in čûy ( you went ) [ âw ] as in čâw ( eye )

Rahimpour and Dovaise (2011, p.77)

**English Language Sound System**

The English language is a branch of the Indo- European family; and its alphabet relies on the Latin alphabet. English is not a phonetic language, because the letters do not represent phonemes. Like the other languages, English has two main types of sounds, which are consonants and vowels; there are 26 consonants and 12 vowels in the English language. English vowel sounds. The International Phonetic Alphabet (1999) classifies the English vowels according to the different mouth shapes and the position of the tongue

***Simple vowels***

There are twelve simple vowels in English: five long and six short vowels, with the addition of short sound (called schwa) , /ə/ , which is always associated with weak syllables (Roach, 2000). The short vowels are /i, e , û , ə, ǒ , u / and the long vowels are /i:, a:, o:, u:, з: /.



As has been observed in the Figure 2, there are eleven vowels in the English language sound system, including the /i, e, u, o, ɑ, ə, ʌ, ɛ, o, ʊ, æ/ sounds. The vowels of the English language could be differentiated according to the tongue’s and lips’ location in the mouth. As Underhill (2005) illustrated, the tongue’s horizontal position determines (front–center–back) features of vowels; the vertical tongue’s position shows (high–mid–low) characteristics, the lips’ position reveals the (rounded–neutral–spread) features. Finally, the only feature which is different from the others is the duration of vowels (long–short), because it is not controlled by the tongue’s and lips’ position. /i, e, u, ʊ/ are high, /I, o, ə/ are mid vowels, /ɑ, ʌ, ɛ, æ/ are low vowels, /u, o, ʊ/ are round sounds, while /i, e, u, o, ə, o, ʊ / are neutral and spread, /i, u, o, ɛ/ are long vowels, /e, ə, æ, ʌ, ɑ, ɪ, ʊ/ are short vowels.

***Diphthongs***

There are totally eight diphthongs in English. They are /ai, ei , эi , iə , eə , uə , au , əu /. The diphthongs in English, unlike Kurdish, consist of a movement from one vowel to another vowel. The first part of a diphthong is much longer and stronger than the second part.

**Comparison of Kurdish and English Language Sound Systems**

After descriptions of both Kurdish and English segmental units, Kurdish and English are different from their language family: Kurdish is a branch of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo- European family, whereas English is a branch of the Indo- European family of languages. The Kurdish language relies on the Arabic alphabet, while English is based on the Latin alphabet. Kurdish is a phonetic language where all the sounds represent the independent phonemes, and it is read as it is written; but in contrast, English is not a phonetic language, and is not pronounced as it is written. English language vowels do not handcuff Kurdish EFL learners in their articulation. However, the two systems are different from each other in the number of vowels, since simple vowels in Kurdish consist of 8 vowels, whereas in English there are 12 vowels, according to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

**Factors that are influencing English pronunciation acquisition**

Many researcher and linguists hold study on this regard and they found some linguistic factors that EFLSs face during their work on pronunciation, here are the main factors, such as: the differences between L1 and L2 sound system, the inconsistency of English language, the mother tongue interference, the influence of spelling on pronunciation, target language complexity, utilizing improper teaching methods, lack of interest for learning L2, age , attitude and motivation and also neglecting pronunciation as a language skill during learning.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

For achieving the objectives of this research, 40 male and female students, who they are students still at Salahaddin University, College of education, randomly were taken as a sample. They are from first, second, third and fourth stages of the college. Their ages are between18 to 23. They were students with different pronunciation skills, whom they were never been in any country that their language is English, as Britain, Australia…etc. and they are Kurdish native speakers. Each 10 students from a stage, 5 of them were male and the other 5 were female, in another word, 10 student from first stage, 10 students from second stage, 10 students from third stage, and 10 students from fourth stage, for checking their vowel pronunciation errors and their pronunciation improvements up to their levels of study.

**Classroom observation**

Through researcher's two years of experience of teaching phonetics and pronunciations this research has been done. During teaching, every teacher have the ability to observe the difficulties that their students have and encounter, so classroom observation gave the researcher reason for doing this study and then it helped her to test the validity of the data collected in the questionnaire. So observation was the first tool was used in this research.

**Questionnaire**

It is the second instrument for collecting data for identifying the exact errors that are made by students precisely. It was contained more than 90 words, which are taken from (sheep and ship) book which is written by Baker Ann (2006), with given vowel sound transcriptions as options to be selected when the participants think that they are the right choice for the given lexical item's vowel sounds. English vowel sounds (monophthong and diphthong) have been used as options, which are totally 20 vowels, because the deal is with Kurdish English errors not English Kurdish errors.

**Tape recording**

The aim by using this instrument is to identify the pronunciation errors that are done by students of English department. And it is also to make sure whether their selected option , that were given for transcribing the vowels for more than 90 items which are exist in the questionnaire, are identical with their pronunciation in order to make the result will be reliable and trustworthy. In which each participants are asked to read aloud all the items. Then the recordings can be played repeatedly as many times as one need that will enable researcher to identify the errors, which many researchers depend on this tool for collecting their data.

Discussion

Conclusion

References

Appendix