

## **Issues of Pronunciation while Teaching EFL in the Context of Saudi Arabia**

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**Abstract.** English is such kind of language that if it is not pronounced correctly, its meaning will be changed. And even sometimes meaning becomes opposite to the base word. So pronunciation is a very important issue while learning English. As Arabic speaking people, like other non-native English speakers, Saudi students are also facing some problems regarding accuracy in pronunciation. This study investigates the reasons of mispronunciation while learning English as a foreign language in real classroom situation as well as outside the classroom. It also emphasizes the role of teachers while teaching EFL in their classrooms and conveys some suggestions to them.

**Keywords:** Pronunciation; opposite; accuracy; investigation; mispronunciation; suggestions.

### **Introduction**

Like all the other EFL learners of the world, Saudi students also try to be native like English speakers regarding pronunciation in both academic and practical life. But it is not an easy task to acquire another language fully and it is very difficult to acquire 100% accuracy in a foreign language. Because there are many complexities in language acquisition. One of the famous linguists and language researchers Wong (1987) revealed in his opinion and, later on, cited by Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin that, “pronunciation is not exclusively a linguistic matter”. (Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin 43) There are some other issues which must be taken into consideration. Among other serious issues and factors, interference of mother tongue, language acquisition and the age of EFL learners, exposure to the target language and cultural differences, attitude of the learners towards the target language and the role of EFL teachers play a vital role while learning English as a foreign language. This article focuses not only on the reasons of mispronunciation of English language but also on the ways to develop the teaching strategies and methods to help the Saudi learners to learn English language quickly, effectively and practically.

### **Historical Background of EFL learning in Saudi Arabia**

To keep patch with the process of Globalization, Saudi authority is also emphasizing the learning English as a foreign language to communicate with the entire world. “The kingdom of Saudi Arabia has undergone great political, social and economic development. To meet new challenges, the Ministry of Education has introduced English as a foreign language (EFL) in schools since 1925”. (Al-Ahaydib,

67) In 1999 A.D, under the supervision of Ministry of Education, the TEFL curriculum was prepared specifying the development of Communicative English among the students to communicate with the other parts of the globe. In this regard, two curriculum documents were formed. The first was prepared in 1987 and the second was prepared and modified in 2000. All the TEFL text books supervised by Ministry of Education were written on the basis of these two documents. The books employed the latest method of teaching, the 'Communicative method'. (Al Hajailan 91) Now in all schools, colleges and universities of Saudi Arabia, English language course has been compulsory to develop the communicative skills of the students, their merit and knowledge in all sectors of science and technology. Although Saudi students have some challenges regarding English pronunciation, these students are progressing very remarkably and rapidly and at the same time they are implementing their communicative skills and knowledge in their practical life.

#### **Interference of mother tongue while learning EFL**

While learning another language, mother tongue creates a serious clash with foreign language which may hinder the foreign language learning process. Oldin asserted that "Native language phonetics and phonology are powerful influences on second language pronunciation". (Oldin 112) As an Arab country of the region, the language of Saudi Arabia is Arabic. So, as the non native English speakers, Saudi EFL learners often pronounce English words keeping the local accent in their mind. This reality happens not only with the Saudi students but also most of the EFL learners. It is not a rigorous crime regarding learning a different language, rather it's a very common issue. We must know that our mouths and vocal cords are completely adaptable. In early childhood, as we use the words of our mother tongue more and more and we are well practiced, our entire speech system obviously adjusts with the mother language and consequently it becomes very difficult to any '*foreign*' sounds.

People of Europe have their own accent to pronounce English words. Africans, Arabs, South Asian, and Eastern Asian people speak English through their own phonemes. The EFL learners in Saudi Arabia cannot pronounce [p]. They sound as [b]. In case of *party*, they pronounce *barty*. Similarly, they pronounce *f* instead of *v*. English word *Verify* is *Ferify* to Saudi students. Not only that, *d* and *t* have different pronunciation in their language. The main reason of this influence of local accent is that in Arabic tongue, there are no sounds of *p*, *d*, *t* and *v*.

In this case, the teacher should allow the EFL learners to continue their speech, even, with the extreme mixture of the local accent and encourage them to express what is in their mind. One thing we should remember that in Saudi Arabia English is a foreign language, not the mother tongue, even, not the second language. So 100% accurate pronunciation should not be expected the Saudi learners.

### Language acquisition and the age of EFL learners

In one of the books of Communicative English, it has been described that “Language acquisition is to the way people develop ability in their mother tongue. It is a natural, subconscious process in which users are not usually aware of acquiring a language. They are aware only of the fact that they are using the language for communication. In non-technical terms, acquisition is picking up a language spontaneously” (National Curriculum Board- Bangladesh, 2010).

This picking up of a language is easier for the younger learners. Regarding the age of EFL learners Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson delivered a message, “Younger learners acquire second language automatically from mere exposure, while older learners have to make conscious and labored efforts”. (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson 152) According to Lenneberg, automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear (after puberty), and foreign languages have to be taught and learned through a conscious and laboured effort. (Lenneberg 176)

In Saudi Arabia, the learners begin their learning English as a foreign language not in the early stage of childhood; they become familiar with the English Alphabet after twelve. So the theory and the process of acquiring a foreign language are badly hampered here. Although the Saudi authority is trying heart and soul to develop the condition of learning English as the foreign language in the academic and non-academic environment throughout the kingdom and encouraging the students of all level categorically, the students are missing the particular age for acquiring other language. In high schools and universities, English as a foreign language has been compulsory not in the preliminary stage of education. Penfield asserted that “For the purposes of learning languages, the human brain becomes progressively stiff and rigid after the age of nine”. (Penfield & Roberts 236) He further found, “when languages are taken up for the first time in the second decade of life, it is difficult to achieve a good result”. (*Ibid* 255) For example, if an Egyptian baby is born and brought up in England, from his early childhood, he can easily pronounce accurately *thank you, three*, it means, he can articulate the proper sound of *th*. But if an adult Egyptian goes to England as an EFL learner, it is very much difficult for him to adapt with the sound [th] *thanks, three* to his mouth and vocal cord. He usually says *sank you, sree*.

So the significance of age regarding acquiring a foreign language must be kept in mind while teaching and creating an academic environment both inside the class rooms and outside the class rooms. Moreover, language acquisition is the precondition of learning accurate pronunciation of that language. If the process of language acquisition is not maintained seriously and hampered by any kind of obstacle, the accuracy of pronunciation will never be developed in the memory and mind of the EFL learners.

### **Exposure to the Target language**

In early childhood of human being, he or she learns language through daily contacts and everyday interactions with their parents, siblings, relatives and childhood playmates. Through these vast interactions, children become able to know the significance and role of the language in their social life. Gradually these children start to recognize the patterns of sentences, grammatical use, variation of meanings, homophones, homonyms and morphology and, later on, they become able to express their thoughts and ideas while speaking in a particular language by articulating accurate pronunciation. Same thing happens in the case of foreign language learning. Those children who hear more and more words and sentences in everyday interactions and conversations with parents, relatives, friends, and teachers and watch and listen to television and radio programmes such as cartoon, movies and news, can easily and rapidly learn the target language even with the accurate pronunciation. ( Kendall King & Alison Mackey 97-98)

In the context of Saudi learners the scope of interactions regarding the exposure to the target language is very limited. In schools, English has become a compulsory academic subject from class seven. In universities Communicative English is compulsory only for two semesters rather it is concluded as ESP (English for Special purpose) course. The use of English in everyday interactions, conversations, with parents, relatives and childhood playmates is beyond expectations for Saudi EFL learners. Even there are very few numbers of television channels and programmes which broadcast English movies, cartoons, news and sports. Socially and culturally Saudis have their own values which do not inspire the interference of a foreign language to communicate.

Moreover, Arabic language and literature is significantly rich and also a medium of a big part of the world. So, psychologically, Saudi people do not feel the necessity of learning other language to communicate. For Saudi learners class room is the only place to develop their communicative competence in a foreign language. But most of the teachers of English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia are teaching how to use Arabic. (Al-Abdan, A.A. 396) which may hamper to expose the ideas and thoughts of the students and also may deprive them of hearing the accurate pronunciation of learned words. It may also have a serious negative impact on speaking development, too.

### **Learner's attitude towards the language**

Another very significant issue in the context of EFL learning is the attitude of the learners towards the target language. According to Gardner and Lambert, '*positive attitude*' enhances the ability of the learners to learn the foreign language. On the other hand, '*negative attitude*' does not serve the purpose (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Here '*attitude*' indicates whether the learners are interested or

reluctant to the target language. Brown indicated, "Attitude is defined as a reference to the set of beliefs that the learner holds about members of the target language group (e.g. whether they are seen as interesting, boring, honest or dishonest, etc.) and also about his culture". (Brown 231-244)

As the Saudi EFL learners have limited scope of exposure to the target language and they have their own social values and beliefs, most of them possess the '*negative attitude*' towards English as a foreign language in their mind. Although, unlike the past, English as a foreign language has found a substantial form and both the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education have taken manifold steps to encourage the students to learn English to communicate with other nations, very few students have the '*positive attitudes*' towards English.

In the context of '*positive*' and '*negative*' attitude towards the target language, motivation plays a vital role. According to Gardner, there are two kinds of motivations in a language learning situation –

1. **Instrumental motivation:** It aims at immediate results such as passing an institutional or academic examination and getting a job.

2. **Integrative motivation:** It aims at learning a language to communicate and integrate with people from another culture who speak the same language.

Again, Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972) asserted that when a language is learnt only for utilitarian purposes, the success in a foreign language is supposed to be lower than if it is learnt for the interactive purpose. But in the context of Saudi EFL learners, after a keen observation it might be said that instrumental motivation creates a deep enthusiasm among them. However, whatever the kind of motivation, students must be motivated regarding learning a foreign language. Their '*negative attitude*' must be transformed into '*positive attitude*' towards the target language and EFL teachers are the only motivators for the Saudi learners as class room is the only place to expose and practice English as a foreign language.

A survey report has been included here regarding the '*positive*' and '*negative*' attitude towards the target language and the role of motivation. The survey report was taken place in the Faculty of Preparatory Year Programme, Jazan University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in fall semester 2013. In this practical survey three professional and experienced EFL teachers and ninety EFL learners participated and the whole survey is result oriented. To clear the result of the survey three tables have been produced below and which show how the student's '*negative attitude*' has been transformed into '*positive attitude*' after motivation.

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Table - 1

(Running the class room teaching without motivation regarding the target language)

Group	Number of students in EFL class	Number of attended students			Result in the PG-1
		1 <sup>st</sup> week	2 <sup>nd</sup> week	3 <sup>rd</sup> week	
501	30	28	22	17	Attended 25 passed only 10 (40%)

Table - 2

(The EFL teacher motivated the students at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> week)

Group	Number of students in EFL class	Number of attended students			Result in the PG-1
		1 <sup>st</sup> week	2 <sup>nd</sup> week	3 <sup>rd</sup> week	
503	30	30	22	30	Attended 30 passed 25 (83.3%)

Table - 3

(Students were motivated in the beginning of the first week)

Group	Number of students In EFL class	Number of attended students			Result in the PG-1
		1 <sup>st</sup> week	2 <sup>nd</sup> week	3 <sup>rd</sup> week	
505	30	30	30	30	Attended 30 passed 28 (93.3%)

From the survey we find that the number of students of group 501 who were never motivated is lessening from the beginning of the first week up to third week and only 10 students passed among 25 attended students in the Progress Test-1. The successful rate in the examination is only 40%. For group 503, students were motivated in the second week and the number of attended students increased at the beginning of the third week. The result of the examination is quite better than group 501. Thirty students attended in the Progress Test-1 and 25 students passed which is 83.3% of the attended students. Finally, for group 505, all the students were motivated by their EFL teacher and no student was absent up to the Progress Test-1 and 28 students passed among 30 attended students. The successful rate in the examination is very remarkable which is 93.3% of the attended students as well as the total number of students of the EFL class.

#### **Role of EFL teachers while teaching:**

In the context of Saudi Arabia, only EFL teachers can create an environment which enables students to be exposed to the target language and give them more opportunity to use it, because no one can learn a language without using it. As '*motivation*' is considered to be a catalyst in learning a foreign language, learners must be motivated to change their attitude towards the target language and this motivation can be done effectively by the teachers only, specially in Saudi Arabia, where class room is the only place to be exposed to English as a foreign language. An EFL teacher may adopt many measures to make his language class effective and fruitful. He may look for the answers to some of the questions mentioned below to find out the right way to motivate the students :

- What is the purpose of learning English as a foreign language?
- What are the problems the learners face while learning the target language?
- What are the barriers to their exposure to the target language?
- What do they do when they want to articulate some difficult words?
- What kind of motivation the teacher should proceed to motivate the students?
- How the problems faced by the learners can be solved?

EFL teachers may use a range of course books, modern teaching materials like Smart board (electronic board), electronic pens, different types of interesting software and other audio - visual technology to attract the students to the language classes. These modern instruments obviously help the students to catch up the accurate pronunciation while listening to the words or sentences and very rapidly they can learn how to pronounce the particular words or phrase.

More steps can be taken by the EFL teachers such as utterance of interesting dialogues and quotations from some famous dramas, novels, prose and poetry, role playing of a particular character, language games and even solving formal exercises with funs. Other typical tasks may help the teachers to make the EFL class more effective and practical:

- Planning and Preparing lessons
- Classroom management
- Setting different types of oral and written tests
- Evaluating the students on regular basis—weekly, monthly etc
- There must be an arrangement of at least one feedback after completing chapter or unit; and
- There must be motivation sessions—at least two times a month that encourages the EFL learners to be more articulated and active in the class room regarding the practice of the target language

### **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, pronunciation is the most significant factor while learning English as a foreign language. If a person is unable to pronounce words, then it is very likely that he will find it extremely difficult to spell and to write. If people are not able to pronounce words properly they run the risk of not being understood. For the development of the accurate pronunciation memorizing the IPA symbols can help the learners of foreign language. But it is true that memorizing IPA symbols is very much difficult for a foreigner whose language is not English. From this study it is clear that regarding mispronunciation in the context of Saudi EFL learners many inter-related factors are responsible. Although many reasons are responsible for this, all of them did not come in front of the lines of priority as the subject to be discussed. One thing must be admitted that Saudi authority is heartily trying to change the situation regarding EFL learning including pronunciation, even they encourage the learners to communicate with the other world in English. But it is also to be kept in mind that nothing can be changed overnight, especially, in education sector of any country. Beside the motivation and encouragement of the students, EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia—both the native and non-native should be well trained considering the matters discussed above like the interference of Arabic language, social and cultural differences and learners' attitude. According to the suggestions of EFL researchers and under the guidance of different types of national and international organizations, EFL teachers must use English for classroom instructions and interactions with the learners. These teachers can share their experiences and different types of opportunity for the learners to grow in their understanding and the use of English as a foreign language. By using and practising English as a foreign



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language more and more in the classroom, Saudi EFL learners will be able to meet their learning expectations and goals and also be able to increase the level of communicative competence in a foreign language even with the accurate pronunciation.

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