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Pronunciation Difficulties at the Segmental Level Encountered by EFL Students: A Case Study of EFL First-Year Students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University in Al-Bayda City

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صعوبات النطق التى يواجهها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: دراسة حالة لطلاب السنة الأولى في اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة عمر المختار في مدينة البيضاء على المستوى الصوتي

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الملخص:
تتناول هذه الدراسة الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب السنة الأولى في جامعة عمر المختار بمدينة البيضاء، ممن يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL)، في نطق الأصوات الساكنة الإنجليزية بدقة.
اعتمدت الدراسة منهجًا كميًا، حيث استُخدمت أدوات كمية لجمع البيانات وتحليلها. شملت أدوات البحث استبيانًا وُزّع على 49 طالبًا، بالإضافة إلى اختبارات نطق أُجريت مع 20 طالبًا. وقد عُرضت نتائج اختبارات النطق في صورة نسب مئوية، أظهرت الأصوات الساكنة التي تُمثل تحديًا للطلاب، ومن أبرزها:
/r/، /dʒ/، /ʒ/، /θ/، /p/، /ð/، و /tʃ/.
كشفت نتائج الاستبيان عن عدة عوامل تؤثر سلبًا في نطق الطلاب، من أبرزها: تأثير اللغة الأم، وقلة فرص ممارسة النطق، وضعف التعرض للغة الإنجليزية في البيئات اليومية. كما أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن الطلاب يعانون من صعوبة في الربط بين الشكل الكتابي للكلمات وطريقة نطقها، مما يؤدي إلى ارتكاب أخطاء نطقية متكررة.
وتؤكد هذه النتائج الحاجة الملحّة إلى تبنّي استراتيجيات تعليمية موجّهة، تسهم في تحسين مهارات النطق لدى الطلاب، وتمكنهم من تجاوز التحديات الصوتية التي تعترضهم.

الكلمات الدالة: الأخطاء في النطق، التحديات، العوامل، أصوات الحروف الساكنة في اللغة الانجليزية، طلاب السنة الأولى في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) .

Abstract
This study investigates the difficulties faced by EFL first-year students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University (OMU) in Al-Bayda City regarding accurate pronunciation of English consonant sounds. Adopting a quantitative approach, the study utilized quantitative techniques for data collection and analysis. The data collection tools included a questionnaire administered to 49 students and pronunciation tests conducted with 20 students. The findings from the pronunciation tests were presented as percentages, highlighting specific consonant sounds that posed challenges for the students, such as /r/, /dʒ/, /ʒ/, /θ/, /p/, /ð/, and /tʃ/. In addition, the questionnaire results identified several factors negatively influencing students' pronunciation, including their claim of the first language interference, limited pronunciation practice, and a lack of exposure to the English language. Furthermore, the results of the current study revealed that students struggle with recognizing the lack of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation, which leads to mispronunciations. These findings highlight the essential need to adopt targeted teaching strategies that contribute to improving students' pronunciation skills and enable them to overcome the phonetic challenges they encounter.

Keywords: Challenges, EFL First-year students, English consonant sounds, factors, mispronunciations.

1. Introduction

Pronunciation is about how we perceive and produce the sounds of a language and how these sounds affect those who are listening. It involves understanding the sounds of a language and being able to make them correctly (Burns, 2003).

According to Hornby (1995, as cited in Mulatsih, 2018), pronunciation refers to how a language is spoken, how words are pronounced, and the speaking style of an individual within a particular language.

Accurate pronunciation is crucial for language acquisition as it significantly impacts comprehension, regardless of grammar proficiency. Proper pronunciation not only improves language skills but also influences how individuals are perceived and understood. It is essential for learners to view pronunciation as a practical skill that requires consistent practice rather than just a theoretical concept (Kobilova, 2022). In the field of language teaching, pronunciation is one of the four key language elements—structure, vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling. Despite its importance, many individuals tend to disregard correct pronunciation during speech, leading to misunderstandings. Given that similar-sounding words can carry different meanings in English, accurate pronunciation is crucial to prevent misinterpretations (Srakaew, 2021). It cannot be denied that effective communication in spoken English heavily relies on clear pronunciation and intonation (Burns, 2003). Thus, prioritizing good pronunciation skills is vital for effective communication and preventing communication breakdowns (Cakir & Baytar, 2014).

Various studies have shown the importance of accurate pronunciation and the negative consequences of poor pronunciation. For example, Zoss (2015) investigated how English learners view their own pronunciation and provided information about the significance of teaching pronunciation. She found that a significant portion of the participants feel that they would be more confident engaging in conversations with native speakers if their pronunciation were better. Some participants expressed negative feelings due to instances where they were not understood. In addition, participants emphasized the importance of good English pronunciation for effective communication, maintaining attention, being respected, advancing in one's career, building self-confidence, and expressing oneself clearly. They highlighted that even with valuable ideas, poor pronunciation can hinder their impact. Another study conducted by Momade (2021) found that incorrect pronunciation causes communicative difficulties and prevents speakers from being

understood and listeners from understanding. Gilbert (1983, as cited in Zoss, 2015), pronunciation is significant because students need to understand others and need others to understand them. Furthermore, Husna (2021) asserts that improving students' pronunciation significantly affects their speaking ability, leading to enhanced quality in English communication.

2. Research Questions

Q1. Which consonant sounds pose challenges for First-Year EFL students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University in Al-Bayda City in Libya?

Q.2. What are the factors that contribute to the challenges faced by First-Year EFL students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University in accurately pronouncing English consonant sounds?

3. Literature Review

Several studies have discussed the difficulties that learners encounter when learning the pronunciation of English consonant sounds. Shak, Lee, and Stephan (2016) carried out a study that focused on discovering the problematic sounds faced by low-proficient students when learning English pronunciation. The study revealed that the participants had problems with sounds they were not familiar with, such as /ð/ and /θ/. Furthermore, Malay students had difficulties with the plosives /g/, /t/, and /d/ which already exist in their language. This is because these sounds in Malay usually occur in the beginning or middle of a word and are usually preceded or followed by a vowel. They do not appear at the end of words and do not occur in consonant clusters.

In addition, Hago and Khan (2015) conducted a study investigating the difficulties of English pronunciation encountered by Saudi secondary school learners when pronouncing English consonants. The findings indicated that the participants encountered difficulties with the sounds that don't exist in Arabic.

The analysis also showed that consonant clusters of more than three consonants are problematic for Arab learners of English, and this led participants to unintentionally insert the vowel sound /ɪ/ to break up the consonant clusters. They pronounced sport as /ispɔːt/, street as /istiriːt/, and children as /tʃildirin/. There are many factors that can affect how EFL learners pronounce English sounds. A study conducted by Jariyah (2020) discovered some of these factors. The mismatch between spelling and pronunciation confuses EFL learners because they find it challenging to predict how a word is pronounced based on its written form. Furthermore, Jariyah's study indicated that the learners' first language, lack of exposure to the target language, learning accurate pronunciation after puberty, and lack of motivation can cause problems for the learners when dealing with English pronunciation.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1. Speech Learning Model

This study relies on Flege's Speech Learning Model (SLM), proposed in 1995, which explains the challenges that second language learners encounter in acquiring accurate pronunciation of L2 sounds. Flege's model includes seven hypotheses, but this study relies on three of those hypotheses.

Hypothesis 3 states that greater phonetic dissimilarity between L2 and L1 sounds increases the likelihood of perceiving differences between L1 and L2 sounds. Learners' ability to perceive the phonetic differences between L2 sounds and their closest L1 equivalents can help learners improve their pronunciation and overall proficiency in the second language. Furthermore, hypothesis 5 states that learners may struggle to form distinct phonetic categories for L2 sounds, and this results in combining similar sounds from L1 and L2 into the same category. In addition, hypothesis 4 emphasizes that the age of learning impacts the ability to recognize phonetic

differences between L1 and L2 sounds and that younger learners are more flexible in distinguishing these phonetic differences.

4.2. Input Hypothesis

According to Krashen (1982), language acquisition requires learners to be exposed to comprehensible input that is slightly above their current language level. Krashen believes that high interaction and exposure to comprehensible input can improve learners' overall language skills, including their pronunciation.

5. Methodology

5.1. Design

This study employed a quantitative approach within a case study framework. This design focuses on collecting numerical data that can be analyzed using statistical procedures. It emphasizes numerical data over descriptive language (Creswell, 2014).

5.1.1. Instruments

5.1.1.1. A questionnaire

There are different types of questionnaires, and the one utilized in this study is the Likert-Scale questionnaire. In this type of questionnaire, the respondents are provided with a set of questions or statements along with a predefined range of responses graded along a continuum and are asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement (Roopa & Rani, 2012). The questionnaire utilized in this study was adapted from Antaris and Omolu's (2019) work and some questions were adapted from Almuslimi's (2020) work to align with the research goals. The questionnaire was used to collect data about the factors that students believe contribute to the pronunciation difficulties faced by first-year students at OMU in Al-Bayda city in Libya.

5.1.1.2. A pronunciation test

The list of words used in this study was taken from Bram's (2019) study, which was titled '*Academic Word List Pronunciation of First-Year English Education Students*' conducted by Bram in 2019. The list contains English consonant sounds in initial and final positions. To ensure each sound is represented in two positions except where certain sounds cannot occur (e.g., /h/ in final position and /ŋ/ in initial position), additional words were added by the researcher. The words were put in sentences so that students wouldn't notice the targeted words. Within each sentence, there are words representing each targeted sound in initial and final positions.

5.1.2. Participants

The sampling technique adopted to select the participants in this research is probability sampling, more specifically simple random sampling. The population of this current research is EFL first-year students at OMU in AL-Bayda city in Libya. The total number of first-year students is 84. The sample selected for the questionnaire includes 50 students. Neither of the participants has gone to or lived in any English-speaking country. For the questionnaire, the researcher asked interested students to raise their hands and chose participants from those who volunteered.

6. Limitations of the study

Due to time constraints, this study focuses on consonant sounds. A comprehensive examination of both consonants and vowels could result in a lengthy thesis; therefore, this aspect has been left for future research by another researcher.

7. Findings and Discussion

7.1. Findings of Pronunciation Test

The recording process in the pronunciation test was carried out using Praat software installed on a Toshiba laptop to ensure accurate and reliable recording. Moreover, the targeted words were phonetically transcribed according to RP phonetic transcription. In addition, the researcher, after carefully and repeatedly listened to the participants' recordings, and under the supervision of her

supervisor, also wrote the phonetic transcription of the targeted words as pronounced by the participants. Table 1 shows the English consonant sounds that appeared to be problematic for the participants, along with the percentage of students who struggled with each sound.

Table 1. Problematic English consonant sounds for EFL first-year students at OMU

Sound	Number of students	Percentage
r	20	%100
dʒ	18	%90
ʒ	18	%90
θ	16	%80
p	15	%75
m	15	%75
ð	13	%65
tʃ	12	%60
f	10	%50
v	6	%30
h	4	%20
l	3	%15
ʃ	3	%15
k	2	%10
j	1	%5
z	1	%5
w	1	%5

7.2. Discussion of Pronunciation Test Findings

Out of the 24 English consonant sounds, 17 were considered problematic. However, some of these 17 sounds proved to be more challenging for learners than others. The consonant sound /r/ was accurately pronounced by all students when it occurred in word -initial positions. However, when it appeared in word-final positions, the students did not pronounce it as RP speakers do. If their pronunciation were not compared to that of RP speakers, it would be considered accurate. All students tended to pronounce /r/ in word-final positions either without knowing or ignoring the fact that /r/ in RP is non-rhotic. According to Ogden (2009), "Non-rhotic dialects are ones where [r] is pronounced only before a vowel" (p. 90).

In addition, the sound /dʒ/ was replaced either with /g/ or /ʒ/. Those who replaced /dʒ/ with /g/ in the word 'age' seemed to have developed a tendency to pronounce the letter 'g' as /g/ consistently. On the other hand, those who substituted it with /ʒ/ appeared to overlook the fact that /dʒ/ is an affricate, not a fricative. Replacing /dʒ/ with /ʒ/ is known as deaffrication. Similarly, the pronunciation of /tʃ/ underwent the process of deaffrication. The majority of students replaced it in the word-initial position with the sound /ʃ/. However, this sound was non-problematic when it occurred in the word-final position since all students accurately pronounced it except one student who replaced it with /ʃ/. In fact, the word used to represent /tʃ/ in the word-final position is 'match'. Thus, the presence of the sound /t/ may have helped the students to produce an accurate pronunciation of the word.

Moreover, the sound /ʒ/ was replaced with another consonant sound. In the word 'genre', it was replaced with the sound /g/. Only one student replaced it with /dʒ/, and another with /tʃ/. Students who used /g/ seemed to believe that the letter 'g' should always be pronounced as /g/. Even in the word-final position, /ʒ/ was replaced with /g/. Only one student used /dʒ/ instead, and this same student also replaced /ʒ/ with /dʒ/ in the word-initial position. Regarding the voiceless counterpart of /ʒ/, three students substituted it with other sounds. In the word-initial position, one

student replaced /ʃ/ with /s/, which may be due to the presence of 's' in the word while two replaced it with /tʃ/. In the word-final position, only one student replaced /ʃ/ with /tʃ/. The letters 's' and 'h' together may sometimes refer to the sound /ʃ/. However, there are words where 's' and 'h' do not form the sound /ʃ/ such as 'dishonest' and 'mishandle' (Brooks, 2015). Those who mispronounced /ʃ/ in 'shoes' may be unaware of how 'sh' is pronounced when coming together in a word.

Regarding the sounds /p/ and /v/, they were replaced with /b/ and /f/ respectively. This could be due to the absence of these sounds in Arabic, which is the students' first language. In fact, replacing /p/ with /b/ and /v/ with /f/ is a common tendency among Arab learners, and this observation is supported by several studies, including Hago and Khan's study (2015). Regarding the pronunciation of /p/ in the word-final position, according to Ladefoged and Johnson (2011), final stops are typically unreleased when followed by a word that starts with a stop. Most participants who successfully produced an accurate pronunciation of /p/ in word-final position tended to leave it unreleased, which helped them in achieving correct pronunciation.

Another important observation is that the spelling of a word can affect how students pronounce it. The sound /m/ was accurately pronounced by all students in the word-initial position. In the final position, the word used to represent this sound is 'lamb', which contains a silent 'b'. However, the majority of the students mispronounced it by pronouncing the 'b'. Out of 20 students, 12 pronounced /b/ after /m/, while three students silenced the /m/ sound and pronounced /b/. Since the sound /m/ exists in Arabic and Arab students are familiar with it, the issue then may be with the word itself rather than the sound.

Again, the discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation appeared to be a significant issue for the participants, and the students' ignorance of pronunciation rules led to mispronunciation. The combination 'wh' is sometimes pronounced as /w/ as in 'what', 'where', and 'why', and sometimes as /h/, as in 'whose', 'whole', and 'whom' (Brooks, 2015). The sound /h/ raised difficulties for four students. Three students replaced it with /w/ due to the presence of the letter 'w' in the word while one student replaced it with /ʃ/, which is difficult to explain.

Some sounds appeared to be non-problematic when they occur in word-initial positions, but problematic when they occur in word-final positions such as /ð/ and /l/. The majority of participants substituted /ð/ with another sound, 12 students substituted it with its voiceless counterpart /θ/, while one student substituted it with /t/. The combination 'th' is sometimes pronounced as /ð/ and sometimes as /θ/. Thus, those who replaced it with its voiceless counterpart may have missed this rule. Interestingly, the sound /θ/, when it occurred in the word-initial position, was replaced with /ð/ by 14 participants. Regarding /l/, it raised difficulties for three students. Two students essentially mispronounced the word representing the sound while one followed /l/ with a vowel sound. The word used to represent /l/ is 'bottle', and the presence of 'e' at the end of words may prompt some students to add a vowel sound. The student's tendency to add a vowel sound after /l/ refers to the students' unfamiliarity with the vowel-consonant-final e rule. This rule states that the final 'e' in words with the vowel-consonant-final e pattern, such as 'cape', works on lengthening the preceding vowel (Calder, 2000). Similar to /ð/ and /l/, the sound /f/ was also non-problematic in word-initial positions but problematic in word-final positions. Half of the participants mispronounced the word representing /f/ in the word-final position. Five students replaced /f/ with /g/. This may be due to the presence of the 'g' in the word. This can be supported by what participants in Jariya's (2020) study stated that the lack of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation sometimes led to mispronunciation. The other five either replaced the targeted sound with another sound or uttered a random word instead.

The sound /k/ was not seriously problematic. In the word-initial position, one student replaced it with /p/, which may be due to the visual similarity between the letters 'p' and 'q' while

the other replaced it with /t/ in the word-final. This may stem from the student's familiarity with the word 'quite,' leading her to mistakenly think that the word was 'quite' instead of 'quick'.

Finally, the sounds that appeared to be least problematic are /j/, /z/, and /w/. The word representing the sound /j/ was mispronounced by one student only. In fact, the student silenced the sound and didn't pronounce it at all. Regarding the sound /z/, it was replaced by one student with its voiceless counterpart /s/. The presence of 's' in 'goes' may have prompted the student to produce /s/ instead of /z/. Furthermore, the sound /w/ was substituted by one student with a totally different sound. She replaced it with /m/. The student may have confused the sounds of 'm' and 'w' since 'm' is the upside-down version of 'w'.

It's clear from the above texts that the substitution of sounds appeared to be the most common error made by participants. Some students substituted certain sounds with similar sounds such as /p/ with /b/. In fact, learners' inability to perceive the phonetic differences between /p/ and /b/ made them replace /p/ with its similar sound in Arabic /b/. Therefore, they underwent the process of equivalence classification, which made them group /p/ and /b/ together instead of forming a single phonetic category for each one of them. This finding aligns with hypotheses 3 and 5 of Flege's Speech Learning Model, which state that learners' ability to spot the phonetic differences between similar sounds in L1 and L2 can help them produce accurate pronunciation of these sounds. If learners fail to spot these phonetic differences, the category formation for an L2 sound will be blocked by the mechanism of equivalence classification, which makes them replace sounds in L2 with their similar sounds from L1.

It has also been observed that students tended to pronounce the silent letters, which contributes to inaccuracies in their pronunciation. For example, 12 out of 20 students pronounced the 'b' in 'climbed'. Not only silent consonants but also silent vowels may lead to mispronunciation. Student 14 mispronounced the word 'age' as [ədʒeɪ]. If the final 'e' were not pronounced, the student's pronunciation of /dʒ/ would be correct. It has also been observed that some students, when facing a word they are not familiar with, tended to produce sounds that do not exist in the word, which led to the production of a completely different word.

7.3. Findings of Questionnaire

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed statistically using SPSS software (Version 27) and presented in tables and percentages.

Table 2. Influnce of native language on English learning.

1. My native language influences when I learn English.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	7	14.3%
Agree	20	40.8%
Disagree	14	28.6%
Strongly disagree	8	16.3%

The first statement aims to determine whether students believe their first language affects their second language learning process. Based on the results, 20 participants (40.8%) believe that their first language affects their learning of a second language. In contrast, 14 participants (28.6%) do not believe it has an effect. In addition, 8 participants (16.3%) strongly disagree that their first language affects their learning, while 7 participants (14.3%) strongly agree that it does.

Table 3. Difficulties in achieving native-like pronunciation.

2. I find it difficult to pronounce the word like a native speaker		
	N	%
Strongly agree	6	12.2%
Agree	16	32.7%

Disagree	15	30.6%
Strongly disagree	12	24.5%

The second statement concerns whether students encounter difficulties in pronouncing words like native speakers. Based on the results, 16 students (32.7%) agree that they find it difficult to pronounce words like native speakers. In contrast, 15 students (30.6%) do not find it difficult. In addition, 12 students (24.5%) strongly disagree that they experience any difficulties, while only 6 students (12.2%) strongly agree that they struggle with pronunciation compared to native speakers.

Table 4. Percieved importance of pronunciation improvement.

3. It is not important for me to improve my pronunciation.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	2	4.1%
Agree	3	6.1%
Disagree	14	28.6%
Strongly disagree	30	61.2%

The third statement addresses students' lack of will to improve their English pronunciation. Based on the results, 30 participants (61.2%) strongly disagree with the notion that improving their English pronunciation is unimportant. Furthermore, 14 participants (28.6%) also disagree with the statement. In contrast, only 3 participants (6.1%) agree that improving their English pronunciation is unimportant, while 2 participants (4.1%) strongly agree.

Table 5. Motivation to improve one's pronunciation.

4. I have no motivation to have good pronunciation.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	1	2.0%
Agree	1	2.0%
Disagree	19	38.8%
Strongly disagree	28	57.1%

The fourth statement aims to discover whether students lack motivation to have good pronunciation. Based on the results, 28 participants (57.1%) strongly disagree with the notion that they have no motivation to improve their pronunciation. In addition, 19 participants (38.8%) also disagree with this statement. In contrast, only two participants support the idea presented in the statement: 1 participant (2.0%) agrees, while another participant (2.0%) strongly agrees.

Table 6. Frequency of pronunciation practice.

5. I rarely practice pronunciation.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	3	6.1%
Agree	17	34.7%
Disagree	18	36.7%
Strongly disagree	11	22.4%

The fifth statement addresses the rarity of pronunciation practice. The highest percentage, 36.7%, represents the 18 participants who disagree with the notion of rarely practicing pronunciation. In contrast, the second highest percentage is 34.7%, indicating that 17 participants

agree with the statement. Furthermore, 11 participants (22.4%) strongly disagree, while only 3 participants (6.1%) strongly agree.

Table 7. Attitudes towards one's pronunciation.

6. I do not care about my pronunciation when I speak.		
	N	%
Agree	5	10.2%
Disagree	23	46.9%
Strongly disagree	21	42.9%

The sixth statement addresses the idea of carelessness about pronunciation when speaking. The majority of participants, 23 (46.9%), disagree that they do not care about their pronunciation when speaking, while 21 participants (42.9%) strongly disagree with the statement. Only 5 participants (10.2%) agree, and no participants strongly agree.

Table 8. Pronunciation based on spelling.

7. I always pronounce words in the way they're written.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	1	2.0%
Agree	11	22.4%
Disagree	25	51.0%
Strongly disagree	12	24.5%

The seventh statement addresses the idea that spelling influences how students pronounce words. The results show that the majority of participants, 25 (51.0%), disagree that they predict pronunciation based on spelling. In addition, 12 participants (24.5%) strongly disagree with the statement. In contrast, 11 participants (22.4%) agree, while only 1 participant (2.0%) strongly agrees.

Table 9. Infrequent use of pronunciation resources.

8. I rarely check to correct the pronunciation in dictionary.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	6	12.2%
Agree	22	44.9%
Disagree	15	30.6%
Strongly disagree	6	12.2%

The eighth statement addresses the rare check of one’s pronunciation in the dictionary. Based on the results, a total of 22 participants (44.9%) agree that they seldom check the dictionary for correct pronunciation. In contrast, 15 participants (30.6%) disagree with this notion, indicating that they do not rarely check for correct pronunciation. In addition, 6 participants (12.2%) strongly agree, while another 6 participants (12.2%) strongly disagree.

Table 10. Impact of lack of immersion on pronunciation.

9. I have never stayed in a foreign country, therefore I cannot pronounce the words like a foreigner.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	16	32.7%
Agree	18	36.7%
Disagree	7	14.3%
Strongly disagree	8	16.3%

The ninth statement addresses the notion of staying in a foreign country and its effect on one's pronunciation. Based on the results, 18 participants (36.7%) agree with this notion, believing that not having stayed in a foreign country has contributed to their non-native pronunciation. Furthermore, 16 participants (32.7%) strongly agree with the statement. In contrast, 7 participants (14.3%) disagree, and 8 participants (16.3%) strongly disagree, suggesting that some do not believe that living abroad is essential for achieving a native-like pronunciation.

Table 11. Perceived difficulty of phonetic symbols.

10. The phonetic symbols of pronunciation are difficult. Therefore, I do not understand how to pronounce the words.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	3	6.1%
Agree	11	22.4%
Disagree	25	51.0%
Strongly disagree	10	20.4%

The tenth statement addresses the perceived difficulty of phonetic symbols and their effect on understanding pronunciation. Based on the results, the majority of participants, 25 (51.0%), disagree with the notion that phonetic symbols are difficult and that this difficulty affects their understanding of pronunciation. However, 11 participants (22.4%) agree that they find phonetic symbols difficult. In addition, 10 participants (20.4%) strongly disagree with that statement while only 3 participants (6.1%) strongly agree.

Table 12. Challenges due to spelling-pronunciation mismatch.

11. The lack of English spelling and pronunciation correspondence causes the main difficulties.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	10	20.4%
Agree	25	51.0%
Disagree	11	22.4%
Strongly disagree	3	6.1%

The eleventh statement addresses whether the lack of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation makes students mispronounce some words. Based on the results, the majority of participants, 25 (51.0%), do agree with the addressed notion. However, 11 participants (22.4%) disagree. In addition, 10 participants (20.4%) strongly agree that this lack of correspondence affects their pronunciation while 3 participants (6.1%) strongly disagree.

Table 13. Insufficient exposure to English

12. There is a lack of exposure to English language.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	18	36.7%
Agree	22	44.9%
Disagree	3	6.1%
Strongly disagree	6	12.2%

The twelfth statement addresses the notion of insufficient exposure to the English language. The majority of participants, 22 (44.9%), agree with the statement with a percentage of 44.9%. Furthermore, 18 participants (36.7%) strongly agree. There is clear consensus on this statement, as most participants either agree or strongly agree. However, some participants do not share this view; 6 participants (12.2%) strongly disagree, and 3 participants (6.1%) disagree with the idea that there is a lack of exposure to the English language.

Table 14. Insufficient time for practice.

13. Insufficient time is devoted to pronunciation practice.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	7	14.3%
Agree	29	59.2%
Disagree	10	20.4%
Strongly disagree	3	6.1%

The thirteenth statement addresses the notion that pronunciation practice is not given sufficient time. The great majority of participants, 29 (59.2%), agree with the statement. However, 10 participants (20.4%) do not share this view. In addition, 7 participants (14.3%) strongly agree, while 3 participants (6.1%) strongly disagree.

Table 15. Awareness of rules without practice.

14. I know pronunciation rules, but I don’t practice them. e.g., I sometimes pronounce /b/ in 'thumb'.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	3	6.1%
Agree	25	51.0%
Disagree	15	30.6%
Strongly disagree	6	12.2%

The fourteenth statement addresses the idea of not practicing pronunciation rules despite being aware of them. Nearly half of the participants, 25 (51.0%), agree that they do not practice these rules. However, a notable percentage of participants, 15 (30.6%), disagree, indicating that they do not ignore pronunciation rules. Furthermore, 6 participants (12.2%) strongly disagree with the statement, while only 3 participants (6.1%) strongly agree.

Table 16. Unfamiliarity with pronunciation rules.

15. I don't know the pronunciation rules.		
	N	%
Strongly agree	2	4.1%
Agree	13	26.5%
Disagree	26	53.1%
Strongly disagree	8	16.3%

The last statement in the questionnaire addresses the issue of not knowing the pronunciation rules. Based on the results, the majority of participants, 26 (53.1%), disagree with the statement, indicating that they have knowledge of the pronunciation rules. Meanwhile, 13 participants (26.5%) agree that they do not know the rules, and only 2 participants (4.1%) strongly agree. In addition, 8 participants (16.3%) strongly disagree.

7.4. Discussion of Questionnaire Findings

This section discusses the most frequently selected responses by participants in the questionnaire. First, a significant proportion of participants believe that their first language affects their learning process in English. The influence of a learner's first language can be referred to as 'cross-linguistic influence'. According to Kenworthy (1987), differences between English and the learner's first language can lead to pronunciation difficulties. This is similar to

what Lado (1957) stated, that learners find items that are similar to their native language easier than those that are different.

Regarding the second statement, a notable group of participants finds it challenging to pronounce words like native speakers. In fact, Siahaan (2022) confirmed that after the age of puberty it is very difficult to have native-like pronunciation. In addition, Piske, Mackay, and Flege (2001) stated that achieving a native-like pronunciation in a second language is a skill that declines with age. The majority if not all participants in this study have started learning English after the age of puberty and this explains why the majority of them agree that they find it difficult to pronounce words like a native speaker. This finding supports hypothesis 4 of Flege's Speech Learning Model, which states that the age of learning (AOL) influences learners' ability to distinguish phonetic differences. The likelihood of noticing phonetic differences between L1 sounds and L2 sounds decreases as the age of learning increases. This is because younger learners tend to have more plasticity in their phonetic perception, making it easier for them to pick up distinctions between sounds. In addition, with an increase in AOL, learners may have already solidified their phonetic patterns based on their L1, leading to a difficulty in perceiving and producing new phonetic distinctions present in the L2. Therefore, as L2 learners grow older, their ability to notice phonetic differences between L1 and L2 sounds declines. This aligns with the Critical Period Hypothesis, which states that achieving native-like pronunciation is difficult after the age of puberty (Lenneberg, 1967, as cited in Siahaan, 2022).

Most participants strongly disagree with the notion stated in the third statement that enhancing one's pronunciation is unimportant. Similarly, a significant portion of participants strongly disagrees with the notion that they lack motivation for achieving good pronunciation. Participants' responses to statements 3 and 4 indicate that they have positive attitudes towards English. According to Ellis (1994), positive attitudes can encourage learners to make an effort to learn a second language.

It seems that participants recognize the importance of pronunciation practice, as a considerable number of them disagree with statement 5. It is encouraging that EFL first-year students understand the importance of pronunciation practice because, according to Kobilova (2022), pronunciation is a practical skill that requires consistent practice.

Regarding the sixth statement, nearly half of the participants disagree with it, indicating that they care about how they sound when speaking English. In fact, many studies, including Zoss (2015) and Kobilova (2022), confirm that good pronunciation makes learners more confident during conversations with native speakers. In addition, it ensures effective communication, maintains attention, helps advance one's career, and builds self-confidence. Participants also appear to be aware of the discrepancies between spelling and pronunciation. Predicting pronunciation based on spelling, according to Jariyah (2020), often leads learners to mispronounce words in English. The fact that more than half of the participants are aware of the need to avoid relying solely on spelling is encouraging.

However, what is not encouraging is that the majority of participants acknowledge that they rarely check the dictionary for correct pronunciation. In addition, some participants believe that their lack of experience living in a foreign country contributes to their inability to sound like native speakers. Living in an English-speaking country provides greater exposure to the language. Many studies, including Tympou (2018) and Keshavarz and Keshavarz (2022), confirm that exposure can impact EFL pronunciation. Participants' responses to statement 9 support the input hypothesis by Krashen (1982), which serves as a foundation for this study and which states that learners need to be exposed to the target language in order to enhance their skills .

Moreover, more than half of the participants disagree that phonetic symbols are difficult to understand. They also disagree that they do not know how to pronounce words correctly.

However, a significant portion of participants agrees that the lack of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation can lead to difficulties in pronunciation. While this is supported by several studies, participants' responses to statement 11 indicate their awareness of this lack of correspondence, which is a positive sign .

Furthermore, many participants believe that insufficient exposure to the English language contributes to difficulties in pronunciation. This observation aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which underscores the significance of language exposure in the language acquisition process. Not only insufficient exposure, but also inadequate time for pronunciation practice can lead to pronunciation challenges. The majority of participants agree with statement 13, indicating that they recognize the need for more dedicated time for pronunciation practice. In fact, consistent practice is essential for developing pronunciation skills (Kobilova, 2022), and the responses to statement 13 reinforce the necessity for increased focus on this aspect of language learning.

The last two statements relate to pronunciation rules. Concerning the fourteenth statement, 51.0% of participants agree that they know pronunciation rules but do not practice them while speaking. In addition, 53.1% of participants disagree with the assertion that they do not know the pronunciation rules. This indicates that while participants may be aware of the rules, they are intentionally ignoring them. Indeed, this highlights a huge gap between knowledge and practice.

8. Conclusion

Based on the data collection and analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn. The students faced challenges with various English consonant sounds, including /r/, /dʒ/, /ʒ/, /θ/, /p/, /m/, /ð/, /tʃ/, /f/, /v/, /h/, /l/, /ʃ/, and /k/. While some sounds were problematic, students often struggled due to their unfamiliarity with the words representing those sounds.

In addition, the pronunciation of /r/ in the word-final position did not match the standards of Received Pronunciation (RP). Although the students’ pronunciation might be considered accurate without comparing it to the RP pronunciation.

Furthermore, the researcher observed that students tended to substitute target sounds in the second language with sounds from their first language, leading to pronunciation errors. This substitution issue indicates a reliance on familiar phonetic patterns from their native language, which can hinder accurate pronunciation.

Another challenge was pronouncing of silent letters. Students sometimes pronounced letters in English words that are typically silent, which results in mispronunciation. It has been observed that some learners exhibited a tendency to add extra sounds when articulating words, such as inserting an additional vowel sound in words like 'table'.

Regarding the factors that affect students' English pronunciation, the study identified several factors contributing to pronunciation difficulties among learners. The factors included a lack of experience in English-speaking countries and limited interaction with native speakers, which hindered learners' ability to achieve accurate pronunciation. In addition, the mismatch between spelling and pronunciation often led learners to be confused. Insufficient exposure to English and insufficient time devoted to pronunciation practice were also identified as contributing factors. Lastly, the tendency to ignore pronunciation rules, despite being aware of them, highlights a gap between knowledge and application.

Addressing these pronunciation challenges and contributing factors is crucial for enhancing English pronunciation skills among EFL learners.

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