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Teaching Pronunciation for Arab learners of English: Using Gilberts' Prosody Pyramid

Wagdi Rashad Ali Bin-Hady¹

Abstract

Developing proficiency in the target language requires sharpening one's repertoire in several competencies, including, linguistic, discourse, sociolinguistics as well as strategic competence which enable language learners to compensate any breakdown that usually occurs as a result of learners' limited knowledge whether in the system or pragmatic of the target language. However, all the above elements together play a major role in developing learners' overall communicative competence, they all be useless if the learners have not developed intelligible pronunciation in the target language. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate some of the pronunciation problems that Arab learners of English encountered regardless whether they belonged to the Arabic language interference or as a result of poor development in the intra-language systems. Henceforth, the paper depends on secondary data gathered from previous studies to reach a clear understanding about such problems and suggest some pedagogical techniques for teaching pronunciations to Arab learners of English, specifically with more focus to teaching the suprasegmental elements of phonology. The researcher recommends for English language teachers at secondary or tertiary levels to apply the Gilbert's Prosody Pyramid for teaching pronunciations to Arab students. Finally, the researcher explains how such model can be implemented in the classroom.

Key words: *phonology; segmental; suprasegmental; consonant clusters; stress, rhythm, Prosody Pyramid.*

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1.1 Introduction

Developing a good pronunciation in the target language is one of the most important need for learners (Khanbeiki & Abdolmanafi-Rokni, 2015). It enables learners not only to be understood by others, but also to be comprehensible listeners (Gilbert, 2008: 6). It is recommended that pronunciation should be taught to English learners at early years. According to Gilbert (2001: 173) learners may develop a bad habit and become discouraged to talk whenever pronunciation teaching is not given to them at early levels. Moreover, Arabic learners of English could acquire good pronunciation of English whenever they being exposed enough to natural situations (Huwari & Mehawesh, 2015: 33). It is clearly viewed that Arabic learners of English have some noticeable errors in pronunciations. Some of these errors fossilize and dominated them from achieving proficiency in English language. Al-saidat (2010) emphasizes on the necessity for Arab learners of English to equate themselves with intelligible pronunciation of English.

Therefore, achieving intelligible pronunciation which definitely helps learners to build their communicative competence depends not only on sound systems but also requires developing their stress, intonation, and rhythm. According to Gilbert (2008: 9), "practicing pronunciation by focusing only on individual sounds is like using only part of the language". For helping Arab learners to achieve intelligible pronunciation, Huwari & Mehawesh (2015: 36) recommended that the Arab Ministries of educations should train English language teachers on teaching pronunciation and support schools with requirements like cassettes, video-players, T.V. etc.

2.0 Literature Review

Phonology is defined as "[t]he study of the way in which the sounds in a language are organised to express meaning" (Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill, & Pincas, 2013: 226). Phonology is accordingly classified into segmental and suprasegmental. The first refers to speech sounds, including vowels and consonants, whereas the later stands for rhyme, stress, intonations (Nunan, 2015: 92). Therefore, the researcher will briefly define and explore the literature under two categories. These components will be discussed later.

2.1 Segmental phonology

As mentioned above, segmental phonology includes both the vowel and consonant sound systems of a language.

2.1.1 English vowel problems face EFL Arab students

As the chart below displayed, Swan and Smith (2001) explained that the shaded phonetic English sounds have similar or near similar in the Arabic sound systems. Therefore, it is expected that Arab learners of English may utter them easily. On the contrary, the unshaded English sounds have no Arabic equivalents which definitely lead Arabic learners of English to mispronounce them if they have not got enough focus during their early years of studies. It is suggested that any syllabus which aims to develop Arabic learners of English pronunciation to give high emphasis on such sounds that are not found in the Arabic language sound systems. Similarly, Faris & Hussein's (n.d.) study is in line with Swan and Smith's notion, as they found that most Iraqi university students encounter difficulties when pronouncing the following English sounds: / ə/, / ʌ/, / ɜ:/ and / e/ (7). Furthermore, Ali (2013: 1) reported that Sudanese learners of English face problems in releasing central and back English vowels.

i:	ɪ	e	æ	eɪ	aɪ	ɔɪ
ɑ:	ɒ	ɔ:	ʊ	aʊ	əʊ	ɪə
u:	ʌ	ɜ:	ə	eə	ʊə	aɪə aʊə

(Swan & Smith, 2001: 196)

2.1.2 Consonant problems face EFL Arab students

According to the chart below, five English sounds, /p/, /v/, /z/, /ŋ/ and /r/ might be mispronounced by Arab learners of English as such sounds have no near/similar in the Arabic phonology. Altamimi (2015: 2) found that Arab learners of English substituted these sound (/p/, /z/, /v/, /tʃ/ and /ŋ/) by (/b/, /dʒ/, /f/, /ʃ/ and/n-k) respectively. Therefore, one may hear words like: /blei/ for /plei/ play, /plɛdʒər/ for /plɛzər/ pleasure, /fəri/ for /veri/ very, /ʃɪldrən/ for /tʃɪldrən/ children and /raɪtɪŋ/ for /raɪtɪŋ/ writing. Similarly, Ahmad and Nazim (2013: 150) found that Saudi preparatory students mispronounced some consonant English sounds like /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /z/, /ŋ/, henceforth, they suggested the sound should be taught at preparatory stage. Ismael, Mahadin, and Masri (2015) conducted a study to investigate the problem that Jordanian learners of English at tertiary level faced difficulties with some English consonants sounds, like: /p/, /f/, /fɪ/, /l/, /z/, /v/, /s/, /ʒ/. Therefore, the study of (Ismael, Mahadin, & Masri, 2015) is in line with the other precious studies as Ahmad and Nazim, 2013; Altamimi, 2015, and the beliefs of (Swan & Smith, 200). Thus, it can be

included that Arab learners at different level of studying English whether at preparatory, secondary or even university level still face the same problems with specific English consonant sounds. This leads us to say that whether Arab teachers of English language did not focus on pronunciation totally or that such errors fossilized in students' articulations.

p	b	f	v	θ	ð	t	d
s	z	ʃ	ʒ	tʃ	dʒ	k	g
m	n	ŋ	l	r	j	w	h

(Swan & Smith, 2001: 197)

2.1.3 Consonant clusters problems facing EFL Arab students

Consonant clusters are defined as the "combination of more than one consonant occurring together within a single syllable" (Verma, 2014: 289). English language combines two consonant sounds like: pr, pl, gr, gl, thr, thw, sp., or three consonants sounds together as: spr, skr, str, spl. There are three consonant clusters in Arabic and ten in English (Swan & Smith, 2001)

Accordingly Na'ama's (2011) investigation to the ability of Yemeni students at college level to pronounce English consonants clusters. He found that most Yemeni students could not correctly pronounce English final consonants clusters with three and four segments (155). To come up with such difficulties, Arab learners of English insert the front short vowel /i/ in the onset or code of monosyllabic English words, as:

Onset

1. /sɪblæʃ/ 'splash' 2. /sɪblɪ:n/ 'spleen' 3. /sɪkrɪ:n/ 'screen' 4. /sɪbrɪt/ 'sprite' 5. /sɪtreɪn/ 'strain' 6. /sɪkræp/ 'scrap' 7. /sɪtreɪt/ 'straight' 8. /sɪpreɪ/ 'spray'

Coda

1./stɒbɪd/ 'stopped' 2. /dɪvɪləbɪd/ 'developed' 3. /lɑ:fɪd/ 'laughed' 4. /ɑ:skɪd/ 'asked' 5. /wɔ:kɪd/ 'walked' 6. /gru:bɪz/ 'groups'

(Al-saidat, 2010) (128-129).

2.2 Suprasugmental phonology

It is acknowledged that Suprasugmental features of phonology are more important to be taught than segmental features (Yedomakha, 2013). Interestingly, it is found that English native speaker assessors tend to focus on stress, rhythm and intonation when they assessed foreign learners of English (Al-Ahdal, Al-Hattami, Al-Awaid, & Al-Mashaqba, 2015). Moreover, (May, 2011) correlates that importance of mastering the music (intonation, stress, rhythm) of the target language, with being understood by others. However, EFL teachers usually neglect to train their students on suprasegmental features because they themselves lack competence in such features (Yedomakha, 2013). Similarly, May (2011) stated that during his long experience in teaching English, all students enrolled in his classes have not ever been explicitly or inexplicitly trained on pronunciation prosody.

2.2.1 Stress

Stress is defined as "the emphasis we give to individual syllables within a word as well as the emphasis given to words within utterances" (Nunan, 2015: 96). Similarly, it is " the degree of emphasis or loudness, measurable in terms of intensity, muscular activity or air-pressure" (Broughton et al., 2013: 320). Accordingly, Gilbert (2008: 14) asserts that one of the crucial problems that learners of English ever face is their inability to recognize spoken words. She relates the sort of such problem to learners' unawareness of the stress patterns when they learn new words. Similarly, Fraser (2001) states that learners of English did not neglect stress pattern totally, however, they usually use stress inappropriately.

Arabic and English shared a similar rhythmic system as they are both stressed-timed languages (Swan & Smith, 2001; Hamdi, Barkat-defradas, Ferragne, & Pellegrino, 2004). It is expected therefore that Arab learners of English might not face any difficulties with English stress patterns. However, Shormani and Alsohbani (2015) found that stress patterns are one of the major obstacles that Arab learners of English face, they related this sort of difficulty to the consistent placements of stress in the Arabic language while English stress changed according to the words grammatical class (p.148). Moreover, Three types of challenges might face Arabic learners of English: stressing unstressed syllables in individual words, stressing the wrong word in a thought group or omit syllable in connected speech (Yates & Zielinski, 2009: 122). In order to help Arab learners to produce appropriate stress in English, the researcher follows the ideas of Fraser: "in order to learn to use stress appropriately for English, they [learners] have to learn to conceptualise stress- in other works, to know what it

means, to be able to recognise it and use it and manipulate it and play around with."(Fraser, 2001: 21).

2.2.2 Rhythm

Rhythm refers to "any regular recurring motion, or movement marked by a regulated succession of strong and weak elements, a regular recurrence or pattern in time referring to cyclical natural phenomena" (Erickson, 2013: 53-4). Learners usually tend to apply their first language rhythm into the target language, however, it is not impossible to master the second language rhythm whenever frustrating efforts and intelligent practices are made (Erickson, 2013: 156). Teaching English rhythm is one of the frustrating issues that EFL teachers face. Fraser (2001: 76) stated that among the best techniques to teach English rhythm is to expose learners to natural speech and encourage them to comprehend the stress words and syllables and motivate them to reproduce in small chunks what they heard in group or chorus till they master the rhythm naturally.

2.2.3 Intonation

Intonation is defined as the "pitch levels on individual syllables and their combination into contours"(Gumperz, 1982: 100). Both Arabic English languages share similar intonation features like contouring and meaning (Swan & Smith, 2001: 199). According to Gilbert, (2014: 133) "[i]ntonation is NOT hard to teach, if your priorities reflect the underlying significance of the specifically English system of calling attention to the focus ideas and the grouping of words". She added:

an essential part of teaching the communicative value of intonation is to use exercises in which the listener's answers depend on noticing the speaker's choice of focus word. Such tasks give each student many opportunities to practice both speaking and listening. They also provide students with the opportunity to receive immediate, practical feedback. Furthermore, changing students' partners from time to time aids learning to accommodate to variations in speech.(*ibid*, 2008) (36)

3. Teaching pronunciation in the Arab world

Some studies targeted teaching Arab learners of English pronunciations in different Arabic settings. Firstly, Saqqaf and Baddapalli (2012) reported the importance of contrastive analyses for teaching pronunciation to Arab learners of English. Next, Ahmad and Nazim

(2013) recommended for curricula designers to include the sounds systems of English at preparatory level, henceforth, arable learners would not face difficulties in producing English sound at a later level. Then, Altamimi (2015) found that teaching English sounds for Arab learners using minimal pairs strategies developed students pronunciations. Al-Ahdal et al., (2015) found that using interventional program based on suprasegmental features at Qassim University, KSA., for two weeks increased the experimental group pronunciations towards intelligibility as compared with the control group whose pronunciation is still poor. Therefore, they recommended that teachers at the tertiary level should focus on training their students on the prosodic features of phonology. Al-Samawi (2014: 273) found that training Arab students to pronounce English consonant clusters by writing on them Arabic vowelization (harakaat), that are: "(madd) = long vowel (dhammah) = /u/, /v/ above the consonant (fat-hah)= /æ/, /ə/ under the consonant (kasrah) = /e/, /ə/, [skoon] = over an consonant followed by another consonant", could help them to achieve intelligibility in declusterazition.

4.0 Prosody pyramid

The term prosody pyramid is used by Gilbert as a model for teaching English pronunciation. So, as the term seems, it contains two words: prosody and pyramid. Prosody according to Gilbert refers to rhythm and melody (intonation). Henceforth, as the prosody model metaphorically consists of levels beginning with a base and ending with a sharp edge, thus the word pyramid is used accordingly. The prosody pyramid has a base called the (thought group), and in every thought group there is a word which has the most important meaning, it is called the (focused word), and every focused word has a syllable which received the stressed, it is called the (peak/nucleus)(Gilbert, 2008). Therefore, each level of the prosody pyramid will be explained and suggested some techniques to teach them for students of Arab world:

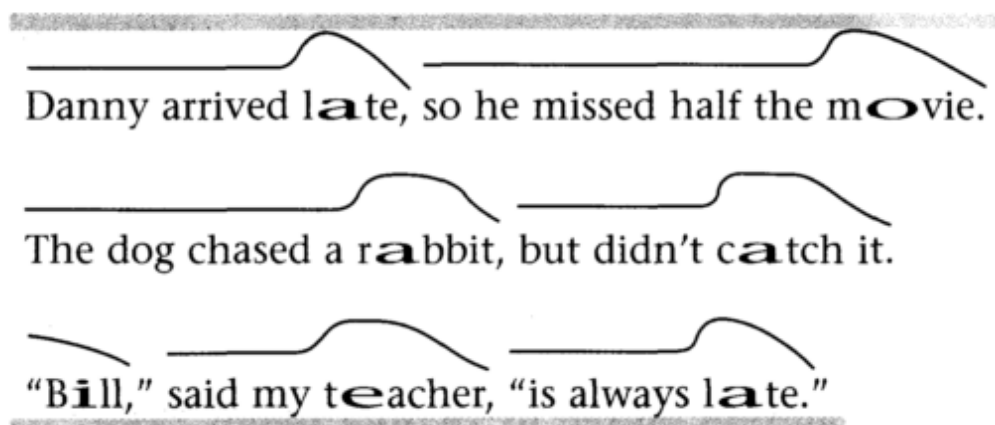
4.1 The Thought Group

The term thought group refers "to a discrete stretch of speech that forms a semantically and grammatically coherent segment of discourse" (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996) (175). Thus, native speaker's speech is grouped into thoughts, such taught is determined by listeners depending on pauses or changing the pitch of their melody. According to Gilbert native speakers usually pause in slow speech to let the listeners noticing the thought group

has ended, however, in rapid speech native speakers change the pitch of their melody at the end of each thought group (Gilbert, 2008: 11).

It is necessary for teachers to help their students to analyze native speakers speech as the pause or drop the pitch at the end of each thought group. Teachers can do so by bringing short script recorded by native speakers and play it to them several times. As soon as learners figure out the thought group, teachers then write the same sentences on the board or on any postures and motive students to imitate the melody of native speakers. The most important step at this stage according to Gilbert (2008) is to comprehend the beginning and the ends of each taught group (11). Teachers should help their students to analyze taught group by signals like " pause, pitch drops and lengthening the final stressed syllable specifically the vowel sound". Teachers can find various examples on YouTube. There are some links that teachers themselves can get benefit from them and bring them to their students.(see, 7. You Tube links).

some examples of thought groups are:



(Gilbert, 2005: 132).

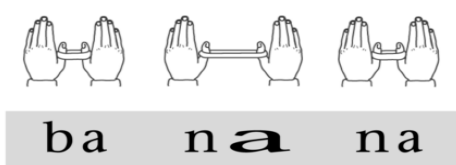
4.2 The Focused Word

As soon as the students can figure out the beginning and end of each thought group, teachers can then transfer to train their students to notice the focused word in each thought group. Gilbert (2008) defined the focused word as the most important word that the speakers want their interlocutors to notice. Therefore, native speaker use intonations differently when they pronounce the focused word (12). Generally, contents words (noun, verb, adjective and adverb) are usually stressed, whereas functional or structural words, (articles, prepositions,

helping verbs) are often unstressed. This it is important for teachers to give such signs to their students by which they could figure out the focused word in each taught group. Yates and Zielinski (2009) stated that teachers should tell students that the "Important" words are stressed instead of saying to them "content" words, as the term contents may be confusing.

At this stage, it is important for teachers to remind their students that the focused word in each thought group usually receives some features as lengthening the vowel sound, as well as changing in the melody. Working with the examples above, the focused words are, "late/movie" ; "rabbit/ catch" and " Bill/ teacher/ late" usually uttered with strong beat and long timing for the vowel sounds and also the pitch fall.

Teachers can use different techniques for making students aware about the stress and lengthen of certain sounds, specifically, the focused word. Here is an example about the length of vowel in the word banana.



(Gilbert, 2008: 38).

It is benefitable at this phase that students can acquire even to some level about English stress and melody as teachers expose them to natural speech. Whenever teachers feel that students need more practice about comprehending the focused word in thought group. Teachers can explicitly tell them that the focused words usually come at the end. It is suggested that teachers can share with their students some natural videos or audios recording by native speakers and carefully selected to practice focused words in thought group at their homes. Moreover, it is also recommended for teachers to motivate their students to rehearse short chunks previously practiced. At this stage, the focus should be on the intonation, stress and rhythm. Even if students mispronounced some sounds, teachers should write them down and train them later on. It is not suggested to move from this step until students acquire even the accepted level of intonation and rhythm for the given utterances earlier.

Finally, it is time for teachers to train their students on the connected speech even for the utterances given previously. Some rules should be introduced at this stage:

4.2.1 Connected speech

Native speakers usually utter a thought group continuously with one breath airstreams. So, they give a strong beat to contents words and reduce structural words. Yates and Zielinski (2009) said that Arab learners of English seem to produce English utterances by stressing unstressed words and emphasize functional words and unstressed syllables (p.123). It is the role of teachers to train their students on comprehending unstressed syllables and functional words reduction by over exposing them into natural speech and motivating them to apply such reduction features to their production of thought groups.

As mentioned earlier, teachers can work with some of the sounds that students mispronounced when practicing producing the thought groups under the following stage.

4.3 The Stressed and Peak Syllable

As the students practiced much about figuring out the beginning and ending of thought groups as well as picking up the focused word in each thought group, it is time for teachers to accustom them with comprehending the peak syllables in the multisyllabic focused word. Gilbert (2008: 14) stated that whenever a multisyllabic word is intended to be the focused word in any thought group, teachers should train their students about which syllable in the focused word should receive the stress.

At this phase, it is the time for practicing the sounds that students mispronounced as teachers noticed them at the first earlier stages. Furthermore, it is expected that students could not pronounce consonant sounds like:

The grammatical ending of words. i.e., (ed) added to the verb at past tenses and present perfect, (s) at present simple and of plural, the consonant clusters, as well as consonant, and vowel sounds that students mispronounced.

5. Conclusion

The current study has investigated the some of the major obstacles that Arab learners of English face while communicating in English. The literature explored indicates that very limited empirical studies conducted in the Arab world specify for assessing or even teaching suprasegmental features of phonology for Arab learners of English. The study found that Arab learners of English mispronounced some consonant English phonemes like, /p/, /v/,/r/, etc; some vowel sounds specifically front vowel, e.g. /e/, /3/,/, etc., and some three and four

consonants clusters like, /sks/, /xt/,etc. The source of such mistakes is considered to be the unavailability of such sounds and clusterization in their mother tongue, (Arabic). Moreover, the study found the Arab teachers of English didn't pay attention to teaching pronunciations specifically, suprasegmental features, stress, rhythm, intonation. It has been mentioned that both Arabic and English are stressed-time languages, Arab learners of English tend to stressed unstressed words, and syllabus and functional words, therefore, it is recommended that applying the top-down approach for teaching pronunciation starting by exposing their students to thought groups, to accustom them on intonation, rhythm of English instead of transferring their first language melody into English. It is recommended that teachers should not transfer to the next step, till students got accustomed to comprehending and try initiating the rhythm used by native speakers on thought groups. Next, teachers can transfer from the thought group into the focusing words. It is suggested at this time to train their students on the comprehending and producing the most important word in a thought group and work with them on the contraction strategies used in connective speech. Finally, teachers should motivate their students to notice how the peak sound in the focused group being lengthened and received the melody or change in the pitch. At this stage, teachers can train their students at some sounds like grammatical word endings and consonant clusters.

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7. You Tube links

7.1. Thought group

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHZIA0-G1sc>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yd24_1n-8PM

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5-SkNM6mzM>

Consonant sounds

/p/,/b/ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjvHyq5SsSQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmsRkAeNCYO>

/f/,/v/ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_NrAKuUyzc

/r/,/l/ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLXyFOJupbo>

Vowel sounds

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMM_hwyHxaI

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kur9zAMOkKc>

Consonant clusters

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxKUWoNfetE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmZxuGbv18>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CU3IHCRHbdI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bs0hFfJfQg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sz33j6DcsxQ>

Stress and Rhythm

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbcEiFTmkQo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUVGhF1fFig>

Connected speech

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70JZWxC9bKU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sw7zVvJE3Q>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGfOAVpEHIE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6D9C5AHZKkk>

grammatical word endings

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5T4zBYmO5Y>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TPe_x80Pgs