The Impact of colloquial Iraqi language on the pronunciation of English language learners

by
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Abstract

Pronunciation is considered as one of important features of spoken language. It is crucially important, as it is usually the first thing people notice about English language learners. The present study is a phonological one that tries to answer a nagging question asked by both Iraqi teachers and learners of English whether or not the colloquial Iraqi Arabic has an impact on the pronunciation of English and to find out the reasons behind the mispronunciation of Iraqi learners of English. To answer such a question, an experiment is administered at governmental Iraqi Secondary Schools for (100) learners: (50) boys and (50) girls at fourth/fifth class who are at the same age 16/17 years. The experiment includes two parts: a pretest of English proficiency and a protest which includes recording learners reading a Standard English text and a colloquial Iraqi one. Accurate pronunciation of Iraqi learners for English sounds either means they have acquired them (English sounds) well enough or they have similar sounds in their language or they are talented while inaccurate pronunciation means that interference or dissimilarity of sound system of two languages is the reason behind that. Contrastive linguistics and Errors analysis in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) are used to analyze the data. Gender, educational background and geographical area of the learners' are some factors that play a great role in their English pronunciation.

Keywords: pronunciation, phonological study, Contrastive linguistics, Errors analysis, Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

1. Introduction

Charles Carpenter Fries from the University of Michigan in the 1940s instigated the program of contrastive linguistics. Fries (1945: 9) contended that "the most effective materials [in foreign language teaching] are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner". Some years later, this project was put into practice by Fries' colleague Robert Lado (1957). The assumption that foreign language teaching can be improved by comparing the learner's native language with the language to be learned came to be known as the "Contrastive Hypothesis". Wardhaugh (1970) created the "strong version" of the CA hypothesis to describe the efforts to predict areas of difficulty that exist between languages. Wardhaugh maintained that the strong version was quite unrealistic. Thus, he created the term "weak version" of the CA hypothesis that resigns itself to explaining difficulties caused by interlingual differences strictly on an after the fact basis. The posteriori analysis of errors soon gained great popularity in the decade of the 70s. Wardhaugh (1970) makes a clear distinction between the strong and weak hypothesis of contrastive linguistics. The strong hypothesis states that the difficulties of the learner can be predicted by a systematic contrastive analysis and teaching materials can then be devised to meet these difficulties. The weak hypothesis claims no more than an explanatory role for contrastive linguistics: where difficulties are evident from the errors made by learners, then comparison between the mother tongue and the second language may help to explain them. Therefore, he advocated an interlingual form of error analysis. Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis have been commonly recognized as branches of Applied Linguistics Science. The main assumptions of Contrastive Hypothesis can be summarized as follows (cf. König & Gast 2009: 1):

 First language acquisition and foreign language learning differ fundamentally, especially in those cases where the foreign language is learnt later than a mother tongue and on the basis of the full mastery of that mother tongue.

 Every language has its own specific structure. Similarities between the two languages will cause no difficulties ('positive transfer'), but differences will, due to 'negative transfer' (or 'interference'). The student's learning task can therefore roughly be defined as the sum of the differences between the two languages.

 A systematic comparison between mother tongue and foreign language to be learnt will reveal both similarities and contrasts.

 On the basis of such a comparison it will be possible to predict or even rank learning difficulties and to develop strategies (teaching materials, teaching techniques, etc.) for making foreign language teaching more efficient

1.1 Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive analysis (CA) is the systematic comparison of two or more languages, with the aim of describing their similarities and differences. CA has often been done for practical/pedagogical purposes. The aim has been to provide better descriptions and better teaching materials for language learners. There is more to CA than this, however. When we compare, we often see things more clearly. CA was viewed as a means to predict and thereby circumvent the difficulties associated with learning a second language. Cook (1999:86) states CA is "most successful in the area of pronunciation", Felix (1980) speculates that at the phonological level L2 learners start with their L1 system (quoted in Ioup, 1984). It has been suggested that "studies of SLA have tended to imply that CA may be most productive at the level of phonology" (Richards; 1984: 204).

James (1980, 187) realizes the futility of trying to further our understanding of the second language learning process by relying on one approach: "I have no wish to vindicate CA at the expense of EA; each approach has its vital role to play in accounting for L, learning problems. They should be viewed as complementing each other rather than as competitors for some procedural pride of place". Carl (1971) maintained that Contrastive Analysis is a necessary component of a second language learning model which reliably forecasts that the speaker of an arbitrary first language is liable to produce grammatically deviant second language sentences, the structural descriptions of which will resemble those of analogous first language sentences.

1.2 Error Analysis

Error Analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make. It consists of a comparison between the errors made in the target language and that target language itself. Error analysis emphasizes the significance of learners' errors in second language. It is important to note here that Interferences from the learner's mother tongue is not only reason for committing errors in his target language. As Richards (1971) classified errors observed in the acquisition of English as a second language as follows: a) Overgeneralization, covering instances where the learners create a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structure of the target language; b) Ignorance of rule restriction, occurring as a result of failure to observe the restrictions or existing structures; c) Incomplete application of rules, arising when the learners fail to fully develop a certain structure required to produce acceptable sentences; d) False concepts hypothesized, deriving from faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language. Some errors can be attributed to weaknesses or failure of memory (Gorbet, 1979).He added that the theory of error analysis proposes that in order to learn a language, a person creates a system of 'rules' from the language data to which he is exposed; and this system enables him to use it. Corder (1974, p.125) stated that "The study of errors is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. In this respect it resembles methodologically the study of the acquisition of the mother tongue. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner and may give us indications as to the learning process." Richards in a study of English errors produced by Speakers of Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, French, Czech, Polish, Tagalog, Maori, and Maltese establishes a set of errors not due to the interference from the native language but due to what he calls "over-generalization, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules, and the building of false Systems and concepts". These errors he calls 'intralingual and developmental (Richards, 1970).

1.3 Difference between Error Analysis and Contrastive Analysis

Error analysis differs from contrastive analysis as follows:

1. Contrastive analysis starts with a comparison of systems of two languages and predicts only the areas of difficulty or error for the second language learner, whereas error analysis starts with errors in second language learning and studies them in the broader framework of their sources and significance.

2. EA unlike CA provides data on actual attested problems and so it forms a more efficient basis for designing pedagogical strategies.

3. EA is not confronting with the complex theoretical problems like the problem of equivalence encountered by CA.

4. EA provides a feedback value to the linguist, especially the psycho-linguist interested in the process of second language learning in ascertaining:

    a. Whether the process of acquisition of first language and second language learning are similar or not?

    b. Whether children and adults learn a second language in a similar manner or not?

5. EA provides evidence for a much more complex view of the learning process- one in which the learner is seen as an active participant in the formation of and revision of hypotheses regarding the rules of the target language.

6. CA studies Interlingual error (interference) whereas EA studies intralingual errors besides Interlingual.

2. Literature Review

Acquisition of second language (L2) phonology is possibly the most challenging task for L2 learners. As a result, many tend to preserve a foreign accent in their speech even after they have attained a high level of proficiency in other aspects of L2 use. Many studies in the field of (SLA) discussed the factors that hinder achieving native-like pronunciation among foreign languages learners in general (O'Connor, 1980; Yule, 1996).

2.1 Studies on the Perception of Arab Learners of English

A recent study that investigates the interference of L1 in the acquisition of vowels is conducted by Nikolova (2010) in which she deals with the differences in the phonological systems of Arabic and English and their effect on the acquisition of vowels by EFL learners from Saudi Arabia. This study is limited to the investigation of 10 vowels in American English. Another study that examined the perception and production of Standard Southern British English (SSBE) vowels by Syrian Arabic EFL learners was conducted by Almbark (2012). Saadah (2011) remarked that English and Arabic, in general, differ in the type of contrast implemented in the vowel system. Zarka's study (2013) concentrates on English pronunciation errors made by native Arab speakers, while they are conversing, delivering speeches or giving presentations. Paying keen attention to these errors and attempting to correct them will affect the process of second language acquisition and learning.

2.2 Studies inside Iraq

Mahdi's study (1985) is a comprehensive study concentrates on the sound system, morphology and syntax in Basra. The area under investigation comprises urban Basra and the suburbs, districts, (nawähi) outskirts and provinces (aqdiya) around it, namely from al-Fau at the head of the Shat al-Arab to al-Härtha, when the two rivers Tigris and Euphrates now meet (the Euphrates having changed its course from where it used to meet the Tigris at al-Qurna) Al-Siraih (1977, p. 32). Kareem's study (2014) is concerned with sound perception and recognition of English vowel shortening in isolated words as well as in sentential contexts as recognized by Iraqi learners of English. Shortening vowel is a process in which a long vowel in potentially occurring CVVC syllable shortens as CVC(Kager et al, 1999, 88).

2.3 The languages of Iraq and the origin of Iraqi Arabic

Arabic was the only official language of Iraq until the 2003 invasion when Kurdish was officially added as a second language in 2004 by the new constitution, and when Assyrian Neo-Aramaic (also known as Syriac, with Chaldan and Ashuri as its main varieties) and South Azeri (also known as Turkmen) gained official status as regional languages (Jastrow, 2005). In addition to the variety of languages spoken in Iraq, Arabic speakers are known for a local dialect variety called Iraqi, or 'Mesopotamian' Arabic (see: Van Ess, 1938; O'Leary, 1925; Blanc, 1964; Jastrow, 1994; Versteegh, 2001). Mesopotamian is one of five major Arabic dialects according to Versteegh (2001: 145); these are: dialects of the Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamian dialects, Syro-Lebanese dialects, Egyptian dialects, and Maghreb dialects. Each of the areas containing these dialectal groups was arabicised in two separate processes, the first resulted in innovative sedentary dialects and the second "brought into being local rural and nomadic dialects", which in a way preserved some features of Old Arabic (ibid: 145). Mesopotamia underwent two stages of 'arabicisation'. The first was as early as the Arab conquest around military centres founded by invaders such as Basra and Kufa where urban varieties of Arabic emerged; the second was a 'layer' of Bedouin dialects of tribes migrating from the peninsula (ibid: 156).

Present-day Iraqi Arabic shows cross-linguistic influence in the form of many loan-words from such languages as Persian, Turkish (due to having borders with Iran and Turkey respectively), and English (due to the British invasion during the past century, but also due to the dominant use of English in technology and the world wide web). Other dialectal influences are due to being in contact with neighbouring Arab countries such as the Gulf countries in the South and South West, i.e. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, plus others to the West and North West, i.e. Jordan and Syria. Some of the vocabulary unique to IA speakers has been traced back to languages of ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia such as of Sumer and Akkad.

2.4 Dialectal divisions in Iraq: qeltu vs. gelet

Detailed investigations of Iraqi Arabic(IA) have led to the identification of distinctive features between regions of Iraq or communities within one region. The main distinction so far has been made on the basis of two dialectal types: qeltu (or qiltu as is referred to in some of the literature) and gelet (or gilit, also used in some of the literature). The words qeltu and gelet are derived from qultu meaning 'to say' in the first person singular of the present perfect tense in Standard Arabic. The word qultu is used as a representative of a vast number of vocabularies containing the Arabic phoneme [q] that are realised differently among each dialectal group, with [q] and [g] as the main variants. In the case of the qeltu-group, speakers tend to mostly preserve the Classical Arabic[q] and only use [g] in loan-words; whereas in the case of the gelet-group, speakers tend to use [g] in most contexts but also preserve the [q] in many Classical Arabic origin words.

The distinction between the two dialectal groups was originally made by Blanc (1964) when he investigated the dialect of Baghdad and found that it varied across religious communities rather than regions. Blanc (ibid) found three types of communities of speakers who, although living in the same city, had dialectal differences, namely the Muslims (Sunnis and Shiites), the Christians and the Jews. The division was made on the basis of one main characteristic Blanc (ibid: 3) refers to as "the unusually profound and sharply delineated dialectal cleavage that divides these populations into three nonregional dialect groups, corresponding to the three major religious communities". He (ibid) found that the non-Muslim groups, Christians and Jews, had slight differences and shared most characteristics; thus they were deemed to belong to the same qeltu dialectal type; while all Muslims of Baghdad shared the same gelet dialectal type.

From the speech of the few non-Baghdadi speakers he also investigated, Blanc (1964) found the same qeltu-gelet pattern existed in other Iraqi areas. However, the divisions beyond Baghdad included geographical as well as religious distinctions, which led Blanc (ibid: 181) to divide the whole of Iraq on the basis of the above classification into two linguistic areas corresponding roughly to the geographical areas bordered by sides of the two rivers: Upper Iraq and Lower Iraq. These two areas are also referred to as Upper Mesopotamia and Lower Mesopotamia, to cover the areas upper to the two rivers and those from Tikrīt [tɪkriːt]) to the Persian Gulf, respectively. Two main dialectal groups exist within both areas. The first group, the qeltudialects, are spoken by the non-Muslim population of Lower Iraq and the sedentary population (Muslim and non-Muslim) of Upper Iraq (mainly all people of Mosul, ʻAna ([ʕaːnɛː]), Tikrīt and Hīt ([hiːt])); whereas the second group, the gelet-dialects, are spoken by the Muslim population (sedentary and non-sedentary) of Lower Iraq and by the non-sedentary populations in the rest of the area (ibid: 5-6). According to Blanc (ibid: 6), the qeltu dialects are related to the Aleppo region dialects, while the gelet ones are related to the Bedouin dialects of the Shāmīya ([ʃaːmɪɛː]) and those of Kuwait, Khūzistān ([xuːzɪstaːn] and the Persian Gulf area. However, despite the vast variation of boundaries separating communities and the existence of non-Arabic communities on the land, Blanc (1964: 5, 181) considered the area as sharing one Mesopotamian Dialect, denoting that it covers "all the Tigris and Euphrates valleys and the areas between them, from the sources on the Anatolian plateau down to the Persian Gulf". A detailed account of the phonological features of IA in general.

In the study of Southern Iraq and Khūzistān, Ingham (1997: 13-14) offers what he considers as a more detailed classification of the gelet dialects, dividing them into two types: Southern gelet, which refers to characteristics of speakers of Basra, Nasiriya and ʻAmara; and Central Mesopotamia, which includes characteristics of speakers of Baghdad, Mussayab, Hilla and Karbala (also referred to in Bellem, 2007: 229). From an early stage of investigation when Ingham (1969) studied the dialects of Khūzistān, he found links between these dialects and the one across the Shaṭṭ al-ʻArab ([ʃaṭˤalʕaɾab]) towards Arabia. Ingham (1997: 31) found phonological, morphological and lexical patterns which correlated with regional and occupational (nomadic vs. sedentary) factors.

3. Methodology

An experiment has conducted by the researcher that includes two tests. A pretest, which is a TOFEL test, measures the learners' proficiency in English language. Harries (1969: 11) offers the view that when one is designing a test for subjects who share the same L1, CA is undoubtedly useful of various patterns of the TL. Thus a pretest is designed according to what has mentioned in the theoretical section while the posttest consists printed texts for colloquial Iraqi language and a Standard English language which are recorded.

3. 1 Data Analysis Procedure

The data is grouped and categorized in tables according to the error type made by the learners and the repair strategy they adopted. In order to cater for pronouncing the words they are learning, the learners of a second language adopt some strategies in their interlanguage phase to help them pronounce these words properly. These repair strategies describe the mechanism of how they avoid these target lexical items or phonemes. Thus they make phonological changes that lead to changes in the syllable structure. In this section a brief description of some of repair strategies will be shown as below:

1. Vowel insertion occurs when a learner inserts a vowel between consonant clusters. The word 'amazed' is a good example. The proper pronunciation of it is [ə meizd], while many learners pronounce it as [əmei zid] adding the vowel [i] to split the final consonant clusters and stress shift depending on their competence of the Arabic syllable structure and stress patterns.

 2. Metathesis is a strategy in which the positions of the phonemes are reordered, as in the word ''ask'' when it is pronounced as [a:ks] or the word ''documentary'', is pronounced as [diməktri].

 3. Prothesis is the insertion of a vowel at the beginning of a syllable containing a consonant cluster. This is a common repair strategy employed by native speakers of Arabic learning English. It usually occurs in word chunks where a word ends with a consonant and the next word begins with a consonant too. The Arabic speaker here finds it difficult to maintain pronouncing adjacent consonant clusters in connected speech. The combination of ''three plays'' is a perfect example when it is pronounced in some Arabic dialects as [Ɵri: epleiz] not [Ɵri: pleiz].

3.2 Subjects

An experiment has been conducted for 100 subjects. They belong to Governmental Basra Secondary Schools in Iraq. They are 15/16 years old. (35) Subjects are in fifth scientific branch and (65) are in fourth scientific one. The classification of the subjects is illustrated according to their gender, number and class.

Table (1) Subjects' characteristics

Gender	Fourth Class	Fifth Class
Males	40	10
Female	25	25
Total	65	35

3.3 Tools

The researcher makes use of two printed texts. One is colloquial Iraqi language whereas the second is written in Standard English Language. A mobile recorder is also used to record their voices while they are reading.

4. Data analysis:

Tables are used to analyze words that are pronounced incorrectly.

Table (2) shows vowel insertion in the words:

	Input	Output	Repair Strategy	Err. No.	Per.
1	əmeizd	əmei zid	Vowel insertion [i] The learners insert the short vowel[i] in the consonant cluster at the end of the word. They use this strategy because they don't have consonant cluster in their mother tongue standard and colloquial one. They emphasized on the final sounds. More the half of learners do this strategy and this means it is a phenomenon that needs to be studied.	56/100	56%
2	ʤoind	ʤoi nid	Vowel insertion[i] The learners insert the short vowel[i] in the consonant cluster at the end of the word. They divide the word from one syllable into two syllable word.	44/100	44%

| 3 | imbærst | impær sid | Consonant substitution[b]→[p]+vowel insertion[i]
 Here most of the learners substitute [b] with [p] in second syllable. It is an interesting point in the sense that Standard Arabic language has the voiced stop consonant [b] but not voiceless stop [p]. But through the investigation in this study, the researcher has found out that [p] is exist in colloquial language. It is used in loan words (Mahdi: 1985). It is an acceptable pronunciation if the learner pronounced the word with [b] or [p] such as „parda" which means curtain or ''barda'' which means a wave of cold. AlKhuli(1983) noted that Arab students of English confuse [p] with [b] and that is linked to the influence of mother tongue, so their tongue get stiff with their L1 sounds and they commit such errors until the mastery of L2 sounds.
 Another strategy the learners use is vowel insertion where they inserted [i] in the final consonant cluster and they emphasize it in their pronunciation. Their foreign accent clearly appears in its pronunciation. | 71/100 | 71% |

Table (3) shows Metathesis

	Input	Output	Repair Strategy	Err. No.	Per.
1	a:sk	a:ks	Metathesis Here the learners use this strategy unconsciously. They pronounce [k] before [s] while it is vice versa. They think they pronounce the word correctly. They do this strategy because they have the same phenomenon in their colloquial language. Actually it is found in the pronunciation of some people who come from rural areas of another governorate. An example of their pronunciation is صگد ← صدگ Though this phenomenon very rare happens and the percentage is very little but it is found in the colloquial language of the Iraqi learners.	4/100	4%
2	dokjuməntri	diməktri	Changing vowel + deleting consonant + Metathesis Here the two learners have changed [o]→[i] then they delete the consonant sound [n] later they brought [m] before [k]. In other words [m] precedes [k] in pronunciation.	2/100	0.02%
		di:məktri	Metatheis Here the learner has done the same action of the previous ones but with one change that is s/he used a long vowel [i:] instead of short one [i] in the first syllable.	1/100	0.01%
		Different pronunciation	Nine of the learners use different pronunciations. Each one has pronounced it differently and this means they are not familiar with this word.	9/100	9%
		Not		1/100	1%

		pronounced			
3	Latifa	left	Metathesis Here the learners have brought [f] before [t] in their pronunciation.	2/100	0.02%
		laif	Changing short vowel into diphthong + deleting consonant	1/100	0.01%
		lætivə	Consonant substitution [f]→[v] Here the learner has changed the voiced labiodentals consonant [f] which is found in their standard and colloquial language with voiceless labiodentals consonant [v] that is not found in their standard language but very rare in variation of colloquial language.	1/100	0.01%

Mahdi (1985:9) mentioned that [f] is usually substituted for [v] in loanwords, although the original sound is sometimes retained by educated speakers such as:

tilfizyoon   television

fiitaamiin or viitaamiin   vitamin

fiiza or viiza   visa

Table (4) shows Prothesis

	Input	Output	Repair Strategy	Err. No.	Per.
1	Өri: pleiz	Өri: epleiz	Prothesis Here the learner inserts a short vowel sound [e] before the consonant clusters [pl-]. Just one learner has used this strategy.	1/100	1%
		i Өri: pleiz	Prothesis Here the learner inserts a short vowel sound [i] before the first word which starts with consonant clusters [Өr-]. This means it is difficult for him to pronounce two consonant sounds come one after another so s/he has used this strategy to make the pronunciation easy for him/her. Arabs depend more on their diacritic system to insert vowels or to add stress to words, especially in connected speech.	1/100	1%

Table (5) shows another problematic area of Iraqi learners in English pronunciation

	Input	Output	Repair Strategy	Err. No.	Per.
1	æktʃli	ok təli	Consonant substitution English has a deep orthography system in which the relationship between letters and sounds is not a one to one relationship. In other words, a group of letters might represent only one sound as in (-tu-) or(-tio) making the sounds [ʧ] , [ʃ] respectively.	24/100	24%

	Input	Output	Repair Strategy		
2	Pro fi ʃ nəl	Pro fis nəl	Consonant substitution	11/100	11%

Table (6) shows the different realizations for one letter (a)

	Input	Output	Repair Strategy	Err. No.	Per.
1	O :l	ə:l	Vowel change one letter is represented by different sound articulations	10/100	10%
		a:l	Vowel change	8/100	8%
		il	Vowel change	5/100	5%
2	wont	wənt	Vowel change	11/100	11%

Conclusion

Many linguists and researchers on (SLA) concluded that the English pronunciation problems among speakers of other languages are the same but it is according to each language background. Arabic language is among them. The results of CA should be regarded as raw materials that have no direct use in the classroom. These results can be processed and used in preparing teaching materials or companion and complementary materials for the teaching of pronunciation, preparing pronunciation tests, and diagnosing areas that need much time and energy. Finally, it should be reiterated that neither all differences cause problems, nor all problems happen because of the differences. Nevertheless, this study claims that although the foreign language learners are not exposed to sufficient L2 input, they still have access to the phonology, syntax, and structures of the L2 through direct teaching.

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