

WHY THE ARAB LEARNERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMMIT ERRORS IN PRONUNCIATION AND GRAMMAR : A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO THE STUDY

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Abstract

This paper makes a psycholinguistic approach to observe and analyze why the Arab learners of English language commit errors in pronunciation and grammar. It also presents the suggestions.

First, it phonologically analyzes the English phonotactics in the English of Arab learners of English as a foreign language to determine the types of pronunciation difficulties they encounter. More specifically, it investigates the types of declusterization processes found in their interlingual communication and the sources of such processes. The results of this study demonstrate that Arab learners of English unintentionally insert an anapestic vowel in the onset as well as in the coda of certain English syllables. Results also show that the major reason for declusterization processes is the mother tongue influence.

In order to overcome such difficulties, this paper suggests a new approach for teaching and learning English language syllable structure system.

Secondly, it focuses on the errors committed in grammar by analyzing it psycholinguistically.

Objectives And Methodology

This study aims at:

1. Identifying ,classifying, and analyzing errors of insertion made by Arab learners of English in the area of pronunciation,
2. Finding out the possible sources of these errors, and
3. Suggesting teaching procedures that help teachers and students overcome the areas of difficulty.

-Methodology:

This study follows a psycholinguistic approach to analyse the errors and mistakes committed by Arab learners of English language in pronunciation and grammar.

- Participants of the study :

This study is conducted by observing the performance of B.A. Ist and IInd year English language learners in the College of Arts and Sciences Kasr Al-Khiyar ,Al-Margib University . These students were scrutinized for committing errors in pronunciation and grammar specific to Arab students .

INTRODUCTION

The ultimate goal of most foreign language learners is to attain native like fluency. They want to be indistinguishable from native speakers. However, for many learners, this dream has remained a dream and has not come true especially in the area of pronunciation as native speakers usually identify them as non-native speakers because of their accent. A large number of foreign language learners believe that the main difficulty they encounter when speaking the foreign language is pronunciation and consider this difficulty as the main source for their communication problems (Altaha, F 1995: 34).

English occupies a high status among world international languages, as it has become the language of diplomacy, trade, communication, technology and business. Thus, learning English provides the person with an advantage as an active participant in today's world, opening new horizons to a better future (Cook, V.J. 1992: 140).

English as an international language has been taught in almost all countries in the world. In Libya English is a foreign language which is a compulsory subject to be taught in all schools from lower secondary to upper secondary schools to under-graduate students in universities ;even in elementary schools. However, we have seen that the proficiency in English of secondary school graduates still creates disappointment among teachers themselves as well as parents. The unsatisfying quality of English in Arab countries of course is related to different variables.

we have tried to shed light on some of these variables here .That is to say, the causes behind the errors committed in pronunciation and grammar in English language by the Arab learners.

The importance of investigating pronunciation and grammar difficulties stems from the fact that, it stands as an obstacle in communication. However, it is necessary, in this research, to find out why the aforesaid learners face difficulty in the acquisition of the phonological system and grammatical structure of any non-native language (English).

1.ERRORS IN PRONUNCIATION AND ITS CAUSES

Errors in pronunciation of any non-native speaker of any language is mostly impeded by the influence of mother tongue .However, the Arabic and English phonological systems vary extensively, not only in the range of sounds used, but also in the relative importance of vowels and consonants in expressing meaning. While English has 22 vowels and diphthongs to 24 consonants, Arabic has only eight vowels and diphthongs to 32 consonants.

| | | | |
|---|----|---|-----|
| أ | A | د | Dd |
| ب | B | ت | Tt |
| ث | T | ذ | Dhh |
| ج | Th | ر | 'A |
| ح | J | ز | R |
| خ | H~ | س | F |
| ك | Kh | ش | Q' |
| د | D | ص | K |
| ذ | Dh | ض | L |
| ر | R | ط | M |
| ز | Z | ظ | N |
| س | S | ع | H |
| ش | Ch | ف | Ou |
| ص | Ss | ق | Y |

1.1 Consonant Clusters

English has far more consonant clusters than Arabic. Some initial two-segment clusters which Arabic does not have corresponding equivalents to, include: pr, pl, gr, thr, thw, sp. The three-segment initial consonant clusters are entirely absent in Arabic, e.g., clusters such as spr, skr, str, spl. Faced with the challenge of such consonant clusters, Arabic speakers often insert short vowels in order to "assist" pronunciation in the following manner:

| | | | | |
|------------------|----|-----------------|-----|---------------|
| <i>'perice'</i> | or | <i>'pirice'</i> | for | <i>price</i> |
| <i>'ispring'</i> | or | <i>'siring'</i> | for | <i>spring</i> |

The range of consonant clusters appearing at the end of words is also much smaller in Arabic. In dramatic contrast to English, which has 78 three-segment clusters and fourteen four-segment clusters occurring at the end of words, Arabic has none. Again, faced with such terminal clusters, Arabic speakers tend to insert short vowels to assist pronunciation:

| | | |
|-------------------|-----|-----------------|
| <i>'arrangid'</i> | for | <i>arranged</i> |
| <i>'monthiz'</i> | for | <i>months</i> |
| <i>'nexist'</i> | for | <i>next</i> |
| <i>'sikas'</i> | for | <i>six</i> |
| <i>'lookas'</i> | for | <i>looks</i> |

1.2 Insertion of /ɪ/ in the onset

In all the following English monosyllabic words, the onset consists of three consonants; actually, such combinations pose difficulties for Arab learners of English as their native dialect does not allow clusters of the type CCC initially. As a result, they insert the high front short vowel /ɪ/ which declusterizes the clusters to ease their pronunciation. What can be inferred here is that insertion is a rule governed process as all participants insert the above vowel after the first member of the consonant cluster.

1. /sɪblʌʃ/ *splash*
2. /sɪblɪ:n/ *spleen*
3. /sɪkrɪ:n/ *screen*
4. /sɪbrʌɪt/ *sprite*
5. /sɪtreɪn/ *strain*
6. /sɪkrʌp/ *scrap*
7. /sɪtreɪt/ *straight*
8. /sɪpreɪ/ *spray*

Teachers often encounter examples of such pronunciations, which also can carry over into the spelling of such English words by students whose mother tongue is Arabic.

1.3 Influence of English Spelling on Pronunciation

While there are no similarities between the Arabic and English writing systems, Arabic spelling within its own system is simple and virtually phonetic. Letters stand directly for their

sounds. Arabic speakers attempt, therefore, to pronounce English words using the same phonetic methodology. Add to this the salience of consonants in Arabic and you get severe pronunciation problems caused by the influence of the written form:

'istobbid' for stopped (the 'p' sound does not exist in Arabic)
'forigen' for foreign.

1.4 Rhythm and Stress

Arabic speakers can have problems grasping the unpredictable nature of English word stress since Arabic is a stress-timed language. In stark contrast with English, word stress in Arabic is predictable and regular. The idea that stress can alter meaning, as in con'vict (verb) and 'convict (noun) is utterly foreign. Arabic words that are spelled identically often appear, and mean completely different things, but will have dissimilar short vowels which count as sounds and change the meaning altogether.

Phrase and sentence rhythms are similar in both Arabic and English languages, and cause few problems. Primary stresses occur more frequently in Arabic while unstressed syllables are pronounced more clearly. As with English, the unstressed syllable has neutral vowels, but such vowels are not 'swallowed' as in English. Arabs reading English often avoid contracted forms and elisions, and read with a rather heavy staccato rhythm.

1.5 Intonation

Intonation patterns in Arabic are similar to English in contour and meaning. However, Arabic speakers use rising tones rather than structural markers to denote questions, suggestions and offers far more frequently than English-speakers, and this practice is often carried over into the spoken English of Arabic speakers.

When reading aloud however, as opposed to talking, the Arabic speaker tends to intone or chant, reducing intonation to a low fall at the ends of phrases and sentences. Speech making, news reading and religious recitation are all quite different in rhythm and intonation from normal speech. Consequently, Arabic speakers called on to read aloud in front of a group may produce a very unnatural recitation because they see the process of formal reading as distinct from everyday speech.

In their attempt to identify problems that encounter Arab students of English at initial stages, Kharma & Hajjaj (1989) present four major areas of difficulty. As far as consonants are concerned, they presented two problematic issues. First, certain pairs are confused by learners such as /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ as in chair and share ; /v/ and /f/ as in fast and vast; /dʒ/ and /ʒ/ as in /dʒɑ:/ jar and /ʒɑ:/ jar; /p/ and /b/ as in pin and bin; /ŋ/ and /n/ as in /sɪŋ/ sing and /sɪŋ/ sing; /s/ and /θ/ as in sin and thin. Second, learners insert a short vowel to break down the long consonant clusters to pronounce them as in /sɪprɪŋ/ for spring; /wɪʃɪd/ for wished; /ɑ:skɪd/ for asked (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989: 14). In vowels, two types of difficulty are identified. First, certain diphthongs are replaced by other sounds due to L1 interference for example, /eə/ → /eɪ/; /ʊə/ → /u:/; /ɪə/ → /ɪ:/;

and /əʊ/ → /ɔ:/. Second, the distinction between certain pairs of vowels as in /ɪ/ and /e/ as in sit and set; /ʌ/ and /ɒ/ as in luck and lock; /əʊ/ and /ɔ:/ as in coat and caught (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989, p. 16).

Analyzing the pronunciation errors experienced by five Saudi learners of English as a second language, Binturki (2008) investigates the difficulties in producing the voiceless bilabial stop /p/, the voiced labiodental fricative /v/, and the alveolar approximant // especially what word environments are most difficult for participants. His results show that participants have difficulty with the three-targeted consonants, but the greatest is with /v/. The study also finds that difficulty is closely related to certain word positions, so all the three sounds are used more accurately when occurring in word initial position than in word final position.

Tushyeh (1996) investigates errors committed by Arab learners of English at various linguistic levels. At the phonological level, participants have a difficulty in distinguishing the following pairs: /p/ and /b/, /f/ and /v/, and /ɪ/ and /e/.

Wahba (1998) focuses his study on problems encountered by Egyptian learners of English as a second language and concludes that certain phonological errors made are related to stress and intonation. These errors are interlingual ones; attributed to phonological differences between the sound systems of English and Arabic.

In order to see the influence of ones L1 on the acquisition of the L2 pronunciation, Barros (2003) identifies and analyzes the difficulties encountered by Arabic speakers when pronouncing English consonants. The participants were a group of Arabic speakers came from different Arab countries with different colloquial Arabic backgrounds. All participants were in contact with the target language group and culture after the age of puberty for at least four years. The results show that eight English consonants, namely, /ŋ/, /p/, /v/, /d/, /l/, /dʒ/, //, and /r/ are identified as problematic ones for Arabic speakers. The author also finds that interference of L1 seems to be the major factor contributing to pronunciation problems that might differ from one Arabic speaker to another, depending on the colloquial variety of Arabic they use.

1.6 Syllable Structures in Modern Standard Arabic(MSA):

It is necessary to have a quick look at the syllable structures in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and in English language.

In MSA, the syllable structure may be expressed by the following formula: CV(V)(C)(C). Therefore, the following syllable types are admissible:

- a. CV
- b. CVV
- c. CVC
- d. CVVC
- e. CVCC
- f. CVVCC

There is some difference between MSA syllable structure and that of the participants (Jordan) Ammani dialect of Arabic; for example, the syllable CVVCC does not exist in Ammani Arabic while CVCC is not a common one. Another syllable structure, namely, CCVC is found in Ammani Arabic but not in MSA.

English syllable may be expressed by the formula: (C)(C)(C)V(C)(C)(C)(C). The following syllables exist in English:

- a. V
- b. CV
- c. VC
- d. CVC
- e. CCV
- f. VCC
- g. CCVC
- h. CCVCC
- i. CCCV
- j. CCCVCC
- k. CCCVCCC
- l. CVCCCC

The errors found in this study fall under three types namely, (i) insertion, (ii) substitution and (iii) deletion. As far as the declusterization process is concerned, attention is paid only to the

insertion type .Therefore, substitution and deletion types are not tackled in this study. As mentioned above, learners native language interference is indispensable.

As evident from the above syllable structures, the systems are different. Many English syllables are predicted to be difficult for Arab learners since they do not exist in Arabic language. In Arabic language, onset is an obligatory element in the structure of any syllable and it should be always C which means that no word is allowed to begin with a vowel sound. In other words, no two consonants are allowed to meet in the beginning of any word without being separated by a

vowel. The coda of the syllable is optional in the above structures since some syllable types are open (i. e. ending in a vowel). So the coda can be zero, one or two consonants but not more.

Hence these given causes are enough to justify their errors and difficulties to gain proficiency in English language pronunciation.

2-ERRORS IN GRAMMAR AND THEIR CAUSES

The grammatical structure of Arabic, a Semitic language, is very different from that of Indo-European languages such as English. These great differences must be borne in mind while teaching to the Arabic speakers.

The basis of the Arabic language is the three-consonant root. A notion such as writing, cooking, or eating is represented by three consonants in a particular order. All verb forms, nouns, adjectives, participles, etc. are then formed by putting these three-root consonants into fixed vowel patterns, modified sometimes by simple prefixes and suffixes.

Example #1

| | | | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Root | /k/ | /t/ | /b/ | | (= <i>writing</i>) |
| <i>A person</i> | <i>who</i> | <i>does</i> | <i>this</i> | <i>for</i> | <i>a living</i> |
| <i>Passive</i> | <i>participle</i> | | | <i>katib</i> | (= <i>a writer</i>) |
| <i>Present tense</i> | <i>yaktubu</i> | | | <i>(=</i> | <i>written)</i> |
| | | | | <i>maktoob</i> | <i>(= he writes)</i> |

Example #2

| | | | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|---|
| Root | /j/ | /r/ | /h/ | | (= <i>wounding</i> or <i>cutting</i>) |
| <i>A person</i> | <i>who</i> | <i>does</i> | <i>this</i> | <i>for</i> | <i>a living</i> |
| <i>Passive</i> | <i>participle</i> | | | <i>majrooh</i> | (= <i>wounded</i> or <i>a battle casualty</i>) |
| <i>Present tense</i> | <i>yajruhu (= he wounds him)</i> | | | | |

There are over 50 such patterns. While not all forms are found for each root, the three-consonant root is the structural basis of the language.

It follows that Arabic speakers have great difficulty in grasping the confusing range of patterns for all words in English; that nouns, verbs, and adjectives follow no regular patterns to distinguish one from another, and may, indeed, have the same orthographic form. Such regularities of morphology as English has, particularly, in the area of affixes, will be readily grasped by Arabic speakers, e.g. -ing, -able, un-, etc.

2.1 Word Order

In formal written Arabic, the verb comes first followed by the subject. This convention is followed more in writing than in speech, and may transpose to English writing:

e.g. Decided the minister yesterday to visit the school.

2.2 Questions and Negatives; Auxiliaries

The auxiliary "do" has no equivalent in Arabic. Where no specific question word is used, a question is marked only by its rising intonation:

e.g. -You went to London?

-You like coffee?

Note that the Arabic for "where?" is ("Ayna " which is often confused with dialect "wayn?", "when".

Negatives are formed by putting a particle (laa or maa) before the verb:

e.g. He not play football.

2.3 The Verb to Be

There is no verb "to be" in Arabic in the present tense. The copula (am, is, are) is not expressed. It is therefore, commonly omitted in English by Arabic speakers, particularly in present progressive forms:

*e.g. The He boy teacher.
He going to school. tall.*

2.4 Pronouns

Arabic verb forms incorporate the personal pronouns, subject and object, as prefixes and suffixes. It is common to have them repeated in English as part of the verb:

e.g. John he works there.

2.5 Articles

There is no indefinite article in Arabic, and the definite article has a range of use different from English. The indefinite article causes particular problems as it is commonly omitted with singular and plural countables:

e.g. - This is book or This book (for - This is a book)

- He was soldier

When the English indefinite article has been learned by the Arabic speaker, it tends to be used wherever the definite article is not used:

e.g. - There are a books.

- I want a rice.

There is a definite article form in Arabic, though it takes the form of a prefix (al-). It is used, as in English, to refer back to indefinite nouns previously mentioned, and also for unique reference (the sun, on the floor, etc.)

The most common problem with the definite article arises from interference from the Arabic genitive construction:

English

John's book. (or The book of John.)

A man's work. (or The work of a man.)

The teacher's car. (or The car of the teacher.)

Arabic

Book John.

Work man.

Car the teacher.

Most errors of word order and use of articles in genitive constructions are interference of this kind:

e.g. - This is the book the teacher.

- This is the key door.

It follows that Arabic speakers have great difficulties with the Saxon genitive construction.

The special cases, in which English omits the article, e.g. in bed, at dawn, on Thursday, for breakfast, etc. usually take the definite article in Arabic:

e.g. - At the sunset we broke our fast.

- What would you like for the breakfast?

All days of the week, some months in the Muslim calendar, and many names of towns, cities and countries include the definite article in Arabic, which is often translated, appropriately or not:

e.g. - We lived in the Cairo.

- We had a flat in the Khartoum.

- On Monday we went to Cardiff.

2.6 Adjectives and Adverbs

Adjectives follow nouns in Arabic and agree in gender and number. This may cause beginners to make mistakes:

e.g. - He is man tall. (for He is a tall man.)

Adverbs are used less commonly in Arabic than in English and, except for adverbs of time; do not have a fixed pattern. Adverbs of manner are often expressed in a phrase: quickly is expressed "with speed", and dangerously as "in a dangerous way." There is frequent confusion between the adjective and adverb forms in English, and the adjective form is usually overused:

e.g. - He drives very dangerous.

2.7 Prepositions and Particles

Arabic has a wealth of fixed prepositions and particles, with both verbs and adjectives. Many of these do not coincide with their direct English translations:

e.g. to arrive to

to be short of

afraid from

angry on

near from

an expert by

Some prepositions have verbal force:

· "On" expresses obligation:

e.g. It is on me that I pay him.

"To" and "for" express possession:

e.g. This book is to me / for me. (for This book is mine.)

· "With" expresses present possession:

e.g. With me my camera. (for I have my camera with me.)

· "For" expresses purpose:

e.g. I went home for (I) get my book. (for I went home to get my book.)

2.8 The Active and Passive Voices

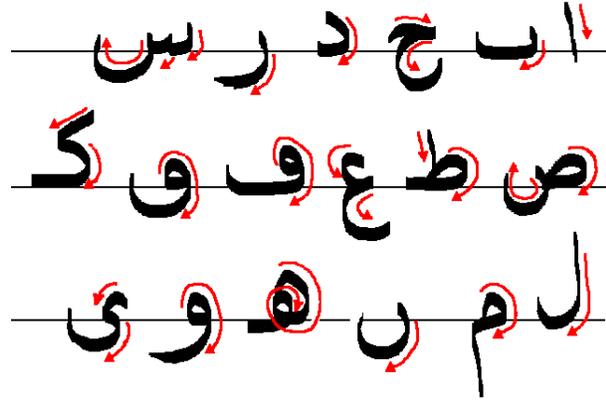
There are active and passive forms for all tenses in Arabic, but they are virtually identical, differing only in the (unwritten) short vowel. A passive verb in a text is therefore only recognizable as such from its context. The passive voice is used far less frequently used in Arabic writing than in English, and hardly at all in everyday speech. Thus while the concepts of active and passive will readily be understood, the uses and forms of the passive cause problems.

2.9 Vocabulary

The acquisition of vocabulary is particularly difficult for Arab learners of English. Only a minimal number of words in English are borrowed from Arabic. A small range of mainly technical words, such as computer, radar, helicopter, and television, have been taken into Arabic, but these are common to most languages. Arabic speakers have very few aids to reading and listening comprehension by virtue of their first language, and they should not be expected to acquire English at anything like the same pace as European learners.

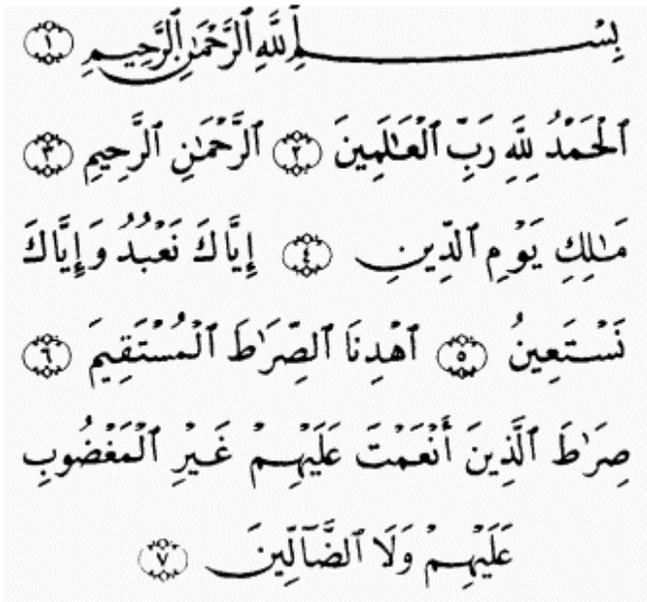
2.10 -Writing System (Orthography and Punctuation)

Arabic orthography is a cursive system, running from right to left. Only consonants and long vowels are written. There is no upper and lower case distinction, nor can the isolated forms of letters normally be juxtaposed to form words.



Arabic speakers must, hence, learn an entirely new alphabet for English, including a capital letter system; and then master its rather unconventional spelling patterns. All aspects of writing in English cause major problems for Arabic speakers, and they should not be expected to cope with reading or writing at the same level or pace as European students who are at a similar level of proficiency in oral English.

A Writing Sample



1. In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.
2. Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.
3. The Beneficent, the Merciful.
4. Master of the Day of Judgment.
5. Thee (alone) do we worship, and Thee (alone) we ask for help.
6. Show us the straight path.
7. The path of those whom Thou hast favored; not (the path) of those who earn Thy anger nor of those who go astray.

Opening sura (chapter) of the Qur'an

2.11 Punctuation

Arabic punctuation is now similar to western style punctuation, though some of the symbols are inverted or reversed, e.g. a reversed question mark and comma. The use of full stops and commas is much freer than in English, and it is common to begin each new sentence with And or So. Connected writing in English tends therefore to contain long, loose sentences, linked by commas and "ands."

3.SOURCES OF DIFFICULTY

The source of any error in language learning can be overgeneralization, omission - as a learning strategy, spelling-to-sound rules, stage of development or learners mother tongue interference. What is relevant to this study is (i) interference and (ii) stage of development. They are discussed below.

a) Interference

Learners of any language, whether L1 or L2, form hypotheses about the rules of the language they are learning. In L2 situation, they sometimes rely on their L1 background to form such hypotheses that will result in a successful or erroneous structure, depending on the feature or rule being transferred. As far as the English syllable structure is concerned, it is clear that certain English syllable types do not exist in Arabic and they pose difficulties for Arab learners in different ways. When looking at the structure of the English permitted onsets, one finds that the combinations: CC and CCC are going to be problematic ones for Arab learners of English in general. CC- does not pose any difficulty for these learners in particular as it is used in their colloquial variety of Arabic. English permitted codas are more problematic ones than onsets as the number of consonant members is relatively high. The following combinations are predicted to form difficulties for learners: CCC and CCCC. It is believed that vowels drag words, that is to say, without vowels it is difficult to produce a string of consonants, as it is difficult for any speaker to move from one place of articulation to another where the articulators are very close to each other, if not in contact. When having the required practice and experience, one will overcome such difficulties. Learners without such experience tend to break down the long combinations by inserting a short vowel somewhere within the cluster to declusterize it. This

declusterization splits the syllable into two syllables that ultimately makes the word easy to pronounce. Declusterization can be attributed to mother tongue negative influence, interference.

The interference of Arabic grammatical structure in English writing is quite normal, as grammatical structure of Arabic, a Semitic language, is very different from that of other Indo-European languages such as English. Arabic language is based on three-consonant root system. All verb forms, nouns, adjectives, participles, etc. are then formed by putting these three-root consonants into fixed vowel patterns, modified sometimes by simple prefixes and suffixes. Not only the irregular patterns of nouns, verbs and adjectives in English confuse the Arabic speakers also the word order ,questions ,negatives ,auxiliaries, verb phrases, verb to-be , pronouns ,articles, adverbs, prepositions and particles, active and passive voice and ,vocabulary .

b) Stage of Development

Language acquisition does not take place at one time but through stages. The learner constructs a system of abstract linguistic rules, which underlies comprehension, and production of the target language; this system is equivalent neither to L2 nor to L1 and referred to as Interlingual communication. At each stage, the learner modifies his/her Interlingual communication by adding rules, deleting rules, or restructuring the whole system. Such modifications are based on the learners' errors; and if the utterance is grammatical, there will be no need for any modification. Certain errors belong to beginning stages while others are found in other stages. Many errors produced by beginners are not found in the Interlingual communication of advanced learners, which means that learners need more time for certain features to master; a fact that reflects their stage of development in their Interlingual communication. One might attribute the pronunciation errors found in (1-20) to the participants stage of development.

Conclusions And Suggestions

As shown in this paper, it is evident that certain English syllables are difficult to learn for Arab learners of English. Although the literature suggested some pronunciation problems which were predictable regarding Arab learners of English in relation to some sounds, the main objective of this paper was to find out the causes that pose pronunciation and grammar difficulties for Arab learners and what makes them declusterize certain English clusters rather than others.

As mentioned above, this paper aims at three main objectives. In relation to objective one, participants did make pronunciation errors in which they declusterize certain target language clusters by inserting an anaptyctic vowel in the onset of some syllables as well as in certain syllable codas.

As far as the second objective is concerned, it is evident from the types of grammatical errors made by the participants that the sources of such difficulties were interference of participants L1 as well as their stage of development. The former was more prominent than the latter.

The third objective was suggesting some teaching procedures that may help teachers as well as learners overcome pronunciation difficulties. The following procedures might be of great assistance when dealing with pronunciation problems related to consonant sequences:

1. Introducing syllable patterns of learners' mother tongue,
2. Introducing short syllable patterns of English language first,
3. Introducing long syllable patterns of English language,
4. Making a comparison between the syllable patterns of both languages pinpointing the differences, and
5. Putting more emphasis on the foreign syllable patterns in order to eliminate the number of pre-edited errors.

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