# COMMON PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS
# IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Gennady Medvedev

Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

**Abstract**. *This study focuses on pronunciation difficulties of certain segmental features related to Oman's local English language teaching environment that includes language learners of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. The paper draws its conclusions from research findings, looks into some commonly mispronounced words, in and outside English language classrooms, explains the reasons behind such challenges and suggests some practical ideas to avoid common pronunciation problems in the context of the inclusive English language classroom.*

**Key words**: *pronunciation, practice, sounds, common errors*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This research looks into some methodological and educational implications of pronunciation practice and instruction in language teaching in the Omani context that may be relevant to other language specialists working in the Gulf countries and outside this region. The Omani linguistic landscape is extremely diverse and includes a variety of local accents and dialects of Arabic. To illustrate, for some students, who come to study at the tertiary level from the southern province of Dhofar, Arabic is not their mother tongue. This socio-regional diversity has its influence on the teaching paradigm in the English language classrooms in Oman (Al Issa, 2020, Mashani 2015).

Thus, the main objective of the paper is to share some professional experiences of implementing various methods and techniques in teaching Omani students, inclusive of their different ethnic and linguistic background, and to discuss further ways of improving pronunciation skills in a wider geographical and pedagogical context. The inclusive aspect of this objective correlates with Oman's education policy that emphasizes diversity in education for all (Al Musawi et al., 2022; Tuzlukova et al., 2023).

### 1.1. Background theory: common views

Kelly (2000) makes two clear statements about teaching pronunciation. Firstly, according to Kelly (2000), teaching pronunciation is often given inadequate attention. Secondly, when pronunciation becomes important, it is usually in reaction to a particular problem.

Dalton and Seidlhofer (2004) state that "it is the individual sounds which, to most learners, seem to be the most readily perceptible, most 'tangible' aspect of pronouncing a foreign language" (p. 143). On the same vein, Kelly (2000) highlights the reasons for pronunciation challenges that include the fact that there are certain sounds in English that learners do not have in their mother tongue. Kelly is also of the opinion that the learners' L1 may have certain sounds or their combinations that cannot be found in English. This idea is echoed by Swan & Smith (2013) who believe that "a learner's English is likely to carry the signature of his/her mother tongue, by virtue both of what goes wrong and what does not" (p. xi). In their opinion, this phenomenon is "most striking in the case of pronunciation" (ibid).

We often tend to make our initial judgement, which has formal or informal expression, by the way a person sounds. Pronunciation research, however, has lacked focus and attention on this point and often loses to grammar and vocabulary studies. The general trend has moved from the more classic audio-lingual method to its combination with the communicative approach to language teaching and its further integration into course books and ESL classroom. This change in attitude to teaching pronunciation is found in the research of Derwing and Munro (2005), Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010), and Grant and Brinton (2014).

According to Grant & Brinton (2014), today there is a clear move from just a native speaker model to a variety of models and standards depending on the listener and the context. Traditional stand-alone pronunciation courses are replaced by integration into the content of different skills areas, mostly listening and speaking modules. Thus, the key goal of a language learner is not a perfect and 'native-like' type of pronunciation, but rather comfortable intelligibility.

Ideal pronunciation in its classic definition may no longer be seen as the ultimate goal in the academic or daily life, unless the mispronunciation of certain words does not bring meaning across and causes serious strain to the listener. In a Power Point classroom presentation, a slide with 'jop' instead of 'job' may not be so misleading. However, this is not the case of a student who writes on a classroom whiteboard the abbreviation *MT* for 'empty' and submits a file with a front 'bag' instead of a front 'page'. Such instances can be misleading and cause serious cognitive difficulties. If disregarded, this may have some cognitive consequences outside the language classroom, e.g. a beautician's office in a busy local neighborhood was working with the sign of a 'Puty Center' for a while.

Kelly (2007) summarizes this concept by stating that "a learner who consistently mispronounces a range of phonemes can be extremely difficult for a speaker from another language community to understand" (p. 11).

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS AND FINDINGS

This study looks into common pronunciation problems which learners of English in Oman often face. Thus, Omani English language instructors at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) were approached with the following research questions:
- Which English words do Omani people commonly mispronounce?
- What are the reasons for such mistakes?
- What are the best ways to deal with this problem pedagogically, in and outside the language classroom?

The reason for choosing Omani language specialists as a target group for the survey is based on the assumption that the local instructors may be more aware of the linguisitc landscape in their region.
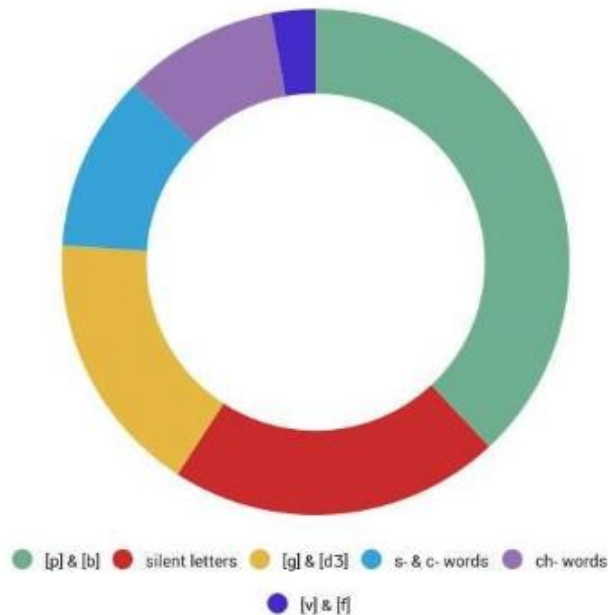


Fig. 1 Common pronunciation difficulties

As it can be seen in this donut chart, most respondents indicate the pronunciation of [p] and [b] sounds is the important issue to be considered, whereas the articulation of [f] and [v] sounds is the least topical. The respondents to the survey confirm what other scholars (Hewings 2004; Kenworthy 1999) see as typical pronunciation errors of Arabic speakers: [g] vs [k], [p] vs [b], and [gʒ] vs [g].

Let us look again into the second research question, which aims to find out the main reasons behind such pronunciation problems.

As we can see from Figure 2, the interference and influence of a learner's mother tongue is indeed the main reason for the common pronunciation errors of Omani learners of English. Silent letters and lack of awareness come second, followed by the specific phonological features of English and Arabic including its dialects.
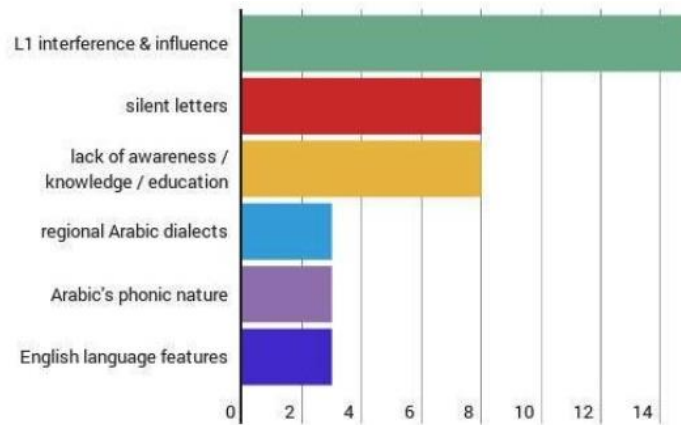
Fig. 2 Main reasons for pronunciation errors (summary)

The latter statement needs further clarification in Oman's regional context. Some local dialects of Arabic in Oman tend to pronounce the word جميلة 'jameel' (beautiful) not with an affricate [gʒ], but a plosive [g] or even [j] sound (e.g. when a speaker comes from the coastal town of Sur). Consequently, language instructors may witness this phenomenon in cases of such everyday words as *college*, *page*, *message*, *language* and *village*.

Finally, the researcher asked the informants about the steps that need to be taken to avoid these pronunciation challenges from a pedagogical and methodological perspective.



Fig. 3 The best ways to deal with pronunciation challenges (summary)

As we see in Figure 3, the least popular activity in Omani context is to sing a song and use a dictionary. Nonetheless, some approaches may be more culturally and pedagogically acceptable, which will be further discussed in more detail.

2.1. CLEAR PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS

In the Omani ELT context, one of the most vivid pronunciation problem is the articulation of the afficate [dʒ], which, as Kelly (2007) describes, "occurs when a complete closure is made somewhere in the mouth and the soft palate is raised" (p.49). In its visual definition, Karnevskaya (1990), as well as many other classic books on English phonetics and phonology, illustrate the nature of the contrastive pair [p] vs [b], with [p] being unvoiced and weak, and [b] being voiced and strong. However, today when a learner has access to online tools and platforms, there is no need to bring a mirror to the English classroom. Instead, as Hincks (2015) suggests, you should add more technology to learning pronunciation. Likewise, a students can observe the actual process of pronouncing sounds on different YouTube platforms, e.g. BBC Learning English. What is important in the local context is to be selective as to which pairs to contrast, i.e. the main focus in case of Omani learners will be the production of the sound [p] and [dʒ]. The main reason for this choice is that Arab learners of English often rely on their local dialect, and in the case of [dʒ] naturally choose [g] instead. What we need to raise is the students' awareness of the misundestanding which is likely to occur when they say 'gob' instead of 'job'or 'games' but not 'James'.

## 2.2. Pronunciation practice: 'people' and 'problem'

Although some linguists (e.g. Morley, 1991) claim that you cannot approach pronunciation instruction with a one-size-fits-all methodology, in this research we will look at some practical activities that should be effective and efficient for Arab learners of English. Such activities are pedagogically and methodologically sound and are aimed to improve the quality of the target segmentals. During our study, the Omani teachers of English submitted a concise word list of most frequently mispronounced English words.



Fig. 4 Most frequently mispronounced words (infographics)

As it can be seen in Figure 4, the most frequently mispronounced word in our study is the word 'people' which if followed by the runner-up word 'problem'. A closer look at the infographics will demonstrate that most of these words are based on the [p] and [b] differentiation.

What could be done about these particular problematic words? Hewings (2004) describes a popular technique of using a sheet of paper that the learners put in front of their mouth, and in the case of a strong consonant, they should feel a puff of air move the paper. In the case of the [p] vs [b], the author suggests we exaggerate the differences to develop student awareness. Kelly (2007) also suggests using diagrams and learner-friendly explanations to describe these pronunciation phenomena, e.g. sound chains and dictations. Yet another example of an activity focused on raising awareness can be found in Hancock's "Pronunciation Games" (2012). Here, the instructor chooses a rule and makes a list of words. The students follow on a model in small groups and contribute to the rule. Thus, our goal as language instructors is to make such activities not only aspirational but also inspirational.

There are common ways of dealing with uncommon pronunciation difficulties. In the case of the words *page*, *message*, *college*, *village,* and even the key word *language*, the sound [dʒ] has to be properly modelled, clarified and practiced to avoid confusion. One of the popular practical solutions to these pronunciation challenges is a set of relevant tongue twisters, in which *John enjoys his orange juice*, *Jack and Jill went up the hill,* and *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers*. Students can be very creative, and when asked, make their own tongue twisters with the target sound and may come up with something about Steve Jobs and his great job.

Some other less common techniques and practices, which are not to be found in classic course books, also prove to be effective in this region when they are based on the local culture. Let us take an example of the local way of reading poetry. A student will read a tongue twister line by line, and the class will echo the last word in each line.

Davis & Rinvolucri (1994) offer an extensive list of dictations. The type of dictation used in the author's class is a kind of a 'musical dictation' that involves group work. Students get in groups and receive a sheet of paper and just one pencil. The teacher can play a simple rhyme from YouTube and students pass the pencil around. When the 'music' stops, the student who has the pencil at that moment must write down the work the teacher dictates. Others can help with the spelling but they cannot touch the pencil.

Having received some sophisticated feedback from Omani colleagues at SQU, let us try to feed forward some more classroom ideas for language instructors working in GCC countries, including other areas around the world:

- Thumb-up and thumb-down (pointed with the right hand) resembles the sounds [b] and [p] and should be visual and meaningful enough for the learners during the speaking or writing class.
- Tongue twisters pronounced with a local poetic twist or produced by the students themselves.
- Key words to be shown and exposed, taught and clarified, drilled and practiced can be put not in a traditional vocabulary bag, but in a cone-shaped paper locally known as a 'mahroot'.
- To raise awareness of target phonemes for lower level students, a Google Translate feature can be helpful. For example, when the teacher demonstrates the difference between 'park' and 'bark' with instant translation on a classroom whiteboard.

3. Discussion: Perspectives of Pronunciation Pedagogy

As Derwing & Munro (2014) put it, "If we take a native-like accent as the goal, pronunciation teaching is destined to fall short" (p. 17). In the past, English major students would have to take traditional courses based on drills and stand-alone pronunciation activities with the goal of 'native-speakerism'. Furthermore, Hewings (2004) states that 'it is now generally accepted that the target of 'native-speaker' pronunciation is unachievable for the vast majority of learners of a second language' (p.13).

We as ESL teachers need to be aware of students' *accentedness* that refers to the extent to which an individual's speaking English differs from a particular variety of the English language. English as lingua franca allows variation and change. We should also allow certain changes in teaching concepts to move toward the enhancement of intelligibility that ought to be interwoven in the fabric of the language course we teach. The key focus should be given to the pronunciation problems that hinder intelligibility. This concept and a change in the teaching paradigm is supported by research findings and recommendations (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Derwing & Munro, 2010). Indeed, our learners have different needs, aspirations and abilities. Thus, the ultimate goal of language instructors is also to be selective in the means and culturally accepted teaching tools that can fix the common pronunciation problems.

4. Conclusion

Although pronunciation is a feature of speech, it is closely linked to the element of writing, in particular spelling. Hewings (2004) believes that the relationship between pronunciation and spelling is "often thought to be complex and chaotic" (p. 9). In a wider pedagogical context, let us refer to a quote from Dalton & Seidlhofer (2004) who raise a crucial question about where our students come from. These authors conclude that we must "take the learners' perspective into account with regard to their feelings about pronouncing a foreign language, their needs, their goals and to help them appreciate the relevance of pronunciation to real-life language use" (p.150). Common approaches and practice to eliminate common pronunciation difficulties may be of a universal nature and can be useful to many language specialists who nurture clear pronunciation. With proper practice with the emphasis on the learners' intelligibility, in and outside the language classroom, the common pronunciation problems discussed in this article should not be so common after all.

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