

Phonological Errors Encountered by Learners in Oman: Students' Performance Analysis and Teachers' Perceptions

Mohammad Ahmad Ibrahim Al-Shallakh¹

Abstract

Studies have shown that most Omani learners still face many difficulties in learning English despite years of learning the four language skills in different academic institutions. They also commit different types of errors in practising the language. Learners in Oman study Communication Skills Courses in the colleges to enrich their knowledge and communication skills. However, the learners still commit phonological errors in practising the English language inside and outside the classroom. This study investigates Omani students' language errors in a college in Oman. This study employs a mixed-method approach to collect data. The researcher conducts the initial stage of the Research and Development (R&D) methodology addressed by Gall et al. (2003). The researcher uses need analysis and unstructured interviews to investigate the learners' errors and the teachers' perceptions of these errors. The findings reveal that the learners suffer from different phonological errors and need help minimising them.

Keywords: *Phonology; Errors; Perception.*

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, English has become one of the most important languages to learn globally, especially in Arab countries. Since people live in a globalisation era, they are supposed to have the ability to speak and understand English significantly to communicate with people in different situations (Avillanova, 2016). Teaching students in academic institutions how to communicate using English as a foreign language has been generally undervalued. It was also misinterpreted as involving training and memorising the grammatical rules and memorising dialogues and sentences (Mallia, 2017). For many learners, the primary and essential goal of learning any language is to use this language effectively in different situations. Despite the recent applications and methods emphasising teaching the four language skills, there are still linguistic difficulties and issues in teaching and learning the deep structure of the language and in practising English in the classrooms deriving from the teacher, student, educational program and curricula as they are called the four fundamental components of education (McDonough, 2003). This situation lets the students recognise the gap between what they want and what they can say without committing linguistic errors. The mentioned also leads them to diagnose what they partially and do not know when suffering to create outputs (Mackey, 2016).

When conducting placement tests in the colleges' foundation programs to test the learners' level and output of English, the results show a big gap and a severe weakness in the language's deep structure (Al-Issa, 2007). They have increasing difficulty in

¹ Assistant Professor in the General Foundation Department, Head of the General Foundation Department at Sur University College, Oman

determining the linguistic parts of the spoken English language. In addition, they make many mistakes in pronouncing words and forming sentences correctly with the subject-verb agreement, and they do not know when to stress syllables in words and sentences. They continually make various linguistic errors (Al-Shallakh, 2016).

In Indonesia, Renaldi et al. (2016) primarily studied Indonesian students' phonological difficulties in learning English, especially consonant sounds. They started by observing talks, speeches, and presentations made by students. They averred that students faced many problems pronouncing certain words' sounds. The phonological issues were related to consonant sounds, mainly voiced and voiceless dental fricative, voiceless post-alveolar fricative, and voiced approximate alveolar sounds. The reason behind these errors was the weak phonological knowledge of the foreign language learners due to the shortage of this side in the instructional materials. So, some learning materials should be addressed to the learners according to their problems in learning English.

Pronunciation errors also occurred among Saudi learners. Hago and Khan (2015) stated that those learners also faced difficulty pronouncing consonants. They aimed to shed light on the cluster system of the English language. They used questionnaires, classroom observations and document collection to collect their needed data. Their results mentioned that Saudi learners had difficulties pronouncing eleven different consonants. These learners would unintentionally insert a vowel sound into English syllables to break up consonant clusters. Hago and Khan suggested some new pedagogical solutions to address these pronunciation problems. Therefore, the authors addressed the issue due to the shortage and the lack of instructional materials. Nasser and Hamzah (2018), who conducted their study in Saudi Arabia, mentioned that the reason behind the students' weaknesses in pronunciation was the lack of motivation to be independent learners in developing this skill and the wrong teaching method to be applied in the classroom. This teaching method focuses only on the teacher's role and neglects the students' role as the centre of the learning process. The authors recommended more work focusing on independent methods to help learners independently learn phonology outside the classroom.

Summarising the above points, Arab learners commit different phonetic errors in practising English in different situations. The students make these errors because they fail to grasp English's linguistic structures fully. Teachers also share the cause of this problem because they do not give the students the proper guidance. These issues come out as a result of gaps in the used syllabus. Most syllabi focus on teaching the four skills, but they ignore the importance of inserting a focus on linguistics in the syllabus (Hinkel, 2006). They also use different learning processes and do not allow the students to practice self-endorsement activities. Therefore, creating environments that will enable learners to internalise their violation reasons for the importance of learning English and help their autonomous regulation outside the classroom can help overcome some of these barriers.

The relationship between learning, learner, and curricula is always essential in language learning. The problems mentioned above in teaching and learning English as a foreign language occurred partially due to the textbooks used in schools and colleges. In teaching and learning English, many researchers (Ibe-Bassey, 2000; Ikot, 2008; Okwara, 2009; Omuna et al., 2016) shared the same point behind the problems of teaching English as a foreign language with current instructional materials. Learning materials help teachers to enhance the quality of instructions. If they are available in adequate supply, variety, and range, the curriculum's objectives are ultimately achieved, and the students will be proficient in English.

Problem Statement:

The teachers' perception of the learners' errors is a good indicator that the learners commit different types of mistakes, which are noticeable to the teachers (Yoshida, 2010). The association of the teachers' perceptions toward the Omani learners' errors in

language learning is crucial because it focuses on the learners' errors and gives more effectiveness in the recovery plans, which might minimise or solve these errors. Teachers' beliefs are far more influential than knowledge in determining how individuals organise and define tasks and problems. The teachers' perceptions can play a significant part in language learning. However, the extent to which the teachers' perceptions of the variables in light of linguistic differences and learners' language proficiency levels differ toward them remains a gap in the literature (Mohammadi & Yousefi, 2019)

According to the Omani Higher Education Ministry report (2016), learners' performance in the college is not satisfactory. It started a continuous need to improve, develop and propose the learning materials to meet Omani Vision 2040. The ministry encourages researchers, material developers, and designers to improve the Oman colleges and universities' used learning materials. Moreover, the selected college's report (2015) stated that the student's performance needs to be improved by implementing the learners in more activities and adding more efforts by the teachers to help weak learners.

Other researchers such as Sabtan and Elsayed (2019), Al-Yaqoobi (2016), and Al-Issa (2006) conducted many different types of assessments to evaluate the student's level of English. They found that learners face difficulties using English and commit phonological errors due to the lack of these fields in the learning materials. The shortcomings of the Omani English teaching system urge a change in this system. The learning method, such as the self-learning method, needs to be changed, and a supportive learning material needs to be created to match the new learning methodology. Therefore, this study's primary purpose was to explore the learners' linguistic difficulties in learning English. The study also aimed to determine the exact linguistic problem concerning phonology.

Research Objectives:

This study aims:

- 1- to determine the phonological problems faced by Omani EFL learners in learning English.
- 2- to determine the teachers' perceptions of the learners' phonological problems Omani EFL learners face in learning English.

Research Questions:

To outline a coherent study of the stated phenomena, the researcher sought to answer the following questions below to solve the mentioned problems:

1. What phonological problems are Omani EFL learners facing in a college in Oman?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions toward the learners' phonological errors that face Omani EFL learners in a college in Oman?

Research Design:

Initially, the researcher used the qualitative approach because it helped interpret and understand the meaning and intentions of peoples' interactions. Data used in the first part came from analysing the students' examinations and the teachers' interviews. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) described qualitative research as involving interpretation. This step enables the researcher to look at the larger picture to understand the phenomenon of the questions. This approach also helped the researcher look at relationships within the study, and it requires ongoing data analysis. Finally, qualitative research is exploratory and descriptive. It also allows the researcher to describe the participants' experiences.

On the other hand, the researcher used the quantitative approach to get data from the participants once they applied and used the new learning kit. This approach helped the researcher analyse data and describe these statistics. The researcher used this approach to highlight the point of the research problem by analysing the collected data from the

previous examinations. It also helped the researcher examine the teachers' questionnaires collected data, as clarified below in the research's steps.

Sample:

The researcher chose a convenient sample sampling technique for his study. Convenient sampling, or Accidental sampling, is one of the most common sampling procedures in foreign language acquisition studies. It is a nonprobability or nonrandom sampling, where the population members are easily accessible and available at a given time (Dornyei, 2011; Lisa, 2008).

This part describes the sample used to gather the needed data for the initial step of the Research and Development process by analysing 75 previous final examinations of a group of students who studied the Communication Skills Course in the college during the first semester of the Academic Year (2017/2018). Analysing the exams depended on the college's transcript and a detailed explanation to show the students' errors in detail. The researcher read the learners' answers and highlighted their linguistic errors based on the answer transcript, which shows the learners' level of English and determines the learners' specific committed errors. This number presents all students who took the final examinations of that year. This step also describes the second step of need analysis to conduct the unstructured interviews with the college teachers who teach this course. As explained later, the need analysis results were presented for the English teachers to rank them. The researcher also prepared an unstructured interview to get English teachers' perceptions of the students' phonological problems. The Self-learning Kit content was formulated based on the researcher's data from the selected group's examinations. The students' errors must also be highlighted to help teachers correct them (Usha & Khader, 2016).

Results

The first question was directed to investigate whether the students in a college in Oman commit phonological problems after completing the Communication Skills course. They also discovered and determined these linguistic errors and highlighted the importance and majority of them.

Therefore, in this research, the main aim of the Need Analysis step was to analyse and determine the phonological errors committed by the students in learning Communication Skills Course in a college in Oman in a previous semester. Thus, the first stage was collecting learners' examinations, then finding and identifying these errors, finally describing those errors and presenting an explanation.

After collecting the needed data from previous examinations, the following steps of error analysis were followed, defined and specified by Corder (1974). Firstly, each final examination paper was checked question by question to ascertain the previous semester's selected sample's phonological errors. The researcher checked some elements' omission, selection, addition, or disorders in the examinations.

Thus, the researcher found errors were put under different categories using this coding, and the data were presented in tables for better understanding. The researcher categorised the phonological errors into eight ranking groups, starting with number one, which presented the highest number of errors committed by the students, while number eight presented the students' least number of mistakes. This ranking helped the researcher focus on the students' most repeated errors.

The first research question was directed to determine Omani learners' phonological problems in learning English. Again, the last step of error analysis was the final table that presented the ranking of the phonological errors of the students' mistakes, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1 The Phonological Errors Committed by the Students

Areas of Phonological Errors	Students' Errors	Rank
1-Pronouncing /p/ and /b/ sounds	71	3
2-Pronouncing past tense sound /d/, /t/, and /id/	77	2
3-Pronouncing /s/ and /z/	91	1
4-Pronouncing long vowels	18	7
5-Pronouncing /f/ and /v/ sounds	42	6
6-Intonation errors	17	8
7-Stress errors	29	4
8-Syllable errors	32	5

- Legends: 1=more errors / 8=less errors

Table 1 clearly shows that the highest kinds of committed phonological errors in front of the students' faces are 'pronouncing the sounds /s/ & /z/' and 'pronouncing the past tense sounds /d/, /t/ & /id/'. These two areas of minimal pairs are ranked as numbers one and two in the highest points. Pronouncing the /p/ and /b/ sounds is the third level of these problems. The 'stress errors' and 'syllable errors' are ranked four and five. To be ranked sixth, these errors were followed by 'pronouncing /f/ and /v/ sounds'. The last two errors are 'pronouncing the long vowels' and 'the intonation' in the seventh and eighth positions on the phonological side.

The second question was directed to investigate the teachers' perception of the learners' errors in the previous section of this chapter. The data collection process describes analysing the examinations and conducting the unstructured interviews with the teachers who used to teach this course in the college. The researcher of this study collected and then studied their errors by analysing their examinations and conducting interviews with the teachers who used to teach this group. This process helped in improving the learners' learning process.

The researcher then interviewed all English language teachers (10 teachers) in the English Department. The researcher came to the interview with no predefined framework or prepared questions. He only had the tables which presented the students' errors to be ranked by the teachers based on their experience in teaching in the college. The researcher applied this step to confirm and support the previous findings through the teachers' perceptions of the students' errors. The same table of errors was presented to each teacher, individually asking them to rank the students' errors based on their experience through their teaching journey in the college with those students. The teachers ranked these errors starting from number one, which presents a significant error that students commit and is considered a priority to be tackled by teachers, then they organised the rest of the mistakes to reach number eight, which presents the lowest importance errors that the teachers should tackle after finishing the priority ones.

The last section of the second research question was directed at determining teachers' perception of the learners' phonological problems in learning English. Again, the previous step of error analysis was the final table that presented the ranking average of the phonological errors of the students and the teachers' perceptions of the same types of mistakes, as shown in Table 4.6:

Table 2 Combined Phonological Errors as Perceived by Teachers to their Students and the Committed Errors by the Students

Areas of Phonological Errors	Students' Errors	Rank	Teachers' Perception	Rank	Rank Average
1-Pronouncing /p/ and /b/ sounds	71	3	28	1	2
2-Pronouncing past tense sound /d/, /t/, and /id/	77	2	41	3	3
3-Pronouncing /s/ and /z/	91	1	40	2	2
4-Pronouncing long vowels	18	7	64	8	8
5-Pronouncing /f/ and /v/ sounds	42	6	43	4	4
6-Intonation errors	17	8	49	6	7
7-Stress errors	29	4	45	5	6
8-Syllable errors	32	5	50	7	6

- Legends: 1=more errors / 8=less errors

As shown in the ranking column of the teachers' perception in Table 2, 'pronouncing the /p/ and /b/sounds is the most critical minimal pairs' errors the learners commit. It is followed by 'pronouncing the /s/ and /z/' sounds in the second-ranking level and by 'pronouncing the /d/, /t/ and /id/sounds in the third-ranking level. The 'minimal pairs /f/ and /v/' and 'the stress errors' are ranked in the fourth and fifth level, while 'the intonation errors', 'syllable errors' and 'the long vowels' are ranked at the bottom on the category level accordingly.

The combined phonological errors perceived by the same English teachers to their students in a college in Oman and the committed mistakes by the same students who finished the final exams of the Communication Skills Course in the same college are also presented in Table 4.6. As applied in Tables 4.4 and 4.5, the students who committed errors were ranked from one to eight, and the teachers' perceptions were ranked similarly. The average of both rankings was calculated and presented in the last column in Table 4.6 above.

This table clearly shows no agreement between the teachers' perceptions' rankings and the students' committed errors' rankings, as shown in Tables 4.4 and 4.5, but they were close in order. The highest minimal pairs in the phonological areas that stand in front of the students' faces are 'pronouncing the sounds /b/& /p/' and 'pronouncing the sounds /s/, & /z/'. These two areas of minimal pairs are ranked in the highest points as number two for both. 'Pronouncing the past tense sounds (-ed)' is classified as the third level of these problems. These errors are followed by 'pronouncing /f/ and /v/sounds to be ranked fourth. The 'stress errors' and 'syllable errors' are ranked as number six because they gave the same average results. The last two errors are 'the intonation' and 'pronouncing the long vowels' to be placed on the phonological side's seventh and eighth positions.

Discussion:

The first research question investigated the different types of errors the learners commit in phonology. The results in Table 4.3 clearly state that the learners suffer in pronouncing English words and phrases correctly. Many researchers, such as Renaldi et al. (2016), Hago et al. (2018) and Nasser and Hamzeh (2018), conducted their studies focusing on the learners' phonological errors, the reasons behind these errors and how they affected the learners' performance in speaking. This study's results generally agreed with the mentioned names above but did not agree with the exact types or categories of errors.

They noted that the learners have different phonological problems, the learners were not motivated to learn, and they felt shy to learn and practice speaking in the classroom in front of others Hago and Khan (2015), Renaldi et al. (2017) and Nasser and Hamzeh (2018) used different ways in collecting their data, such as classroom observation and questionnaires to the students and the teachers to determine the learners' phonological difficulties in learning English. They mentioned that the students felt too shy to speak in the classroom, were not motivated by teachers, and the methodology used in learning was incorrect. They also added that the learning materials were not enough to cover this side of the learning process.

The results of this study also confirmed that learners in a college in Oman suffered from linguistics in learning English and committed different phonological errors. These results also gave evidence to the researcher about the students' weaknesses in phonology. As mentioned, the learners spent years learning English in schools, finished the Communication Skills course in college, and still committed different phonological errors. This might be enough to prove that the learning material ignored the linguistic side of teaching Communication Skills. Therefore, these phonological results were the basis for proposing self-learning material to address some of these phonological issues to minimise them.

The second research question investigated the teachers' perceptions toward the linguistic errors committed by the learners. It also investigated the relationship between the students' linguistic errors and the teachers' perception of these errors. It also investigated the relationship between the eight phonological errors committed by the Omani learners. This question relates to the concept of error analysis as dependent variables to be the study's basis.

Although teachers' perceptions prioritised 'the minimal pair sounds /b/ and /p/', 'pronouncing the long vowels' came at the bottom of the list. On the other hand, the students' ranking phonological errors equalised the top categories for the minimal pairs of /b/ and /p/, and /s/ and /z/. This disagreement and doubling in the ranking resulted from evaluating the phonemes and sounds, which was not easy to assess by the teachers. The researcher depended on the average order of students' results and teachers' perceptions to focus on the highest-ranking average.

Summary:

The need analysis process showed that Omani learners in a college in Oman suffered from different linguistic issues in learning and practising English. They suffered from other types of phonological errors. As stated in the previous section, those learners needed supporting learning material to fill the gap and satisfy their linguistic needs, as clarified in the need analysis process in determining the student's needs to propose a new learning material.

Recommendations:

As stated in the research problem, the time the learners spend in the classroom learning English is insufficient and does not cover their needs. Autonomous learning theory directs matter's solution by shifting the learner from dependent to self-directed (Ozturk, 2020; Danilenko, 2018; Razali & Jamrus, 2019). This shifting helps the learners know their needs and be more motivated to cover them without help. They only need a little direction from the teacher to the learning material that covers their needs. Therefore, the next part discusses proposing the suggested learning material. It determined the learning material's objectives and content.

To find solutions to the highlighted issues above, addressing some steps toward improving the used instructional materials or proposing a new supporting kit to textbooks in these institutions and schools and colleges. The new material should only focus on the linguistic areas to fill the gaps in other textbook materials.

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