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Pronunciation Problems among Saudi Learners: A Case Study at the Preparatory Year Program, Najran University Saudi Arabia

Jalal Ahmad

Abstract

This study attempts to investigate the difficulties Saudi students encounter when pronouncing certain English consonant sounds. All participants in the study are adults who graduated from secondary schools and joined the Preparatory Year Program at Najran University. The participants have never been to any of the English speaking countries, so they do not have any kind of exposure to a native English environment. The results show that the Arabic speakers in this study had difficulties in pronouncing certain English consonant sounds, such as: /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/, and /ŋ/. This study also provides an insight and assists ESL/EFL teachers with some helpful suggestions and teaching strategies that will reduce future problems regarding English consonant pronunciation among Arab learners.

Key Words

Pronunciation Problems, Secondary Graduates, English Exposure, Development of teaching strategies

Introduction

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Every language has a rule for combining sound segments to make meaningful words. Children adopt these sound rules through listening followed by trial and error. Later they develop a linguistic competence through which they recognise and produce meaningful sounds.

On the other hand, when students learn a second or foreign language, they face some overlaps because of the very different phoneme systems of both languages. So, when they try to speak a second language, they produce the sounds which are closest to the sounds and also exist in their mother tongue. For example, most Arab speakers pronounce the words play and cheap as blay and sheep. This kind of pronunciation problem creates a big hindrance in the process of communication amongst speakers. Moreover, it spoils the teaching and learning efforts in second language learning settings.

Trubetzkoy (1939, as cited in Rakas, 2008) said that *the phonological* system of a language is like a sieve through which everything that is said passes. Each person acquires the system of his mother tongue. But when he hears another language spoken he intuitively uses the familiar "phonological sieve" of his mother tongue to analyze what has been said. However, since this sieve is not suited for the foreign language, numerous mistakes and mispronunciations are the result. The sounds of the foreign language receive an incorrect phonological interpretation since they are strained through the "phonological sieve" of one's own mother tongue. (p.2)

In the author's two and half years of experience teaching English to Saudi students at the Preparatory Year level, it has been found that the students are hardly able to pronounce certain consonant sounds correctly. For example, the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/ has no counterpart in the phonemic system of Arabic language, thus, its voiceless-ness is not easily realized by Saudi students, and it is always replaced by its voiced counterpart /b/, which has a phonemic value in the Arabic phonemic system.

The same case is noticed with the palato-alveolar affricates /tʃ/, palato-alveolar fricatives /ʒ/ and labio-dental fricatives /v/. The sounds /tʃ/, /ʒ/ and /v/ don't have counterparts in the Arabic consonantal system and are not normally realised by Saudi students, consequently these are often replaced by the sounds /ʃ/, /dʒ/, ʒ or z/ and /f/ respectively—for example, the sound /tʃ/ as in cheap is replaced by the sound /ʃ/ as in sheep; the sound /ʒ/ as in leisure is replaced by the sound /dʒ/ as in ledger or by the sound /z/ as in laser and finally the sound /v/ as in vine is replaced by the sound /f/ as in fine.

The alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/ are not the cause of major obstacles, but they are pronounced by Saudi students as inter-dental, rather than alveolar plosives.

The author has observed that the velar nasal /ŋ/, which is a single consonant represented in English writing by two letters (-ng), is also mispronounced by many Saudi students. As a result, they pronounce the word (heating = /hi:tiŋ/) as /hi:ti-n-g/, (visiting = /visitiŋ/) as /visiti-n-g/ etc.

Problem Statement

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Saudi students who are learning English as a Second/Foreign Language face different problems with every component of language such as reading, writing, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Most of the time, the other components are greatly emphasised in classroom teaching, while pronunciation is hardly touched upon. Consequently, the learners come up with faulty pronunciation which creates big obstacles in the process of communication. Though some studies have been conducted in the field of pronunciation, it has often focused on vowel pronunciation, phonological analysis of English phonotactics, English phonetics and orthography, consonant clusters, stress intonation, patterns in spelling mistakes, and intonation analysis etc. The current study focuses on problems of pronunciation of English consonant sounds by Saudi students who have passed their secondary school and have enrolled in the Preparatory Year Program at Najran University. With the help of data collected from the students, the author will provide some suggestions and teaching strategies which will reduce future problems regarding the pronunciation of English consonant sounds.

Purpose of the Study

The primary concern of the author of the present study is to identify the problematic areas in the learning of consonant sounds by Saudi learners of English as a second language. The author has also provided some suggestions regarding improving English consonant pronunciation. The results and suggestions will provide insights and assist teachers of English as a Second Language in order to reduce future problems regarding pronunciation.

Previous Research and Studies

Many researchers have conducted their studies on the mistakes committed by Arab learners while learning English as a second or foreign language, such as Harrison, Prator and Tucker (1975), Abdul Haq (1982), Kharma & Hajjaj (1989), Altaha (1995), Wahba (1998), Binturki (2008) and Al-Shuaibi (2009) and some others. Mostly they have focussed on the field of phonology, morphology and syntax.

In his study, Al-Shuaibi (2009) focuses on the phonology of phonotactics, and he finds that learners have difficulty in pronouncing English initial consonant clusters having three members and final consonant clusters of three and four members. He showed some processes involved in the pronunciation of these clusters, namely-- reduction, substitution and deletion.

Wahba (1998) investigated the problems faced by Egyptian learners of English as a second language. His study shows that certain phonological errors committed by the learners are related to stress and intonation. He suggested that these errors are interlingual and occur because of the phonological differences between the sound systems of English and Arabic.

E.M. Al-Saidat (2010) conducted his study of English phonotactics to discover the types of pronunciation problems Arab learners encounter while learning English as a second language. In his study the researcher investigated what types of declusterization processes are found in their interlanguage and what the sources of such processes are. The researcher, in this study, showed that Arab learners of English unintentionally insert an anaptyctic (p.128) vowel in the

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onset as well as in the coda (p.129) of certain English syllables. This study also demonstrated that the major reason for declusterization processes is the mother tongue influence.

Methodology

Participants

The author selected eight students randomly from different sections for the current study. The students were from different regions of Saudi Arabia. Neither they had received any English language instruction in English speaking countries nor had they been to any English speaking countries to have any kind of English exposure. They had completed secondary school and enrolled in Najran University's Preparatory Year Programme.

Data Collection

Eight students were randomly selected for recording samples of consonant sounds. Four words were selected for each problematic consonant sound in all three positions - initial, medial, and final word positions. Each participant was asked to read these words aloud while being recorded. The students were informed that the speech styles provided by them would be tape-recorded.

All the participants were told that the project was designed to explore the problems regarding the pronunciation of selected English consonants which Saudi students encounter. All the data was collected at the Najran University campus.

Data Analysis

The recordings were carefully analysed. An English native speaker was asked to identify the problematic sounds as they occurred within the participants' aural speech recordings. He was directed to pay special attention to the particular consonant sound within the words.

Tools

In the present study, the author used a laptop and microphone in order to record sample consonant speech sounds.

Findings

The table given below shows the mispronounced English consonant sounds by Saudi students. Eight students were randomly selected from different sections. They were given some selected English consonant sounds to tape-record which are generally mispronounced by the most of the Saudi students. A particular consonant sound in different word positions (i.e. initial, medial, and final) was given to the students to read. While the students were reading the words, their sounds were being recorded. The students' recorded sound was analysed by a native speaker of English.

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Participants	Problematic consonant	Phonetic symbol (IPA symbol)	Phonetic symbol of participants' mispronounced speech	Percentage of mispronunciation
1.	[P] in word initial position	/p/	/b/	40
2.				73.75
3.				30
4.				60
5.				17.5
6.				55
7.				57.5
8.				82.5
1.	[P] in word medial position	/p/	/b/	47.5
2.				45
3.				50
4.				37.5
5.				35
6.				46.25
7.				50
8.				32.5
1.	[P] in word final position	/p/	/b/	5
2.				6.25
3.				15
4.				2.5
5.				0
6.				32.5
7.				5
8.				12.5

Table A: Percentage of mispronunciation of sound /p/ by the participants in word initial, medial and final position

The above result shows a considerable percentage of mispronunciation of /p/ sound by the participants in all three positions—word initial, medial and final. The participants frequently replace the target sound i.e. voiceless bilabial plosive /p/ with its voiced counterpart /b/.

Participants	Problematic consonant	Phonetic symbol (IPA symbol)	Phonetic symbol of participants' mispronounced speech	Percentage of mispronunciation
1.	[T] in word initial position	/t/	/t̤/	7.5
2.				1.25
3.				1.25
4.				2.5
5.				0

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6.				0
7.				0
8.				0
1.	[T] in word medial position	/t/	/t̪/	0
2.				5
3.				3.75
4.				0
5.				0
6.				0
7.				0
8.				0
1.	[T] in word final position	/t/	/t̪/	0
2.				16.25
3.				0
4.				2.5
5.				0
6.				0
7.				0
8.				2.5

Table B: Percentage of mispronunciation of sound /t/ by the participants in word initial, medial and final position

According to the above data most of the participants have pronounced sound /t/ correctly. Though a few of them have come up with a little mispronunciation, it is avoidable as it is intelligible and does not create any obstacle in the communication process.

Participants	Problematic consonant	Phonetic symbol (IPA symbol)	Phonetic symbol of participants' mispronounced speech	Percentage of mispronunciation
1.	[D] in word initial position	/d/	/d̪/	2.5
2.				5
3.				2.5
4.				3.75
5.				2.5
6.				3.75
7.				5
8.				0
1.	[D] in word medial position	/d/	/d̪/	3.75
2.				32.5
3.				52.5
4.				2.5

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5.				10
6.				2.5
7.				20
8.				2.5
1.	[D] in word final position	/d/	/ɖ /	3.75
2.				50
3.				47.5
4.				52.5
5.				37.5
6.				8.75
7.				2.5
8.				62.5

Table C: Percentage of mispronunciation of sound /d/ by the participants in word initial, medial and final position

As the above result displays, the percentage of mispronunciation with sound /d/ is mostly in word medial and final position.

Participants	Problematic consonant	Phonetic symbol (IPA symbol)	Phonetic symbol of participants' mispronounced speech	Percentage of mispronunciation
1.	[V] in word initial position	/v/	/f/	0
2.				1.25
3.				1.25
4.				0
5.				20
6.				62.5
7.				20
8.				0
1.	[V] in word medial position	/v/	/f/	48.75
2.				17.5
3.				5
4.				0
5.				2.5
6.				52.5
7.				2.5
8.				5
1.	[V] in word final position	/v/	/f/	5
2.				10
3.				5
4.				17.5

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5.				12.5
6.				42.5
7.				32.5
8.				12.5

Table D: Percentage of mispronunciation of sound /v/ by the participants in word initial, medial and final position

Sound /v/ is also problematic for the participants as it has been shown in the above result. Saudi learners replace this sound with the sound /f/ which affects the communication process.

Participants	Problematic consonant	Phonetic symbol (IPA symbol)	Phonetic symbol of participants' mispronounced speech	Percentage of mispronunciation
1.	[CH] in word initial position	/tʃ/	/ʃ/ or /s/	1.25
2.				35
3.				2.5
4.				0
5.				0
6.				60
7.				0
8.				0
	[CH] in word medial position	/tʃ/	/ʃ/	0
				17.5
				35
				13.75
				3.75
				21.25
				8.75
				0
	[CH] in word final position	/tʃ/	/ʃ/	0
				45
				67.5
				26.25
				27.5
				0
				7.5
				23.75

Table E: Percentage of mispronunciation of sound /tʃ/ by the participants in word initial, medial and final position

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Sound /tʃ/ becomes problematic when it occurs in word medial and final position. Only two participants have considerably mispronounced this sound in word initial position.

Participants	Problematic consonant	Phonetic symbol (IPA symbol)	Phonetic symbol of participants' mispronounced speech	Percentage of mispronunciation
1.	[SU] in word medial position	/ʒ/	/ʃ/, /z/ & /s/	43.75
2.				73.75
3.				60
4.				37.5
5.				22.5
6.				88.75
7.				30
8.				37.5
	[GE] in word final position	/ʒ/	/g/	66.25
				97.5
				77.5
				52.597.5
				97.5
				100
				100
				67.5

Table F: Percentage of mispronunciation of sound /ʒ/ by the participants in word medial and final position

Consonant /ʒ/ has been the most mispronounced sound by Saudi learners. The results show that every participant has pronounced this sound with great mistake in both the positions—word medial and final. Mistakenly, this sound has generally been replaced with four sounds: /s/, /ʃ/, /z/ and /g/. The results show that when this sound occurs in word medial position the participants generally replace it with /s/, /ʃ/ and /z/ sounds; for example when the author asked the participants to read the following words: *leisure*, *pleasure* and *measure*, all of them came up with different pronunciation. Some of them pronounced it as /s/, others pronounced it as /ʃ/ or /z/. Moreover when it occurs in word final position the participants frequently replace it with sound /g/; for example, the participants were asked to read the words *garage*, *rouge* etc. They replaced the last sounds in the words with /g/ sound.

Participants	Problematic consonant	Phonetic symbol	Phonetic symbol of	Percentage of mispronunciation
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		(IPA symbol)	participants' mispronounced speech	
1	[NG] in word final position	/ŋ/	/n-k/ or /n-g/	52
2				72.5
3				47.5
4				50
5				57.5
6				45
7				50
8				35

Table G: Percentage of mispronunciation of sound /ŋ/ by the participants in word final position

According to the data sound /ŋ/ has been pronounced as /n-k/ or /n-g/ when it occurs in word final position.

Despite the above tables, the following bar graph further displays each participant's speech results. The figure below shows the percentage of each mispronounced consonant sound in each participant's speech. An average was calculated for each mispronounced consonant sound from all three positions in a word. (initial, medial, and final positions).

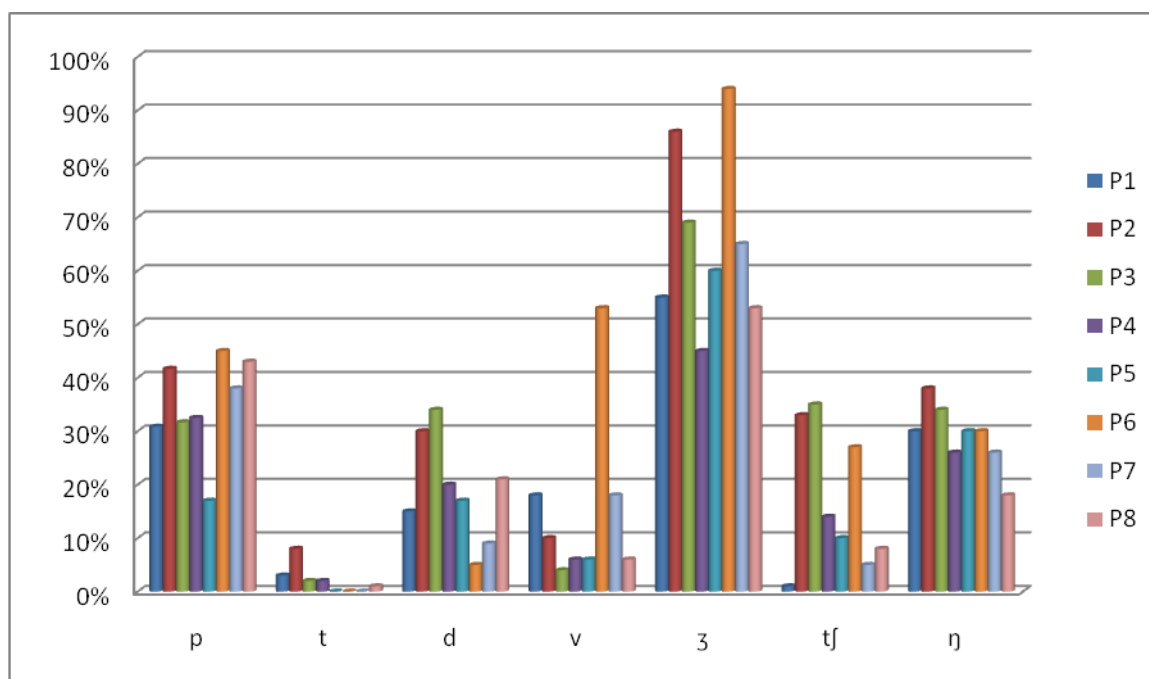


Figure A: Mispronounced consonants in each participant's speech

The above figure shows that all participants have experienced 16-45% difficulties in /p/, 5-30% in /d/, 5-52% in /v/, 45-95% in /z/, 2-35% in /tʃ/, and 17-38% in /ŋ/ sounds. Very little problem has been noticed in /t/ sounds, and the most problematic sound for all the students is /z/.

Participant 1 experienced 30% problems in sound /p/, 2% in sound /t/, 15% in sound /d/, 18% in sound /v/, 55% in sound /z/, and 30% in sound /ŋ/. Student 1 does not have a major problem in sound /t/ and /tʃ/.

Participant 2 experienced 40% difficulties in sound /p/, 8% in sound /t/, 30% in sound /d/, 10% in sound /v/, 85% in sound /z/, 32% in sound /tʃ/, and 38% in sound /ŋ/.

Participant 3 experienced 30% difficulties in sound /p/, 33% in sound /d/, 3% in sound /v/, 68% in sound /z/, 13% in sound /tʃ/, and 34% in sound /ŋ/. This participant does not have a problem with the /t/ sound.

Participant 4 experienced 31% difficulties in sound /p/, 20% in sound /d/, 5% in sound /v/, 45% in sound /z/, 13% in sound /tʃ/, and 26% in sound /ŋ/.

Participant 5 experienced 17% difficulties in sound /p/, 17% in sound /d/, 5% in sound /v/, 60% in sound /z/, 10% in sound /tʃ/, and 30% in sound /ŋ/.

Participant 6 experienced 45% difficulties in sound /p/, 5% in sound /d/, 51% in sound /v/, 94% in sound /z/, 28% in sound /tʃ/, and 30% in sound /ŋ/.

Participant 7 experienced 38% difficulties in sound /p/, 8% in sound /d/, 18% in sound /v/, 65% in sound /z/, 5% in sound /tʃ/, and 25% in sound /ŋ/.

Participant 8 experienced 42% difficulties in sound /p/, 20% in sound /d/, 5% in sound /v/, 52% in sound /z/, 8% in sound /tʃ/, and 18% in sound /ŋ/.

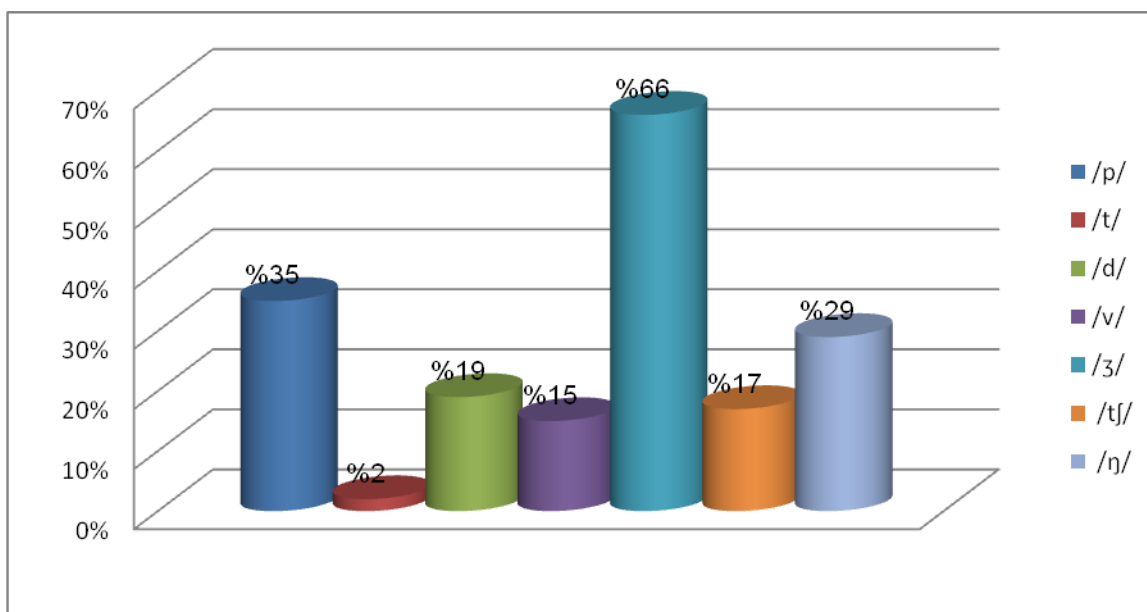


Figure B: Average mispronunciation of consonants by the participants

As we can see in figure B, the consonant sound /z/ represents the highest percentages of error in the Saudi students' speech, it is mispronounced 66% by the participants, and /t/ represents the lowest percentage of errors, as it was mispronounced only 2%. The consonant sounds /p/ and /ŋ/ represent significant percentages of pronunciation errors too. The percentage of mispronunciation for these two phonemes was respectively 35% and 29%. The consonant sounds /d/, /v/, and /tʃ/ also represent a considerable error percentage, as the percentage of mispronunciation for each of these three phonemes is respectively 19%, 15%, and 17%.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Like other English language skills or sub skills courses, such as reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary etc., English pronunciation is very important for ESL/EFL learners to develop their communicative efficiency. It is one of the basic skills required for the students in their English language learning.

As shown in this study, certain English consonant sounds are difficult to pronounce for Saudi learners. The above tables show that most of the participants faced problems while pronouncing the consonant sounds, /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /z/, and /ŋ/. They pronounce /p/ as /b/ when it appears in the initial and final positions of a word. They pronounce /d/ as /ḍ/ when it appears in the medial or final positions. According to the above data /v/ is replaced by /f/ when it appears in the medial and final positions. Most of the participants pronounce /tʃ/ as /ʃ/ when it appears in all three positions. The /z/ sound is sometimes replaced by /ʒ/, /s/ or /z/, when it is in medial position, and when it is in final position it is pronounced as /g/. The /ŋ/ sound is sometimes replaced by /n-k/, and sometimes it is replaced by the /n-g/ sound when it appears in the final position of a word.

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The present experimental study contributes to the identification of specific areas of difficulty which hamper communication through the mispronunciation of individual English phones and sounds. Awareness of the problem areas of learners provides a basis for future material planning, design and production.

Teaching English pronunciation covers a range from basic sounds (vowel and consonant), syllable structure, word-accent, to stress, intonation pattern, and rhythm etc. In the present study, the participants' problems with English consonant sound production were the only area investigated.

Based on the findings of the research, some suggestions and strategies are given below which may help teachers and students in reducing student difficulties in pronouncing problematic consonant sounds:

- Awareness is the first step of learning. Teachers should make learners aware of the importance of English pronunciation within English language learning programmes, as well as in English language communication. The learners should be given a basic knowledge of phonetics and phonology, IPA symbols, etc. If the learners have phonetic and phonological awareness of English, they will be able to guide themselves towards correct pronunciation of a particular sound or word.
- While teaching pronunciation in the classroom, the teacher should be conscious about the students' needs. The students may have different competency levels such as learning speed and styles. The teacher should give proper attention to the students and their special needs and problems. The teacher should also conduct a students' needs analysis regarding pronunciation. According to the needs of the learners, the teacher should develop some appropriate materials and strategies to present in the class to reduce the learners' problem(s).
- Unfamiliar sounds -- which do not exist in the learners' mother tongue -- should be identified and given special attention.
- There should be a systematic practice of IPA symbols.
- Oral communication classes should be encouraged in English teaching program.
- The students should be asked to read aloud the text with the support of recorded materials or with the teacher's support. If the student commits any mistakes while reading aloud, the teacher should correct and practice it several times.
- The students should be given situational dialogues which will improve their confidence, while at the same time motivating the students to learn to speak correctly.
- The students should be given enough instructions or opportunities to learn pronunciation within English language courses.

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- The teachers should encourage and motivate the students to speak English outside the classroom.
- Minimal pair drills should be used to distinguish between similar or problematic sounds in the target language.
- The teachers can also use tongue twisters—a technique from speech correction strategies. (e.g., “she sells seashells by the seashore”)
- The students can be provided a listening model by the teacher or some electronic devices, such as a tape-recorder or CD, and then asked to repeat or imitate it.
- Students should be asked to read a text aloud. While reading, any mispronounced word(s) should be corrected by the teacher and should be practiced several times.
- The students should be motivated to watch some English programmes on TV or other visual media, such as BBC English, CNN, etc. These programs offer live exposure to English pronunciation.
- The teacher can provide a variety of exercises and activities, e.g., having situational dialogues, paragraph readings, short presentations, picture descriptions, and interview exercises. The students should be given step by step exercises and activities from word, phrase, to sentence level.

Finally, it is suggested that the students should listen or watch recorded English materials such as recorded talks, speeches, news, movies etc. In this way they will get a live experience of language communication which will lead them towards developing better pronunciation.

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