

## Difficulties Encountered in Teaching English Pronunciation for EFL Learners

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### Abstract

The ultimate aim behind learning phonetics is to communicate effectively without errors because pronunciation plays a spindle role in English language learning. However, EFL learners encounter hindrances in learning correct pronunciation due to the lack of interaction with native speakers; as a matter of fact, they need a leg up from teachers who should provide them with enough and intensive practice. To this vein, the current research work is mainly concerned with finding solutions for pronunciation lacuna of EFL learners and to establish the remedial teaching and learning strategies that can help them in realizing oral proficiency. As such, data were collected quantitatively and qualitatively by means of a questionnaire and an audio recording test for speech of 150 first year students at Dr. Moulay Tahar University. The findings revealed that students are not motivated towards learning pronunciation and, henceforth they fail to procure a command of the language in interaction. The results also showed that there are teaching difficulties due to the absence of language laboratories and teaching strategies that enhance a fair practice of correct pronunciation.

**Keywords:** English phonetics, EFL learning and teaching, first year students, pronunciation errors

### الملخص:

ان الهدف الاساسي من دراسة الصوتيات هو التواصل الفعال دون اي اخطاء لان النطق يلعب دورا محوريا في تعلم اللغة الانجليزية. غير ان هناك بعض العوائق التي تواجه الطلبة في تعلم النطق الصحيح وهذا راجع لقلة التواصل مع الناطقين الاصليين للغة، وعلى هذا يحتاج المتعلمون الى دعم من الاساتذة والذين يتوجب عليهم ان يزودوهم بالممارسة الكافية والمكثفة. في هذا السياق، يعمل هذا البحث في ايجاد الحلول لمشاكل النطق التي يعاني منها طلاب اللغة الانجليزية كلفة اجنبية. وكما تهدف كذلك الى وضع استراتيجيات قد تساعد في التعليم والتعلم وتحقيق الكفاءة اللغوية. وعلى هذا ثم جمع بيانات من خلال استبيان وتسجيل صوتي لخطاب 150 طالب من السنة اولى بجامعة الدكتور مولاي الطاهر. وقد بينت النتائج ان الطلبة يفتقرون الى حافز تعلم النطق الصحيح. كما أظهرت النتائج كذلك ان هناك صعوبات في تدريس الصوتيات لانعدام مخابر اللغة واستراتيجيات التدريس من اجل تعزيز الممارسة

العادلة لنطق الصحيح.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم الصوتيات الانجليزية، تعلم وتعليم اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية، طلاب السنة الاولى، اخطاء النطق

## Introduction

Learning any language insists on its learners studying its pronunciation. In fact, those learners face many challenges because each language has its unique phonetic system. A good example is the huge distinction between Arabic and English consonants in their manner and place of articulation in addition to the non-existence of some consonants. This difference is the first reason that hinders students in speaking English correctly. Perhaps this is the question that attracts scholarly attention in the last few decades, although many experts think that the difficulty is cognitive rather than physical since some students continue suffering from pronunciation lacuna even though they are learning English for several years. This results in many problems when it comes to employment.

Subsequently, the central problem facing foreign language students is that they have to change a given pattern of pronunciation acquired in their mother tongue to a new pattern in the target language and this is the case of Arab students when they attempt to study English pronunciation.

It is sheer truism that teaching phonetics in Algerian universities is still suffering, though teachers are striving to find out the suitable techniques which will have an effect on improving the students' pronunciation. It is also important to state that this sub-fielding of speaking is still neglected in English language teaching in Algerian context due to factors such as the time allotted is not enough in addition to syllabus designing and teaching techniques.

It is also important to add that the role of teachers is of eminent importance in teaching pronunciation. Their role is devoted for guiding the learners, i.e., putting them in the right path through providing them with rules of the correct pronunciation. Most importantly, teachers help also their students to learn how to hear a sound before producing it. They can also help them in learning sounds which are difficult through teaching them how to hear sounds. Though teachers have made all their efforts to improve English pronunciation for their students, they fail due to meaning reasons including syllabus designing, the time allocated and the importance given to other domains like grammar and written expression. Thereby, learners will be lost when they are asked to pronounce words or whole sentences despite the fact they have a special training during their secondary school.

In the light of this tight, the present study under scrutiny aims to shed light on the reasons behind the poor pronunciation of English for EFL learners at Saida University. It also endeavours to explore the poor background of learners in terms of flat intonation, no respect of rhythm and no importance for the use of the stress. Eventually, it strives to find out some possible solutions that can be taken as guidelines to develop certain teaching techniques. Pouring in the same vessel, this small scale research tends to explore the hindrances encountering EFL learners in pronouncing correct English. In the light of this idea, the following research questions spring from the previous research problematic:

1. What are the major hindrances affecting English pronunciation for first year EFL students?
2. Does the lack of practice affect pronunciation proficiency?
3. What are the possible solutions to overcome these hindrances?

In this vein, these research questions are hypothesized as follows:

1. The major hindrances revolve around the lack of materials, time allocated and the negative attitudes displaced towards learning phonetics.
2. If teachers do not provide their students with enough practice, this may lead learners to develop negative attitudes towards learning pronunciation.
3. These hindrances can be overcome if teachers can develop teaching techniques that help learners to change their attitudes towards the point that they will never learn a correct pronunciation.

As a matter of fact, the current research work attempts to explore the field of phonetics and what the difficulties hindering students in order to develop more teaching techniques.

### **English Pronunciation for EFL Learners in the Algerian Context**

It is commonly agreed that Arab learners, who tend to study English pronunciation, suffer from many difficulties due to the large differences between Arabic and English phonetic systems. In order to find solution for EFL learners, many academicians and experts in language teaching conduct many researches. In fact, most of the researchers in the Arab world including Al-Shuaibi (2009) concentrate on exploring phonology and why Arab learners fail to pronounce consonant clusters. In his study, Al-Shuaibi finds that there are some phenomena that appear after pronouncing consonant cluster including deletion. More importantly, he also discovers that students confront obstacles in differentiating consonants including /v/, /T/, /N/and inserting vowels. In his part, Waston (2002) claims that consonants like /v/, /tΣ/, /Σ/ and /δZ/ do not exist in Arabic language; for this reason, some speakers tend to replace /δZ/ with /Z/. Furthermore, Arab learners do not know when they have to insert stress in addition to intonation. Accordingly, Bell (1995) maintains that these pronunciation hindrances can be

confronted if learners will know the differences between Arabic and English sounds.

Another quandary facing EFL learners is the use of consonant cluster which is absent in Arabic phonetic system, while English is a language while is characterized with its use, even though Arabic language is heavy with the use of consonants; consequently, learners tend to insert a short vowel to cover up the difficulty of pronouncing them. Besides, English consonants differ in terms of their place and manner of articulation from Arabic consonantal system.

Yet, it is also necessary to mention the fact that EFL learners find difficulties in learning the correct English pronunciation since acquiring a language with its accent seems difficult for them when they become adult. In other terms, “Young children learn languages better because they are nearer the age at which they became native speakers of their mother tongue” (Mc Donough, 2002, p. 91). Similarly, Scovel (1969) shares the same point observing that “adults never seem able to rid themselves of a foreign accent” (p. 245).

Another feature that may seem difficult for EFL learners is the recognition of silent letters. In fact, this feature is difficult even for native speakers during their childhood. In this vein, Richards (1974) claims that these errors take place even with native speakers during the acquisition stage. For example, pronouncing ‘k’ before ‘n’ such as in knife, knight and ‘b’ like in doubt...etc.

Another quandary facing EFL learners is the issue of linking, elision and assimilation. Of course, linking is of eminent place to English language in connected speech. This feature takes place when a word ending in a consonant is followed by a word ending in a vowel or two words ending in two consonants, the first one is a stop, and the speaker has to move to the place of the second consonant such as ‘let down’. Linking occurs also between vowels especially when they are ending in diphthongs like /<math>\leftrightarrow Y</math>/ or /<math>\epsilon I</math>/ such as in go on and pay up...etc. When it comes to elision, EFL learners find it difficult because there are certain rules to apply for deletion. Indeed, native speakers tend to delete certain sounds to make speech easy; for instance, they delete sounds like /<math>\delta</math>/ and /<math>\tau</math>/ in words such as postman /<math>\pi \leftrightarrow Y \sigma \mu \leftrightarrow v</math>/ and next year /<math>v \epsilon \kappa \sigma \varphi \iota \leftrightarrow</math>/...etc. assimilation is also a feature which is employed in connected speech. It takes place in cases like turning /<math>v</math>/ into /<math>\mu</math>/ such as in ‘I can believe it’ /<math>\alpha \iota \kappa \leftrightarrow \mu \beta \leftrightarrow \lambda \iota \uparrow \omega \leftrightarrow \tau</math>/.

It is also important to add that these factors affect the acquisition of the correct pronunciation; however, there are other features that play a prominent impact. English language is taught as a foreign language. For this reason, the assigned time for learning English in general and its pronunciation in particular is too short that it is difficult to deal the whole syllabus in addition to the great

number of students and the lack of academic tools such as laboratories that can help the teacher.

## Teaching Pronunciation

The question of how to teach pronunciation has attracted scholarly attention in order to design methods and teaching techniques. Some experts in language teaching claim that teachers have to set their learners in real communicative situations through providing students with cues from native speakers' speech, so that it helps them in catching the appropriate pronunciation and develops the auditory side because many EFL learners find difficulties in understanding native speakers. Thereby, learners move from concentrating on how to imitate the native speakers' accent, which is impossible to achieve at their age, into creating their own English.

On the other hand, some experts prefer to use the learner-centred approach. The latter attempts to teach learners to practise what they need in real life situations; for this reason, teachers can depend on it to develop teaching techniques to communicate with learners in a way that can be helpful to teach them correct pronunciation. Henceforth, they can develop a critical thinking in their learners that guides them to select what is appropriate to improve their pronunciation. Accordingly, Morley (1991) observes that the ultimate goal of pronunciation is the ability to communicate in a realistic situation and being understood by other speakers, i.e., "with good pronunciation, a speaker is intelligible despite other errors; with poor pronunciation, a speaker can be very difficult to understand, despite accuracy in other areas" (Fraser, 2000, p. 7).

Without doubt, pronunciation has taken a special position in language learning and teaching. According to Wei (2006), pronunciation takes a special position in English language learning; therefore, EFL learners have to improve their pronunciation since it influences directly their communicative competence. He further highlights that any lack in speaking skill limits the learners' communicative ability because it is the first thing that is evaluated from a person's speech. In this vein, Tench (1981) observes the following:

Pronunciation is not an optional extra for the language learner, any more than grammar, vocabulary or any other aspect of language is. If a learner's general aim is to talk intelligibly to others in another language, a reasonable pronunciation is important.

(p. 45-46)

As far as teaching pronunciation in Algerian context is concerned, one can aptly note that teachers are still looking for the appropriate approaches to teach phonetics, even though educationalists in the field of foreign language teaching and learning have made many changes that suit both teachers and learners. Probably, there have been many other factors that hinder the choice of the right approach.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **Sample**

The sample for the current study under consideration is selected from first year English students at Dr. Tahar Moulay University. About 120 students are randomly chosen for the questionnaire taking into account certain linguistic features mainly age. Most of their ages are between 19 and 22 years old. Their first language is Arabic, while French is spoken as a second language and English is taught as a second foreign language. From the same sample, 50 learners are asked to read sentences in order to conduct a recorded test. On the other side of the corner, ten teachers are also selected for the interview, hoping that it may help us in raising awareness about the necessity of finding out new teaching and learning techniques.

### **Research Instruments**

Data were collected quantitatively and qualitatively by means of a questionnaire distributed to the students. Besides, a recorded test was conducted through collecting a sample from the learners' speech. An interview is also conducted with ten teachers who have experience in teaching phonetics. The questionnaire was distributed by the beginning of the second semester and was collected by the end of the academic year 2014-2015, while recordings were conducted through the whole year to see whether there is an improvement in the students' speech or not.

## **Findings and Implications**

### **Results of the Questionnaire**

Students were given a questionnaire which contains 3 sections; however, the researcher focuses on just the central features that have a direct relation with the research questions under consideration.

#### **Question 1: Is it important to learn English phonetics?**

- Yes
- No

**Table 1. The importance of learning English phonetics**

Importance	First Year students	Expressed in %
Yes	91	75.83%
No	19	15.83%
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	

Table 1 shows that most participants recognized the importance of learning English pronunciation. They justified their answer arguing that a given language cannot be learnt without having knowledge of its spoken form. They added that speaking skill and pronunciation are intertwined in improving the speaker's communicative competence.

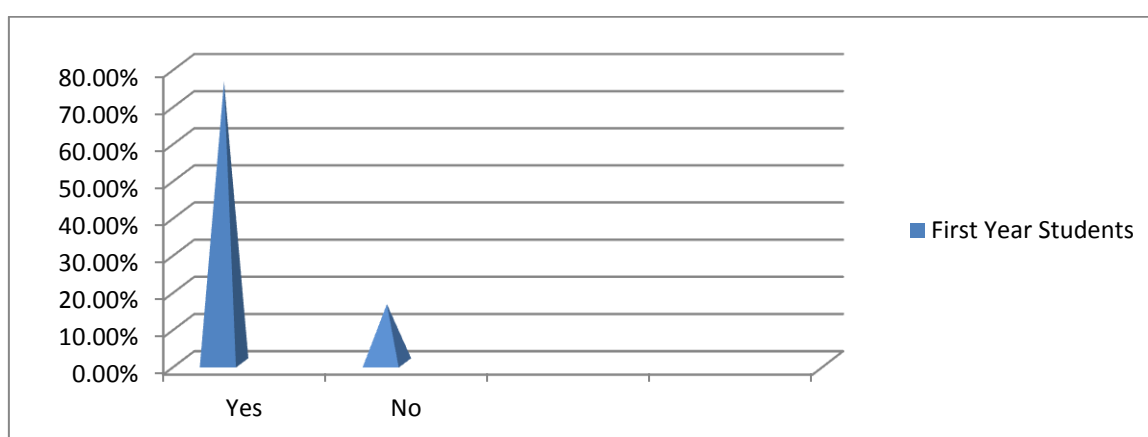
**Figure 1. The importance of learning English phonetics**

Figure 1 reveals that 75.83% of the participants argued that learning pronunciation facilitates communication and helps in understanding native speakers; on the other side of the corner, about 15.83% of the informants claimed that it is not important like other modules including grammar and written expression.

**Question 2:** What are the problems facing you in learning English pronunciation?

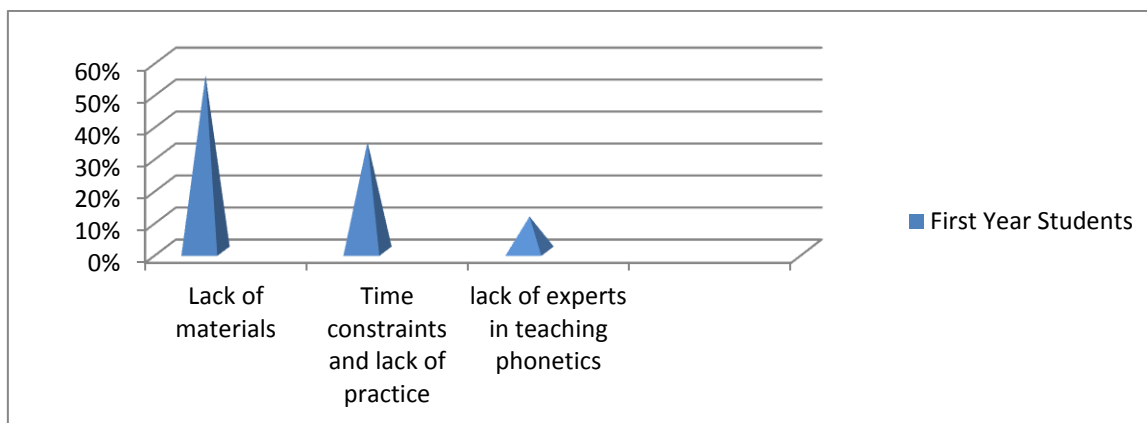
- Lack of materials
- Time constraints and lack of practice
- Lack of experts in teaching phonetics

**Table 2. Problems facing students in learning pronunciation**

Problems	First Year Students	Expressed in %
Lack of materials	66	55%
Time constraints and lack of practice	41	34.16%
Lack of experts in teaching phonetics	13	10.83%

**Total****120**

Table 2 demonstrates that most English learners at Saida University maintained that they are suffering from the lack of materials and laboratories for teaching phonetics in addition to the time allotted for learning phonetics which obliges teachers to think on how to finish the programme rather than on practicing activities to improve their performance.



**Figure 2. Problems facing students in learning pronunciation**

Figure 2 gives a clear view about the participants' attitudes and opinions. In fact, between 55 % and 34.16 % of the learners highlighted that teaching English pronunciation needs more interests in terms of materials provided and practice, whereas the remaining informants link the problem with the lack of good experts who are trained in teaching pronunciation.

**Question 3:** What are the lectures provided by your teachers during your first year?

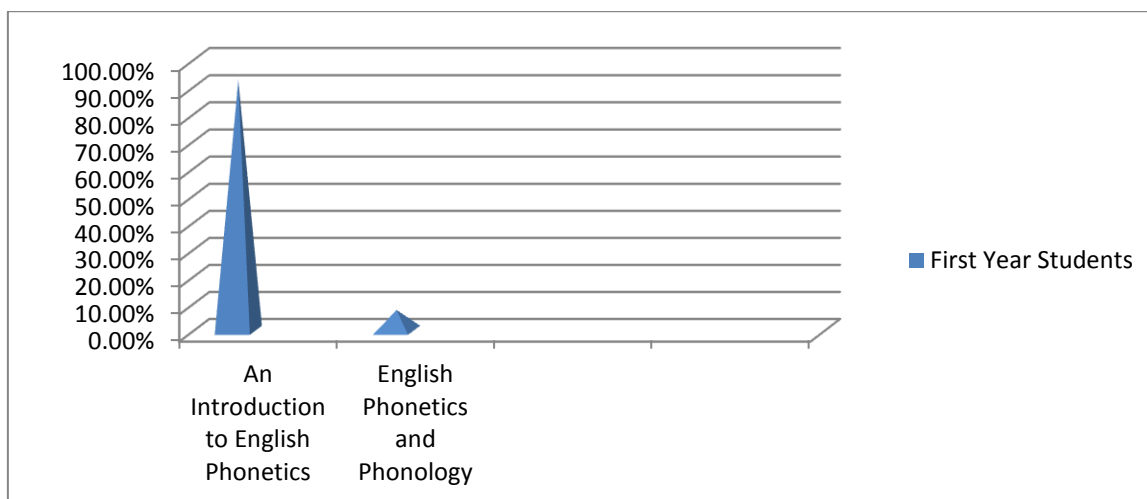
- An introduction to English phonetics.
- English phonetics and phonology.

**Table 3. Lectures provided to improve English pronunciation**

Phonetics Lectures Provided	First Year Students	Expressed in %
An Introduction to English Phonetics	111	92.5%
English Phonetics and Phonology	09	7.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	

Table 3 shows that most of the learners agreed that they are trained on lectures that introduce them to English phonetics, whereas the rest of them argued that they receive lectures in both phonetics and phonology.





**Figure 3. Lectures provided to improve English pronunciation**

Figure 3 demonstrates that about 92.5% of the learners declared that they are receiving lectures on preliminary bases on English phonetics; so that they can distinguish how English vowels and consonants are pronounced through introducing them into articulatory phonetics. However, they stated that they are lacking practice due to deficiency in materials since pronunciation training depends largely on developing the learners' speaking and listening skills.

### The Results of the Interview

As it has already been mentioned, the interview was conducted with ten teachers teaching different modules in the English department at Dr. Moulay Tahar University. Those teachers have experience in teaching English phonetics for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> levels. The researcher has taken the most importance questions of the interview depending on the aforementioned research questions.

**Question 1:** Do you insist on teaching the correct pronunciation for your students?

- Yes
- No

**Table 4. Teachers' opinions towards teaching the correct pronunciation**

Teachers' Opinions	Teachers	Expressed in %
Yes	10	100%
No	00	00%
<b>Total</b>	10	

Apparently, all teachers shared the same view claiming that teaching the correct pronunciation for EFL learners takes an eminent place in the tutor's duties to guide his students and provide the exact rules that work as a roadmap in improving and facilitating their communication in general. They added that they

will not acquire a native command of the appropriate accent since the acquisition of the language takes place at a late age, but it helps them to understand and to be understood, i.e., realizing mutual intelligibility.

**Question 2:** What are the major problems facing you in teaching English pronunciation?

- Lack of pedagogical materials and special laboratories
- The influence of French language in their pronunciation
- Large classes

**Table 5. Problems facing teachers in teaching English pronunciation**

Problems Facing Teachers	Teachers	Expressed in %
Lack of pedagogical Materials and Special Laboratories	07	70%
The Influence of French Language in their Pronunciation	01	10%
Larges Classes	02	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	

Similarly, teachers also complain about the lack of pedagogical tools and laboratories to teach English pronunciation. They further maintained that the programme is overloaded and there are no guiding textbooks provided from experts; as a matter of fact, the teacher finds himself adopting techniques thinking that they are useful for his students. They also observed that they cannot practise activities and wait for all students' feedback because of their large number.

**Question 6:** What kind of activities did you give to your students?

- Debates and communication through which the teacher corrects their pronunciation
- Listening to native speakers and practise some oral productions
- Providing lessons on phonetics and asking them to transcribe words and pronounce orally

**Table 6. Activities provided for English pronunciation**

Activities	Teachers	Expressed in %
Debates and Communication through which the Teacher Corrects their Pronunciation	00	00%
Listening to Native Speakers and Practise	01	10%

some Oral Productions		
<b>Providing Lessons on Phonetics and Asking them to Transcribe Words and Pronounce Orally</b>	09	90%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	

Depending on the results presented in table 6, most of teachers declared that they depend on the syllabus provided by the English department; henceforth, they tend to prepare lectures and supply them with diagrams and APA charts to enhance their understanding, after that they provide them with practice. They added that the nature of the activities revolves around providing lists of words for transcription since the first year is just an initiation to English pronunciation. In contrast, 10% of the teachers argued that they tend to bring materials and provide samples for the learners and ask them to practise.

### Recording Test

The hidden aim behind this test is to evaluate the students' level of pronunciation and the errors made. The researcher has conducted this test during the academic year 2014-2015. 50 students were selected from five groups. Those students were given a list of sentences to read loudly to take a recording sample. Then, the researcher listened to these recordings and checked out the errors made by the participants.

**T** able 7. *Pronunciation test*

Pronunciation Test	First Year Students	Expressed in %
<b>Correct</b>	07	14%
<b>Incorrect</b>	43	86%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	

The findings in the afore table revealed that about 14% of the participants speak without making errors in terms of vowels and consonants, while 86% of them are still mixing Arabic sounds with English especially /d/, /r/ and /v/ and most of them mispronounce /↔/.

**Table 8. Pronouncing English vowels**

English Vowels	Total Number of Students Selected	Number of Incorrect Forms	Expressed in %
/ø/	50	27	54%
/↔Y/	50	19	38%
/αι/	50	21	42%

/ε↔/	50	28	56%
/↔Y↔/	50	31	62%
/α↔/	50	24	48%

Table 8 presents the major percentages found by the researcher. It is found that students cannot distinguish between /θ/ and /ð/. In fact, they find it difficult to distinguish the pronunciation of these sounds. The researcher discovered that they are still mixing diphthongs including /αY/ and /↔Y/ such as in 'no' and 'now', /εɪ/ and /αɪ/ like in 'lay' and 'lie', /ε↔/ and /ɪ↔/ such as in 'hair' and 'hear'. Besides, the analysis demonstrates that the participants have also a problem in distinguishing triphthongs because they have already a problem with diphthongs including /↔Y↔/ and /αYα/ such as in 'lower' and 'flower' or in /αɪ↔/ and /εɪ↔/.

Furthermore, the researcher checked also errors at the consonantal system. She found that the participants are still suffering from the interference of their first language's sounds with English consonants as table 9 shows:

**Table 9. Students' problem with English consonants**

English Consonants	Total Number of Students	Incorrect Forms	Expressed in %
/π/	50	27	54%
/τ/	50	41	82%
/N/	50	44	88%
/Δ/	50	32	64%
/δZ/	50	39	78%
/ρ/	50	41	82%
/ʔ/	50	47	94%

Table 9 gives some facts about the students' problems. The researcher came across the point that the main factor is that the influence of Arabic language is apparent because students have not distinguished yet the difference between English and Arabic sounds, i.e., how English consonants are articulated in comparison to the sounds of their mother tongue. Henceforth, the findings revealed that students have made errors in pronouncing the previous consonants. In terms of /ρ/ and /τ/; for example, they are still pronouncing them like Arabic sounds /Φ/ for 'غ' and /□/'ط'. Another problem with /τ/ and /π/ for Arab learners is that they face difficulties in their pronunciation when they are followed by vowels, i.e., providing aspiration as native speakers. Besides, learners find it very difficult to pronounce dark /ʔ/; for this reason they tend to insert clear 'l'.

## Data Interpretations and Recommendations

It is agreed that exploring an issue is providing half of the reality for its problem; henceforth, the focal aim behind tackling this subject springs from the researcher's aim to find out solutions for the problems encountering learners and teachers in selecting the appropriate techniques to teach and learn English pronunciation. Most importantly, it should be noted that there are important points that teachers of phonetics should take into account in teaching pronunciation:

- They have to develop awareness among EFL learners about the importance of learning English pronunciation through giving them the reasons behind learning the sound system of English language, i.e., they should raise their awareness about the place of pronunciation in developing their speaking skill.
- A recording test error should be provided by each teacher by the end of each semester to evaluate the students' levels; so that he can ameliorate his teaching techniques and therefore providing the appropriate activities that meet his students' needs.
- They can also provide lessons of listening, so that students can have more opportunities to hear how native speakers pronounce sounds and, thereby they can distinguish them from their mother tongue.

The current research work has also recommended that EFL learners should not always depend on the teachers' materials, but they have also to improve their pronunciation through getting the habit to listen to recordings, music, news and movies in English. They have also to train what they have learnt through communicating with their colleagues in English.

## Conclusion

Focusing just on teachers' role and learners' duties towards finding the appropriate solutions to improve English pronunciation for EFL learners is unfair without shedding light on the position of syllabus designers and the importance of assessing EFL learners' programmes of English pronunciation in order to improve them. Indeed, assessment helps teachers to check out and evaluate the teaching techniques and methods related to teaching pronunciation. Obviously, teachers can turn some negative points to their parts; this means that, they can benefit from overcrowded classrooms through providing their learners phoneme cards and pronunciation quiz. They can even open the learners' appetite for research and raise their awareness of the importance of learning pronunciation through changing their attitudes and giving them home works including tongue twisters and limericks and thereby raising competition between them.

Last but not the least, one should say that learning and teaching pronunciation is a hard task that should be swung back to the list of topics that are still triggering experts' interests in pedagogy and foreign language teaching . In this sense, pronunciation should be taught and learnt as an integral part of communication. In fact, it should be viewed as the wheel that pushes the speaker to good oral performance since speaking and pronunciation are intertwined; in this vein, the teacher plays the role of the facilitator because he has to provide his learners with bases on sound production, syllables intonation and stress. Henceforth, the learners can follow these guidelines and develop their awareness towards the importance of pronunciation in developing the four linguistic skills in the target language.

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