Article

Analysing the Improper Pronunciation of Diphthongs by Iraqi EFL learners

Mukhalad Malik Yousif, Aras Abdalkarim Ameen

Department of English, Cihan University, Slemani, Iraq

A B S T R A C T

The current study aims at analysing the improper pronunciation of Iraqi EFL learners concerning the pronunciation of diphthongs in words of various syllables. It describes and identifies thoroughly the mispronunciations of such important sounds in English language. The study attempts at analysing such mispronunciations by clarifying and assigning the phonetic deviations of Iraqi EFL learners when they pronounce diphthongs. So the main objective of the study is to analyse the errors committed by Iraqi learners in the pronunciation of diphthongs grouping each error into its specific category. To verify the objective of the paper, 25 Iraqi EFL learners from the department of English at Cihan University/ Slemani are chosen to be the main participants of the study. The test which was conducted in the laboratory of the Department of English contained 10 words comprising various diphthongs. The results clearly revealed that mispronouncing English diphthongs by Iraqi EFL were mostly observed by replacing the required diphthong with another improper one and they also tended to use simple vowels instead of the correct required diphthongs.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is by no means the most important system used in communication as part of human social interaction and behaviour. The entire communicative process is achieved through oral activities and interactions, that is, through speaking. When learning a second language, learners will have exposure to different levels of linguistic knowledge including how to pronounce the sounds of words so as to be able to communicate in that language.

It is beyond dispute an axiomatic manifestation that pronunciation is the essential vehicle for communication that learners should highly take into consideration if an efficient and successful communication is the goal. In addition acceptable and accurate pronunciation of the target language makes communication fully understandable, smooth and purposeful. Pronunciation is a vital part of fruitful communication. Schmitt (2002:219) defines it as "a term used to capture all aspects of how we employ speech sounds for communication". Celce-Murcia et, al. (2010:8) claim that EFL learners need a

"threshold level of pronunciation" for understandable and comprehensible level of interaction represented by communication. Otherwise, as Hinofotis and Baily (1980:124-125) notes, "up to a certain proficiency standard, the fault which most severely impairs the communication process in EFL/ESL learners is pronunciation".

A great part of mastering an efficient pronunciation is mastering the vowel of the target language due to its significance in making meanings clear and understandable and also due to the fact that improper pronunciation of vowels will definitely results into vague, unintelligible and awkward communication.

In case of English, vowels play a major role in defining the main characteristics of a clear, acceptable and an efficient process of communication due to the attribute that their precise and efficient pronunciations are largely involved in distinguishing meanings of words which are otherwise similar in all other related aspects except for the occurring vowels which distinguish a word from the other as in 'pit', 'pet', 'pat', 'put', 'pot' where their definite articulations inherently expose the feature of closeness. Simultaneously, learning English vowels is not an easy task as McMahon (2002) states that vowels particularly cause difficulty in both perception and production since the features which are used to classify and understand consonants are not helpful in distinguishing between vowels.

Vowel awareness is no easy task because vowels are subject to change in speech rhythm (McCully, 2009). Yet, the difficulty that EFL learners may encounter when attempting at getting efficient acquaintance with the vowel system of English may extend to a further kind of vowels usually termed diphthongs. In the broadest sense, diphthongs are described by Ladefoged and Johnson (2011) as a sound that involves a change within one single vowel. For all diphthongs, they consist of a movement or glide from one vowel to another

(Roach, 2009). The first part of a diphthong is longer and more prominent than the second (McMahon, 2002).

To illustrate, a careful pronunciation of the word 'how' will involve the closing diphthong /aʊ/. on the other hand, the second part of the diphthong will be pronounced shorter and weaker. The tongue glides toward the second vowel but does not quite get there. What such illustration implies about diphthongs is that they involve high level of precision as far as tongue movement and lip position are concerned. As far as EFL learners are concerned, there are a number of difficulties that arise when they pronounce diphthongs. Most importantly, they are unaware of the precise diphthong that should be pronounced in the given word due to their awkward phonetic input. Additionally, practicing the pronunciation of English, particularly diphthongs, is often a marginal process to which little attention is given.

Nadeem and Rehman (2013:578) state that the speech of non-native English speakers may reveal pronunciation inefficiency resulting from such speakers imperfectly learning the pronunciation of English, either by transferring the phonological rules from their mother tongue into their English speech ("interference") or by implementing strategies similar to those used in primary language acquisition. For Iraqi EFL learners, many other impediments arise since most of the English diphthongs are rarely found in Iraqi accent and usually replaced by improper sounds found in their native sound system.

II. METHODS

The test of the current study was conducted on 25 Iraqi EFL learners at the thirst stage majoring English as a foreign language from the Department of English at Cihan University/ Slemani for the academic year 2017-2018. The test contained words taken from the O'Connor's book 'Better English Pronunciation (1980). The main reason behind choosing words which contained different diphthongs was due to the fact that

learners finished this book in the first and second semesters when they were at the first stage. This would verify if learners were still having efficient competent about the pronunciation of diphthongs which they studied before two years or not. The test was conducted in the laboratory of the department of English where learners were instructed to read a list of words which was divided into groups. The first group contained five words with one vowel only representing the diphthong. The second group contained five words which contained two vowels where one was a diphthong and the other was a simple vowel as in the following table 1:

Table 1: Test material words

First Group		Second Group	
Word	Transcription	Word	Transcription
boat	/bəʊt/	compose	/kəmpəʊz/
doubt	/daʊt/	arouse	/əraʊz/
race	/reɪs/	sailor	/seɪlə/
rice	/raɪs/	pilot	/paɪlət/
join	/dʒɔɪn/	annoy	/ənɔɪ/

The transcriptions of the words are entirely in accordance with the British accent so called R.P as it is the basic transcription throughout the book. It should be mentioned that the analysis of the pronunciation of those words would take into consideration the improper pronunciation of the diphthongs only. So when learners commit other mistakes concerning simple vowels or consonants, they are disregarded. The procedure used to analyse the pronunciations of the learners for those words was recording what they read and then they were also instructed to transcribe each word. The reason of transcribing the words was to secure and ensure an objective and an authentic analysis. The data was then analysed identifying the improper pronunciation of each word grouping such inappropriateness in accordance with the committed mistakes in the pronunciation of diphthongs. Percentage of each improper pronunciation along with identifying its phonetic failure was given to estimate the large percentages which mostly influence learners in their mispronunciations.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the current paper are divided into two parts for a better and a comprehensive analysis of the improper pronunciation of diphthongs by Iraqi EFL learners. The first is concerned with the first group of words which contained only a diphthong as the only vowel of the word and the second part is concerned with the second group.

First group analysis

In the first group of the words, Iraqi EFL learners tended to replace the required vowel with an improper long simple vowel and this what the data analysis clearly revealed through both the pronunciation and the transcription of the learners. But the improper replacement of the long simple vowel varied from a learner to another. In other words, some learners used an improper long simple vowel and others used another one for the same word. Thus, for instance, the word 'boat' was once pronounced as /bɔːt/ by some learners whereas it was pronounced as /buːt/ by the others. This clearly reflects that the mispronunciation of the same word was not systematic; learners' committed mistakes were different. In any case, the resulting pronunciation due to this factor was entirely an improper one where sometimes the meanings of the words became unclear and sometimes new different words appeared due to such mispronunciations as in the table 2.

Table 2: Improper vowel replacement-First group

Word	Improper Vowel Replacement	Frequency	Percentage
boat	/ɔː/ + /uː/	16+ 5=21	47.72%
doubt	/ɔː/ + /ɒ/	5+5=10	22.72%
race	/iː/+ /æ/	6+2=8	18.18%
rice	/iː/	3	6.8%
join	/uː/	2	4.5%
Total		44	99.92%

The data analysis explicitly elaborates that learners failed to pronounce the words with their precise diphthong. In the first word, learners excessively replaced the diphthong with the long vowel /ɔː/ so the transcription

became /bɔːt/ which is improper (as the correct transcription is given in Table 1). Here, the meaning of the word 'boat' changed into 'bought' due to such mispronunciation. Out of the 25 learners, 16 pronounced it as a long simple vowel/ɔː/ which indicates a high percentage reflecting their incompetence. In some cases, learners used the vowel /uː/ resulting into /buːt/ which is the transcription of the word 'boot' and not 'boat'. The second word was improperly pronounced /dɔːt/ and /dɒt/ respectively by 10 learners both of which were incorrect. For the former transcription, it is very hard to find any word with such transcription in English language whereas as the latter improper transcription /dɒt/ suggest the word 'dot' and not doubt. The word 'race' was once pronounced /riːs/ by 6 learners and once as /ræs/ by 2 learners. In both cases, such improper pronunciations do not have matching counterpart suggesting that the learners were confused with the pronunciation of other words. The word 'rise' was also pronounced /riːs/ by 3 learners suggesting improper and unmatchable pronunciation. Finally, the word 'join' was pronounced as /dʒuːn/ by 2 learners suggesting that this word might be the lest problematic for Iraqi EFL learners.

In all cases, the replacement of the required diphthong with an improper simple vowel reflected inefficient phonetic competent and may have revealed the fact that learner' long-term memory concerning the precise diphthong pronunciation was weakened and interfered. In some cases, the data analysis revealed that learners realized that the required sound was a diphthong only they failed in identifying which one was required. Once again, the data analysis revealed that the improper replacement of diphthong by Iraqi EFL learners resulted into pronouncing words other than the required and, in some cases, the words were pronounced as not belonging to any English word as in the table 3.

Table 3: Improper diphthong replacement-First group

Word	Improper Vowel Replacement	Frequency	Percentage
boat	/aʊ/	2	7.69%
doubt	/əʊ/	10	38.46%
race	/aI/	9	34.61%
rice	/eI/	5	19.23%
Total		26	99.99%

Therefor, learners were confused in identifying the precise diphthong which the word must be pronounced with and this might be highly attributed to the poor and ineffective strategies used in teaching diphthongs along with assigning specific period for teaching them. As such, learners' phonetic competent gradually rusted and largely reflected the fact that learners were inefficient in the proper pronunciation of diphthongs within English words. The first word was pronounced /baʊt/ which indeed had no correspondent word meaning in English; it is neither 'boat', 'bought' nor 'boot'. The second word witnessed the highest error frequency where it was pronounced /dəʊt/ by 10 learners. Similarly, the word 'race' was pronounced /raIs/ by 9 learners which was the precise diphthong for the next word 'rise' which was also mispronounced /reIs/ fitting the previous one.

It is great significance to state the fact that, relying on the data analysis, that learners committed other mistakes but not were related to diphthongs and hence, were disregarded. What this shows is that in addition to diphthong mispronunciations, leaners also had other inefficiency concerning other aspects like simple vowels and to a certain extent consonants. In tables 2 and 3, the entire frequency of mispronunciation was 70 which were about 56% of the entire percentage of the first group's responses. As can be noticed from the results, the frequency of vowel replacement was higher than that of the diphthong which suggests that Iraqi EFL Learners were really incompetent in being aware of the occurrence of diphthong so they mostly used vowels improperly.

Second group analysis

The results of this group revealed a high percentage of inefficiency as learners were excessively mispronouncing the diphthongs of the second group words. This group characterized with the occurrence of two vowels; one was simple and the other was diphthong. The point which was surprisingly obvious while pronouncing the words was that when the diphthong occurred as the second vowel of the word, it was pronounced as a long simple vowel whereas it was pronounced as a short simple vowel when it occurred as the first one. In addition, there was improper diphthong-diphthong replacement but to a lesser extent. Most importantly, learners tended to replace the diphthong with two kinds of vowels systematically; a diphthong occurring as the second sound was replaced with long simple vowel and a diphthong occurring as the first was replaced with short simple vowel as in table 4:

Table 4: Improper vowel replacement-Second group

Word	Improper Vowel Replacement	Frequency	Percentage
compose	/ɔ:/	20	37.73%
arouse	/ɔ:/	7	13.20%
sailor	/e/	11	20.75%
pilot	/I/	13	24.52%
annoy	/ɔ:/	2	3.77%
Total		32	99.97%

The results explicitly demonstrated the severe lack of diphthongal knowledge by Iraqi EFL learners. On the one hand, it might be plausible to state that having two vowels within the same word caused more confusion and difficulty and resulted into many mispronunciations. On the other hand, such inappropriateness might reflect a systematic deviation in such phonological traits; learners tend to lengthen the vowel in the second syllable of the word whereas shortening it in the first. The first word of the group was excessively replaced by the long vowel /ɔ:/ resulting into pronouncing it as /kəmpɔ:z/ by

20 learners. The diphthong of the second word was also replaced by the same vowel being pronounced as /arɔ:z/ by 7 learners. Hence, the third and fourth words respectively were replaced with short simple vowel; /selər/ and /pɪlət/. The last word was the less problematic but in many cases, it was not pronounced efficiently as a whole. The replacement of the improper diphthong was also observed in the data analysis but to a lesser extent than the first deviation as in the table 4:

Table 5: Improper diphthong replacement-Second group

Word	Improper Vowel Replacement	Frequency	Percentage
compose	/aʊ/	5	17.24%
arouse	/ɔɪ/	12	41.37 %
sailor	/aI/	12	41.37 %
Total		29	99.98%

The percentages illustrates that learners were unable to assign the precise diphthong in words containing two vowels. The first word was pronounced /kəmpaʊz/**.** The second and third words respectively witnessed the highest percentages of deviations, 24 learners, where they mispronounced them as /arɔɪz/ and /saɪlər/. This percentage showed a tendency to use both diphthongs improperly due to interference and incompetent knowledge. Though the other two words did not appear in the table, pilot' and 'annoy', they were also pronounced improperly, as the data revealed but not due to diphthongal attribute. Whether using improper simple vowels or improper diphthong instead of the required ones, learners' inefficient competent was so clear when pronouncing the words. The use of simple vowels excessively was an inevitable outcome due to the poor strategies of vowel input process. Learners tended to use simple vowels because of being unaware of how sounds should be produced. Partially, this incompetent knowledge due the poor and inefficient strategies of teaching pronunciation led Iraqi learners used English vowels which also exist in Iraqi L1 accent

especially /ɔ:/ ,/i:/,/æ/ and /e/. That might be empirically plausible when considering, for instance, that the percentage of using /ɔ:/ was the highest reflecting both inefficient competence and the excessive resort to a correspondent native vowel, that is, negative LI sound transfer.

IV. CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration the results of both groups, learners were excessively replacing the precise diphthongs with simple vowels whether short or long where the frequency of such mispronunciation was 97 which was about 38% of the entire responses. As for the frequency of improper diphthong pronunciation in the two groups, it was 54 which, about 21% of the entire responses. Considering both percentages, the total frequency of mispronunciation was 151 which was about 60% of the entire responses. Whether due to the first or second improper attribute, Iraqi EFL learners showed awkward and inefficient pronunciation of diphthongs mainly due to ineffective, inefficient and short-term strategies of phonetic teaching process. The ongoing strategies of teaching pronunciation in general and diphthongs in particular are to be reconsidered taking into account all the negative factors to eliminate them and the possible positive factors to consolidate them such as the presence of a native modal, extending the length of teaching pronunciation and the continuous engagement of activities and practices of pronunciations at various levels of teaching.

REFERENCES

Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D., and Goodwin, J. (2010). *Teaching pronunciation: A course book and reference guide* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hinofotis, F., & Bailey, K. (1980). American undergraduates' reactions to the communication skills of foreign teaching assistants. *On TESOL, 80, 120-133*.

Ladefoged, P., & Johnson, K. (2011). *A course in phonetics Wadsworth*. Cengage Learning, Scarborough.

McCully, C. (2009). *The sound structure of English: An introduction. (Cambridge Introductions to the English Language).* Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

McMahon, A. (2002). *An Introduction to English Phonology.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nadeem, M.,& Rahman, A. (2013). Stress out of stress: stressing unaccented syllables dilemma. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities, 2(2), 577-586.*

O'Connor, J., D. (1980). Better English Pronunciation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roach, P. (2009). *English Phonetics and Phonology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schmitt, N. (2002). *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*. London: Oxford University Press.

Vitanova, G. and Miller, A. (2002) "Reflective Practice in pronunciation Learning". *In: The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VIII, No. 1.*