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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Artur Kijak

On the Coronal Palatalization in Early Modern and Present-Day English . . . 5

Marie Flesh

“Dude” and “Dudette”, “Bro” and “Sis”: A Diachronic Study of Four
Address Terms in the *TV Corpus* 23

Marta Carretero

The Expression of Epistemicity in British Internet Discussion Forums
in Contrast with Newspaper Opinion Articles and Political Speeches 43

Mersina Mujagić

Figurative Conceptualizations of Nations, Countries, and Institutions
in Newspaper Articles on Migration 71

Nazi Iritspukhova

Metaphor and English Promotional Tourism Discourse: Systematic-narrative
Hybrid Literature Review and Future Research Areas 93

Hasnaa Hasan Sultan Abdelreheem

The Key English Pronunciation Difficulties for Egyptian EFL Learners . . . 115


Miłosz Marcjanik

EMI in Higher Education: Current Challenges 135

Katarzyna Jaworska-Biskup

Food Symbolism and Imagery in the Polish Translations of William
Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 135

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The Key English Pronunciation Difficulties for Egyptian EFL Learners¹

Abstract: Despite all the attempts by ESL and EFL learners to attain (near-)native proficiency, many phonological, lexical and spelling mistakes still occur in any L2 learning environment (Huwari 2019, 31). This paper aims to investigate the key English pronunciation difficulties, both segmental (on the level of speech sounds) and suprasegmental (rhythm, stress, and juncture), of Egyptian learners of English, in a corpus of audio and/or video recordings of English conversation and presentation skills classes by Egyptian university students who are also native speakers of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA). The project involves both contrastive analysis (of the phonological systems of English, Egyptian Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic) as well as error analysis. While the significance of contrastive analysis lies in helping EFL teachers predict the problematic aspects (Al-Saqqaf and Vaddapalli 2012, 56), error analysis would provide them with the actual problems encountered by the learners and the extent of their seriousness.

Keywords: EFL, pronunciation, Egyptian learners, mistakes

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1. Rationale and focus

In the context of language learning and teaching, the majority of pronunciation errors are produced by learners as a result of the interference of their first languages in the process of second language acquisition (Elmahdi and Khan 2015, 97). Learners tend to apply the rules of their mother language(s) to the language(s) they are learning, which may result in “a big hindrance in the process of communication amongst speakers” and “spoils the teaching and learning efforts in second language learning settings” (Ahmad 2011, 23).

According to Gilakjani (2012) and Al-Dilaimy (2012), incorrect pronunciation creates “disgrace” and embarrassment while, on the other hand, proper pronunciation creates “respect”, fosters social bonding among interlocutors and, consequently, enhances communication (cited in Huwari 2019, 31). In my experience as a teacher in an Egyptian higher education institution, teaching English as a foreign language to Egyptians ranging in their proficiency levels (pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate), I have noticed that Egyptian students face problems with some aspects of English phonetics and phonology. This study was conducted to investigate the key English pronunciation difficulties for Egyptian EFL learners, as well as the factors behind the learners’ errors in a contrastive analysis framework.

Arabic and English set examples of languages with two distinct individual grammars that encompass speech characteristics. Therefore, a significant impact of L1 transfer on the participants’ pronunciation of English is expected to be the main source of errors. Another factor behind the phonological problems Egyptian EFL learners face could be the inadequacy of some study programmes in the Arab region. Despite the drawbacks underlying English Language Teaching (ELT) policies of the public educational institutions in the Arab world countries and the criticism directed at the graduates of some inadequate study programmes in these institutions, the amount of literature tackling these aspects is still insufficient (Al-Issa et al. 2017). Exploring the Egyptian EFL learners’ errors of pronunciation and the underlying sources of those errors would aid drawing pedagogical implications that address the problematic aspects with the aim of improving the existing and future teaching and learning practice in Egypt.

2. The main language varieties in Egypt

The linguistic situation involves two standardised varieties of Arabic: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)/Literary Arabic and Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA)/Cairene/Egyptian Dialect, and a continuum of other local dialects of Colloquial Egyptian spoken around the country differing from one another in pronunciation, lexicon and to some extent in structure. MSA is the variety of Arabic taught in schools, used in writing, in official mass media and in most formal speech in all Arabic speaking countries, and

based on the Classical Arabic of the Quran and early Islamic literature (Swan and Smith 2001, 195; Javed 2013, 1). The focus of this research will be on the phonological problems of native speakers of ECA, the variety of Egyptian Arabic originated in Cairo, the capital city of Egypt, and understood across most of the Arab region. ECA is mainly a spoken variety; however, it is encountered in vernacular literature, advertisements, social media as well as informal media. Phoneme inventories of consonants and vowels in both MSA and ECA are given below:

MSA Consonant Phonemes (Hassig 2011, 9)

	labial	dental	alveolar	emphatic	palatal	velar	uvular	pharyngeal	glottal
nasal	m		n						
stop	b		d t	d ^ɕ t ^ɕ	dʒ	k	q		ʔ
fricative	f	ð θ	z s	ð ^ɕ s ^ɕ	ʃ		χ x	ħ h	h
tap			r						
approximate			l		j	w			

MSA Short Vowels (Hassig 2011, 10)

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		u
Mid			
Open	a		

MSA Long Vowels and Diphthongs (Hassig 2011, 10)

	Front	Central	Back	Diphthongs
Close	i:		u:	/aj/
Mid				/aw/
Open	a:			

ECA Consonant Phonemes (Youssef 2006, 13)

	Bilabial	Dental	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Stop	b b ^ɕ	t t ^ɕ d d ^ɕ		k k ^ɕ g g ^ɕ	q		ʔ ʔ ^ɕ
Fricative	f f ^ɕ v v ^ɕ	s s ^ɕ z z ^ɕ	ʃ ʃ ^ɕ ʒ ʒ ^ɕ	x x ^ɕ ɣ ɣ ^ɕ		ħ ħ ^ɕ ʕ ʕ ^ɕ	h h ^ɕ
Nasal	m m ^ɕ	n n ^ɕ					
Lateral		l l ^ɕ					
Trill		r r ^ɕ					
Glide	w w ^ɕ			j j ^ɕ			

ECA Short Vowels (Hassig, 2011, 12)

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		u
Mid			
Open	a		a ^ɐ

ECA Long Vowels and Diphthongs (Hassig, 2011, 12)

	Front	Central	Back	Diphthongs
Close	i:		u:	/aj/
Mid				/aw/
Open	a:		a: ^ɐ	

3. First language transfer

Lado (1957) states that, in the process of L2 learning, “Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture – both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives” (cited in El Zarka 2013, 23). This phenomenon is referred to in the literature as **L1 interference**, **L1 (positive/negative) transfer** or **interlanguage**, and is regarded as a significant factor in the process of L2 learning/acquisition. Richards (1971), for instance, reported that 36% of L2 errors can be attributed to the interference of the learners’ L1 (cited in Tushyeh 1996, 110). In addition, (negative) transfer is identified as one of the sources of errors in L2 acquisition according tSelinker’s (1972) classification which includes: language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication, and overgeneralization of TL linguistic material (cited in Ababneh 2018, 247). In their journey of L2 acquisition/learning, learners tend to carry over the rules of their L1 to the system of the target language, which results in some sort of hybrid system that is “neither the L1 nor the L2” (El Zarka 2013, 19). Such impact of interlanguage diminishes as a learner’s L2 proficiency improves (El Zarka 2013, 19) and may be further influenced by other factors such as: individual differences of teachers or learners, learning/teaching approaches, techniques, procedures and materials, etc. (Jain 1974,

189, cited in El Zarka 2013, 19). On the other hand, the type of transfer, where the cross-linguistic similarities between L1 and L2 aid the process of acquisition, is considered, and referred to in the literature, as “positive transfer” (El Zarka 2013, 23). Mahmoud (2000, 127-128) states that “transfer may be used as a learning strategy to formulate hypotheses about the target language and as a communication strategy to test these hypotheses” (El Zarka 2013, 23).

Moreover, L1 interference plays a greater role in the acquisition of L2 pronunciation compared to other aspects of L2, and is the main cause behind possessing a “foreign accent” (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin 1996, 20, cited in Barros 2003, 23) that is acoustically similar to the learners’ L1 (Avery and Ehrlich 1992, cited in Chouchane 2016, 208). In the context of teaching English to native speakers of Arabic, Marzouk (1993) explored the transfer of L1 vowels and norms of consonant clustering, which was evident in the vowel intrusions in English consonant clusters by Arab learners (cited in Barros 2003, 27). The current study investigates the key English pronunciation difficulties of Egyptian EFL learners through a contrastive analysis (of the phonological systems of Egyptian Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic as the two languages available to the learners before L2, and English as the target language) to see whether the errors are caused by any type of negative transfer of the learners’ L1(s), and to shed light on any other factors hindering the acquisition/learning of English pronunciation.

4. Problematic aspects

4.1 Segmental aspects

Any error analysis requires contrastive analysis; contrastive analysis could explain why certain L2 errors occur. Therefore, it is significant to begin with noting the differences in English and Arabic phonetic segments. While RP, the main variety of English taught in Egypt, has twenty-four consonants and twenty vowels (seven short, five long and eight diphthongs), Egyptian Arabic has twenty-eight consonants and only eight vowels (three short and five long). In Arabic, the three short vowels are “graphically represented” through diacritics above or below the letters, but that is not always the case (Martin 2011, 8). Most Arabic texts are generally not “fully vowelized” (i.e. with no representation of the short vowels in script), which means that the one-to-one correspondence between orthography and speech sounds is not always clear (Martin 2011, 8). This can result in Arabic speakers’ tendency to confuse the English short vowels and to avoid elisions and contractions (Swan and Smith 2001, 196).

4.1.1 Consonants

English spoken by Egyptian learners is characterised by the failure to realise some phonetic qualities such as the voicelessness of the bilabial plosive /p/, which is replaced by its voiced counterpart /b/, the closest alternative in the phonemic system of Arabic. Generally, for the native speakers of Arabic, [b] and [p] are allophones of the same phoneme when heard (Nasr 1997, 24; Swan and Smith 2001, 197). The word *bray* /'breɪ/ can overlap with *pray* /'preɪ/, resulting in communication problems or misunderstandings. This mispronunciation of /p/ may impact other phonemes resulting in more pronunciation difficulties pertaining to assimilation. Different types of assimilation (including voicing and devoicing assimilation) are common in ECA. Thus, Egyptian learners carry it over to their English. For instance, in a word like *speak* /'spi:k/, regressive assimilation occurs when /s/ is assimilated in voicing to /b/, substituted for /p/, resulting in [zbi:k].

Another feature is replacing the voiceless palato-alveolar affricate /tʃ/ with the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative [ʃ] (e.g. *chair* /tʃeə(r)/ can overlap with *share* /ʃeə(r)/). /tʃ/ does not exist in the phonological system of MSA as a separate speech segment, but exists in some dialects of Arabic in junctures of /t/ and /ʃ/ (Swan and Smith 2001, 197). In ECA, it neither exists as a separate segment nor in junctures.

It is also observed that the velar nasal /ŋ/ is mispronounced by many Egyptian learners in words where the consonant is represented by the two letters n and g, especially in the -ing suffix (e.g. *hearing* /'hɪə.rɪŋ/ pronounced as ['hɪə.rɪŋg]) (Ahmad 2011, 24). Both the alveolar nasal [n] and the velar nasal [ŋ] exist in Arabic, but as allophones of the same phoneme /n/ (Kharma and Hajjaj 1989, cited in Elmahdi and Khan 2015, 95).

Other phonemes, such as /dʒ/, /θ/ and /ð/, could also be problematic since they are not used in ECA despite the fact that they exist in the MSA phonemic system. The voiced palato-alveolar affricate /dʒ/ exists in the phonological systems of MSA and some dialects of Arabic. Nevertheless, it is replaced by the voiced velar stop /g/ in ECA (Swan and Smith 2001, 197; Javed 2013, 8) or simplified to the voiced palato-alveolar fricative /ʒ/ in other Egyptian dialects. In their pronunciation of English, Egyptian learners tend to replace /dʒ/ by [ʒ] due to the familiarity with [ʒ] that exists in loanwords like: *garage* /'gær.ɑ:ʒ/ and *beige* /beɪʒ/. Another similar case is that of the dental fricatives, both voiceless /θ/ and voiced /ð/. MSA /θ/ is rendered as either a voiceless dental stop /t/ or a voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ in ECA (e.g. MSA /'θæni/ 'second' (an adverb) is ['tæni] in ECA, while MSA /'θæbɪt/ 'stable' becomes ['sæbɪt] in ECA). In their pronunciation of English, Egyptian learners tend to replace /θ/ by /s/. Likewise, /ð/ is rendered as either a voiced dental stop /d/ or a voiced alveolar fricative /z/ in ECA (e.g. MSA /'ðorɑh/ 'corn' is ['dɔrɑh] in ECA, while MSA /ʊs'tæð/ 'mister' becomes [ʊs'tæz] in ECA). In their pronunciation of English, Egyptian learners tend to replace English /ð/ by /z/. It is noticed in the previous examples of word mispronunciation that the Egyptian

learners can change the manner and place of articulation, but preserve the voicing quality of segments.

Some other errors arise from the notion that one phoneme can differ in nature between Arabic and English though it exists in both languages. Although the voiceless glottal fricative consonant /h/ exists in both Arabic and English, the Arabic /h/ is articulated from further back in the throat and with harsher aspiration compared to its English counterpart. This is a reason why Arabic speakers, generally, tend to pronounce the English /h/ “rather harshly” (Swan and Smith 2001, 197). Similarly, unlike English, the Arabic /r/ is realised as a voiced flap (Swan and Smith 2001, 197) or a trilled consonant. Consequently, Egyptian learners tend to overpronounce initial /r/, post-vocalic /r/, and similar to speakers of other dialects of Arabic (e.g. Saudi learners; Elmahdi and Khan 2015, 94), it appears to be more problematic for Egyptian learners when it occurs in final position.

Similar to Arab learners of English in general, Egyptian learners are spelling-conscious. Unlike what occurs in natural order of language acquisition, the spelling/written forms of English are available to the learners before their pronunciation; an approach adopted by an exam-oriented educational system that focuses solely on written accuracy. Besides, the phonetic system of Arabic is closely related to its writing system, and learners seem to approach foreign languages in the same way they approach their L1(s). These may explain why the pronunciation of an English word can be greatly influenced by its spelling when a consonant is doubled in a word. Another reason could be that Arabic has what is called “doubling” or gemination of a consonant in pronunciation marked in script by what is called a “double-consonant diacritical mark” (Javed 2013, 8-9) placed above the consonant. Therefore, for an Egyptian learner, double letters in an English word could be equal to geminates (e.g. pronouncing *comment* /'kɒm.ent/ with a geminated /m/ as ['kɒm.ment]). English spelling also influences the production of some errors related to the pronunciation of final inflectional *-ed*. *-ed* is both perceived and pronounced as either [d] or [ɪd] even in the cases when it is preceded by a voiceless consonant. In words like *touched*, *judged*, and *fixed*, *-ed* is pronounced as [ɪd] and in words like *laughed*, *swiped* and *smashed*, it is pronounced as [d].

4.1.2 Vowels

The English vowel phonemes /ɪ/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ɒ/, /ʊ/, /i:/, /a:/, /ɔ:/, /u:/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/ and /aʊ/ have equivalents or near equivalents in Arabic. Thus, they are generally less problematic in terms of reception and production although some overlaps may still occur (Swan and Smith 2001, 197). On the other hand, the vowels /e/, /ə/, /ɜ:/, /əʊ/, /eɪ/, /eə/, /ɪə/ and /ʊə/ may cause more problems. For instance, due to the learners' familiarity with /ɪ/, it often replaces /e/, which may result in confusing *bed* /bed/ with *bid* /bɪd/. Moreover, the /ə/ is given more stress and length in pronunciation. Besides, the Egyptian pronunciation of /ə/ is greatly influenced by the spelling

(e.g. a schwa is pronounced as /æ/ in *about* /əˈbaʊt/, /ɪ/ in *pencil* /ˈpen.səl/ and /ʊ/ in *season* /ˈsiː.zən/. /ɜː/ is one of the most problematic vowels. It is hard to perceive and is usually pronounced as [ɪ] (e.g. *girl* /gɜː(r)l/ is pronounced as [gɪ(r)l]). Generally, diphthongs, such as /aɪ/, /aʊ/, /ɔɪ/ and /əʊ/ (or /oʊ/ as in GA), are made shorter. Besides, [eː] replaces the English diphthongs /eɪ/ and /eə/, which Egyptians often confuse. This could make the diphthongs in *state* /steɪt/ and *square* /skweə(r)/ sound similar. /əʊ/ or /oʊ/ are hard to perceive and articulate, and often altered to [ɔː] (e.g. *no* /nəʊ/ or /noʊ/ becomes [nɔː]). Similarly, /ʊə/ is altered to [uː] (e.g. *poor* /ˈpuə(r)/ becomes [ˈpuː(r)]), and /ɪə/ is often altered to [iː] (e.g. *clear* /klɪə(r)/ becomes [kliː(r)]), which can make words like *hear* and *he* sound the same when learning RP).

4.1.3 Consonant clustering

Compared with English, Arabic has far fewer consonant clusters in the initial, medial and final positions. The maximum number of consonants in a medial or final cluster is two in all varieties of Arabic. According to Bauman-Waengler (2009), “In contrast to English, which has 78 three-segment clusters and 14 four-segment clusters occurring at the end of words, Arabic has none” (cited in Elmahdi and Khan 2015, 93). To facilitate the pronunciation of English clusters, Egyptian learners attempt to declusterise them by preceding the cluster starting with /s/ by a prothetic [ʔ]: *spoil* /spɔɪl/ and *stood* /stʊd/ become [ʔɪspɔɪl] and [ʔɪstʊd] (cf. Broselow 2015, 295, Khalifa 2020, 160–162). In other cases, learners resort to inserting short vowels in between the consonants in a cluster as an attempt to facilitate its pronunciation (Swan and Smith 2001, 198) (e.g. initial: *flat* /flæt/ is rendered as [fɪlæt]; medial: *extra* /ˈek.strə/ as [ˈek.ɪs.tɪrə]; final: *text* /tekst/ as [tɪ.kɪst]). Such mispronunciations result in different syllable divisions whereas some involve a change in syllable stress. This suggests that Egyptian learners do not find it challenging to pronounce a medial or a final cluster of two consonants as this resembles the rules of clustering in their native tongue which cannot involve more than two consonants together. Swan and Smith (2001, 198) argue that these examples of consonant cluster mispronunciations could also be carried over into English word spelling by Arab students.

4.2 Suprasegmental aspects

4.2.1 Rhythm and stress

Similar to English, Arabic is a stress-timed language (Swan and Smith 2001, 198). However, the nature of word stress in Arabic is more “regular” and “predictable”, and primary stresses are more common in Arabic than in English (Swan and

Smith 2001, 198). Regarding elisions and contractions, they are less common in the Egyptians' pronunciation of English. Fraser (2001)'s observation that the pronunciation of learners of English as a foreign language is characterised by an inappropriate placement of stress holds for Egyptian speakers, too. The English pronunciation of Egyptian speakers is characterised by more stressed syllables and heavier rhythm than in English. English unstressed syllables by Arab learners in general are given more time and stress, with "neutral" rather than "swallowed" vowels (Swan and Smith 2001, 198). In addition, Arab learners have difficulties understanding the "unpredictable nature of English word stress" and how it can change meaning and/or word class (Swan and Smith 2001, 198). Nevertheless, according to Swan and Smith (2001), phrase and sentence rhythms should be less problematic for native speakers of Arabic due to their similarity in both languages.

4.2.2 Linking (Juncture)

Arabic pronunciation is rich in the use of glottal stops before initial vowels, which might be a reason for the tendency of Arab learners in "breaking up the natural catenations of English" that involves "linking a final consonant with a following initial vowel" (Swan and Smith 2001, 196–199). Egyptian learners also resist changes that are produced from: (1) connected speech intruding /j/, /w/ and /r/ as in: *stay up* [steɪ j ʌp], *go out* [gəʊ w aʊt] and *law and order* [lɔ; r ən ɔ; dɔ] to link a final vowel with a following initial vowel, (2) consonant elisions as in: *and me* [ən mi:] and *tell him* [tel ɪm], (3) junctures resulting in consonant clusters such as in *next spring* (example from Swan and Smith 2001, 199) which will result in insertions of extra vowels in the Egyptian pronunciation of English, and (4) junctures of certain phonemes such as /t/ followed by /j/ in connected speech, as in *first year* [fɜ; stʃɪə(r)], or /d/ and /j/ as in *had you?* [hədʒə].

5. Problems with the current teaching methods and materials

Evaluating English textbook series used in Egyptian primary schools, Abdallah (2016) states that both textbooks and teachers devote limited to no time to the "elaboration and practice" of the pronunciation activities presented. Besides, the books fail to comprise the necessary phonological and communicative aspects of English. Compared to reading and writing, teaching pronunciation with its elements (e.g. sound production, rhythm, stress, intonation, etc.) is considered a less important skill to teach in the Arab world (Mehawesh and Huwari 2015, cited in Huwari 2019, 31). One of the principal criticisms directed at most language courses/materials is that they involve activities and practices that could be employed in numerous foreign language learning/teaching contexts without taking into consideration the uniqueness of each context. A widely known book taught to intermediate to

advanced EFL learners (including English language majors) in many Egyptian higher educational institutions is O'Connor (1980). The book is described by its author as a guide that “provides a thorough and a systematic introduction to the pronunciation of English” and remains one of those books targeting non-native speakers of English. The book includes a variety of practice exercises that require devoting much learning time and effort contrasting individual segments that are not confused by Egyptian learners. For example, unlike for speakers of some languages, the differences between the initials in *fought* and *thought*, *shop* and *genre* and finals in *breed* and *breathe* do not need to be highlighted for the Egyptian speakers of English. Instead, efforts should aim to design activities stressing the differences between segments such as those constituting the initials in *shoe* and *chew*, and finals in *breeze* and *breathe*, to overcome the pronunciation challenges faced by Egyptian EFL students. Moreover, in an appendix towards the end of the book, O'Connor (1980, 138–139) provides tips for teachers of speakers of Arabic, Cantonese, French, German, Hindi and Spanish based on phonological facts pertaining to these languages, aiming to provide the elements that should be focused on when teaching English pronunciation to these language groups taking into consideration the linguistic background of the learners. Nevertheless, written from a perspective of a non-native speaker of Arabic, not all of these conclusions are relevant in the context of teaching English pronunciation to Arabic speakers, and some could be misleading and might not necessarily apply to Egyptian Arabic speakers. For instance, /ʒ/ is not often confused with /z/ or /ʃ/ as it simply occurs in everyday usage of loanwords from Persian and French. In addition, /dʒ/ is not replaced by /tʃ/; both are problematic for speakers of Egyptian Arabic and they are replaced by /ʒ/ and /ʃ/ respectively. The vowel /e/ does not replace /ɪ/ as mentioned; what happens is actually the opposite. Moreover, /ɜ:/ is not replaced by /e/ or /ʌ/; it is often replaced by the phoneme corresponding to the spelling. /e/ does not even exist in any variety of Arabic and speakers are not familiar with it.

6. Methodology: sampling, data collection and participants

The sample studied was a collection of 70 video recordings of English conversation classes where student talk was more dominant so that there would be as much space as possible for a sufficient amount of student oral production and reception to be analysed. The recordings were in forms of: 15 in-class teacher-student role plays, 8 student-student role plays, in addition to 20 in-class individual presentations, 5 in-class pair presentations, 16 online individual presentations and 6 online pair presentations). The total length of the recorded content is 5:44:36 hours (ranging in length between 1:06 and 14:52 minutes each). Recordings were made via Zoom by the researcher, in class by the teachers or at home by the students in case of online classes or presentations available as an alternative to traditional

classroom sessions in the time of the pandemic. The data were collected using semi-structured observation. The researcher's plan was to observe the speech of the student participants, following the observation by note taking, with the students' pronunciation errors as the research agenda. To avoid any threats to the validity of the results, the acoustically unclear target content was excluded from the data. Additionally, the research advisor of the author was involved as a judge after the data analysis had been finalised for the discussion and evaluation of the analysis to enhance the accuracy of the analysis and reliability of the conclusions. Teacher participation occurred in the forms of "interruption", "topic control" and "enforcing explicitness" (Fauzan 2017, 132).

The data were collected within a time span of one semester (fall semester of the academic year 2021-2022) using convenience sampling. Participants are 91 university students (61 males and 30 females) of my colleague teachers. In addition, they varied in their English proficiency levels (pre-intermediate to advanced, with a range of test scores of 20-50/50 on the Cambridge English Placement Test on: reading, writing and listening taken as a prerequisite for joining their study programmes). They belonged to four different faculties: Engineering, Logistics, Computer Science and Business, where English was the language of the study programmes: instruction, examination, textbooks and study materials. In their programmes, students were required to take English for Specific Purposes as well as English as a Foreign Language classes for three semesters (consecutive or separate) during their study years at the university. The study involves participants from different educational backgrounds (foreign-language medium schools and Arabic-medium schools), as well as social/geographical backgrounds to ensure that members of as many sectors of the target population (Egyptian EFL learners) as possible are represented in the sample. However, differences pertaining to gender, educational and geographical backgrounds, study majors, English proficiency levels, and influence of other local dialects of Egyptian Arabic were not investigated in this study.

To overcome any problems that might be encountered during the research project, and to ensure the absence of any safety or ethical issues in such a study that involves observation and technical analysis, the recorded material was stored and used only for the purposes of this research anonymously with no indicative details of a person, a place, etc. Consent was obtained from the Head of the English Department, who was himself one of the teachers, as well as the students and other participating teachers. Both teachers and students were also thoroughly informed about this research and its objectives, and were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any point of time for any reason(s).

The recorded content was analysed in terms of three main parameters of pronunciation: phonemic quality, accuracy of production and duration of the segments (Martin 2013, 267).

7. Findings

7.1 Segmental features

1. Consonants

The first feature concerning the pronunciation of consonants in the analysed corpus was found to be consonant alteration. The data reflected some inconsistencies regarding the pronunciation of certain consonants. Those inconsistencies included:

- 1.1. The alteration of /ð/ to [z], a mispronunciation which also occurs in the ECA-MSA transfer, in words such as: *that, the, together, other, there, their, they, them* and *whether*. However, in words such as: *rather, then* and *than*, /ð/ is pronounced properly while *this* was pronounced correctly at times and mispronounced at others (e.g. twice compared to five times, respectively, by one of the speakers). No instances of articulating /ð/ as /d/ as reported in Barros (2003) where data by Egyptian speakers were studied.
- 1.2. The alteration of /θ/ to [s], a mispronunciation which also occurs in the ECA-MSA transfer:
- 1.3. While /θ/ was altered to [s] in words like: *something, thousand* and *thirty*, it was noticed to be pronounced properly in *thing* and *three*.
The alteration of /p/ to [b] (phonemes that are considered as allophones/“-submembers” of the same phoneme in Arabic, Nasr 1997, 24; Swan and Smith, 2001, 197):
For some participants, /p/ was pronounced as [b] in initial position (e.g. *presentation*), medial position (e.g. *examples; important*) as well as final position (e.g. *hope*). On the other hand, it was realised as [p] in all word positions by the same speakers in: *purpose, percent, please* and *people*, as well as other speakers in: *part, points, problem, steps, stopping, spot, speech, typical* and *drop*), but with less or no aspiration. For some other speakers, it was articulated as [b] in all positions.
- 1.4. The alteration of /dʒ/ to [ʒ] (an example existing in ECA loanwords):
While many participants tended to simplify /dʒ/ to [ʒ] in words like: *major, subject, stage, jolt, energy, job* and *just*, others could manage to properly pronounce /dʒ/ in words like: *language* and *psychology*.
- 1.5. The alteration of /tʃ/ to [ʃ] (an example existing in ECA loanwords):
Similar to the previous instance of consonant alteration, /tʃ/ was found to be simplified to [ʃ] in some words like *questions, slouching, research* and *search* when other participants pronounced the affricate correctly in *approachable* and *achieve*.
- 1.6. The alteration of /v/ to [f]:
[faɪf] for *five*, as an example, was a rare occurrence (one occurrence).

The previous list of pronunciation inconsistencies can be explained within the framework of the concept “mistakes” versus “errors” by Bartram and Walton (1991, 25). To help identify and overcome the pronunciation problems for the learners, Bartram and Walton (1991) distinguished between “errors” and “mistakes”. According to them, “Mistakes are caused by the learners not putting into practice something they have learned while errors are caused by the learner trying out something completely new and getting it wrong” (Bartram and Walton 1991, 25). On the other hand, errors are a product of the learners’ lack of knowledge. Therefore, those examples of inconsistent pronunciations of the same phoneme, sometimes by the same speaker(s), fit in the category of “mistakes” (knowing the rules of pronunciation, but failing to apply them in practice at times).

Moreover, the data also showed consistent occurrences of consonant alteration. The velar /ŋ/ was changed to a combination of the alveolar /n/ and the velar /g/ in words where it represents the two letters n and g (the -ing suffix) (e.g. *smiling, giving, during, upsetting, getting, listening, identifying, working, making, looking, gaining, reading, morning, according*).

Another category of mispronunciations included features pertaining to consonants differing in nature between Arabic and English while existing in both languages. For instance, an overpronunciation of initial and post-vocalic [r] was a noticeable feature in the corpus. The [r] resembled that of Arabic (trill) rather than an English approximant in words like: *for, more, care, sure, rehearse, ensure, your, before, first, related* and *clear*. In addition, the Egyptian Arabic-like pronunciation of [l] (palatal) was dominant in all phoneme positions over the English nature of the phoneme (alveolar) in words such as: *film, still, clearly, little, finally* and *literally*. The phonemes /t/ and /d/ were also pronounced as denti-alveolar rather than alveolar consonants and with no aspiration.

2. Consonant clustering

According to Watson (2002, 56), “Most eastern Arabic dialects exhibit a fairly limited range of syllable types. Three basic syllables are attested in Cairene ... CV, CVV, and CVC” (cited in El Zarka 2013, 27). This could explain why Egyptian EFL learners find it challenging to grasp the syllable patterns possible in English. As a result, in the analysed corpus, the learners resorted to two main repair strategies, involving both improper syllable divisions, as well as phoneme changes, to facilitate cluster pronunciation:

- 2.1. Declusterisation by **inserting short vowels** in between the consonants in a cluster (e.g. [i] or [ɪ] in initial pr- cluster in *presentation*, final two and three-consonant clusters: /tʃt/ in *reached* ['ri:tʃɪd], /-nθs/ in *months* ['mʌn.sɪz], /-rnd/ in *learned* ['lɜ:nɪd], /-rst/ in *first* ['fɪ.rɪst], /-kst/ in *next* ['nɪ.kɪst], /-rks/ in *networks* ['nɪt'wɔːr'kɪs], /-znd/ in *thousand* ['θaʊ'zænd], and [a] in final -nl in: *personal* ['pɜːsə'nal]).
- 2.2. Unlike in some varieties of Arabic (e.g. Tunisian and Moroccan), “CVCC is restricted to ... utterance-final position in Cairene: (Watson 2002, 59, cited in

El Zarka 2013, 30-31). This could explain why Egyptian EFL learners have more issues with final consonant clusters in English compared to speakers of other native Arabics.

- 2.3. Onset insertion: this entailed preceding the cluster starting with /s/ by a prothetic, a combination of a glottal stop [ʔ] and a vowel, usually [ɪ], (e.g. [ʔɪs.tætɪs.tɪks] for *statistics*). According to El Zarka (2013, 33), prothesis is “a common repair strategy employed by native speakers of Arabic learning English.”

3. Vowels

Similar to the segmental consonant pronunciation, one main feature characterising the pronunciation of vowels by the Egyptian EFL learners was found to be vowel alteration. Some manifestations of vowel alteration included:

3.1. Monophthongs

3.1.1. Failure to produce the schwa:

Egyptian learners found the pronunciation of the vowel /ə/ very challenging. Consequently, the vowel was replaced by other vowels that were more familiar to the students. Instances of replacing vowels included:

[ʌ] in

- the final syllables of: *structure, maximum, focus, colour* and *introduction*.
- the -er ending nouns: *user, designer, computer, better, deliver, answer, after* and *later*.

[a] in

- the -tion or -sion ending words: *presentation, connection, conclusion, education, section, relation, perception, recognition* and *optimisation*.
- the first syllable of: *statistics*.
- the final syllables of: *importance* and *common*.

[ɪ] in

- the second syllable of *current*

All syllables of: *comfortable* ['kɒm'fɔr'te;'bɒl]

This instance of mispronunciation also involved misplaced stress (stress equally placed on all syllables). According to Kenworthy (1987, 18), the stress shift in *comfortable* could cause the word *comfortable* to be confused with the phrase/sentence “come for a table”, which may lead to threats to mutual intelligibility and effective communication (cited in El Zarka 2013, 32).

The data also showed failure to realise the schwa resulting from vowel reduction in connected speech: (e.g. *to leave*).

3.1.2. The alteration of /e/ to:

[ɪ]: (e.g. *less, stress, steps, get, better, next, best, hesitate, networks*).

[ʊ]: (e.g. “technology”, a mispronunciation that can be regarded as an influence of how the word is pronounced in its adaptation in ECA).

3.1.3. The alteration of RP [ɑ:] or GA [æ] to [ʌ]:

(e.g. the vowel in *start*; the final syllable of *paragraph*).

- 3.1.4. The alteration of RP [ɔ:] or GA [ʊ] to [u:] in *your*. This example of mispronunciation could be attributed to confusing the vowel in *your* with that of *you* (/u:/) and overapplying familiar pronunciation rules to words that are similar in form and/or meaning.
- 3.1.5. The alteration of /ɜ:/ to /u:/:
 [ɪ]: (e.g. *first*; *serve*)
 [ɔ:]: (e.g. *network*)
- 3.1.6. The alteration of /ɪ/ to [aɪ]: (e.g. *determine* /dɪ'tɜ:(r)mɪn/ to [dɪ'tɜ:(r)mɑɪn])
 The vowel change here could be regarded as an instance of overapplication due to familiarity with the different meanings and word classes of “mine”. Apart from vowel change, the data also reflected other characteristics regarding the accuracy of monophthong production: vowel deletion (e.g. omitting the second vowel in *hesitate*) and change of vowel length. Some short vowels were made shorter (e.g. /æ/ in *stand* and GA chances pronounced as [a]), short vowels were made longer (e.g. /ɪ/ in *live* pronounced as [i:]) and long vowels were made short: (e.g. /i:/ in *fifteen* pronounced as [ɪ]).
- 3.2. Diphthongs
 Learners failed to produce some diphthongs and tended to simplify their pronunciation through approximating them to the closest single phonemes whether short or long. Some examples included:
- 3.2.1. The alteration of /eɪ/ to:
 [e:] in medial position (e.g. *state*, *take*, *make*, *space*, *stage*, *weight*, *straight*, *face*, *raise*, *presentation*, *consideration*, *dictate*, *update*, *relation*, *hesitate*) and to [e;(h)] in final position (e.g. *okay*).
 [i:] (rare occurrence): (e.g. [ti:k] for *take* and [mi:t] for *mate*).
- 3.2.2. The alteration of /ʊə/ to [u:]: (e.g. *ensure*)
- 3.2.3. The alteration of /aɪ/ to [ɪ]: (e.g. *website*; one occurrence).
- 3.2.4. The alteration of RP /əʊ/ or GA /oʊ/ to [ɔ:]: (e.g. *so*, *social*)
- 3.2.5. The alteration of /a-/ in /aʊ/ into a more front [a]: (e.g. *how*, *now*)
- 3.2.6. Another feature in relation to the production of diphthongs was vowel insertion. Learners tended to insert: [ɪ] in between the combination of a diphthong followed by a consonant (e.g. between /aʊ/ and /t/ in *about*, between /aɪ/ and /d/ in *identified*).
4. Word spelling had an evidently remarkable influence on the production of certain consonants and vowels. Some examples of spelling influence included:
- Pronouncing “of” as “off”
 - Pronouncing the plural morpheme -s in words like *friends*, *sounds* and *trends* as [s]
 - Pronouncing the final inflectional -ed as either [d] or [ɪd], but never as /t/: (e.g. final -ed as [d] in *based*, resulting in what is known as “regressive assimilation”, [be:zd] instead of /beɪst/).

- Articulating the vowel in *boost* as [ʊ].
 - Articulating *compose* with [s].
 - Pronouncing the weak vowel schwa depending on the letter representing the phoneme. This was exemplified in:
 - An alteration of /ɪə/ to [ɪʊ] (e.g. in *podium*).
 - An alteration of /ə/ to a short o, [ɒ], (e.g. first syllables of: *continue*, *today*, *consideration*, *comfortable*, *condition*, *connection*; second syllable of *introductory*).
 - An alteration of /ə/ to [æ] (e.g. *about* and *additional*) or to [(ɪ)æ] (e.g. *social*).
 - An alteration of /ə/ to a short u, [ʊ], in all occurrences of words with the suffix -ful (e.g. *successful*).
 - An alteration of /ə/ to /ɔ:/ in the second syllable of the word *comfortable*.
 - An alteration of both /ə/ and the diphthong in *compose* to a short o [ɒ].
 - The influence of spelling was also evident in the gemination of sounds corresponding to the letters doubled in: *affect*, *appear*, *annoy*, *hello* and *additional*, *connection*, *collection*.
5. Although it is beneficial for teachers to be aware of some pattern that would enable them to predict any probable mispronunciations based on the errors/ mistakes their learners tend to produce in a foreign language, the data depicted a group of mispronunciations that are considered unusual for the Egyptian EFL learners and cannot be explained in a contrastive analysis framework. The following examples are some mispronunciations that involve phoneme alteration, vowel length change, phoneme insertion and misplaced stress: [rɪu; 'sɪʊm] for *resume*, [re'le:vənt] for *relevant*, [ɪn'dʌktɔɪ] for *introductory*, ['ʌnɒ;ɪdɪd] for *annoyed*, ['ʌnɪstɪd] for *instead*, ['ʌn'tʌr'rʌpt] for *interrupt* and ['saʊsənt] for *thousand*.

Suprasegmental features

Keeping correct segmental patterns of English pronunciation appeared to be more problematic than the suprasegmental elements in the corpus studied. However, the learners also exhibited other issues pertaining to some suprasegmental elements such as word stress as well as features of connected speech.

6. Word stress

Issues with proper placing of stress for native speakers of Arabic in general is attributed to “the differences of both syllable structures and stress patterns in Arabic and English”, and the way the stress is shifted “reflects the native stress pattern” (El Zarka 2013, 49). In the present data, pronunciation inaccuracies related to word stress included:

6.1. Misplacement of stress:

- (e.g. *ideas* ['aɪ, dɪəz], *universities* [ˌjuːnɪvɜː'tɪz])
- 6.2. More stress to the unstressed syllables:
Stress was placed equally on all syllables in: *proper*, *Facebook* and *interested*. Moreover, the data showed a tendency to transfer the enthusiastic nature of Arabic speech to the articulation of English, which influenced the rhythm and melody of the learners' English. In accordance with Swan and Smith (2001, 199), describing the rhythm of English speech uttered by Arab learners of English in general as "staccato", the pronunciation of the Egyptian EFL learners in the current study was also characterised by heavier rhythm.
7. Connected speech/Juncture
- 7.1. Lack of smooth junctures that involve linking a final consonant with a following initial vowel.
(e.g. *I hope you are fine and stand out*).
This could be attributed to the nature of connected speech in English compared to that of Arabic. Kenworthy (1990, 9) states that connected speech in English is characterised by smooth movements due to the use of linking while, in connected speech of Arabic, pauses between words are far more frequent (cited in Mubarak and Rahi 2017, 30). Furthermore, glottal stops are very common before initial vowels in ECA and MSA, which can influence the smoothness and rhythm of speech in the production of English by native speakers of Arabic. Another remarkable difference is that linking in Arabic is both phonological as well as orthographical (reflected in script) while, in English, it is only phonological (Mubarak and Rahi 2017, 35). These differences in the nature of juncture in English and Arabic explain why Egyptian learners in the current study tended to miss out the aspects of smooth linking in English. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that such a feature does not fall into the category of errors/mistakes. It is rather a non-native norm which could also manifest in speech by native speakers of English in certain contexts.
- 7.2. Resistance to changes produced from:
- 7.2.1. consonant elisions across word boundaries:
(e.g. *and today*, *team mate*, *and welcome*, *good day* and *and good bye*).
Native speakers of Arabic do not allow the meeting of two consonants across word boundaries in articulation, and in most cases, they tend to link the two consonant sounds by inserting short vowels in between (Mubarak and Rahi 2017, 35). This explains the learners' tendency to avoid the elision of consonants across word boundaries in the 7.2.1. examples above.
- 7.2.2. the production of:
- The voiced affricate /dʒ/ in the junction of /d/ and /j/: (e.g. *around you*, *drop*),
 - The voiceless affricate /tʃ/ in the junction of /t/ and /r/: (e.g. *try*, *interrupt*), and
 - Connected speech intruding /w/ linking a word-final vowel with a following initial vowel: (e.g. *you are* [juː a;r]).

The learners' inability to use consonants as linking sounds in connected speech is a result of the transfer of the native patterns of Arabic. Although both Arabic and English employ linking "to make their pronunciation fluent and natural", the types of sounds inserted to facilitate the production of an "uninterrupted speech" are different (Mubarak and Rahi 2017, 34). According to Mubarak and Rahi (2017, 35) "the linking sounds in English are consonant sounds while in Arabic are vowel sounds". Unlike in English where consonants such as [j], [w], or [r] are used, Arabic uses vowels as linking sounds in connected speech (Mubarak and Rahi 2017, 35).

8. Conclusions, significance, and recommendations for future research

In this study, the researcher applied both a contrastive and error analysis to the corpus collected with the aim of providing insights for the researchers, educators as well as curriculum planners to bring about useful strategies to address the outcome problematic pronunciation aspects faced by the Egyptian EFL learners. The analysis showed that most of the phonological challenges are a product of the influence of the learners' L1 (Egyptian Arabic) on the target language (EFL) practice manifested in a series of negative transfer instances. Nevertheless, some were caused by the lack of knowledge of the L2 rules and/or the inadequacy of training available for the learners. This goes in line with Fraser (2000) in which the challenges the pronunciation component creates in the EFL/ESL classroom are attributed to the lack of word cognition and the way the English sound system works rather than the physical process of articulation itself.

The study contributes to the research aimed to outline the phonological aspects that should be prioritised when teaching English to Egyptian EFL learners. This could be achieved in light of some EFL framework such as the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) Model by Jenkins (2009) and Patsko (2013) and, accordingly, there will be access to the teaching implications that would aid designing/choosing the most effective EFL teaching materials and techniques as well as study programmes that both address the problematic aspects and are relevant to their sociolinguistic and sociocultural learning/teaching contexts as a step towards improving the existing practice.

Further research should explore other suprasegmental aspects such as intonation. In case the research is conducted in a similar context, future researchers could adopt Brazil's (1997) "discourse intonation" model where selecting and deselecting certain sets of intonation patterns are believed to convey a communicative significance or "interpersonal meanings". The Model focuses on prominence, pitch range, termination and choice of tone (Cheng 2015).

Future research should seek feedback from the learners and teachers, through administering questionnaires and/or interviews, to gain insights to the extent to which they agree or disagree with what the current study has yielded. Furthermore,

exploring the learners' views on their own performances (to see if there is a gap/ discrepancy between what they think they do and what they actually do in terms of performance), expectations from their lecturers and study programmes, desired proficiency criteria/standards, attitudes towards English and the specific items they are learning, the influence of mother tongue, the challenges they face in learning English pronunciation, what they think they lack and what they would like to see applied in textbooks and classrooms (e.g. organised activities/behaviour/approaches/methods) will pave the way for the research outcomes to tap into the participants' educational needs. Future research could also consider the study of variables such as: gender, age, educational backgrounds, teaching/learning contexts, dialectical regions, study majors and English proficiency levels, as well as acoustically conducting a quantitative analysis through the use of some speech analysis software to give a clearer picture as far as the problematic aspects of pronunciation are concerned.

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