

The Individual Differences of the Sounds of English Language among Learners in Irbid University Collage

Maram Teimeh Atallah Haddad

Department of English, Irbid University College, Al-Balqa Applied University, Jordan

Abstract

Reading English as a second language is considered as one of the most important skill of a language to communicate with others since English Language right now has dominated the whole world . The study aimed at investigating the reasons that affect the students' reading skill of elementary stage in English Language in Irbid University Collage, Jordan. This study specifically targeted to show examples of the individual differences among learners in Diploma's level. Thus it aimed to make a little contribution to linguistic theory by investigating different sounds of English produced by Jordanian learners in the first year in the collage. The study is constructed on audio-cassettes recorded in Irbid University collage for forty-five female students. The data on the cassettes (about twenty-three foolscap pages of the transcribed dialogues), along with the native intuition and shared expectations of the writer, made the study possible. The study designated some of the individual differences among learners such as mispronouncing certain consonant and vowel phonemes, the syllable structure, stress timing, and connected speech. Finally, it showed some of the reasons, that affect language learning acquisition, which lead to individual differences such as age, socio-economic level, motivation, language environment, personality of the learners and the teacher, and attitude toward English language.

Keywords: individual differences, sounds of English Language, learning acquisition , education and language .

Introduction

Every speaker of a certain language speaks it in a unique way. There is no two individuals speak a language exactly the same way. That is why people can identify a person solely through his /her voice with its unique sound articulations. But, what happens when a person speaks a second language? Each language has its own grammar rules, sentences structure and word usage. It is very difficult for a person to adopt a second language, because s/he has been influenced by the first language from birth. Accent is also one of the major hindrances in speaking a second language. This paper attempts to investigate some of the individual differences of the sounds of English language among learners in Irbid University Collage. The study investigates different sounds of English produced by Jordanian learners in Diploma's level. It shows that the individual differences of the sounds of English language among learners which affect second language acquisition are: age, socio-economic level, motivation, language environment, sex, personality, attitude and the physical health of the learners.

The study is based on audio-cassettes recorded in Irbid University collage for forty-five female students. The data on the cassettes (about twenty-three foolscap pages of the transcribed dialogues), along with the native intuition and shared expectations of the writer, made the study possible. The dialogues that have been chosen are in appendix (A). The significance of this study stems from the fact that it is, to the best of the author's knowledge, the first applied study that is conducted on English Language in Irbid as it is used in different contexts of curricula. Thus, the approach chosen to obtain the results is descriptive, analytical, and evaluative in nature.

Language learning practice often assumes that most of the difficulties that learners face in speaking English are a consequence of the degree to which their native language differs from English (Wanner and Gleitman, 1982). Language learners often produce errors in the speech sounds of the language they are learning though to result from the influence of their first language such as pronouncing certain sounds incorrectly or with difficulty, saying certain words with hesitation, stutter and speed without concentration on articulating the sounds, and confusing items of vocabulary known as false words. Some of these errors appeared in many students' speech as shown in the following examples.

Example (1):

Look at your brown shoes. They're dirty.

/lək . . . æt j: r . . . r br ə n . . . bln . . . ah..

ʃu:z ð :r . . . ð :r trti /

Example (2):

Yes, but it isn't cheap.

/jes, bt it it izt Ki:p tʃi:p/

Example (3):

These are my old shoes.

/dis ðis a:r mei . . . ə əuld ʃ ʃu:z /

Example (4):

I've got new shoes now.
/əh a:v g:t naunju: ʃu:znau/

Here in these examples, the learners articulated the sentences with stutter and hesitation and the dots means that they took long pause to read the dialogues. They mispronounced certain **consonant and vowel phonemes**:

a. the interdental / ð / and / θ / (the sounds written with **th**) which are common in English (these , the , that, etc; thin, thing, etc.)

b. the alveolar / z / and / s /.

c. Some learners substitute a [t] or [d] sound, while other shift to [s] or [z], [f] or [v] and even [ts] or [dz].

d. /t/ in "cheap" / tʃi:p/ as / ki:p/ or /ʃi:p/.

e. /au/ in "blouse" / blaʊz/ as /bluz/, /bləʊz/ or /bl:z/ mixed it with the Arabic articulation.

f. /aI/ in "my" /maI/ as /meI/ .

g. / ə / in "dinars" / dɪn ə rz / as / dɪnærz/, /di: nærz/ or /di: na: rz

Another area of the individual differences of the sound of English comes in **the syllable structure**: In its syllable structure, English allows for a cluster of up to three consonants before the vowel and four after it. (e.g., straw, green blouse, brown shoes etc.) The syllable structure causes problems for the speakers to say full sentences in good English, especially in the first stage of their learning until they get sensitive ears for the second language in later stages.

The third area of mispronouncing the sounds of English is **stress timing**. English learner as English does uses the stress for certain purposes such as:

a. Stress for emphasis, students use stress for most of the words they said. They used long vowels for most of the words (e.g. a /æ/, yes /je:s/, the / ðæ/, etc.).

b. Stress for contrast- stressing the right word or expression. This may not come easily to some non-native speakers (e.g., These are my *old* shoes. I've got *new* shoes now.)

Connected speech is the fourth area which may show other individual differences of the sound of English among learners. Phonological processes such as assimilation, elision and epenthesis together with indistinct word boundaries can confuse learners when listening to natural spoken English, as well as making their speech sound too formal if they do not use them. Taylor in his book "Psycholinguistics learning and using language", talks about some of these processes and classifies four types of errors that learners make: substitution, addition, shift and deletion (Taylor, 1990, pp196-198). For example, they may substitute certain phonemes for another as mentioned before or certain words for another such as, (may for my, now for new, this for these, etc.) Example (5) illustrates how the learners may add certain sounds, words or even phrases.

Example (5):

How much is it?
/ah haumtʃ ɪzðæt/

In this example the learner adds " ah and that ". And in example (2), s/he shifts /t/ to /k/ or /ʃ/ in the word "cheap".

Example (6):

Twenty dinars.
/tədeɪdɪnər/

Here this learner adds "today" instead of "twenty" and deletes the plurality "s" in "dinars".

Example (7):

Twenty dinars.
/ de: ... twentɪbərɪz /

While this learner shifts /d/ to /b/ in the word "dinars" and adds /de:/ at the beginning of the phrase.

Example (8):

Look at your brown shoes. They're dirty.
/ lʊkæt j:ɪ brɑn ʃu:z. ðeər d:ɪ /

This learner says this sentence in good English. S/he pronounces it correctly, without difficulty, without hesitation, without stutter and with concentration on articulating the sounds as many other students. From all above, we can say that English as a foreign language in Jordan is spoken in a non –English –spoken region that is why we can see individual differences among these learners. But how does an individual acquire a language, whether his/ her first language, or foreign language, or second language? This question is answered by many linguists especially under the branch of applied linguistics "psycholinguistics", which also deals with the individual's differences among learners (Fromkin, 1993).

There are many factors that affect a language acquisition and lead to individual differences among its learners.

1. **Age** is a very important factor because as much as the learner is learning it in an early age as s/he in language acquisition will be. It is very essential to start earlier in language acquisition. It is clear that students who start learning English at an earlier age of 5 attain higher level of proficiency than those who start at later age for

example at the age of 12 .

2. **Socio-economic level.** We all know that there are differences between people according to their socio-economic status. Mezher in his study finds that with respect of the family monthly income, the students are classified into three categories: a-low income students, b- medium income students and c- high income students (Mezher, 1980). So according to this study , a low income families cannot send their children to private schools which are known with their good facilities and more teaching's aids in their curricula than public schools.

3. **Language environment** is also another factor that enhances the previous factor. Bates in her book, **From First Words to Grammar**, explains the role of the society, its environment and its socio-economic status on individual differences in language acquisition.

4. **Motivation.** Most of the curricula in Jordan concentrate on the structural approach rather than communicative approach. Most schools do not attract the students especially in English, so most of them repeat saying "I hate English". Students' lack of confidence to use the language because they're afraid and shame when they make mistakes because of lack of motivation in teaching .

5. **Personality of the learner and his /her teacher.** It is very important to know the personality of each learner and the good teacher. Good teacher has certain qualities. S/he is not here to teach, but to take his young learners to his /her side, create natural situations that could appeal to them, take them away from the passive level of any book to the real merry situations they like to enjoy. This works with the third factor above. The family and the teacher have a big role to prepare the child physically and psychologically to acquire the language and help him/her to get good habits to do that. Therefore, curriculum is not as much a course of study as it is the transactions that occur among learners in a classroom context or a good environment (Vacca and Rasinki, 1992, p.19).The teacher should have a lovely personality, a creative mind, a creative memory, paternal behavior and a sense of duty and responsibility.

6. **Attitude toward English language.** English has gained much importance in Jordan than before at school, in daily life, and in travelling abroad. Governments insist on teaching English as foreign language and search to improve it in daily life for communication .It is the world's most widely spoken language now so we have to emphasis on that point .

Conclusion

This paper is addressed to an investigation of the individual differences of the sounds of English language among learners in Irbid University Collage. The differences of the sounds of English are drawn from a corpus of forty-five female students' sounds in their first year recorded on audio-cassettes. The data on the cassettes (about twenty-three foolscap pages of the transcribed dialogues), along with the native intuition and shared expectations of the writer, made the study possible. Thereupon, the typical individual differences of the sounds of English among the learners appear as variable pronunciation, hesitation, stutter and speed without concentration on articulating the sounds, and mispronouncing certain consonants and vowel phonemes, error in syllable structure, stress timing and connected speech.

This paper investigated also, some of factors which lead to these individual differences such as age, socio-economic level, language environment, motivation, personality of the learner and his /her teacher, and attitude toward English language. Finally, in the light of this conclusion; this paper recommended that we must let the learners play in English, listen to merry songs in English, act and react in English through natural situations. Then, qualify the teachers to create natural situations for the learners to get the right foreign accent.

References:

1. Bates, Elizabeth, Bretherton, Inge, and Snyder, Lynn. (1988) *From First Words to Grammar: Individual Differences and Dissociable Mechanism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Fromkin, V., and R., Rodman. (1993) *An Introduction to Language*. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston.
3. Hymes, D.(ed). (1964) *Language in Culture and Society: A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology*. New York: Harper and Row.
4. Mezher, A., Saleem. (1980) *An Investigation into the Effect of the Early State of English as a Foreign Language*. M.A. Thesis: Yarmouk University.
5. Rivers, Wilgam. (1968) *Teaching Foreign- Language Skills*. Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press.
6. Taylor, Insup and Taylor, M. Martin. (1990) *Learning and Using Language*. London: Prentice-Hall International Inc.
7. Vacca, Richard, and Rasink, Timothy. (1992) *Case Studies in Whole Language*. Forthwort: Harcourt Brance Jovanovich.
8. Wanner, E. and L.Gleitman (eds). (1982) *Language Acquisition*.Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix (A)

(Brown shoes and green blouse)

Dialogue (1)

A- Look at your brown shoes. They're dirty.
 B- These are my old shoes. I've got new shoes now
 A- They're clean. Look.

Dialogue (2)

A- That's a nice green blouse.
 B- Yes, but it isn't cheap.
 A- How much is it?
 B- Twenty dinars.
 A- That's very dear.
 B- Yes, it is.

Appendix (B)

<i>Transliteration Scheme</i> (The phonetic values of the symbols will be basically those of IPA).	
<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Phonetic Description</i>
b	voiced bilabial stop
t	voiceless alveolar stop
ð	voiceless dental fricative
j	voiced alveopalatal affricate
x	voiceless uvular fricative
d	voiced alveolar stop
ð	voiced dental fricative
r	voiced alveolar approximant
z	voiced alveolar fricative
s	voiceless alveolar fricative
ʃ	voiceless alveopalatal fricative
tʃ	voiced alveopalatal fricative
g	voiced velar stop
f	voiceless labiodental fricative
q	voiceless uvular stop
k	voiceless velar stop
l	voiced alveolar lateral
m	voiced bilabial nasal stop
n	voiced alveolar nasal stop
h	voiceless glottal fricative
w	voiced labiovelar glide
ɪ	short high front unrounded
a	short low front unrounded
u	short high back rounded
i:	long high front unrounded
a:	long low front unrounded
u	long high back rounded
e	long front mid unrounded
æ	Short front low unrounded
ə	Long central mid unrounded
ɑ	Long low back rounded