

Investigating EFL Omani Learners' Ability to Produce English Phonics in taught words and in untaught words

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to Investigate EFL Omani Grade Two Learners' Ability to produce the (43) sounds which are taught in grades one and two course books. It focuses on answering the following question: Are there any significant differences between grade two learners' ability to produce phonics in taught words and in untaught words? The study sample consisted of second grade learners in Al-Batinah North Governorate in the academic year 2010/2011. They were 100 learners. To answer the research questions, a reading test to measure learners' ability to produce phonics was used. The Major finding of the present study was: There is a significant difference between grade two learners' ability to produce phonics in taught words and phonics in untaught words in favor phonics in taught words.

Key words: Grapheme, Phoneme, Phonics, Sound clusters

Related literature

The phonic approach to reading instruction

Jeanne & Helen (n.d), indicate that learners who learn phonics, do better in all aspects of reading such as word identification skills, accuracy of oral reading, silent reading comprehension and fluency than those who do not learn phonics. This indicates that failure at phonics could result in weak readers. Adams (1990), concludes that teaching phonics is a critical factor for success in early reading. Hughes (1976), states that many children fail to read because of their lack of phonic knowledge. David & Yvonne (2004, p83) state that "learners who learn English as a second or foreign language must develop the ability to comprehend and produce the sounds of English".

The International Reading Association (1997) has asserted three basic principles regarding phonics and the teaching of reading:

1. The teaching of phonics is an important aspect of beginning reading instruction.
2. Classroom teachers in the primary grades should value and teach phonics as a part of their reading program; teachers make appropriate instructional decisions for the inclusion of phonics based on their knowledge of children and their language development.
3. Phonics instruction is more meaningful when it is presented within the contexts of language use that provides patterns and structures to support learners' understandings. Therefore, effective phonics instruction need to be embedded in the context of a total language reading program and not just presented in isolation.

The English graphemes and phonemes

Graphemes can be defined as the different forms by which a letter can be printed A, a, G, g etc... They are the letters of the alphabet written on paper to represent separate sounds of speech written in words. English has twenty six graphemes, six of them are vowels and the rest are consonants. A phoneme is the smallest significant unit of sound in a language. The phonemes are the sounds of the English language e.g. /b/, /z/ etc. which are represented by letters e.g. b, z etc. (Richards, 1992).

English as an international language has forty four phonemes as they are presented in the IPA (The International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols. They are divided into twenty four consonants and twenty vowels.

The Arabic and English consonants, vowels and consonant clusters

Arabic is marked by a rich consonantal system. It has twenty-eight consonants. On the other hand English has twenty four consonants. Most of the Arabic consonantal phonemes are similar to the English phonemes. However, the consonants /g/ as in 'goat', /dʒ/ as in 'joke', /ŋ/ as in 'thing', /p/ as in 'pull', /tʃ/ as in 'cheese' and /v/ as in 'van' do not exist in Arabic and hence they do not have a written form. Therefore, when reading English Arab learners will either avoid producing these sounds or replace them by the nearest sounds in Arabic. (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989).

Table. The English consonants which may/may not cause difficulty to Arab learners

p	b	t	d	tʃ	dʒ	K	g
f	v	θ	ð	S	z	ʃ	ʒ
m	n	ŋ	h	L	r	W	y

According to Kharma & Hajjaj (1989), the shaded consonants in Table (1) have equivalents or near equivalents in Arabic and should therefore be perceived and articulated without great difficulty by Arab learners, although some confusions may still arise e.g. learners might confuse 'b' with 'd'. Un-shaded consonants can cause problems to Arab learners. However, the consonants /g/ and /dʒ/ are pronounced in dialects of some Arabs and, therefore, may not cause problem to them. The consonant /tʃ/ occurs naturally in all dialects in junctures of /t/ and /ʃ/ and therefore may not become a major problem for Arab learners.

The vowels

English has a greater number of vowels than Arabic. It has twenty vowels according to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). On the other hand Arabic has eight vowels only. They are /a/, /U/, /i/, /ā/, /ū/, /ī/, /ai/ and /au/. This can make English vowels more difficult for Arab learners than producing English consonants. When Arab learners are asked to recognize and to produce English vowels, they tend to replace the English vowels with the nearest vowels in Arabic .(Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989).

Table. The English vowels which may/may not cause difficulty to Arab learners

i:	ɪ	ʊ	u:	ɪə
e	ə	ɜ:	ɔ:	ʊə
æ	ʌ	ɑ:	ɒ	eə
əʊ	aʊ	eɪ	ɔɪ	aɪ

According to Swan & Smith (2001), the shaded vowels in Table (2) have equivalents or near equivalents in Arabic and should therefore be perceived and articulated without great difficulty by Arab learners, although some confusion may still arise. On the other hand the un-shaded vowels do not have equivalents or near equivalents in Arabic and therefore, they can cause problems to Arab learners.

Jones (1996), writes that most English consonants exhibit a regular grapheme-phoneme relationship. Irregularity in letter-sound correspondences is obvious in vowels where a grapheme can represent many phonemes and several graphemes-represent a single phoneme. From this it might be predicted that Arabs will show lower performance with English vowels than with English consonants.

The consonant clusters

A consonant cluster is “a sequence of two or more consonants”. (Richards, 1992. p.79). Roach (2000, p.68), states that “when we have two or more consonants together without a vowel intervening them we call them a consonant cluster”.

Consonant clusters in English may occur in word-initial position as in “draw”, in word-medial position as in “instrument” and in word-final position as in “garaged”. The number of consonants which go together is varied. English can have up to three consonants in a cluster as in 'strong'.

(Kuiper and Allan, 1996). In contrast, Arabic has no sequence of more than two consonants with no vowel intervening them. (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989).

Kharma & Hajjaj (1989), write that Arabic can have a sequence of two letters; therefore, the consonant blends may not cause a lot of difficulty to Arab learners. However, because some of these consonant blends contain consonants which do not exist in Arabic and some of them contain irregular grapheme- phoneme relationship, they might be difficult for Arab learners to produce. Altaha (1995), investigated Saudi learners' ability to produce English consonants. He found that the learners tended to insert a vowel in words that contain a sequence of two initial consonants or insert a vowel between the first two consonants in words that contain a sequence of three initial consonants.

Related Studies

Arab learners' ability to produce English consonants

Zainab & Malatesha (2011), investigated the ability of (70) Bahraini Arabic learners who study English as a second language at grades four and six in Bahrain Public schools. The learners were tested to produce the sounds /v/, /p/, /b/ and /f/ by using isolated words. The researchers found that the learners had difficulty producing /v/ and /p/. They related this to the non-existence of these two sounds in Arabic. They also found that the learners confuse /b/ with /p/ and /v/ with /f/.

Jalal (2011), investigated the difficulties Saudi students encounter when pronouncing certain English consonant sounds. The eight participants in the study are adults who graduated from secondary schools from different regions of Saudi Arabia and joined the Preparatory Year Program at Najran University. The participants have never been to any of the English speaking countries, so they do not have any kind of exposure to a native English environment. Four words were selected for each consonant sound in all three positions; initial, medial, and final word positions. Each participant was asked to read these words aloud while being recorded. The results show that the Arabic speakers in this study had difficulties producing the consonant sounds /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/, and /ŋ/. The researcher related learners' difficulty with /p/, /v/, /tʃ/ and /ŋ/ to the non-existence of these sounds in Arabic.

Binturki (2008), investigated the ability of five Saudi learners of English as a second language to produce the three consonants /p/, the /v/, and /r/.

A word list and a reading passage were used to elicit the target sounds in order to generate data for both context and isolation. His results show that participants have difficulty with all the three-targeted sounds. However, the greatest difficulty was with /v/. The researcher related this to the non-existence of these sounds in Arabic. The learners showed the same performance with /p/ and /r/. The study also indicated that difficulty was closely related to certain word positions. The three sounds are used more accurately when occurring in word initial position than in word final position.

Barros (2003), looked into pronunciation difficulties with English consonants facing ESL Arab learners after the age of puberty. The aim of the study was to identify and to analyze difficulties in pronunciation of six Arabic speakers who have been living in the United States for four years. The subjects of the study did not represent a single Arabic accent. They were from different Arab countries; two subjects were from Egypt, one was from Saudi Arabia and three were from Kuwait. The results showed that the sounds /d/, /p/, /v/, /dʒ/ and /ð/ were mispronounced respectively as [t], [b], [f], [ʒ] and [də]. The researcher reported that (5) out of (6) of the participants had problems with the following consonants (in order of difficulty): /d/,

/p/ and /v/. The consonants /dʒ/ and /ð/ were mispronounced by (2) participants. The two Egyptian subjects were the only participants who experienced problems with the phonemes /dʒ/ and /ð/. The other participants all displayed the same mispronunciations, but one subject from Kuwait who pronounced the sound /v/ appropriately. The author noticed that the interference of first language seems to be the major factor contributing to pronunciation problems that might differ from one Arabic speaker to another, depending on the colloquial variety of Arabic they use. We can conclude from this that there are differences in pronunciation among Arab learners. This gives us the insight that we cannot generalize pronunciation mistakes to all Arabs. There are certainly differences in various Arab backgrounds and dialects which result in different mispronunciations in English.

Barros (2003), stated that the greatest number of participants in the study experienced problems with the phoneme /p/ and half of them had difficulty with /v/. The researcher attributed this mispronunciation to the fact that the above sounds are not present in the Arabic alphabet and they are substituted with /f/ and /b/.

Altaha (1995), investigated the problems Saudi Arabian students encounter when learning English pronunciation. The participants in his study started learning English at the age of (13) and never left their native country to learn English. Participants were asked to say out English words that contain the English sounds. He collected the data by recording and analyzing the spoken English of the participants in different conditions and situations. Regarding consonants, he found that the participants have problems with some pairs of consonant sounds (i.e. /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ as in chair and share; /v/ and /f/ as in van and fan; /p/ and /b/ as in pat and bat). The participants also pronounced the letter c as [k] when it should be pronounced as [s].

Khurma & Hajjaj (1989), tried to identify the pronunciation problems encountered by Arab learners who come from different Arabic countries when they start to study English in the University of Kuwait. As far as consonants are concerned, they stated that certain pairs are confused by Arab learners such as /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ as in chair and share; /v/ and /f/ as in fast and vast; /dʒ/ and /ʒ/ as in jump and vision; /p/ and /b/ as in pin and bin; /s/ and /θ/ as in sin and thin.

Messiha (1985, p.225), investigated the ability of Egyptian learners to produce English consonant sounds. She asked the learners to read words that contain the tested sounds. After the analysis of data she stated that "it is an elementary linguistic fact" that the English phonemes which are not present in Arabic are the cause of the phonetic difficulties that Arab learners face. The researcher added that the phonemes /p/, /θ/, /ð/, /v/ are good examples of the pronunciation difficulties which are mispronounced as [b], [s], [z], [f] respectively by Egyptian speakers.

Arab learners' ability to produce English vowels

Ryan & Meara (1991), compared the performance of (10) Arabs at the age of twenty who come from the middle east and (10) non-Arab learners of English with English vowels with the performance of native speakers of English. All the learners were students at the University College of Swansea. They used lists of words that contain English vowels. There were three lists of words. One had the vowels at the beginning of the word, the second had the vowels at the middle of the words and the third had the vowels at the end of the words. The results of the study showed that Arabs were the poorest performers with English vowels with all the lists of words, followed by the non-Arabs and finally the native speakers of English.

Khurma & Hajjaj (1989), found that Arab learners seem to confuse certain pairs of vowels such as /i/ and /e/ as in sit and set; /ʌ/ and /ɒ/ as in luck and lock; /əʊ/ and /ɔ:/ as in coat and caught. The English vowels /eə/ as in hair, /ʊə/ as in 'tourist', /ɪə/ as in 'here', /əʊ/ as in show and

/eɪ/ as in 'wait' caused much difficulty to Arab learners when they tried to recognize and produce them. The findings of the study done by Altaha (1995), showed that the participants replaced the sounds /e/ and /ɛə/ with the sounds [i] and [ə:] respectively.

Method

Subjects

The population of this study consisted of grade two learners. It is taken from Omani governmental Basic Education schools in Al-Batinah-North Governorate in the academic year (2010/2011).

Since the collection of data for this study requires about (20-25) minutes to test each learner's ability to produce the phonics under investigation, a number of (100) learners of grade two out of (1632) has been selected to be the sample of the study. They were selected randomly from five random schools of the governorate. From each school a number of (20) learners was selected.

Research Instrument and procedures

Reading Test

As mentioned before a reading test was adapted to be used to test grade two learners' ability to produce English phonics in taught and in untaught words. It consists of (86) items that will test the learners' ability to produce the (43) sounds in taught words and in untaught words. It has a marking sheet to be filled by the evaluator who will test the learners (see appendix A).

The appropriateness of the content of the reading test was validated by thirteen jury members including two EFL instructors from the Language Center, three instructors from the College of Education, five instructors from the College of Arts in Sultan Qaboos University. It was also validated by two members from the Curriculum Department of the Ministry of Education, and one supervisor of English (see appendix B).

Based on the recommendations of the jury members, taught words were separated from untaught words and clear instructions for the evaluators were given.

The reliability of the reading test was established by using (20) grade two Basic Education learners who were not included in the sample of the study. These learners were selected randomly from the population of the study. The test was conducted and marked by the researcher. The data of the piloted test was computed using the SPSS and the internal consistency method was used to calculate the reliability of the test.

After the approval of the thesis proposal the researcher analyzed grades one and two course books and selected the sounds to be investigated and adapted the reading test. Then, he established the validity and the reliability of the research instrument. Then he took a letter from the administration of the College of Education to the Ministry of Education requesting the facilitation of the researcher's mission to administer the research instruments. Then the Ministry of Education sent to the Educational Directorate General of Batinah north governorate requesting the facilitation of the researcher's mission to administer the research instruments in the schools of the governorate. Then a letter from the Educational Directorate was given to the researcher to submit to each school principal where the sample will be taken from for cooperation.

To decide the sample of the study the researcher asked for the list of all the schools in the governorate. A sample of five schools was decided and twenty learners from each school were selected randomly.

The administration of the reading test

To test (100) learners in (5) different schools the researcher trained (5) English senior teachers who work in those schools to administer the reading test. They were asked to explain the reading test to the learners and then to administer it with them. The researcher showed the senior teachers how to conduct the reading test practically with some students who were excluded later from the sample of the study. Then, the senior teachers were given enough time to test their learners. Finally, the researcher thanked the senior teachers for their cooperation and collected the question papers and the marking sheets of the reading test.

After the administration of the reading test the data was analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). In order to address the question of the study, descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed. In addition to descriptive statistics, a General Linear Model Repeated Measures test was also used to see if there are any significant differences between grade two learners' ability to produce phonics in taught words and in untaught words.

Data analysis and Discussion

In this study the researcher will use the following criteria to evaluate grade two learners' ability to produce the forty-three sounds which are taught in grades one and two:

- If a specific sound shows a mean less than (0.70), then that sound will be considered below the acceptable level of performance. That means learners have difficulty producing it (31 learners have difficulty with the sound).
- If a specific sound shows a mean of (0.70) or above, then that sound will be considered at the acceptable level of performance. That means learners can produce it (70 learners have no difficulty with the sound).

The research question: Are there any significant differences between grade two learners' ability to produce phonics in taught words and in untaught words?

Table. 3 *The difference between grade two learners' ability to produce the sounds in taught words and in untaught words*

Types of measurements				Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig. ^a
Variable 1	mean	Variable 2	mean		
Sounds in taught words	0.75	Sounds in untaught words	0.69	.058*	.000

Table (3) shows that there is a significant difference between grade two learners' ability to produce the sounds in taught words and in untaught words in favor of their performance to produce them in taught words. In order to locate the differences between grade two learners' performance with the sounds, the following tables will present the learners' performance with the (43) sounds in taught words and in untaught words.

*Grade two learners' performance with phonics in taught words***Table. 4 learners' performance with phonics in taught words.**

No.	Phonic	N	Mean	Std.	No.	Phonic	N	Mean	Std.
1	q(square)	100	0.24	.429	23	p(purple)	100	0.75	.435
2	u(umbrella)	100	0.57	.498	24	cl(clock)	100	0.76	.429
3	l(little)	100	0.59	.494	25	t(train)	100	0.76	.429
4	i(arabic)	100	0.62	.488	26	ff(puff)	100	0.77	.423
5	st(breakfast)	100	0.62	.488	27	sk(skirt)	100	0.77	.423
6	y(yellow)	100	0.64	.482	28	n(snow)	100	0.78	.416
7	d(dates)	100	0.64	.482	29	v(Vicky)	100	0.78	.416
8	r(ruler)	100	0.65	.479	30	sn(snake)	100	0.81	.394
9	sw(sweater)	100	0.68	.469	31	x(six)	100	0.81	.394
10	ss(dressed)	100	0.68	.469	32	sc(scarf)	100	0.81	.394
11	j(jelly)	100	0.70	.461	33	sm(smell)	100	0.84	.368
12	bl(blanket)	100	0.70	.461	34	b(black)	100	0.85	.359
13	w(windy)	100	0.70	.461	35	c(cake)	100	0.85	.359
14	sl(slide)	100	0.71	.456	36	br(bread)	100	0.85	.359
15	zz(buzz)	100	0.71	.456	37	sp(sport)	100	0.86	.349
16	gl(glass)	100	0.73	.446	38	fr(frog)	100	0.89	.314
17	k(park)	100	0.73	.446	39	f(fish)	100	0.89	.314
18	a(apple)	100	0.73	.446	40	z(zebra)	100	0.92	.273
19	g(green)	100	0.74	.441	41	e(red)	100	0.93	.256
20	ll(fell)	100	0.75	.435	42	o(orange)	100	0.94	.239
21	h(honey)	100	0.75	.435	43	m(milk)	100	0.94	.239
22	s(swings)	100	0.75	.435	Overall mean			0.75	

It is clearly shown from the overall mean value of (0.75) out of the total mean value of (1) presented in Table (4) that the overall performance of EFL grade two learners with English phonics in taught words is at the acceptable level of performance. There are (33) sounds at the acceptable level of performance and (10) sounds below the acceptable level of performance. The mean values show that the learners' ability to produce the sounds 'm' and 'o' (0.94), 'e' and 'z' (0.92), 'f' and 'fr' (0.89), 'sp' (0.86), 'br', 'c' and 'b' (0.85), 'sm' (0.84), 'sc', 'x' and 'sn' (0.81), 'v' and 'n' (0.78), 'sk' and 'ff' (0.77), 't' and 'cl' (0.76), 'p', 's', 'h' and 'll' (0.75), 'g' (0.74), 'a', 'k' and 'gl' (0.73), 'zz' and 'sl' (0.71) and 'w', 'bl' and 'j' (0.70) in taught words is at the acceptable level of performance. However, the mean values of 'q' (0.24), 'u' (0.57), 'l' (0.59), 'i' and 'st' (0.62), 'y' and 'd' (0.64), 'r' (65), 'sw' and 'ss' (0.68) indicate that the learners' performance with these sounds in taught words is below the acceptable level of performance.

*Grade two learners' performance with phonics in untaught words***Table. 5** *learners' performance with phonics in untaught words.*

No.	Phonic	N	Mean	Std.	No.	Phonic	N	Mean	Std.
1	q(quiz)	100	0.25	.435	23	fr(refrigerator)	100	0.70	.461
2	sc(rescued)	100	0.35	.479	24	m(match)	100	0.71	.456
3	ss(assistant)	100	0.49	.502	25	f(flew)	100	0.72	.451
4	v(visited)	100	0.55	.500	26	h(hole)	100	0.72	.451
5	b(brought)	100	0.55	.500	27	sn(snacks)	100	0.73	.446
6	y(stayed)	100	0.57	.498	28	j(jump)	100	0.73	.446
7	i(visit)	100	0.57	.498	29	ff(giraffe)	100	0.76	.429
8	z(Suzy)	100	0.59	.494	30	sw(swim)	100	0.77	.423
9	a(thank)	100	0.59	.494	31	g(get)	100	0.79	.409
10	sk(skipping)	100	0.60	.492	32	sm(small)	100	0.79	.409
11	u(under)	100	0.61	.490	33	sp(spider)	100	0.79	.409
12	l(lunch)	100	0.63	.485	34	e(next)	100	0.80	.402
13	o(wok)	100	0.63	.485	35	br(brush)	100	0.80	.402
14	zz(pizza)	100	0.64	.482	36	w(went)	100	0.80	.402
15	d(draft)	100	0.65	.479	37	s(swam)	100	0.83	.378
16	bl(blazer)	100	0.66	.476	38	sl(sleep)	100	0.83	.378
17	gl(gloves)	100	0.67	.473	39	k(like)	100	0.84	.368
18	c(colour)	100	0.67	.473	40	p(plan)	100	0.85	.359
19	x(oryx)	100	0.69	.465	41	t(print)	100	0.86	.349
20	ll(full)	100	0.69	.465	42	r(ran)	100	0.90	.302
21	cl(click)	100	0.70	.461	43	st(stop)	100	0.91	.288
22	n(wanted)	100	0.70	.461	Overall mean			0.69	

It is shown from the overall mean value of (0.69) out of the total mean value of (1), presented in Table (5), that the overall performance of EFL grade two learners with English phonics in untaught words is below the acceptable level of performance. There are (23) sounds at the acceptable level of performance and (20) sounds below the acceptable level of performance. The mean values show that learners' performance with the sounds 'st' (0.91), 'r' (0.9), 't' (0.86), 'p' (0.85), 'k' (0.84), 'sl' and 's' (0.83), 'w', 'br' and 'e' (0.80), 'sp', 'sm' and 'g' (0.79), 'sw' (0.77), 'ff' (0.76), 'j' and 'sn' (0.73), 'h' and 'f' (0.72), 'm' (0.71), 'fr', 'n' and 'cl' (0.70) in untaught words is at the acceptable level of performance. However, the mean values of 'q' (0.25), 'sc' (0.35), 'ss' (0.49), 'v' and 'b' (0.55), 'y' and 'i' (0.57), 'z' and 'a' (0.59), 'sk' (0.60), 'u' (0.61), 'l' and 'o' (0.63), 'zz' (0.64), 'd' (0.65), 'bl' (0.66), 'gl' and 'c' (0.67), 'x' and 'll' (0.69) indicate that the learners' performance with these sounds in untaught words is below the acceptable level of performance. To discuss the results of this question, the researcher will first discuss the significant differences between grade two learners' ability to produce the tested sounds in the three levels. Then he will discuss the learners' performance with the tested sounds in each of those three levels.

The significant differences between grade two learners' to produce the tested sounds in taught words and in untaught words.

The results of the study show that there is a significant difference between the learners' ability to produce the sounds in taught words and in untaught words in favor of their ability to produce the sounds in taught words. While there are (33) sounds in taught words, there are (20) sounds in untaught words at the acceptable level of performance. On the other hand, there are (10) sounds in taught words, there are (23) sounds in untaught words below the acceptable level of performance.

With regard to learners' better performance with sounds in taught words than in untaught words.

Grade two learners' better performance with sounds in taught words than in untaught words could be attributed to the following points:

- Some of the untaught words included in the test might have contained some sounds, which were taught but were difficult to be produced by the participants; therefore, they did not try to produce even the targeted sounds.
- Learners found it difficult to figure out the sounds which were in untaught words but were not taught in grades one and two course books; therefore, they did not try to produce even the targeted sounds.
- Learners are not challenged or trained to read words, which are not included in their course book.
- Learners are not taught word attack skills which the researcher mentioned in chapter two. This could have made their performance with untaught words the least. However, Beck & Juel (2002), state that the knowledge of letter-sound relationships is of a little value unless the learners can use that knowledge to figure out words. Whether learners have learned the sounds of letters through implicit or explicit phonics, figuring out a new word still requires that the sounds of the letters can be combined or blended.
- Learners' better performance with sounds in taught words than in untaught words can be attributed to a more emphasis is given (by the teachers or the course books) to the use of the sight word or the whole word method than to the use of phonological knowledge when reading words.

The phonics in taught words

The results of the reading test show that grade two learners' performance is at the acceptable level of performance with all the sounds being tested in taught words except 'q', 'u', 'l', 'i', 'st', 'y', 'd', 'r', 'sw', 'ss' and 'j'. The learners' overall level of performance with sounds in taught words is at the acceptable level of performance. It seems from the results that Omani grade two learners have difficulty with the consonant 'j' because this consonant does not exist in Arabic. The same thing is with the vowels /ʌ/ which was presented by 'u' and the vowel /ɪ/ which was presented by 'i'. This result supports what Barros (2003) and Kharma & Hajjaj (1989) have found about these sounds with Arab learners. Although the consonant 'r' exists in Arabic, the Omani learners showed difficulty with it. This supports the results of Binturki (2008), with Saudi learners and

could be related to deficient training and exposure given to this sound when it appears in words. However, according to the literature, the consonants 'q', 'l', 'd', and 'y' and the consonant clusters 'st', 'sw' and 'ss' are supposed to make no difficulty on Arab learners as the consonants exist in Arabic, and the consonant clusters are made of no more than two consonants. Therefore, the learners' difficulty with these sounds can be attributed to deficient training, lack of exposure and little practice given to these sounds inside the classroom.

As a result, learners were confused about the sounds and the names of the letters such as 'y', 'st', 'sw' and 'ss' and some pairs of consonants such as 'd' and 'q', and 'b' and 'p' as mentioned by previous studies with other Arab learners.

The phonics in untaught words

The results of the reading test show that grade two learners' performance is at the acceptable level of performance with all the sounds being tested in untaught words except 'q', 'sc', 'ss', 'v', 'b', 'y', 'i', 'z', 'a', 'sk', 'u', 'l', 'o', 'zz', 'd', 'bl', 'gl', 'c', 'x' and 'll'. The learners' overall level of performance with sounds in untaught words is below the acceptable level of performance. The learners' difficulty with 'i', 'u' and 'o' can be related to the non-existence of these vowels in Arabic. (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989). However, the sound 'a' has an equivalent or a near equivalent sound in Arabic, and accordingly, it should not create a problem for Omani learners. Therefore, the difficulty with this sound could be related to the fact that the learners could not read the digraph 'th' in the word 'thank' which was included in the test and as a result of this, they did not attempt to produce the rest of the words' sounds. The difficulty with 'q', 'v', 'b', and 'd' can be as a result of confusion between these consonants. The learners might have confused 'd' with 'b', 'v' with 'f' and 'q' with 'p'. The learners' difficulty with these sounds supports what (Jalal. 2011; Zainab & Malatesha. 2011; Binturki. 2008; Barros. 2003; Altaha. 1995; Kharma & Hajjaj. 1989; Messiha. 1985), have found with their participants. The learners' difficulty with 'sc', 'ss', 'y', 'z', 'sk', 'l', 'zz', 'bl', 'gl', 'c', 'x' and 'll' can be attributed to learners' confusion between the sounds and the names of the letters, e.g. as in 'sc'.

It also can be due to lack of emphasis given to these sounds by grade two teachers. Mainly, the learners' failure to produce sounds in untaught words could be attributed to the following reasons:

- The lack of word attack strategies, e.g. trying to sound out words, the use of the onset-rime method to decode words, looking for chunks in the word (prefixes, suffixes, ending, base words), blending chunks and the re-read or trial-and-error technique have resulted in students' inability to pronounce certain sounds.
- Normally children try to avoid reading more difficult words as a result of lack of fluency.
- Learners did not find enough time to decode the sounds of the words while the conduction of the reading test.
- The length of words and some consonant clusters might have contributed negatively to the production of those sounds.
- Normally children try to avoid reading more difficult words as a result of lacking of fluency. Therefore, they need to be asked to read challenging words .(Chall & Jacobs, 2003).

Summary & conclusion

The following are the main conclusions of this study:

- A. There is a significant difference between grade two learners' ability to produce sounds in taught words and sounds in untaught words in favor of learners' ability to produce sounds in taught words.
- B. The performance of Omani EFL grade two learners with the tested sounds in taught words is at the acceptable level of performance with the all the tested sounds except 'q', 'u', 'l', 'i', 'st', 'y', 'd', 'r', 'sw' and 'ss'. The overall learners' level of performance with the tested sounds in taught words is at the acceptable level of performance.
- C. The performance of Omani EFL grade two learners with the tested sounds in untaught words is at the acceptable level of performance with all the tested sounds except 'q', 'sc', 'ss', 'v', 'b', 'y', 'i', 'z', 'a', 'sk', 'u', 'l', 'o', 'zz', 'd', 'bl', 'gl', 'c', 'x' and 'll'. The overall learners' level of performance with the tested sounds in untaught words is below the acceptable level of performance.
- D.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study some recommendations can be given. These recommendations if adopted and implemented would help to improve learners' abilities to produce phonics. There are two types of recommendations, the first ones to improve grade two learners' phonological performance and the additional ones for further research.

Recommendations to improve learners' phonological performance

After the conduction of the current study, the researcher recommends the following to improve grade two learners' phonological performance:

1. Teaching word attack skills to grade two learners to help them read untaught words.
2. Activating different methods to reading instruction and not just the whole word method to improve learners' performance with sounds in untaught words.
3. Giving more focus on the sounds which are difficult to grade two learners.
4. Giving more challenge to grade two learners by asking them to read words from outside the course book.
5. Including more explicit and synthetic ways to teach phonics in grades one and two course books.
6. Presenting a sound in all forms where it can appear, to get learners notice the different letters that can represent it, e.g. /k/ can be presented by 'c', 'k', 'ck' and 'q'.
7. Presenting a letter in all forms where it can appear, to get learners notice the different sounds it can represent e.g. 'c' can be /s/ as in 'face' and /k/ as in 'cat'.
8. Teaching the phonic song instead of the alphabet song with young learners to avoid confusing the sounds of the letters with their names.
- 9.

Recommendations for further research

1. The researcher recommends a further research in which the sounds below the accepted level of performance are investigated deeply.
2. The researcher recommends a further research with a greater number of learners, and teachers to increase the reliability of the result and therefore, to make the generalization.
3. The learners in this study were not recorded while producing sounds. This could not tell whether they were confusing or substituting the difficult sounds with other sounds or

omitting them. Therefore, the researcher recommends another study, which tries to look deeply at what exactly learners do when producing the sounds.

About the Authors:

Dr. Salma Al-Humaidi obtained her PhD from the USA in 2002. She is currently working as an assistant professor of ELT at Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman. She has published research papers on teaching practice, task-based learning, learner centered methodology, and microteaching. Currently, she is working on two papers about the performance of students in English as a foreign language and qualities of English language teachers in Oman. She also attended many international conferences and symposia about ELT.

Jasim Al-Belushi has a master in English language education in 2012. He has been working as a supervisor of English in the Ministry of Education. He is interested investigating ways to develop to develop young learners abilities in the main English language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

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**Appendix A The Final Version of the Reading Test
The Marking Sheet**

BPST-II - - Basic Phonic Skills Test Marking Sheet (For students reading at grade 2) Adapted from: John Shefelbine, California State University, Sacramento, 2002

Student No: _____/_____ Evaluator _____
 Date: ____/____/2011 Time: From ____:____ To ____:____

1. Reading taught words with the tested sounds: Ask the learner to look at the words on his/her sheet, study them for 2 minutes and then say them. Mark correct answers, incorrect answers or NR with a √ (Producing the tested sound only is to be considered as correct).

No	taught word	Tested sound	correct	incorrect	NR	No	taught word	Tested sound	correct	incorrect	NR
1	milk	m				23	orange	o			
2	swings	s				24	apple	a			
3	fish	f				25	umbrella	u			
4	little	l				26	red	e			
5	ruler	r				27	slide	sl			
6	snow	n				28	sweater	sw			
7	honey	h				29	skirt	sk			
8	Vicky	v				30	scarf	sc			
9	windy	w				31	sport	sp			
10	yellow	y				32	breakfast	st			
11	square	q				33	dressed	ss			

12	zebra	z				34	bread	br			
13	black	b				35	frog	fr			
14	cake	c				36	fell	ll			
15	dates	d				37	buzz	zz			
16	green	g				38	puff	ff			
17	purple	p				39	glass	gl			
18	train	t				40	blanket	bl			
19	jelly	j				41	clock	cl			
20	park	k				42	snake	sn			
21	six	x				43	smell	sm			
22	Arabic	i									

2. Reading untaught words with the tested sounds: Ask the learner to look at the words on his/her sheet, study them for 2 minutes and then say them. Mark correct answers, incorrect answers or NR with a ✓ (Producing the tested sound only is to be considered as correct).

No	Untaught word	Tested sound	correct	incorrect	NR	No	Untaught word	Tested sound	correct	incorrect	NR
44	match	m				66	woke	o			
45	swam	s				67	thank	a			
46	flew	f				68	under	u			
47	lunch	l				69	next	e			
48	ran	r				70	sleep	sl			
49	wanted	n				71	swim	sw			
50	hole	h				72	skipping	sk			
51	visited	v				73	rescued	sc			
52	went	w				74	spider	sp			
53	stayed	y				75	stop	st			
54	quiz	q				76	assistant	ss			
55	Suzy	z				77	brush	br			
56	brought	b				78	fridge	fr			
57	colour	c				79	full	ll			
58	draft	d				80	pizza	zz			
59	get	g				81	giraffe	ff			
60	plan	p				82	gloves	gl			
61	print	t				83	blazer	bl			
62	jump	j				84	click	cl			
63	like	k				85	snacks	sn			
64	Oryx	x				86	small	sm			

65	visit	i				
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Adapted from <http://www.csus.edu/>

Appendix B (Instruments Validity Check Committee)

No	Name	Position & Place Of Work	Specialization
1	Dr. Mohammed Al-Okda	Asst. Professor, Curriculum and Instruction, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman	Curriculum
2	Dr. William Schreck	Asst. Professor, Curriculum and Instruction, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman	Curriculum
3	Dr. Mohammed Ismail Abu Rahma	Asst. Professor, Curriculum and Instruction, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman	Curriculum
4	Fawziyah Hamdan Al Zidjaliah	Director of Cycle One Office, Directorate of Curriculum, Ministry of Education, Oman	Curriculum
5	Christine Hourigan	English Materials writer, Directorate of Curriculum, Ministry of Education, Oman	Curriculum
6	Dr. Khamis Al Busa'idi	Asst. Professor, College of Arts & Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman	Applied Linguistics
7	Dr. Abdulmoneim Mahmood	Assoc. Professor, College of Arts & Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman	Applied Linguistics
8	Dr. Abduljabbar Al Sharafi	Asst. Professor, College of Arts & Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman	Applied Linguistics
9	Dr. Rahma Al Mahrooqia	Asst. Professor, College of Arts & Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman	Applied Linguistics
10	Dr. Balasubramanian	Asst. Professor, College of Arts & Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman	Applied Linguistics
11	Dr. Mohammed Akhtar Khan	Asst. Professor, Language Center, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman	Testing
12	Dr. Rima Mansoor Al Zidjalia	Asst. Professor, Language Center, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman	Testing
13	Anwar Salih Al Beloushi	Governorateal Supervisor, General Directorate of Education, North Batinah, Oman	English Language