Phonological Problems of Omani EFL Learners: Pedagogical Perspectives and Implications

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Abstract
Like many non-native learners, English is a Foreign Language to Omani learners; therefore, Spoken English turns out to be difficult and often problematic. Non-native learners of English face several phonological problems mainly because most languages follow specific, predictable rules of pronunciation, but English does not. There are native and non-native varieties of English, which differ not only in terms of vocabulary and grammar but also in pronunciation. In the backdrop of phonological differences between varieties of English and ensuing pronunciation problems, this action research was conducted to investigate the phonological problems that Omani learners at school level encounter. The study was based on focused observation using the diary as a tool for data collection for six months each in one (1) class of grade seven (7) and one (1) class of grade nine (9) in two Omani public schools. The total sample size was 100. The collected phonological data were coded and organized in terms of marked thematic categories. The recurrent problems which surfaced in the Spoken English of Omani learners involved in this study were pure vowel substitution for diphthongs */əʊ/* and */eɪ/*, replacement of */p/* by */b/* sound, insertion of the vowel sound */ɪ/* while pluralizing the words, syllabification of initial and final consonant clusters, deletion of */s/* sound occurring as the final element from consonant clusters, the alternation between */dʒ/* and */g, /ʒ/* and */dʒ/, /tʃ/* and */ʃ/* sounds, replacement of */t/* by /t̪/ sound, lengthening of certain vowel sounds, pronouncing 'r' in all phonetic environments, irregularities in the use of weak forms, and not following the rules of aspiration. Based on the emerging phonological problems, certain remedial activities were planned and used with the students, which helped improve their phonological problems considerably. These remedial activities are proposed and recommended as measures of pedagogical intervention.
Keywords: alternation of sounds, aspiration, consonant clusters, non-native varieties, Omani learners, phonetic environment, phonological problems, predictable rules, syllabification

Introduction

In today's world of competition, the knowledge and competence of English are desirable for many reasons. English is widely used as a contact or link language between the speakers of other languages. It is generally the medium of higher education. In the areas of Science and Technology, English is used for communication. It is the language commonly used in seminars and conferences. In academic or intellectual gatherings, English is preferred for transacting business. A considerable amount of English is used on radio, television, and social media.

By consensus, people believe that English makes a considerable difference in their career prospects. It is often felt that proficiency in English is an essential skill that will affect their success in the future. To be able to speak well in English is an advantage for getting a job, promotion, and favor. Those who choose salesmanship require excellent command of English. Students who plan to pursue higher studies and overseas assignments realize the importance of English.

Among other skills, 'speech' is primary to language in the sense that we first learn to speak for communication. Writing comes later. And, the use of speech is generally more than that of writing in everyday interactions and situations. "Having a good pronunciation of a language, as Al Yaqoobi, Ali, and Sulan (2016) have argued, is essential for communication, particularly intelligibility" (p. 59). The correct pronunciation of words is also essential for the reason, as Nation and Newton (2008) have stated that if learners' pronunciation of a word is not stable, then the word cannot quickly enter long-term memory because the unstable pronunciation makes it difficult for the word to be held in the phonological loop. As Roach (2009) has explained, "Languages have different accents, and they are pronounced differently by people from different geographical places, from different classes, of different ages and different educational backgrounds" (p. 3). A more significant issue with the phonological system of English is that it does not allow for a one-to-one relationship between the spellings and pronunciations. George Bernard Shaw, an Irish playwright, drew people's attention to the confusing spelling system of English (cited in Patil, 2002, p. 16). He took the example of the sounds represented by 'gh,' 'o,' and 'ti' in the following words, respectively: enou**gh**, w**o**men and na**ti**on. How are these letters pronounced? The letters 'gh' in enou**gh** is pronounced like the same as the first letter in **f**ish; the letter 'o' in w**o**men is spoken as the second letter in f**i**sh, and the letters 'ti' in the na**ti**on are articulated as the last two letters in fi**sh**. Therefore, G. B. Shaw wondered why people didn't spell the word fish as **ghoti**! Thus, as Patil, (2002) has argued, "It is no surprise that English language is a difficult language to pronounce" (pp. 16-17), where spelling is no guide. Such a situation of diversity and differences calls for research studies in non-native contexts of the English language where English is not learned as the mother tongue.

Literature Review

According to Gillette (1994) and Pennington (1994), the influence of learners' first language causes pronunciation errors. In English, as Balasubramaniam (1981, rep. 1995) has discussed, spelling is not a reliable guide to how a word is spoken as there is no one-to-one correspondence between the letters and sounds of English. Another reason for such differences, as Patil (2002) has explained, are there due to varieties of English. There are native varieties of English such as British English, American English, Australian English, etc. and there are non-native English

varieties like Indian English, Singaporean English, etc. These varieties of English also differ not only in terms of vocabulary and grammar but also in terms of pronunciation.

Some studies have been conducted on the Omani students' pronunciation problems; however, their scope is limited in nature. Al Balushi and Al Seyabi (2016), in their study on the spelling strategies, have found that Omani EFL learners predominantly use spelling strategies such as sounding out, syllabification, and visual checking, which indicates that the students try to link pronunciation with spelling. Another study, conducted by El Shorbagi et al. (2017) on the first-grade basic education program Omani students, has indicated towards the gap and need for effective phonemic and phonological awareness programs. Al Yaqoobi, Ali, and Sultan's study (2016) has examined Omani EFL learners' errors in certain consonant sounds, which are limited to only some plosive and affricate sounds. Al Mahrooqi's (2012) study has focused on Omani students' perspectives on low proficiency of English in Oman in which some reflections have been made on phonological aspects. In view of the limited perspective of phonological problems of Omani learners available in the literature, this study focuses on examining all those phonological aspects where deviations are observed in Omani school learners' phonological productions in English.

Al Yaqoobi, Ali, and Sulan (2016) have reported that the first language interference, teachers, curriculum, and lack of students' practice outside the classroom are the factors that affect Omani learners' pronunciation in English" (p. 60). As an illustration of L1 interference of Omani learners, the classic example of the dichotomy between the voiceless, bilabial, plosive sounds */p/* and */b/* in the context of English and voiced, bilabial, plosive sound */b/* in the context of Arabic phonological system can be highlighted and discussed. As Brown (2000), and Nunan and Carter (2001) have argued that */p/* and */b/* are two different phonemes in the phonological system of English language; however, voiceless, bilabial, plosive sound */p/* does not exist in the phonological system of the Arabic language. Therefore, the Omani learners, and also other Arab learners, replace the phoneme */p/* by */b/* due to this binary gap. As a result, they pronounce, for example, the word 'pin' as */bɪn/* rather than */pɪn/* which leads to semantic confusion. Similarly, Brown (2000) has found that L 1 transfer is a significant source of errors for L 2 learners. O'Connor (2003) has rightly argued that learners are confused with such sounds, and they tend to replace such sounds with other sounds that are similar to their L 1. Similarly, Binturki (2008) and Hameed and Aslam (2015) have reported that consonant sound pairs such as */p/* & */b/*; */s/* & */θ/*; */z/* & */ð/*; and */tʃ/* & */ʃ/* cause similar pronunciation problem of replacing the one with the other in English words. In similar context, Wahba (1998) has reported that "Egyptian learners wrongly pronounce the word */pju:pl/* as */bju:bl/* (p. 3). As Rabab'ah (2003) has explained other factors that contribute to the faulty pronunciation are: first language interference, lack of interest, and lack of exposure to English speaking environment. According to Abbad (1998), low priority is given to pronunciation training in English language courses, and in Al Jadidi's (2009) view, lack of awareness regarding pronunciation issues are the reasons for the problems of phonological intelligibility EFL learners face.

As Patil (2002) has explained, there are three significant causes of phonological errors: carelessness, over-carefulness, and affectation. Carelessness creeps in due to lack of awareness and motivation, while over-carefulness and affectation may result from over-consciousness (p. 33). If one wants to talk naturally and effectively, he/she should learn to recognize and avoid these errors. Effective speech expresses a thought, an idea, and an opinion in the simplest and most economical way. If one's pronunciation is defective, the listener will not listen to her/his ideas. Careless pronunciation generally either annoys or amuses the listeners. Unless one intends to be funny, his/her speech must never amuse the listeners. So conspicuous the phonological problems listed above may become at times that they would force the listeners to focus their attention on the form of speech rather than on its substance. Hence, we need to be careful and alert all the time.

In line with Dani's (1993) argument that the Spoken English Practice course should form an integral part of remedial work of language skills of listening and speaking (p. 23), remedial work for the phonological problems is a compelling need for the non-native EFL learners.

This phonological action research was undertaken based on the direction from the above studies. The following section discusses how this action research was conducted in the Omani EFL context.

Research Methodology and Design

Based on the premise that the phonological system of English language, unlike many other languages, does not allow for one-to-one correspondence between the spelling and pronunciation of those spellings and also that syllable structures and accent, rhythm, and intonation patterns surface differently in different languages; this action research was initiated. This study, to investigate phonological problems of middle school Omani EFL learners was conducted for a period of one year. The class size was 25 in each class. The study was based on focused observation using diary as a tool for data collection for a period of six months in one (1) class of grade seven (7) and grade nine (9) each of an Omani public school named Khalid Bin Al Waleed School in Bid Bid, Dakhilia region and for another six months in one (1) class of grade seven (7) and grade nine (9) each of an Omani public school called Maabela Higher Secondary School of Muscat region of Oman. The total sample size was100. In order to see students' phonological performance in their natural setting, I have employed the method of observation in view of the following research insights: As Basit (2010) has argued, "Observing the behavior of others is a natural phenomenon (p. 118). Researchers like Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) regard observational methods as an essential measure to gain in-depth insight into situations. Observation is the method, which allows the researcher to get information by seeing what is happening without asking questions (Nunan,1992), and it is a "non-judgmental description of classroom events that can be analyzed and given interpretation." (Gebhard, 1999, p. 35). In this study, therefore, I have adopted a simple observation method to collect data. Comprehensive class notes were documented in a diary throughout the period of this study.

The collected phonological data were coded and organized in terms of marked thematic categories. Based on the phonological productions of students in the classes, and also outside the classroom, diary notes were recorded on a regular basis for a period of six months in each school. At the end of the data collection period, the diary notes were examined, sifted through, and listed

in terms of emerging thematic categories based on the frequency of errors that occurred. The remedial measures that helped students overcome their phonological problems in the two cycle-two grade 7 and 9 classes each, in the two schools, are organized and discussed in this paper.

In the following sections, the frequently encountered phonological problems and remedial measures used for improvement successfully are discussed. The pronunciation errors of average Omani learners in the middle phase of their school studies are classified and discussed in the following section, followed by remedial measures that were used as a pedagogical intervention.

Identified Phonological Problems of Omani EFL Learners
1. Replacement of /p/ by /b/ sound

As /p/ sound does not exist in the phonological system of Arabic language, most Omani EFL learners of English tend to replace it by /b/ sound as it shares the same place and manner of articulation except for the fact that /p/ is a voiceless sound and /b/ is a voiced sound. Thus, the word *pay* becomes *bay* in their speech. This phenomenon may often become a significant hindrance to the intelligibility of Omani English. Sometimes it may also lead to an embarrassing situation as in the case of *pray* versus *bray*. The matter of the fact is that such a substitution either brings about a total change in meaning or results in a nonsensical word. Here are some more such examples.

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
pot	/pɔ:t/	/bɔ:t/
plank	/plæŋk/	/blæŋk/
plot	/plɔ:t/	/blɔ:t/
Paul	/pɔ:l/	/bɔ:l/
pat	/pæt/	/bæt/
pin	/pɪn/	/bɪn/

2. Replacement of /t/ by /t̪/ sound

Some Omani EFL learners find it challenging to articulate /t/ sound correctly. Below are some examples of such replacements, which cause confusion and sometimes misunderstanding.

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
contact	/kɒntækt/	/kɒnt̪ækt̪/
skit	/skɪt/	/skɪt̪/
sixteen	/sɪksti:n/	/sɪkɪst̪i:n/
test	/test/	/t̪est̪/
sister	/sɪstə/	/sɪst̪ər/
tutor	/tju:tə/	/t̪ju:t̪ər/

3. Pure vowel substitution for the diphthongs /əʊ/ and /eɪ/

Although diphthongs like */əʊ/* and */eɪ/* do exist in Arabic words and phrases like */t̪əʊ/* and */eɪ ʃeɪ/* meaning 'now' and 'anything' respectively, the Omani EFL learners somehow tend to replace the diphthongs */əʊ/* and */eɪ/* by long monophthongs or pure vowels /o:/ or /e:/ respectively. Generally speaking, this problem does not cause any serious problems, but at times it may result in some confusion. Here are some examples:

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
close	*/kləʊz/*	*/klo:z/*
goat	*/gəʊt/*	*/go:t̪/*
hotel	*/həʊtel/*	*/ho:t̪əl/*
fate	*/feɪt/*	*/fe:t̪/*
baby	*/beɪbɪ/*	*/be:bɪ/*
late	*/leɪt/*	*/le:t̪/*

4. Alternation between /dʒ/ and /g, /ʒ/ and /dʒ/, and /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ sounds

A frequent alternation is observed between /dʒ/ and /g/ sounds and between /ʒ/ and /dʒ/ sounds and between /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ sounds in the speech of Omani EFL learners. Thus the word, for example, *engage* is sometimes heard as /enge:dʒ/ and sometimes as /endʒe:dʒ/. Similarly, the word *pleasure* is heard as /ple:dʒər/ and chin as /ʃɪn/. Such alternations may, at times, hamper intelligibility of speech. Some more examples of these alternations are as follow.

4.1. Alternation between /dʒ/ and /g/ sounds

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
jot	*/dʒɒt/*	*/gɒt/*
John	*/dʒɔ:n/*	*/gɔ:n/*
job	*/dʒɒb/*	*/gɒb/*
jet	*/dʒet/*	*/get/*
ginger	*/dʒɪŋdʒə/*	*/gɪŋgər/*
vegetable	*/vegɪtəbl/*	*/vegtɪbɪl/*

4.2. Alternation between /ʒ/ and /dʒ/ sounds

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
pleasure	*/pleʒə/*	*/ple:dʒər/*
measure	*/meʒə/*	*/me:dʒər/*
rouge	*/ru:ʒ/*	*/ru:dʒ/*
leisure	*/leʒə/*	*/ledʒər/*

| closure | /kləʊʒə/ | /klo:dʒər/ |
| genre | /ʒɒnrə / | /dʒɒnərə / |

4.3. Alternation between /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ sounds

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
chin	/tʃɪn /	/ʃɪn /
church	/tʃɜ:tʃ /	/ʃɜ:ʃ /
choose	/tʃu:z /	/ʃu:z /
chain	/tʃeɪn /	/ʃe:n /
Chinese	/tʃaɪni:z /	/ʃaɪni:z /
chicken	/tʃɪkɪn /	/ʃɪkɪn /

5. Insertion of a vowel /ɪ/ for the articulation of -s, -es, and -ed morphological inflections

Omani middle-grade school EFL learners are often found to insert a vowel sound for the articulation of plural marker -s, -es and the past tense marker -ed which, as per the standard conventions of pronunciation, invariably goes wrong in many situations. Words like **films** and **arrived** are often pronounced as */fɪlmɪz/* and */əraɪvɪd/.* Incidentally, the rule of pronunciation for these inflections differs in terms of their phonological environments. The articulation of the plural marker -s/-es results in */-s/* if the inflected word ends in a voiceless sound; */-z/* if it ends with a voiced sound, and */-ɪz/* if the inflected word ends with */s/*, */z/*, */ʃ/*, /tʃ/, /dʒ/ and /ʒ/. Similarly, the articulation of -ed inflection is */-t/* after a voiceless sound; */-d/* after a voiced sound, and */-ɪd/* after */t/* and */d/* sounds occurring word finally in the inflected words. Here are some illustrative examples from the Omani students' productions.

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
bulbs	/bʌlbz/	/bʌlbɪz/
asked	/ɑ:skt/	/ɑ:skɪd/
arranged	/əreɪndʒd/	/əre:ndʒɪd/
thanked	/θæŋkt/	/θæŋkɪd/
watched	/wɒtʃt/	/wɒtʃɪd/
attached	/ətætʃt/	/ətætʃɪd/

The frequent occurrence of such words in rapid speech may make English of Omani learners sound un-English.

6. Deletion of /s/ as the final element from consonant clusters

Some Omani EFL learners find it challenging to pronounce consonant clusters in words with multiple consonant sounds, especially with recurrence of */s/* sound as part of such words. This

phenomenon, at times, results in a faulty subject-verb agreement in a speech, which may lead to confusion and embarrassment. Below are some examples.

Consonant Cluster	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
/-ksθs/	/sɪksθs/	/sɪksθ/ or /sɪksθɪs/
/-mpts/	/tempts/	/tempt/ or /temptɪs/
/-lfθs/	/twelfθs/	/twelfθ/ or /twelfθɪs/

7. Lengthening of vowel sounds

Omani EFL learners are generally found to be lengthening vowel sounds, which at times, does result in serious confusion as the length may often bring about a change in meaning or confusion. Consider the following examples:

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
pull	/pʊl/	/pu:l/
full	/fʊl/	/fu:l/
fit	/fɪt/	/fi:t/
hit	/hɪt/	/hi:t/
clinic	/klɪnɪk/	/kɪli:nɪk/
video	/vɪdɪəʊ/	/vi:dɪ o:/

8. Syllabification of initial and final consonant clusters by inserting a vowel sound

It is observed that many Omani EFL learners have difficulty in pronouncing consonant clusters. Perhaps, in the process of simplifying the pronunciation, they insert the vowel sound /ɪ/ and syllabify the consonant clusters. Such a syllabification often creates confusion and makes the rapid speech far more challenging to understand. Here are some examples which may be noticed frequently.

8.1. Initial consonant clusters

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
please	/pli:z/	/pɪli:z/
drink	/drɪŋk/	/dɪrɪŋk/
splendid	/splendɪd/	/ɪsplendɪd/
station	/steɪʃn/	/ɪste:ʃʌn/
smile	/smaɪəl/	/ɪsmaɪl/
straight	/streɪt/	/ɪstre:t/

8.2. Final consonant clusters

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
drenched	/drentʃt/	/drentʃɪd/
helped	/helpt/	/helpɪd/
solves	/sɒlvz/	/sɒlvɪz/
linked	/lɪŋkt/	/lɪŋkɪd/
clamps	/klæmps/	/klæmpɪs/
attempts	/ətempts/	/ətemptɪs/

9. Pronouncing /r/ sound in all positions of words

As per the British convention of pronunciation, the letter **'r'** is not pronounced in all the positions in words. However, Omani EFL learners retain /r/ sound in all positions. According to the British phonological system, it is not articulated if it is preceded by a vowel sound, and it is not followed by a vowel sound. For example, 'r' in the word 'sir' will not be articulated as it is preceded by /ɜ:/ vowel sound and it is not followed by a vowel sound. But, it is articulated if it is followed by a vowel sound. For example, 'r' in the word 'central' will be articulated because it is followed by /ʌ/ vowel sound. This phenomenon does not cause any serious problem as far as the intelligibility of speech is concerned. However, it is likely to cause a problem for Omani learners if they are subjected to the listening of Standard British English. Moreover, it is a clear case of phonological deviation from the Standard British Pronunciation system.

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
war	/wɔ:/	/wɔ:r/
center	/sentə/	/sentər/
actor	/æktə/	/æktər/
mother	/mʌðə/	/mʌðər/
alarming	/əlɑ:mɪŋ/	/əlɑ:rmɪŋg/
artistic	/ɑ:tɪstɪk/	/ɑ:rtɪstɪk/

10. Aspiration

Usually, Omani EFL learners are not heard to aspirate /p/, /k/, and /t/ sounds when they occur in stressed syllables of English words, which the native speakers of English always do. Non-aspiration of these three sounds in stressed syllables may not make their speech unintelligible, but the ignorance of it may pose problems for them in comprehending the native speakers' rapid speech. As per the British model of pronunciation, the aforementioned three sounds should be aspirated when they occur in stressed syllables, as highlighted below.

Word	Pronounced in Standard English	Pronounced in Omani Context
table	/'tʰeɪbl/	/te:bɪl/
appoint	/ə'pʰɔɪnt/	/əpɔɪnt/

| *cage* | /ˈkʰeɪdʒ/ | /keːdʒ/ |

11. Miscellaneous

Here, a few idiosyncratic pronunciations are noticed. For example, the words **sixteen**, **sandwich**, and **doctor** are invariably pronounced by Omani EFL learners as */sɪgɪstiːn/*, */sændvɪk/*, and */dɒːto̪ːr/* respectively. A number of Omani learners are also observed pronouncing the words, **depth**, **ate** and **letter** as */dɪpθ/*, */æt/*, and */leːtər/* respectively. It seems that these Omani learners are over-generalizing some patterns learned and practiced elsewhere, which are certainly deviant forms that might cause unintelligibility.

Word	**Pronounced in Standard English**	**Pronounced in Omani Context**
sixteen	/sɪkstiːn/	/sɪgɪstiːn/
sandwich	/sændwɪtʃ/	/sændvɪk/
doctor	/dɒktə/	/dɒːto̪ːr/
depth	/depθ/	/dɪpθ/
ate	/eɪt/	/æt/
letter	/letə/	/leːtər/

12. Accent, rhythm, and intonation

Many deviations are observed when it comes to the accent, rhythm, and intonation in the speech of Omani EFL learners. This may be due to a lack of awareness, mother tongue influence, and carelessness. Often the words are stressed at the wrong syllables. Structure words are seldom used in their weak forms in rapid speech, which disturbs the characteristic sprung rhythm of the English language. Conventionally speaking, the content words are stressed according to the stress rules, and structure or grammatical words are weakened and crowded together so that the stressed syllables maintain their occurrence after a fixed interval of time. Further, Omani learners are observed to be predominantly using a level tone, thereby missing to communicate subtle nuances of meaning which is not communicated through the bare meanings of words and phrases in utterances. Such supra-segmental meanings are exploited through the strategic use of fall, rise, fall-rise and rise-fall intonations in one's utterances used in different contexts.

Having explored major phonological problems of Omani learners at the middle school level, it is now time to recapitulate the above findings and look into some remedial measures that delivered favorable results and suggest specific pedagogically essential recommendations.

Suggested remedial measures as solutions to EFL learners' phonological problems
The following remedial measures, implemented with the Omani EFL learners at the middle levels of school education, which helped improve upon the phonological problems of the participants of this study, may be considered for handling the phonological problems in similar EFL phonological contexts of studies.

1. Learners should be motivated to improve upon their pronunciation by participating in learner-friendly activities like collecting and practicing reading news in the classroom every day. This activity can be done on rotation, and 5 minutes could be devoted for it every day either in the beginning or at the end of the class. This can also be done as a part of the morning assembly. Several role-playing games may be organized in regular English classes and in substitution classes to improve upon students' phonological skills.

2. The problems of faulty articulation of sounds may be taken care of by incidentally doing the required speech therapy exercises and also by drilling the contrastive sounds using minimal pairs. A reasonable degree of awareness and understanding can be inculcated for the correct articulation of speech sounds by way of practicing minimal pairs as they overtly indicate the substitution of one sound for the other in pairs resulting in a total change of meaning or resulting in altogether nonsensical word. Consider for illustration the following minimal pairs for specific sounds.

Contrasting Sounds	Minimal Pairs	Contrasting Sounds	Minimal Pairs
/p/ & /b/	*pay-bay, pin-bin, pray-bray*	/ɪ/ & /iː/	*hit-heat, bit-beat, knit-neat*
/s/ & /ʃ/	*ass-ash, sea-she, sin-shin*	/iː/ & /aɪ/	*beak-bike, heap-hype, neat-night*
/s/ & /z/	*place-plays, sue-zoo, seal-zeal*	/æ/ & /əʊ/	*cat-coat, bat-boat, flat-float*
/v/ & /w/	*veal-wheel, vine-wine, veil-wail*	/uː/ & /əʊ/	*blue-blow, shoe-show, do-dough*
/p/ & /f/	*peel-feel, pale-fail, pool-fool*	/eɪ/ & /aʊ/	*they-thou, hey-how, bay-bow*

3. To use Shastri's (1993) argument, language is essentially taught as a tool of verbal communication, and it is by and large considered as a set of speech patterns and rules of grammar as a description of these patterns. Therefore, training in speech patterns becomes a prerequisite for communicative competence in speaking. Therefore, for improving upon the rhythm in the target learners' English speech, several structures of routine communicative importance holding various rhythmic patterns may be drilled in rotation and practiced in the class. Care should be given in the use of stressed and weak syllables in utterances. Consider, for example, the use of the two forms, i.e., strong versus weak forms, in the following utterance which consists of the strong syllable followed by weak syllable throughout and represents *ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum* rhythm, where *ti* represents a **weak syllable** and *tum* represents a **strong syllable**.

I   ˈwant   to ˈtake   the ˈdog   for a ˈwalk   in the ˈpark.
[əɪ   ˈwɒn   tə ˈteɪk   ðə ˈdɒg   fərə ˈwɒk   ɪnðə ˈpɑːk]
  ti **tum**   ti **tum**   ti **tum**   ti **tum**   ti **tum**
    (□□   □□   □□   □□   □□)

Incidentally, structures holding some basic rhythmic patterns in English, as the following, maybe drilled and practiced.

(i)   ***Pattern one:*** *ti tum   ti tum* (□□□□)

He's ˈ**lost** his ˈ**book**.

It's ˈ**made** of ˈ**steel**.

*(ii) **Pattern two:** ti tum   ti ti tum* (□□□□□)

I ˈ**pro**mise to ˈ**come**.

I'll ˈ**try** to imˈ**prove**.

*(iii) **Pattern three:** ti **tum** ti ti **tum** ti* (□□□□□□)

He ˈ**went** to the ˈ**mar**ket.

I ˈ**saw** him on ˈ**Mon**day.

*(iv) **Pattern four: tum** ti ti **tum*** (□□□□)

ˈ**Fo**llow the ˈ, **crowd**.

ˈ**What** have you ˈ**done**?

*(v) **Pattern five:** ti **tum** ti **tum** ti **tum*** (□□□□□□)

I ˈ**want** to ˈ**buy** a ˈ**pen**.

It ˈ**ha**ppens ˈ**all** the ˈ**tim**e.

*(vi) **Pattern six: tum**   ti ti ti **tum** ti* (□□□□□□)

ˈ**When** are you reˈ**tur**ning?

ˈ**Thank** you for the ˈ**mo**ney.

*(vii) **Pattern seven:** ti ti **tum** ti ti ti **tum*** (□□□□□□□)

He was ˈ**si**tting in the ˈ**front.**

She adˈ**mit**ted he was ˈ**wrong.**

*(viii)   **Pattern eight:** ti **tum** ti ti ti ti **tum*** (□□□□□□□)

He's ˈ**tak**ing another **call.**

She's ˈ**pro**bably in the **class.**

*(ix) **Patttern nine:** ti **tum** ti ti ti* (□□□□□)

I've ˈ**eat**en them all.

I ˈ**thought** it had been.

*(x) **Pattern ten: tum** ti ti ti ti **tum*** (□□□□□□)

ˈ **Throw** it into the ˈ**fire**.

ˈ **Why** did you run aˈ**way**.

Conclusion

This paper has traced various uses of English in the present-day contexts and underlined the importance of Spoken English in the field of higher studies, academic circles, and the global job market. It is in this context that several common phonological problems of Omani middle school EFL learners have been explored and investigated, keeping in mind the fact that they are non-native learners and users of English. The recurrent problems in the Spoken English of Omani EFL

learners involved in this study were pure vowel substitution for diphthongs */əʊ/* and */eɪ/*, replacement of */p/* by */b/*sound, insertion of the vowel sound */ɪ/* while pluralizing the words, syllabification of initial and final consonant clusters, deletion of*/s/* sound occurring as the final element from consonant clusters, alternation between */dʒ/* and */g, /ʒ/* and */dʒ/,* and */tʃ /* and */ʃ / sounds, replacement of /t/* by /t̪/ sound, lengthening of certain vowel sounds, pronouncing 'r' in all phonetic environments, not following the rules of aspiration, and irregularities in the use of weak forms. These problems have been illustrated with several examples collected through classroom action research and personal interaction with the students outside the classrooms. Subsequently, some remedial measures and pedagogically essential recommendations have been suggested in order to handle and improve upon the pronunciation differences, deviations, and deficiencies of Omani school learners. The main points which emerge as solutions, remedies, and implications in this context are to ensure the involvement and participation of Omani learners in learner-friendly ear training and speech production training and integration of formal testing and evaluation of learners' verbal abilities. It has been argued here that this will bring about positive change in the attitude of the learners towards the phonological aspects of the English language. And finally, the training of non-native teaching force through an intensive training course in Phonetics and Spoken English is strongly recommended with a view to facilitating a conducive environment of competent Spoken English in Omani EFL classrooms.

Pedagogical implications and recommendations

As Bansal (1993) has rightly argued, "An educational program has to be based on the needs of the community for which it is planned" (p. 1), and "A course in Spoken English has to include specific training in pronunciation" (p 3). In view of lack of emphasis on Spoken English in curriculum, Howatt (cited in Saraswati, 1993, p. 109) has rightly argued that "If our system of modern languages, in the present case of English language, is ever to be reformed, it must be on the basis of preliminary training in General Phonetics." In view of such pedagogical routes and the findings of this study, the following recommendations should be a part of proficiency courses and training programs in Spoken English for Omani EFL school learners.

1. Various simple structures catering to most of the day-to-day communicative needs may be drilled with varying intonation patterns (i.e., fall, rise, fall-rise, and rise-fall tones), indicating various meanings in different contexts. The most frequently used communicative functions in day-to-day speech situations are related to conversational skills for introduction; greetings and responses to greetings; introducing others; joining a conversation; leaving a conversation; taking leave; requesting; extending, accepting, and declining invitations; asking, refusing for and giving information; asking for information; suggesting; agreeing; agreeing partly; disagreeing; complementing; responding to compliments; complaining; apologizing; etc.

2. The spoken form of English is seldom evaluated sufficiently in most of the school education systems. Our examination-oriented students may not take it seriously what is not going to be tested. Hence, it is recommended that spoken ability must be tested in an oral test, which can be clubbed with every written examination.

3. The choice of a pronunciation model is advantageous as it sets a target of achievement for learners. The choice of model should be based on practical and realistic considerations keeping in mind the factors such as intelligibility, acceptability, and availability of teaching materials based

on the model under consideration. If these factors are taken care of, it will not matter then whether the model is native or foreign. For historical reasons and for practical convenience of the availability of books, Received Pronunciation (RP) may be recommended. RP is widely accepted all over the world, so the students have an advantage in following this model. However, at the time of evaluation, the teacher may slightly relax the standard expected of a student since we know that strict adherence to RP is nearly impossible in a foreign setting of teaching and learning. For example, replacing the sounds */eɪ/* and */əʊ/* by */e:/* and /o:/; using */r/* sound whenever it is indicated in spelling; unaspirated */p/, /b/,* and */t/* sounds when they occur in stressed syllables; and, a few Omani intonation patterns with minor deviations may be acceptable.

4. The complexity of the situation arises when speakers of other languages who are non-native speakers of English and also who are not the speakers of the learners' L1 teach English to the L1 dominated learners (in the present case Arabic). Obviously, these teachers are likely to influence the pronunciation patterns and habits of the learners differently. Hence, it is recommended that an intensive training course in Phonetics and Phonology of English be given to these teachers of English so that they are better equipped to achieve a kind of uniformity of pronunciation throughout the country.

5. And lastly, as an implication of this study on further research, it is recommended to conduct a national level phonological study to investigate Omani learners' pronunciation problems using a more significant data involving from all the regions of Oman in order to arrive at more generalized results based on multiple data collection instruments and triangulation of results as this action research is strictly limited to the data collected only from two classes in two schools from two regions using a singular data collection tool of diary through focused observation.

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