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## THE IMPORTANCE OF PHONETIC SYMBOLS, STRESS AND INTONATION IN THE TEACHING OF PRONUNCIATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TO SAUDI STUDENTS

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#### Abstract:

The learning/teaching of English language pronunciation is considered a great challenge for both the teacher and Saudi students due to multiple factors. Some of these factors are weird and confusing spelling patterns of English vocabulary, mother tongue (Arabic in our case) effects in the process of learning second language (that is English in our case), and a lack of general awareness with regards to stress and intonation among Saudi students. Few sounds, that are a vital part of English language and are totally missing in Arabic language, can also be a major factor in the learning process of English language pronunciation at initial stages. In this article we are aimed to discuss some of these factors and will also try to move forward for a possible and practical solution.

**Keywords:** Phonetic, intonation, pronunciation, spelling pattern, stressed, speech sound

#### 1. Introduction:

The teacher's awareness of the system of the target language, that is of course English in our case, is of great importance in the teaching of English language pronunciation. It is largely dependent on teacher's awareness of the overall system of language that he is teaching. The teacher's own background knowledge and understanding of the sound system of English language is of paramount importance for the teaching of pronunciation. Knowing the facts allows a teacher to select and adapt learning material as well as process according to the needs of

the students. As a teacher, one has the opportunity to initiate the success of the students in learning English, and I hope that this article will provide you with some new ideas.

## 2. Phonology and Phonetic Symbols:

Phonology is the branch of study that deals with the sound system of a language. Every language is basically composed of some major speech sounds. One of the problems for the learners of English is that the language (English) has many more speech sounds (44) than it has letters of the alphabet (26). "We sometimes know what a word means through our reading experience but we are not sure how to pronounce it." (Phonology<sup>2</sup>, AIOU-Islamabad)

We are not sure whether a particular vowel is long or short whether a particular consonant is silent or not and where the stress should be

In short, the written form of many English words does not give enough help with their exact pronunciation. For example;

Corps

Cupboard

Croatia

Chic

Pizza

Colonel

Pneumonia

It is needless to say that we will prefer to use a dictionary (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English or Longman Dictionary of Contemporary

English) however using a Dictionary for pronunciation is not as simple. It demands an understanding of the phonetic symbols.

## 3. Weird and confusing spelling patterns for Saudi students:

*"The reason for the variation, and for the mismatch between spelling and sound, is that sound-changes have occurred since the spelling-system of English was established and standardized"*

The Historical Evolution of English Pronunciation by JEREMY SMITH (The Handbook of English Pronunciation)

"English has about 44 major speech sounds but only 26 letters of the alphabet." (Page 18, Phonology 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition-2009, publisher AIOU-Islamabad) Further

- The 26 alphabets of English Language are associated with writing
- Thus; mainly used for writing, the alphabet of English language does not represent English speech sounds
- Sometimes a single alphabet represents more than one sound
- Conversely one sound can be represented by different letters or a group of letters

### 3.1. Few Examples of weird and confusing sounds from Arabic language

Let us take two examples to further clarify this issue of weird and confusing spelling patterns of English language specially with respect to Saudi students.

As we mentioned that a single alphabet may represent more than one sound. The Saudi

students are familiar with different sounds in their language which they call Fatha, Damma and Kasrah. In English all these three different sounds are sometimes represented by only one letter. Let us have a look at them one by one.



### Fatha

“The Fatha sign is a small line placed above a letter” (<https://talkislam.info/>). In English language vocabulary we can hear this sound in words like cup, but etc. The middle vowel sound of these words is known as Fatha in Arabic language and the English alphabet ‘u’ represent this sound.

### Kasrah

“The Kasrah sign is a small line placed below a letter” (<https://talkislam.info/>). In English language vocabulary we can hear this sound in words like busy and business. It is a vowel sound and again is represented by the English letter ‘u’.



### Damma

“The Damma sign is a small curl placed above a letter” (<https://talkislam.info/>). In English language vocabulary we can hear this sound in words such as put. One more time to remind

you that it is the same ‘u’ letter of English alphabet that represent this sound.

You may have noticed that all these three different sounds in Arabic language with different names and symbols are represented by same letter ‘u’ of English alphabet in different words such as but, put, busy etc. but all of them have different sounds which are similar to that of Fatha, Damma and Kasrah sounds of Arabic language.

This is how English language weird and confusing spelling patterns surprised the Saudi English language learners at their initial stage of learning pronunciation of new English vocabulary.

On the other side, one sound can be represented by different letters or group of letters as **The Arabic letter ‘Sheen’ (ش)** (<https://talkislam.info/>) sound in Asia, shine, pressure, nation, special, initial and chivalry. **The letter ‘Sheen’ (ش) in the word Asia is represented by English letter ‘s’**  
**The letter ‘Sheen’ (ش) in the word shine is represented by the letters ‘sh’**  
**The letter ‘Sheen’ (ش) in the word pressure is represented by the letters ‘ss’**  
**The letter ‘Sheen’ (ش) in the word nation is represented by the letters ‘tio’**  
**The letter ‘Sheen’ (ش) in the word special is represented by the letters ‘cia’**  
**The letter ‘Sheen’ (ش) in the word initial is represented by the letters ‘tia’**  
**The letter ‘Sheen’ (ش) in the word chivalry is represented by the letters ‘ch’**

all these different spelling patterns such as s, sh, ss, tio, cia, tia, and ch represent **the letter 'Sheen' (ش)** sound of Arabic language.

### 3.2. What can we do to avoid this confusion?

*“Since at least the nineteenth century, the study of sound-change has been at the heart of English historical linguistics and our current state of knowledge depends on the insights of generations of scholars”*

The Historical Evolution of English Pronunciation by JEREMY SMITH (The Handbook of English Pronunciation)

The issue arises with the weird and confusing spelling patterns in English language. The main reason is that we have only 26 letters of the alphabet to represent 44 sounds of English language. As we mentioned earlier that English language has 44 basic sounds which are represented by 26 letters of alphabet in English. The solution is the phonetic symbols which represent all 44 sounds of English language, means one phonetic symbol for one sound, thus 44 phonetic symbols for 44 basic sounds of English language.

In order to illustrate all the sounds of English, we shall need to use a special script, one that represent what we say or hear, rather than what we write or read. This special script is called phonetic script, which represent speech sounds in writing. English has 44 basic speech sounds which are called phonemes. Out of these 44 phonemes 24 are consonant and 20 are vowel sounds (not letters).

Now coming back to our two examples taken from Arabic language where one letter ‘u’ of English is representing three

different sounds which are similar to Fatha, Dumma and Kasrah in Arabic language. Vice versa one Arabic sound **‘Sheen’ (ش)** Is represented by many different spelling patterns including **s, sh, ss, tio, cia, tia, and ch.**

The solution is the use of phonetic symbols to represent the three different sounds of same letter ‘u’ and also that of the Arabic sound **‘Sheen’ (ش)** to avoid confusion.

Sound	Phonetic symbol	Examples
<b>Fatha</b> / / _____	/ʌ/	but, sun, cut
<b>Kasrah</b> / / _____	/i/	busy, business
<b>Damma</b> و _____	/o/	put
<b>'Sheen'</b> (ش)	/ʃ/	Asia, national, pressure, special, initial, chic, splash

The use of a good dictionary having phonetic script of vocabulary can always be of great help to the exact pronunciation of a new word. The Saudi students can also rely on the listening option of a given word in digital dictionaries. In this way, with the help of the phonetic symbols and by exercising the listening option, one can attain clarity and accuracy in pronunciation to the maximum extent.

#### 4. Consonant sounds:

Consonants are those phonemes that are produced by blocking or hindering, in some way, the free passage of air from the lungs. There are twenty-four (24) consonant sounds in English. Out of the twenty-four (24) phonetic symbols for these consonant sounds sixteen (16) are similar to those of the alphabet letters Eight (8) English consonant sounds have no equivalent in Arabic language.

Some Examples of consonant sounds: Ball /b/, Day /d/, Fast /f/, Get /g/, Hat /h/, Key /k/

#### 4.1 Types of consonants:

##### (i) Stop consonants (also called plosive):

When the passage of air is hindered to the extent of being completely blocked, the resulting sound is a stop. Examples /pb; td; kg/

##### (ii) Fricatives:

When the air is squeezed, rather than blocked, with the result that there is audible friction, the resulting sound is a fricative. Examples /fv, sz/

##### (iii) Nasal consonants:

When the air is released through the nose, rather than through the mouth, the result is a nasal sound. There are three nasal consonants: /m, n, ŋ/

#### 4.2 Place of articulation:

In the above classification of consonant sounds, we have examined only those consonant differences that are related to the blocking or hindering the free passage of air from the lungs. In our examples for this classification, we have sounds that have

great differences as well as similarities. We have, for instance, /p/ and /k/together in the same group, but it is obvious that they originate in different parts of the mouth such

as lips, teeth, tongue etc which are also called the organs of speech. Thus, we need another classification of consonant sounds with relation to its place of articulation.

**4.2-a Types of consonant sounds according to Place of Articulation:**

S.NO	Place of Articulation	Phonemes
1.	Lips together	/b/,/p/,/m/
2.	Upper teeth on lower lip	/f/,/v/
3.	Upper teeth on tip of tongue	/ð/,/θ/
4.	Tip of tongue on hard ridge behind upper teeth	/t/,/d/,/s/,/z/,/n/
5.	Tip of tongue a little further back than position 4	/w/,/i/,/r/,/ʃ/,/ʒ/
6.	The back of the tongue touches the back of the mouth (further back than position 5)	/k/,/g/,/ŋ/

**Note:** The phonetic symbols used in this article are taken from a website <https://www.ling.upenn.edu/>

**5. Vowel sounds:**

Vowels, of course, contrast with consonants. They are produced without hindering the passage of air in any way.

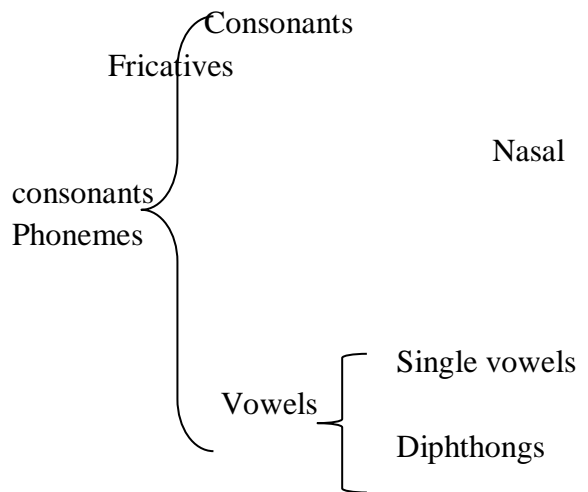
Vowels with double symbols are called diphthongs. Diphthongs consist of two sounds, they start in one place and then quickly glide to another. Examples /ei/, /əʊ/, /eə/

There are twenty (20) vowel sounds in English. Some vowels (12) are single sounds and others (8) are double sounds. The vowels with double sounds are called diphthongs Some vowels have symbols similar to English alphabet but they represent different sounds.

The vowels with double symbols are called diphthongs. Diphthongs consist of two

sounds, they start in one place and then quickly glide to another.

Stop consonants



**6. Syllables:**

“A syllable is produced by a single chest pulse” (Page 74, Phonology 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition-2009, publisher AIOU-Islamabad) and containing one, and only one vowel sound

**6.1 Open syllable:**“Syllable that ends with a vowel sound is called open syllable”(Page

74, Phonology 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition-2009, publisher AIOU-Islamabad) Examples go /gəʊ/ , play /plei/ , star /sta/

### 6.2 Closed syllable:

“Syllables that end with a consonant sound are closed syllables.” (Page 74, Phonology 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition-2009, publisher AIOU-Islamabad) Examples at /æt/ , us /ʌs/ , ask /ask/

### 7. The pronunciation of /r/:

If there is a vowel sound after /r/ then it is pronounced as in camera, instruction, arrive etc. and when there is no vowel sound after it then it is not pronounced as in support, star, army etc. However in American English it is pronounced in both the cases

### 7.2 The pronunciation of /t/ and /d/:

If there is a consonant sound before and after /t/, /d/ then /t/, /d/ is not pronounced. For example, next week, best man, brand new, kindness, postman, exactly etc.

### 8. Some English sounds that are missing in Arabic language:

There are 8 consonant sounds in English, which have no equivalent sounds in Arabic language. These are the problem sounds for the Arab English users and the mispronunciation of these sounds creates hurdles in communication Extensive practice and a little attention is required to avoid this problem. The following table presents some of these problem sounds with contrastive examples;

WORD	PHONETIC SYMBOL (For the initial sound of the word)	WORD	PHONETIC SYMBOL (For the initial sound of the word)
Three	/θ/	Tree	/t/
Through	/θ/	True	/t/
Theme	/θ/	Team	/t/
Thin	/θ/	Ten	/t/
Bear	/b/	Pear	/p/
Bush	/b/	Push	/p/
Bath	/b/	Path	/p/
Bark	/b/	Park	/p/
There	/ð/	Dear	/d/
That	/ð/	Date	/d/
Them	/ð/	Dim	/d/
Those	/ð/	Dose	/d/

### 8.1 Change in meaning due to mispronunciation:

He eats **pear** (bear)

Where is the **parking** area? (Barking area)

After the cold war era the U.S. gave its allies a **push** (Bush)

### 9. Sentence stress and intonation:

Sentence stress and intonation are closely related. Most stress words in a sentence are content words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and not the structure words such as pronouns and prepositions. Stress is given to those words that are felt to be most important

Look \_\_\_\_\_ at it

Give \_\_\_\_\_ it to me.

Choose \_\_\_\_\_ one for me

Talk \_\_\_\_\_ to them.

In connected speech, those content words are stressed that provide new information. Content words that simply repeat what is already known are not stressed. For example Qasim bought five cotton shirts, but Ali bought three nylon shirts.

#### 9.1 Contrastive stress:

When the same sentence is given different stress patterns in order to emphasise different contrasts and various shades of meaning: it is called contrastive stress.

Ali's father bought him a new car.  
Ali's father bought him a new car (not mother)

Ali's father bought him a new car (not lend)

Ali's father bought him a new car. (not old)

Ali's father bought him a new car (not a motor-bike)

### 9.2 Intonation

The major function of intonation is to modify meaning and to indicate attitude. "Intonation is basically concerned with the pitch of the voice." (Page 504, Diploma in TEFL Text book- 552 Units 1-18, year 1987, publisher AIOU-Islamabad) Intonation can change the meaning of a sentence. Intonation can show a speaker's attitude or mood such as enthusiasm, surprise, annoyance, hesitation or agreement.

How strange! (surprise)

My fault? (surprise and annoyance)

Even a single phrase such as, "Oh my

God!" can be expressed in different attitudes and moods For example anger, surprise, happiness, tired, terror etc.

### 10. The standard of English language pronunciation:

Being an international language. English is spoken with a variety of accents around the globe. "International English does not belong to any one country or any one speech community; it belongs to the world." (Page 539, Diploma in TEFL Text book- 552 Units 1-18, year 1987, publisher AIOU-Islamabad) Some of these variations are acknowledged on international level and are followed by different countries of the world. British and American English are considered the main varieties, whereas the Australian, Canadian, Irish and Scottish varieties of English are also well known among English users around the globe No variety is either good or bad, however it is better to use one variety instead of a mixture



for teaching/learning purposes. At present, there are two approaches with regards to English accent and pronunciation.

### **10.1 Theoretical approach:**

Few points with regards to the theoretical approach are as under;

- English is basically the language of the British people
- It is the British English that has been analyzed in greatest details
- Most of the Dictionaries use it as a model
- It is still associated with educated people

Therefore, we should be as close as is possible to the British standard of pronunciation, which is called Received Pronunciation abbreviated as RP.

### **10.2 Practical approach:**

Few points with regards to the practical approach are as under;

- English is an international language and is spoken by people with a variety of accents around the globe
- International English does not belong to any one country or any one speech community, it belongs to the world

Therefore, the pronunciation which is understood and intelligible, wherever English is spoken, is acceptable.

### **Conclusion:**

Study material, like the one in your hands, on teaching of pronunciation is always lacking something crucial due to the fact that it is the branch of study which deals with speech (sounds) that is “what we say or hear rather than what we write or read.” (Page 6,

Phonology 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition-2009, publisher AIOU-Islamabad). Audio-video cassettes accompanying such study materials can be of great value in distance education. However, in classroom teaching the teacher himself can present the model pronunciation for his students. As a teacher, try to give your students the confidence to use English without worrying too much about making mistakes. If there is a lot of purposeful talk in the classroom, the less able students will hear correct forms and new vocabulary from other students and will be encouraged to use English with confidence

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