

Perspectives on Teaching Arabic Phonetics

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Abstract

All over the world, scholars made points of reference to Arabic Linguistics at all levels mainly Phonetics, Phonology and Grammar. Arabic Phonetics indeed has been an object of academic study for more than a thousand years. Scholars attempted to deal with the challenge posed by teaching languages. They showed how modern approaches to teaching English can be adopted to teach Arabic pronunciation. The aim of this paper then is to provide teachers along with practitioners with as much tips as possible to teach Arabic pronunciation. In other words, research-directed approaches proposed for teaching English pronunciation are suggested for use by practitioners engaged in teaching Arabic.

Keywords: Arabic phonetics , Teaching , research-directed approach

الملخص

في جميع أنحاء العالم، جعل الباحثون نقاط مرجعية للغة العربية على جميع المستويات خاصة علم الصوتيات، علم الأصوات وعلم النحو. صوتيات اللغة العربية كانت في الواقع موضوعا فقد حاول العلماء التعامل مع التحدي الذي تفرضه؛ للدراسة الأكاديمية لأكثر من ألف سنة تعليمية اللغات وأظهروا كيف يمكن اعتماد نهج حديثة في تعليمية اللغة الإنجليزية لتدريس صوتيات اللغة العربية.

الهدف من هذه الورقة البحثية إذن هو تزويد المعلمين والباحثين على حد سواء بأكبر قدر ممكن من النصائح لتعليم صوتيات اللغة العربية. بعبارة أخرى، تقترح هذه الورقة البحثية المنهج القائم على البحوث في اللغة الإنجليزية ليتم استخدامه في تدريس صوتيات اللغة العربية. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** صوتيات اللغة العربية، التعليم، النهج القائم على البحوث



I INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, many educational institutions are meant to consciously create a significant relationship between teaching and research within higher education. It is the concern of this paper indeed to shed light on this research-teaching nexus, mainly in teaching Arabic pronunciation. In fact, it was the expansion of new universities with government assistance for research that transmuted research from being an exclusive activity undertaken by specialists in a small number of institutions to something predictable to all instructors (Miller, 2012:11).

It is highly acknowledged that learners of Modern Standard Arabic (as a first or foreign language) face many problems in articulating certain sounds and confirm their lack of ability to "get it exact" all the time. This is due mainly to the shortage of articulatory, acoustic and perceptual information on Arabic sounds produced by native speakers. Thus, it is this paper's aim is to show how research-led approaches in teaching English pronunciation can be mapped upon teaching Arabic pronunciation.

II WHAT IS RESEARCH-LED APPROACH?

Research-led teaching is an amalgamation of a number of approaches to teaching. It may even involve the use of any number of these dimensions at the same time. This would depend on the extent to which different scholars comprehend "research", how they view the nature of their subject content, and how they understand teaching. Commonly, "research" is grasped primarily as a set of "out-class tasks" activities (like conference papers, teamwork and posters) then teaching will lie on these targets (Brew, 2003).

Indeed, it is only through this approach that the sense of the 'self' is explored, through a theoretical introduction, grounding in self-efficacy, its influences, and also with a strong focus on the self-reflection.

In other words, teachers empathize with a student in order to work with him or her. Explanations from a teacher are needed, but eventually it is the learners' research which help them much to

create the self-efficacy belief that will push them forward (Miller, 2012: 42).

More importantly, research-led approach teaching is based on the premises that a learner learns more successfully when he: she is involved in meaningful activities while he is at the same time provided with a vehicle for reinforcing academic skills. Though it is time consuming look for materials for research-led teaching, the results are well worth the efforts (Curtain, 1995).

III RESEARCH-LED TEACHING ON ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

According to Derwing and Munro (2005), an important measure to successful pronunciation can be defined as *Intelligibility*. Park (2015: 45) has explained the concept as the *extent to which an utterance is understood by a listener*). Based on many case studies, it is found that pronunciation teaching should prioritise only those aspects of pronunciation which hinder intelligibility. Different pedagogical activities may be offered to test which aspects of English pronunciation may merit the attention of instructors, *depending on who their learners wish to be intelligible to*. Probably, this distinction is critical for learners of English, but is likely to be less critical for learners of Arabic for instance. Certainly, learners of Arabic will typically learn Arabic in order to communicate with native speakers of Arabic, rather than with other non-native speakers of Arabic (Hellmuth, 2014).

Two other measures to successful pronunciation were *Comprehensibility and accentedness* which were defined by Saito (2011: 45) as 'listeners' estimation of difficulty in understanding an utterance' and 'the degree to which the pronunciation of an utterance sounds differ from an expected pronunciation pattern', respectively.

It was highly acknowledged by Saito (2011) that *suprasegmental* and *segmental* activities enabled students to do better regarding the two aforementioned criteria. However, Derwing and Munro (2005) found that

Accentedness did not necessarily interfere with comprehensibility: even heavily accented speech can be highly comprehensible. Although some L2 learners who strongly struggle to look like the natives should not be halt to following their ambitions, academics should fix accurate goals for L2 learners based on empirical research evidence, such as comprehensibility rather than accentedness.

IV FUNCTIONAL LOAD IN ARABIC PRONUNCIATION

In terms of acquisition patterns, a study presented by Amayreh and Dyson (1998) was conducted on Jordanian Children. The two researchers discovered the following:

- a) early consonants [b t d k f m n l w ħ q ʔ]
- b) intermediate consonants [s ʃ χ ʁ h r θ s^ʕ ð^ʕ dʒ]
- c) late consonants [t^ʕ d^ʕ ð z ʕ]

It is concluded therefore that the consonants with high functional load in Arabic are those which are acquired early. In another study, Amayreh and Dyson (2000: 98) suggested that the early accuracy of clear [l] in Arabic may be due to its high frequency in the language and its relatively high functional load. Further examples included /l/ deletion.

As opposed to English, there are no reported cases of vocalisation of /l/ in Arabic.

Hassan (2011: 329) found also that it is difficult to pronounce [lʕ], the difficulty in its production is related to the general difficulty experienced by Arab children in acquiring emphatics due to the complexity of these sounds as they involve simultaneous articulatory postures. He said in this respect: *“The usual pattern that appears in the production of emphatics by children is de-emphasis.... e.g. [lati:f] for adult [lʕatʕi:f] ‘kind’. Since emphatic [lʕ] in Arabic is mainly produced as a result of an emphatic context, its correct production usually depends on whether or not the other emphatic sound(s) within the same utterance have been acquired. Though the incidence of de-emphasis gradually declines with age, it does not easily disappear and sometimes persists even after the age of six, perhaps due to the infrequency and low functional load of emphatics in Arabic”*

The same experiments also confirmed that all consonants are acquired early in medial position in the word but early in word-initial or word-final position.

V PROSODIC FEATURES AND HIGH FUNCTIONAL LOAD IN ARABIC PRONUNCIATION

While discussing the word-stress systems of Cairene and San'ani, Watson (2007:79) maintained that Arabic is a word stress language. This means that one of the syllables in a content word is perceived as receiving main stress. Stress falls on a final syllable if it is superheavy (CVVC or CVCC). According to Chahal & Hellmuth (2014: 4), only a few dialects display minimal pairs which differ in the position of word stress alone. The functional load of the position of stress in the word is probably thus low in Arabic, and its correct realisation may be a relatively low priority for L2 learners.

Within the same respect, Hellmuth (2014) suggested that the list of possible nuclear accent forms varies across dialects, and thus that variation in the choice of nuclear accent may vary across dialects in Arabic as it does in British English. The position of the nuclear accent can vary too, to mark another focus. Similarly this observation is found in English.

In another study by Rifaat (2004), the author points out that the Arabic (EA) intonation system is both structurally and functionally simple. To understand this property of EA, Rifaat suggested a model which represents EA intonation with the most minimal subset of universal elements in order to facilitate cross-linguistic comparison (see also Hellmuth thesis 2006).

VI DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A broader evidence base is needed, to include a study of the relative functional load of segmental contrasts along the lines of Brown (1988), as well as a replication in Arabic of Grabe et al.'s (2005) methodology for comparison of cross-dialectal intonation patterns. Further research should also explore what factors influence the intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentedness ratings of the speech of L2 learners of Arabic, and the extent to

which prioritisation of teaching and error-correction strategies, in the directions suggested here, can influence such ratings (cf. Derwing et al. 1998). Finally, it would be helpful to clarify whether intelligibility (rather than accent reduction) should be the goal of pronunciation training and teaching, for Arabic and other non-global languages, and if so, whether the concept of intelligibility to non-native rather native listeners is relevant in the context of learners of languages other than English.

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