

## Difficulties Encountered by Arab Students in Pronouncing English Correctly

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### ABSTRACT

Since spoken language is the most important channel of communication, it is supposed to be the first skill to master when learning a language. However, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, learners encounter various problems limiting their abilities. One of the remarkable phenomena in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning is the inability of most students to utter English correctly and fluently. The present study investigates the difficulties that hamper high school students from pronouncing English vocabulary and simple sentences correctly and fluently. This research was carried out in an attempt to assess the English course outcomes that were reflected in learners disabilities of correct and fluent English pronunciation. The data were collected through surveying second-year high school students' responses to two instruments. A questionnaire was addressed to a sample of 100 Saudi male students from 4 secondary schools, and semi-structured interviews with 5 students from the population were conducted to provide deeper diagnosis regarding problems of English pronunciation. In order to provide further details about the subject studied, analyses of the syllabi are presented. The study recommends remedial pronunciation activities, practice of confusing words, and phonics practices throughout the course.

**Key words:** Difficulties, Obstacles, Arab students, Pronunciation

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### INTRODUCTION

It is so obvious that learning English is in a highly increasing demand in this rapidly changing global village. This is for several reasons. First, English is an important language as it is the dominant international language which is the official language for a lot of countries as well as the medium of the Internet and overseas communication, the bridge of international trade, and the channel of worldwide conferences. (Ahmad, 2016; Crystal, 2012; Rossner & Bolitho, 1990). Second, most studies and researches are done in English. English is the primary language of the U.S., Britain, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and various Caribbean and Pacific island nations. It is also the official language of India, the Philippines, and many sub-Saharan African countries (Crystal, 2012). In addition, it is the second most widely spoken native language in the world (British Council, 2013; Lasanowski, 2010; Yano, 2001). It is the most widely taught foreign language, and the international language of science and business. English language has been lauded as the most 'successful' language ever, with 1,500 million speakers Worldwide since English is now the language most widely taught as a foreign language – in more than 100 countries (Crystal, 2003). In the Arab world, English is taught as a foreign language where there is lack of practice community. Teaching and learning

English as a foreign language still face a lot of challenges. Consequently, various amendments in the Saudi education system have been made; one of these reforms has been adopting the communicative language teaching (CLT) as a prescribed approach in EFL classrooms; however, a lot of difficulties are still facing Arab students in pronouncing English perfectly (Alshumaimeri, 2003; Elyas & Al-Grigri, 2014; Fareh, 2010). Here, the study traces some of these and how to overcome them.

### Problem Statement

English language position in EFL context cannot be underestimated. A lot of attempts have been carried out to help EFL Saudi learners master communicative skills; nonetheless, the limited opportunities to practise beyond classrooms make it a challenge to fully achieve that target. The problem this study investigates arises from the fact that EFL high school students face difficulty, to varying degrees, in English language skills. One of the most apparent problems that are encountered by high school students is pronouncing correct English (Ahmad, 2011; Alfallaj, 2013; Alshumaimeri, 2003; Elyas & Al-Grigri, 2014; Fareh, 2010). Sharpling (2012) asserts that "Pronunciation is probably one of the hardest skills in English to learn. It takes a lot of time and effort to improve pronunciation" (p. 1).

Arab learners' inefficacy in pronouncing English is supposed to be due to many factors, such as the content to be studied, the methodology of teaching to be applied, the lack of practice, nature of the English language, and interferences of L1, among others. Moreover, most non-native speakers of English commonly interfere their mother tongue pronunciation and communication style into those of the target taught language, which is English, resulting in accented speech (CAL, 2011). Accurate pronunciation of English is a real challenge to both EFL students and teachers. Tharpe (2007) said that the great challenge that faces ESL teachers is English phonological features, and it is much more in EFL settings. Nonetheless, a few studies were detected investigating or tackling the problems of pronunciation. Consequently, this study was conducted to help to clarify that issue.

### Definition of Pronunciation

One of the main targets of EFL learning is communication. To communicate properly, a learner is in bad need of proper pronunciation to make the message clear as well as to receive it well. Saylor (2005) divides pronunciation into proper and improper. He defines proper pronunciation as "reproducing the sound of the word through speech in such a way that any fluent speaker of the language would effortlessly know and understand the message", whereas improper pronunciation causes misunderstanding.

### Significance of the Study

Alfallaj (2013) stated that most Saudi students might be perfect at grammar, vocabulary; nevertheless, most of them lack the ability to speak English accurately and fluently. So, this research significance lies in its highlighting the value of proper pronunciation as it is a tool of sending and receiving information via the communication system among human creatures. Any problem in pronunciation may disconnect or spoil the message. More importantly, finding out the difficulties that face high school students, second grade in this study, is supposed to help to find the appropriate remedial activities for them. It also helps learners as well as teachers to pay a great deal of importance to more pronunciation practice.

### Research Questions

Attempting to tap on the problem this study traces which is pronunciation obstacles encountered by EFL Arab students, three questions were raised to guide the research:

1. Do Arab learners have difficulty in pronouncing English correctly?
2. What are the factors causing pronunciation problems?
3. What are the pronunciation problems encountered by second-year secondary Arab students?

### Limitations

This study is limited to high school Arab male students studying in their second grade of secondary stage in EFL context. This study is limited to the problems of correct

pronunciation; other skills are not dealt with in this study. Finally, the results of this study can only be generalized to high school students, not to other stages.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A big deal of knowledge body and studies have been carried out investigating the problems encountered by Arab students in pronouncing English. However, the problem still exists; most high-school students have great difficulty in pronouncing English perfectly. Herein lies the importance of this study in literature.

Literature is rich in studies investigating the obstacles hampering learners' speaking proficiency. Barros (2003) conducted a study entitled "Pronunciation Difficulties in the Consonant System Experienced by Arabic Speakers When Learning English after the Age of Puberty". The results of her study showed that Arabic speakers have difficulties to pronounce eight English consonants. The results also demonstrated that the difficulties experienced by Arabic speakers may differ depending on the country from which they come.

In another study, Ahmad (2011) carried out a case study at the Preparatory Year Program, Najran University, Saudi Arabia; called "Pronunciation Problems among Saudi Learners". The results showed that Saudi students had difficulties in pronouncing certain English consonant sounds, such as: /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/, and /ŋ/. Finally, one of the suggested solutions is that "Linguists see that the knowledge of linguistics, especially, phonology, would help teachers a lot overcome most of their students' problems in pronunciation" (Alfallaj, 2013, p. 134).

### Causes of the problems of Pronunciation

A group of factors works together to make the problem of pronunciation more difficult. The nature of English, the syllabi, the interference of the mother tongue, Arabic, and the teaching and learning environment. A high school Saudi student finds himself surrounded by a non-English speaking environment; most are studying for a main target of passing exams and getting grades, most instruction zooms into memorizing vocabulary and grammar.

Looking at the syllabi that used to be administered to second-year secondary students, it was an amazing status: earlier students studied a course book called "English for Saudi Arabia", the old curriculum which one can hardly find any conversation or phonics exercises. Then, schools shifted to teaching "Mega Goal," "Traveller," and other course books which are communicatively oriented, but current syllabi are under frequent change.

In addition, "Written English and spoken English are obviously very different things" (O'Conner, 1998, p. 1). English is totally different from Arabic in the previous sense, which led to the difficulty in code switching. In terms of pronunciation, learners of ESL always meet difficulties from the outset. Moreover, pronunciation puzzles them because the same letter has different sounds. Take the following pairs as a few examples—(bath – bathe), (South – Southern), (now – know), and (uncle – university). Moreover, some verbs and

nouns are pronounced differently although they are the same spelling, (e.g., desert (v)/desert (n)).

For Arab learners including Saudi students, pronunciation is frustrating from the very beginning. English pronunciation differs from spelling in many cases, especially in silent letters. Also, difficulties in pronouncing certain consonants and vowels add to the difficulty. Interestingly, even though all of these obstacles, it is still hopefully expected to have fluent speakers of English by following specific remedial procedures discussed later.

### Tracking Changes in the English Curriculum

Since the establishment of Saudi Ministry of Education in 1953, English has been taught as a foreign language (EFL). Systematically, students at public schools used to start learning English from grade seven onwards; nonetheless, it is now taught earlier as a compulsory subject (Sayegh & Rahman, 2009). Up to now, it is the main second language taught in Saudi schools. The realization of the necessity of English as an international language has dawned upon the vision of English as a veritable window to the outside world; one that allows citizens to explore the world around them. This vision of the education mission has been depicted in the high concern given to teaching and learning of English by the stakeholders and resulted in teaching English from an early age unlike preceding decades, sometimes even from Kindergarten I.

A lot of efforts have been exerted to ensure success in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. In an attempt to overcome difficulties faced by both teachers and learners, policymakers prescribed the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) to help students communicate well (Al-Hajailan, 2003). Teaching and learning English in Saudi Arabia are nowadays prioritized regarding support politically, economically and legislatively (Altammamy, 2011; Shabbir, 2006). Nonetheless, learning outcomes, regarding communicative competence, are still below the expectations (Abahussain, 2016).

Unfortunately, the communicative outcomes of the learning process in the Arab world, despite all of the exerted efforts, are yet insufficient (Rabab'ah, 2003), this negatively impacted learners' intrinsic motivation students who are not able to orally communicate easily and naturally (Alrabai, 2014; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018; Hamad, 2013; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Most learners' levels are still weak. Modern statistics, questionnaires, chatting through forums over the internet and oral discussions with teachers and students have shown that mastering English pronunciation faces different kinds of obstacles.

Obviously, a lot of attempts have been carried out. So, the new syllabus for the intermediate stage has been aided by a lesson about phonics at the end of each unit, which, on the other hand, is neglected by some teachers. Yet, modern generations have realized the importance of learning English and so, began to encourage young learners to seize the chance of learning English. Moreover, parents themselves began to seek after learning it and do their best to speak English. Parents, nowadays, are very proud of their children

when they speak English, especially in front of others. However, using English in everyday life is still limited. English can be practised in a few places such as some restaurants, during flights, over the internet through chats as well as at schools. Overall observation concludes that it is becoming more familiar now that young men chat in English over the internet or in public places, but this is still insufficient. Actual interactive practices of English are still limited. So, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in the Arab world is one of the hardest tasks.

### Accuracy and Fluency

Accuracy refers to how well a speaker produces the target language in relation to its system; whereas fluency is the production of language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2009). This caused some to call for fluency at early learning stages and accuracy to come later. Nonetheless, it is believed in this study that they complement each other and accuracy can be taught within fluency. Nevertheless, this study traces accuracy much more fully than fluency.

### METHODOLOGY

The present descriptive study investigates the current situation of participants' speaking efficiency level, tracing obstacles, and suggesting solutions. The type of data obtained made this research in line with quantitative research design. Directed by the objectives set for this study, a survey questionnaire was administered to EFL Saudi learners to find out the speaking difficulties encountered by second grade of high school students in Saudi Arabia. Following the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were held. This was done in order to elicit participants' pronunciation problems and to hold discussions over practical suggestions that may help overcome speaking difficulties. Most of the data collected were processed statistically.

### Participants

The participants assigned to respond to the questionnaire were 100 Saudi male students in their second grade of high school (sometimes called secondary school) selected based on the convenience technique, and were selected from 4 different schools in the southern region of Saudi Arabia. The participants were selected from those schools which were available to the researcher and willingly participated in the questionnaire. Out of the 100 students participating in the questionnaire, five students were selected purposively based on their English scores in the previous final exam. One student from each category—the highest score, the post average score, the average score, the pre-average score, and the lowest score.

### Instruments

This study attempted to find the available answers to the previous research questions through different tools of collecting



data. The data for this study were collected from a group of 100 Saudi male students studying EFL in the second year secondary, attempting to trace the difficulties they face in pronouncing English correctly and fluently as a result to the syllabi, the nature of English, the TEFL methodology or the surrounding environment; trying to provide possible remedies to these hinders. Tools used, after ensuring their validity, to collect these data, were:

1. a paper-and-pencil questionnaire addressed to 100 EFL learners to investigate the difficulties encountered in pronunciation and the causes of these obstacles, and
2. semi-structured interviews with five students in order to shed light on the difficulties they face in pronouncing English through specific points addressed to participants to speak about in order to explore more points of defects in pronouncing English.

The validity of the questionnaire items and the interview questions was ensured by consulting three academicians in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) and three EFL teachers. And for the reliability of the analysis of the interviews data, an expert specialized in ELT was consulted. Reliability of the questionnaire findings was checked for internal consistency using SPSS (Version 24.0). According to the Cronbach's Alpha result (.787), the internal reliability of the items ( $n=13$ ) was at an acceptable level.

### Data Analysis

For the data collected from the questionnaire, the SPSS (Version 24.0) was used to calculate the descriptive data obtained. On the other hand, close analysis was employed for the data collected from the semi-structured interviews; analysing the sentences introduced to students to say and to explore their comments on the issue of speaking. Then, the data offered to an academician to see how objective was the analysis.

### Ethical Considerations

Subjects in this study were to volunteer freely. They were assured that the data given by them is confidential. The data are used for academic purposes only. No part of their data would be used for other purposes. They were also told that they had the freedom to quit at any point or to exclude their responses.

### FINDINGS

The results obtained for the present study came from two sources— the responses to the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews. Table 1 presents the demographic data obtained about the participants based on their responses to the first section of the questionnaire.

From the data shown in Table 1, all participants were male (100%) since it was difficult for the researcher to reach female respondents. Moreover, most participants' age ranged from 15 to 17 (92%), only (8%) were aged 18 to 19. In addition, all participants (100%) were Saudis. All previous data revealed the homogeneity found among respondents. Moreover, Table 2 presents the results obtained from the questionnaire.

**Table 1.** Participants' demographical data ( $n=100$ )

S	Item	Category	N
1	Gender	Male	100
		Female	0
2	Age (In years)	15-17	92
		18 – 19	8
3	Nationality	Saudi	100

For scaling the 13 items of the questionnaire, the responses were scaled as follows: first, the positive responses of 'Strongly Agree' was scaled for 5, and 'Agree' was given 4; secondly, the neutral point of 'Not Sure' was scaled for 3; whereas the negative responses of 'Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree' were for 2 and 1 point(s) respectively. During the analysis of the quantitative data collected, 'Not Sure = 3' was used as a midpoint.

Results collected based on the respondents' answers to the questionnaire were calculated using SPSS (Version 24.0) in order to get statistical outputs that were analysed and interpreted to find answers to the questions raised for the present study. In other words, findings obtained from the five-point Likert Scale questionnaire ( $n=100$ ) were linked to the research questions. The first question set to answer was: 'Do Arab learners have difficulty in pronouncing English correctly?' Looking closely at the first seven items in the questionnaire as shown in Table 2 and by using 'Not Sure' as a midpoint, results of items 1, 2 and 3 showed that only few participants (11%), with a mean score of 2.06 at 0.930 standard deviation, expressed the easiness of pronunciation, a mean score of 1.75 at standard deviation of 0.757 and percentage of (7%) do not interfere their L1 in the process of speaking English, and (3%) could switch from their mother tongue to the target language with a mean of 1.78 and 0.690 of standard deviation. On the other hand, most participants (83%) with a mean score of 4.33, higher than the midpoint, at a standard deviation of 1.015 find correct pronunciation a difficult task for them as uncovered by the scales of item number 4. Moreover, (70%) of participants,  $M = 3.89$  and  $SD = 1.442$ , hesitate when speaking English, and (68%) are concerned about fluent pronunciation with a mean of 3.68 and 1.370 of standard deviation. In sum, scales of items expressing the difficulty of speaking English, items 4, 5 and 6, were found higher than the mid-point of 3.00. Thus, it can be concluded that majority of responses reveal that Arab learners do lack the skill of pronouncing English correctly around (75%). However, it is an interesting clue that students realize that shortage and express their desire to improve their pronunciation as the percentage of (100%) revealed with a mean of 4.47 and a standard deviation of 0.501.

Attempting to answer the second question of this study, items 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 were classified into two contributing factors— processing factor in items 8 and 9, and practices factor for items 10, 11, 12 and 13. This is done to uncover the factors causing pronunciation problems. Based on the data given, it was found that the main causes of these English pronouncing obstacles are either because of learners' internal processing or classroom practices. Self-monitoring or inter-

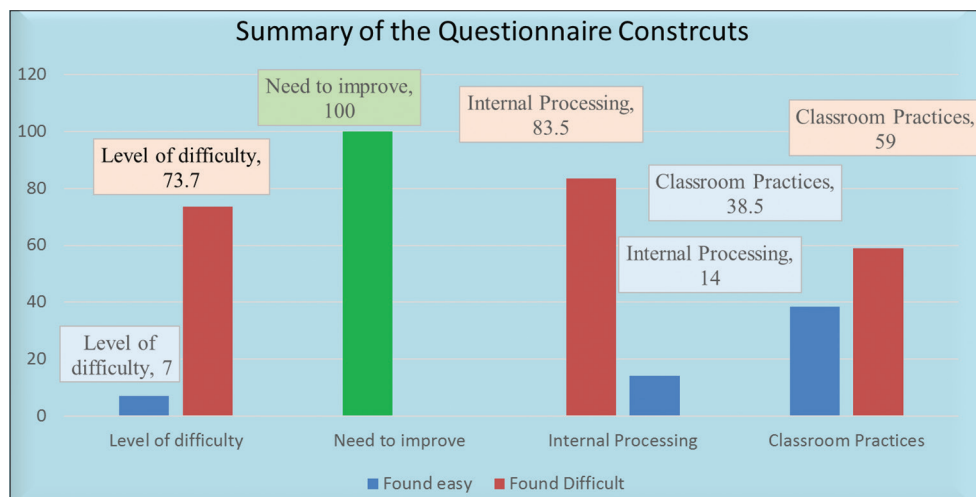
nal interpretation is one of these major factors as revealed by the high percentage of responses (90%) with a mean of 4.46 at 0.892 standard deviation, then the nature of English language gap between spelling and pronunciation as the (77%) of responses revealed with a mean of 3.83 at 1.215 of standard deviation. For classroom practices, a mean of 3.40 at 1.325 standard deviation with (63%) of classrooms instruc-

tion is conducted mainly in Arabic, and some rely primarily on the Grammar-Translation Method. In addition, (55%) of students,  $M = 3.28$  and  $SD = 1.334$ , do not practise speaking sufficient English in classrooms at the supposed level.

To sum up, Figure 1 gives a summary of the collected data from the questionnaire. It counts for the average percentage of the three constructs or domains of the

**Table 2.** Questionnaire item analysis (n=100)

Construct	Item	Responses Percentage (%)			M	SD		
		Strongly Agree + Agree	Not Sure	Strongly Disagree + Disagree				
Factors	Level of difficulty	1. I can speak English easily.	11	4	85	2.06	.930	
		2. When I speak, I speak directly without much thinking of L1.	7	1	92	1.75	.757	
		3. I can switch from my native language to L2 naturally.	3	0	97	1.78	.690	
		4. Speaking English correctly is a difficult task for me.	83	10	7	4.33	1.015	
		5. When I speak, I hesitate a lot.	70	7	23	3.89	1.442	
		6. Fluent English pronunciation is difficult for me.	68	0	32	3.68	1.370	
	Process	7. I find it a must to improve my English pronunciation.	100	0	0	4.47	.501	
		8. On saying something in English, I always phrase it in Arabic; then I translate it into English.	90	3	7	4.46	.892	
		Practices	9. Vocabulary spelling confuses me when I speak.	77	2	21	3.83	1.215
			10. My teacher mostly uses Arabic while explaining English lessons.	63	0	37	3.40	1.325
			11. My teacher mostly uses English while explaining English lessons.	35	2	63	2.71	1.327
			12. I speak a lot of English during classes.	42	0	58	2.94	1.309
			13. I do not speak enough in English during classes.	55	3	42	3.28	1.334



**Figure 1.** Average of the Three Domains

questionnaire – level of difficulty, processing, and classroom practices. First, the response of “Not sure” was considered as a neutral mid-point. Second, the average for the positive responses of “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” was calculated separately from that of the negative responses of “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree”. Then, the average was calculated for the obtained percentage of the questionnaire items 1, 2 and 3 as being English pronunciation an easy task (=7%); whereas the average percentage for items 4, 5 and 6 as being a difficult task was (73.7%); showing that most learners face considerable difficulty in pronouncing English. However, all participants (100%) admitted the need to improve their pronunciation skills as demonstrated by the green column in the above graph.

For the second domain of the internal processing of the pronunciation task, responses to items 8 and 9 showed that (83.5%) of respondents have obstacles hindering processing the target task, and hence lowering their performance. Thirdly, the role of classroom instruction and practices was investigated in which the average of the positive items 11 and 12 was (38.5%); whereas (59%) saw that classroom practices were insufficient as reflected in their responses to the items 10 and 13.

Finally, driven by the last research question concerning the pronunciation problems encountered by the target population, semi-structured interviews were carried out with five students selected from the questionnaire respondents based on their scores in English. During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to say some words, a few phrases, and short sentences in English in order to assess their pronunciation. Then, discussions were motivated upon the issue of pronouncing English, and learners’ suggestions regarding overcoming obstacles that hinder the development of students’ English pronunciation English. Most issues reported by respondents fell into three main categories. First, they found difficulty in pronouncing specific sounds such as syllabic sounds as in (bottom, people, unbelievable), /z/ as in (pleasure), and /ŋ/ as in (sing, singer). Secondly, the participants’ responses revealed high confusion in terms of sufficing appropriate stress and intonation, especially when they are placed on first syllables; e.g., ‘comment (n). Lastly, some suprasegmental features such as linking speech together without inverting unnatural sounds between words were deemed a challenge for EFL speakers based on the obtained data. Most participants added an unnatural sound between words; for example, in (can’t swim, watch this please). These data addressed the third question which is: ‘What are the pronunciation problems encountered by second-year secondary Arab students?’

## DISCUSSION

Based on the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews data, the main findings of the study revealed that most second grade of high school students have major problems in proper pronunciation of English; these findings are supported by a strong evidence found in literature (Alfallaj, 2013; Alshumaimeri, 2003; Elyas & Gri-gri, 2014; Fareh, 2010; Rabab’ah, 2003). However, all

participants were statistically (100%) found realising the importance of correct and fluent pronunciation and their need to enhance these speaking skills. Some sounds and stress locating were found difficult for Arab learners and need more practice to master; this interpretation come in line with the findings concluded by Barros (2003) and Ahmad (2011). For speech connection, it was of considerable difficulty as it requires a high degree of accuracy and code-switching from Arabic as the native language to English as the target language.

As revealed by the gleaned data, the main causes for such difficulties faced by EFL learners in speaking English were mainly related to some factors worsening the task for them. Students could not find role models to copy. Most teachers’ practices revealed paying the least attention to helping students master pronunciation. The majority of participants expressed that there is a wide gap between sounds in Arabic as their native language and English as the target foreign language. Most of the difficulties encountered were due to mother tongue interference, and silent letters in English (Alarabi, 2014; Abahussain, 2016; Fareh, 2010; Hamad, 2013).

In spite of all exerted efforts done by the Saudi Ministry of Education to help learners master communicative skills, the problem of lacking speaking and pronunciation skills still exists as the present study results showed. Most obstacles in the way to achieving the ministry target as encountered by participants were a result of the nature of English, the lack of a supportive learning environment, the syllabi, teaching pedagogy, and the lack of pronunciation practices and exercises. These findings related to the uncovered factors come in agreement with the discussions held by Alfallaj (2013), Al-Seghyer (2014) and Al-Sobhi and Preece (2018). However, learners expressed a positive motivation to struggle against these factors to master pronouncing correctly. Participants expressed their appreciation if teachers speak mostly in English and give more space for students to speak as much as possible.

## CONCLUSION

EFL learners are confronted with a lot of problems that negatively affect mastering English skills (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017). Among those obstacles is the task of correct and fluent pronunciation. Despite being important in conveying the correct message in speaking, drilling on pronunciation and other speaking skills seems to be neglected in most EFL contexts and actual assessment rubrics (Ahmad, 2011; Al Hosni, 2014; Hamad, 2013; Ma, 2015; Morley, 1991; Rabab’ah, 2003). To help overcome the investigated pronunciation difficulties, studying phonics in a simple way is recommended from early education stages. It is highly recommended to design remedial activities of pronunciation; live practice of English and exercises of confusing words are to be given on phonics throughout high school syllabi. Much more practice and activities are required to help overcome pronunciation difficulties (Rabab’ah, 2005; Richards, 2006), varying the techniques and approaches employed in teaching English as a foreign Language

(TEFL) as recommended by the British Council (2009). In addition, listening to native speakers during English programmes on TV and the radio helps improve the listening skill and results in improving the proper pronunciation. One more trick that might work as confirmed by the basic methodology employed by the Kassel researchers involves recording students performing oral tasks such as telling a story in the target language (Ellis, 2012), and feedback discussions over the recordings are to be held accordingly. Further research is recommended to find more innovative and practical solutions to speaking problems in EFL contexts; one suggested source is to make use of the Internet in doing so.

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