



Investigating Difficulties that EFL Students Face in English Pronunciation in Secondary Schools in Ghat-Libya

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Abstract:

The current study was designed to investigate the pronunciation issues encountered by foreign language learners in Ghat, south-west Libya. The findings have important implications for understanding students' English pronunciation problems. This study employs qualitative research methods to acquire an extensive understanding of a topic. This study used two data collection tools: observation and a pronunciation test. During the observation, the initial ideas and perceptions were documented, and the verbal data was collected for further analysis. The data were gathered from three secondary schools in Ghat that teach English as a foreign language in approximately four lessons per week. The test consisted of ten sentences and was administered to five secondary school students. According to the study, the most common pronunciation challenges among EFL students are a) vowel sound confusion, b) consonant sound confusion, and c) inflectional morpheme errors. Students commonly use the sound /ɪ/ for front vowels and the sound /ɒ/ for back-rounded vowels and fail to pronounce central vowels due to problems in predicting pronunciation. Additionally, the survey found that the most prevalent consonant issues are p, f, v, ð, θ, z, ʃ, and ʒ. Finally, students frequently pronounce /s/ at the end of regular plural nouns; insert /t/ before /s/ or /z/ in plural nouns, and before /d/ in past verbs, regardless of the preceding phonemes. Consequently, the researchers concluded that EFL students in Ghat secondary schools frequently pronounce the alphabet letter as written, failing to predict its pronunciation when the letter has numerous pronunciations.

Keywords:

English pronunciation, EFL learners, vowel sounds, consonant sounds, inflectional morphemes.

Introduction:

A considerable amount of literature has been published on learning ESL and EFL pronunciation. Pronunciation is crucial in spoken language for clarity of communication, confidence, credibility, and listening comprehension as well. That is to say, clear pronunciation boosts confidence and increases participation in conversations. Good pronunciation also enhances credibility and professional sound, making it easier to understand others' pronunciation.

However, during learners' educational journeys, they frequently confront a variety of issues with English pronunciation. Thus, recent research has shown an increased interest in such issues. They have focused on the common pronunciation problems of learners of English. Understanding learners' pronunciation

problems or challenges is crucial for effective language teaching.

For example, it allows for tailored instruction, focusing on common students' faults, and increasing students' confidence. Addressing these difficulties helps to address individual challenges, resulting in a more efficient learning environment. Yet, learners' backgrounds can have a considerable impact on the types of pronunciation problems they encounter while learning English. Knowing these types is beneficial for a teacher in assisting their students' challenges by tailoring instruction, as discussed before. Although extensive research has been carried out on EFL students' pronunciation problems, no single study showing the common pronunciation problems among students in Libya exists or has been

published so far. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore the learners' pronunciation difficulties at the secondary school level in Ghat, a city in the south-west of Libya. The research data in this paper is drawn from two resources: observation during the English class, in particular, reading-aloud activity sessions, and a pronunciation test. To explore the students' pronunciation problems, the audio data from the current investigation was later transcribed for analysis. The analysis in this study used grounded Theory, which is an inductive technique that focuses on theory creation rather than testing. The findings of this study should make an important contribution to the field of second or foreign language learning and education. Yet, the reader should bear in mind that the study is based on a qualitative study, and no percentage of the students' errors was presented throughout the study.

The first section of this paper will identify some essential terms in phonetics that are used in this study. Additionally, it presents some difficulties faced by EFL learners with pronunciation in literature. Then, the second section is concerned with the methodology used for this study. The next section analyzes and discusses the results of the observation and a pronunciation test. Finally, it introduces the conclusion.

Literature Review:

Learning the English language implies mastering a range of various skills and abilities that together cater to learning the language to a certain level of proficiency. One of these skills is pronunciation. Pronunciation is recognized as a fundamental ability that students should acquire, primarily because it can affect accuracy and comprehension. Seidlhofer (2001:56) defined pronunciation as "the production and perception of the significant sounds of a particular language in order to achieve meaning in contexts of language use." This definition is close to those of Yates and Zielinski (2009), who define pronunciation as the sounds we make to convey meaning when speaking. It includes the segments and suprasegmental features. Segmental features include all consonant and vowel phonemes. They refer to discrete components that can be detected physically or auditorily in the flow of speech in any language, while supra-segmental features of speech are those that encompass more than one

sound in an utterance, and they include features such as tone, juncture, length, intonation, and stress (Sharma, 2021).

Gelvanovsky (2002) references the fact the fact that pronunciation is crucial in communication as it influences the listener's understanding. Poorly pronounced segments and suprasegments can hinder effective communication, even if grammar and vocabulary are correct. Talkpal (2024) states that if we cannot hear the sounds of a language correctly, we may have difficulty understanding what others are saying. This might make it harder to engage in discussions and slow our language learning progress. Besides, pronunciation can influence our capacity to be understood by others. If we have a thick accent or mispronounce words, native speakers may have difficulty understanding us. This can be frustrating for both parties and impede our capacity to form relationships with native speakers.

Gelvanovsky (2002) adds that apart from having a key function in attaining efficient communication, pronunciation has an essential social value, being associated with prestige, similar to other values such as intelligence, professional competence, persuasive power, diligence, and social privilege that are all considered indispensable for socioeconomic success.

Yet, learning English as FL or SL often leads to pronunciation issues. According to Faisal (2023), in many languages, the letters of the alphabet are pronounced the same way they are written. However, English has several exceptions to this norm. For instance, words are commonly spelled differently than they are pronounced. In English, each sound is represented by many letters or sequences. A single letter might represent multiple sounds or none at all. Another problem stated by Faisal (2023) is that foreign English learners have communication challenges due to inflectional morphemes, including regular plural nouns, third person singular, possessive -'s, and regular past tense morphemes, which vary with word endings. All of which lead foreign English learners and speakers to produce incorrect pronunciation of words and morphemes, which in turn causes poor communication with native speakers of the English language (Faisal, 2023).

There are many studies that attempt to explore such pronunciation difficulties made by learners of English as FL or SL. An example of these studies is the one conducted by Ha (2005) to identify the most common pronunciation difficulties among Vietnamese English learners. The learners were English department students who had completed four years of English. The data was collected through an oral test. This is the final oral test for students. During the test, each student was asked to provide a five-minute presentation on a certain topic. While listening to the students' speeches, the researcher took note of any faults in pronunciation. The study identified three major categories of mistakes. a) The most frequent error was sound omission, with ending sounds being the most frequently omitted. Vietnamese learners struggle to pronounce some sounds, such as /z/, /dʒ/, and /tʃ/, especially at the end of words. Additionally, many learners struggle with pronouncing the sound /z/, sometimes ending up with /s/ due to overpronunciation. b) The second form of error involves auditory misunderstanding. The most common errors are /t/, /tr/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/, /dʒ/, /s/, and /θ/. c) Next, 'sound redundancy errors occur when individuals overpronounce finishing consonants, adding /s/ or /z/ at the end or in the middle of words.

Moreover, Barros (2003) investigated the problems Arabic speakers may have while pronouncing English consonants. All of the participants are adults: six Arabic native speakers, five men and one female, arrived in the United States after puberty and have been here for at least four years. Three participants are graduate students at West Virginia University, with two from Egypt and one from Saudi Arabia. The remaining three Kuwaiti undergraduates attend the same university. The study found that Arabic speakers struggled to pronounce eight English consonants, including /ŋ/, /l/, /d/, /r/, /p/, /v/, /dʒ/, and /ð/. The latter two were exclusively experienced by Egyptian participants. The study found that problems for Arabic speakers vary by the learner's country of origin.

Furthermore, the Hassan (2014) study sought to evaluate the difficulties in English pronunciation encountered by students whose first language is Sudanese spoken Arabic. In other words, identify the challenging sounds and the underlying causes. Then find some strategies to

help Sudanese English students improve their pronunciation. The study included fifty students from the University of Sudan of Science and Technology (SUST) and thirty university lecturers of English from the same university. The data were collected using observation, recordings, and a structured questionnaire. The data gathered were examined statistically and descriptively. The study found that Sudanese English students with Sudanese Spoken Arabic had difficulty pronouncing English consonants such as /z/, /s/, /ð/, /θ/, /b/, /p/, /ʃ/, and /tʃ/, and vowels with multiple pronunciation options.

A recent study conducted by Plailek and Essien (2021) aimed to identify the elements influencing EFL students' English pronunciation and address their issues. The study involved 208 students from Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University's Faculty of Education in Thailand who speak English as a foreign language. Data gathering tools included an English pronunciation test, a questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview. The data was analyzed using percentages, means, standard deviations, and content analysis. The study found that learners struggle with English phonemes at the initial syllable position, such as /ð/, /θ/, /dʒ/, /ʒ/, /v/, and /z/, as well as /ð/, /θ/, /v/, /f/, /s/, and /l/ at the final syllable position.

Another more recent study was by Lefiandi (2023) in Indonesia. This study examines students' difficulty in pronouncing English consonant sounds. The goal is to discover and understand the variables causing incorrect pronunciation of consonant sounds among students. A descriptive-qualitative approach was used to recruit five English department students from the Aceh Besar region for this study. Data collection included a vocabulary exam and in-depth interviews. The study found that students struggle to pronounce some consonants, including [b], [d], [g], [v], [ʒ], [z], and [ʃ].

The diversity of the studies' results reviewed in this section proves that pronunciation problems vary by learners' origin and where they are from. This is also another motive for the researchers to explore difficulties faced by foreign learners of English in their country.

Research Methodology:

This study follows qualitative research paradigms to gain a comprehensive understanding

of a subject. Two data collection tools were used in this study: observation and pronunciation test.

The first tool used in this research is observation. Observation is "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p. 79, as cited in Kawulich, 2005, p. 1). Observation is the process of gathering data without making inquiries. The current study applied direct observation, in which the students were observed in the classroom. This strategy enables the researcher to collect data on the issue and provides information about when, where, how frequently, and how long behavior occurs (IRISCENTER, 2024). The observation took place in three secondary schools in Ghat: Ghat Secondary School in Ghat Center, Alfarouk Secondary School in Albarket, and Umar Almuhtar in Awenat. There were about 25 students in each class, and their ages ranged from 15 to 17 years old. The students study English as a foreign language in about four classes a week. During carrying out the observation, the initial thoughts and perceptions were written down. In addition to direct observation and note-taking, the research was supported by speech data collection. Understandably, this tool has become increasingly popular in current research in general. Speech data collection is the practice of recording speech for future use, such as in research. This tool is argued to help academics gain a better understanding of real-world speech exchanges and human language ability. In the current study, this technique was employed to assist in capturing the speech during the classroom observation so that the data can be richer with solid evidence, which will facilitate analyzing and assessing the participants' pronunciation competency. To reach this aim, the audio data of the current study was transcribed later, as pronounced by students, and compared to the phonetic transcription in the Cambridge Advanced Learned Dictionary.

The analysis of the study generally followed the Grounded Theory; its inductive approach focuses on theory construction rather than testing (Turner and Astin, 2021). To reach a conclusion about the most common pronunciation problems students face at this level, an analysis was undertaken across several categories of consonant and vowel sounds and other important pronunciation issues. Mispronounced sounds were identified as problematic sounds.

The second research tool in the current study is the pronunciation test. It contained ten sentences, which were administered to five secondary school students who were chosen randomly from the targeted classes. The test straightens the observation results and makes the observation more valid. Again, the students' speech was recorded and analyzed, as in the previous tool, to get information about their English pronunciation faults on consonant and vowel sounds and other pronunciation issues.

Data Analysis and Discussion:

The data presented throughout this chapter came from both an observation tool and a test tool. The data in this study will be analyzed based on place and manner of articulation:

1) Vowel confusion:

Vowels are often produced with a convex tongue in the mouth, and they are classified as front, back, or central based on which part of the tongue is raised highest in the mouth. Additionally, vowels are classified according to the height of the tongue and jaw. When the tongue is raised closer to the roof of the mouth, the vowel is considered to be close or high; when the tongue is lowered and the jaw is as open as possible, the vowel is called open or low. Midvowels are those that are uttered somewhere in the middle of two extreme heights (Revel-Rogerson, P., 2013).

1.1 Front Vowels: /i:/ /ɪ/ /e/ /æ/

Table (1) Vowel confusion in front vowel sounds

The phonetic symbols	The Raising of the Tongue	the duration of the sound	Problematic vowel	Phonetic representation of students' mispronounced speech
i:	High/Close	long	ea/ee (in the middle of the word) i (in the beginning of the word)	/ɪ/
ɪ	High/Close	short	i (in the middle of the word)	/e/ /aɪ/
e	Mid	short	e (in the beginning and middle of the word)	/ɪ/

æ	Low/Open	short	A (in the middle of the word)	/ɪ/
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The table clearly indicates the students' preference for using /ɪ/ among other front vowels. In the words with the alphabet letters combination ea and ee, which make /i:/ sound, some students mispronounced them by using the /ɪ/ sound in the words *beach, seat, season, speak reasons, means, and eighteen*. However, with the word *sea*, the /i:/ sound was pronounced /eə/ by one of the students; the error might be made as both sounds are produced from these compound letters. The /æ/ sound was also replaced with /ɪ/ in the background and *man*. The /e/ sound in *event, level, direct, dress, and empty* was pronounced /ɪ/ similar to other front vowels in preferring the /ɪ/. Yet, when the students mispronounced the /ɪ/ sound in words such as *his, him, and thing*, the /e/ sound was used. And the sound /ɪ/ in *live* (v) and *river* was mispronounced by some students by using the /aɪ/ sound instead; conversely, /aɪ/ in *Nile* and *sign* was produced /ɪ/ instead. But among all these confusions, the sound /ɪ/ was mostly used in place of other front vowels when they came at the beginning or middle of the word.

1.2 Central Vowels: /ʌ/ /ə/ /ɜ:/

Table 2: Vowel confusion in central vowel sounds

The phonetic symbols	The Raising of the Tongue	of the duration of the sound	Problematic vowel	Phonetic representation of students' mispronounced speech
ɜ:	Mid	long	o (in the middle position of the word)	/ɔ:/
/ə/	Mid	short	e, u, o (in the middle position of the word)	/ɪ/
				/ɒ/
/ʌ/	Mid	short	u, o, oo (in the middle position of the word)	/ju:/
				/ʊ/
				/u:/

During the pronunciation exam, all students used /ɔ:/ rather than /ɜ:/ in the word *working*. It is indicated that some common words with the /ɜ:/ sound are spelled with the letter *o*, and some students may notice this and think it requires a rounded vowel like [or]. (Lean English Pronunciation, 2022).

In terms of the /ʌ/ sound, it is clear that students have some difficulties predicting when to pronounce the letter /ʌ/. This letter is considered to be difficult for most second-language English learners, as many words pronounced with /ʌ/ have the same spelling as ones pronounced with other, rounded vowel sounds (Pronunciation Studio, 2024). The following are examples of words mispronounced by students matched to other words that have the same sounds as the students' mispronunciation:

Table 3: Examples of words mispronounced by students matched to other words that have the same sounds as the students' mispronunciation

Examples of words with /ʌ/ mispronounced by students		Examples of words having the same sounds mispronounced by students		
Become, country, or ceremony	/brɪ'kɒm/	ɒ	comedy	'kɒm.ə.di/
	/'kɒn.tri/			
	/'ser.i.mə.ni/			
Such but	/sɒtʃ/	ʊ	Push	/pʊʃ/
	/bʊt/			
blood	/blu:d/	u:	Boom	/bu:m/
puzzled	/'pju:z.lɪd/	ju:	Mute	/mju:t/

Similarly to the /ʌ/ sound, the /ə/ sound can be spelled in a variety of ways, which may explain why students continue to make errors when pronouncing words with this sound, as they may not know when they use it. In the current study, errors were made probably because the students pronouncing the letter as it is written, as the letter *e* is pronounced /ɪ/ in the words *level, favorite, number, and open*, the letter *u* was pronounced /ʊ/ in *careful*, and the letter *o* was pronounced /ɒ/ in *reason, love, and today* instead of /ə/.

1.3 Back Vowels: /u:/ /ʊ/ /ɔ:/ /ɒ / a:/

Table 4: Vowel confusion in back vowel sounds

The phonetic symbols	The Raising of the Tongue	The duration of the sound	Problematic vowel	Phonetic representation of students' mispronounced speech
/u:/	High/close	long	ʊ (in the middle position of the word)	ɒ
/ʊ/	High/close	short	ʊ (in the middle position of the word)	/ɒ/
/ɔ:/	Mid	long	a, o (in the middle position of the word)	/ɒ/
/ɒ/	Mid	short	/	/
/a:/	Low/open	long	a (in the middle position of the word)	/æ/

The table clearly shows the students' tendency to pronounce /ɒ/ in place of other back-rounded vowels. The long /u:/ was replaced with /ɒ/ in cool and food., and the /ʊ/ sound was replaced with the /ɒ/ in the word (look). Besides, the /ɔ:/ sound **in normally, for example, football, tall, and calling,** was replaced with /ɒ/; this mispronunciation is caused by the length of the vowel, with /ɔ:/ being longer, tighter, and more rounded.

It was also noted that one student mispronounced the word **law** as /ləʊ/.

/ɔ:/ and /əʊ/ frequently pose challenges for students and generate difficulty when learning how to pronounce pairings of words such as **low** and **law**. The two words have no link to each other (OLA, 2024). The difference in pronunciation is only one vowel sound, known as minimal pairs. **Law** has the /ɔ:/ sound, while **Low** uses the /əʊ/ sound (as in go and no) (OLA, 2024).

The word **car**, on the other hand, was pronounced /kær/ by students in the pronunciation test. The /a:/ sound seems to introduce challenges

to the speaker when he pronounces it. The /a:/ sound is a British sound—typical sound in the Received Pronunciation Accent. Yet, it might be replaced with /æ/ by native speakers from different parts of the UK (ETJ English, 2018). Additionally, this sound does not really exist in American English and is replaced with the /æ/ sound too (British English Pronunciation, 2020). Thus, students' pronunciation of the word **car** as /kær/ is acceptable here.

1.4 Diphthongs:

“Diphthongs have similar length to long vowels. They consist of a glide from one vowel to the position of another (Revel-Rogerson, P., 2013, p. 79)”. They are [eɪ], [ɔɪ], [aɪ], [eə], [ɪə], [ʊə], [əʊ], and [aʊ].

Table 5: Vowel confusion in diphthongs

Phonetic symbol	eɪ	ɔɪ	aɪ	e	ɪ	ʊ	əʊ	a
Problematic vowel	a (in the middle position of the word)		i (in the middle position of the word)				ʊ (in the middle position of the word)	
Phonetic representation of students' mispronounced speech	aɪ e ɪ æ		ɪ i				u:	

In terms of the diphthongs, /aɪ/ among the diphthongs was the most mispronounced vowel. Words with letter **i** in *sign, vibrant, direct, driving, right,* and *organize* that produce the /aɪ/ sound were mispronounced when the /ɪ/ sound substituted for the /aɪ/ sound. The words with **y** at the end of *why, by, and identify* are mispronounced again by pronouncing /i/ instead of /aɪ/. The /eɪ/ sound is another sound with frequent errors in pronunciation. This sound

was replaced with front short vowels /ɪ/ as in *shaking*, *maintaining*, and *wake*, /e/ as in *races*, /æ/ as in *safely*, and /aɪ/ as in *favorite*. The word *road* was pronounced *rude* by one student in the reading-aloud activity, which indicates the students' confusion in distinguishing between minimal pairs *road* and *rude* with /əʊ/ and /u:/ sounds.

2) Consonant Confusion:

The analysis of students' mispronunciations is according to the place of articulation:

2.1 Bilabial /p/ /b/ /m/ /w/:

Table 6: Consonant confusion in Bilabial Sounds

The phonetic symbols	Manner of Articulation	Problematic consonant	Phonetic representation of students' mispronounced speech
p	Plosive	P (in any position of the word)	/b/
b	plosive	/	/
m	nasal	/	/
w	approximate	w (in the beginning position of the word one)	/v/

Among the bilabial sounds, /p/ was constantly mispronounced. Students made an evident inaccuracy in pronouncing the sound /p/ in most, if not all, words with the /p/ sound. They all pronounced the sound /b/ instead of /p/ in words such as play, speak, place, puzzle, April, empty, opened, dropped, happened, people, computer, speed, important, police, and spending. This section's results are identical to those obtained by Adila and Refnaldi (2019). Their study was conducted in Bukittinggi with first-grade students from Bukittinggi Senior High School. The data was acquired through a speaking test. None of the students made any mistakes with the /b/ and /m/ sounds, whereas /p/ was replaced with the /b/ sound. In terms of the current study, this outcome was expected given that the participants are Arabic and are known to have difficulties pronouncing this sound. The study conducted by Ababneh, I. (2018), aiming to investigate English pronunciation errors made by Saudi students, proved the difficulty in

pronouncing the /p/ sound. He states that the /p/ sound is voiceless and created by the lips. The speaker should push air out of the mouth. Arabs often confuse the voiceless stop consonant /p/ with the voiced stop /b/ sound, which is available in Arabic. They adopt this repair approach when necessary. Jathmi and Alqahtani (2021) also state that the [P] sound is distinct from other sounds because it is not a consonant in the Arabic alphabet and is generated with other comparable sounds from the same vocal tract.

In addition, many students pronounce *one* as /vɒn/ when reading. This confusion occurs because other nouns beginning with [on] are frequently pronounced with the vowel sound [o]. This issue was well explained by Rudling (2023). She clarifies that *one* and *once* are problem words because they are pronounced with a /w/, whereas the other words with the letter pattern 'on' are not. She adds that [on] in these words was initially pronounced the same as the others, and the change occurred when the /w/ sound was added to them, which appeared in popular speech sometime between 1150 and 1476 (Middle English period) and was first recorded in 1400. Then, in the seventeenth century, the /w/ in one and once became standard.

2.2 Labio-dental: /f/ /v/

Table 7: Consonant confusion in Labio-Dental Sounds

The phonetic symbols	Manner of Articulation	Problematic consonant	Phonetic representation of students' mispronounced speech
f	Fricatives	f (in the final position of the word)	/v/
v	Fricatives	v (in the final position of the word)	f

This finding reveals that EFL students have trouble producing these two sounds. This was demonstrated by some research, such as one done by Plailek, T., and Essien, A. (2021), which attempted to explore EFL students' English pronunciation problems at a Thai institution. The study discovered that /v/ and /f/ sounds are among the English phonemes that cause students problems when they are in the final syllable position. The study did not elucidate how these sounds were mispronounced because it was a

quantitative examination of pronunciation errors. The current study clearly demonstrates in examples that /f/ can be substituted for /v/ and vice versa when inserted at the end of a word. The current study revealed that many students pronounced the word f/vf/ and some students pronounced five /faiv/. Yet, it is generally argued that pronouncing the word /vɸf/, which sounds off, is an error frequently made by foreign English speakers of English (Tarle, J., 2021).

2.3 Dentals /θ/ /ð/

Table 8: Consonant confusion in dental sounds

The phonetic symbols	Manner of Articulation	Problematic consonant	Phonetic representation of students' mispronounced speech
/θ/	Fricatives	Th (in any position of the word)	/t/
/ð/	Fricatives	Th (in any position of the word)	/d/

The /ð/ sound in words like "that," "then," "with," and "the" was frequently pronounced /d/ instead. And the sound /θ/ in words such as thing, something, birthday, three, and think was substituted with /t/. Although we do have the /ð/ and /θ/ sounds in Arabic, many students mispronounce these two sounds with /d/ and /t/, respectively. This problem can be because of students' mother tongue influences, as Arabic speakers tend to pronounce some Arabic alphabet according to their Arabic language variety and not to the classic Arabic *alfushaa*. The letters ذال and ثاء with the phonetic descriptions /ð/ and /θ/ are among the letters that are not pronounced in the Libyan colloquial language. The letter ذال /ð/ is replaced with دال /d/, as in the words ذرة, ذراع with / ð/ sound, are commonly pronounced in Libya ذرة, ذراع with /d/ sound instead; the ثاء /θ/ is replaced with the letter تاء /t/ as in words ثوم, ثعلب with / θ / sound are commonly pronounced in Libya as توم, ثعلب with /t/ sound. This continually led to the incorrect pronunciation of words with these sounds.

2.4 Alveolar: [t] [d] [n] [s] [z] [l]

Table 9. Consonant confusion in alveolar sounds

The phonetic symbols	Manner of Articulation	Problematic consonant	Phonetic representation of students' mispronounced speech
/t/	Plosive		
/d/	Plosive		
/s/	fricative	C (in any position of the word)	/k/
/z/	fricative	s (in the middle position of the word)	s
/n/	nasal	/	/
/l/	approximate	/	/

Among all alveolar sounds, the alveolar fricatives /s/ and /z/ were occasionally mispronounced. The /z/ sound in *easy, easily, reason, seasons, use, and lose* was replaced with /s/, while the /s/ sound in *dancing, ceremony, accident, and celebration* was produced /k/ by some students, while in converse, it was pronounced /s/ in traffic. It appears that there is confusion in expecting what the letter should be pronounced when the letter has more than one pronunciation as the letters C and S: the letter C with /s/ and /k/ sounds, and the letter S with its common sounds /s/, /z/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/.

2.5 Palatal: [ʃ] [ʒ] [tʃ] [dʒ] [j] [r]

Table 10: Consonant confusion in Palatal Sounds

The phonetic symbols	Manner of Articulation	Problematic consonant	Phonetic representation of students' mispronounced speech
/ʃ/	Plosive	Sh (in the beginning position of the word). Ci (in the middle position of the word). S (in the sugar)	tʃ k s
/ʒ/	Plosive		
/tʃ/	fricative	Ch (in the beginning position of the word)	ʃ
/dʒ/	fricative	G (in any position of the word)	g
/r/	nasal	/	/
/j/	approximate	Y (in the position of the word)	i:

Errors in pronouncing these sounds are common in / ʃ / and /tʃ/. ʃ was pronounced tʃ in

shoes, /k/ in *special*, and *specialist*, and /s/ in *sugar*. Many foreign speakers of English struggle to pronounce the fricative /ʃ/ because of two reasons: the spelling is difficult and may be confusing; thus, even if the spelling is corrected, the speaker might involuntarily mispronounce it (sounds31 American, 2018), while /f/ was substituted by /ʃ/ in words such as *research*, *choose*, and *beach*.

The confusion also occurs in the compound consonant letters that result in the sound /tʃ/, as in *temperature*, when it was pronounced with the suffix -ture /t ər/ instead of /tʃ ə r /.

The letter *g* was pronounced once by a student as /g/ instead of /dʒ/ in *passenger*. The letter *g* can cause some problems for foreign speakers as it has more than one pronunciation: /g/, /dʒ/, -ing /ŋ/, and /ʒ/. When the letter *e* comes after the letter *g*, it can be pronounced with two sounds: /g/ as in *tiger*, and /dʒ/ as in *passenger*. Additionally, some Arabic speakers may mispronounce the sound /dʒ/ of the letter (ج) with /g/ because some Arabic dialects pronounce /g/ as /dʒ/, but in terms of our participants, this reason is not being suggested as both sounds are existing in their accent, and (ج) is pronounced /dʒ/ or /ʒ/.

As importantly, the word *year* was pronounced with /i:/ instead of /j/, which made the word sound like ear /ɪə r /. This seems like a like a common error made by foreign learners. Brunori, R. (2016) claims that many people struggle to pronounce these two words differently. However, /j/ is not identical to /i/ or /ɪ/ because the former is produced in the center of the mouth rather than the front, and the tongue is relatively close to the palate.

2.6 Velars: [k] [g] [ŋ]:

Table 1: Consonant confusion in Velar Sounds

The phonetic symbols	Manner of Articulation	Problematic consonant	Phonetic representation of students' mispronounced speech
/k/	Plosive	/	/
/g/	Plosive	/	/
/ŋ/	nasal	g (in the middle position of the word <i>angry</i>)	dʒ

In contrast to how the letter *g* was pronounced in the last example, it was again mispronounced in the opposite way, in which it was pronounced / dʒ / instead of /g/ in *angry*. This clearly shows students' confusion in expecting the correct sound of a letter that has more than one pronunciation.

2.7 Glottal: [h]

This sound is produced by reducing airflow via the open glottis ([h]) or by entirely stopping the air at the glottis.

Table 12: Consonant confusion in Glottal Sounds

The phonetic symbols	Manner of Articulation	Problematic consonant	Phonetic representation of students' mispronounced speech
/h/	velar	/	/

The present investigation discovered no inconsistencies in this sound among secondary school students.

3) Silent Letter:

During the reading-aloud session, three students mispronounced the word *hour*. They produced the letter *h* in *hour*, which is a silent letter. The letter *H* is one of the letters that might have no sound in certain words. Interestingly, all three students are from the same school. It is unclear whether this error by students from the same school was caused by our general belief that EFL students tend to pronounce the letters of the alphabet exactly as they are written or because they were not corrected by the instructor when they made this error in a class. Regardless of the causes, it is believed that there are no patterns or guidelines for learning the silent letters or when they occur. Knowing which words contain silent letters requires years of skill and familiarity (Language Tool, 2024).

4) Pronunciation Error in Inflectional Morphemes:

Data collected from both a pronunciation test and reading-aloud session activity as well as direct observation indicates the students' pronunciation errors in pronouncing the inflectional morphemes.

4.1 Regular plural nouns, third person singular, possessive-'s morphemes:

The plural ending of a regular noun is determined by the last sound, which is voiced or unvoiced. If the word ends in a voiced consonant, /z/ is added; if it ends in a voiceless sound, /s/ is added. If the ending of the word is with the /s/, /z/, /sh/, or /ch/ sound, the /ɪz/ is added. The following table shows the words with regular plural nouns, including the accurate pronunciation description and students' mispronunciations.

Table 13: Students' mispronunciations of regular plural nouns compared to their accurate pronunciations

The word	The word	Types of inflectional morphemes	Students mispronunciation	Type of error
levels	/ˈlev. ə ls/	Regular plural nouns	/ˈlev. ə lɪs/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /s/
suffers	/ˈsʌf. ə rs /	third-person singular	/ˈsʌf. ə rɪs /	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /s/
Dates	/dets/	Regular plural nouns	/dɛɪtɪs/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /s/
roads	/rəʊds/	Regular plural nouns	/rəʊdɪs/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /s/
accidents	/ˈæk.sɪ.d ə nt/	Regular plural nouns	/ˈæk.sɪ.d ə nɪs/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /s/
passengers	/ˈpæs. ə n.dʒə r z/		/ˈpæs. ə n.dʒə rs /	Replacing the /s/ instead of /z/ after voiced /r/
injuries	/ˈɪn.dʒ ə r.ɪs/	Regular plural nouns	/ˈɪn.dʒ ə r.ɪs/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /s/+ Replacing the /s/ instead of /z/
belts	/belts/	Regular plural nouns	/beltɪs/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound

				before /s/
computers	/kəmˈpjʊ.tərs/	Regular plural nouns	/kəmˈpjʊ.təɪs/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /s/
drivers	/ˈdraɪ.vərs/	Regular plural nouns	/ˈdraɪ.vəɪs/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /s/
races	/reɪsɪs/	Regular plural nouns	/reɪsɪs/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /s/
concludes	/kənˈkluːdɪz/	Third-person singular	/kənˈkluːdɪz/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /z/
starts	/stɑːtɪz/	Third-person singular	/stɑːtɪz/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /z/

The pronunciation errors in the above table can be divided into two problems. First, some students pronounce regular plural nouns by pronouncing the /s/ sound at the end of the word, even if the preceding phonemes are voiced sounds. Second, the majority of students insert the /ɪ/ sound before the /s/ or /z/ sound in plural nouns, even if the word ends in sounds other than: (s, z, -ge or dge, x, sh, or ch).

4.2. Regular Past Tense Morphemes:

After the consonants /t/ and /d/, the -ed form is pronounced /ɪd/; after all other voiced sounds, the -ed form is pronounced /d/. After all other voiceless sounds, the -ed form is pronounced as /t/. The following table presents the words in past tense, including the accurate pronunciation description and students' mispronunciations.

Table 14: Students' mispronunciations in regular past tense compared to their accurate pronunciations

The word	The word	Students mispronunciations	Type of error
dressed	/drest/	/dresi/	Omitting the inflectional

			morpheme
happened	/hæp.ənd/	hæp.ənɪd	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before the /d/ sound
dropped	/drɒpt/	/drɒpɪd/	inserting the /ɪ/ sound before the /d/ sound
opened	/'əʊ.p ənd/	/'əʊ.p ə nɪd/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before the /d/ sound
looked	/lʊkt/	/lʊkɪd/	Inserting the /ɪ/ sound before the /d/ sound

The table (14) indicates that the problems in pronouncing some regular past tense words are caused by students inserting the /ɪ/ sound before /d/, making the sound /ɪd/ in all words regardless of the voicing case of their preceding phonemes.

Based on the results, students should practice pronouncing inflectional morphemes. As a Libyan teacher, I have noticed that grammar lessons are heavily emphasized in English classes, particularly at the preparatory and secondary school levels from 7th grade and up, with little or no emphasis on practicing pronunciation in what students learn in grammar lessons, particularly in regular plural nouns, third person singular, possessive -s morphemes, and regular past tense.

5) Other problems:

In the reading aloud session activity, students face some difficulties other than those discussed above. These activities can be classified as follows:

5.1 Word Stress:

Some words were wrongly pronounced not because of sound confusion or insertion but because of where the stress was placed. Placing stress on the wrong syllable can lead to mispronounced words and unclear speech. English is a stress-timed language, which means that the meaning of a given utterance is dictated by the proper placement of emphasis in a word (Karjo, 2016). The following table shows some

words that were mispronounced because of this sound.

Table (15): Students’ mispronunciations in word stress compared to their accurate pronunciations

Word	Students’ mispronunciation	The correct pronunciation
military	/mi.'l.i.tri/	/'mil.i.tri/
direct	/'daɪ.rekt/	/daɪ'rekt/
Prevent (v)	/'pri.vent/	/pri'vent/
Historically	/hɪsto'r.i.kli/	/hɪ'stɔr.i.kli/

5.2 Poor word recognition

Many students in the reading-aloud session struggled to read some words because they could not identify or recognize them. They hesitated when encountering an unknown word. Some of them used the method of pronouncing each letter of the alphabet as printed, ignoring silent letters or the correct sound of the phoneme within the word, while others sought help from the teacher when they could not receive it; they just continued the previous strategy. The majority of mispronounced words were new or key words for the lesson; the students are less familiar with them. The following list includes these words as well as the title of the passage from which they are taken.

Health: consciousness, insulin, injection, diabetes.

Military: military, branches, aeroplanes, helicopters, aircraft, technical, specialist,

Ghedames: culture, industries, Tuareg.

Conclusion:

This study intends to investigate the learners' pronunciation challenges at the secondary school level in Ghat, a city in the southwest of Libya. The most obvious findings to emerge from this study are summarized based on three main points. First, the pronunciation difficulties in **vowel sound confusion**. The most

significant students' difficulties in pronouncing vowel sounds are three. First, students often use the /ɪ/ sound instead of other front vowels at the beginning or middle of words, and the /ɒ/ sound instead of other back-rounded vowels. Second, students often failed to pronounce the central vowels; this confusion might be due to difficulties in predicting when to pronounce these sounds as the letters producing them can be pronounced with other sounds too. Finally, the /aɪ/ sound is the most mispronounced among diphthongs with words like vibrant, direct, driving, right, and organize and is substituted with /ɪ/. Second, the pronunciation difficulties in **consonant sound confusion** The students struggled to pronounce the following consonants: First, /p/ in any word position was always replaced with the sound /b/, then /f/ and /v/ in the word's final position. Third, the /ð/ and /θ/ sounds at the beginning of the words were frequently mispronounced as /d/ and /t/. Fourth, the /z/ sound in the middle of words containing the letter S, which is frequently pronounced /s/ instead, Finally, the /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ sounds are due to the unusual English pronunciation of several letters. Third are the pronunciation **difficulties in inflectional morphemes**. Some students make regular plural nouns by pronouncing the /s/ sound at the end of the word, even if the preceding phonemes are voiced sounds. Besides, the majority of students insert the /ɪ/ sound before the /s/ or /z/ sound in regular plural nouns and before the /d/ sound in regular past verbs, regardless of the voicing case of their preceding phonemes.

The researchers draw two major conclusions from their current study. The first is that foreign language learners usually pronounce the letters of the alphabet as they are written. Second, the learners often fail to anticipate how the letter should be pronounced when it has multiple pronunciations, such as the letters C and S. The findings of this investigation complement those of earlier studies, and they have significant implications for understanding common students' difficulties in English pronunciation, which can help our teachers assist their students' challenges by planning and improving their teaching. However, the major limitation of this study is that it uses only a qualitative approach. Further research needs to be carried out to identify the factors contributing to students' difficulties with pronunciation.

Appendix (1)

Pronunciation Test:

1. My favorite number is five.
2. There are four seasons in the year.
3. Some people love playing football.
4. These shoes are made in China.
5. He thinks of his son.
6. The weather is cool today.
7. She eats Indian food.
8. My car is not working.
9. She speaks English well.
10. You are a tall man.

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