An Analysis of Pronunciation Errors of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract
As oral skills are increasingly seen as a high priority, phonology and pronuncia tion teaching are occupying a central position in the teaching and learning of other languages. The present study is an attempt to shed some light on identifying and exploring the diffculties of Iranian EFL learners in phonology and pronunciation. To achieve this goal, 3 male language learners (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) were randomly selected and were required to articulate 3 different types of material. Having analyzed the data, the study revealed that, first, pronouncing /ɪə/ as /eə/, /æ/ as /e/, /ɑ:/ as /ɔ:/, /ʊ/ as /u:/, /aɪ/ as /ɔɪ/, /ɪ/ as /i:/, /əʊ/ as /ɔ:/, /w/ as /v/, /ð/ as /d/ or /z/, /θ/ as /t/ or /s/ and /ŋ/ as /ng/ and mispronouncing /ɒ/, /ʌ/, /ɜ:/, /ə/, /ɔɪ/, /eə/, /r/ and /aʊ/ **are the most frequent errors among Persian-speaking learners. Second, the study indicated that the speed of reading was inappropriate for all the beginning, intermediate, and advanced learners.**
Keywords: **phonology, pronunciation errors, speed of reading**

1. Introduction
It is reasonable to accept the fact that L1 English speakers can recognize the foreign accents of non-L1 English speakers like Chinese, Italian, and Farsi ac- cents, which may affect the intelligibility of certain sounds, but more often it conveys the fact that such speakers are not L1 English speakers. In other words, a foreign accent is the constant occurrence of the phonetic differences from the norms of a language which L1 speakers of that language recognize as unfamiliar to the sound system of their own language. In fact, L2 learners with a foreign ac- cent may be unintelligible in the sense that they are often misunderstood, or they may be intelligible but understanding them requires more effort.

Moreover, being able to speak English includes a number of skills involving vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, and so on. Besides, it can be argued that the most important of such skills is pronunciation. Despite having a good grasp of

vocabulary and the grammatical rules of the English language, speakers would be unintelligible if they have a poor pronunciation. Though pronunciation is an aspect of language difficult to acquire, the

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reality is that in many English language classrooms, teaching pronunciation is granted the least attention.

A major difficulty, however, facing almost L2 learners is the achievement of acceptable pronunciation that enables them to be understood by L1 English speakers. In fact, many of these learners master the elements of language such as syntax, morphology, or even semantics to the level of almost native-like competence but often fail to master phonology. According to Avery and Ehrlich (1992), the nature of a foreign accent is determined, to a large extent, by the learners' L1. In other words, the sound system and the syllable structure of an L1 have some infiuence on the speech or production of an L2. To support this view further, Swan and Smith (1987) suggest that pronunciation errors made by L2 learners are considered not to be just random attempts to produce unfamiliar sounds, but rather refections of their L1 sound system.

Considering the abovementioned statements, therefore, good pronunciation should be one of the first things considered in L2 teaching. One can live without advanced vocabulary by using simple words to say what they want to say. One can live without advanced grammar by using simple grammar structures instead. But there is no such thing as simple pronunciation. Good pronunciation should be one of the first things considered in L2 teaching. Pronunciation is an integrated and integral part of L2 learning because it directly affects L2 learners' communicative competence as well as performance.

Nonetheless, teaching L2 pronunciation is still a peripheral and/or neglected dimension in L2 syllabuses, materials, and classrooms. This study aimed at analyzing and identifying Persian- speaking learners' segmental and suprasegmental errors as far as their fuency and accuracy is concerned.

2. Background to the Study

Farsi, also known as Persian, is a widely spoken member of the Iranian branch of the Indo-European languages and a subfamily of the Indo-Iranian languages. It is the national language of Iran and is also widely spoken in countries like Afghanistan and, in an archaic form, in Tajikistan and the Pamir Mountain region. In

addition, there are other minority groups of native speakers of Farsi in many other places of the world including Europe and North America. It is estimated that there are over 40 million Farsi speakers in the world (www.farsinet.com).

Besides, many languages of the world like English and Farsi are alphabetic in the sense that they represent their vowels and consonants in the form of letters in their orthography. In these languages, words are composed of one or more syllables. According to Windfuhr (1979, p. 529), Farsi is characterized as a syllable- timed language. In other words, the syllables are said to occur at approximately regular intervals of time, and the amount of time it takes to say a sentence depends on the number of syllables in the sentence, not on the number of stressed syllables as in stress-timed languages like English and German. Furthermore, Farsi syllables always take one of these patterns (i.e., CV, CVC, or CVCC).

All in all, Farsi and English, though belonging to the same language family (i.e., Indo-European), are very different in alphabet, sound system, and syllable structure. The Farsi alphabet is based on Arabic, which is a consonantal system and contains 32 letters (23 consonants, 6 vowels, 2 diphthongs, and a total of 29 phonemes; Samareh, 2000, p. 85; Windfuhr, 1979, p. 526), whereas the English alphabet is based on Latin which contains 26 letters (24 consonants, 12 vowels, 8 diphthongs, and a total of 44 phonemes; Sousa, 2005, p. 37).

Fraser (2000a) observes that many learners of English as a foreign language have major difficulties with the English pronunciation even after years of learning the language. Hinofotis and Baily (1981) note that "up to a certain proficiency standard, the fault which most severely impairs the communication process in EFL/ESL learners is pronunciation," not vocabulary or grammar. Davis (1999), for example, reveals that an area of concern and, indeed, one of the top priorities of L2 students after completing elementary English courses is pronunciation. Further, it is important to make a distinction between speaking and pronunciation as it is sometimes wrongly applied interchangeably. Simply put, pronunciation is viewed as a subskill of speaking. Fraser (2000b) explains that being able to speak English includes a number of subskills, of which pronunciation is "by far the most important" (other subskills of speaking include vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics). She argues that "with good pronunciation, a speaker is intelligible despite other errors; with poor pronunciation, a speaker can be very difficult to understand, despite accuracy in other areas." Despite this, the teaching of pronunciation remains largely neglected in the field of English language teaching. In discussing the importance of pronunciation, Murphy (1991) describes them as vital in providing the much needed learning experiences to develop accurate control over the sound system within a language.

Though pronunciation activities were stressed in some decades, they took a back seat in others depending on the teaching method that was popular during that particular time. In the grammar-translation method of the past, pronunciation was almost irrelevant and, therefore, seldom taught. Then, in the 1950s and 1960s, pronunciation took the center stage with the introduction of the audio-lingual method—a method that emphasized the behavioristic drilling of sound contrasts and word pairs and the articulation of individual sounds. However, the drawback to this method was the failure to recognize the need to focus on "rhythm and into- nation, the construction of useful sentences, or the practice of realistic conversations." Instead, L2 learners spent hours repeating sounds and sound combinations in the language laboratory. With the development of the communicative method in the 1970s, pronunciation was downplayed to disassociate itself with any link to the drilling practices of the audio-lingual method. As a result, there appeared to be no chance for the teaching of pronunciation within the communicative method. As the communicative method grew popular, little focus was given to training teachers in the finer points of teaching pronunciation. Fraser (2000a) notes that many teachers today struggle with teaching pronunciation and then concludes that their training gave them an insuffcient basis to work from. With the emergence of more holistic, communicative methods and approaches to L2 teaching today, calls are being made for pronunciation to be addressed within the context of real communication. In this respect, Morley (1991) argues that L2 learners can expect to master the pronunciation of English if pronunciation lessons are made an integral part of the oral communication class.

Pronunciation teaching is no longer simply a question of teaching the sound system of an L2 in its segmental aspects. Isolated sounds and their functions as distinctive features in an L2 are an inescapable phenomenon in L2 learning naturally, but we can no longer be satisfied that the study of segmental features leads to an adequate degree of phonological control in the new language. In terms of classroom practice, work on single sounds and their allophonic variants has a purpose in remedial teaching and in an understanding of phono-morphological processes at word and utterance boundaries. With regard to segmental and supraseg mental features, Florez (1998) defines segmental features as

"the basic inventory of distinctive sounds and the way that they combine to form a spoken language." She notes that pronunciation instruction has often concentrated on the mastery of segmental features through discrimination and production of L2 sounds via drills. Suprasegmental features, on the other hand, "transcend the level of individual sound production, extend across segmentals and are often produced unconsciously by native speakers" (Florez, 1998). Hall (1997) contends that one cannot deny the importance of phonemic discrimination but goes on to cite several researchers who contend that suprasegmental features like stress, rhythm, and intonation are, if anything, more important than segmental features. Wong (1987) reminds us that the most relevant features of pronunciation—stress, rhythm, and intonation—play a greater role in English communication than the individual sounds themselves. Supraseg mental features include the following: stress: a combination of length, loudness, and pitch applied to syllables in a word; rhythm: the regular patterned beat of stressed and unstressed syllables and pauses; adjustments in connected speech: modifcations of sounds within and between words in streams of speech; prominence: speaker's act of highlighting words to emphasize meaning or intent; and intonation: the rising and falling of voice pitch across phrases and sentences. McCarthy (1991) observes that pronunciation teaching in the past has drawn on the works of linguists who have been able "to segment the sounds of language into discrete items called phonemes" which, when used in constructing words, "produce meaningful contrasts with other words." Fraser (2000b) describes it as "unfortunate" when segmental and suprasegmental features of pronunciation are separated and cautions that it is not the way to go when taking a communicative approach to teaching pronunciation. Hall (1997) cites a study by Evans et al. (1993) in which Japanese learners benefited from supraseg mental practice through "marking texts for thought groups, shifting emphasis in sentences, and changing the moods of scripts by exploring different intonational patterns." Lam- bacher (1999) adds to this point and submits that with communicative ability (and not native-like pronunciation) as the main goal of learning, "the prevailing view is that improvement in the prosodic features has a closer correlation with improved intelligibility of L2 learners."

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Three male participants from different levels of language profciency (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) were randomly selected from Sadi Language Insti- tute through a survey using convenient sampling. They were all adults and in- formed of the purpose of the study. They were required to articulate some selected materials elaborated on in the following sections.

3.2. Materials

The materials consisted of three lists (some de-contextualized words, some phras- es, and a couple of sentences), and three reading passages taken from authentic sources both from different levels of profciency and appropriate to those of the participants. These lists were chosen in a way that they revealed the participants' segmental, stress pattern, and intonation errors.

3.3. Procedure

The study included four phases, all of which recorded for further analysis. In Phase 1, the participants were interviewed and asked to introduce themselves. It was almost a free task for the participants, and they were allowed to talk about anything regarding their personal information. In Phase 2, a passage with appro- priate level of diffculty was given to the participants to be read aloud. In Phase they were given a few minutes to look at the passage and then asked to give a summary. And in Phase 4, a list of de-contextualized words as long as phrases and sentences was given to the participants to be read aloud.

Table 1. *Common English Pronunciation Errors*

Fix Problem	English Sound	Example	Common Error	Example
Tongue high and front. Move to center.	/ɪə/	beer	/eə/	bear
Move tongue to a lower front position.	/æ/	man	/e/	men
Tongue more central and mouth open.	/ɑ:/	far	/ɔ:/	four
Keep mouth round and tongue back.	/ɒ/	not	/u:/	fool
Back of tongue high. Lips rounded but relaxed. Short.	/ʊ/	full		
Tongue low central. Lips relaxed.	/ʌ/	cup		
Fix tongue in central position. Long.	/ɜ:/	bird		
Weak endings: e.g., London, England	/ə/	the		
Start with tongue low front.	/aɪ/	buy	/ɔɪ/	boy
Start with tongue low and back.	/ɔɪ/	boy		
Relax the mouth and keep sound short.	/ɪ/	sit	/i:/	seat
Tongue central. Then tightly round lips.	/əʊ/	bone	/ɔ:/	born
Start with lips tightly rounded. Unround and glide.	/w/	west	/v/	vest
Tongue from center front. Draw back to center.	/eə/	bear		
Start with lips tightly rounded. Unround.	/ʊə/	tour		
Tongue low front to high front to center.	/aɪə/	fire		
Tongue low front. Then round & unround lips.	/aʊə/	flour		
Voiceless. Friction. Tongue between teeth.	/θ/	thin		
Voiced. Friction. Tongue between teeth.	/ð/	they	/d/	day
Voiced. Friction. Tongue between teeth.	/ð/	clothe	/z/	close(v)
Voiceless: tip of tongue behind top teeth. Friction.	/s/	rice	/z/	rise
Back of tongue to back roof. Nasal.	/ŋ/ + /k/	think	/ŋ/ + /g/	"thin" + k
British /r/ is weaker and sometimes silent.	/r/	sir		sirrrr
From low front vowel to lips tightly rounded.	/aʊ/	cow		

4. Results and Discussion

Before showing the results, it will be useful to know what the most likely en- countered segmental errors of Persian-speaking learners are. Table 1 shows the common errors among Persian-speaking learners, although it cannot be considered as a guideline for all situations. This table was taken from www.btinternet. com:

As Table 1 shows, pronouncing /ɪə/ as /eə/, /æ/ as /e/, /ɑ:/ as /ɔ:/, /ʊ/ as /u:/, /aɪ/ as /ɔɪ/, /ɪ/ as /i:/, /əʊ/ as /ɔ:/, /w/ as /v/, /ð/ as /d/ or /z/, /θ/ as /t/ or /s/ and /ŋ/ as /ng/ and mispronouncing /ɒ/, /ʌ/, /ɜ:/, /ə/, /ɔɪ/, /eə/, /r/ and /aʊ/ are the most encountered errors among Persian-speaking learners. So, L2 teachers should be prepared in advance for dealing with these learners' areas of difficulty. Although this table is based on British accent, it can be a useful guide for identifying the difficulty areas among Persian-speaking learners.

Regarding the results of this study, the beginner participant introduced himself very briefly by telling his name and age. He did not use advanced vocabulary and structure. The rate of speech was acceptable, but the criteria of connected speech were not met.

Then, he was asked to read the passage aloud, of course after giving him a few minutes to look at it. He read the passage very slowly. It did not have the property of connected speech. The intonation was fat for almost every sentence, even for the questions. Then, he was asked to give a summary. He failed to tell the gist of the text. He just memorized some sentences from the text and gave the exact words with long pauses between each sentence. After that, he was given the list of the selected de-contextualized words, phrases, and sentences. The beginner participant's segmental errors are shown in Table 2:

Table 2. *The Beginner Participant's Segmental Errors*

Words	Correct Pronunciations	Participant's Errors
bird	/bɜːrd/	/briːd/
our	/aʊər/	/oʊver/
stop	/stɑːp/	/stɔːp/
rubbed	/rʌbəd/	/rʌbəd/
chemistry	/tʃemɪstri/	/kemɪstri/
school	/eskuːl/	/eskuːl/
very	/verɪ/	/werɪ/
duster	/dʌstər/	/dʊstər/
looked	/lʊkt/	/lʊkəd/

And, the incorrect stress patterns of the beginner participant are shown in Table 3:

Table 3. *The Beginner Participant's Incorrect Stress Patterns*

Correct Stress Patterns	Participant's Errors
for`get	`forget
de`gree	`degree
co`rrect	`correct

When it came to the intermediate participant, he introduced himself by giving more details about himself, his job, and his major but with short pauses between them. The vocabulary and structures he used were more advanced than the beginner participant. The rate of speech was promising, and the words were connected. Then, he read the passage aloud. The speed of reading was acceptable. The words were connected to some extent, and with regard to the compound sentences, his performance was acceptable. The intonation was better than that of the beginner participant, but in regard to the tag questions, it was a little inappropriate. When it came to giving the summary, the intermediate participant did a great job in summarizing the text. He gave a summary in his own words, and it was completely understandable—there were some pauses between the sentences, though. After that, he was given the list of the selected de-contextualized words, phrases, and sentences. The intermediate participant's segmental errors are shown in Table 4:

Table 4. *The Intermediate Participant's Segmental Errors*

Words	Correct Pronunciations	Participant's Errors
done	/dʌn/	/dɑːn/
calm	/kɑːm/	/kɑːlm/
believable	/bɪliːvəbl/	/bɪliːveɪbl/
month	/mʌnθ/	/mʌns/
were	/wɜːr/	/vɜːr/
ashamed	/əʃeɪmd/	/əʃæmd/
heaven	/hevən/	/hiːvən/
missed	/mɪst/	/mɪsd/

The incorrect stress patterns of the intermediate participant are shown in Table 5: Regarding the advanced participant, he introduced himself by giving almost every

Table 5. *The Intermediate Participant's Incorrect Stress Patterns*

Correct Stress Patterns	Participant's Errors
co`rrect	`correct
`interesting	in`teresting
be`lievabe	belie`vable

detail of his personal information but with short pauses between them, al- though the pauses were shorter than those of the intermediate participant. The vocabulary and structures were advanced. The rate of speech was normal, and it had the properties of connected speech. Then, he was given the passage. The speed of reading was not acceptable at all, but the overall speech was connected. Regarding the intonation, especially in long sentences, it was not appropriate. Then, he was asked to give a summary. In this phase, he did not do quite a good job considering his high level of profciency. Although his summary was understandable, a lot of sentences were exactly the same as the sentences in the passage. The speech was connected, and the number of pauses was few. After that, he was given the list of the selected de-contextualized words, phrases, and sentences. The advanced participant's segmental errors are shown in Table 6:

Table 6. *The Advanced Participant's Segmental Errors*

Words	Correct Pronunciations	Participant's Errors
watched	/wɑ:tʃt/	/wɑ:tʃd/
passed	/pæst/	/pæsd/
advantages	/ədvæntədʒəz/	/ədvænteɪdʒəz/
automobile	/ɔ:təməbi:l/	/ɔ:təməbaɪl/
purposes	/pɜ:rp əsɪz/	/pɜ:rp ɔ:sɪz/
supply	/səplaɪ/	/sʊplaɪ/
mechanism	/mekənɪzəm/	/məkænɪzm/

The incorrect stress patterns of the advanced participant are shown in table 7:

Table 7. *The Advanced Participant's Incorrect Stress Patterns*

Correct Stress Patterns	Participant's Errors
me`chanism	`mechanism
`indirect	indi`rect
`Japanese	Japa`nese

5. Conclusion

Pronunciation teaching has become more interested in and interesting to the learner. Contemporary pedagogy in this area is dealing with questions of greater complexity as a result of the increase in knowledge about phonology that is currently available. It is becoming apparent that intonation phenomena may not inhabit the same cognitive domains as other linguistic features of language. Advances in knowledge and the pressure for pedagogical development imply fundamentally different and continuing training and development for L2 teachers and learners. There is a subsequent demand for better teaching materials that are improved both in their awareness of the discipline and in their adaptability to specific teaching settings and the variable individual learner requirements. This, in turn, presupposes new modes of evaluation, involving new technology and tailored to the needs of particular L2 learners in particular contexts with particular necessities. The ideology of attainment criteria is being questioned and the native/ nonnative speaker distinction is becoming outmoded. Research possibilities are numerous, for example, in the area of Interlanguage phonology, where issues of developmental hierarchies transfer versus interference and fossilization can be addressed. Phonology and pronunciation teaching are coming to occupy a central position in the teaching and learning of other languages as oral skills are increaseingly seen as a high priority.

The findings of this study have implications for theoretical development and practical applications. In considering the theoretical development, more research needs to be done with a larger sample of Farsi speakers of English, outside or within Iran, to build on the understanding of the extent to which phonological characteristics of Farsi speakers of English overlap. In terms of practical applications, the findings of this study can act as an acceptable model to assist both L2 learners and teachers in English language learning and teaching. Firstly, it can assist L2 learners who may not realize the extent to which L1 English speakers misunderstand them as they have not been familiarized with the phonetic differences between the model of English pronunciation that they were taught. Secondly, it may allow L2 teachers to obtain an awareness of the likely problems to be incurred by L2 learners' lack of familiarity with the phonetic differences between the learners' own pronunciation and more other models, which would enable the learners to detect their own pronunciation errors and, subsequently, work towards correcting them. In addition, L2 teachers need to be trained to obtain a thorough knowledge of the L2 sound system and the appropriate intelligible models to encourage them to devote time, specifically to focus on phonemes that are identified to have caused problems for L2 learners.

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