

Teachers' Perspectives on Errors in English Consonant Sounds by Saudi EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

The current study attempts to find out the teachers' opinion regarding the errors Saudi EFL learners encounter when they pronounce English consonant sounds. The participants in the study are teachers who are currently teaching in the Preparatory Year Program, Najran University, Najran KSA. The results show that lack of proper attention towards teaching pronunciation, and lack of motivation among the EFL learners towards learning pronunciation leads them into such pronunciation errors. According to the data, which I collected from the teachers, the students generally encounter errors while pronouncing some consonant sounds like /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /z/, /ŋ/ etc. This study provides insights and suggests EFL teachers and curriculum designers to focus on teaching English sound system to the students. Teaching the sound system of English to the students will reduce future problems of pronunciation regarding English consonant sounds among Arab EFL learners.

Keywords: teachers' perspectives, consonant sounds, Saudi EFL learners

Introduction:

Saudi students who are learning English as a Foreign Language face different problems with every component of language such as reading, writing, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Most of the time, the other components are greatly emphasised in classroom teaching, while pronunciation is given less attention. Moreover, pronunciation has rarely been selected as an area of study by researchers. M. Madden (1997) in his research article mentions that there are only a few research papers in the field of pronunciation in comparison to that in other fields of language learning such as, grammar, communicative competence and sociocultural awareness (p.5).

In the author's two and half years of experience of teaching English to Saudi students at the Preparatory Year Program, it has been found that the students are hardly able to pronounce certain consonant sounds correctly. For example, the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/ is most often replaced by its voiced counterpart /b/. The same case is noticed with the palato-alveolar affricates /tʃ/, palato-alveolar fricatives /ʒ/ and labio-dental fricatives /v/. The sounds /tʃ/, /ʒ/ and /v/ are not normally realised by Saudi students, consequently these are often replaced by the sounds /ʃ/, /dʒ, ʒ or z/ and /f/ respectively—for example, the sound /tʃ/ as in cheap is replaced by the sound /ʃ/ as in sheep; the sound /ʒ/ as in leisure is replaced by the sound /dʒ/ as in ledger or by the sound /z/ as in laser and finally the sound /v/ as in vine is replaced by the sound /f/ as in fine.

The alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/ are not the cause of major obstacles, but they are pronounced by Saudi students as inter-dental, rather than alveolar plosives.

The author has observed that the velar nasal /ŋ/, which is a single consonant represented in English writing by two letters (-ng), is also mispronounced by many Saudi students. As a result, they pronounce the word (heating = /hi:tiŋ/) as /hi:ti-n-g/, (visiting = /visitiŋ/) as

/visiti-n-g/ etc. The primary concern of the present study is to focus on the pedagogical causes of the above errors that lead the students not to overcome of the faulty pronunciation of English consonant sounds.

Though, some research has been conducted in the field of pronunciation on various issues. The present study tries to know the teachers' opinion on the errors regarding English consonant sounds made by Saudi EFL learners. Based on the data collected from the teachers, the study provides some insights and suggestions to overcome of the said difficulties.

2.1 Previous Researches and Studies

Many researchers have conducted their studies on the mistakes committed by Arab learners while learning English as a second or foreign language, such as Harrison, Prator and Tucker (1975), Abdul Haq (1982), Kharma & Hajjaj (1989), Altaha (1995), Wahba (1998), Binturki (2008) and Al-Shuaibi (2009) and some others. Mostly they have focussed on the field of phonology, morphology and syntax.

In his study, Al-Shuaibi (2009) focuses on the phonology of phonotactics, and he finds that learners have difficulty in pronouncing English initial consonant clusters having three members and final consonant clusters of three and four members. He showed some processes involved in the pronunciation of these clusters, namely-- reduction, substitution and deletion.

Kharma & Hajjaj (1989) tried to investigate the problems that Arab students of English encounter at the initial stages and showed four major areas of difficulty. First, they found that certain pairs of consonant sounds are confused by Arab learners. Second, learners insert a short vowel to break down the long consonant clusters. Third, certain diphthongs are replaced by other sounds due to L1 interference. Last, Arab learners are generally confused with the distinction between certain pairs of vowels.

Wahba (1998) investigated the problems faced by Egyptian learners of English as a second language. His study was basically on stress and intonation. Barros (2003, as cited in Al-saidat 2010) studies the difficulties encountered by Arabic speakers when pronouncing English consonants. The researcher found eight English consonants, namely, /ŋ/, /p/, /v/, /d/, /l/, /dʒ/, /ð/, and /r/ as problematic ones for Arabic speakers. The researcher also noticed that mother tongue interference was the main cause which was responsible for pronunciation problems. And, this problem could vary from one Arabic speaker to another because of the colloquial variety of Arabic they use.

E.M. Al-Saidat (2010) conducted his study of English phonotactics to discover the types of pronunciation problems Arab learners encounter while learning English as a second language. In his study the researcher investigated what types of declusterization processes are found in their interlanguage and what the sources of such processes are. The researcher, in this study, showed that Arab learners of English unintentionally insert an anaptyctic (p.128) vowel in the onset as well as in the coda (p.129) of certain English syllables. This study also demonstrated that the major reason for declusterization processes is the mother tongue influence.

The author of this study intends to know the teachers' opinion regarding the errors Saudi EFL learners face while pronouncing English consonant sounds.

According to the data, which I collected from the teachers, the students generally encounter errors while pronouncing some consonant sounds like /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/, /ŋ/ etc.

Methodology

3.1 Participants

Ten teachers were selected in this study. All of them are teaching English language in the department of English, Preparatory Year Programme, Najran University. They have two to four years of experience of teaching English to Saudi students in Saudi Arabia.

3.2 Data Collection

The teachers were given questionnaire in order to obtain their opinion regarding the current study. All the participants were told that the project was designed to discover the pedagogical status of pronunciation in ESL/EFL teaching/learning situation at the Preparatory Year, Najran University. (Questionnaire is available in the appendices)

3.3 Data Analysis

After collecting the data it was analyzed carefully.

Tools

In the present study, the researcher used questionnaire in order to collect data from the teachers.

Findings

4.1 Results and Interpretations of the Teachers' Questionnaire

1. How long have you taught the English language in Saudi Arabia?

No. Of Teaching Years in Saudi Arabia	% Of Teachers
1-2 Years	30% Teachers
2-3 Years	20% Teachers
3-4 Years	50% Teachers

Table4.2: Teachers' experience teaching English in Saudi Arabia

Before asking the questions about teaching and learning of pronunciation to the teachers, the researcher enquired teacher's experience of teaching English in Saudi Arabia. It is clearly shown in the above table that most of the teachers have 2-4 years of experience teaching English to Saudi students, and some have 1-2 years of experience teaching the same curriculum.

2. Do you think that Saudi students have poor English pronunciation?

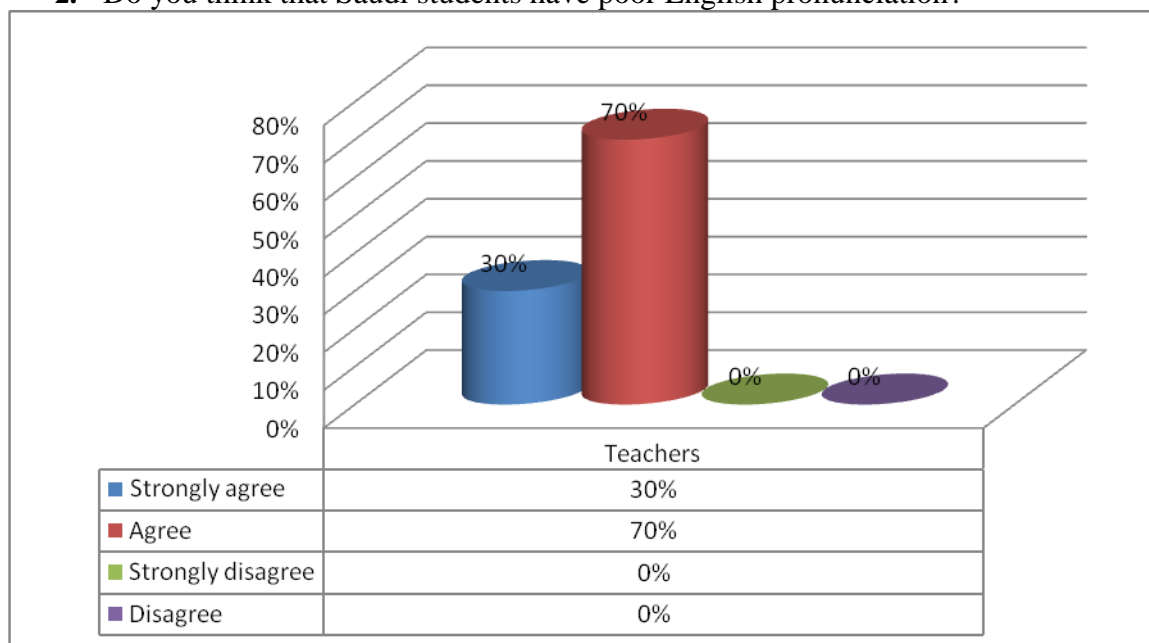


Figure4.16: Teachers' opinion about Saudi students' pronunciation

The above figure shows that all the respondents believe that Saudi students face problems in English pronunciation.

3. If you agree, what may be the reason(s) for poor English pronunciation of Saudi students? (Multiple answers were accepted)

- A. Mother tongue interference
- B. Students are not interested in improving their pronunciation
- C. lack of an English speaking environment
- D. Lack of systematic practice of IPA.
- E. Others -----

% of Teachers	Response
10% Teachers	Option B
10% Teachers	Options C&D
40% Teachers	Options A,C&D
20% Teachers	Options A,B&C
10% Teachers	Options A&C
10% Teachers	Options A,B,C&D

Table4.3: Reason(s) for poor English pronunciation of Saudi students

The researcher further asked the respondents the reasons for the lack of intelligible pronunciation among Saudi students. A majority of them gave the following three reasons: mother-tongue interference, lack of English speaking environment, and lack of systematic practice of IPA.

4. Which consonant sounds are difficult, as per your observation, to pronounce for Saudi students? (Multiple answers were accepted)

% of Teachers	Problematic consonant sounds
80%	/p/ and /v/
50 %	/ʒ/, /ŋ/, /tʃ/,
30 %	/d/, /t/
20%	/b/, /f/ /ʃ/, /dʒ/,

Table4.4: Problematic consonants for the Saudi students

When the teachers were asked to point out the problematic consonant sounds for Saudi students as per their observations, most of them selected /tʃ/, /ŋ/, /v/, /p/, /ʒ/, /t/ and /d/ sounds.

5. How often do you teach the following pronunciation items?

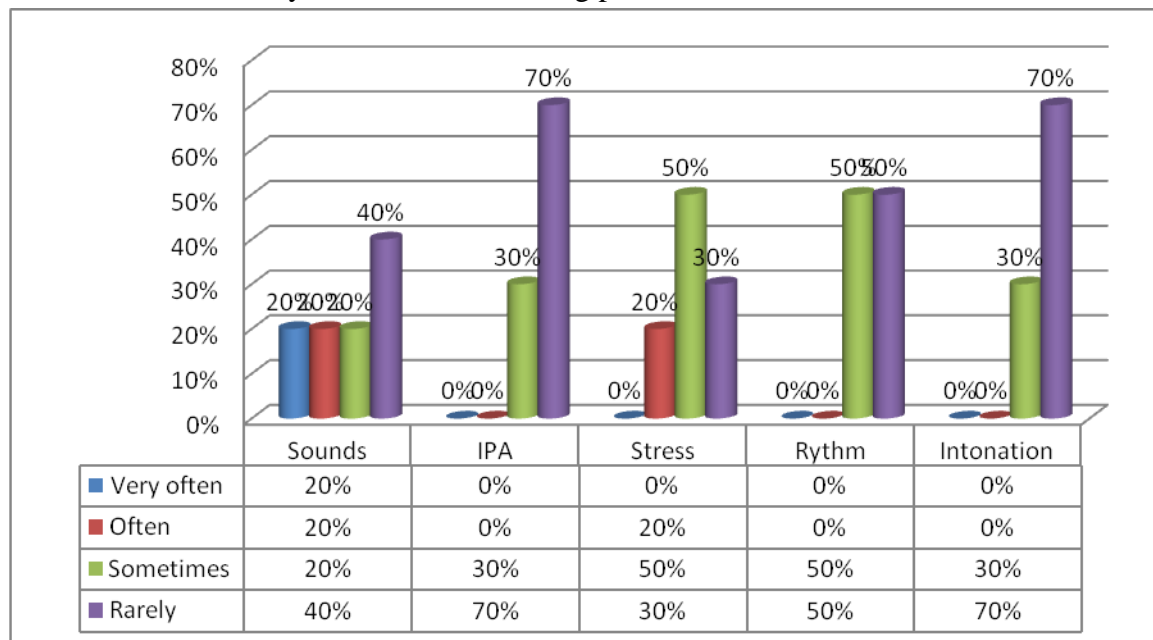
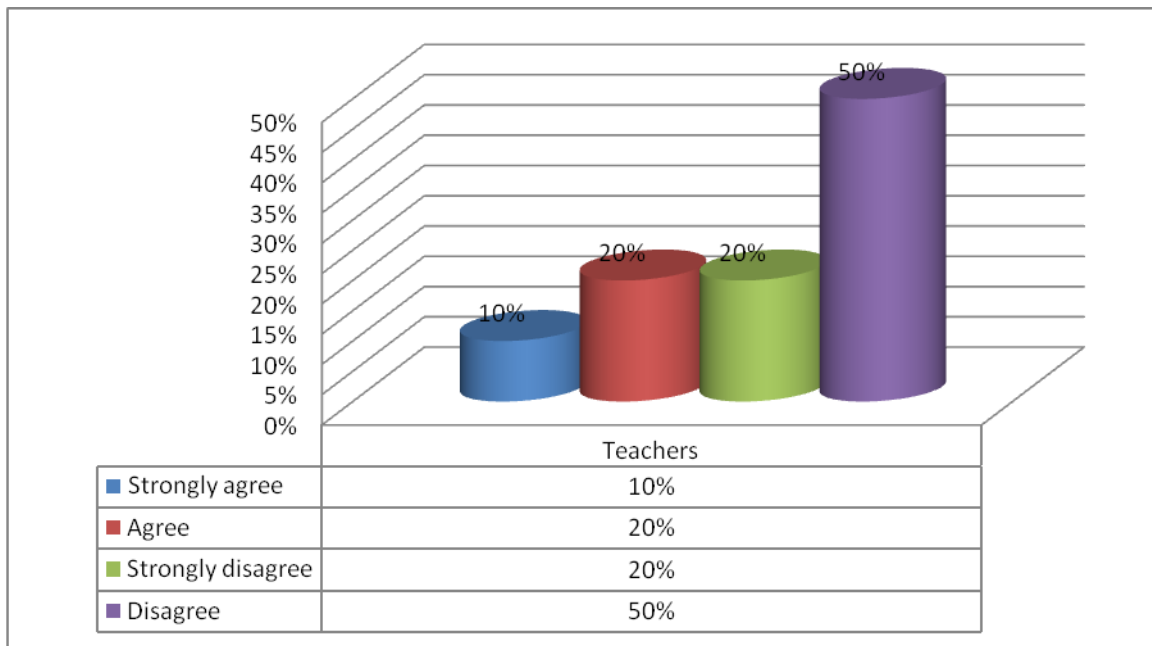


Figure4.17: How often the above Pronunciation items are taught to the students?

Figure4.17 shows that the following pronunciation topics have been mostly neglected. Sixty percent of teachers agree that they rarely or sometimes teach sounds; 40% of them believe they teach them very often or often. On the other hand, a majority of the teachers (70%) agree that they rarely teach IPA symbols. The same response was given for the subsequent items: stress, rhythm, and intonation.

6. Do you think the students receive enough pronunciation instruction in their present English courses?



Figur4.18: Are there enough pronunciation instructions given in their present English courses?

Seventy percent of teachers thought that the students did not receive enough pronunciation instruction in their present courses.

7. With regard to each item, is it taught or do you practice it in your English classes?

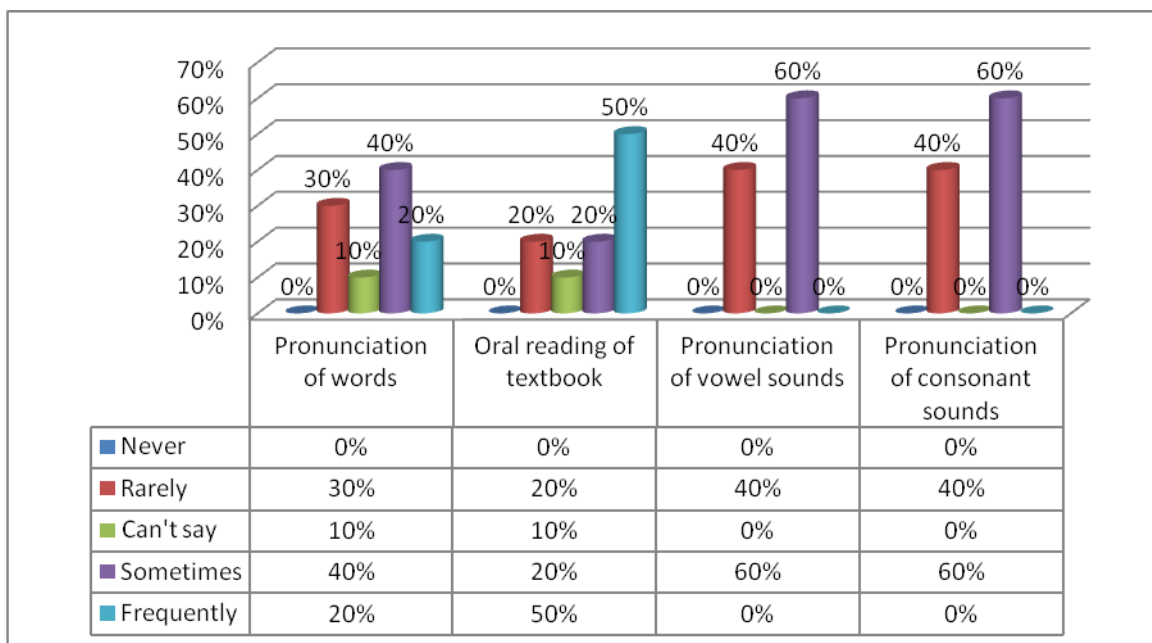


Figure4.19: The pronunciation items practised in English classes

According to the above data the most frequent item taught is oral reading of textbooks. Enough attention is not paid to the rest of the items such as, the pronunciation of words and the pronunciation of vowels and consonants.

8. Does listening to English songs help in improving pronunciation?

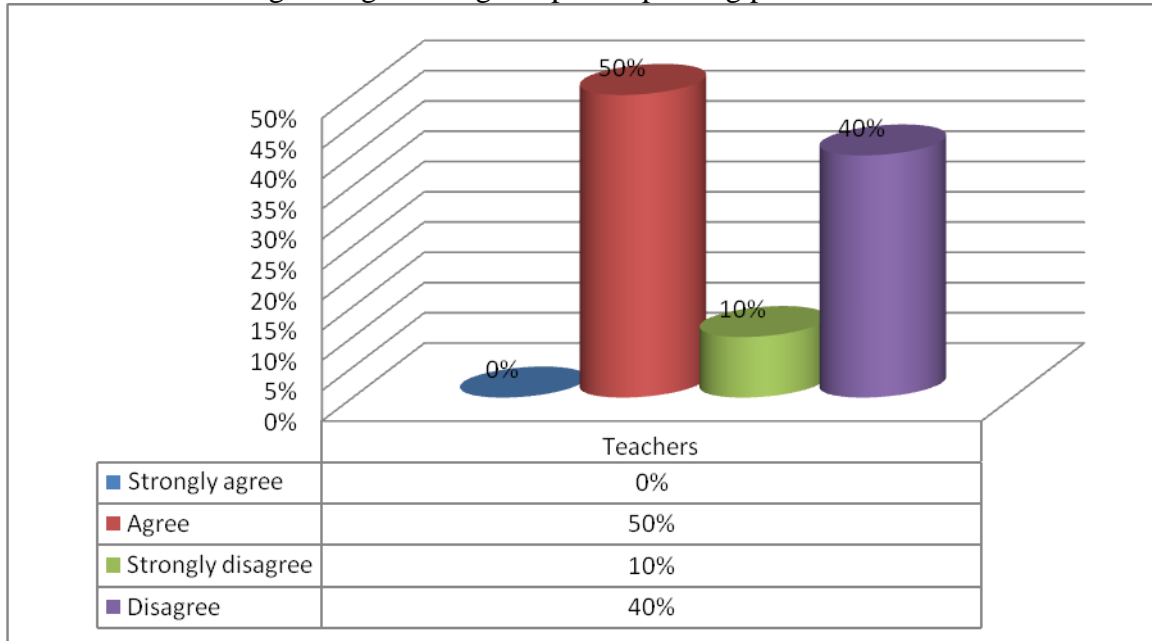


Figure4.20: Is listening to a song helpful in improving pronunciation?

Figure4.20 shows that 50% of the teachers believe that listening to English songs improves pronunciation, and the other 50% of teachers believe that listening to English songs does not help in improving pronunciation.

9. Does reading aloud with the support of the recorded English material help in improving pronunciation?

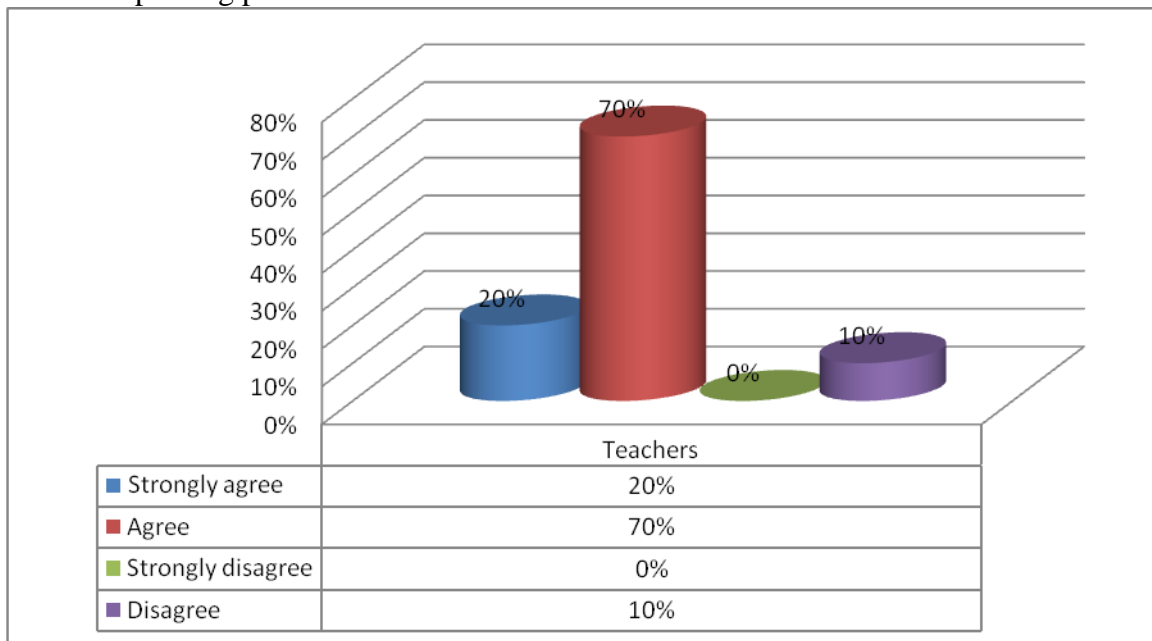


Figure4.21: Effectiveness of oral reading with recorded material in improving pronunciation

The above data indicates that 90% of teachers believe that if the students are asked to read a text aloud with the support of recorded English material, it can improve their pronunciation.

10. Does watching English programs on TV help in improving pronunciation?

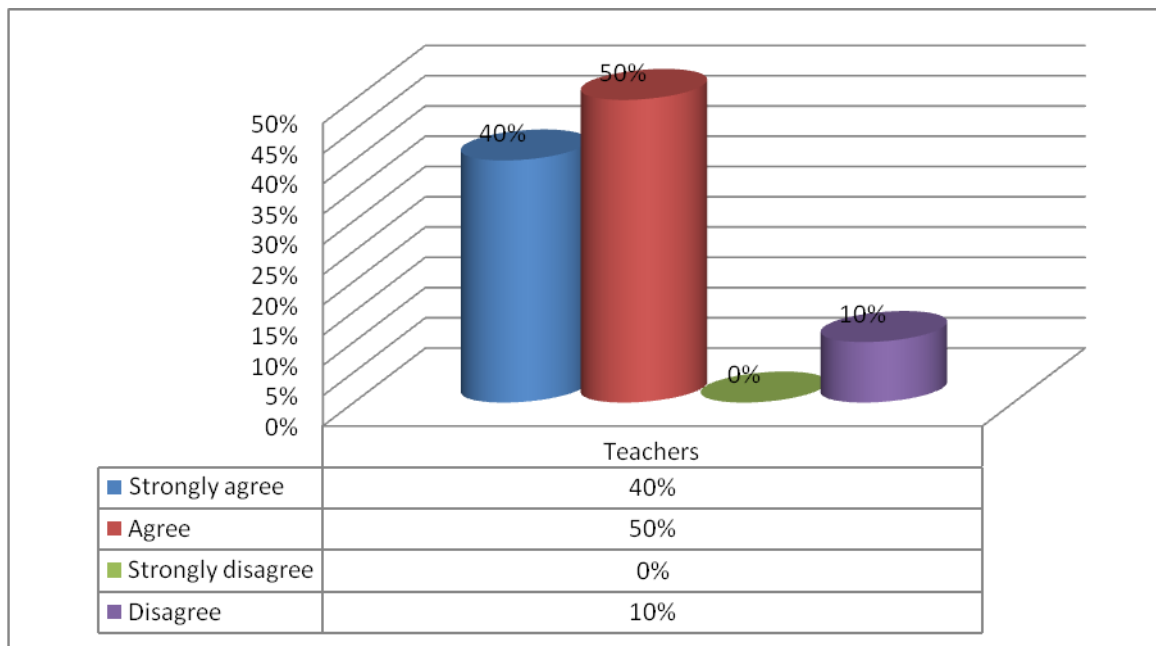


Figure4.22: Effectiveness of watching English TV programming in improving pronunciation

Ninety percent of the teachers gave a positive response towards the effectiveness of watching English language TV programming in improving pronunciation.

11. Does watching English movies help in improving pronunciation?

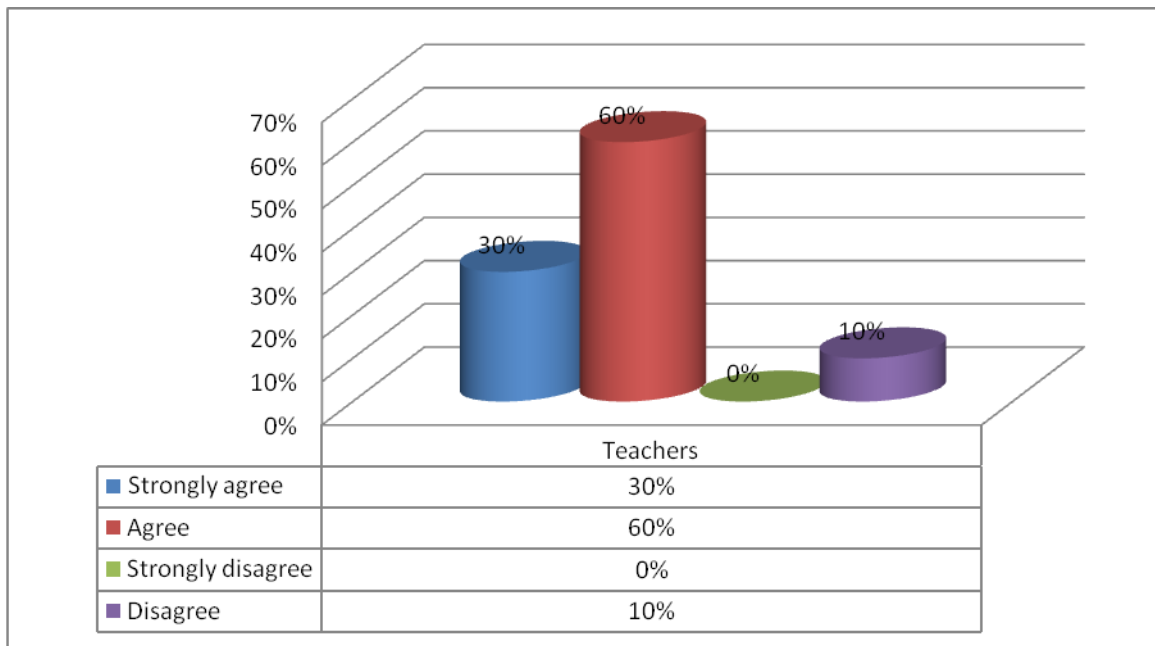


Figure4.23: Effectiveness of watching English movies in improving pronunciation

Figure4.23 show that 90% of the teachers believe that watching English movies can help in improving English pronunciation.

12. Does reading aloud with the teacher's support help in improving pronunciation?

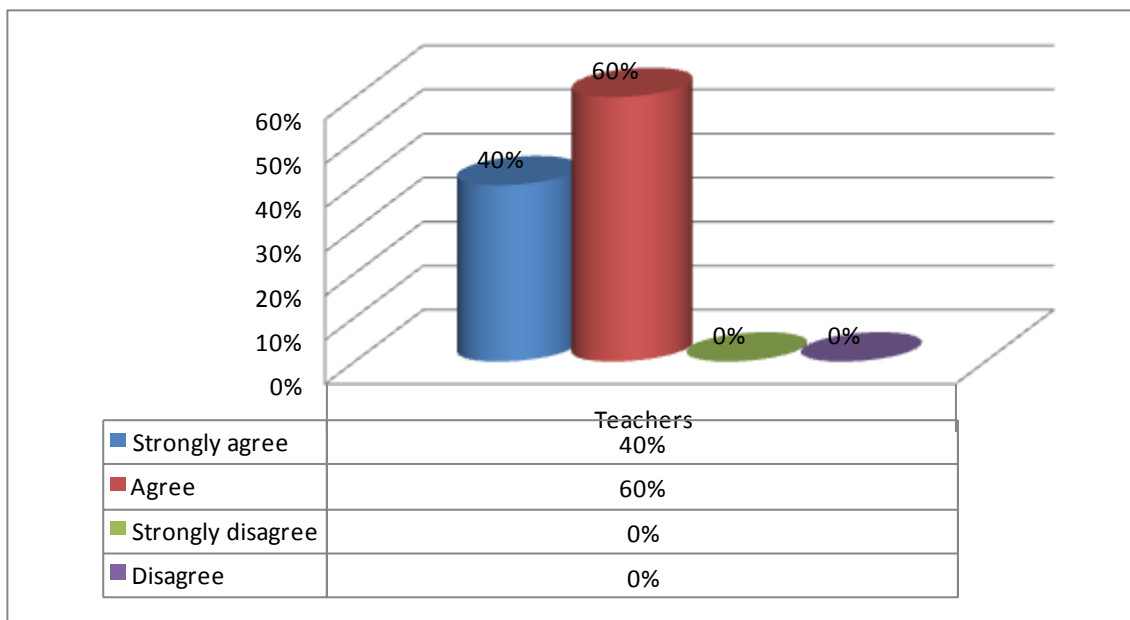


Figure4.24: Effectiveness of oral reading with a teacher's support in improving pronunciation

With regard to whether reading aloud with a teacher's support can help in improving English pronunciation, 60% of the teachers agree and 40% of the teachers strongly agree that it does.

13. Does having situational dialogues help in improving pronunciation?

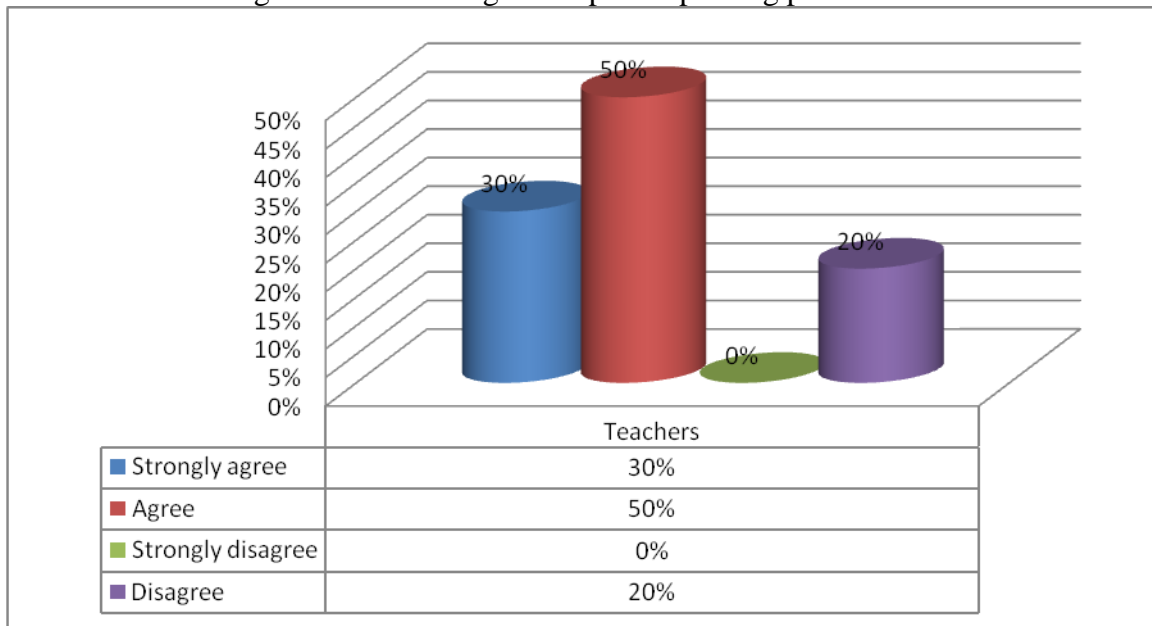


Figure4.25: Effectiveness of situational dialogues in improving pronunciation

According to the above figure, 80% of the teachers believe that having situational dialogues in the classroom can help in improving pronunciation.

14. Does the teachers' explanation of how to pronounce phonetic symbols help in improving pronunciation?

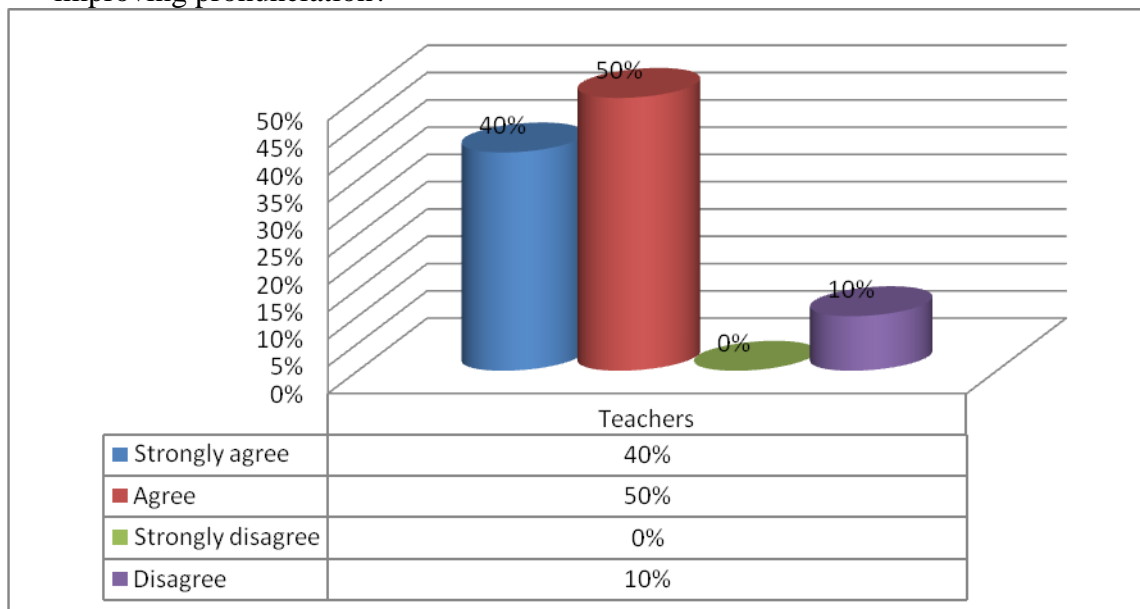


Figure4.26: Does teaching phonetic symbols help in improving pronunciation

The present data shows that 90% of the teachers believe that teaching phonetic symbols to the students and explaining how to pronounce them can improve English pronunciation.

15. Do minimal-pair practices help in improving pronunciation?

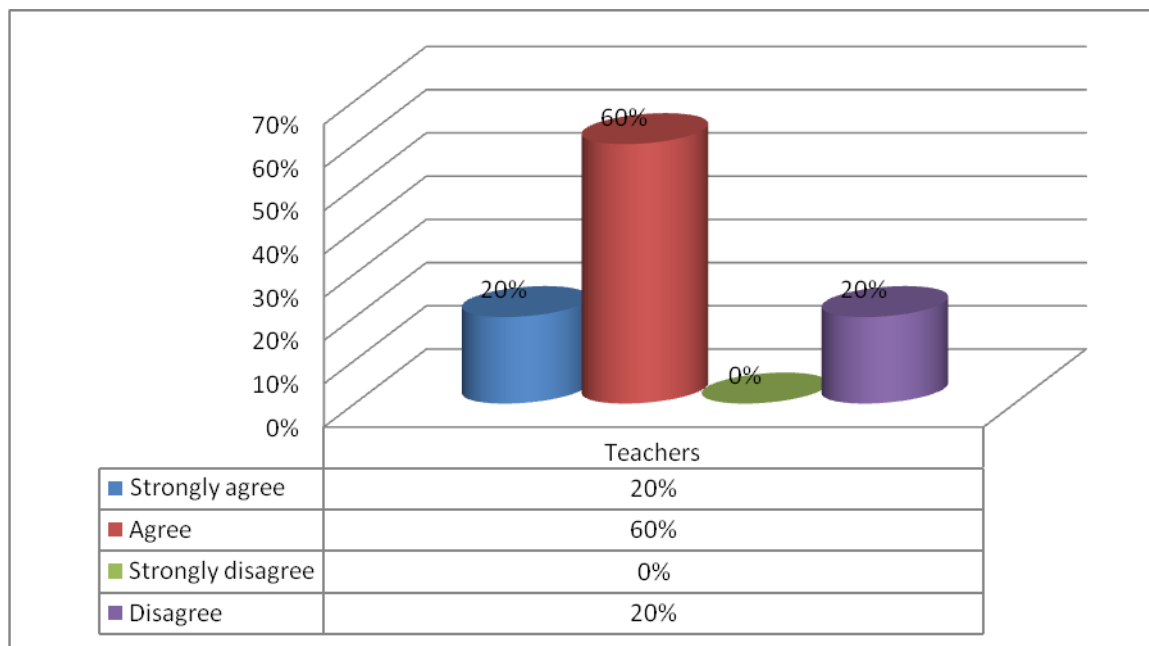


Figure4.27: Effectiveness of minimal pair practice in improving pronunciation

Figure4.27 shows that 80% of the teachers have the opinion that teaching minimal-pair sounds to the students will help in improving the students' English pronunciation.

16. What kind of English pronunciation will you suggest to your students as their target in learning pronunciation?

Response	Teachers' %
English pronunciation with an Arabic accent	20% Teachers
Intelligible pronunciation	70% Teachers
Native-like pronunciation	10% Teachers

Table4.5: The goal of English pronunciation according to the teachers

When asked about the goal of teaching and learning English pronunciation, 70% of the respondents suggested that "intelligible pronunciation", should be the goal of the teaching of pronunciation, where as 20% suggested "English pronunciation with an Arabic accent", is also acceptable and only 10% suggested "native-like pronunciation" is the objective of teaching pronunciation.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Conclusions

Like other English language courses, such as reading, writing, speaking, grammar etc., English pronunciation is very important for ESL/EFL learners to develop their

communicative efficiency. It is one of the basic skills required for the students in their English language learning.

As shown in this study, certain English consonant sounds are difficult to pronounce for Saudi learners of English. According to the teachers' response a majority of the students face problems in the sounds—such as /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /z/ and /ŋ/. As the data displays the fact that not enough attention is given to teach and practice the English sound system in the classroom. The present experimental study contributes to the identification of specific areas of difficulty which hamper communication through the mispronunciation of individual English phones and sounds. Awareness of the problem areas of learners provides a basis for future material planning, design and production.

Suggestions

Teaching English pronunciation covers a range from basic sounds (vowel and consonant), syllable structure, word-accent, to stress, intonation pattern, and rhythm etc. In the present study, the participants' problems with English consonant sound production were the only area investigated.

Based on the findings of the research, some suggestions are given below which may help teachers and students in reducing student difficulties in pronouncing problematic consonant sounds:

- Awareness is the first step of learning. Teachers should make learners aware of the importance of English pronunciation within English language learning programmes, as well as in English language communication. The learners should be given a basic knowledge of sound system of English, phonetics and phonology, IPA symbols, etc. If the learners have phonetic and phonological awareness of English, they will be able to guide themselves towards correct pronunciation of a particular sound or word.
- The teacher should conduct a students' needs analysis test regarding pronunciation. According to the needs of the learners, the teacher should develop some appropriate materials and strategies to practise in the class to reduce the learners' problem(s).
- Unfamiliar sounds -- which do not exist in the learners' mother tongue -- should be identified and practiced in the classroom.
- There should be a systematic practice of IPA symbols.
- Minimal pair drills should be used to distinguish between similar or problematic sounds in the target language. This is a technique introduced during the Audio-Lingual period to help the students differentiate between the similar or problematic sounds in the target language through listening discrimination and aural practice.
- The teachers can also use tongue twisters—a technique from speech correction strategies. (e.g., “she sells seashells by the seashore”)

- The students can be provided a listening model by the teacher or some electronic devices, such as a tape-recorder or CD, and then asked to repeat or imitate it. This is a technique introduced in the Direct Method.
- The students should be given enough instructions or opportunities to learn pronunciation within English language courses.

Finally, it is suggested that the students listen to or watch recorded English materials such as recorded talks, speeches, news, movies etc. They should always try to communicate in English with friends, teachers and relatives without any hesitation.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

This research study was limited to the pronunciation of the English consonant sounds /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/, and /ŋ/ which were identified by the teachers as problematic for Saudi students. The outcome of this study may vary with Arabic speakers from different countries, as Arabic has unique variations in different countries and places.

4.2 Further Studies

A research on the need analysis regarding pronunciation and developing suitable materials for Arab learners to teach pronunciation can be conducted, since there has been a small focus on this area.

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