

Morphophonemic Peculiarities Confronting Iraqi University Students in English Pronunciation

By

Omar Abbas N

Department of English/ College of Education/ Al-Farahidi University/ Iraq

Email: omar.abbas.naama@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims at giving an account of an analysis of errors made by Iraqis/ Al-Farahidi University students in the area of English Morphophonemic system. This causes a major problem for university students in interlingual and interlingual strategies. The technique used is an error analysis for a random sample of the second level of English Dept. Faculty of Education, Farahidi University focusing on data collection and data analysis. Moreover, the research uses a two-question diagnostic exam. It was discovered that the majority of Iraqi university students are uninformed of how to pronounce morphophonemic changes, as evidenced by the high incidence of erroneous replies, and that the students are more clueless at the production level than at the recognition level. Certain comments and recommendations for additional research have been made in light of the findings.

Keywords: *Pronunciation, Morphophonemics, Errors, Interlingual, Intralingual*

1. Introduction

Pronunciation, which procures increasing significance at present, has, from time immemorial, attracted the attention of scholars and phoneticians. Pronunciation plays a great role in the history of language teaching all over the world. Kelly (1969) dubs, for example, pronunciation is the “Cinderella” area of foreign language teaching. He shows that Western philologists and linguists have studied grammar and vocabulary much longer than pronunciation. For this reason, grammar and vocabulary have been much better understood by most language teachers than pronunciation, which began to be studied systematically shortly before the beginning of the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, the Arab world, especially Iraq, neglects teaching pronunciation at both schools and the initial levels of learning at universities. This study tries to deal with problems confronting Iraqi university students in the pronunciation, especially the morphophonemic aspects because morphonemics is a branch of linguistics, which studies the phonological structures of morphemes, which happen when they are, combined (See Celce-Murcia et al 2003; Serra et al., 2021; Turfboer & Silvius, 2021; van Gunsteren, 2020).

2. The Problem, Purpose, Objectives, & Limit of the Study

The topic of this study is vitally important to be investigated. English morphophonemics is the most difficult aspect in pronunciation, which Farahidi university students encounter. They make many morphophonemic errors in English. Frequently they make errors in this difficult type of communication. Thus, there have been various examples illustrating these errors, which are common among these Iraqi University students. For example caps /kɒps/, as /kɒpz/, deers /di:rz/ becomes /di:rs/, played /pleid/ becomes/pleiid/ and so forth (See Celce-Murcia et al, 2003:247-268).

This study is designed to identify errors that Iraqi university students at the second level make in the English morphophonemics, and then try to explain such errors (See Corder, 1974). This study also aims at giving some conclusion and pedagogical suggestions that may help university tutors understand and correct their students' errors in the morphophonemic area in a more systematic way.

Limits of study are as followed:

1. This study will mainly deal with the English morphophonemic system as a phonological unit; moreover, this avoids any detailed analysis of the topic under investigation.
2. The language usually referred to for the explanation of students' transfer of errors is Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) since it is officially used in Arabic newspapers, radio, TV, etc. and thus may cause interference.
3. The study is confined to students at Department of English, Faculty of Education, Al-Farahidi University, which is the location of the study. The subjects of the study are twenty students randomly chosen from the second level.

3. Data Collection

This section covers the following subheads:

3.1 Test Description

This paper seeks to investigate morphophonemic errors made by Iraqi university students at the University level in pronouncing these morphophonemic aspects of English lexical items. A pronunciation test was given to second year students, Department of English, Faculty of Education, Al-Farahidi University.

3.2 The Subjects

Twenty-second year students were randomly chosen because of their exposure to English in terms of continuous speaking. They have also exposed to the morphophonemic aspects as a university subject. They studied such aspects in their own study, so they are aware of this kind of pronunciation test, their age ranges from 19-20 years old.

The subjects were asked to attempt the following questions: pronounce the following plural nouns, past tense, and present tense. The content of this test is like that, it is a little bit familiar to them; they have to choose the right sound in pronouncing the presenting word whether it is a noun or a verb. Then they have to tick by using this sign (x) in the space for the right one.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Frequencies & Categorization of Errors

Frequencies and Categorization of errors can be seen in the following table*

Category	Frequency	Percentage	Example
/z/--/s/	16	80%	Births /bɛ:tZ/
/s/--/z/	18	90%	Songs/saNs/
/z/--/iz/	17	85%	Buses/b ɔ sz/
/s---/T/	13	65%	Deers /di:rs/
/d---/t/	17	85%	Talked/tɛ:kd/
/t---/d/	14	70%	Played/pleiid/
/d/---/id/	10	50%	Part/pa:td/
/id---/T/	15	75%	Hit/hitid/
/z/--/s/	12	60%	Stops/staps/
/s---/z/	13	65%	Cries /krais/
/z---/iz/	13	65.5%	Searches /sɛ:tZz/

*This table reveals that there are (11) categories of morphophonemic errors identified

in the pronunciation test made by the second university students at Department of English, Faculty of Education, Al-Farahidi University. These categories fall within the interlingual and intralingual errors under investigation of the study:

4.2 Categorization and Analysis of Errors

This present study is going to deal with problematic area facing students in English pronunciation, as this would necessarily require work that is more extensive. It has, therefore, been found convenient to restrict this study to one of the main slopes where students' pitfalls were observed to revolve around in abundance, namely morphophonemics. (See Chomsky and Halle(1968), Kelly (1969), Nida (1972), Strauss (1980), Dickerson (1981), Matthew (1982), Thakur (1997), Celc-Murcia et al (2003).

4.3 Morphophonemics Operationally Defined

The term "morphophonology" has been looked at in different ways. It would be out of the scope of this study to circumscribe the term fully. For the main purpose of the study, then, morphophonemics is variation in the form of morphemes because of phonetic factor, or the study of this variation. (See Richards et al 1992:237).

4.4 Morphophonemic Errors

Students' morphophonemic errors in their pronunciation test would be handled with reference to the following categories:

4.4.1 Category I: /z/ for /s/

A close examination of the previous table (1), it is observed that 80% of the students make errors in pronouncing the sound /s/ and substitute it by the sound /z/ due to their inadequate knowledge of the main rules of using such sounds that there is a special case in pronouncing the sounds /s/and/z/. A close look at this problem, it is found that the main reason is the interlingual factor that the students do not have plenty of time in learning such an aspect at university level, even schoolteachers have not given them ant information about such an area; in other words, they neglect this kind of pronunciation skill and focus on reading and writing skills.

4.4.2 Category II: /s/ for /z/

It is obvious that this category is the dominant one 90% of the students have replaced in pronouncing the sound/z/ by the sound /s/. This is because of the interlingual errors, which occurred for the inadequate knowledge on the part of the students of morphophonemic rules.

4.4.3 Category III: /z/ for /iz/

The table (1) shows that 85% of the students make errors in pronouncing the sound /iz/ and replaced it by the sound /z/. The percentage reveals that the students are low proficient. However, the main cause is attributed to the mother tongue transfer; these errors can be called intralingual errors, which result from faulty or partial learning of the target language.

4.4.4 Category IV: /z/, or /s/ for T(zero form)

From the table (1) it is observed that 65% of the students commit errors in pronouncing words (plural nouns) which actually have a zero article or form in English and substitute it by adding the sounds /z/ or/s/. The main reason for such a problem is overgeneralization. Most of the students keep in their minds if one wants to change a singular noun into a plural one he /she must add the letter/s/.Therefore, they carry out this rule all over the nouns in English except that those words are familiar to them; hence, they do not add the letter/s/.For example, the noun man/m@n/, when you ask any student to give you the plural form they will already say

men/men/.

Nevertheless, a word like *deer* /di↔/, which is not familiar to them, they already add the suffix marker /s/. Such errors are made because of the lack of sources and the students are not exposed to English good enough. Another reason for such a problem is that there are no special rules helping the students distinguish between the words, which need to add the morphological plural marker /s/ to it and those words, which do not need. For that case, they feel confused.

4.4.5 Category V: /d/ for /t/

From the previous table (1) it is noticed that 85% of the students make errors in pronouncing the past tense. The rule of such a case is when a past verb form ends by voiceless sound we add /-ed/ and it is pronounced as /t/. However, the students instead of pronouncing such a verb by /t/ sound, they tend to use /d/ sound. Unfortunately, such an error is due to two reasons; **the first reason is overgeneralization**, most of the students know that changing the infinitive form of verb into past, they should add the letters /-ed/. Because of that they tend to pronounce it as /-d/. **The second reason is the inefficient methods of teaching**. Teachers do not usually refer to the way of articulation of the sound in their teaching if the grammar rules of such a tense. Such a kind of errors, therefore, which usually result from faulty learning of a target language.

4.4.6 Category VI: /t/ for /d/

In this category it is observed that 70% of the students make errors in pronouncing the sound /-d/ and replace it by the sound /-t/, the main reason is the students pronounce the past tense randomly without taking in their consideration the special rules for pronouncing such verbs. Hence, this is also attributed to their inadequate knowledge of the rules of forming the past tense.

4.4.7 Category VII: /a/ for /id/

This category exposes that only 50% of the students make errors in this case. They tend to pronounce the sound /-d/ instead of the sound /-id/. This kind of errors can be resorted to the inefficient method of teaching as well as the students' carelessness. This is a type of errors that can be within the kind of interlingual errors.

4.4. Category VIII: /d/ for /T/ (zero form)

It is noticed here that 75% of the students make errors in pronouncing the zero form, they pronounced it as /-id/. The major cause for such an error is the mother tongue interference whereby the Arabic words or past tense can be pronounced by their right sounds. For example, the past tense /kataba/ is pronounced phonemically with their letters. For this reason, learners transfer their language into the target language. For example, when they pronounce the word *played*, they pronounce it like /pliid/. The second reason is **overgeneralization**. The students tend to put the sound /-id/ to make past. For example, they will add /-ed/ for the verb /hit/-/hitid/. such verbs are irregular verbs whereby /-ed/ cannot be added. Such errors called **"Intralingual errors"** which result from language transfer i.e., mother tongue influence.

4.4.9 Category X: /z/ for /s/

The table (1) classifies that 60% of the subjects make errors in pronouncing the sound /s/ and replace it by the sound /z/. For example, they pronounce the present tense *stops* like /stopz/, which is faulty. They should pronounce it like /stops/.; this is because of their lack of the rules of such a case.

4.4.10 Category XI: /s/ for /z/

It is obvious that 65% of the students make errors in pronouncing the present tense

sound/z/ and pronounce it as/z/. It is noticed that third person present tense has the same rules of pronouncing the sounds/s/, /z/, /iz/ in the plural nouns. The main reason for such an error is due to the students' lack of knowledge in the rules of past tense in the target language.

4.4.11 Category XII: /z/ or /s/ for /iz/

It is observed that the rate of this category is the same of the tenth category, which is 65% of the students make errors in pronouncing the sound/iz/ and replace it by the sounds /z/ and /s/. For example, the word *searches* they pronounce it as /sɛ:tʒz/ and the word *wash* they pronounce it as /wɔ:ʒz/. It is thought the major reason for such an error is the ineffective teaching method and lack of technological labs here at Al-Farahidi University due to the lack of practice.

5. Discussion of Results

Table (1) reveals that the category number I is predominate in the data. The English plural morpheme /s/ is pronounced similarly regardless of its written form in the case when the word ends by a voiceless sound the plural sound /s/ will be pronounced as it is written /s/. For example, *caps* /kɒps/. However, if the plural noun ends by a voiced sound then the /s/ and /z/ are separate phonemes in English. This can also be seen in pronouncing /s/ in the third person present tense.

Moreover, 90% of the students, as it is noticed, replace in pronouncing the sound /z/ by the sound /s/. That is because of overgeneralization. Most of the students learning English know that if one wants to change a singular noun into a plural one, he/she has to add the letter /s/. For example, the noun [huts] /hʌts/. Therefore, they have overgeneralized this rule over all the words. This can also be observed similarity in the plural noun of deer as deers. Such errors can be within the intralingual errors.

In addition, when the students were asked to show the reasons, they replied that schoolteachers did not pay their attention to the sounds of English in general.

Joining the college, they found the same negligence on the part of university tutors in their concentration on such a pronouncing practice. In addition, most of the students, unfortunately, do not make efforts in achieving a self-educated study. Most of the students here at Baghdad, it is believed, that they cannot teach themselves without tutors' efforts. This related to both insufficient teaching/learning processes.

The textbooks in Iraq do not present such sounds and make focus on them on plenty of pronunciation drills. This needs amendments from the Ministry of Education adapting in the English curriculum at Iraqi schools. Only 10% is found that they can recognize the morphophemic rules. This is because they enrolled courses in a private institute and followed a self-educated study.

Finally, it is noticed that interlingual and intralingual errors go hand by hand in the findings of this study. Such morphemic errors, both interlingual and intralingual, should be paid special attention, especially in the study of contrastive analysis, and error analysis as an effective university course.

6. Recommendations

Morphophonemic rules are not that much easy, especially for foreign learners. Thus, they are

a lot of activities should be carried out to solve this major problem facing university students.

These syllabus designers should take into account the practice on discriminating the vowel and consonant sounds as much as they do in presenting the alphabets. Though this point is hardly to apply, but it is vitally important at Farahidi university situation here in Iraq in general which requires a language lab. University tutors as well as schoolteachers should pay their attention to this major problem by giving students a lot of pronunciation drills and exercises, especially the morphophemic rules.

Students should do their best to practice a lot and try to follow a self-educated way of learning. Focus should be put on one of the functions of the-s morphological ending (plurals, possessive, third person, and singular) and writing a short dialogue to provide students with practice in pronouncing this ending.

Development of activity is important for teaching the-s ending for the third person singular present tense to an EFL class that includes a pronunciation focus. Reading an article about a foreign language acquisition study has importance, which focuses on acquisition of morphemes in EFL.

7. Conclusion

Although foreign language learners often receive extensive grammar instruction (including past tense, plurals, possessive, pasts of speech) at an early stage, the pronunciation aspects of such grammar lessons are not always well addressed. This lack of integration between grammar and pronunciation can affect other areas of language proficiency, such as listening, speaking, and writing. For example, if students are unaware of the phonological realizations for the regular past tense ending, they are likely to confuse present and past utterances. In addition, these markers may be missing from their speech and writing. Thus, this is clearly an area where university students' tutors and textbook writers, especially at the beginning level, need to give greater attention to pronunciation.

8. Bibliography

- Azar, B. S (1983). *Chart book: A reference grammar*. (2nd ed.) Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Byrd, P. and Benson, B. (1994). *Problem solution reference for ESL Writers*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- Chomsky, N. & Halle, M. (1968). *The sound pattern of English*. New York: Harper & Rows.
- Celc-Muria, M., Brinfor, D.M., and Goodwin, J.M. (2003). *Teaching pronunciation: A reference for teaching of English to speakers of other languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dickerson, W.B. (1981). A pedagogical interpretation of generative phonology II: The main word stress rules of English. *TEST Studies*, 4, 47-93.
- Greenbaum, S. and Quirk, R. (1990). *A student's grammar of the English language*. Essex: Language Group UK Limited.
- Hodges, J.C. and Whitten, M.E. (Eds). (1986) *Harbrace college handbook*. (10th ed), San Diego: Har Court Brace Jovanovich.
- Muclin, A. (1987). *Reference guide to English: A handbook of English as a second language*. (2nd ed). New York: Holt, Richard and Winston.
- Matthew, P.H. (1982), *Morphology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nida, E.C., and Platt, J, and Platt, H. (1992). *Language teaching and applied linguistics*.

- London. (1972). *Morphology*. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press.
- Richards, J.: Longman Group UK Ltd.
- Strauss, S. L. (1980). "How abstracts are English Morphology?" *Gloss* XIV, 89.
- Serra, F. R., Scafuto, I. C., Vils, L., & Mattos, M. S. (2021). Skills and Project Managers: Relationship between Personal Characteristics and Performance Indicators. *The Journal of Modern Project Management*, 9(1), 16-33. <https://doi.org/10.19255/JMPM02602>
- Thakur, D. (1997). *Linguistics simplified morphology*. Batna : BB Printers.
- Turfboer, J., & Silviu, G. (2021). Start marketing your project; The relationships of Marketing BY the project with stakeholder engagement and project success. *The Journal of Modern Project Management*, 9(2), 112-127. <https://doi.org/10.19255/JMPM02708>
- van Gunsteren, L. A. (2020). Continuous Adjustments and the Reality Test in Managing Complex Projects. *The Journal of Modern Project Management*, 8(1), 82-95. <https://doi.org/10.19255/JMPM02305>