

## Challenges in Learning Received Pronunciation Among English Department Students at Al- Iraqia University

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### Summary:

This study tackles the main difficulties faced by students of the department of English in the college of education for women at Al Iraqia University in learning Received Pronunciation, and sheds light on some of the obstacles that cause general weakness among students in pronouncing this accent, and suggests appropriate solutions to get rid of them. The study reviews the definition and the importance of pronunciation in general in civilized human communication, and then moves on to demonstrate the differences between dialect and accent to be an introduction to reviewing what Received Pronunciation is, its characteristics, and its importance. In addition, the study reviews some basic rules on how to pronounce Received Pronunciation. After, searching and investigating, in addition to conducting a questionnaire for the students about the most important difficulties they face in learning this accent, the researchers concluded some general and specific difficulties related to learning and mastering this accent, and suggested some appropriate solutions that help in solving these problems.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 The Basis of the Study

Acquiring Received Pronunciation (RP) by Iraqi students can pose significant challenges due to differences in phonetic systems, cultural backgrounds, and limited exposure to native English environments. Factors such as Arabic phonology, which differs vastly from English, along with socio-cultural norms, may contribute to difficulties in mastering RP. Moreover, limited access to resources, proper training, and immersion experiences further hinder Iraqi students' proficiency in acquiring RP. So, this study is a trial to shed light on the difficulties that the students in the department of English in the college of Education for Women at Al- Iraqia University face in acquiring RP during their study.

### 1.2 Aims of the Study

The study aims to define and identify Received Pronunciation, an accent that is taught in the departments of English , and identify the difficulties that students face in learning it, and then find appropriate solutions for them.

### 1.3 The Procedure of the Study

This study is divided into two parts: the first is the theoretical background, and the second is the practical; the analysis of the questionnaire. The questionnaire is consisting of 11 items explaining the possible reasons behind the difficulties the students face in learning Received Pronunciation. In front of each item is a box to answer (yes) or (no).

### 1.4 Limits of the Study

The limits of the study are:

1. The accent to be researched and to shed light on the problems students face in learning it is Received Pronunciation and not any other accent.
2. The research sample was second-year students in the Department of English at the College of Education for Women, Al- Iraqia University.

### 1.5 Significance of the Study

1. The study presents a detailed survey of the concepts of dialect ,accent ,and Received Pronunciation which is hoped to enrich students' and researchers' knowledge about them.

2. It is thought that students and researchers of language can benefit from the practical results of this study in order to find appropriate solutions to the problems facing students in learning this accent.

### 2. Pronunciation

Pronunciation is a term denoting the sounds generated by speakers and heard by listeners, enabling mutual understanding and effective communication (Nunan, 2003). In the renowned Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics, Richards et al. (1992) describe pronunciation as the manner in which sounds are interpreted by the listener. Harmer (2001) asserts that the significance of an utterance is determined by the manner in which speakers articulate it. Therefore, clear articulation by students is crucial for both understanding and effectively conveying the intended message. Learners need to grasp the content of the message and employ basic linguistic tools to ensure comprehension, emphasizing the connection between pronunciation and the sounds produced during speech.

To achieve mutual understanding as native speakers, it is essential to align with the accepted pronunciation norms prevalent in specific speech communities. While many commonly associate pronunciation with the act of producing sounds in speech, the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics emphasizes that pronunciation should be defined as "the manner in which sounds are interpreted by the listener." Placing emphasis on the perceptions of listeners holds significant importance. The way we articulate words, phrases, and sentences communicates a substantial amount about our individual identity. Acknowledging the existence of various acceptable English pronunciation styles prevalent in numerous English-

dominant nations' worldwide, language educators must recognize and appreciate the diversity inherent in English pronunciation (Richards et al., 1992). Burgess and Spencer (2000) made a distinction between pronunciation and phonology, providing distinct definitions for each. Phonology pertains to the comprehension of how the sound system of the target language operates, encompassing both suprasegmental and segmental components.

In the context of language learning, pronunciation involves actively practicing and employing the phonological features of the target language during speech. This proficiency is cultivated through experiences in comprehending the phonological aspects encountered in the spoken discourse of the target language. Effective communication is achieved by students when they articulate their thoughts clearly and intelligibly. Furthermore, to ensure mutual understanding, students need not only to comprehend spoken language but also to utilize straightforward language in their responses. Pronunciation holds a crucial role in our lives as it enables us to express our values and participation in social contexts through spoken communication. These complexities might be why educators find the teaching of pronunciation challenging (Seidlhofer, 2001).

### 3. Accent and Dialect

Every individual, regardless of whether they perceive themselves as speaking a standard form of English, possesses an accent. It is a widespread misconception to categorize some speakers as having accents while considering others as not. While there might be a perception that certain speakers exhibit more pronounced or easily recognizable accents compared to others with subtler or less apparent accents, the reality is that every language user speaks with an accent. An accent denotes the unique pronunciation characteristics that distinguish an individual speaker's regional or social origin within a language. A dialect refers to a linguistic variation that sets itself apart from other varieties based on differences in grammar,

vocabulary, and pronunciation within a language. Dialectology is the field of study focused on examining these dialects, aiding in the differentiation between dialects of the same language by assessing their mutual intelligibility. Essentially, dialectology explores whether speakers of different dialects can understand each other or not.

(Yule, 2014) Accent serves as a broad term encompassing dialect. It pertains to the distinctive sound of voices resulting from geographical origins. Accents have developed over time due to individuals interacting in isolated regions and adopting localized speech patterns. This occurred in an era when travel was limited, leading people in specific neighborhoods to primarily interact with those who shared similar speech characteristics, contributing to the emergence of regional accents. Dialect, on the other hand, is an extension of accent but goes beyond the sound of voices. Instead, it refers to how grammar and lexical choices are shaped by geographical influences, representing a distinct speech style divergent from Standard English. Geographical locations significantly impact our dialects, influencing the words we choose. For instance, in several Northern languages, both 'chuddy' and 'chewy' convey the same meaning of chewing gum, originating from the conventional English term 'chewing gum' (Hasa, 2016).

#### 4. The Difference between the British and the American Accents

The British accent and the American accent are widely acknowledged as two of the most prominent English accents, characterized by distinctions in pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary. One of the notable distinctions between British and American accents lies in pronunciation. Generally, British English exhibits a more rounded pronunciation of vowels, contrasting with the flatter and more nasal pronunciation found in American English. As an illustration, the word "bath" in American English is articulated with a short "a," while in British English, it is pronounced with a long "a."

Moreover, American English emphasizes on the letter "r" at the end of a word, whereas British English often drops the "r" sound totally. For example, the word "car" is pronounced with a strong "r" in American English, but the "r" sound is not emphasized in British English (Roach, 2009). In addition, American English sets a major emphasis on the pronunciation of the letter "r" at the end of words, while British English considerably deletes the "r" sound completely. For instance, in American English, the word "car" is spoken with a distinct "r" sound, whereas in British English, the emphasis on the "r" is less pronounced (Roach, 2009). An additional disparity between British and American accents is observed in intonation. British English utilizes for a lot of times a rising intonation, marked by a pitch ascent at the end of a sentence, whereas American English commonly employs a falling intonation, featured by a pitch descent at the end of a sentence (O'Connor & Arnold, 2012). This disparity in intonation can influence the interpretation of a sentence. For example, in British English, a rising intonation usually indicates a question, while in American English; a falling intonation is often used to indicate a question. Vocabulary is another domain where distinctions between British and American accents emerge. While both accents adhere to Standard English, variations exist in the words and expressions employed. For instance, in British English, the term "lorry" designates a large truck, while in American English, the term "truck" is utilized instead (Trudgill & Hannah, 2002, p. 84). Moreover, certain words carry different meanings in British and American English. For example, in British English, "biscuit" denotes a sweet cookie, whereas in American English, it refers to a savory cracker (Trudgill & Hannah, 2002, p. 86). Briefly, the British and American accents show notable differences in pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary. These variations can affect the understanding of words and sentences, underscoring the significance of comprehending the delicacies inherent in each accent. Recognizing these

disparities make the people enhance their ability to communicate effectively with other people from diverse countries and cultures.

Here is a list of some English words that differ in British and American English

| British English   | American English   |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| articulated lorry | trailer truck      |
| autumn            | Autumn, fall       |
| barrister         | attorney           |
| bill (restaurant) | bill, check        |
| biscuit           | Cookie             |
| block of flats    | apartment building |
| bonnet (clothing) | Hat                |
| bonnet (car)      | Hood               |
| boot              | Trunk              |

##### 5. Importance of Teaching Pronunciation

In her article, Jahan (2011) highlighted the importance of pronunciation in communication. She further noted that due to the unavailability of English-medium schools for an extended duration, students lacked the chance to acquire English as a second language. Inappropriate English pronunciation makes listeners easily misunderstand the speaker, but proper pronunciation encourages them to communicate with the speaker willingly.

Furthermore, Jahan asserted that although teaching pronunciation poses challenges, it holds considerable importance in the realms of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. According to her, attaining a flawless native-like accent is nearly impossible for ESL learners. However, as long as professional English speakers can comprehend the learners' pronunciation, successful communication can be achieved. Mumeneen (2011) also underscored the significance of pronunciation in both speaking and listening. Even among students who have attained a Bachelor of Arts in English, issues persist with English pronunciation. Consequently, in the job market, these individuals often struggle to make a favorable impression during interviews. Moreover, this pronunciation challenge leads to various difficulties in their everyday interactions with others.

## 6. What is Received Pronunciation?

In the southeastern region of England, well-educated native English speakers commonly employ a pronunciation known as "received pronunciation. This accent is often considered a standard regional pronunciation that non-native English speakers are encouraged to adopt (Crystal, 2008).

### 6.1. Importance of RP

Received Pronunciation or RP, represents a type of British English historically spoken by the upper class and honored institutions in the United Kingdom. While it is no longer the limited accent of prestige, RP continues to keep an important position in British society and is recognized and esteemed in international contexts. The following are varied resources that delve into the significance of RP. As per a study conducted by Alizadeh and Katouzian (2014), RP keeps to be widely considered as the standard accent in the UK, much linked with education and social variance. The study argues that acquiring RP is useful and valuable for individuals want to share in UK society and culture. This accent is commonly utilized in formal and public situations, employing as an indicator of social condition. The study also notices that RP enjoys evident admission and acceptance in international settings, presenting a valuable feature for persons engaged in international travel or work. As for the British Council (2019), RP is commonly comprised in the curriculum of language schools and English as a Second Language (ESL) courses universally. The British Council highlights that RP renders as a beneficial means of international communication and is frequently considered as a symbol of education and intellectualism. This is due to the understanding of RP as a balanced and readily comprehensible version of English, making it suitable as a lingua franca for people from different linguistic backgrounds.

In spite of that, it's crucial to acknowledge that the constant emphasis on RP in specific contexts may immortalize class and cultural alignments. According to Lippi-



Green (2012), the historical association of RP with the high class and elite institutions in the UK can lead to exclusion for those who speak with different accents or dialects. Lippi-Green assures that it is fundamental to appreciate the variation of English accents and dialects, warning against preferring one accent over others. Briefly, as RP still a significant and widely acknowledged form of English, facilitating worldwide communication and conveying a sense of education and stylishness, it is essential to acknowledge and estimate other English varieties, avoiding the favoring of one accent or dialect over others.

## 6.2. Types of RP

RP is a prestigious variant of British English commonly associated with the educated upper classes in England. Recognized for its articulate and precise pronunciation, RP is known as the standard form of British English. However, within RP, there are several types exist, each with distinct features studied extensively by linguists and language experts. Southern RP, linked to the southern regions of England, particularly London and its environs, is among the well-known types. According to Widdowson (2003), Southern RP is characterized by its clear and precise pronunciation, joining elements such as the glottal stop and nonrhotic pronunciation of the "r" sound. The glottal stop is used as a substitute for the "t" sound in words like "button" and "kitten." Meanwhile, the nonrhotic pronunciation of the "r" sound requires its omission after a vowel, as in words like "card" and "hard." Instead, a skilled modification of the vowel sound typically indicates its presence.

There is another category within RP is public school RP, related to the English upper class and commonly referred to as "posh" or "plummy" RP. This variant is spoken by people who joined public schools, except private institutions in the UK. As outlined by Cruttenden (2008), public school RP is known by meticulous and precise pronunciation, specifically of vowels and diphthongs. For instance, the diphthong in

the word "face" combines the sounds "e" and "i" Public school RP often shows a close diphthong in words like "face," "make," and "great," contributing to a distinctly posh pronunciation. Another addition to RP is Estuary English, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s according to the changes in social attitudes and migration patterns. Estuary English is characterized by a more casual and informal demeanor within the RP spectrum related to the southeast of England, specifically around the Thames estuary. As outlined by Coggle (2007), this variant includes characteristics like joining of glottal stops and a broader array of regional accents and slang. Estuary English is acknowledged as a transitional form, serving as a connection between conventional RP and the diverse range of accents and dialects prevalent in many parts of the UK.

### 6.3. How to Teach RP

RP is an English accent often linked to prestige and social standing. While teaching RP shows challenges, utilizing effective strategies can help students in acquiring this accent. At the beginning, it is essential to familiarize students with the sounds and attributes of RP. This way can be done by the exposure to audio or video recordings presenting RP speakers, such as news presenters or actors. In addition, the distinctive features of RP, including its using of long vowels and diphthongs, as well as its absence of regional accent features should be taught to the students. Then, engaging the students with an understanding of the specific traits of RP boosts their ability to acknowledge and reproduce them (Hughes & Trudgill, 1996). Next, offering students many opportunities for practice are preferable. This can be done by different exercises, such as listening to and echoing RP recordings, reading aloud RP texts, and participating in conversations using RP.

Feedback should be given to students in recognizing areas that require development (Wen, 2013). An essential aspect of RP instruction includes assisting students in comprehending the social and cultural implications related to this accent. It is crucial

to emphasize that though RP is often connected to prestige and social standing, it does not exceed other accents. A comprehensive explanation should be presented about the historical and cultural factors contributing to the establishment and perpetuation of RP as a prestigious accent to the Students (Hughes & Trudgill, 1996). In addition, teachers should create opportunities for students to practice RP away from the classroom setting. This can be accomplished through homework assignments focused on RP, encouraging students to be engaged in conversations with native RP speakers, and getting online resources such as videos, podcasts, and forums dedicated to RP (Hughes & Trudgill, 1996). Finally, although teaching RP implies challenges, utilizing effective strategies such as concentrating on phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, role-play exercises, and offering a chance for practice can authorize teachers to teach this accent and improve students' English language skills successfully.

#### 6.4. Difficulties of Learning RP

RP is a form of British English pronunciation which has been considered the standard accent that non-native English speakers will face difficulties in mastering. One of the basic difficulties is the distinct patterns sounds and intonation of RP. This accent contains many vowel and consonant sounds not found in other English varieties. For example, the pronunciation of the "r" sound differs in RP, forming an obstacle for non-native speakers. Moreover, RP shows some intonation patterns different from other English varieties, which results in another difficulty for learners. The problematic system of stress and rhythm in RP can be additional challenge for learners to overcome (Crystal, 2018).

Additionally, learning RP shows challenges based in social and cultural factors. Though RP is associated with the upper class, non-native English speakers may find the possibility of learning it terrifying and not confident enough to do so. Comprehending the social and cultural differences surrounding RP can be

challenging for learners, preventing their effective acquisition of it. Besides, a lack of exposure to RP results in many difficulties, as it is not widely spoken beyond the United Kingdom, few chances are presented for learners to hear and practice it. Moreover, many people learning English are exposed to different varieties such as American English or Australian English, which complicate their acquisition of RP. So, conquering RP is a hard task for non-native English speakers. The distinct sounds and intonation patterns, social and cultural factors, and the limited exposure to RP are various challenges that can form obstacles to the learners. However, learners can overcome these difficulties and effectively acquire RP by suitable resources and support. An essential point to recognize is that learning RP is not primary for effective communication in English, and learners should not feel forced to acquire it unless it stands with their communication needs (crystal, 2018).

## 7. Discussion and Results

Although English departments in Iraqi universities teach RP in phonetics and phonology lessons, it is noted that students face serious difficulties and challenges in learning this accent which had a bad impact on their pronunciation. So, in order to find out the reasons behind the difficulties the students face in learning RP, the researchers conducted a questionnaire to survey the students' opinions about the reasons behind these difficulties. After searching and investigating, in addition to conducting a questionnaire for students about the reasons behind the difficulties they face in learning this accent, the researchers found that the problem lies in two reasons: the first reason is related to learning the English language in general, and the second is related to learning this accent in particular. As for learning English in general, the problems can be summarized as follows:

1. Errors in pronunciation of any non-native speaker of language are mostly impeded by the influence of mother tongue. The Arabic and English phonological

systems Vary extensively, not only in the range of sounds used, but also in the relative importance of vowels and consonants in

expressing meaning. While English has 22 vowels and diphthongs to 24 consonants, Arabic has only eight vowels and diphthongs to 32 consonants.

2. English has far more consonant clusters than Arabic. Some initial two segment clusters which Arabic doesn't have corresponding equivalents to include: pr, pt, gr, thr, thw, sp. The three-segment initial consonant clusters are entirely absent in Arabic clusters such as spr, skr, str, spt. Faced with the challenge of such consonant clusters, Arabic Speakers often insert

short vowels in order to "assist" pronunciation in the following manner; /ingilis /, /siprin/, /sitriit/...etc. in addition, this is also applicable to the final clusters.

3. While there are no similarities between the Arabic and English writing systems, Arabic spelling within its own system is simple and virtually phonetic. Letters stand directly for their sounds Arabic speakers' attempt, therefore, to pronounce English words using the same phonetic methodology.

4. Arabic speakers can have problems grasping the unpredictable nature of English word stress since Arabic is a stress-timed language. In contrast with English, word stress in Arabic is predictable and regular. The idea that stress can alter meaning, as in (convict) "verb", (Convict) "noun" is utterly foreign Arabic words that are spelled identically often appear, and mean completely different things, but will have dissimilar Short Vowels which count as sounds and change the meaning altogether.

5. Phrase and Sentence rhythms are similar in both Arabic and English languages, and cause few problems primary stresses occur more frequently in Arabic while unstressed syllables are pronounced more clearly. As with English, the unstressed syllable has neutral vowels, but such Vowels are not swallowed as in English. Arabs reading English often avoid contracted

Forms and elisions, and read with a rather heave staccato rhythm.

6. Intonation patterns in Arabic are similar to English in contour and meaning. However, Arabic speakers use rising tones rather than structural markers to denote questions, suggestions and offers far more frequently than English-speakers, and this practice is often carried over into the spoken English of Arabic speakers.

When reading aloud however, as opposed to talking Arabic speaker tends to intone or chant, reducing intonation to a low fall at the ends of phrases and Sentences. Speech making, news reading and religious recitation are all quite different in rhythm and intonation from normal speech. Consequently, Arabic speakers Called on to read aloud in front of a group may produce a very unnatural recitation because they see the process of formal reading as distinct from everyday speech (Mohammed, 2009)

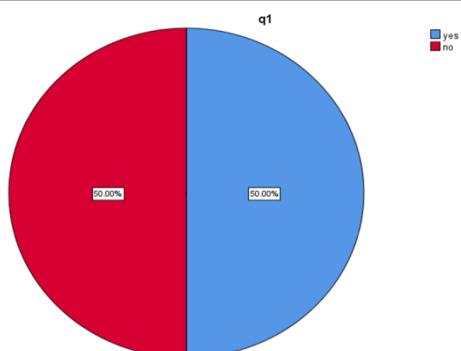
As for the problems that the students of the Department of English in the College of Education for Women, Al-Iraqia University, face in learning RP they can be deduced from the students' answers to the questionnaire.

The questionnaire consists of 12 items explaining the possible reasons for these difficulties. In front of each item is a box to answer (yes) or (no).

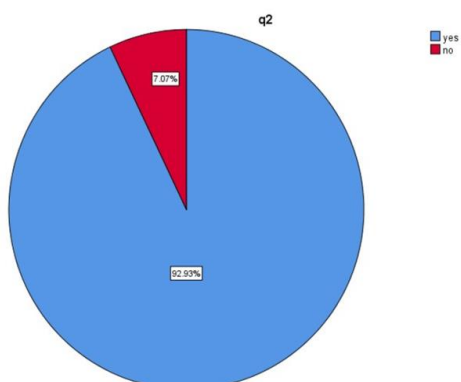
The results of the statistical work show that the students in the second stage, at the department of English, College of Education for Women at Al Iraqia University face certain difficulties related to learning RP, which can be illustrated as follows:

Questionnaire Analysis

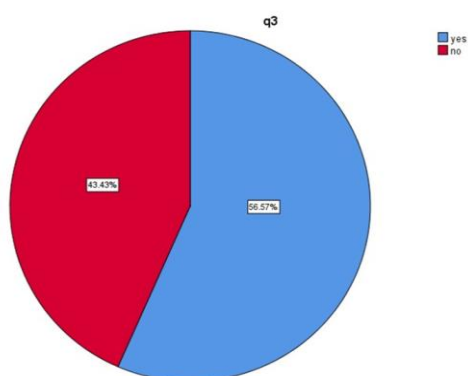
Q1: lack of experts in teaching phonetics



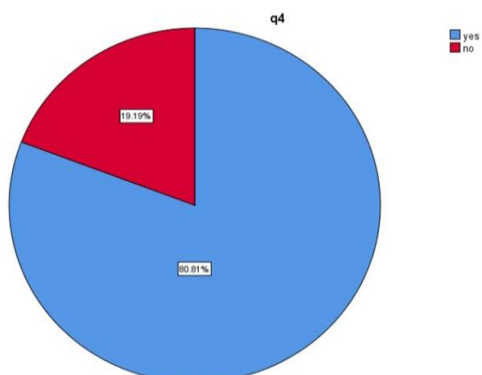
Q2: lack of convenient sound laboratories



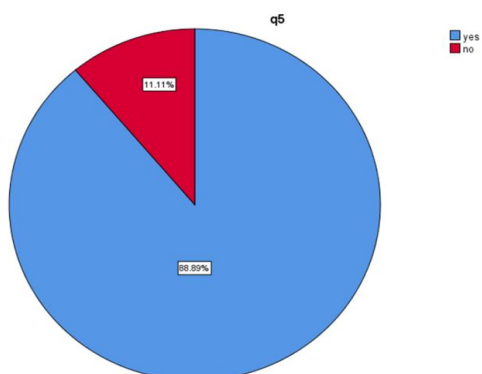
Q3: the influence of Arabic language in your pronunciation



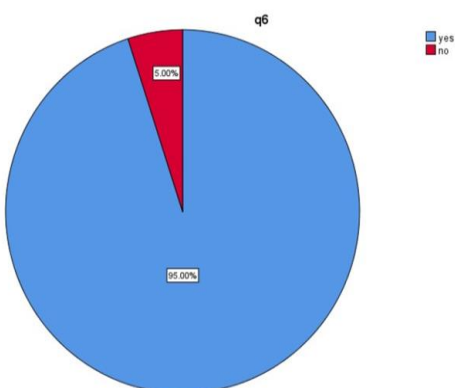
Q4: RP is not used in lessons other than phonetics



Q5: you didn't learn RP from a young age

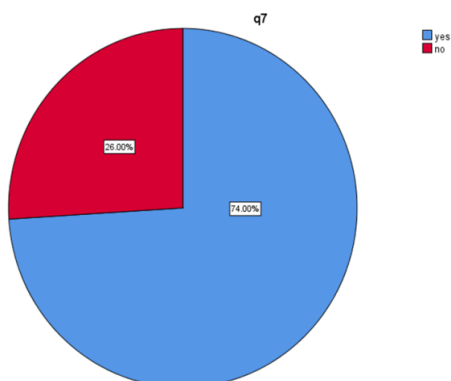


Q6: your teachers in primary and secondary schools didn't use this accent in teaching you English

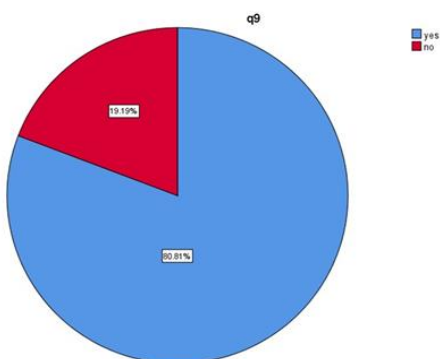




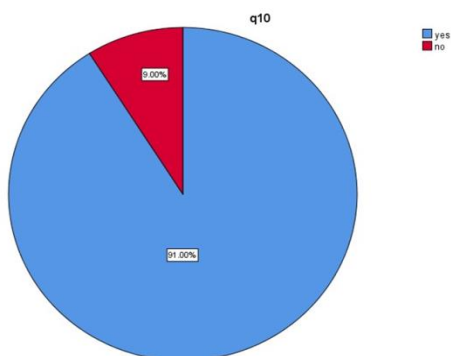
Q7: in the school curriculum, there were no lessons teaching you how to pronounce this accent



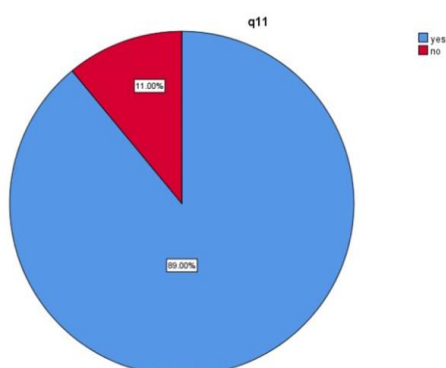
Q8: there aren't native speakers in your country who speaks RP so you can practice the language with them



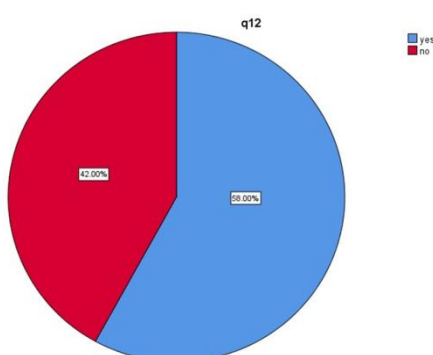
Q9: the American accent is prevalent on movies and most of the media



Q10: you lack a lot of practice to strengthen your jaw muscles to reach a correct RP



Q11: you don't listen much to the media, such as radio and TV, nor watching English movies that speak RP



1. The percentage of the questionnaire shows that 92. 93% in favor of the lack of providing modern appropriate laboratories for teaching phonetics and phonology.
2. 80. 81% of students support the fact that using this dialect is limited to the phonetics and phonology lessons only, and teachers of other subjects do not use it in their lesson.
3. 88.89% of the students didn't learn RP from a young age.

4. 95% of the students agreed that their teachers in the primary and secondary schools didn't use RP in teaching English language.
5. 74% of the students explained that the curricula in the primary and secondary schools didn't adequately allocate teaching pronunciation, especially RP. In other words, teaching RP was almost non-existent.
6. 80.81% of the students agreed that there are no native speakers in our country whom they can practice RP with.
7. 91% of the students explained that one of the reasons they are not acquainted with RP is the prevalence of the American dialect in the media and movies they watch.
8. 88% of the students declared that they lack sufficient training to strengthen their speech organs to be proficient in speaking this accent.
9. 58% of the students explained that they don't listen much to the media or social media that use RP, nor do they watch movies that speak it.
10. The rest of the percentages are disturbed as follows : 50% believe that there are insufficient specialized and competent teachers of phonetics and phonology, and 56% of the difficulties are attributed to the influence of the mother tongue (Arabic language) on learning the English language in general and RP in particular.

In light of these results, the researchers suggest the following:

1. Re-include the teaching of pronunciation in general and RP in particular in the curricula of the secondary schools, considering it to be the mother accent.
2. Changing the conversation curriculum adopted in the department of English to be in RP, as teaching it in the American accent creates confusion for students, leading to a lack of harmony and proficiency in speaking RP.
3. Encouraging students to listen to British English programs to strengthen their pronunciation.

4. Directing school teachers and university professors to adopt this accent in teaching as it is the official accent approved by the ministries of education and higher education.
5. Directing English literature professors in particular in Iraqi universities to rely on speaking RP, given that English literature principally is the mirror that reflects British culture.
6. Attempting to provide English language departments with appropriate audio laboratories and maintain them.
7. Choosing professors to teach phonetics and phonology with special competence and good pronunciation skills and having the ability and willingness to train students and bring them to a high level of mastery of pronunciation.

#### Conclusion:

After the thorough study and analysis to the difficulties that the students face in acquiring the RP in the departments of English, the research has come up with the following conclusions:

1. Iraqi students in departments of English need to be taught by teachers who use the RP only in all the subjects during their undergraduate study.
2. Teachers in the departments of English should show their students videos to native speakers of RP explaining the same subjects they teach inside the class.
3. Change the text books of all the under graduation study to the RP and do not allow any other accent to be followed.
4. Let the students practice the RP inside the class by using student-teacher method in all the subjects, and all other participations.
5. The departments of English need to be supplied with devices that enable the teachers and students to practice the RP easily.

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## التحديات التي تواجه طالبات قسم اللغة الإنكليزية في كلية التربية للبنات في الجامعة العراقية في تعلم اللهجة البريطانية الفصحى

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الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة. اللهجة البريطانية الفصحى. التعلم المخصص:

يتناول البحث أهم الصعوبات التي تواجه طالبات المرحلة الثانية في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، كلية التربية للبنات، الجامعة العراقية في تعلم اللهجة البريطانية الفصحى، ويسلط الضوء على بعض العقبات المسببة لضعف التلطف باللغة الإنكليزية لدى الطالبات بشكل عام، وضعف التلطف باللهجة البريطانية الفصحى بشكل خاص، ومحاولة إيجاد الحلول المناسبة لها. أجرت الباحثتان استبياناً للطالبات لمعرفة أهم الصعوبات التي تواجههن في تعلم هذه اللهجة.

وفي ضوء النتائج الإحصائية للاستبيان، توصلت الباحثتان إلى بعض هذه الصعوبات والمعوقات، واقترحتا بعض الحلول المناسبة لها.