

## Evaluating the Absence of Pronunciation Instruction in the English for Iraq Curriculum at the Secondary Schools

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تقييم اغفال تدريس مادة الصوت في منهج اللغة الانكليزية في المدارس الثانوية في

العراق

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### Abstract in Arabic

مادة الصوت مكون جوهري في اللغة الانكليزية يلعب دوراً هاماً في كل من التواصل ومهارة القراءة . اذا لم يتلقى متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية تدريساً في مادة التلفظ، فأنهم قد يشق طريقهم بجهد كبير لكي يتواصلوا بشكل فعال ويقروا بطلاقة. تدريس مادة التلفظ من مراحل دراسية مبكرة شيء ضروري لأن هناك علاقة قوية بين اصوات اللغة الإنكليزية وجوانب لغوية أخرى كالمعنى والتهجى وبعض القواعد اللغوية . الصوت غائب في منهج اللغة الانكليزية المطبق في الوقت الحاضر في المدارس الثانوية في العراق. وبسبب هذا الاغفال ، فأن الطلبة يواجهوا مشاكل عديدة عندما يتابعوا دراساتهم في اللغة الانكليزية في مرحلة الكلية . هذه الدراسة تسلط الضوء على اهمية تدريس مادة التلفظ في المرحلة الثانوية وتوصي بتضمين مادة التلفظ أما في ملحق مقرر رسمياً أو اضافته وحده في مادة التلفظ كملحق تكميلي للمنهج ليعالج هذه الفجوة ويحسن كفاءة الطلبة اللغوية. الكلمات المفتاحية: التلفظ ، التواصل ، المنهج

### Abstract

Pronunciation is an essential component of the English language, playing a crucial role in both communication and reading skill. If EFL learners do not receive instruction in pronunciation, they may struggle to communicate effectively and read fluently. Providing pronunciation instruction from the early stages of education is necessary, as there is a strong connection between English sounds and other key aspects of language, such as meaning, spelling and grammar. In actuality , pronunciation is not included in the course books titled *English for Iraq* curriculum , which is currently prescribed for the Iraqi secondary schools . Neglecting this vital component has made students encounter numerous difficulties when pursuing their undergraduate study in English. This study highlights the importance of pronunciation instruction in secondary schools and recommends the inclusion of either an official addendum or a supplementary unit on pronunciation to address this gap and enhance students' language proficiency. **Keywords: Pronunciation, Communicate, Curriculum**

### 1-Introduction

Pronunciation plays a key role in spoken and written communication. In spoken communication, it helps a listener to understand what a speaker says and at the same time, helps a speaker to express what s/he wants to say precisely. Pronunciation can change the meanings of a lot of words, for example, the word " minute" can be pronounced either / minit/ which means a unit of time equal to 60 seconds (noun) or /mainju:t/ which means tiny or very small (adjective), another example, the word (record), when the stress is on the first syllable, it is a noun , whereas the word (record) is a verb when the stress is on the second syllable. This is not only found in English, but it is also found in other languages, for instance, in Arabic , the word (فلاح) with a stress on the first syllable means a farmer, whereas (فلاح) with a stress on the second syllable means good deeds. Another example, the word (الصبا) /alsiba / means the youth and (الصبا) /alsaba / mean. a slight wind in the

morning , and in Kurdish, the word (شِير)/feir/ with a stress on the middle of the word means a lion, whereas (شِير) /ʃir/ without a stress means milk. In daily life, spoken English is used more frequently than its written form, which is generally confined to examinations and formal documentation. Therefore, accurate pronunciation plays a crucial role in facilitating comprehension and avoiding misunderstanding. Halliday (1985: 49-55) states that spoken English is the foundation of human language. Inaccurate pronunciation can result in semantic confusion or unintended social awkwardness, particularly when speakers fail to distinguish between minimal pairs or near-homophones. For instance, insufficient precision may lead to the misinterpretation of pairs such as: "guy" vs. "gay", "pens" vs. "penis" or "us" vs. "ass". In written communication, pronunciation also plays a crucial role in spelling, for example, many learners ask, "Why is the last consonant letter in the verb "refer" is doubled when adding one of the suffixes -ing or \_ed and not doubled in a verb like "suffer"? The answer to this question depends on pronunciation. The word "refer" has the stress on the last syllable, whereas in "suffer" the stress is on the first syllable. In addition to what has been mentioned above, pronunciation plays an important role in some linguistic rules. For instance, learners cannot know how to use the indefinite articles correctly unless they know how to pronounce the words which come after them because the use of the indefinite articles depends on sounds, not on letters, for example:

- A line is a one-dimensional figure. (The word "one" begins with the consonant sound /w/ )
- The examination lasted for an hour. (The word "hour" begins with the diphthong /au/ )
- There is a university in every Iraqi city. (The word "university" begins with the consonant sound /j/ )

In conclusion, it can be said that pronunciation is fundamental for all learners prior to evaluating their academic and professional success and development. This component is essential for EFL learners whether their principal field of study is English, engineering, medicine, etc. They will definitely need to consult the dictionary about the pronunciation of a new word. How can they know its pronunciation if they do not know the phonetic symbols and phonetic transcription? It can be concluded that EFL learners are required to be competent at pronouncing as well as transcribing the phonetic symbols of the English words.

### **1.1-The Problem of the Study**

Despite efforts to enhance English language instruction in Iraq through the adoption of the *English for Iraq* textbook series, a significant gap remains in the area of pronunciation instruction. While the series emphasizes communicative skills, it fails to incorporate structured lessons on pronunciation across all educational levels. This omission has serious pedagogical implications, as pronunciation is a fundamental component of oral communication. Iraqi EFL learners, particularly those at primary and secondary schools are being deprived of exposure to the phonological area of English, such as stress, intonation, rhythm and individual sounds. As a result, many learners develop inaccurate pronunciation. This gap in the curriculum does not only impede learners' oral / aural fluency and confidence but it is not in line with the communicative goals outlined in the national educational policy. The negligence of pronunciation instruction in the EFL curriculum in Iraq presents a critical problem that requires urgent attention from educators, curriculum designers and policy-makers.

### **1.2-The Aim of the Study**

This study aims to shed light on a significant and longstanding gap in the teaching of pronunciation in the English language curriculum prescribed in Iraqi secondary schools. Despite the critical role that pronunciation plays in effective oral / aural communication and overall language proficiency, this component has been largely overlooked in the current curriculum. By examining the structure and content of the *English for Iraq* textbook series and evaluating the outcomes on EFL learners, this study seeks to underscore the educational consequences of this omission. It also aims to emphasize the need for integrating systematic and explicit pronunciation instruction in order to improve learners' communication competence and support their academic and professional futures.

### **1.3 Research Assumption of the study**

The absence of explicit pronunciation instruction in the *English for Iraq* curriculum at secondary schools negatively affects students' pronunciation proficiency and contributes to difficulties in other language areas, such as spelling and meaning. Therefore, integrating systematic pronunciation instruction would lead to students' proficiency in the target language, especially in pronunciation.

### **1.4-Significance of the Study**

This study could be of benefit for educators, curriculum-designers and educational policy-makers, as it highlights a critical gap in the current English Language curriculum. By drawing attention to the absence of

pronunciation instruction, it emphasizes the urgent need for corrective action to enhance learners' oral / aural communication skills and overall language proficiency.

## **2- Historical Background**

Before 2003 , Iraq implemented a national English curriculum titled *The New English Course for Iraq* . This curriculum consisted of an eight \_ book series : The first two books were designed for primary school pupils , while the remaining six were intended for secondary school students . The series was developed by a committee of distinguished university teachers headed by Dr. Khalil I . Al- Hamash ( Ph.D.) .Although the series was initially based on the principles of the Audio- Lingual Method , Book 8 represented a significant shift toward the principles of the Communicative Approach . Books 3,4,5,6,7 and 8 progressively introduced and covered the English sound system , providing EFL students with gradual exposure to pronunciation practice and continuous assessment . This gradual exposure gave a more accurate picture of students' achievements . ( Mousavi : 1997 : 21 ) In school and public examinations , there was only one specific question given to assess learners' ability in pronunciation . As a result , when students pursued further studies in English language , they did not encounter significant difficulties with pronunciation and generally performed well in related examination tasks .

## **3- The Current Status of English in Iraq**

In Iraq, English is taught as a foreign language. It is instructed in schools and colleges as an independent subject matter, but learners rarely use it outside the educational institutions, i.e, Learners have limited opportunities to use it beyond the academic settings. The Communicative Approach, which is currently Implemented in Iraqi educational institutions, places a heavy emphasis on speaking skill which means making pronunciation central to effective communication and without accurate pronunciation, communication becomes ineffective and often leads to misunderstanding

(Riddell, 2003 : 82)

It is worth mentioning here that the large number of learners in each classroom poses a significant obstacle to the precise application of the communicative approach. The current English curriculum has neglected pronunciation instruction , moreover , questions related to this component have been completely removed from both school and public examinations . As a result , the majority of students who join universities are incompetent at pronunciation skill , often struggling with the correct articulation of sounds . This gap has created a noticeable barrier to effective communication and academic performance in English language departments .It is recommended that preparing a simplified and systematic approach to pronunciation instruction from the early stages of education could help learners internalize the basic rules for natural recognizing as well as producing oral language elements .

## **4- The Impact of Pronunciation on Various language Aspects**

To highlight the significance of pronunciation Instruction in language learning, particularly for EFL learners, it is essential to examine its impact on the following language aspects:

### **4.1 - Understanding meaning**

Understanding the meaning of spoken language in particular depends on accurate pronunciation.

Mispronunciation, placing stress on the wrong syllable or using improper intonation can cause confusion and misinterpretation. Therefore, regular exposure to pronunciation training significantly improves learners' proficiency and oral communication efficiency.

a- Arabic has six vowel phonemes (Al-Ani 1970 : 3) whereas English has twenty. This phonological difference

causes confusion for indigenous Arabic-speaking EFL learners. Pronunciation instruction enables them to distinguish between short and long vowel sounds such as live /liv/ versus leave /li:v/ or hat / hat / versus hate / heit/. Moreover, Arabic does not permit initial or final consonant clusters. As a result, Arabic-speaking learners insert an extra vowel sound between consonants, for example, saying /a:skid / instead of / a: skt /.

Additionally, some English phonemes such as /p/ , /g/ and /3/ are not found in Arabic. Therefore, many Arabic-speaking learners do not differentiate between "bath" and "path", "glass" and "class"

it goes without saying that pronunciation can also change word part of speech as its meaning , therefore ; identifying word stress helps learners to pronounce words clearly and be understood correctly, For example;

- present (n.) = gift (The stress is on the first syllable).
- present (v.) = to give something to someone. (The stress is on the last syllable).
- object (n.) = something you can use or touch (The stress is on the first syllable).

- object (v.) = to disagree with someone (The stress is on the last syllable).

The above-mentioned examples are two-syllable words that can be pronounced in two different ways.

Here , the stress changes the part of speech.

Another aspect of the phonological system is Intonation, which refers to the tone or pitch of the voice, plays a significant role in conveying meaning. For example:

"You are very clever! " (with a rising tone)

This sounds ironic.

"You are very clever. " (with a falling tone).

This is a simple declarative statement.

**b-** If EFL learners do not study pronunciation, they are unable to pronounce the -ed, and -s suffixes accurately or distinguish the light and dark /l/ sound, which may lead to ineffective communication.

**c-** If they do not study pronunciation, they might be unable to discriminate to pronounce the definite article "the"/ði:/ or /ðə/.

/ði:/ before a vowel sound, for example: The apple

/ðə /before a consonant sound, for example: The book.

They are also unable to know to pronounce words with variable pronunciations, For example, the letters "ea" in words such as: mead /i:/ bread /e/ great /ei/

**d.** If they do not study pronunciation, they could be unable to determine whether the letter "c" is pronounced as /s/ or /k/. They are also unable to know whether the letter "r" is pronounced or silent.

To sum up , good pronunciation supports more confident speaking, fluent reading aloud and better listening comprehension.

#### **4.2- Spelling**

English is not a phonetic language as Arabic in the area of phonetics . As a result , many Arabic – speaking EFL learners expect matching between spelling and pronunciation in English . This phonological difference poses a significant challenge for the learners who always struggle with both mispronunciation and misspelling . Kelly (2000:131) states that working on spelling and pronunciation together helps learners independent study outside the educational institutions Despite the fact that there is no consistent relationship in English between the two components mentioned above , some general rules or notes can be devised to facilitate English orthography (Collins and Inger M. Mees 2008:105)

**a-** Accurate pronunciation can help EFL learners predict and remember correct spellings ; therefore, mastery of digraphs ( a pair of letters that together represent a single sound, such as "ph" for the /f/) lays a strong foundation for reading and writing proficiency in English. Introducing digraphs early helps EFL learners associate specific letter combinations with particular sounds which enhances both accurate pronunciation and correct spelling.

**b-** To bridge the phonological gap between English and Arabic and help EFL learners overcome the difficulties they encounter in pronunciation and spelling , it is beneficial to explicitly teach :

- Homographs ( words which have the same spelling , but pronounced differently , depending on contexts . For example live /liv/(v.) vs. live / laiv / ( adj ) ; lead / i:/ (v.) vs. lead / e / .

- Homophones : ( words which have the same pronunciation , but different spelling . For example : week vs. weak.

**c-** If EFL learners do not study phonetic rules , they will not be able to identify the number of syllables in the words. Consequently, they may struggle to apply the correct suffixes. For example, they may not know when to use "-er" (as in big → bigger) or when to use "more" (as in beautiful → more beautiful), which often depends on the number of syllables in the adjectives. (Swan 2005: 113-114).

**d-** If learners are not familiarized with the phonetic rules of the English oral language , they will be unable to determine whether to double the final consonant of multisyllabic words when adding suffixes. This is because they do not know where the primary stress falls, on the first syllable or the last. For instance, in suffer → suffered (stress on the first syllable, no doubling) versus refer → referred (stress on the second syllable, the final consonant doubled).

(Swan 2005: 553)

**e-** If they do not study pronunciation, they may not be able to determine whether the vowel letters "ei" or "ie" are pronounced /i:/ or not. This affects correct spelling particularly in relation to the rule. "i" "before" "e" except after "c", so we write "ei". For example:

-ceiling, deceive, conceive, receipt  
-believe, field, piece, shield, chief

Exceptions: seize, Neil, Keith

(Swan: 2005: 554)

#### 4.3- Grammar

Pronunciation also affects grammatical accuracy, For example:

If EFL learners do not study pronunciation, they may be unable to determine whether to use the indefinite article "a" or "an" before singular countable nouns. This choice does not depend on spelling, but on the initial sound of the word that follows. For example:

- an hour (because "hour" begins with a vowel sound /au/ despite starting with letter "h").
- a uniform ( because "uniform" begins with a / ju:/ sound, a consonant sound).
- a university (also begins with / ju:/ )
- a one-dimensional figure ("one" starts with a /w/ sound).

#### 5- Conclusions

- 1- Pronunciation instruction is a crucial element in the development of oral communication skills among Iraqi EFL learners. Its absence in the secondary school curriculum leaves students ill- equipped for effective spoken interaction.
- 2- The current English curriculum lacks explicit focus on pronunciation, despite the fact that accurate pronunciation is fundamental for intelligibility and fluency. This omission contradicts the communicative approach adopted in Iraqi educational institutions.
- 3- There is an urgent need for curriculum reform to address this gap. Without support and structured materials, both teachers and learners are left without guidance on how to approach pronunciation systematically.

#### 6-Recommendations

- 1- The Ministry of Education should form a specialized committee of EFL experts and curriculum- designers to review the current curriculum and recommend specific changes related to pronunciation instruction.
- 2- An official addendum or supplementary unit on pronunciation should be developed and distributed across all secondary schools.  
This should include clear learning outcomes, phonetic content, and practical exercises.
- 3- An ongoing assessment of learners' pronunciation should be integrated into the classroom routine, using a formative method that provides feedback and encourage improvement.

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