An Analysis of Errors Made By Yemeni University Students in The English Consonant-Clusters System

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Abstract

This study aims to shed light by giving a critical analysis of errors made by Yemeni/Hodeidah University students in the area of English consonant clusters system. This causes a major problem for university students’ interlingual and intralingual strategies. The technique used is an error analysis for a random sample of three levels at English Dept. Faculty of Education, Hodeidah University focusing on data collection and data analysis and arriving at recommendations and conclusion of the study.

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1- Introduction

One of the focal facts about language enquiry is that it is a communicative process by means of the information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviors. Actually, Arabic and English are entirely different in their linguistic system. Both languages are of two typical families. Unfortunately, each has different language components, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. The English phonological system, especially segmental features, is accordingly different from that of Arabic. The Arabic and English consonant clusters have a variety of structures. Hence, the topic of study is very important to be investigated. The consonant clusters are the difficult aspects in English pronunciation so that Yemeni students at college encounter problems and make serious errors due to different sources. The study consists of two parts: a theoretical part and a practical one. The first part is focused on the theoretical background, the scope, the problem, the purpose, the objectives, and the limits of study, and literature review while the second one deals with data collection, data analysis, a discussion of findings, recommendations, and conclusions.

2- The problems, the purpose, the objectives, and the limits of the study

The topic of this study is very important to be investigated. English consonant clusters are the most difficult aspects in pronunciation that Hodeidah University students face. They make many errors in the English clusters. They repeatedly make errors in this difficult type of pronunciation work. Thus, there are many examples given to them that illustrate these errors, which are common with them, e.g. “spread”, “splendid”, “play”, “next”, “tests”, “asked”…etc.

They usually tend to follow the strategy of Epenthesis in English clusters; it is the insertion of a vowel or consonant segment within an existing string or cluster reduction (See Celce-Muria. et al 2003: 83 and 164-65); they pronounce these words as in the following manners:
/spired/, /spilendid/, /pilei/, /nekist/, and so on.

Actually these errors are considered a big detect in the pronunciation of the students at Hodeidah University levels. This is because it is not always easy to pronounce two or more consonants as a result, the university students in Yemen employ certain strategies (like cluster reduction) to make consonant cluster easier to pronounce. It is known that Arab speakers learning English as a foreign language might also employ vowel insertion, especially initial consonant clusters beginning with s- as in the examples mentioned above.

This study is designed to identify the errors that Yemeni University students at the three levels (I, II, III,) make in the English consonant clusters, and to try to explain such errors. This study also aims at arriving at some conclusions, and pedagogical suggestions that may help University instructors understand and correct their students’ errors in a more systematic way.

Limits of the study:
1- This study will mainly deal with the English consonant clusters system as phonological (segmental) structures and this avoids any detailed analysis of the topic under research.
2- The Language usually referred to for the explanation of students transfer of errors is modern standard Arabic since it is officially used today in Arabic newspapers, radio, TV, newscasts, official meetings, conferences. Thus, colloquial Yemeni Arabic can also play significant role in these errors.
3- The study is confined to students at English Dept/ Faculty of Education/Hodeidah Univ. which is the location of the study (levels I, II, III). The population of the study is fifteen students randomly chosen from each level.

3- Literature Review: The State of Art
In phonology literature, the scholars are generally agreed that consonant clusters are sequences of two or more consonants at the beginning or end of syllable.” (Verma&Krishnaswamy. 1996:39; Balasabramanian, 2000: 117; Roach, 2004:71), and they are agreed on the
nature of English consonant clusters: initial consonant clusters, and final consonant clusters. (See Balasubramanian, 2000, 117-121; Celce-Murcia, et al, 2003: 83’164-165). They have stressed the universal phonological fact whereby the type of syllable structure among the language of the world is CV. They believe that the vowel is the obligating component in the nucleus of a syllable; that is, a syllable composed of a consonant sound followed by a vowel sound. (Dalton and Seidhofer 1994: 34-8, Celce-Murcia et al 2003, 80-9,Roach, 2004:71-80,127)

Celce-Murcia et al (2003: 83) have dealt with the strategy of cluster reduction whereby the English speakers tend to frequently use to simplify the consonant clusters both initially and finally occurred.

Celce-Murcia, et al, (2003: 83,164-165) have brilliantly discussed the strategy of Epenthesis; it is the insertion of a vowel or a consonant segment within an existing string of segments. This may occur as word – internal epenthesis in words like “film”----/[filәm]/; “please” ------/[pәleiz]/ or word-external epenthesis as in “sport” /әsport/ by speakers of Arabic. These two types of epenthesis are the major categories of errors made by Hodiedah Univ. students. Languages differ greatly in the ways in which consonants can form clusters, and in which positions in the word the clusters can occur. This can be illustrated in the following section dealing with English and Arabic consonant clusters.

4- Comparsion of English and Arabic Consonant Clusters System

English consonant clusters are two, three, or more consonants. Consonant clusters may occur at the beginning of a word (an initial consonant cluster), at the end of a word (a final consonant cluster). For example, in English: initial cluster/spl-/[splәʃ]/ “splash”; final cluster /-stl/ in /test/.

English permits consonant clusters at the beginning and end of syllables. (See Richards et al, 1992:79; Verma and Krishnaswamy, 1996:39; Balasubaramian, 2000:117-121; Celce-Maria, 2003:80-89, and Roach, 2004:71-76). However, in Arabic, consonant clusters can occur only at the end of syllables and that Arabic does not permit consonant clusters at the beginning of syllables.
Hence, Arabic has three consonant clusters while English has ten (See Al-Khawali, 1993:60-61). But Balasurbarmain,(2000:117) stressed that initial consonant cluster in English can be made up of either two or three consonants (as in “spleen” and “steam”) and final consonant clusters can be made up of either two, three, or four consonants (as in “texts”).

Actually, there are two types of clusters in initial and final consonant clusters. The former refers to the sequence of two or three consonants that occur at the beginning of a word. While the latter refers to the sequence of two or more consonants that occur at the end of a word. Really, English initial consonant clusters are divided into two kinds: Initial clusters- made up of two consonants and initial clusters- made up of three consonants. The first kind is of two types in English. The first type is composed of /s/ followed by one of the following small sets of consonants / p, t, k, f, m, n, l, w, j / as in the following words; “spy”, “stay”, “sky”, “sphere”.

“small”, “snow”, “sleep”, “sear”, and “suit”. The sound /s/ in these clusters is called the pre-initial consonant and the other consonants / p, t, k…etc/ in the previous examples are the initial clusters.

The other type of two initial consonant clusters begins with one of the following consonants / p, t, k, d, b, G, f, v, m, h / followed by one of the following sets / l, r, w, j / as in (“play”, “try”, ”quick”, “few”,…etc/) and the three initial consonant clusters in English has a sequence of three consonants which occur initially. They are as follows (spr-, str-, skr-, spj-, skj-, skw-) as in (“spring”, “scream”, “street”, “spurious”, “stupid”, “skewer”, “splendid”, and “square”).

In English final clusters, the sequence of consonants at the end of words are more varied than at the beginning mainly because /-s/ or /-z/ have to be added to most nouns to give their plural forms as in the words (“dogs”, “facts”, “fields”, etc), and /-t/ or /-d/ have to be added to most verbs to form their past tense as in “wished” /wiʃt/, “asked”
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The sound /θ/ is also used to form nouns like “strength”/streŋθ/, “sixth”/siksθ/... etc.

Arabic, on the other hand, does not permit initial consonant clusters at all. In the syllable-final position, Arabic permits consonant clusters, but these clusters can be made up of two consonants. Here some examples of the final consonant clusters are permissible in Arabic: /-sb//hizb/; /-lb//qalb/; /-rb//karb; /-bt //sabt/.

Here, it is noticed that the phonology of English permits consonant clusters up to three consonants to begin a syllable, up to three consonants to begin a syllable, and up to four consonants to end a syllable. Hence, wide varieties of syllable-structures, closely connected with consonant clusters, are possible in English.

Compared with English, Arabic has very few permissible syllable structures because linguists have claimed that Arabic syllables cannot begin with a vowel. This is a convention rule that Arabic syllables cannot begin with a vowel. Hence, words like /?Ab/; /?bb/; /?um/.

Most of difficulties, which university students face in learning English, are a consequence of the degree to which their native language differs from English. As a result interlingual errors may occur due to the mother tongue interference (both negative and positive transfer) (see Naama, 2006(forthcoming).

A native speaker of Arabic learning English, for example, faces many more difficulties in realizing the English consonant clusters because they alternate consonant and vowel sounds and try to force vowels in between the consonants (e.g. desks /desks//deskus/).

Generally speaking, Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing. This fact has been clearly stated by many researchers; e.g. Abdulhaq (1982) and Krasper (1983). To shed light on the problems of Arab learners of English, the following are examples taken from different countries. In Jordan, for example, studies have been conducted to investigate lexical, syntactical, and phonological errors made by Jordanian learners of English; e.g. Abdulhaq,(1982) Zughail and Taminian(1984). Abdulhaq (1982:1) states, "There are general outcries about the continuous deteriorations of the standards of English..."
proficiency of students among school teachers, university instructors and all those who are concerned with English language teaching." In support of Abdulhaq’s view, Zughaul (1984) found that "Jordanian EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English."

In Saudi Arabia, there are specific goals in the teaching of English. Among these, students should be able to understand and communicate using a variety of notions and linguistic functions based on every day situations. Accordingly, all Saudi school graduates are expected to develop native-like facility in English, which enable them to communicate spontaneously, effectively, and confidently.

In Sudan, Kambal (1980) analyzes the major syntactic errors made by Sudanese university students in the area of verb phrase and the noun phrase. Egyptian learners of English also face problems. Wahaba (1998:36) summarizes some of these problems.

In Yemen, Abbad (1988:15) admits that Arab learners of English have most difficulties in communication. Arab learners find it difficult to communicate freely in the target language (English). This may be due to the methods of learning and learning environment, which may be said to be unsuitable for learning a foreign language. Accordingly, intralingual errors may be emerged among Arab learners of English.

The weakness of English language learners in general, and English language department majors graduates more specifically, has been attributed to various factors: lack of knowledge, English language department curricula, teaching methodology, lack of the target language environment and the learners’ motivation (Saleiman, 1983; Mukattash, 1983; Zughaul, 1983, and Ibrahim, 1983)

This study has come across only one study about consonant clusters errors. Abdullmanan (2005) conducted a study in which he found that Arab learners put a short vowel before and after the first consonant in the initial consonant clusters. He attributed this insertion of a short vowel to students’ endeavours to facilitating the difficult pronunciation of initial consonant clusters due to mother tongue transfer. As you see this is the only study, which this paper has come across so far.
5- The Study

This study deals herewith the following sections:

5.1 Data Collection

This section can cover the following sections:

5.1.1 Description of test

The cassette recorder will be used in order to keep the record of the students' pronunciation of English consonant clusters clear. The students will be asked to read certain words that include two-initial-consonant clusters like (play), three-initial-consonant clusters as in (spread); two-final-consonant clusters as in (wicked); and three and four-final-consonant clusters as in (next, sixths).

5.1.2 Validity of the test

The results of this study will be valid and generalizable to all Yemeni university students. It is thought that the study will result in objective judgments because the nature and the areas of the topic of this study is very clear, e.g. initial-consonant clusters, and final-consonant clusters made up of two or three and four consonants. Thus, this study can make sure of these aspects easily in each item.

5.1.3 Subjects

The sample of the study is 45 students randomly chosen from the three levels of The English Dept., Faculty of Education, and Hodiedah Univ. These students can cover different levels: good, moderate, and low.

5.1.4 Research procedure

1) The elicitation technique used is reading pronunciation of certain items given to the three levels.

2) An error analysis has been conducted to identify, classify, and explain errors made.

5.1.5 A Taxonomy of Consonant-Clusters Errors

In this part of the study, all the categories of errors accompanied with their numerical data were collected from the English
Dept., Faculty of Education, Hodiedah Univ., levels (I, II, and III). The students’ response frequency occurrence will be illustrated in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Errors</th>
<th>Initial consonant clusters</th>
<th>Final consonant clusters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Made of 2</td>
<td>Made up of 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pb- (play)</td>
<td>Sp- (spread)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Interpretation of Test Results

Here in this section, the study is going to interpret the pronunciation test conducted on 45 Yemeni students at the university levels (I, II, III) who were randomly chosen as a representative sample of Yemeni university learners of English. A close look at the above-mentioned table, five categories of consonant-clusters have to be investigated and analyzed.

6.1 Error category I: Initial-Consonant Clusters Made Up of Two Consonants:

This category shows that only 26 students out of 45 students were able to pronounce the initial-consonant clusters made up of two consonants as in the above-mentioned table. They pronounced it with inserting the short vowel /i/ as in (play, slay) -----/ pilei/, /sili/, they generalize the strategy of epenthesis where the learner makes an insertion of a vowel within an existing string of segments. (See Celce-Murcia, 2003:164).
6.2 Error Category II: Initial-Consonants Clusters Made Up of Three Consonants:

In relation to the initial-consonant-clusters made up of three consonants, it seems no one pronounces them appropriately and properly. They fail to pronounce them correctly. They also tend to insert the vowel /i/ in words as “spread”, “splendid” --/spired/, /splendid/.

This aspect of pronunciation which is the initial-consonant clusters made up of three consonants are completely absent in Arabic. Throughout the recorded cassette, it was noted that all the subjects, who mispronounced /spr-/ and /spl-, inserted a short vowel after the second consonant and before the third consonant as can be shown in the pronunciation of the following words /spired/ and /splendid/. Some pronounced them with putting a short vowel at the beginning of the consonant clusters and between the consonant-clusters.

In a study conducted by Abdullmanan (2005:1), it is found that Arab learners put a short vowel before and after the first consonant in the initial-consonant clusters made up of three consonants.

He attributed this insertion of a vowel to students’ endeavors to facilitating the difficult pronunciation of initial-consonant clusters made up of three consonants. This difficulty in this type of error could be attributed to mother tongue interference (an interlingual error).

6.3 Error Category III: Final-Consonant Clusters Made Up of Two Consonants

Here the students pronounced (songs) as--/sɔŋz/. In this category of error only ten students got true scores in pronouncing the final-consonant cluster/-kt/. Most of the students pronounced it as /pikid/. It is thought that this was escorted to the students’ overgeneralization. They did not recognize that the /-d/ sound has to be pronounced /t/ if it is preceded by a voiceless sound /k/. They tended to believe that it should be pronounced like /played/ and some other verbs.

As for the second word /sɔŋs/, only few students failed to pronounce it. It is obvious that they have no difficulty in pronouncing
According to Al-Wafi, two-consonant clusters can occur in Arabic at medial and final positions of words. Thus, it is found this kind of consonant cluster in Arabic words like “nafṣ” mean (soul) and “kenz” means (treasure). Accordingly, this category indicates that final-consonant clusters made up of two consonants have scored the highest frequency occurrence of true pronunciation. This could be attributed to the similarity between the two languages Arabic and English in this aspect (a positive transfer); according to Lado’s theory where the structures and forms of the two languages are the same, no difficulty would be anticipated. (See Lado, 1957:1-2).

6.4 Error Category IV & V: Final-Consonant Clusters Made Up of Three and Four Consonants

According to the category of final-consonant clusters made up of three and four consonants, it is observed that no one could pronounce this type of consonant-clusters.

These two types are the most difficult consonant clusters for Yemeni university students. No one could pronounce the word “sixths” correctly. All of the subjects attempted to insert a short vowel among the four consonants clusters as in the following manner: “sixths” ---/siksiθ/ or /sikθis/. These two types of final-consonant clusters are common in English but they are not familiar in Arabic at all. This supports Lado’s theory (1957:2) that most errors will occur in the phonological aspects when the two languages differ from each other.

7. Discussion of Result Findings

These result findings of these types of errors show that the most serious errors made by Yemeni university students occurred in three and four-final-consonant clusters. These two types are usually nil in Arabic segmental features. It is the major cause of interlingual phonological errors of Yemeni university students in the English consonant clusters. Accordingly, they shift to use the common system in their mother tongue to the target language, i.e., English.
Another cause beyond making such errors in English consonant-clusters is the lack of using teaching aids. The frequent use of various listening aids is very important in improving the students' standard of pronunciation learning English as a foreign language. Due to the difficulties in English consonant-clusters, students have to listen to cassettes more and more to realize and distinguish the nature of English consonant-clusters.

In addition, incompetent instructors affect their students' pronunciation. No doubt, many instructors in Yemeni universities need to pay attention to their own pronunciation and do their best to uproot their students' phonological competence in discriminating this aspect of English phonology; the consonant clusters in all their types. Accordingly, these serious difficulties may result in the mispronunciation of the Yemeni university students in English consonant clusters.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1 Conclusion

To sum up, the results of this study show that the participants made a variety of errors in pronouncing English consonant clusters for different factors:

The first factor is that the effect of mother tongue, Arabic, because of negative transfer in a way that there are major differences between Arabic and English as far as the consonant-clusters are concerned.

The second factor is that the lack of practicing of listening aids by the Yemeni university students. They do not usually utilize the various kinds of audio and video aids to improve the standard of their pronunciation.

The third factor is that the inadequate pronunciation of the university instructors. This will make the university students unaware of the good pronunciation. This may make the university students internalize the inadequate pronunciation, which may become so difficult to overcome.

Accordingly, Yemeni university students tend to break up the consonant clusters by following the strategy of epenthesis and cluster
reduction. This in turn will let the students persist on making such errors in English consonant clusters if there have been no appropriate teaching methods and techniques.

A cursory look at the categorization of errors in the English consonant clusters has revealed that there have been two types of errors: interlingual and intralingual errors. Both of these types of errors constitute the major types of errors in English consonant clusters made by university students in Yemen, particularly at Hodeidah University.

The first type: interlingual errors have been attributed to mother tongue interference due to the mismatch between the two languages, English and Arabic (see categories I, III, IV, and V) while the second one has got less role in the majority of these errors (see category II), this type of errors is mainly attributed to the bad methods of teaching and lack of training and the part of the university students.

Generally it can be concluded that these two major types of errors made by the university students have resulted from various pronunciation strategies such as cluster reduction, resyllabification, and epenthesis.

8.2. Recommendations

In teaching English as a foreign language, the tutors always describe pronunciation as the Cinderella of language teaching. This is considered as a very important language skill. Both productive and receptive skills constitute the learner’s tendency to learn a language, but Yemeni university students lack the basic knowledge of articulatory phonetics (especially the segmental features). It is important to place a heavy emphasis on listening (reception) as a way into releasing appropriate pronunciation (production) of English sounds in general and consonant-clusters in particular.

Apart from using knowledge of our university students and our ears in order to be aware of their pronunciation problems, it is also useful to have some prior knowledge of what elements of English phonetics and phonology are likely to cause problem. This is one area of language learning where few people would question the use of contrastive analysis. This needs to be focused on University teaching and learning situations.
Having informed the university students of some of the main areas of contrast between native language (Arabic) and target language (English) and what difficulties they have, it then remains for the university tutor to build this information into a variety of meaningful classroom exercises and drills. In doing so, the university students’ pronunciation communicative competence will be developed and this also makes pronunciation an active element of learning process and lets university students focus on the language they are producing.

University students can be exposed to English consonant clusters through demonstrations, diagrams, and explanations. Consonant cluster sounds can be drawn to the students’ attention every time they appear on a tape or in the tutors’ own conversation. In this way the students’ ears can gradually be trained. On hearing properly the students are able to speak correctly.

The key to successful pronunciation, however, is not so much getting students to produce correct consonant cluster sounds, but rather to have them listen and observe how English is spoken—either on audio or video tape or from the tutors themselves. The more aware they are, the greater the chance that their own intelligibility levels will rise.
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A Test Format

Read the following English words to show their consonant-clusters:-

Play, spread, picked, wicked, songs,
Asked, next, sixths, steam, skeam,
Sleep, sphere, spleen, spray, street,
Scream, least, begged, film, leaps,
Asks, sixths, texts, twelfths.