

## **PRONUNCIATION ENCUMBRANCES FOR OMANI EFL STUDENTS AT THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTRE OF THE SALALAH COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY: A PRE OBSERVATIONAL STUDY**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The study investigated the pronunciation encumbrances encountered by different linguistic groups of Omani students in the English Language Center at Salalah College of Technology. The study employed teachers' observations and inferences as a research method to delve deeper in the nature and causes of the students' pronunciation difficulties. Teachers' inferences and narratives constitute the sum total of the students' pronunciation problems in English as well as their recalled experiences over the span of teaching in the center.*

**KEYWORDS:** Pronunciation, encumbrances, English, learning.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The geographical region of the Dhofar Governorate, in far southwestern Oman on the Arabic Peninsula, is home to a wide variety of local cultures, traditions and legends. Looked at from the perspective of a linguist, the area offers a treasure trove of miscellaneous influences and flavors that help to compose a very diverse and appetizing stew, although the ostensibly official language for all of the region's inhabitants is Arabic, the influences of other autochthonous languages and/or dialects and the geography of the Dhofari region constitute the main *raison d'être* to conduct this study. To take the case of the residents of Salalah first, it is true that most of the citizenry living within and abutting its limits do, indeed, speak a fairly standard Arabic. However, in the neighboring mountains which overlook the sea ledge, there are numerous tribesmen who speak Jabali, one of several languages in the country for which there exists no discernible written form. Moving in either a northeasterly or southwesterly direction from Salalah, wide expanses of desert and valleys can be found, and with them the distinctive dialects of the wandering Bedouins, which can take the forms of several languages dedicated to several of the tribes in these areas, such as the Dhania (also called Al Kathiria), Mahri, and Harsousi dialectic variants of the Arabic language. All of these various influences and exceptions to the standard expectation of spoken and written Arabic and English can be seen even more closely with an eye towards one of the leading educational institutions in the region, the sole higher college of technology, the Salalah College of Technology.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This article focuses on several of the different linguistic groups, as well as the pronunciation encumbrances that can arise from the use of them, within the study of intensive English as a foreign language in the English Language Foundation Center at the Salalah College of Technology.

### **Questions of the Study**

The questions that this pre-study attempts to answer are as follows:

(1. What potential pronunciation problems do students from various linguistic backgrounds and circumstances in the Dhofari region face when they attempt to learn English together, in a unified setting, instructed by a teaching staff from various and different linguistic backgrounds and expectations for oral production?

(2. What potential solutions may be offered to ideally eliminate, and at the very least improve upon, total oral production and individual mistakes, errors and other oral issues that students from Arabic and Arabic-related linguistic backgrounds encounter?

## METHODOLOGY

This article can be better described as a pre-observational study that is intended to be carried out before a more substantive study may be attempted. According to DeWalt and DeWalt (2002), observation as research method is used “to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study that is as objective and accurate as possible given the limitations of the method” (p.92). It can be used to help answer general descriptive research questions, to build theory, or to generate or test hypotheses for further future research.

### Participants

The study is focused upon the observations, inferences and narratives of a group of teaching staff who have been engaged in their craft for anywhere between five and seven years. These individual teachers have been selected randomly, but also with certain characteristics in mind. One of the instructors hails from the city of Salalah, and can be judged to fairly represent the segment of students who exhibit vocabulary and oral production issues common to the relatively urban area of Salalah. Another two instructors are from two different families that hail from the nearby mountains and desert, and bring with them a background that can be said to fairly represent the linguistic and oral production issues of those SCT college students who speak Jabali and the distinctive dialects and/or languages of the wandering Bedouins. A fourth instructor is a native speaker of English, hails from outside the region of Dhofar, as well as the country of Oman, and can therefore be called upon to make observations about the spoken abilities and tendencies of the students from a completely disinterested or neutral perspective as to competing linguistic tendencies between speakers of closely related, yet dissimilar language variants. The final instructor, i.e. the researcher, hails from the neighboring country of Yemen, which is generally acknowledged to have been the original birthplace of the language that is known as standard Arabic today, as well as the locus of the culture that is very often, and irrevocably connected to, the language or languages and their variants that are spoken in the Arab Peninsula.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the viewpoint of a Jabali educated background, there are several unique features in play. For example, it may be observed that, in the Jabali spoken language, there is a preponderance of vocabulary words that feature the /j/ sound in English. The practical effect that occurs when these students attempt to speak English, therefore, is that the students who speak Jabali have been observed to generalize the production of this sound to English words which employ both the soft /g/ and hard /j/ sounds, so that “girl” becomes /'jɜ:l/, or “language” becomes /'læŋwɪdʒ/.

It may also be noted that there currently exist in the spoken Jabali language very few examples of consonant blends that English vocabulary is famous for. This circumstance in turn, leads to a couple of related pronunciation issues: in the first place, it is quite common for students of English from Jabali backgrounds to generalize the /ʃ/ sound to all other consonant blends from “ch” as in “chair” to “sh” as in “share” or from the sound /tʃ/ to /ʃ/. Using the same logic, it has also been observed that, due to the absence of these kinds of blends from the original Jabali language, speakers of Jabali who are trying to learn English will add unrelated vowel sounds to physically produce a consonant blend, with an English vowel sound as a filler that will take the place of the unfamiliar blend. Examples given of this type of mistake include the oral production of the word /'estɒp/ for stop, or /'esku:l/ for school. Finally, it can be quite common for Jabali-originated learners of English to dramatically overemphasize the pronunciation of any occurrence of the /d/ sound as a double-d sound, resulting in a very obvious overemphasis on the production of the /d/ sound wherever it may occur. These instructors also commented on the situation that, in the Jabali tongue, there exist almost no words that employ the English /v/ sound, so that when students who speak Jabali encounter these sounds, they tend to run over them very quickly so as to avoid pronouncing the unfamiliar sound altogether, or will produce the /f/ sound in place of it, which is the closest linguistic sound that exists in Jabali.

Moving to the students who hail from Salalah, and who speak the closest proximal Arabic to the textual form, it may first of all be noted that the Arabic language does not make a habit of identifying intonation and stress patterns for syllables or different grammatical parts of words. Therefore, the instructor from Salalah remarked that the prevailing pronunciation issue she observed from the students she taught from her same area was that the students tended to speak in English very rapidly, and also to her what sounded to be a monotone, as they were unaccustomed to using these strategies in enunciating their Arabic. As was the case with the Jabali students, the teacher from Salalah also noted the tendency of the city students to mistake the hard /j/ sound in words such as “good” with the /j/ sound heard in the word “game”.

Moving to the students from the desert, the linguistic issues for these students can be thought of as very similar to their counterparts from Salalah, as they do speak Arabic, however their Arabic is colored by certain dialects which are uniform between various tribes of the desert but slightly different when spoken to other Arab speakers from outside their immediate geographic regions. For example the teacher who hails from the desert has observed that, in some of the Arab variants that are used when communicating between desert tribes or peoples; it is quite common for a sound resembling the English diphthong /eɪ/ to be used. Therefore, when these students attempt to speak English, they carry with them the tendency to produce only the first, and most dominant, of the vowel sounds contained in the vowel pair. As an example, the word “teacher” becomes /'teɪtʃə/. As is the case with the students from the city, students from the desert were found to have exhibited the same basic mistakes and tendencies to be unable to produce a /v/ sound, as well as to make mistakes in recognizing and producing the sounds of /p/ and /b/.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding observations constitute the sum total of problems and issues with the student body of the English Language Foundation at the Salalah College of Technology, as well as summary observations or recalled experiences over the span of teaching from the collective participants in this study. This article makes no claim to representing the entire body of

possible mistakes and misconceptions that may truly exist. Rather, this article is being put forth to spur on further research into this general area, as well as to encourage potential solutions to be offered, based upon these future findings. The author of this pre-study heartily endorse direct instruction and awareness building on the part of the student population at a point in time that is early enough, and within the proper learning and study environments, so that the affected students may focus upon these issues more intensely and in a more dedicated manner, and in so doing, develop the confidence to expand their total amount of learned oral vocabulary, as well as the learned curiosity of attempting to pronounce sounds, with accompanying stress and intonation, heretofore unknown due to these sounds not being produced in their original languages.

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The phonetic transcriptions of the examples given in the body of this article were obtained using the well-known website <http://www.phonemicchart.com/transcribe/>.

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