

Arriving at English Pronunciation by Means of Arabic Consonant Sounds: A Case Study on EFL Students in Indonesian Context

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Abstract: *This study aimed at identifying the influences of some Arabic consonant sounds in the way of how Indonesian EFL students pronounced English words. The investigated language consultants were students of English Department of the University of Muhammadiyah Malang. The data were taken when the consultants, some were with exposure to Arabic and some others were without knowledge of Arabic, were to read an English short story loaded with some targeted consonant sounds that occur in both Arabic and English. Afterwards, the data were transcribed and checked to find out whether the targeted phonemes were appropriately pronounced. As made clear under the data analysis, this current study has obtained an affirmative answer: Arabic consonant sounds do accommodate Indonesian EFL students to pronounce English words. The connection between the produced sounds and their exposure to English and Arabic phonemes were thoroughly further discussed. Finally, the issue of crosslinguistic influence as underlying factor was to be revealed further*

Keywords: *Arabic consonant sounds; English consonant sounds; Indonesian EFL students, crosslinguistic influence*

1. Introduction

Languages across the universe have been classified into a number of families with distinct typologies. The typology of language is basically departing from the sameness of characteristics among languages. Language typology is the study of what the languages of the world are like (Slobin, 2006; Shopen, 2007). English, Arabic, and Bahasa derive from three completely distinct language families, namely Germanic, Semitic, and Austronesian. Thus, it is not surprising that there are various differences among these three languages. This is in line to Goldsmith (1995) who posits that every language has distinctly structural systems. However, when different languages are compared from the viewpoint of their structures and organizations, they somehow show some similarities. One of the similarities is noticed in the phonetic aspects in which different languages may share similar speech sounds.

Javed (2013) conducted a comparative study between English and Arabic sound systems. He has found out that despite numerous distinctions which are present between Arabic and English, both languages still share some similar phonemes, for instances /θ/, /ð/, and /ʃ/. Further, these similarities may facilitate Arabic students learning English to pronounce English words correctly.

Meanwhile, another comparative study was conducted by Pallawa and Alam (2013). They reveal that Indonesian students face difficulties pronouncing words. The reason of these problems lies on the phonological difference between both languages in which they do not recognize some English speech sounds. This supports Dardjowidjojo (1978) who explains that Indonesian students find it difficult to learn English pronunciation because these two languages have different phonetic system in which some speech sounds present in English do not appear in Bahasa.

It is generally known that most people in Indonesia embrace Islam as their religion; and as Muslims, they are obliged to be able to read Quran, which is written in Arabic. With respect to this condition, it is then assumed that many Indonesian EFL students own some knowledge about phonological and phonetic aspects of Arabic.

This current study mainly aimed to investigate how Indonesian EFL students pronounced English words by means of their knowledge of Arabic consonant sounds. It was to dig out how they transferred their knowledge of Arabic phonemes to deal with English pronunciation, particularly when they encountered English words containing similar sounds in Arabic but not existing in Bahasa. Such a transfer can be indicated as applying knowledge of one language to the use of another language, or called as a cross-linguistic transfer (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008), which will be discussed further in this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Consonants

Native speakers of any language noticeably have a deep knowledge about the language they speak since they grow up with it. This knowledge includes the phonetic aspects of the language, such as a phoneme or speech sound. A phoneme itself is the smallest unit of sound that distinguishes one word from another. Davenport & Hannahs (2010) assert that native speakers can distinguish any speech sound which exists in their mother tongue. For example, English speakers are still able to recognize kinds of dental sounds /θ/, /ð/ although they appear in the same alphabetical realization ‘th’ like in ‘father’ in which they pronounce it as /ð/ and ‘thumb’, which is pronounced as /θ/.

There are two major categories of a phoneme called vowel and consonant sounds. Todd (1987) explains that consonants are the phonemes that are produced by obstructing the airflow through the vocal tract. He also asserts that to describe consonants there are some aspects to consider such as the manner and the place of articulation. The IPA convention affirms that according to the place of the articulation, consonants comprise bilabial, labiodental, dental, alveolar, postalveolar, retroflex, palatal, velar, uvular, pharyngeal, and glottal sounds. Meanwhile, regarding to the articulation manner, consonants are categorized into plosive, nasal, trill, tap, fricative, affricate, lateral fricative, approximant, and lateral approximant.

In addition, consonants can also fall under two other categories according to whether or not there is an obstruction or blocking of the airflow. These types are voiced and voiceless/unvoiced sounds. The instances of voiceless and voiced pairs of consonants are [p b], [t d], [k g], [q ɢ].

2.2. English Consonants

There are 21 English alphabets; and further, these consonants are classified according to their places of articulation, manners of articulations, and the occurrences of the obstruction of the airflow as follows.

TABLE I: English Consonants

	Bilabial	Labio-Dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato-Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p, b			t, d			k, g	
Nasal	m			n			ŋ	
Lateral				l				
Frictionless Continuant				r				
Fricative		f, v	θ, ð	s, z	ʃ, ʒ			h
Affricate					tʃ, dʒ			
Semi-vowel	w					j		

Adapted from Todd (1987)

From the table 1, it can be seen that there are 24 consonant sound realizations for the 21 English alphabets with 8 sound pairs, in which the former sound is a voiceless sound and the latter is considered as a voiced sound. Moreover, these broad realizations are closely due to the history of this language; it is often found that there is no fixed one-to-one correspondence between a letter and its sound realization (Crystal, 1995). For example, letter ‘th’ can be pronounced as either /θ/ or /ð/, and letter ‘y’ may appear as either a consonant as in ‘yes’ /jes/ or a vowel as in ‘creepy’ /kri:pi/.

2.3. Indonesian Consonants

Indonesian language or usually called Bahasa is one of languages coming from Austronesian language family. There are 23 consonants existing in this language (Dardjowidjojo, 2009). Further, the following table indicates types of consonants in Bahasa.

TABLE II: Bahasa Consonants

Place of articulation Manner of articulation	Bilabial	Labio-Dental	Alveolar	Alveo-palatal	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops	p, b		t, d			k, g	
Fricatives		f	s, z	ʃ		x	h
Affricates				tʃ, dʒ			
Nasals	m		n		ɲ	ŋ	
Lateral			l				
Flap/trill			r				
Semi-vowel	w				y		

Adapted from Dardjowidjojo (2009)

In comparison to English consonants, it is clearly noted from table 2 that Bahasa has slightly fewer consonants than English does. In addition, there are some vowels in Bahasa which do not appear in English, such as /x/ and /ɲ/. However, there are also some English consonants which do not exist in Bahasa, for instances /θ/, /ð/, and /ʒ/.

2.4. Arabic Consonants

Arabic is spoken by Arabs who come from the Arabia in the Middle East region. These people belong to the Semitic group, the son of Prophet Noah. (Al-Rafii in Bosha 1993). This language is articulated in very broad regions stretching from the Middle East to Northern Africa. Accordingly, there are various dialects which may have different phonetic aspects. Nevertheless, this study only deals with the standard Arabic language. According to Bosha (2008), Arabic has 28 sounds which are categorized as follows:

- a. Glottal /k/, /q/, /ʕ/, and /x/
- b. Palatal /tʃ/, /j/
- c. Lingual/Alveolar /d/, /s/, /ʃ/, /z/, /s^ʕ/, and /r/
- d. Dental /n/, /l/, /d/, /θ/, /ð/, /ð^ʕ/, /t/ and /t^ʕ/
- e. Labial /w/, /m/, /b/, and /f/
- f. Semi glottal /h/, /ħ/, /ʕ/, and /ʔ/

From the classification above, it can be indicated that some consonants are pharyngealized, by which the pharynx is obstructed when the sound is articulated. The pharyngeal sound is indicated with /^ʕ/. Meanwhile, in comparison to English, the two languages show some similarities in which consonants like /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/ appear in both of them. Yet, there are also big differences taking place between both languages, in which some Arabic sounds do not exist in English and vice versa.

2.5. Cross-linguistic Transfer

This study mainly examines how Arabic consonant sounds are transferred by the Indonesian EFL students when they pronounce English words. This transfer is a cross-linguistic transfer in which a language user applies his/her knowledge of one language to the use of another language (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). A cross-linguistic transfer is usually a result of bilingualism or multilingualism in which a person is able to speak two or more languages. One of the transfers which is frequently carried by a bilingual speaker is a phonological transfer. Jarvis & Pavlenko (2008) further explain that a phonological and phonetic transfer refers to ways in which a person's knowledge of the sound system in one language can affect that person's perception and production of speech sounds in another language.

3. Research Method

The subjects of this current study were two groups of English Language Education Department (ELED) freshmen of the University of Muhammadiyah Malang (UMM); and each of which consisted of 6 students. The first group involved students who graduated from Islamic boarding schools. These students were chosen as they have attained much exposure to Arabic. Meanwhile, the second group comprised other students coming from public schools; these students got limited or even no exposure in Arabic at their previous schools. The freshmen were selected because it was considered that they still got little exposure to English environment in the ELED of UMM, therefore it was expected that the result of their pronunciation was still influenced by their prior knowledge before entering the university. Furthermore, to avoid the gender bias issue, the number of research subjects in each group comprised 3 males and 3 females and all of them have shared a considerably similar level of English skills as indicated by their TAEP (Institutional TOEFL equivalent test) score which ranges from 450 to 475.

A short story text written in English was employed in this research. Since the goal of this study was to find out the influence of Arabic consonant sounds to accommodate EFL learners to pronounce English words, the text was rich of English consonant sounds which also occur in Arabic. In addition, there were only 5 targeted sounds or phonemes picked up in this study, namely three fricative sounds; /ʃ/, /θ/ and /ð/, and two other affricate sounds; /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. The data collection constituted preparing the instruments, choosing the language consultants to read the text aloud, while being recorded, transcribing the recordings of 8 students from both groups, and finally highlighting the targeted sounds they produced.

4. Findings and Discussion

As made clear under the data analysis, the research question stated at the end of the Introduction has obtained an affirmative answer: Arabic consonant sounds do accommodate Indonesian EFL students to pronounce English words. This answer is represented below.

TABLE III: Consonant Sounds Produced by Students from Islamic Boarding Schools

No	Research Subjects	/θ/ Σ=7	%	/ð/ Σ=7	%	/ʃ/ Σ=6	%	/tʃ/ Σ=7	%	/dʒ/ Σ=6	%
1.	DS	5	71%	7	100%	6	85%	6	85%	7	100%
2.	EL	6	85%	7	100%	6	85%	7	100%	5	71%
3.	HL	6	85%	3	42%	3	42%	6	85%	1	14%
4.	NR	6	85%	7	100%	6	85%	7	100%	7	100%
5.	KH	5	71%	7	100%	6	85%	6	85%	6	85%
6.	AD	7	100%	7	100%	6	85%	6	85%	6	85%

Table 3 shows us that there are five targeted consonants, namely /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, and /dʒ/. For consonant sound /θ/, half of research subjects pronounced six out of seven words correctly, while two others got two

mispronounced words and only AD got it all perfectly (100%). Meanwhile, most research subjects obtained 100% in pronouncing words with /ð/. Almost similarly, most of the students nearly got error-free pronunciation in saying /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ with one error or maybe a mistake. Lastly, two people got 100% correct pronunciation of /tʃ/ and the others got 85%, 71%, and 14% respectively. This tells us that most research subjects employed correct pronunciation with only few mistakes. Therefore, this result has attained a positive answer that the students' knowledge on Arabic consonants may help them to pronounce English words.

This supports Javed (2013) who posits that English and Arabic share some phonological features and one of them is that they have several similar consonant sounds. The finding has revealed that the language consultants who have knowledge in both Arabic and English correctly employed most of the targeted sounds in English. It reflects that the respondents were aware that the sounds have existed in both languages and thus the phenomenon of cross-linguistic influence has happened here; this sort of cross-linguistic influence has occurred in a form of a phonological transfer from Arabic to English. As Jarvis & Pavlenko (2008) explain that a phonological transfer refers to the transfer of a person's knowledge of the sound system in one language to that of another language, this study does prove that this sort of transfer from Arabic to English exists. Moreover, this transfer shows a positive result because it facilitates the students with some Arabic phonology background to learn English pronunciation.

A quite different finding is shown in the consonant sounds produced by those who have graduated from regular schools, as follows.

TABLE IV: Consonant Sounds Produced by Students from Regular Schools

No	Research Subjects	/θ/ Σ=7	%	/ð/ Σ=7	%	/ʃ/ Σ=6	%	/tʃ/ Σ=7	%	/dʒ/ Σ=6	%
1.	AN	1	14%	6	85%	1	14%	5	71%	7	100%
2.	FA	1	14%	7	100%	5	71%	7	100%	5	71%
3.	AS	0	0%	7	100%	0	0%	5	71%	6	85%
4.	JU	1	14%	1	14%	6	85%	6	85%	6	85%
5.	MA	0	0%	7	100%	1	14%	7	100%	6	85%
6.	SI	0	0%	2	28%	5	71%	7	100%	6	85%

The table reveals considerably various results, in which some sounds such as /θ/ and /ʃ/ were pronounced poorly by most research subjects; whereas /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ demonstrated positive results as most of them got correct pronunciation. For /ð/, there were two research subjects who found it difficult to produce the sound. Therefore, the comparison between table 3 and 4 tells that the students graduating from Islamic-based schools who have knowledge on Arabic and English sounds perform better pronunciation than the students graduating from regular schools.

Despite the fact that both tables show different results, the issue of cross-linguistic influence has played an important role in both findings. The former represents that the students who have linguistic background in both Arabic and English succeeded in pronouncing the targeted words. Whereas, the students from the latter group apparently applied phonological features from their native language. Unfortunately, Bahasa as their mother tongue does not share similar sounds in the targeted words; therefore, they failed to pronounce many of the targeted words.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Arabic and English, although coming from different language families, share some phonological features. This current study has found out that the phonological features in Arabic can facilitate the students to pronounce English words. The students graduating from Islamic-based schools who are knowledgeable of both languages have proven to be able to pronounce the most of the targeted words in English correctly. Further investigation is

expected to be conducted on how the cross-linguistic issue of both Arabic and English can facilitate EFL learners to learn English pronunciation.

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