

# Saudi EFL Learners Views on English Pronunciation

Jalal Ahmad<sup>1</sup>, Mohammad Nazim<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup>Najran University,  
Najran, Saudi Arabia

---

**ABSTRACT---** *The current study attempts to find out the main causes of errors Saudi EFL learners make in English pronunciation. The participants in the study are students who passed their secondary school and were enrolled in the Preparatory Year Program at Najran University. The results show that lack of proper attention towards teaching English pronunciation, and lack of motivation among the learners towards learning pronunciation lead the EFL learners into faulty pronunciation. The results also demonstrate the students' unawareness and ignorance regarding the sound system of English that is equally important component in the situation of EFL pedagogy. This study works as an eye opener and suggests EFL teachers and material designers to focus on teaching the sound system of English to the students. Teaching the sound system of English to the students will reduce problems of English pronunciation among Saudi EFL learners.*

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Languages have rules for combining sound segments to make meaningful words. While learning its mother tongue a baby adopts these sound rules through listening and trial and error. Later it develops a linguistic competence through which it recognises and produces meaningful sounds. On the other hand, it will be difficult for a second or foreign language learner to adopt these sound rules of the target language because of the mother tongue interference some other various reasons.

Saudi students who are learning English as a Foreign Language face different problems with every component of language such as reading, writing, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Most of the time, the other components are greatly emphasised in classroom teaching, while pronunciation is given less attention. Moreover, pronunciation has rarely been selected as an area of study by researchers. M. Madden (1997) in his research article mentions that there are only a few research papers in the field of pronunciation in comparison to that in other fields of language learning such as, grammar, communicative competence and sociocultural awareness (p.5).

Though some researches have been conducted in the field of pronunciation, the focus is often on vowel pronunciation, phonological analysis of English phonotactics, English phonetics and orthography, consonant clusters, stress intonation, patterns in spelling mistakes, and intonation analysis etc. But the researchers have hardly tried to know the students' views on the said topic. The present study tries to know the students' mindset on their faulty English pronunciation.

### 1.1 Previous Researches and Studies

Many researchers have conducted their studies on the mistakes committed by Arab learners while learning English as a second or foreign language, such as Harrison, Prator and Tucker (1975), Abdul Haq (1982), Kharma & Hajjaj (1989), Alaha (1995), Wahba (1998), Binturki (2008) and Al-Shuaibi (2009) and some others. Mostly they have focussed on the field of phonology, morphology and syntax.

In his study, Al-Shuaibi (2009) focuses on the phonology of phonotactics, and he finds that learners have difficulty in pronouncing English initial consonant clusters having three members and final consonant clusters of three and four members. He showed some processes involved in the pronunciation of these clusters, namely-- reduction, substitution and deletion.

Kharma & Hajjaj (1989) tried to investigate the problems that Arab students of English encounter at the initial stages and showed four major areas of difficulty. First, they found that certain pairs of consonant sounds are confused by Arab learners. Second, learners insert a short vowel to break down the long consonant clusters. Third, certain diphthongs are replaced by other sounds due to L1 interference. Last, Arab learners are generally confused with the distinction between certain pairs of vowels.

Wahba (1998) investigated the problems faced by Egyptian learners of English as a second language. His study was basically on stress and intonation. Barros (2003, as cited in Al-saidat 2010) studies the difficulties encountered by Arabic speakers when pronouncing English consonants. The researcher found eight English consonants, namely, /ŋ/, /p/, /v/, /d/, /l/, /dʒ/, /ð/, and /t/ as problematic ones for Arabic speakers. The researcher also noticed that mother tongue interference

was the main cause which was responsible for pronunciation problems. And, this problem could vary from one Arabic speaker to another because of the colloquial variety of Arabic they use.

E.M. Al-Saidat (2010) conducted his study of English phonotactics to discover the types of pronunciation problems Arab learners encounter while learning English as a second language. In his study the researcher investigated what types of declusterization processes are found in their interlanguage and what the sources of such processes are. The researcher, in this study, showed that Arab learners of English unintentionally insert an anaptyctic (p.128) vowel in the onset as well as in the coda (p.129) of certain English syllables. This study also demonstrated that the major reason for declusterization processes is the mother tongue influence.

The author of this study intends to know the teachers' opinion regarding the errors Saudi EFL learners face while pronouncing English consonant sounds.

According to the data, which I collected from the teachers, the students generally encounter errors while pronouncing some consonant sounds like /p/, /d/, /v/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /ŋ/ etc.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Participants

One hundred students were selected in this study. All of them were students of in the department of English, Preparatory Year Programme, Najran University. These students directly came from their secondary schools, and they did not have any English native countries exposure.

### 2.2 Data Collection

The students were given questionnaire in order to obtain their opinion regarding the current study. All the participants were told that the project was designed to discover the learners' views regarding English pronunciation problems. (Questionnaire is available in the appendices)

### 2.3 Data Analysis

After collecting the data it was analysed carefully. And computed in excel format to display the percentage of the results.

### 2.4 Tools

In the present study, the researcher used questionnaire in order to collect data from the students.

## 3. FINDINGS

Results and Interpretations of the Students' Questionnaire

### 1. In English, Which skills are you better at?

(Indicate the order of ability on a scale of 1 - 4: 1 = best, 4 = worst)

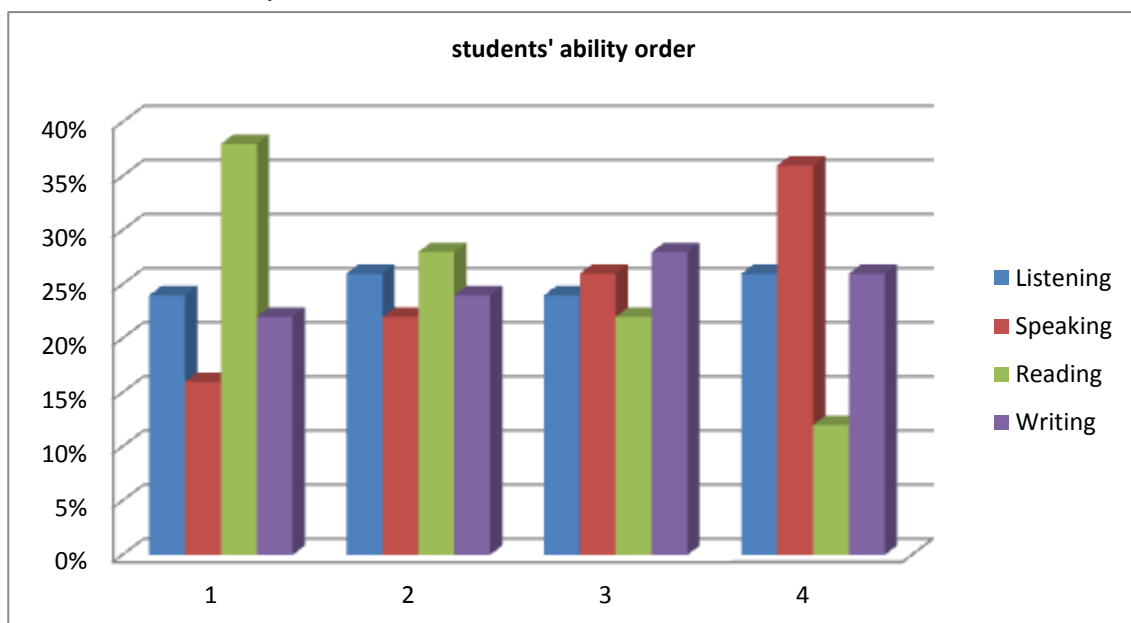


Figure3.1: Order of ability of four skills on a scale of 1-4: 1= best, 4= worst

The above figure shows that the highest percentage of students believe that they have the least ability in speaking, and 26% of students responded that they have the least ability in listening and writing. The data clearly shows that 62% of students face problems in listening and speaking which lead them towards faulty pronunciation.

**2. What are your main difficulties in listening, if any?**

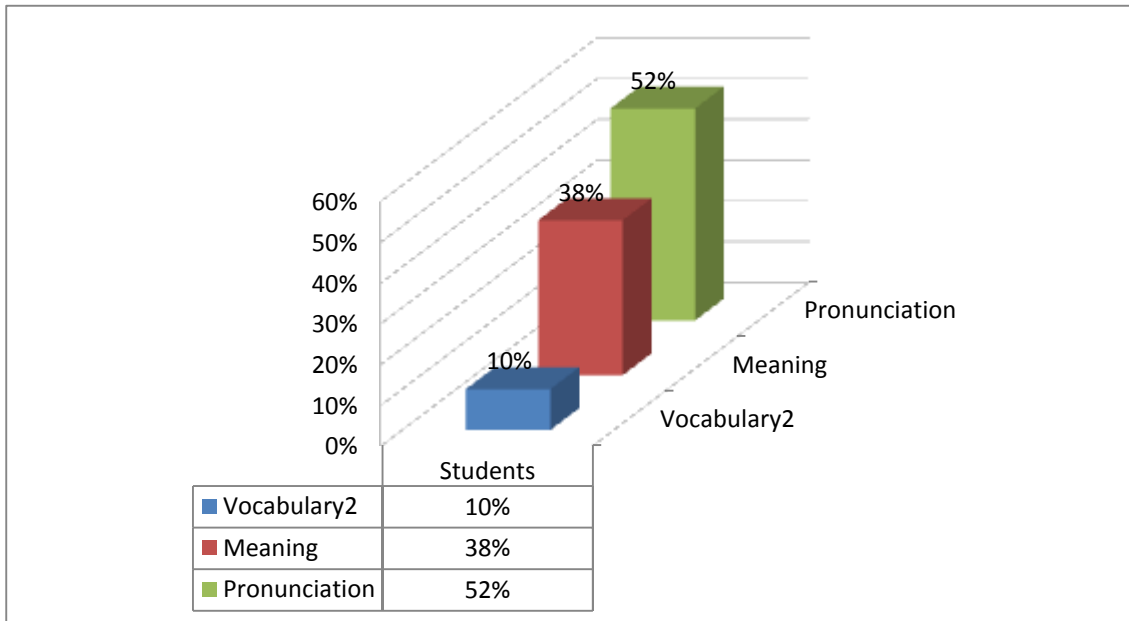


Figure 3.2: Difficulties in listening

When the researcher asked the participants about their main difficulties in listening, 52% of them responded that they encountered problems in pronunciation. As well, 38% of respondents believe that they have problems with meaning which suggests that not being able to identify some sounds causes problems in listening and consequently in correct production of speech sounds. Again this data shows lack of pronunciation among the majority of the students.

**3. What are your main difficulties in speaking, if any?**

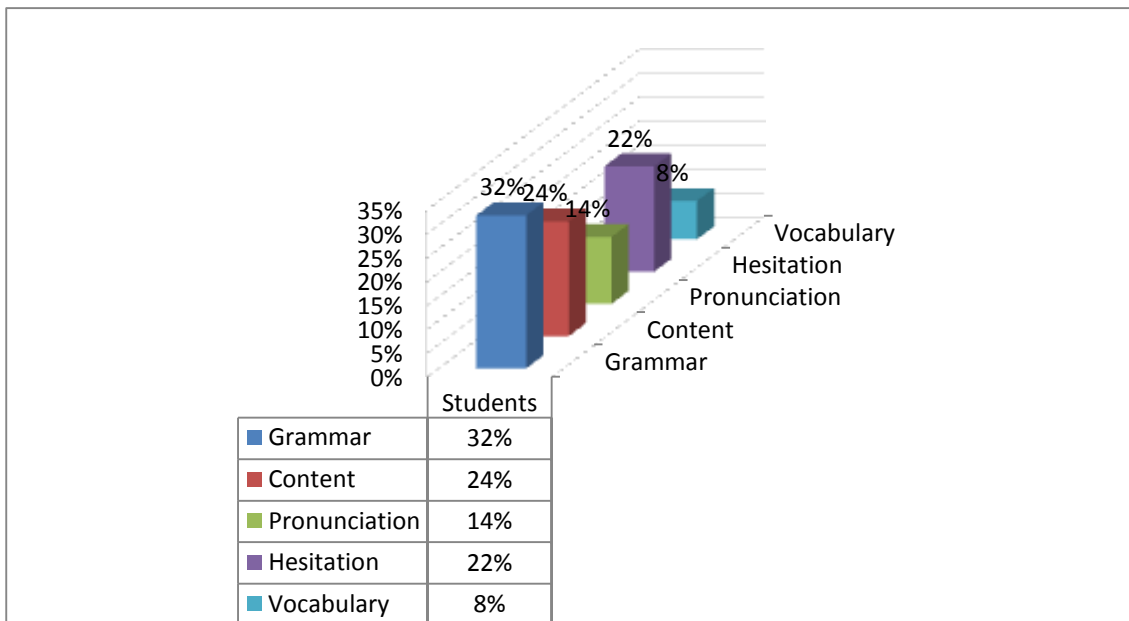


Figure 3.3: Difficulties in speaking

The above data shows that only 14% of participants believe that pronunciation is the main difficulty for them in speaking; however, observation shows that most of the students encounter problems in pronunciation. Moreover, 22% of

students feel hesitation while they speak, which is another reason for their faulty pronunciation. Moreover, 32% of students face problems in grammar, 24% in content, and 8% in vocabulary.

**4. Can you read the phonetic alphabet?**

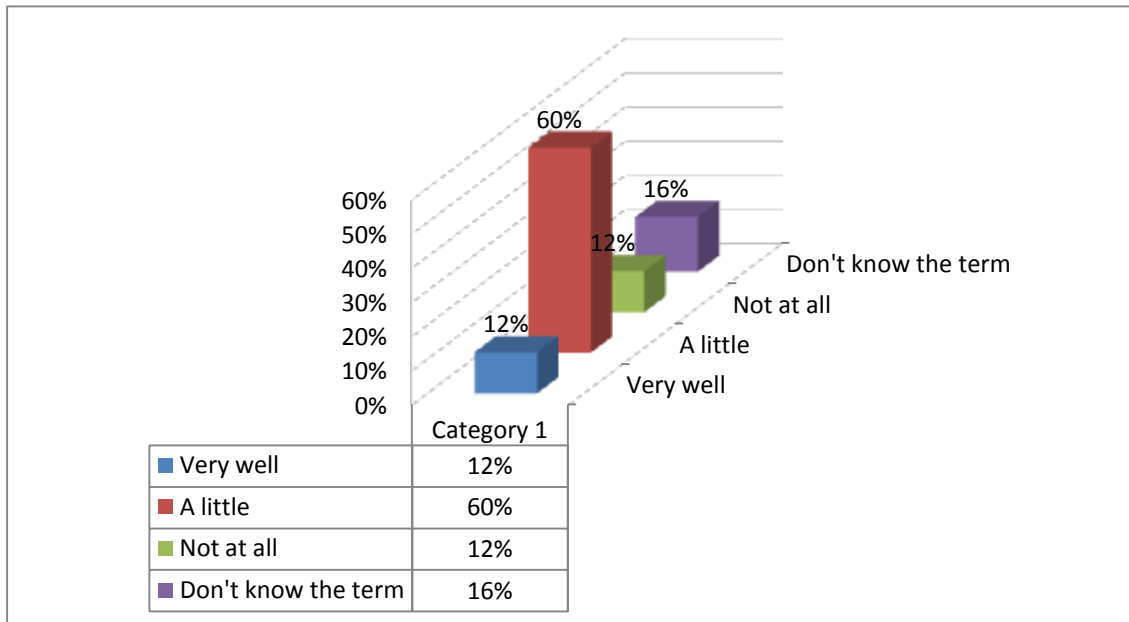


Figure 3.4: Are they able to read the phonetic alphabet?

When the students were asked whether they were able to read the phonetic alphabet, 60% of the students responded that they were able to read only a little. Moreover, 16% did not know the term. And, only 12% of students said they were able to read very well. Though being able to read the phonetic alphabet does not automatically lead to correct pronunciation, it is true that not being able to read can be a barrier in the improvement of pronunciation.

**5. Do you think that Saudi students have poor English pronunciation?**

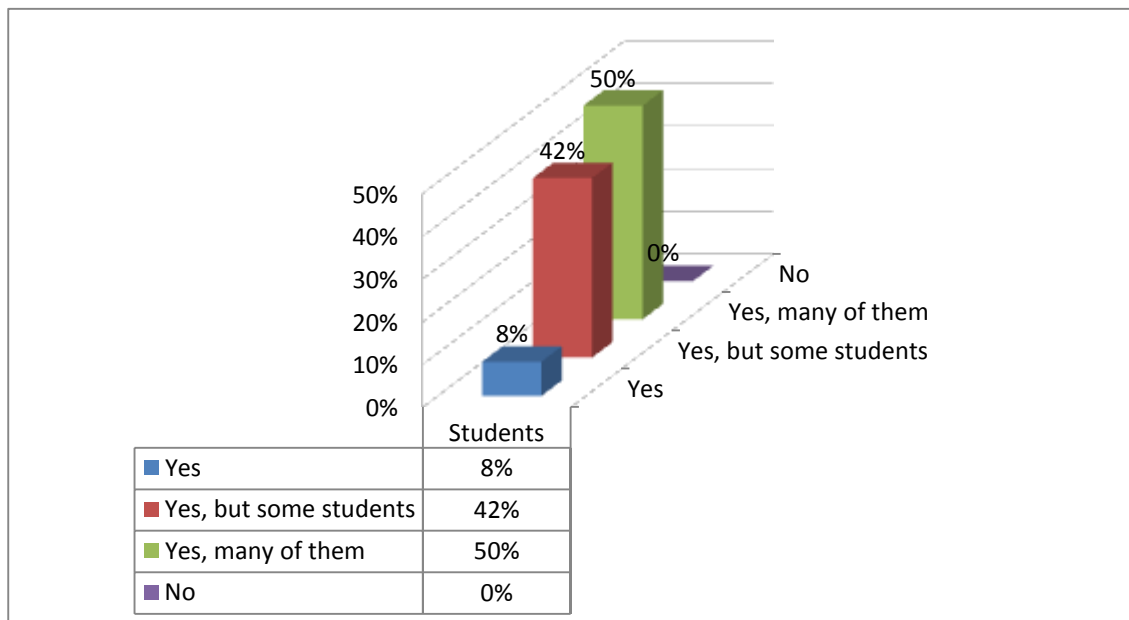


Figure 3.5: Condition of Saudi students' pronunciation

The above data show that a majority of the students believe that many of the Saudi students have poor English pronunciation, and another 42% of students believe only some of them have pronunciation problem. The above response bears witness to the pronunciation problems among the Saudi learners.

**6. Were you taught Oral Communication at secondary school?**

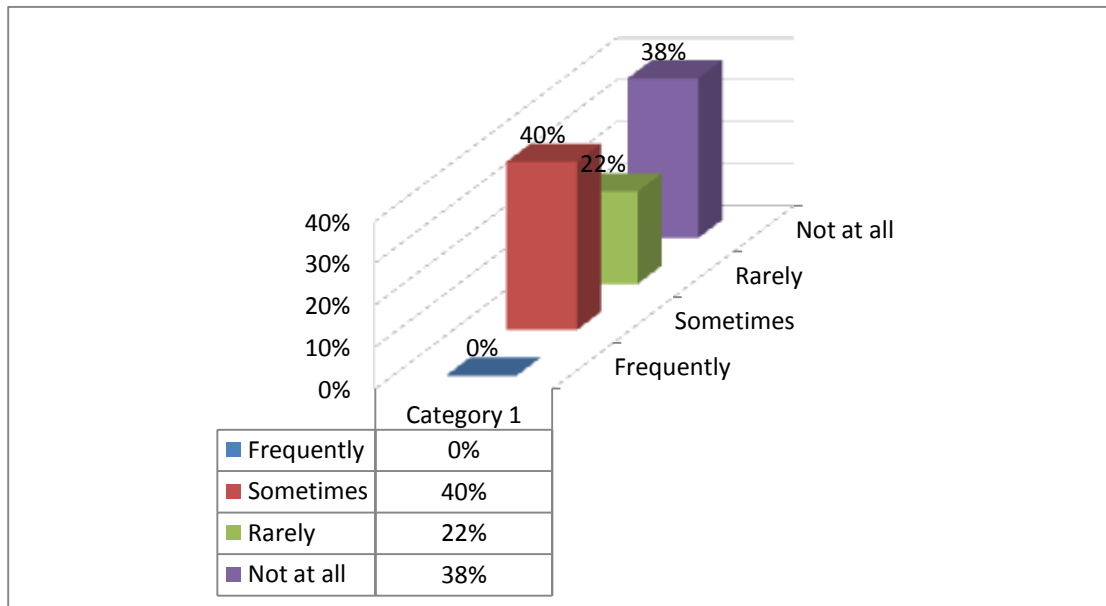


Figure 3.6: Were they taught oral communication at secondary school?

Figure 3.6 shows that 40% of the students were taught oral communication classes in secondary school, but they were not sufficient. Even 38% of students said they did not receive any oral communication classes. Since many aspects of pronunciation are taught in oral communication classes, insufficient oral communication instruction or completely neglecting it can be a great cause of faulty pronunciation among students.

**7. Were you taught the following items in secondary school?**

- (a) Pronunciation of words (b) Oral reading of textbooks (c) Pronunciation of each vowel (d) Pronunciation of each consonant

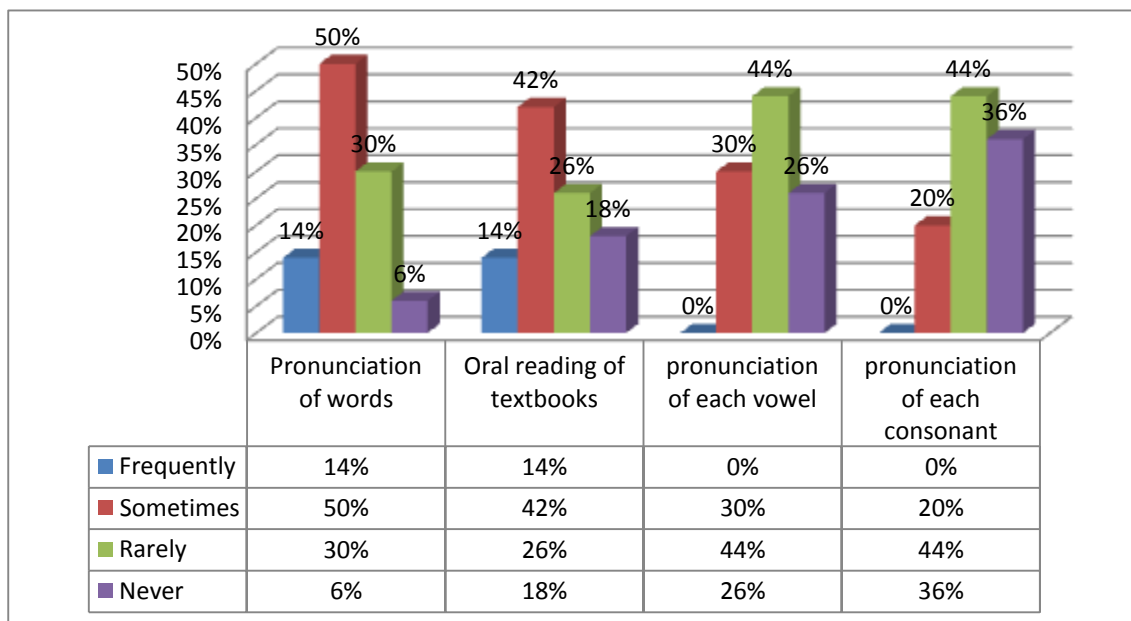


Figure 3.7: Pronunciation items taught at secondary school

The above figure shows that only 14% of students thought that they were frequently taught the pronunciation of words and oral reading of textbooks in secondary school. On the other hand, no students responded that they were ever taught the pronunciation of vowels and consonants in secondary school. Fifty percent of the respondents answered that they sometimes received instructions on the pronunciation of words; whereas, 30% of students responded that the frequency of word pronunciation instruction was rare. Though 42% of students responded that oral reading was sometimes taught in secondary school, 44% believe that they were rarely or never taught this item.

The above data indicate that very little attention was given to vowels and consonants. About 70% of students responded that they rarely or never had any instruction on vowels. Moreover, 80% of students have the same idea about consonants. It shows that the basic components of pronunciation were neglected at the secondary school level.

**8. Are you concerned about your pronunciation when you speak English?**

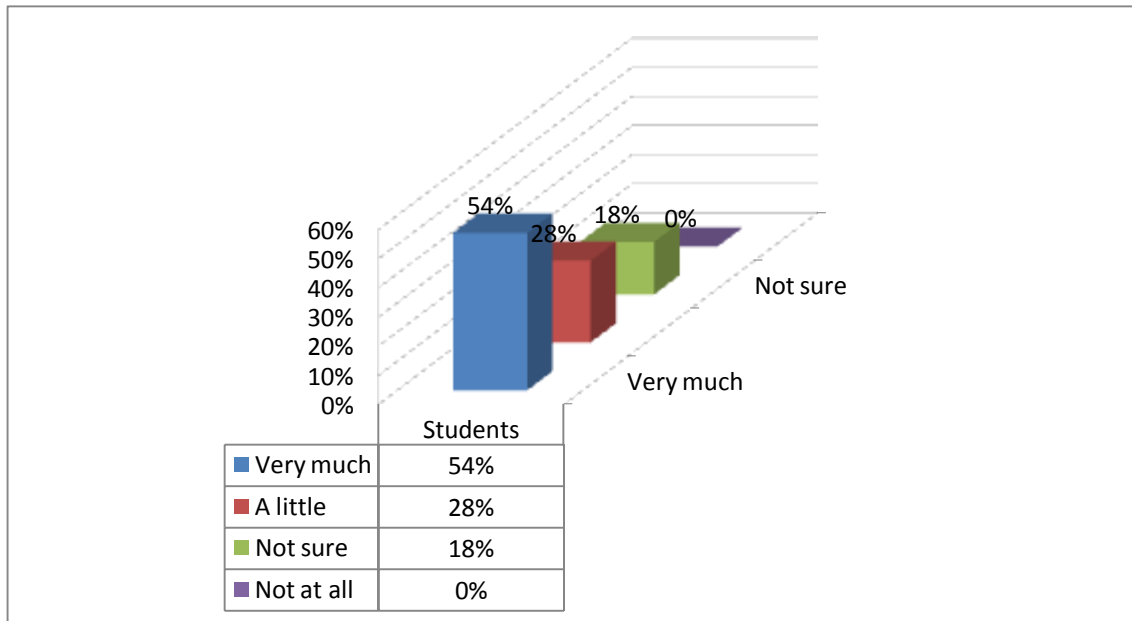


Figure 3.8: Are you concerned about your pronunciation when you speak English?

Figure 3.8 shows that a majority of the students feel that they should speak English with good pronunciation. This means that they have some motivation towards producing correct pronunciation.

**9. Are you willing to do extra homework or spend extra time in order to improve your pronunciation?**

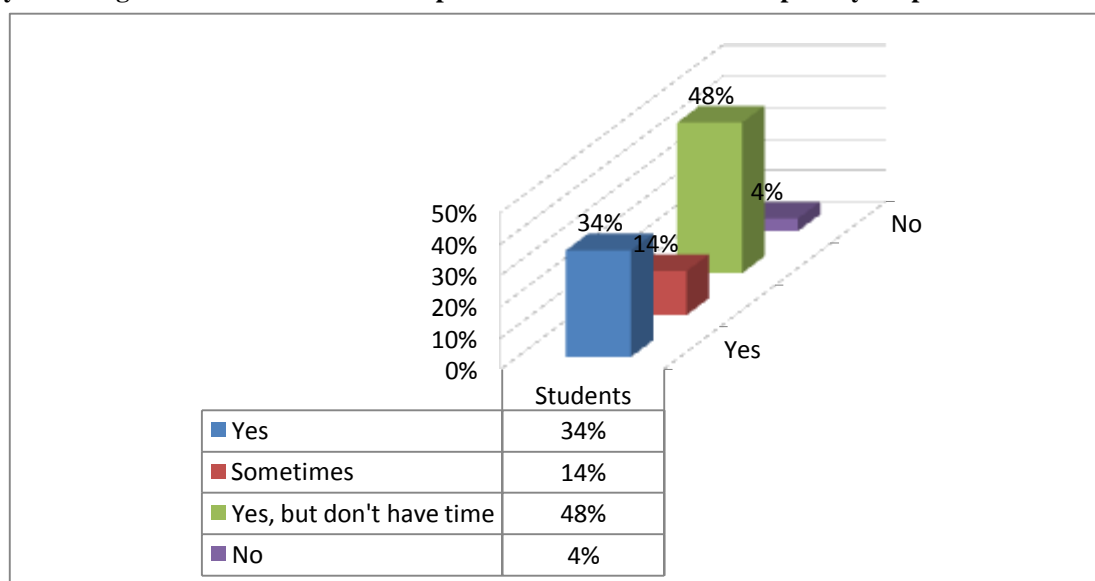


Figure 3.9: Students' interest to improve pronunciation

According to the above data, 34% of students are willing to do extra home work in order to improve their pronunciation. On the other hand, 48% of students responded that they are also interested in improving their pronunciation, but they do not have sufficient time. These students need some motivation towards learning pronunciation.

**10. What may be the reason for the poor English pronunciation of Saudi students?**

Options: (Multiple answers were allowed)

- A. We did not get enough instruction on pronunciation throughout secondary school.
- B. The difference between the Arabic and English languages.
- C. Lack of effort by learners.
- D. Pronunciation has nothing to do with university entrance examination.
- E. We rarely have opportunities to speak English.

Table 3.1: Reason of poor English pronunciation of Saudi students

Students' Response	Options				
	A	B	C	D	E
36%	✓				
6%		✓			
16%			✓		
4%				✓	
30%					✓
2%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2%	✓	✓	✓		✓
2%	✓		✓		✓
2%	✓				✓

Multiple answers were accepted in collecting the above data. Thirty six percent of the participants chose option ‘A’ which reflects that they had not received enough pronunciation instruction throughout secondary school. Moreover, 30% of respondents said that the lack of sufficient exposure to the English language and English speaking environments was the main cause for their poor pronunciation. The remaining participants chose more than one option which included options ‘A’ and ‘E’ respectively. Apart from that, 16% of the respondents believe that due to their lack of effort to learn English pronunciation, they are responsible for their own poor pronunciation. The above data illustrates the three main reasons for their pronunciation problems:

1. Mother tongue interference,
2. Rare opportunities to speak English, and
3. Lack of motivation or lack of interest towards learning pronunciation

**11. During class, do you tend to pronounce English with an Arabic accent?**

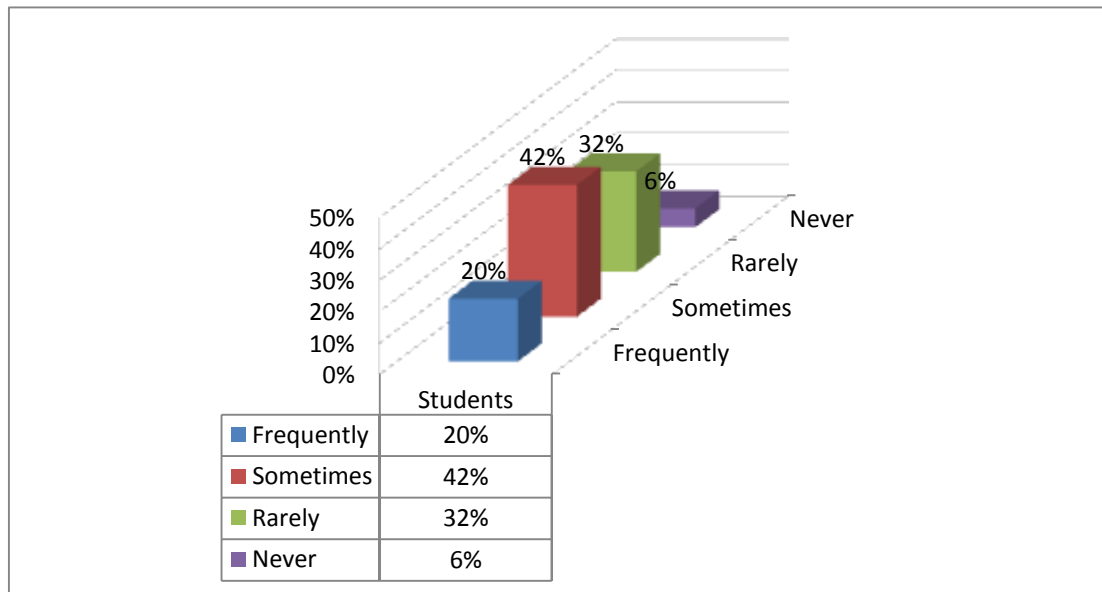


Figure 3.10: Do they pronounce English with an Arabic accent?

The above data shows that a majority of the students believe that they frequently or sometimes pronounce English words with an Arabic accent in class. Moreover, 32% of the students replied that they rarely pronounce English words with an Arabic accent.

**12. How much do you use your native language in proportion to English?**

(Options are given below)

- A. About 80% native language, 20% English
- B. About 60% native language, 40% English
- C. About 40% native language, 60% English
- D. About 20% native language, 80% English

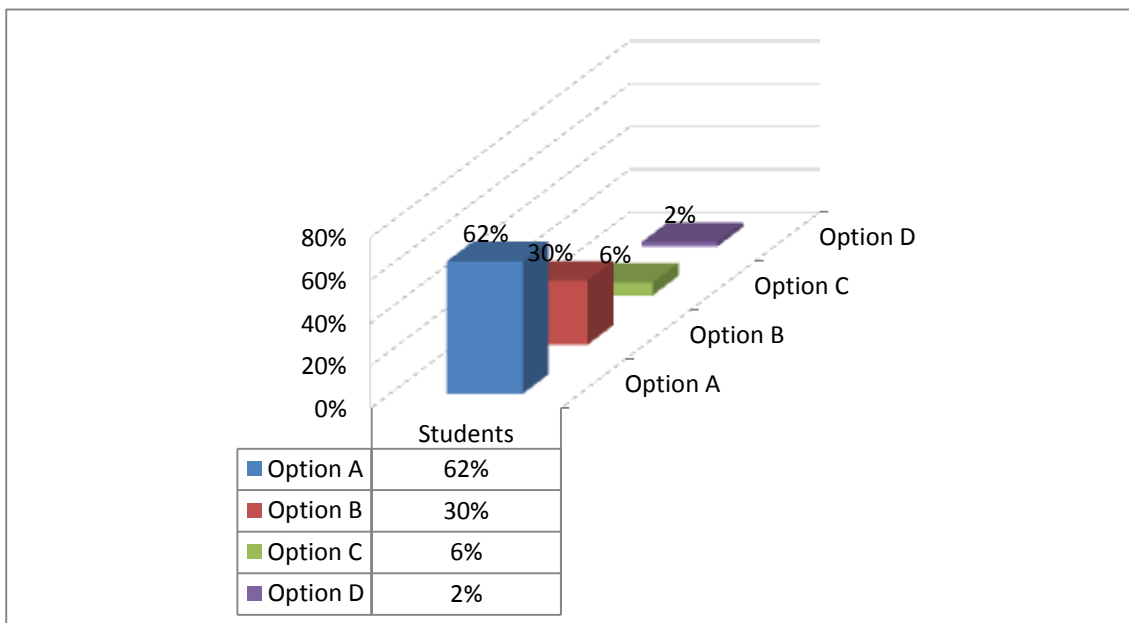


Figure 3.11: Percentage of using their native language in proportion to English

Figure 3.11 shows that a majority of the students (62%) use their native language 80% and English language about 20% of the time in their daily conversation. Moreover, 30% of the students said that they use about 60% native language



and about 40% of English language in their conversation. This data shows that they rarely use English language in their conversation which limits their practise of different aspects of phonetics and phonology.

**13. How many hours do you spend each week improving your pronunciation?**

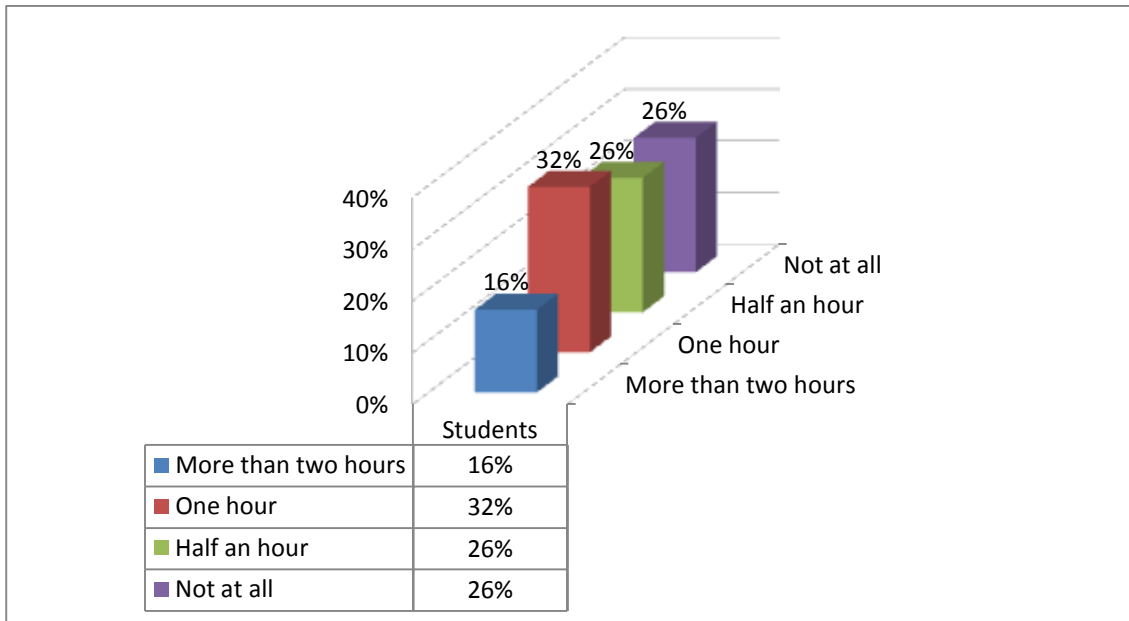


Figure 3.12: weekly time spent on improving pronunciation by the students

The above figure indicates that 58% of students spend 30-60 minutes each week on improving their pronunciation. On the other hand, 26% of students responded that they do not spend any time at all on their pronunciation. Again this data shows a lack of motivation and a lack of interest towards learning pronunciation.

**14. Do you have the opportunity to speak English outside the classroom?**

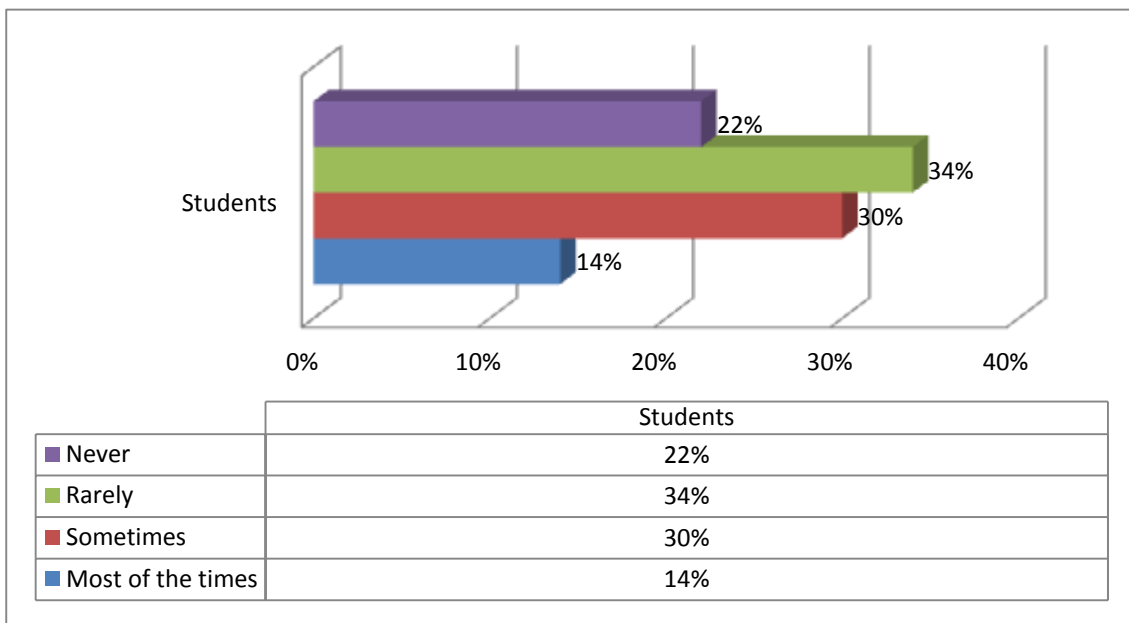


Figure 3.13: Opportunity to speak English outside the classroom

The researcher asked whether the students have any opportunity to speak English outside the classroom. Sixty-four percent of the students responded that they sometimes or rarely have that chance. Whereas, 22% of students replied that they never have such an opportunity. Again, they show a lack of exposure to the English language that causes them to miss unconscious practice of sound segments.

15. Do you listen to the English programs on English News channels such as B.B.C. or CNN?

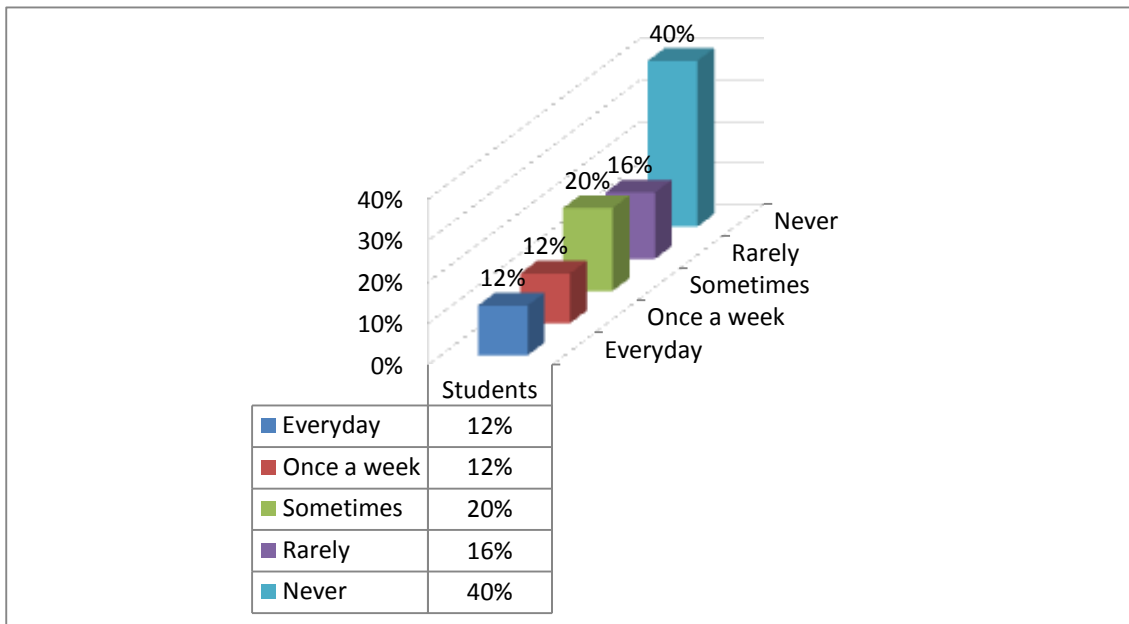


Figure 3.14: Time spent listening to English programmes

The above data shows that only 12% of students watch English news channels every day, and another 12% watch them every week. Moreover, 20% of students watch these channels some times. On the other hand, 56% of students watch these news channels rarely or they never watch them.

16. Do you listen to English records/ cassettes / CDs?

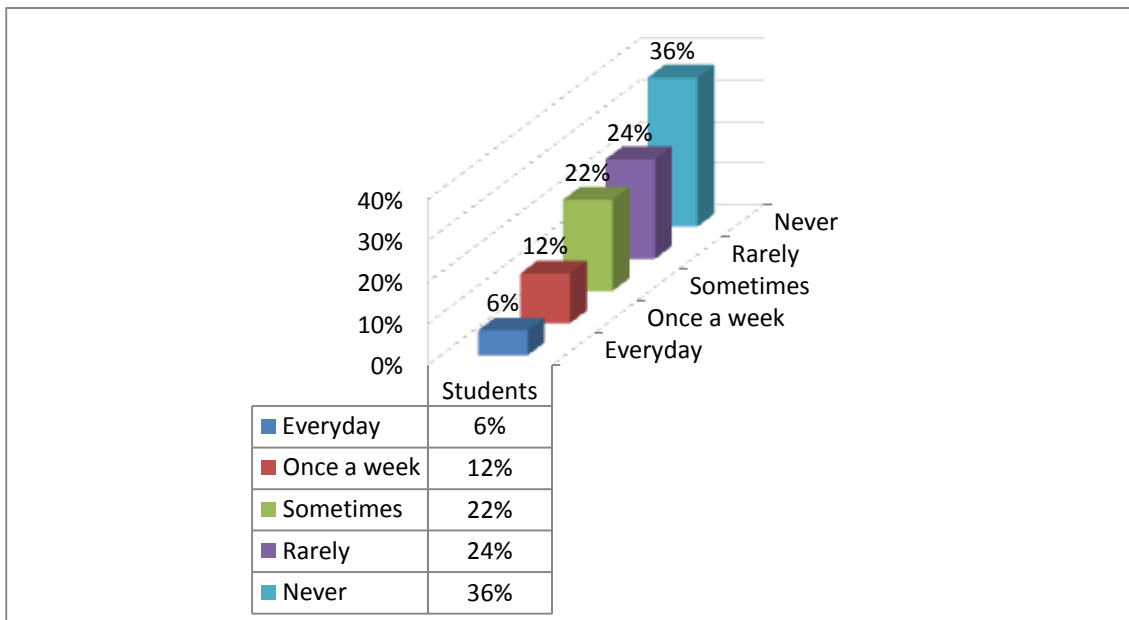


Figure 3.15: Time spent listening to English records/cassettes/CDs

It is presented in the above figure that only 6% of students listen to recorded English materials every day, and 12% of students do this practice once a week. On the other hand, about 60% of them responded that they never or rarely use CDs and audio cassettes to improve their pronunciation. This again shows a lack of motivation or a lack of effort of the majority of the subjects towards learning English pronunciation.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

### **4.1. Conclusions**

Like other English language courses, such as reading, writing, speaking, grammar etc., English pronunciation is very important for ESL/EFL learners to develop their communicative efficiency. It is one of the basic skills required for the students in their English language learning.

As shown in this study, most of the learners are unaware of the sound system of English. The reason, according to the findings, is negligence of sound system of English in EFL class. The students don't get enough lessons on sound system of English at school level. The current study suggests EFL teachers and material designers to focus on the sound system of English. Teaching the sound system of English to the students will reduce problems of English pronunciation among Saudi EFL learners.

### **4.2. Suggestions**

Teaching English pronunciation covers a range from basic sounds (vowel and consonant), syllable structure, word-accent, to stress, intonation pattern, and rhythm etc. In the present study, the participants' problems with English consonant sound production were the only area investigated.

Based on the findings of the research, some suggestions are given below which may help teachers and students in reducing student difficulties in pronouncing problematic consonant sounds:

- Awareness is the first step of learning. Teachers should make learners aware of the importance of English pronunciation within English language learning programmes, as well as in English language communication. The learners should be given a basic knowledge of sound system of English, phonetics and phonology, IPA symbols, etc. If the learners have phonetic and phonological awareness of English, they will be able to guide themselves towards correct pronunciation of a particular sound or word.
- The teacher should conduct a students' needs analysis test regarding pronunciation. According to the needs of the learners, the teacher should develop some appropriate materials and strategies to practise in the class to reduce the learners' problem(s).
- Unfamiliar sounds -- which do not exist in the learners' mother tongue -- should be identified and practiced in the classroom.
- There should be a systematic practice of IPA symbols.
- Minimal pair drills should be used to distinguish between similar or problematic sounds in the target language. This is a technique introduced during the Audio-Lingual period to help the students differentiate between the similar or problematic sounds in the target language through listening discrimination and aural practice.
- The teachers can also use tongue twisters—a technique from speech correction strategies. (e.g., “she sells seashells by the seashore”)
- The students can be provided a listening model by the teacher or some electronic devices, such as a tape-recorder or CD, and then asked to repeat or imitate it. This is a technique introduced in the Direct Method.
- The students should be given enough instructions or opportunities to learn pronunciation within English language courses.

Finally, it is suggested that the students listen to or watch recorded English materials such as recorded talks, speeches, news, movies etc. They should always try to communicate in English with friends, teachers and relatives without any hesitation.

## **5. FURTHER STUDIES**

A research on the need analysis regarding pronunciation and developing suitable materials for Arab learners to teach pronunciation can be conducted, since there has been a small focus on this area.

## **6. REFERENCES**

- Abdul Haq, F. An Analysis of Syntactic Errors in the Composition of Jordanian Secondary Students. MA Thesis, Jordan, Yarmouk University, 1982.
- Al-Shuaibi, A. Phonological Analysis of English Phonotactics of Syllable Initial and Final Consonant Clusters by Yemeni Speakers of English. M.A. Dissertation, Language in India, V 9, 195-328, 2009.
- Altaha, F. Pronunciation errors made by Saudi university students learning English: Analysis and remedy. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 109, 110-123, 1995.
- Binturki, T. A. Analysis of pronunciation errors of Saudi ESL learners. MA Dissertation, Southern Illinois University, USA, 2008.
- Celce Murcia, M. Teaching Pronunciation Communicatively. *Mextesol Journal*, V7, N1, 10-25, 1983.

- Emad M. Al-Saidat. Phonological Analysis of English Phonotactics: A Case Study of Arab Learners of English. *The Buckingham Journal of Language and Linguistics*, V 3, 121 to 134, 2010.
- Harrison, W. Prator, C. Tucker, G. English Language Policy Survey of Jordan. Centre for Applied Linguistics, Arlington VA, 1975.
- Kharna, N. & Hajjaj, A. Errors in English among Arabic speakers: Analysis and remedy. Longman: London, 1989.
- Madden, M., & Moore, Z. *ESL Students' opinions about instruction in pronunciation*. *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education*, V3, 15-32, 1997.
- Wahba, E. Teaching pronunciation-why? *Language Teaching Forum*, V36, 3-32, 1998.