

Conversation in Progress: A Sociolinguistic Investigation Of Mistakes Commonly Committed by Students of English

Dr. Raad S. Abdul-Hassan
Dept. of English
College of Education
Thi Qar University

Abstract

The present study attempts to investigate the mistakes which are committed by the Iraqi learners of English. A number of phonological variables have been chosen for this purpose. Furthermore, the gender of the student as well as the stage/ class have been taken into consideration. A number of first year students of the Department of English, College of Education/ Thi Qar were chosen as informants. Relevant data has been elicited from them as they pass to the second and then to the third stage. This is to study the progress in the informants' linguistic behavior as they pass from a stage to the other.

The percentage score has been adopted as a tool for calculating the obtained results. The manipulation of the data showed that the male students committed more mistakes than the female students. In addition, there was a gradual progress as the student passes from the first to the second and then the third stage.

It is hoped that the findings of the study could be of value and assistance in teaching subjects such as Conversation, Phonetics & Phonology, and Comprehension.

Introduction

This paper represents an attempt as to provide an account of the mistakes which are commonly committed by students of English. The mistakes chosen for investigation were mainly phonological. This is due to the fact that most of the mistakes which the university lecturer may encounter are mainly of the type which is referred to as "expressive". In other words, such type of mistakes are committed in a situation where the student knows the answer to a question, for example, but he/she may lack the appropriate know-how to express him/herself using the spoken or/and the written form of language.

Conversation has been chosen as the major tool for conducting the investigation, as the investigation is mainly of a phonological nature. A number of variables, which have been considered as the most common, were chosen for the analysis.

A number of students from the first stage/ department of English, College of Education/ Thi Qar were chosen as the informants whom the data was elicited.

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The elicitation of the data was conducted in three stages. As the same students pass to the second stage and then to the third stage, the same data was elicited. The first three stages were chosen because "conversation", as an academic subject, is taught during the first as well as the second stages of the study at the department of English, college of Education at the Iraqi universities.

The finding of the research showed significant differences in accordance with the stage as well as the sex of the student.

Aims of the study

The major aim of this paper is to show the progress as talking takes place as a result of the study of English at the university level starting with the first and ending up with the third stage. This is so when we consider the frequency distribution as well as the number of the correct choice of the variables in question. It is hoped that the paper will be of some value to the university teachers who are directly involved in teaching subjects such as Phonetics, Conversation, Comprehension and Composition as well as Grammar. This could, as a result, be implemented in the gradual and selective choice of the material to be taught to the students of the first three stages at the departments of English.

Conversation

Conversation is a mutual activity between two, or possibly more, persons. It has been defined by Crystal and Davy (1978), as cited by Mohammed and Gatta (1993) as:

any stretch of continuous speech between two or more people with audible range of each other who have the mutual intention to communicate, and bounded by the separation of all participants for an extended period

"Conversation", as mentioned above, is an academic subject which is taught during the first two stages of the study at the departments of English, Colleges of Education at the Iraqi universities. The recommended textbook is Situational Dialogues by M. Ockenden, (1974) . As a subject, conversation is a very important one. To acquire an acceptable fluency in conversation would require a noticeable commend of other linguistic activities such as Grammar and Phonetics. To be able to conduct a successful conversation one should be capable of

generating fully meaningful and grammatical sentences which are uttered with correct pronunciation¹.

On data and informants

Twenty students, ten males and ten females, have been selected as the major source of data elicitation. The choice of the students was based on the assumption that they represent the majority of the students of the department, being of average intelligence, academic performance and normal capabilities.

The selected variables

The variables which have been chosen for investigation represent the outcome of two pilot studies which have been conducted before approaching the informants for data elicitation. The pilot studies showed that the following variables are worth investigating. They are:

1- /r/ which has two realizations

- a- pronounced /r/ when it occurs initially, for example in words such as 'room' and 'ring' and before vowels, for example in words such as 'bring' and 'street'.
- b- silent /r/ when it occurs finally, for example in words such as 'car' and 'teacher' and before consonants, for example in words such as 'bird' and 'sword'.

2- /p/ which has two realizations

- a- aspirated /p/ which occurs initially, for example in words such as 'pen' and 'pile'
- b- less aspirated /p/ which occurs when preceded by /s/, for example in words such as 'special' and 'spider'.

This sound is not found in Arabic, therefore the Arab learners of English, among whom are our informants students, are expected to replace it with the nearest sound in Arabic, namely /b/. So a word like 'people' would be expected to be pronounced as /bi:bl/ instead of /pi:pl/, especially among less advanced learners.

3- Consonant clusters which represent more than two consonants occurring together, for example in words such as 'street' and 'children'. It is expected that in breakage of the cluster, by using a vowel among them, would occur among less advanced learners. In this respect, one would expect to hear /sitri:t/ and /tʃildrin/ instead of /stri:t/ and /tʃldrin/ respectively.

4- The diphthong /ei/. This diphthong occurs in words such as 'make' and 'bake'. It has been found that some Iraqi learners would substitute /ei/ with /iə/. So a pronunciation like /miək/ or /biək/ would be detected as a common mistake among such learners.

Data Manipulation

The term "data manipulation" refers to the analysis of the data elicited as the major step in research conducting ². The regular procedure involves finding out the outcome of the research through calculating the results obtained. This is usually conducted through a statistical procedure which may involve the use of certain statistical tests such as the T-test or the ANOVA, the analysis of variance. The results of implementing these tests are commonly considered as the major tools for deciding whether to accept the hypothesis or, on the other hand, the null hypothesis. This is usually done through calculating the p-value (see Abdul-Hassan 1988). The choice of the test(s) is determined by the nature of the data and the objectives of the research ³. The calculation of the scores, in the case of the type of research which involves the use of scores, is accomplished either by considering the actual or the percentage scoring (see Milroy 1980).

The data elicited in this research has been calculated on the basis of the percentage scoring. This is a procedure which has been adopted in various studies such as Milroy and Milroy's well-known study in Belfast.

The manipulation of the data aimed at showing the role of the two social variables, namely the sex and the academic stage (year) of the student. Although the research has been conducted on the same students throughout three stages of their academic study, they will be referred to as students of first year, second year and of third year. This is done for clarification and distinction purposes. The percentages of the mistakes committed are used as a means of results presentation.

1. The /r/ variable

This variable has two recognized variants, pronounced and silent /r/. The results of the data elicitation showed some differences among the students in the choice between these two variants. They have been treated as two distinct entities.

- a- The pronounced /r/: The first stage male students scored a higher percentage than their female counterparts. The male percentage score was 33% while that
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of the female was 30%. This means that on this variant the male first stage students committed more mistakes than the female students.

As for the second stage students a similar result occurred. The male students percentage score was 19% while the female students had a percentage score of 16%. This again means that on this variant the male students committed more mistakes than the female students.

The third stage students have also showed a similar tendency. The male students percentage score was 14% while the females' was 12%. This result is compatible with that of the first and the second stage students in that the male students committed more mistakes than the female students.

A general view on these results gives us three indications. The first is that male students, of all the three stages, committed more mistakes than the female students. The second result is that there is a gradual development in the correct pronunciation of the pronounced /r/ from the first to the second and on to the third stage. The third and the last indication is represented by the sharp difference in the progress between the transition from the first to the second stage on one hand and from the second to the third stage on the other. The progress achieved when the students pass to the second stage is far more than that of the students passing to the third stage. Table (1) and figure (1) below provide an image as to the percentage scores of the informants of the pronounced /r/.

Table (1) Students' Percentage Scores of the pronounced /r/

Gender	First Stage Students	Second Stage Students	Third Stage Students
Male	33%	19%	14%
Female	30%	16%	12%

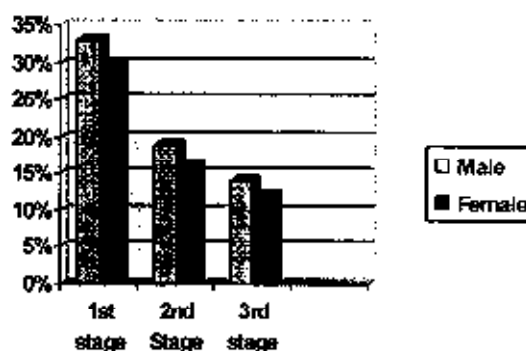


Figure (1) Students' Percentage Scores of the pronounced /r/

b. The silent /r/: The silent /r/ represents the second realization of the /r/ variable. The first stage male students' score was 26%. On the other hand the

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female students scored slightly less, being 24%. This means that the male students committed slightly more mistakes than the female students.

The second stage students followed a similar tendency. The male students scored a slightly higher scores than the female students. The male percentage score was 15%. The female percentage score on the other hand was 14%. Such a result is likely to be similar to that of the first stage students.

The third stage students were on the same track with their colleagues. The male students scored a percentage score of 10%. The female students' percentage score was 8%. The difference between the male and the female students at this stage is also similar to those of the other stages.

A general view of the results of the students of the three stages would provide us with the following indications. First that the male students committed slightly more mistakes than the female students. Second that there is a gradual progress which is taking place as the student passes from the first to the second and then to the third stage. Third that the progress which is taking place between the first and the second stage is more than between the second and the third stage. Table (2) and figure (2) below illustrate that.

Table (2) Students' Percentage Scoring of the silent /r/

Gender	First Stage Students	Second Stage Students	Third Stage Students
Male	26%	15%	10%
Female	24%	14%	8%

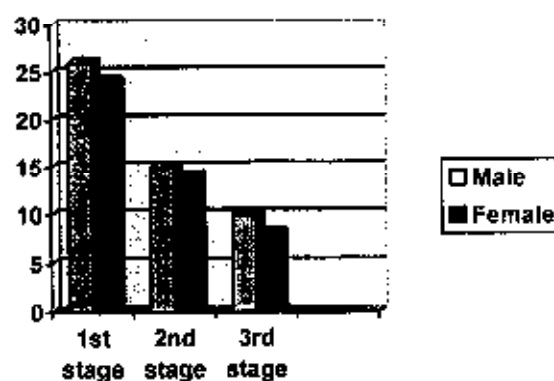


Figure (2) Students' Percentage Scoring of the silent /r/

2. The /p/ variable: The /p/ variable has two realizations; the aspirated and the less aspirated /p/. What of interest to us here is the replacement of /p/ by /b/ by the students. Therefore, the percentage scores presented below represent that of the /b/ as used instead of /p/.

The male students of the first stage scored a percentage score of 24%, while the female students of the same stage scored a lower percentage score of 21%. This means that the male students of the first stage have committed more mistakes than the female students of the same stage.

The findings of the manipulation of the data obtained from the students of the second stage showed that the male students scored a percentage score of 9%. The female students, on the other hand, scored a less percentage score of 6%.

The difference between the male and the female students of the third stage percentage scores was less than that of the other two stages. The male students scored the percentage score of 5% while the female students scored the percentage score of 4%. This indicates that the male students of the third stage committed slightly more mistakes than the female students of the same stage.

A general view on the findings of the manipulation of the data elicited from the students on this variable would show us several indications. First that, generally speaking, the male students committed more mistakes than the female students. Second that there is a gradual progress which is taking place from the first to the second and then to the third stage. Third that there is a noticeable rate of progress taking place between the first and the second stage more than that which occurred between the second and the third stage. Fourth that the difference between the male and the female students of the third stage represents the minimum difference value among the three stages. This could be interpreted as a sign of the progress taking place as the third stage is an advanced one. Table (3) and figure (3) provide a representation of these findings.

Table (3) Students' Percentage Scores of /b/

Gender	First Stage Students	Second Stage Students	Third Stage Students
Male	24	9	5
Female	21	6	4

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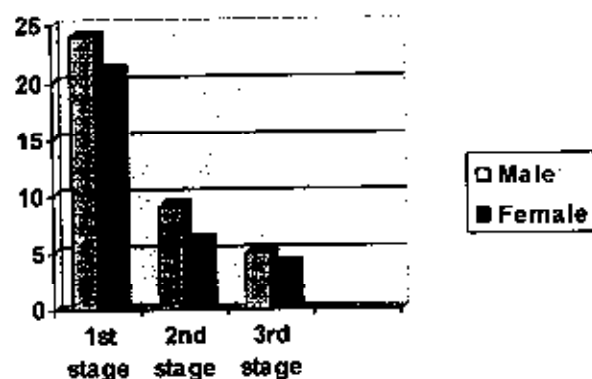


Figure (3) Students' Percentage Scores of /b/

3. The consonant clusters: The consonant clusters pronunciation represents a common problem which the Iraqi students of English face. The first stage students, as males and females, differ in their percentage scores. The male students scored a percentage score of 86%. On the other hand, the percentage score of the female students was 73%. This result clearly indicates that the male students committed more mistakes than the female students of the same stage.

As for the students of the second stage, a similar view has emerged. The male students scored a percentage score of 33%. The female students percentage score was 20%. This also can be interpreted as that the male students committed more mistakes than the female students of the same stage.

The same tendency was detected in the case of the third stage students. The male students scored a higher percentage score than the female students. The percentage score of the male students was 40% while that of the female students was 25%.

A general view on these results provides us with the following indications. First that the male students percentage score was higher than that of the female students. This means that the male students were committing more mistakes than their female colleagues. Second that there is a noticeable progress which is taking place from the first to the second stage, but not from the second to the third stage, and in the case of both the male and the female students. Such a result should be worth taken into

consideration, as it is a sign of a negative change. This could be interpreted as that this variable has not been appropriately taught and practiced. As a result there is a need to focus on this variable as it requires more attention especially during the second and the third stages of study at the departments of English. Table (4) and figure (4) below provide an illustration of these findings

Table (4) Students' Percentage Scores of Consonant Clusters

Gender	First Stage Students	Second Stage Students	Third Stage Students
Male	86%	33%	40%
Female	73%	20%	25%

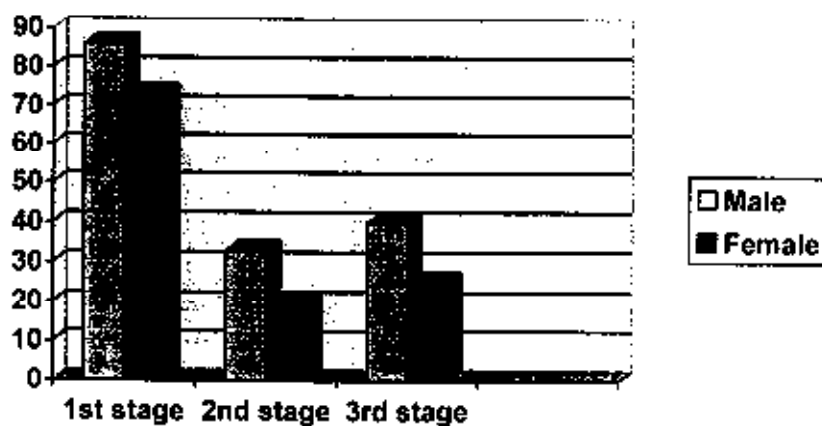


Figure (4) Students' Percentage Scores of Consonant Clusters

4. The /ei/ variable: This variable is wrongly replaced by /i / by the Iraqi students of English. The manipulation of our data, on this variable, showed the following outcome.

The first stage students showed some differences in the pronunciation of this variable. While the male students scored a percentage score of 75%, the female students scored a lower percentage score, namely 65%. This indicates that the number of mistakes which has been committed by the male students is higher than that of the female students.

The male students of the second stage showed no differences as to the pronunciation of this variable. The students of both sexes scores a percentage score of 50%.

As for the third stage students some differences were detected the male and the female students. The percentage score of the male students was

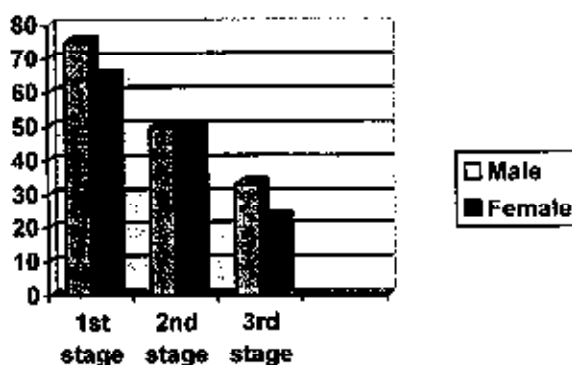
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33%. The percentage score for the female students, on the other hand, was 23%. This means that the male students committed more mistakes than the female students.

A general view on the results obtained from the students on this variable could provide us with the following results. First that the male students committed more mistakes than the female students. Second that there is a gradual progress which is taking place as the student passes from the first to the second and then to the third stage. Third, while both the male and the female students have shown progress as they pass from the first to the second stage we notice that the progress rate achieved by the students, 20%, is higher than the female students, 15%. On the other hand, we see an opposite view emerging when the students pass from the second to the third stage. The male students progress, 17%, is lower than that of the female students, 27%. Table (5) and figure (5) below provide an illustration of these results.

Table (5) Students' Percentage Scores of /ei/

Sex of Students	First Stage	Second Stage	Third Stage
Male	75%	50%	33%
Female	65%	50%	23%



**Figure (5)
Percentage**

**Students'
Scores of**

/ei/

Concluding Remarks

¹ For an account of acquisition of fluency in English conversation see Mohammed and Gatta (1993).

For a detailed description and analysis of the teaching of English conversational skills at the university level see Kadhum (1987).

² See Milroy (1980), Downes (1984), Milroy (1987), Abdul-Hassan (1988), Daffar (1990) and Abdul-Hassan (1998) for an account of data collection and analysis.

³ Fasold (1984) and Butler (1985) provide descriptions of the various approaches to the statistical methods of data analysis.

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أستمرارية الحوار : بحث نفسي أجتماعي الأخطاء التي يرتكبها عادة طلاب
اللغة الإنكليزية

الخلاصة

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى دراسة الأخطاء المرتكبة من قبل المتعلمين العراقيين لدى استخدام اللغة الإنكليزية . اختير عدد من المتغيرات الصوتية للدراسة إضافة إلى جنس الطالب ومرحلته الدراسية كمتغيرات اجتماعية . اختير عدد من طلبة قسم اللغة الإنكليزية في كلية التربية في ذي قار للحصول على المعلومات المطلوبة . تم اخذ المعلومات منهم من عندما كانوا في المرحلة الأولى ثم لدى نجاحهم الى المرحلة الثانية ثم الثالثة .

اعتمدت النسب المئوية كوسيلة لتبيان النتائج المتحققة . اظهر تحليل المعلومات أن الطلبة الذكور ارتكبوا أخطاء أكثر من الطلبة الإناث . إضافة إلى ذلك بينت الدراسة أن هناك تطورا تدريجيا لدى الطلبة عند نجاحهم من المرحلة الأولى إلى الثانية ثم الثالثة. يؤمل أن تكون نتائج الدراسة ذات فائدة وعون في تدريس المواد الدراسية مثل المحادثة والصوتيات والنظام الصوتي والاستيعاب.