

EFL Learners' Attitudes towards the Proper Pronunciation of English and Podcasts as a Facilitator of Proper Pronunciation

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the attitudes of Saudi students of English towards proper pronunciation, and podcasts as a facilitator of proper pronunciation. It will discover the importance given to correct pronunciation, as well as gauging learners' attitudes towards the possibility of introducing podcasts as a new language input tool for facilitating improvements in pronunciation. To achieve this, the previous literature in this area is reviewed, followed by presenting the results and analysing the data from an attitudinal questionnaire distributed amongst 23 Level 3 Saudi EFL learners from the department of English at Imam University. The questionnaire is divided into two parts- one concerning proper pronunciation, and the other podcasts. The data analysis shows that the participants, in spite of the low rate of improvement in their pronunciation, have positive attitudes towards the proper pronunciation of English. This outcome is compatible with previous studies' results, which assert that having a positive attitude towards a particular language and its speakers can improve pronunciation. The students were presented with a total of five podcasts related to their speaking and listening textbook for use over an eight week period, and at the end of this time they were requested to complete the questionnaire. The findings support the usefulness of examining learners' attitudes towards new Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) applications before using them in a practical way. The results show a high rate of acceptance of podcasts and that, overall, the students have positive attitudes towards them.

Keywords: CALL, English, podcasts, pronunciation

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Introduction and background

There has been significant expansion in the Saudi Higher Education sector in recent years; as of 2011, there were 24 government-funded universities providing degree programmes for some 749,238 undergraduates (Statistical Department, Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia, 2011). Recently, interest in EFL (English as a foreign language) has grown significantly due to the King Abdullah Scholarship Programme, which sends hundreds of thousands of Saudi students abroad to study English with the aim of pursuing specific degree programmes overseas. The English language fulfills several important functions and enjoys an eminent status in various sectors at every level in Saudi Arabia, particularly in Higher Education.

Language learning comprises an interlinked network of skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. Since speaking is such an important aspect of communication, good second language (L2) learners should not ignore pronunciation. Rightly or wrongly, people often judge a speaker's level of language competence by his/her pronunciation in terms of fluency and accuracy, and in this respect, creating a positive first impression really counts, particularly in the professional world. It is surprising, then, that little emphasis is currently being placed on improving pronunciation skills in the Saudi system by either teachers or students.

The role played by attitudinal perspectives in L2 learning has been a major concern of L2 and foreign language (FL) researchers, since a learner's positive or negative attitude towards language learning in general; towards a specific language, or towards speakers of that language, has frequently been proven to play a vital role in his/her success or failure in FL acquisition. Language learning is affected by both attitudes and motivation, since learners with a negative attitude are unlikely to produce satisfactory results.

Studies have revealed that the personal characteristics of learners can contribute towards their success in FL acquisition, and specific links have been made between highly positive attitudes towards the target language (TL) and learner's success in pronunciation. Kenworthy (1987), for example, found the acquisition of proficiency in pronunciation to be a product of both linguistic and non-linguistic factors, with the speaker's attitude being important, along with his/her native language, age, exposure to the TL, and innate phonetic ability. Thus, one aspect of this study has examined the attitudes of Saudi EFL learners towards pronunciation as a language skill. Research has also shown that another key factor in good pronunciation is listening to the TL being spoken by native speakers. Therefore, good pronunciation can also be viewed as a by-product of good listening.

Statement of the Problem

As a teacher and former student of EFL, it has been observed that many Saudi undergraduates have difficulty pronouncing English correctly due to the fact that EFL learners in Saudi Arabia face a number of significant obstacles to achieving high levels of performance in pronunciation. The key problems can be summarised as:

- EFL teachers tend to be non-native
- Students lack frequent face-to-face contact with native speakers as role models
- Students are more likely to have contact with English speakers for whom this is L2/FL
- Students face interference from their native language (Arabic)

One of the key difficulties is that pronunciation errors can become fossilised. Students have a tendency to adopt the pronunciation features of their first language (Arabic) when speaking English, and if these problems are not tackled at a fairly early stage, the potential exists for those who are prospective teachers to pass the same pronunciation errors on to their students. Saudi EFL teachers have traditionally used tape recordings in the classroom setting to address this lack of exposure to native speakers. This technique initially played a useful role in accommodating students' need for naturalness, but it now seems outdated. Thus, it is believed that practitioners and educators must seek new pedagogical approaches, using recent technological means, to deliver EFL material or improve skills. Thus, this view, together with the researchers' personal interest in podcasting as an influential means of improving pronunciation, has led to this study.

One potential solution offered by digital technology would be to replace tape recordings with podcasts. Furthermore, approaching Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) innovations from an attitudinal perspective is a trend increasingly being adopted by language educators and researchers in order to assess how students might respond to them. Therefore, this study does not focus on the effectiveness of podcasting to enhance learners' pronunciation; instead, since this is an emerging technology in Saudi Arabia, the decision was taken to conduct an attitudinal study to examine how this technological innovation would be viewed by Saudi students.

Aims of the Study

As this is an attitudinal study, it aims to assess the attitudes of Saudi students of EFL towards the importance of pronunciation as a component of language learning, and to gauge their attitudes towards the possibility of introducing podcasts as a new language input tool to facilitate improvements in English pronunciation.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the students' attitudes towards the importance of the pronunciation of English?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards the introduction of podcasts as a new language input tool for facilitating improvements in pronunciation?

Literature review

Pronunciation

The importance of pronunciation

Pronunciation includes two major components: segmental features, that is, vowel and consonant sounds, and suprasegmental features, also known as prosody. Pennington (1989) defines prosody as "the patterns in individual words of stress, pitch, tone, and rhythm and the intonational patterns of longer utterances" (Pennington, 1989, p. 22).

Like other EFL skills, good pronunciation helps learners with their communicative efficiency. Kriedler (1989), states that correct and clear pronunciation is important in language learning, since without it, learners might not be understood and may be poorly perceived by other English speakers. Morley (1998) also argues that pronunciation plays an important role in helping learners to become more intelligible speakers. She adds that limited pronunciation skills can make learners lose their self-confidence, and may have a negative influence on them when estimating their credibility and abilities. Fraser (1999, 2000) also claims that poor pronunciation

could, in turn, condemn learners to lower social, academic and work advancement than they deserve. Consequently, Morley (1998) stresses the importance of teaching pronunciation, arguing that tutors should work as "pronunciation coaches" when the students are initially receptive to learning in this area.

Pronunciation Problems of Saudi EFL Learners

Some researchers and neurologists claim that it is impossible to attain native-like pronunciation after the age of puberty because of the brain's limited plasticity. Lenneberg's (1967) findings, for example, confirm that few learners can attain native-like pronunciation in a FL, especially those who have learned to speak it later on in life. Other researchers, however, hold an opposing view, suggesting that the human brain has the ability to change and develop with the passage of time. Lund (2003), for instance, concludes that it is still possible for students to achieve native-like pronunciation in their twenties, suggesting that a degree of brain plasticity can survive through to that age. Neufeld and Schneiderman (1980, p.105) also report that adults are able to achieve native-like proficiency in the articulatory and prosodic features of a L2. Since Saudi learners begin the study of EFL at the age of 10, this suggests that they should be well-placed to succeed in mastering pronunciation. It also means that undergraduates who have acquired bad habits in pronunciation should still be capable of addressing this through remedial work.

As the participants in the current study are Saudi EFL learners, it is also useful to examine the literature which has investigated the specific pronunciation problems of these learners, because although students of EFL in Saudi Arabia spend a considerable time studying English sounds, they still face difficulties in acquiring a good standard f pronunciation. The most salient pronunciation error that they commit is related to L1 interference, which refers to the process of transferring a linguistic feature that exists in the L1 into the L2 when it should not occur. In terms of pronunciation, this is likely to cause errors in rhythm, intonation, and aspiration in the TL.

A number of researchers have conducted studies on the errors committed by Saudi EFL learners, including Ahmad (2011), Al-Saidat (2010), Altaha (1995), Bin Turki (2008) and Khan (2011). Those most relevant to the purposes of this study are discussed here. Bin Turki's (2008) study reveals that due to the inter-language of Saudi speakers, their speech contains instances of incorrect production of certain problematic sounds, including differentiating between /p/ and /b/ and /v/ and /f/. Ahmad (2011) also conducted a study that attempted to investigate which English consonant sounds created most difficulties for Saudi learners of EFL, and his findings confirm those of Bin Turki's, concluding that the participants particularly struggled with /p/, /b/, /v/, /t/, and /ŋ/. Ahmad's (2011) study also provides helpful suggestions and teaching strategies which could be used to assist ESL/EFL teachers in reducing future problems regarding pronunciation of these English consonants among Arab learners in general. Khan (2011) also found that speakers of the Saudi variant of Arabic, in particular, are not able to differentiate between /sh/ and /ch/ as in **sheep** and **cheap**. They were also sometimes confused by the use of /s/ and /c/.

Podcasting

According to Downes (2005), the first mention of the term "podcasting" appeared in an article written by the journalist Aled Williams in *The Guardian* in February 2004. Since then,

podcasts have made their presence felt in various areas of contemporary life, and their numbers have grown extensively. Campbell (2005) mentions five causes of the rapid spread of podcast usage:

1. Internet activity is pervasive and a common activity throughout the world.
2. Broadband technologies have grown rapidly, allowing large media files to be downloaded.
3. The multimedia abilities of personal computers have become commonplace.
4. The distinction between streaming and downloading material has begun to blur.
5. The rapid growth of iPod™ and MP3 adoption.

Podcasting is one of the latest technological innovations that language educators can use as part of CALL, and it falls into the category referred to as e-Learning (Downes, 2005). Podcasts are audio files which the user can upload through the internet via laptops or smart phones. Those files can then be transferred onto personal computers, laptops, and mobile devices such as MP3 players, mobile phones, and personal digital assistants (PDAs). Audio files available for downloading and other means of online listening have been in existence for some time, but podcasting differs in so far as it is automatically downloaded content. Podcasts have the additional benefit of mobility and transportability, allowing learners to use them in a variety of settings such as at home, when travelling, and even in the open air.

Podcasting in EFL/ESL Contexts

Many online EFL podcasts are produced by language teachers or native English speakers interested in teaching EFL, and audio podcasts often contain printable transcripts to help students to follow them. Many researchers and practitioners have highlighted the benefits of ESL/EFL podcasting.

First and foremost, they offer a possible option for practicing listening and speaking skills outside the classroom. Thorne and Payne (2005) were amongst the first to refer to the idea that podcasts could be provided to language learners, noting that: "Students are able to listen to podcasts in another language, thus creating their own mobile immersion environments" (p. 386). Godwin-Jones (2005) highlights the accessibility of podcasts and their easy application for use in listening practice. Both Robb (2006) and Stanley (2006) see podcasts as an attractive option for language teachers wishing to supplement scripted listening textbook materials with authentic listening materials, including real-life conversations. Stanley (2006) also argues that they can be used as a way for students to gain information about specific aspects of English, such as idiomatic expressions or grammatical constructions.

According to Constantine (2007), the most obvious use of podcasting in a language module is for listening comprehension, with podcasting serving as a great resource for global listening, since the content is relevant and authentic. Ting (2011) argues that podcasts have incredible potential for language learners, not only as integrative and supplementary learning tools, but also as powerful generators of knowledge.

Presenting the chief benefits of podcasts, Zychla (2007) has addressed some of the general problems in the field of language education that podcasting could help alleviate. Amongst these

problems are insufficient language exposure; students' overdependence on teachers, and differences in facilities among schools. Zychla (2007) also reports that some schools encourage learners of EFL to record their own podcasts so that their instructors can evaluate their performance. Borja (2005), spoke to an instructional-technology specialist at the University of Nebraska's College of Education, and notes that: "Educators are starting to see how podcasting can help hone students' vocabulary, writing, editing, public speaking, and presentation skills." In a nutshell, podcasts can make up for the absence of natural language input and are best described as ubiquitous tools.

Attitudes

As previously noted, attitudes play a crucial role in the process of language learning, as they appear to affect the success or failure of students. Gardner (1985) maintains that motivation to learn a FL is determined by basic predispositions and personality characteristics, such as the learner's attitude towards foreign people in general, and towards the target group and language in particular. Karahan (2007) holds that positive attitudes will support learners striving to learn EFL. The next sections focus on two significant aspects of attitude concerning FL learning: attitudes towards correct pronunciation, and attitudes towards podcasts.

Attitudes towards Pronunciation

Various studies have verified that most EFL learners are not satisfied with their pronunciation skills and dream of speaking English fluently (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002). One of the earliest studies by Guiora *et al.* (1972) concludes that the psychological demands of FL learning are related to pronunciation skills, and they argue that pronunciation is the most outstanding expression of language ability; the hardest skill to acquire in a new language, and the most difficult aspect to lose in one's native language. Elliot (1995) found that subjects' attitude towards pronunciation, as measured by the Pronunciation Attitude Inventory (PAI), is the principal variable in relation to target language pronunciation. Elliot's study is built on earlier research by Suter (1976), who concluded that students who are more concerned with their pronunciation display better pronunciation of English. In a study conducted by Derwing (2003), more than half of the interviewees felt that they would receive more respect if they were able to pronounce English better.

Attitudes towards Pronunciation-specific Podcasting

Ducate and Lomicka (2009) conducted a study to examine the effects of using podcasts to improve pronunciation in L2 learning, and looked at how students' attitudes towards pronunciation changed over the course of a semester. The study included 22 participants enrolled on intermediate German and French courses. They completed a pre- and post-survey based on Elliott's (1995) Pronunciation Attitude Inventory to assess their perspectives regarding pronunciation. The study reveals that students found the podcast project positive and enjoyable. In another study, Tavales and Skevoulis (2006) suggest that students, with the help of podcasts, could record themselves or native speakers and then engage in listening practice as they focused on pronunciation, grammar use or intonation. The results show an enhancement in their pronunciation.

Jessica and Anne (2010) point out that there are numerous benefits from integrating podcasts into a pronunciation course, including the opportunity for learners to recycle the course material

by reformulating the content in their own words and in an original format. They assert that integrating podcasting into any course is one way of drawing the learner's attention towards the importance of accurate pronunciation. Lee and Chan (2007) conducted a study with 18 students studying information technology. After listening to three to five minute podcasts over the course of a semester, the students participated in a survey which indicated that they perceived listening to the podcasts as being worthwhile and enjoyable.

Research design

The current study functions as an exploratory survey in which both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are used. The rationale behind approaching this study from an attitudinal perspective, rather than an experimental perspective, is due to three reasons: Firstly, there have been no attitudinal studies on podcasting in Saudi Arabia, and so that makes experimental studies important. Secondly, previous studies on emerging technological applications are reported to have started with an investigation into attitudes and feedback. Once such applications have become established in a society, their effect can be researched and examined; podcasting in education in general, and in language teaching in particular, is considered to be an emerging technology in Saudi Arabia. The third reason is ascribed to the difficulty in assessing any improvement in the students' pronunciation due to the lack of native speakers of English.

The setting

The study was carried out at the Department of English, Imam University, Saudi Arabia, during the first semester of the academic year 2016-2015. The study lasted for eight weeks, starting with a presentation on podcasts, and ending with the questionnaire collection.

Participants

The participants consisted of 23 level three students from the department of English at Imam University. All students had finished a one year (two academic semesters) intensive course in English. Their ages ranged from 20 to 23 years and Arabic is their first language. The reason behind targeting this group is due to the appropriateness of the academic level at which they are studying. To clarify, they are neither beginning to say that they may not have valued the importance of pronunciation, yet they are not advanced enough to say that they may have difficulty honing their pronunciation.

Instrument

In order to answer the research questions that have guided the study, a questionnaire has been employed as the main data-gathering instrument. The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part, which seeks to examine students' attitudes towards pronunciation, is based on Elliott's (1995) Pronunciation Attitude Inventory (PAI) (see Part I in Appendix A). PAI is a model that was first introduced by Raymond Elliott in 1995, which attempts to probe learners' attitudes, feelings and aims, with regards to foreign language pronunciation.

Main findings

Attitudes towards Proper Pronunciation

The first research question asks about the attitudes of the participants towards proper pronunciation. First, an examination of the scores for the three negatively worded items (items 3,

8 and 9) in the questionnaire will be presented. For item three (I will never be able to speak English with a good accent), more subjects (61%) rejected this supposition and believe they can speak English with a good accent. This implies that they have a strong aptitude for speaking English with a good accent. Responses to item eight (Communicating is much more important than sounding like a native speaker of English) gained a lower percentage (26%) of agreement; while the majority of participants (74%) value the aim of communication over merely passing as a native speaker of English. As for the third item (Good pronunciation skills are not as important as learning vocabulary and grammar), the number in agreement (12) was 52%, while those who disagreed (11) made up 48%. This implies that just over half of students value learning grammar and vocabulary over acquiring the proper pronunciation; however, this score is totally inconsistent with that of Ducateand Lomicka (2009). This attitude in both Ducateand Lomicka`s study, and the current study for items eight and nine, may not be surprising since language courses during this preliminary stage perhaps emphasise communication, vocabulary and grammar over pronunciation. Surprisingly enough, the findings for item nine in Lord`s (2008) study show a significantly different attitude. Her subjects strongly disagree with that statement and, moreover, they value the importance of pronunciation over vocabulary and grammar.

In terms of attitudes towards native-like pronunciation, which can be seen in the scores of items one, seven and 12, the results of the three items taken as a whole suggest that the participants are noticeably inclined to attempting to sound like natives when speaking English. As much as 82% of the subjects strive to reach nativity in spoken English. A possible reason for this high score could be due to the fact that students of English are becoming more concerned about sounding like natives in order to gain self-confidence. Actually, a number of studies stress that speaking with near native-like pronunciation gives the speaker more self-confidence. As suggested by Moyer (1999), positive orientation towards the language appears to be an important factor in developing native-like pronunciation.

As for attitudes towards proper pronunciation, represented by items 2, 4, 5, 6, 10 and 11, the data again shows that participants displayed a considerably positive attitude. An overview of the responses reveals the following: (1) The participants believe that they can improve their pronunciation skills in English; (2) they put more emphasis on proper pronunciation in class; (3) they want to acquire better pronunciation skills, (4) they strongly value the importance of acquiring proper pronunciation and (5) they are concerned with their progress in pronunciation. Taken as a whole, these attitudes represent almost 80% of the total number of participants. Consequently, these positive levels of attitude confirm what was hypothesised earlier, in that EFL learners have a positive attitude towards acquiring the proper pronunciation of English. As evidenced by Lord`s (2008) research findings, the participants have a very positive attitude towards proper pronunciation and their ability to achieve accurate pronunciation. Moreover, this result is in line with Sparks and Ganschow`s work (1991), as they conclude that students with a positive attitude towards the target language are more successful at pronunciation than students with less positive attitudes.

Attitudes towards Podcasts as a Facilitator of Proper Pronunciation:

Likert- scale Statements

The second research question concerns the attitudes of the participants towards podcasts as a facilitator of proper pronunciation, and the second part of the questionnaire addresses this question. The learners that displayed positive attitudes made up 69%, whereas those with negative attitudes comprised 12%. The first three items, which state that podcasts are interesting,

useful and enjoyable, showed a highly positive attitude rate, ranging from 61% up to 83%, and a very low negative attitude rate ranging from 2% down to 0%. This implies that the subjects are highly oriented towards using CALL tools and have a good aptitude at utilising the new technology. This result can be ascribed to the widespread use of technological devices and smart phones that support podcasting, along with students' ownership of and interest in such devices. Moreover, the plethora of benefits and features that can be gained from such tools makes the use of devices interesting and enjoyable, as well as useful. In Ducateand Lomicka's (2009) study, participants perceived podcasts as being positive and enjoyable.

Items five and nine concern the integration of podcasts as a supplement for use in listening courses. Nineteen students (83%) support the idea of integrating podcasts into a listening and speaking course, and 13 (57%) feel comfortable listening to lecturer-related podcasts. This finding shows that students are no longer restricted to language laboratories for listening materials, since podcasts have become easily accessible. Similarly, Stanley's (2006) study reveals that podcasts could be used as a supplement to textbook material and a source of authentic listening material. Miller and Hilas (2010) point out that one of the benefits of integrating podcasts into a pronunciation course is the opportunity for learners to recycle the course material by reformulating the content in their own words.

Items four and seven address two functions that podcasts can provide for EFL learners. Podcasts could serve as ubiquitous learning tools and be used to identify various regional accents. Seventeen students reinforced the former function, and nineteen supported the latter function. None of the students disagreed with the role that podcasts could play in helping to identify different English accents. Such a result is indicative of the students' belief in the usefulness of the portability of podcasts, since they have been raised in a media-rich environment and live in an information-centric world. Again, this feature of podcasts is stressed in the study by Godwin-Jones (2005). In a nutshell, despite the low rate of improvement in pronunciation, the overall findings show that the attitudes towards podcasts as a facilitator for proper pronunciation are positive.

Implications

The findings suggest that while useful, podcasting alone is not sufficient enough to greatly improve pronunciation during an academic semester. If teachers want their students to improve their pronunciation skills through the help of audio aids such as podcasts, they are recommended to provide them with more focused and consistent pronunciation practice in class. Accordingly, it is suggested that EFL instructors should integrate podcasting into listening and speaking classes in order to ensure greater advances in pronunciation skills. To be precise, a listening and speaking course is an ideal environment for the employment of course related podcasts as an authentic listening material supplement. Usually, listening and speaking skills textbooks are accompanied by CDs or MP3s, but those aids cannot surpass the many ubiquitous features of podcasts. Nowadays, the internet is abundant with pronunciation-specific podcasting providers that teach the various components of pronunciation.

This exploratory survey could open the doors to more comprehensive studies as part of further research. A similar experimental study with a larger number of participants may produce more generalisable results. Further studies on podcasting that include more students, more levels and more raters should result in clearer and more reliable outcomes. Also, such studies could

examine whether students' pronunciation does improve over a year or even longer. Since the current study has not emphasised any particular pronunciation features, a more detailed examination of the acquisition of particular pronunciation features (segmental and supra-segmental), as well as the impact that podcasting can have on these features, would be worth investigating. It would also be useful to follow up the results from similar studies in order to assist learners and educators by producing model strategies for using podcasts in EFL contexts.

Conclusion

The results from this study are promising and encouraging, not only because they are in compliance with previous research findings that indicate that EFL students have the potential to increase performance in pronunciation skills, but also regarding the role that new technologies such as podcasting can play in the process of language development in general. Learners' attitudes towards new CALL technologies such as podcasting have been shown to be generally positive. Moreover, language educators should keep up with new CALL innovations, as today's students are demanding the use of technological applications in the classroom, and if educators do not provide these, they are likely to be left behind. The use of podcasting is particularly useful in Saudi EFL settings, as teachers are usually non-native English speakers, and such technology facilitates the incorporation of regional as well as standard dialects.

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