

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This study was conducted to examine the intelligibility of Arabic-accented English vowels, specifically the perception of the target vowels by Malaysian speakers of English. It is hoped that the findings of the current study can give insight into the problem that other speakers of English face when communicating with Arabic speakers of English with a strong Arabic accent. The Arabic accented sounds which have been said to affect perception (Munro, 1993) have been chosen to form the primary data for this study. The first section offered a broad survey of this study, comprising the background, statement of the problem, and the research questions followed by significance and limitations of the study.

1.1 Background

Language as a means of communication bears the function of conveying the intended message from the speaker to the listener. If the listener understands the message conveyed, the communication is regarded as successful. However, this success is conditioned by many factors, such as utterance and word choice of the speaker, sentence structure, culture, and the context of situation. Since English, which was once only the privilege of people living in the British Isles, has become a global language which is applied to inter- and intra-communication between nations, it is critical to examine whether its users/speakers can use it appropriately.

English generally has three different groups of users: native (ENL), second (ESL) and foreign language (EFL) users. Despite the situation that “the English-language standards are determined by speakers of ENL” (Jenkins, 2003:16), other varieties of English are developing their own standards by adopting some language features of their own, such as sounds, sentence structures, vocabulary and social norms. Those varieties of English are sometimes named the “New Englishes” (Platt, Weber & Ho), of which the vowel sounds vary in terms of both their quality and quantity (Cf. Jennifer Jenkins, 2003; Maxwell & Fletcher, 2009; Salbrina, 2006; Yan & Vaseghi, 2003). Therefore, it is a matter of dispute whether the second or foreign language speaker is intelligible enough to other speakers of English or is inferior to the standard varieties.

Given that the Arabian Peninsula is an EFL area, it can be anticipated that the English language used there bears its own features distinguishing it from other varieties of English. Thus, it can also be assumed that the characteristics of English pronunciation of Arabic speakers vary compared with that from other countries. However, whether this non-native variety of English is intelligible enough for users of English other than Arabs is still a question to be explored.

In the process of learning a second/foreign language, how well a learner learn it depends on many factors, like their language ability, background, ways of learning. Some often experience a reduction of satisfaction of their progress when communicating with others using the “new” language. This lack of effectiveness in communication can be due to their non-native/foreign accent or differences between the speech sound production of

the native speakers and that of the others, despite the fact there may be other factors accounting for this matter, for example, different syntactic structure and/or grammatical errors. However it is not necessary that a remarkable accent of a second/foreign language blocks ordinary verbal interaction; people who speak with an accent may have no problem being understood by others.

Regarding this phenomenon, this paper aims to examine the Malaysian ESL learners' perception of Arabic-accented English. The two parameters in this study are Malaysian speakers of English and Arabic-accented English, which correspondingly refer to native Malay speakers from Malaysia, and Omani English speakers. Only English vowel monophthongs are analyzed in the current study.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The critical status of the English language globally is that it is used nation wide in Malaysia together with the national language, Bahasa Melayu (Asmah Omar, 1997), and is also valued greatly by students and scholars in the Arabian Peninsula. Many studies have been conducted on the learning of English language by Arab researchers (Rababah, 2001; Wahba, 1998; Abbad, 1988; Mukattash, 1983). With globalization, there is an increase in the number of international students studying in Malaysian universities. Only a few of this fast growing number of people manipulate Bahasa Malaysia; therefore, English becomes the main medium of communication amongst themselves and between them and the local people, though Chinese, Tamil and many other languages of India also play a role as facilitators in cross-national interactions.

Accordingly, whether their respective varieties of English can be comprehended by others than those from their own language community, especially the local people in Malaysia, and to what extent they get their message correctly conveyed remain critical, for the achievement of these two factors determines and marks the success of the communication. As a result, being one of these “foreign” varieties as using by a great number of Arabs in Malaysia, there is an increasing necessity to carry out an investigation of Arabic-accented English.

There are many differences between the phonological structure of English and Arabic, such as the number and quality of vowels (Al-Ani, 1970; Ali Hubais, 2009) and allophonic distribution of phonemes (Khaled Huthaily, 2008; Abudlbaseer Eid, 2006). These factors all render the production of Arabic speakers’ English sounding less “standard” than the standard British English, thus being entitled “foreign accent”. Although there have been a number of studies on the pronunciation of both Malaysian and Arabic accented English (e.g. Zuraidah, 1997; Flege & Port, 1981; Mitchell, 1993), they focus on the form rather than the communicative content. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine to what extent is the English spoken by Omani speakers of English intelligible to Malay speakers of English, in order to enable comparisons with other varieties of English, reveal problems that need to be attend to specifically in the teaching of English for Arab speakers, and to make learners themselves aware of the significant variables in their learning of articulation of English.

The term intelligibility describes the measure of success in communication, based on the production, transmission, or perception of the speech sounds of a language (Carney, 1986; Kent, Weismer & Rosenbeck, 1989). However the current research focuses on only one dimension of this, which is the perception of sound produced by non-native speakers of English. Even though there are redundant cues distinctive in speech that permit various results of speech perception to take place under different conditions (Borden & Harris, 1980), this study merely coped with speech sounds, specifically vowels since they tend to be one of the typical manifestations of accent differences among different varieties of English (Deterding, 2003).

1.3 Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the problems that the Malaysian faced when communicating with native Arabic speakers. It also explores which English vowels are perceived correctly by native Malay speakers and which ones are not. Further, an attempt will be made to explore the individual differences in target vowel perception. The data in this study was collected from Omani speakers of English.

Modern Standard Arabic has six monophthong vowels /i/, /a/, /u/, /iː/, /aː/, /uː/ (Al-Ani, 1970; Alghamdi, 1998; Newman, 2002); therefore, according to Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which advocates that if a segment exists in the L2 but not in the L1 a learner will have trouble perceiving and producing the new segment. It can be anticipated that Arabic speakers of English might have some problems in producing certain vowels new to their own phonetic category. In the Malay inventory,

the long vowels are absent (Ismail, 1994). Since the two languages have their own sound systems different from English, it can be assumed that the pronunciations of English sounds possess distinctive features and this may contribute to problems of intelligibility (Ali Hubais, 2009), thus leading to difficulties in mutual comprehension of the speakers. Also, according to the Perceptual Assimilation Hypothesis, language-specific experience causes perceptual assimilation of non-native phonemes to native phonemes (Best, 1994).

Another question to be addressed is the potential characteristics that may lead to the success or failure in the subjects' perception of English vowels of L1 language accented English, which in this case is Arabic accented English.

Taking into consideration the assumptions and differences in sound systems noted above, this study will address the following research questions:

1. To what extent are the vowels produced by Arabic speakers of English intelligible to Malay speakers of English?
2. Which vowels are correctly perceived by native Malay speakers and which vowels are not?

It is expected that the findings of this study would help to contribute to the existing study on a variety of English spoken by L1 Arabic speakers of English and also help to provide input for the development of material for the teaching of English pronunciation for these speakers.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Although there have been a number of researches contributing to the study of English phonemes from phonetic, phonological and sociolinguistic perspectives, a dearth of attention has been paid to the varieties of English in the “Expanding Circle” where it is learnt and spoken as a second/foreign language. Since the Arab informant has considerable systematic English learning experience before pursuing his higher education abroad, he is able to pronounce the target vowels with basic knowledge of English phonemes and certain prosodic features, suffice it to say, the Arab informant participating in the current study manifested the development of English education in Arabic countries. In spite of the fact that discrimination difficulties have been shown to impair effective communication (Flege, 1992; Flege & Liu, 2001) production continues to be the focus of researches in the field of phonetics and phonology (Rochet, 1995). Consequently difficulties and problems in perception of a language are often ignored. However successful communication and studies concerning a specific language consists of both facets of production and perception. Moreover, being contingent upon investigation of communicative effectiveness from the aspect of listeners’ perception towards the language, though other dimensions are essential as well, may promise second/foreign language training programs to be more efficient and targeted at determining the necessity of specific training on pronunciation, as well as duration and focus of this phonation training. Therefore, this study may contain pedagogical and practical significance to both students and academics. The exploration of this Arab English speaking community will hopefully help explore the strength and weakness of the pronunciation of Arabic-accented English as a variety of World English, provide

insights for lecturers in the way of instruction, thus making improvement on the production of all Arab learners of English, as well as drawing more self-attention by students to their proficiency in spoken English. This study could also be utilized by course designers or professionals in the design of new language training courses and text books with appropriate activities that serve learners needs best.

1.5 Scope and Limitations

The study was limited by the number of subjects. In order to avoid variables in speech production, it only looked at one Arabic speaker who manipulated Arabic as a first language and English as a second language, due to the fact that the realization of vowels by different Arabic speakers of English may vary; and since its focus was on speaker rather than listener-oriented language, there were twenty Malay speakers of English excluding other speech communities of English tested on the perception of target vowels. On the other hand, the Arabic speaker was confined to people from only one country of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman; whilst the origin of Malay speakers varied. However, though the native Arab subject had considerable educational and language learning background in English, he was the only informant to be examined for Omani-accented English production. As a matter of fact, both the sample size and language learning backgrounds of the subjects prevent the findings of this study to be generalized to all native Arabic-speaking English users. Nevertheless, it does enable a preliminary study on the perception of vowels of Arabic-accented English. What is more, this study only focuses on vowel perception, without consideration of other speech parameters, for example, vowel production, and that of consonants. According to

Ladefoged (2001:93), “each accent (or language) contrasts a certain number of vowels”, therefore it can be anticipated that one of the major differences of the two accents in the pronunciation of English lies in the realizations of vowels in different varieties of English. More studies may be needed in order to gain a full-faceted perspective.