

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many language training experts believe that language learning is actually a collection of skills and not merely a collection of linguistic knowledge (e.g. Siti Hamin Stapa & Abdul Hammed Abdul Majid, 2006; Koren, 1997; Lin, 2007; Mattioli, 2004; Nuttal, 1996; Warford, 2007). Language skills are generally categorised into listening, speaking, reading and writing skills; and in terms of productive skills, the ability to speak is an essential skill in foreign language learning. In relation to teaching and learning a foreign language, appropriate pronunciation is important to ensure intelligibility and can be a measure of the success of teaching and learning a language, especially spoken skills (Fraser, 2000; Tsukada, 2008). In general, most English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learners face difficulties when speaking because of their pronunciation, and they are generally perceived as having a foreign accent, and as pointed out by Tsukada (1999, p. 373), "it is generally accepted that non-native adult learners of a second/foreign language attain limited mastery when it comes to pronunciation".

However, in many EFL contexts, the teaching and learning of pronunciation is neglected, resulting in learners facing problems with English pronunciation (Nair, Krishnasamy & de Mello, 2006). Such is the case in Iran where despite many years of learning English, learners still struggle with many aspects of English pronunciation. In relation to this, the present study examines one particular area of English pronunciation, English vowels, with a view to study how a group of Persian learners produce English monophthongs and diphthongs and to establish the problems they face in producing these English sounds through acoustic analysis.

1.1 English in Iran

English is one of the subjects taught in Iranian schools as a foreign language. Teaching English in Iranian schools began in 1940 when the first English books were introduced in schools. By the 1900s, private language schools emerged in the capital and in many large cities to cater for the growing number of Iranians wanting to study English. Today, English language proficiency is an asset for the younger generation who are looking for better job opportunities.

In the past, the close politico-economic relationship with the United States during the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), led to a large number of students being sent to American universities for higher education (Riazi, 2005). At the same time, Iranian universities also created bilateral relations with American universities to facilitate the allocation of scholarships for postgraduate studies in American universities. However, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the education system in Iran was revamped, and along with it, the English language syllabus changed. The Iranian Ministry of Education and Training controlled the entire school system including the curriculum, teacher training and English language centres. As a result, the national curriculum committee prepared all the related English textbooks to be used at schools. While the focus was on America and by default, American English, before the Islamic revolution, the committee placed British English as a prescribed model for teaching English in Iran.

Further, in the absence of political relations between the United States and Iran due to the revolution, Iran began to create relations with European countries and the people who were in charge of educational policy formulated a plan to promote the teaching of other languages such as German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian in the country. However, as the number of people who were able to teach these languages was

insufficient, and the number of students who wanted to learn these languages was low, Thus, the English language remained the most dominant foreign language taught in schools and even at the present time, the number of people who are interested in learning English as their first priority keeps increasing (Maftoon, 2000).

As a school subject, English is taught from the age of 12. In public junior high schools, it is taught for four hours a week from the age of 12 to 14. In high schools (15 to 17 years), it is a six unit credit course (1 credit is approximately 80 minutes per week of classroom contact). It is an additional four unit credit course at the one year pre-university level (Secretariat of the Higher Council of Education, 2006). In the current system, the structure of the 12-year primary and secondary education is arranged on a 5-3-3-1 basis with five years primary, three years junior secondary, another three years of senior secondary and one year of pre-university education. Thus, a typical Iranian public school student can be expected to have studied English for seven years. By the time students complete their senior secondary and pre-university education, they are expected to have mastered the basic knowledge of writing, reading, speaking and have learned with at least 3000 new words based on the text-books used and as well as training in grammar. The situation in Iran now is that, since it has opened its doors to the world in 1988, this open policy has established English as the most important foreign language in Iran. As an international language, English is widely used by students, researchers and scientists to gather information and, to publish their findings in different fields. However, these activities mainly involve reading and writing rather than speaking and listening. For businessmen, English serves as a means of conducting international business, and for graduates, English is an advantage for those seeking employment in other countries. Further, English has become an important language in the mass media in Iran. Among the most popular media are print and online daily

newspapers such as *Tehran Times*, *Iran Daily*, *Media of Iran*, *Hamshahri*, and *Keihan*. There are also weekly magazines and news programs in English, and Radio Iran is broadcast in English, as are some programmes on particular radio and television channels operated by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (I.R.I.B).

Important as it is, English still remains as a foreign language in Iran, which cannot be compared with its status in countries like India or Malaysia where it is a second language. As a foreign language, the use of English is restricted to schools and English language learning centres. The latter mainly focus on English language teaching but even here the opportunities for real language use are restricted because of the teaching and learning methods and the emphasis on examinations. English is a compulsory subject in the Iranian curriculum, but according to Dahmardeh (2006), in countries like Iran where there is a special emphasis on achievement standards in school; teachers are always worried about arranging and spending time for exams during language learning. They have been trying hard to teach learners about the timing of the exams, that's why large amount of language tests in Iran cannot achieve a valid and reliable assessment of learner communicative language ability in the real contexts. Therefore, evaluation and education of communicative language skills are neglected.

Thus, despite the fact that English is compulsory at all levels of education, English language teaching and learning in Iran is still far from being successful, and many Iranian students still have problems speaking in English, especially in the area of pronunciation. This may be due to many reasons but the most important reason is perhaps the teaching method used. English language teaching in Iran has been greatly influenced by the grammar-translation method and thus, "students' aural and oral skills are not emphasised in Iranian prescribed EFL textbooks" (Jahangard, 2007, cited in

Ghorbani, 2008, p. 132). Besides, as Ghorbani (2008, p. 133) explains, "before 1990's, as reading and translating written English materials were necessary for students, English education focused on reading and translation skills". Hence, the curriculum was generally aimed at developing students' knowledge of grammar, reading and translation to facilitate their reading and translation skills to handle written texts. High school teachers basically applied the grammar-translation method to follow the prescribed curriculum requirements and to meet its expectations, and as Hosseini explains, "this process in language classes, which are mostly run through a hybrid of grammar-translation method and audio-lingual methods, entails translation, repetition, memorization, recitation, and reproduction" (2006, p. 30). They avoided using other methods which they felt were against conventional teaching methods, and emphasised reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary neglecting pronunciation, listening and speaking abilities. Thus, the main focus of teaching English in Iran is to make students pass exams, and since the productive abilities of students in this area are not being tested, most teachers do not focus on speaking skills, including pronunciation.

Recently, despite the introduction of new methods in English language learning centres, the grammar-translation method is still widely adopted or indirectly adopted. This is because "the grammar-translation does not necessarily require the teachers to master the language. What they need to do is just to read through textbooks and to memorise some grammatical rules and words" (Hu, 1990, p. 337). Therefore, teachers can use their mother tongue to teach vocabulary, grammar, texts and even to teach listening and speaking. There are dialogues in textbooks, but they are generally not communicative in nature at all. The focus of such activities is to teach the students a grammatical point or new vocabulary and is not an exercise to improve speaking skill. The enhancement of students' skills in English conversations has largely been neglected. In general, there are

no audio materials for textbooks for listening purposes; and if there are any, the activities are not sufficiently challenging for the students. Moreover it does not help students to use the English language outside the classroom. The second reason for the lack of successful English language learning especially in the area of pronunciation is the type of books being used. The books tend to be out-dated and unappealing, and lack focus on the current needs of students. Furthermore, the sections on speaking and pronunciation practice are insufficient and most of the tasks involve reading and writing, even if they are meant to provide oral practice. Every year, a large amount of money is spent on English language in the education system by the government, but unfortunately, the results are not encouraging. Statistics shows that less than 5 percent of Iranians can speak English (Translated from Gharahjeh, 2010). The fact that English language teaching and learning in Iran is fraught by problems has been acknowledged by the Ministry of Education:

The process of English language teaching in almost all Iranian schools is not accepted and needs a lot of attention. In other words, it should be reorganised in many areas such as learners, teachers, teaching methods and even the curriculum. Unfortunately, as the syllabus designers do not pay attention to the different aspects of the English language teaching and all books are traditionally grammar oriented, English teachers do not focus on other parts of teaching such as pronunciation. This in turn makes the teachers to be confused in pronouncing different sounds too. (Abdul Amir Orfi, Director General Office of Ministry of Secondary Education, quoted in "Learning English Process in schools is not Desirable", 2010 [translated from Persian]).

1.2 Rationale and Statement of the Problem

In relation to pronunciation, the English sound system and how students are supposed to produce English sounds are provided under the section of language content in the syllabus. These include English consonants, vowels (monophthongs, diphthongs and triphthongs), consonants clusters, past tense and plural forms, stress and intonation. However, for the most part, this remains a description in the syllabus and is not translated into teaching and learning activities because of the factors previously mentioned in this chapter. Given that many Iranians work, live and study abroad especially in English speaking countries or countries where English is a second language such the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Malaysia (Naghdi, 2010), there is a need for Iranians to be able to communicate intelligibly in English. Thus, the lack of focus on speaking skills in English language education in Iran is a worrying trend.

Lack of focus on pronunciation is also evident in the dearth of research on the teaching and learning of pronunciation among Iranian learners. Thus, there is a need to start looking at the way in which Iranians, who are mainly first language (L1) speakers of Persian, produce English sounds. The rationale for examining the pronunciation of English sounds by Persian speakers is to provide a platform to investigate whether there are pronunciation problems that should be addressed in the teaching of English pronunciation in Iran.

1.3 The Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine the production of English vowels produced by native speakers of Persian. The objectives of this research are as follows:

- i. To examine English vowels produced by Persian speakers through instrumental analysis of the vowels.
- ii. To determine to what extent Persian English vowels differ from British English and American English.

British English was selected as a model for comparison since it is the teaching model in Iran, while American English was selected since the subjects, who are teenagers may be influenced by American English due to exposure to American media and entertainment.

In relation to these objectives the research aims to answer the following questions:

- i. What are the characteristics of English vowels produced by Persian speakers in this study?
- ii. To what extent are there differences in the realisation of English vowels produced by the female and male Persian speakers in this study?
- iii. To what extent do the English vowels produced by the Persian speakers in this study differ from British and American English vowels?

1.4 The Significance of the Study

The main significance of this study is that it will contribute acoustically analysed empirical data on Persian English vowels, since there is lack of published research in the area of English pronunciation in Iran. Thus, this study will help to fill the research gap, and add to the knowledge on the production of English vowels by Persian speakers. The findings of this study will supply preliminary evidence about the way in which Persian speakers produce English vowels and how this differs from a native variety like British English. Such information can then be used to improve the teaching and learning of pronunciation among Iranian learners.

1.5 The Limitation of the Study

In any research study, there are limitations that affect the overall findings of the result. Firstly, this study was delimited by the sample size and subjects who comprised 13 Iranian learners. Secondly, the analyses were focused on the spoken language in two speaking contexts. These limitations in part were due to the detailed acoustic analysis carried out. The findings therefore, are limited to the sample in question, and are not meant to be a broad generalization of the entire Iranian student population, although it is likely to highlight the patterns of vowel realisation among Iranians.

1.6 Organisation of the Study

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first chapter outlines the objectives of this study. The second chapter will review related literature while the third will describe the methodology used to obtain and analyse the data in this study. The fourth chapter presents and discusses the findings of the study. Lastly, a summary of the findings and their significance within the context of teaching and learning English in Iran are presented.