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Study of Consonant Pronunciations Errors Committed by EFL Learners

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Abstract

As the topic suggests, the research paper presents Study of Consonant Pronunciations Errors Committed by EFL Learners. Error analysis always tries to resolve language learners' problems in acquiring second or foreign language setting. Learning to English pronunciation is perhaps as important as learning listening skill, speaking, and spelling. Errors in English pronunciation create several problems for English language learners in their works. In other words, most of the English language errors of pronunciation are due to the lack of knowledge of language learners. However, all the students in our sample are of age group (16-25) at Bushehr language institute and they are all Iranian nationals. In addition, all of them were female learners. An English pronunciation (consonant) test was used to get information about the knowledge of the learners in English pronunciation. Findings of this article indicated that the first and second hypotheses of this article were accepted, but the third hypothesis was rejected. However, the findings of this paper showed that the Iranian EFL students have problem to pronounce English sounds correctly.

Keywords: Error analysis; Contrastive analysis; English pronunciation; Consonant pronunciations errors.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates consonant pronunciations errors of Iranian EFL learners at Bushehr language institute in Iran. Language of human being has been used through spoken or written communication. The spoken language is more flexible than the written language. Nanjaiah (1994), argues that "the spoken form of a language keeps on changing in course of time depending upon the context and the cultural background of the people who use it. However, spoken language is more important than written language. This is because; spoken language comes first in the history of any language community. However, human started spoken language long before man started written language. Balasubramanian (1981), mentions that written language is only an attempt to represent, using marks on paper, the sounds used in spoken language. Aitchison (2003) argues that spoken language typically involves the characteristics: more than one participant, inexplicit, repetitive, fragments, simple structure, and concrete, common vocabulary whereas written language topically involves characteristics: single writer, explicit, non-repetitive, full sentences, elaborate structure, and abstract, less common vocabulary. The first problem that confronts the EFL learner in his/her effort to acquire a speaking –knowledge of English language is its pronunciation. However, to describe and master the pronunciation of English language, it is necessary for the EFL language learner knows the sound system of English language.

In all languages, there are two categories of speech sounds, namely, vowels and consonants. Let us illustrate them. Varshney (1998), argues that the word consonant has been come from the Greek word consonautem which means the sound produced with the help of some other sound (vowel). He adds that" thus, a consonant has been defined by most modern phoneticians and linguists as a sound which is produced by a stoppage or partial stoppage of the breath, that is to say, in the production of a consonant the movement of air from the lungs is partially or fully obstructed as a result of narrowing or a complete closure of the air passage" (Varshney, 1998). Fromkin *et al.* (2003), mention that "consonants are produced with some restriction or closure in the vocal tract that impedes the flow of air from the lungs". However, consonants are made by causing a blockage or partial blockage in the mouth, and these are usually described in terms of where the sound is made in the mouth, or place of articulation; how the sound is made, or the manner of articulation; and whether or not the vocal cords vibrate, or voicing. The consonants of English differ with another in at least one of the above feature. For example, the two English phonemes of /b/ and /p/ at the initial words of *b*at and *p*at differ with one another in the third feature (i.e. voicing) while /b/ is voiced /p/ is voiceless. Varshney (1998), argues that vowels may be defined with an open approximation without any obstruction, partial or complete, in the air passage. Crystal (2003) says that vowels are sounds articulated without a complete closure in the mouth or a degree of narrowing which would produce audible friction; the air escapes evenly over the center of the Tongue. Vowels are produced with little restriction of the airflow from the lungs out the mouth and /or noise (Fromkin *et al.*, 2003). The quality of a vowel depends on the shape of the vocal tract as the air passes through. Fromkin *et al.* (2003), add that "different parts of the tongue may be high or low in the mouth; the lips may be spread or pursed; the velum may be raised or lowered. English vowels are classified according to three questions: How high or low in the mouth is the tongue? How forward or backward in the mouth is the tongue? Are the lips rounded (pursed) or spread"?

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The need for a systematic approach to analysis language errors of second or foreign language learners for improving the learners' errors of language was also a priority for applied linguistics from 1940s. From 1940s, a much larger number of research works have been done by a number of research scholars in order to recognize language learners' errors and improve them. One of the approaches has been done was contrastive analysis. This theory believes that learners' errors are due interference to the learners' mother tongue. Khansir (2012), states that approach to the study of learner's errors have been divided into categories, namely contrastive analysis and error analysis. Both of them are needed to be considered in getting information of language learner's errors. Khansir (2012), adds that study error analysis should be considered along with contrastive analysis. According to Richards *et al.* (1992) contrastive analysis was more successful in phonology than in other areas of language. Empirical evidence shows that interference mother tongue of learners can cause learners' errors and it is only one of many types of errors found in the lexicon, syntax, morphology and orthography of student's utterances in the target language. It is worth mentioning that error analysis has been recognized as a branch of Applied Linguistics in the 1960s. One of the great linguists of applied linguistics namely 'Corder', thus; he has been known as the father of error analysis hypothesis, Corder (1967) claims that learners' errors are systematic; it is meant that the errors are referred to competence of the learners. Therefore, Learners' errors are seen as a natural and vital part of the learning process. According to theory of error analysis, the information of learners' errors would be useful to text book writers, syllabus designers, teachers and learners. Richards *et al.* (1992), add that Error analysis attempts to develop classification for different types of errors on the basis of the different processes. However, there is fact that language learners everywhere produce numerous errors while acquiring their second language. We should accept this fact that language errors are natural phenomenon integral to the process of second language learning. Language teachers should build a confidence for their learners in using their knowledge of the target language in classrooms settings. Khansir (2008), mentions that in target language situation errors show the learner's inability to use appropriate grammatical structures, semantic categories and other linguistic units. So, Corder (1967) indicates that we should not only focuses on learners errors when communicating in a foreign language, but if the learners errors studied systematically , can provide significant insights into how languages are actually learned. Over the past nine decades, studies in error analysis have been continued to contribute to the growing knowledge of language teachers, and syllabus designers to develop second language in general and English language in particular and this knowledge has been also used in order to teach English more effectively.

However, the discussion of statement of problem of this paper which supported by the researchers' experience shows that almost Persian-speaking learners of English language have many problems to pronounce English sounds in their classroom every day. One of the main problems is that the English teachers see a large number of English pronunciation errors made by Iranian EFL students in their classroom. Therefore, the Iranian English language teachers have been attempted to understand their students' problems to pronounce English sounds a scientific manner. For example, a number of English sounds such as /θ/ in initial words such as thanks, thumb, and three. Another problematic sound is /ð/ in initial position of such words like this, then, and thus; Iranian learners have problem to pronounce them correctly. In this article, the researchers followed the objectives: to examine types of English pronunciation errors in English language; to compare types of English pronunciation errors; and to suggest remedial measure to overcome the committed errors. Thus, the following hypotheses are considered.

H1: Interdental fricatives pose the greatest deal of problem for Persian-speaking learners of English to produce.

H2: Lack of these sounds (i.e. Interdental fricatives and glide) in students' L1 is the main cause of students' pronunciation errors.

H3: Explicit pronunciation instruction can help students to minimize their pronunciation errors as far as these sounds are concerned.

2. Literature Review

Ying (2011), investigates English pronunciation errors of six Chinese undergraduates learners based on contrastive analysis and error analysis. The six Chinese undergraduate students had similar educational background. All the subjects spoke Mandarin Chinese as their mother tongue and rarely used English in their daily conversation. Thus, the pronunciation errors of the Chinese learners were diagnosed and they are divided into four categories such as consonant cluster confusion; omission of grammatical endings and contractions; the absence of certain English sounds in Mandarin Chinese and finally, long and short vowels distinctions. He finally hypothesizes that contrastive analysis and error analysis are useful theories in investigating the characteristic pronunciation errors encountered by Chinese learners who learn English as second language. Hjollum and Mees (2012), examine errors of Faroese speakers in the production of English consonants. They also give a remedial measures suggestion to overcome the English consonants errors. However, the study is done based on audio recording of six informants from Eysturoy in the north of the Faroes. In this research paper, altogether, a total of 3,547 occurrences of sounds were analyzed**.** The outcome of this paper shows that Faroese speakers have problems with examples of phonemic, allophonic and distributional errors. Yildiz (2016), studies errors of Turkish EFL learners' spoken English discourse. In this study, the researcher selects thirty Turkish EFL students are comprised of twenty of whom are upper intermediate level and ten of whom are intermediate level EFL learners. He gives the chance to the two groups in order to select one of the two different topics to speak about. His paper results show that the most frequently encountered errors in this paper by the students include prepositional, lexical, and grammatical errors, in descending order. In addition, the findings of this research work indict that there is no significant difference between two different English proficiency groups based on the number of errors they commit. Shak *et al.* (2016), report the errors of the pronunciation of 12 Malaysian students. Thus, the outcome of this research paper shows that the

students had problems in vowels (pure short vowels, pure long vowels and diphthongs), consonants (plosives, fricatives and affricates), silent letters, and the '-ed' form. Saha and Chanana (2012), examine the errors in spoken English in India languages. In this study, the learners were requested to produce some English words and sentences. The investigators tested them through record. Thus, the learners' errors were categorized and analyzed on the basis of a score sheet and PRAAT software. This study showed that the students have problems in spoken English. Sorayaie and Molavi (2012), investigate the correction of Iranian learners' oral errors in EFL setting in Iran. Their results indicated that the students have strongly positive attitudes toward correction of all errors by their teacher. According to this study the learners prefer correction of phonology and grammar errors more than others and they would rather self-correction among methods. Rezai1 and Heshmatian (2013), examine the morphological speaking errors of Iranian EFL students across proficiency levels and gender in Iran. Therefore, the outcome of this study indicated that there is significant difference between genders in terms of making grammar errors. Kovac (2011), reports the speech errors of engineering learners in Croatia. Thus, the findings of his study showed that morphology errors occurred across all levels of proficiency indicating that advanced English students still fall into trouble with morphological constructions. Afsar (2015), considers error analysis and error correction in spoken language of students in Bangladesh. He indicated that in the process of teaching and learning English language, teachers and students work together in order correct errors in classroom. He added that teachers should also give enough space to self-correction to their learners. Khansir (2014) supports the discussion by Afsar (2015) and Khansir (2014) argues that "it is important that English teachers give more opportunity to learners in classroom in order to practice their lesson. Thus, the teachers should give sufficient time to their students is that the students feel freedom to analyze and reflect what has been exposed to the students".

3. Methodology

This research work focus on consonant pronunciations errors of Iranian language learners. Errors are systematic and directly or indirectly concentrate on the competence of language learners in acquiring their target language. However, it is concluded that a systematic analysis of errors is very useful for language learners in learning their second language. The methodology of this article consists of collection of data and analysis of data. The collection of data in this study is based on its objectives. The data collection of this research work is determined in terms of its objectives: a) to examine types of English pronunciation errors in English language; to compare types of English pronunciation errors; and to give a remedial measures suggestion to overcome the English consonants errors. Finally, in this project the analysis of data have been done by a software package called Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

3.1. Participants

The forty Iranian female learners were chosen for this project. Thus, all the learners in our research project are of age group (16-25) studying at Bushehr language institute. However, the number and the educational level of the learners chosen for collection of data were the same. The participants in this project work belong to English advanced level were studying English academic course at the language institute. In addition, the students are all Iranian nationals. All the students belong to middle class, speaking one language which is Persian; Persian language is the medium of instruction in all Iranian schools and universities. English is used as foreign language in Iranian schools and universities. In addition, Iranian school educational system focuses on English language as a subject from Guidance or secondary schools. In addition, Khansir and Gholami (2014) argue that in Iran English language as a subject is taught as a foreign language from middle (Guidance) school. Though it was introduced as a subject from middle school, the Iranian students accepted it as language to pass in the examination.

3.2. Instruments

The following instruments were employed in the process of collecting data:

1) An Oxford Placement Test (OPT) which was administered to identify homogenous learners regarding their language proficiency.
2) A battery operated digital audio voice recorder was used to record learners' pronouncing the words and sentences.
3) A list of 25 easy words containing the specified three sounds (i.e. /θ/, / ð / and /w/).
4) 15 short sentences embedded with words containing one of the above sounds.

3.3. Procedure

The procedures that were used in the research paper are such as: Administration of the General English Proficiency Test (An Oxford Placement Test (OPT)) and Development of Consonant Pronunciations Test and Data Analysis. Before administered consonant pronunciation test by the researchers in this study, the investigators administered general English proficiency test in order to determine the proficiency level in English of the participants. The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was chosen to reach the level of proficiency of the subjects in English. In administering The Oxford Placement Test (OPT), the investigators piloted the OPT for their target group with the same level. Thus, fifteen Iranian students belong to the target group, with the same level and then had similar characteristic to the subjects in our sample taken part in this pilot. However, the reliability of General English Proficiency Test of this paper has been done by the K-R 21 formula. Its reliability of General English Proficiency Test of this paper based on the K-R 21 turned out to be .84 for the target group. In this experiment, for

the aim of collecting data in this project, the investigators selected the learners who scored between one standard deviation below or above the mean score. Consonant pronunciation test was developed by the researchers to investigate the ability of the students to pronounce English sounds. Thus, for the analysis of data in this project, the researchers used a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. In administering consonant pronunciation test, a pilot test for the target group of the study has been carried out by the investigators. In addition, 15 students of the target group with the same level of proficiency and educational level and also with similar characteristics to the subjects chosen for the project work have been piloted. To in order to access this idea whether the consonant pronunciation test is appropriate for the students of the project, the Researchers used the KR-21 formula for measuring the reliability of consonant pronunciation test. Thus, the reliability of consonant pronunciation test for the students appeared .81. However, in second analysis, Consonant Pronunciations Test was done to examine the hypotheses of the research paper along with the pronunciation errors of the subjects. The analysis of this part focused on these following processes:

- Classification of errors; Comparison of errors, and Suggestion for remedial measures.

The first process of this category is classification of errors. In this process, the investigators attempted to classify pronunciation errors of Iranian EFL learners in this study. The second process of the category is comparison of errors. In this process, an attempt was done to study and compare types of pronunciation errors of Iranian EFL learners in this paper. The third process of this category is called suggestion for remedial measure. Thus, in this process of this research work, the researchers tried to suggest remedial measures in order to improve pronunciation errors of Iranian English foreign language learners. Khansir and Ilkhani (2016) add that for many researchers conduct error analysis studies in the target language because they are interested in collecting data relating to English language learning and their aim is to gain a better understanding of how instruction works and how error analysis facilities language learning in English language for second or foreign language learners.

4. Results and Discussion

This research work is intended to study the actual analysis of the pronunciation errors of subjects in their English language. Thus, the analysis of Iranian students' pronunciation errors have been done based on three parts such as 1) classification and categorization of errors. 2) Comparison of errors and 3) suggestion for remedial measure. The questionnaire of this research work was specially selected to investigate the ability of the Iranian English learners in applying the correct pronunciation rules in the understanding of the sounds system in the English language and to make differentiate between consonant pronunciations in English language. The distribution of words in isolated words is considered in table 1 as follows:

Table-1. The Distribution of Words in Isolated Context

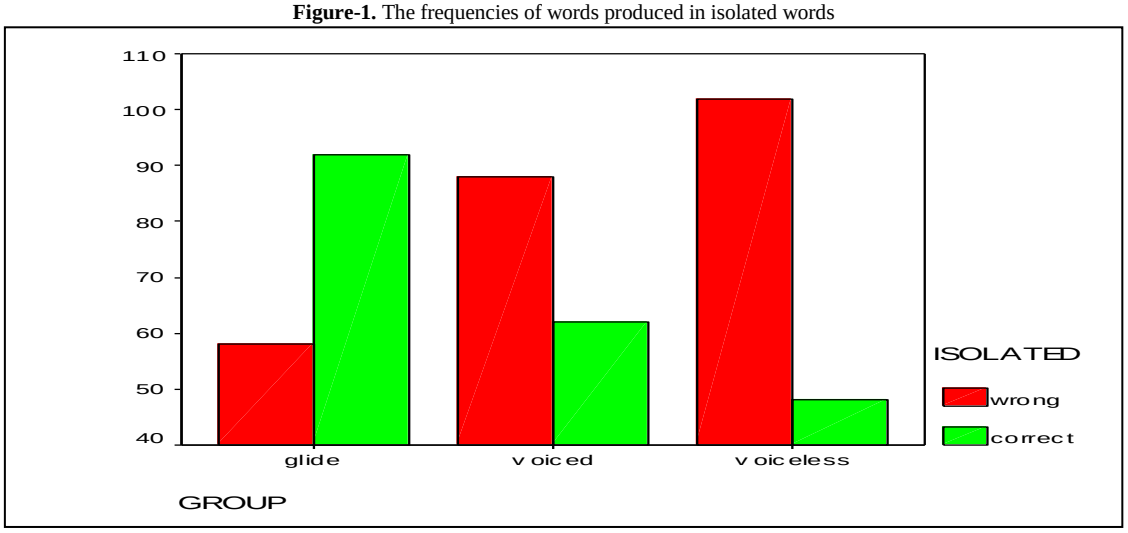
Words	Error		Correct	
	frequency	percent	frequency	percent
Walk	7	23.3	23	76.7
Window	10	33.3	20	66.7
Way	15	50	15	50
Want	15	50	15	50
Wet	11	36.7	19	63.3
They	15	50	15	50
This	18	60	12	40
These	14	46.7	16	53.3
Those	18	60	12	40
Thus	18	60	12	40
Three	23	76.7	7	23.3
Thing	24	80	6	20
Think	20	66.7	10	33.3
Thin	14	46.7	16	53.3
Mouth	21	70	9	30

Table 1 shows the distribution of fifteen words pronounced correctly and incorrectly by students in sentence context. According to the table, word 'three' has been most frequently mispronounced by the students. 76 percent of the Iranian EFL students failed to pronounce the word correctly. According to the table, 'window' has the highest frequency of correctly produced word.

Table-2. The Total Distribution of Words in Isolated Context

Words	Error		Correct	
	frequency	percent	frequency	percent
Glide	58	38.7	92	61.3
Voiced fricative	88	58.7	62	41.3
Voiceless fricative	102	68	48	32

Figure-1. The frequencies of words produced in isolated words



The above table and its figure shows the total number of words pronounced correctly and incorrectly in isolated context. As the table 2 shows that voiceless fricative in isolated words have been most frequently mispronounced by the students. Thus, the major errors observed in voiceless fricative, in this category, the number of 150 sounds produce by the learners, the number of 102 sounds produced errors produced by the learners which came to 68%. This category shows that the Iranian learners seemed to have difficulty to pronounce voiceless fricative sounds. The minimum number of sounds produced errors observed in Glide. Thus, in this category, the number of 58 sounds produced errors produced by the Iranian students which came to 38.7 %. However, the number of 88 sounds produced errors produced by the Iranian EFL learners which came to 58.7% in the category of Voiced fricative in this paper. The Iranian EFL students seemed to have not mastered in the use of the English sounds system in English. The learners are not familiar with the use of words pronounced in English. In addition, there is a special problem for the learners of English, that is, lack of correspondence between the spelling and the sound. This table shows that the students need more to know what to pay attention to and what to work on. Because, learning pronunciation is so complex that the EFL teachers must consider what types of exercises will be helpful. However, the learners need the help of their teachers in pronounce English words correctly.

Table-3. Chi-squared Test for Determining Difference between Words with /w/sound in Word Context

Words	Error	Correct	X^2	df	P
Walk	7	23	6.63	4	0.16
Window	10	20			
Way	15	15			
Want	15	15			
Wet	11	19			

Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference between the productions of words produced correctly and erroneously in isolated words with /w/ sound.

Table-4. Chi-squared Test for Determining Difference between Words with /ð/ sound in Word Context

Words	Error	Correct	X^2	df	P
They	15	15	6.76	4	0.15
This	18	12			
These	14	16			
Those	18	12			
Thus	23	7			

The above table shows that there is no significant difference between the productions of words produced correctly and erroneously in isolated words with /ð/ sound.

Table-5. Chi-squared Test for Determining Difference between Words with /θ/ sound in Word Context

Words	Error	Correct	X2	df	P
Three	23	7	9.37	4	0.05
Thing	24	6			
Think	20	10			
Thin	14	16			
Mouth	21	9			

Table 5 indicates that there is a significant difference between the productions of words produced correctly and erroneously in isolated words with /θ/ sound.

Table-6. The Distribution of Words in Sentence Context

Words	Error		Correct	
	frequency	percent	frequency	percent
Walk	9	30	21	70
Window	12	40	18	60
Way	15	50	15	50
Want	9	30	21	70
Wet	18	60	12	40
They	18	60	12	40
This	21	70	9	30
These	18	60	12	40
Those	21	70	9	30
Thus	24	80	6	20
Three	21	70	9	30
Thing	23	76.7	7	23.3
Think	24	80	6	20
Thin	18	60	12	40
Mouth	10	33.3	20	66.7

Table 6 shows the distribution of fifteen words pronounced correctly and incorrectly by the Iranian EFL students in sentence context. Thus, this table informs that words 'think' and 'thus' has been most frequently mispronounced by the students in sentence context.

Table-7. The Total Distribution of Words in Sentence Context

Words	Error		Correct	
	frequency	percent	frequency	percent
Glide	63	42	87	58
Voiced fricative	102	68	48	32
Voiceless fricative	96	64	54	36

Figure-2. The frequencies of words produced in sentence context

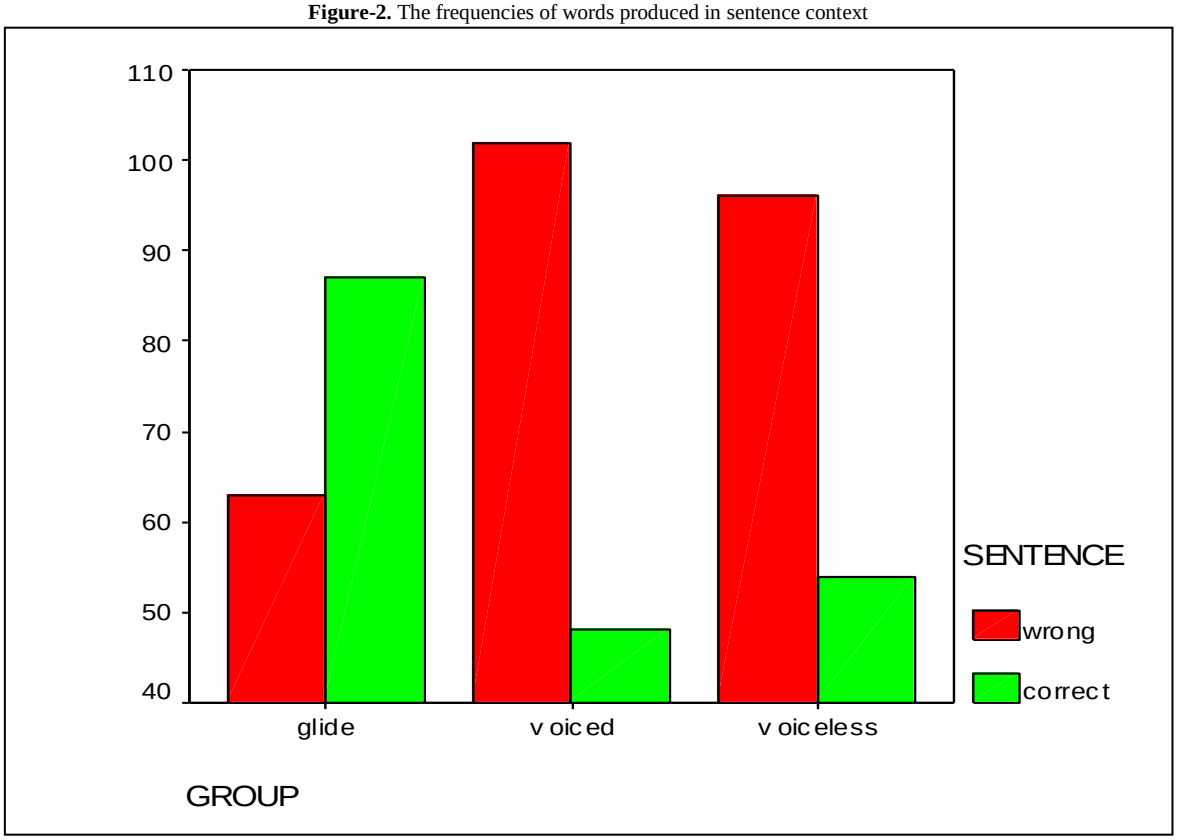


Table 7 and its figure shows the total number of sounds produced errors in fifteen words in sentence context. As the table shows, voiced fricative has been most frequently pronounced erroneously by students. In this table words with glide sound /w/ has been least frequently produced wrongly. 42 percent of students failed to produce the sound correctly in sentence context.

Table-8. Chi-squared Test for Determining Difference between Words with /w/ sound in Sentence Context

Words	Error	Correct	X2	df	P
Walk	9	21	8.37	4	0.08
Window	12	18			
Way	15	15			
Want	9	21			
Wet	18	12			

The above table shows that there is no significant difference between the productions of words produced correctly and erroneously in sentences with /w/ sound.

Table-9. Chi-squared Test for Determining Difference between Words with /ð/ sound in Sentence Context

Words	Error	Correct	X2	df	P
They	18	12	3.86	4	0.42
This	21	9			
These	18	12			
Those	21	9			
Thus	24	6			

Table 9 indicates that there is no significant difference between the productions of words produced correctly and erroneously in sentences with /ð/ sound

Table-10. Chi-squared Test for Determining Difference between Words with / θ / sound in Sentence Context

Words	Error	Correct	X2	df	P
Three	21	9	18.34	4	0.001
Thing	23	7			
Think	24	6			
Thin	18	12			
Mouth	10	20			

Table 10 reveals that there is a significant difference between the productions of words produced correctly and erroneously in sentences with /θ/ sound.

Table-11. Chi-squared Test for Determining Difference between Correct and Incorrect Production of /w/ Sound

	Error	Correct	X2	df	P
Isolated	58	92	0.35	1	0.56
Sentences	63	87			
Total	121	179			

Table 11 shows that there is no significant difference between the frequency of correct and incorrect pronunciation of /w/ sound in word list and in sentences.

Table-12. Chi-squared Test for Determining Difference between Correct and Incorrect Production of /ð/ Sound

	Error	Correct	X2	df	P
Isolated	88	62	2.81	1	0.09
Sentences	102	48			
Total	190	110			

Table 12 reveals that there is no significant difference between the frequency of correct and incorrect pronunciation of /ð/ sound in word list and in sentences.

Table-13. Chi-squared Test for Determining Difference between Correct and Incorrect Production of /θ/ Sound

	Error	Correct	X^2	df	P
Isolated	102	48	0.53	1	0.46
Sentence	96	54			
Total	198	102			

Table 13 shows that there is no significant difference between the frequency of correct and incorrect pronunciation of /θ/ sound in word list and in sentences.

Table-14. Chi-squared Test for Determining Difference between the Incorrect Productions of Three Sounds in World-List Context

	Error	Correct	X2	df	P
Glide	58	92	27.24	2	0.001
Voiced fricative	88	62			
Voiceless fricative	102	48			
Total	248	202			

According to the above table, there is a significant difference between the productions of different sounds in word list context.

Table-15. Chi-squared Test for Determining Difference between the Incorrect Productions of Three Sounds in Sentence Context

	Error	Correct	X2	df	P
Glide	63	87	24.14	2	0.001
Voiced fricative	102	48			
Voiceless fricative	96	54			
Total	261	189			

Table 15 reveals that there is a significant difference between the productions of different sounds in sentence context.

Most of have been written in this research paper has been intended for EFL teachers, particularly for teachers who are only beginning , or are about to begin , their work with teaching English pronunciation with EFL learners in EFL settings. Meanwhile, EFL students should learn much about learning English pronunciation. This paper can alert the EFL teachers easily and swiftly to the effects of instruction. However, the outcome of this paper can press the EFL teachers to discover the most efficient ways of presenting what the teachers would have to teach them. The teachers should try to teach their students what they needed to know about English pronunciation when acquiring their foreign language.

5. Conclusion

The result of this paper showed that the first and second hypotheses of this work were accepted, but the third hypothesis was rejected. ." However, it is found that a very large number of errors are done due to the lack of knowledge of the correct pronunciation of the words. This paper showed that the students have no mastery over the pronunciation of very common words in English language. Finally, this study indicated that Iranian pronunciation errors were systematic errors. In order to remove the errors in pronunciation, the students should be given pronunciation rules in the beginning of the educational course and then some exercises on English consonant pronunciation. Pronunciation of difficult sounds must be written by their teacher in the ELT classroom. Thus, the teacher should pronounce the difficult sounds and ask his/her students to repeat them several times.

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