

## English Pronunciation Problems and Orthography Irregularities: Teacher Perspective Assessment in Sudanese Secondary School Context

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### Abstract

Assessment of students' performance from language teachers' side represents one of the effective ongoing pedagogical activities which may work to give feedback about the actual achievement of students. This study aims to measure the teachers' impressions about the pronunciation errors taking place in students' production due to the irregularities in English spelling. Data for this assessment was collected from English language teachers via paper-pencil-questionnaires. The data is about students' knowledge, teaching issue, course content and phonological awareness and how these elements affect the learning of complex letter-to-sound relationships leading to correct pronunciation or at least reducing pronunciation errors made by students. The results revealed that students have little knowledge about the relationship between letters and sounds and they do not understand how to decipher them. Moreover, the content of the English textbook does not address English pronunciation sufficiently and they rarely present sufficient practice activities which help students in decoding English letters to their sounds. Moreover, teachers are not satisfied with the content of the course claiming that there is a narrow space given to the teaching of the link between letter and sounds. Finally, according to teachers the students' knowledge, teaching issues and phonological awareness are dynamic factors in reducing the pronunciation errors taking place due to irregularities of English spelling. Syllabus design should consider authentic and more advanced tactics teaching English pronunciation in EFL classroom.

**Key words:** irregularities, dynamic factors, phonological awareness, impressions, Pronunciation errors

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of correct English pronunciation is important for EFL learners inside and outside the classroom because it forms a robust element of intelligible communication. Therefore, in approaching the teaching of English pronunciation many sub-skills must be conducted through different techniques. These techniques help students receive lessons improve their English pronunciation fast. According to Aulia (2018), pronunciation plays an important role in the success of English communication. In this line, the teaching of English letter-to-sound relationships is an important point which represents problem for Sudanese EFL learners. Arguably many EFL students do not have background about letter to sound link of English; i.e. letter-to-sound correspondence

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where each letter must be taught with its corresponding sound. Anto (2019) claims that many teachers often lack confidence in teaching pronunciation because they do not have sufficient and appropriate materials for this purpose. On the other hand, many learners of English as a second language experience difficulties with pronunciation even after years of learning the language. Pronunciation errors are often caused by the L1 interference of sound systems that may or may not exist in the participants' native languages. Pronunciation awareness also forms one crucial factor boosting learners pronunciation. It is not to enable learners to pronounce exactly like native speakers but to help them address their pronunciation problems (Anto, 2019).

English learners should be aware of pronunciation errors stemming from letter-to-sound relationships. Moreover, teachers must assist learners in perceiving sounds according to appropriate categories. Kenworthy (1978) reported teachers should provide learners with activities to help them improve their performance. Kenworthy added that learners will not be able to pronounce the new sounds and teachers must provide them with feedback on their performance. Some English pronunciation materials are unfamiliar to many teachers and pronunciation materials must provide clear and easy-to-understand instructions about the pronunciation features they cover, as well as, sufficient exercises of different types. Moreover, pronunciation materials did not address what teachers and learners needs. That is, relevant and authentic materials which work appropriately to clarify the link between letters and sounds.

In relation to English pronunciation errors taking place due to the spelling effect, there is very little literature in this field in the case of Sudanese context. Impressionistic study was done by Hassan (2014) revealed that /θ/, /z/, /ð/, /tʃ/, /ð/, /θ/, /p/, /v/ form pronunciation problems for area of English pronunciation problems caused by difference of spelling systems between English and Arabic languages. It reported some of the impressions of teachers about the effect of English spelling on pronunciation. The findings of the study also revealed that vowels, namely, diphthongs proved to be more difficult than consonants. Alezi (2020) explains that EFL learners mispronounce certain English vowel and consonant clusters. These problems are probably due to interference of native language and limited language exposure. Aulia (2018) claims that to reduce students' pronunciation errors we must raise the students' self-confidence to facilitate successful learning. Moreover, without pronunciation practices, it will be impossible for EFL learners to pronounce English correctly (Sonsaat 2018). On the same line, De Souza (2015) states that phonological awareness forms an important aspect of knowledge for EFL/ESL learners. It helps learners understand the relationship between letter and sound in language. Language awareness concerns what L2 speakers know about the target language (TL) in general. Similarly, Bae, Kahng and Sohng

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(2012) reported that phonological awareness instruction combined with phonetics helps learners understand the structure of the target language and how to perform accurate pronunciation. On the other hand, good pronunciation leads to effective learning, while poor pronunciation causes difficulties in language communication. The explicit teaching of phonological awareness at an early age can help students reduce pronunciation errors, especially in blending or segmenting phonemes; moreover, it should be tailored to the learners' needs.

The role of the teacher is to guide, monitor, support and encourage learners to improve themselves. Gilner (2008) claims that the techniques should follow to improve students' awareness of the target sound system and factors influencing communication include practices on sound-spelling relationships, oral proofreading and engaging tasks for students. In other words, teachers need grounding in the phonetic/phonological systems of both the L1 and L2 as well as familiarity with effective teaching techniques. Interestingly, training learners in FL skills, applying different techniques, such as computerized pronunciation, explicit instruction and self-analysis are essential for the learning of English pronunciation (Markechova, et al. 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to assess the influence of irregularities in English spelling on pronunciation; this is because arguably pronunciation problems experienced Sudanese students at secondary school are caused by different factors. Specifically, these factors encompass; students' knowledge, phonological awareness, teaching issues and content of textbook taught. Absence of these four factors is believed to negatively affect pronunciation. Assessment is conducted by English language teachers' perspectives.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

The research adopted a qualitative paradigm to find the assessment of teachers of English of the target population (Creswell 2014). Assessment here refers to the scores of these teachers reflecting the performance of the students in different points about pronunciation errors of English caused by the irregularities of spelling. As the teachers form a crucial part of data in this study, a paper-and-pencil-questionnaire tool was used targeting the teachers of English. Participants of this study include 50 teachers of English at the secondary school level. They are specialized in teaching English as a foreign language with a long experience in language teaching. All teachers selected for this study teach English at the secondary school level. Although they teach at different schools but they have university degree of English language teaching. And they received similar training opportunities with teaching experience ranging between 15 to 20 years.

The structure of the questionnaires focused on 4 major elements of the problem of the research effect of irregularities of English spelling on pronunciation of learners. It asked teachers to give assessment of four points (i) student knowledge, (ii) teaching issues, (iii) content/ items and (iv) phonological awareness. Moreover, each element of the four above encompasses sub-items/questions. The structure of based on Likert-scale measurement which presents fixed scales where students have to choose.

The content covered homophones and silent letters also cause pronunciation problems. Moreover, errors in English pronunciation among Sudanese learners are attributed to the absence of letter-to-sound relationships. The questionnaire further investigates whether teachers are satisfied with their teaching methods and whether they provide learners with sufficient practice activities in English pronunciation. Additionally, it assesses whether the content of the English textbooks used addresses pronunciation problems relevant to the course. It also explains that phonological awareness develops students' letter-to-sound knowledge.

This section describes the scoring procedure that has been applied in teachers' assessment questionnaire. The Scoring procedure bases on Likert-scale positive to negative order. Likert-scale in this context permit (4) scales including *always*, *often*, *rarely* and *never*. Each of 4 scales has one numeric value including 4, 3, 2 and 1. Importantly the scales are rated in positive to negative order, A positive response starts from 4 sliding downward to 3, 2 and 1 respectively

Table (1) scoring procedure based on Likert-Scale indicators

No	Scale	Responses	
		Positive statement	Negative statement
1	always	4	1
2	Often	3	2
3	Rarely	2	3
4	never	1	4

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cronbach's Alpha result between test items is (.9). This value suggests that the test is reliable with high consistency between test items.

#### 3.1 Overall results

Figure (1) total mean scores of teachers' assessment of Sudanese students

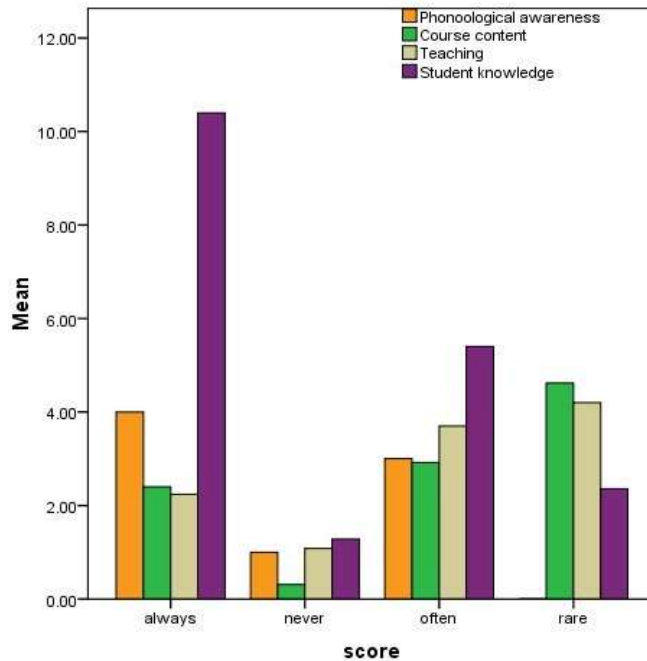


Figure (1) provides a general summary of the total mean scores of teachers responding to the questionnaire items tested. The total mean scores are 39.13%, 23.18%, 22.18%, and 16.74%, against the four elements including students' knowledge, course content, teaching issues and phonological awareness respectively. Teachers have the highest scores when they responded to the lack of students' knowledge and its effect on letter to sound link. Moreover, the teachers' impressions of how often the course content and matters of some teaching issues influence letters to sound relation occupy the second position. Strangely, teachers posit the effect of phonological awareness in developing letters to sound knowledge of students as the lowest grade. Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5 provide more details about the results.

### 3.2 Students' Knowledge

As table (2) the teachers' impressions about students' knowledge: frequencies sequenced in positive to negative order

No	Test item	Positive to negative-scale			
		Always	Often	Rare	Never
	<b>Student knowledge</b>				
1	Linking vowel letter to sound relationship is difficult	1.7	1.3	.28	0
2	Linking consonant letters to sound relationship forms a problem	1.4	1.4	.36	0
3	Linking cluster consonant letters to sound relationship forms a problem for students	1.3	1.6	.2	.04
4	Errors in English pronunciation of Sudanese learners are due to orthography	1.7	1.5	.16	0
5	Homophones cause pronunciation problems	1.5	1.3	.36	0
6	Phoneme to grapheme link makes the pronunciation of English words difficult	1.5	1.3	.32	.04
7	Silent letters cause phone addition	1.4	1.2	.48	0
8	Students' L1 affects learning of relationship between letters and sounds	0	0	2	1.0
9	Students name/ identify letters and link them to their sounds	0.7	.96	0.8	.12
10	Students cannot predict sounds from spelling	0.9	1.2	0.6	.08
<b>11</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>12.1</b>	<b>11.76</b>	<b>5.56</b>	<b>1.28</b>

As table (2) shows that teachers have the highest points when they respond to students' knowledge through Likert-scale positive to negative statements; the total frequency of the 4 scales ranges between 12.1 and 11.76, 5.56 and 1.28. The total frequency values suggest that teachers are pessimistic when they talk about the effect of students' knowledge of English pronunciation, letter sound link, homophones and spelling, etc. The frequent choice of always and often against slight frequent points for rarely and never scales strongly supports this claim

### 3.3 Teaching issues

Table (3) the teachers' impressions about teaching issues: frequencies sequenced in positive to negative order

No	Test item/ Teaching issues	Always	Often	Rare	Never
1	Teachers are satisfied with the methods of teaching	0	0.34	0.56	0.56
2	Teachers provide the learners with sufficient practice activities of English pronunciation	0	0.66	1.28	0.14
3	Teachers receive sufficient training on English pronunciation and phonology	0.8	0.54	0.72	0.26
4	Teaching pays more attention to the effect of letter to sound link on pronunciation	0.24	0.78	1.2	0.08
5	Hearing a native speaker teaching English reduces pronunciation problems	1.2	1.38	0.44	0.04
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>2.24</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>1.08</b>

Table (3) shows teachers' results when they respond to students' knowledge through the Likert-scale from positive to negative order. The total frequencies of the 4 scales are 2.24, 3.7, 4.2 and 1.08. More specifically around 5.94 (60%) of responses of teachers tend to support the claim that teaching issues have some effect on pronunciation. However, around 5.28 (50.3%) of the teachers responses tend to negative or pessimistic claiming that the teaching issues have hardly any positive influence on performance. The results imply that teachers are reluctant about the way some teaching issues such as teaching methods, materials and activities. They are also not fully satisfied with the opportunities of training they received.

### 3.4 Course content

Table (4) the teachers' impressions about course content frequencies sequenced in positive to negative order

No	Test item / content	always	often	Rare	Never
1	The content is relevant to the course	0	0.6	1.42	0.08
2	The content is representative and comprehensive	0.24	0.6	1.12	0.18
3	The content of the English textbook taught addresses pronunciation problems	0.24	1.08	1.04	0.06
4	Content includes word spelling and syllabification	0.72	1.38	0.52	0.1
5	Content considers irregularities	.00	.38	.97	.36
6	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>4.04</b>	<b>5.07</b>	<b>0.78</b>

Table (4) presents the scores of the teachers' impressions about the course content (adequacy, relevance and comprehensiveness, etc.). Scores are arranged through Likert-scale positive to negative order. The total frequencies of the 4 scales are 1.2, 4.92, 4.04, 5.07 and 0.78. These results suggest that around 5.24 (around 50%) of teachers tend to support the claim the course content has some positive effect on pronunciation while around 5.85 (51%) of the teachers are claim that the course content hardly any positive influences on performance. The results imply that the teachers are half optimistic and half pessimistic when they talk about the way some course like adequacy, relevance and comprehensiveness, etc. In detail teachers almost always believe that the content not relevant, unrepresentative and does not address pronunciation issues.

### 3.5 Phonological awareness

Table (5) the teachers' impressions about phonological awareness: frequencies sequenced in positive to negative order

No	Phonological awareness	always	often	Rare	Never
1	Phonic awareness develops letter to sound knowledge of students	<b>2.24</b>	<b>0.72</b>	0.36	0.02
2	Segmental awareness forms difficulty for Sudanese EFL learners	<b>1.0</b>	<b>0</b>	0	0
3	Learners have sufficient explicit knowledge of orthographical and sound systems	<b>0</b>	<b>0.30</b>	0	0
4	L1 has effect on the learning of letter to sound link	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	0	0
	Total frequency	<b>7.24</b>	<b>1.02</b>	<b>.36</b>	<b>0.02</b>

Table (5) presents the scores of the teachers' assessment of the effect of phonological awareness on the pronunciation of English. The scores are arranged on a Likert-scale in positive to negative order. The total frequency values of 4 scales are sequenced as 7.24, 1.02, .36 and .02 respectively. These results suggest that around 8.26 teachers tend to support the claim that phonological awareness positively develops English pronunciation of Sudanese EFL learners. However, a very slight count of the teachers (.38) believes the opposite. The result is that English language teachers are highly optimistic when they talk about the effect of phonological awareness (e.g. phonic, segmental awareness, etc.) on the performance of students. Generally, the teachers are satisfied with the role of phonological awareness in developing the learners' pronunciation.



### 3.6 Mean and SD of teacher questionnaire

Table (6) mean and SD results

Factor	Mean	Percent	Std. Deviation
Phonological awareness	2.08	16.64	2.8
Course content	2.88	23.18	2.2
Teaching	2.80	22.18	1.4
Student knowledge	4.86	39.13	4.09

Table (6) shows the mean and SD statistics of the four tested elements. With regard to the distance between mean and SD of the four tested items, the 'student knowledge' has the farthest standard deviation in comparison to the other three elements; phonological awareness, course content and teaching. This result implies that the impressions of the teachers on the students' knowledge are extremely different. However, their impressions of the other three elements are fairly closer to each other.

### 3.7 Discussion

On the basis of a Likert-scale positive to negative order, teachers' assessment of students' knowledge occupies the first element, forming a problem for students learning English pronunciation. The course content and the teaching issues are in between; they are half problematic areas; phonological awareness respectively. The pronunciation errors stemming from the relationship between letters and sounds can be attributed to several reasons, as the results showed. Learners do not have sufficient knowledge about the relationship between letters and sounds. Teachers rarely provide learners with adequate practice in English pronunciation.

The interference of L1 and lack of English phonological knowledge and spelling probably form the major causes of students suffering from incorrect pronunciation of English. In this line, previous studies supported our findings where the assessments of Sudanese EFL teachers of the perception and production of English vowel in which the results were described as is the worst. The findings attributed these problems to L1 influence and to the lack of explicit language knowledge (Ali 2011). The content of English taught in secondary schools rarely considers the irregularities of English spelling and sound systems. Moreover, even the slight space given to sounds and letters does not address pronunciation problems properly and sufficiently. Interestingly, explicit knowledge of the relationship between spelling and pronunciation can reduce the pronunciation

errors resulting due to spelling. Finally, the teachers' results support the notion that phonological awareness enhances students' understanding of the letter-to-sound relationship.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

According to the above results for the four elements: students' knowledge, teaching issue, the content and Phonological awareness, and the study arrives at some conclusions. Students have more pronunciation errors because they do not have sufficient knowledge about the relationship between letters and sounds. Therefore, teachers need to provide students with tasks such as visual aids on how link different letters to their sound. This act will minimize rate of pronunciation errors. The content of the English textbook does not address the pronunciation problems. This can be a common concern in language learning materials as many textbooks focus on grammar, reading and writing.

To overcome the mispronunciation problems due to spelling, students need to implement strategies to address mispronunciation issues related to spelling. It is essential for students to practice more English pronunciation through authentic material and effective teaching method. Students must be aware that English words are not always pronounced as the way the spelled. This point should consider the course of English to be taught. English language teachers should promote learners' awareness of the relationship between letters and sounds.

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## Appendix 1

### Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
.929	4

