

TEACHING ARABIC PRONUNCIATION TO NON-NATIVES: COGNITION AND PRACTICE

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This study aims to shed light on pronunciation instruction by exploring teachers' beliefs and classroom practices regarding pronunciation teaching. In particular, the study investigates the relationship between Arabic language teachers' beliefs and their current pedagogical pronunciation practices. Data were collected from two groups of subjects (two teachers of Arabic and their 16 students) using different tasks: interviews, class observations, and questionnaires. The result analysis reveals the most frequently used pronunciation techniques in the two different classrooms and how both teachers and students perceived them presenting a brief overview of the way pronunciation is taught in Arabic classrooms illuminating teachers' tendencies and needs.

INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that second language (L2) learners can master L2 morphological and syntactic structures and even gain native-like language abilities (Hinofotis & Baily, 1981). Yet adult language learners are unlikely to achieve natively-like mastery of L2 phonology and some learners experience pronunciation difficulties that cause loss of speech intelligibility (Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1998; Zielinski, 2008). After decades of negligence, L2 pronunciation instruction has recently started to receive attention by instructors and researchers alike (Derwing & Munro; 2005; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011). Several recent studies have explored teachers' cognitions and classroom practices as related to pronunciation (e.g., Baker, 2014; Baker & Burri, 2016; Burri, Baker & Chen, 2017; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005). By and large, most pronunciation studies have mainly focused on teaching English to learners from various language backgrounds, with fewer studies addressing pronunciation issues as related to learners of other languages other than English (Kennedy, Blanchet & Trofimovich, 2014).

Previous research on Arabic language instruction has chiefly focused on grammar and literacy skills (e.g., Ryding, 2013), yet very little is known about Arabic pronunciation instruction. While few studies have explored the perception and production of Arabic segmentals by English speakers (Alwabari, 2013; Shehata, 2015b), a small number have examined classroom contexts and the lack of pronunciation materials that consequently results in students' perception of pronunciation as the most difficult aspect of the Arabic language (Shehata, 2015a; Zouhir, 2013). This paper explores the teaching of Arabic pronunciation and thus it has the added bonus of being about a less-studied context.

Teacher Cognition Research and Pronunciation Instruction

L2 teacher cognition (L2TC) studies have widely investigated teachers' beliefs and knowledge regarding L2 language skills such as literacy (Diab, 2005), grammar (Farrell & Lim, 2005) and assessment (Cohen & Fass, 2001). However, the last decade has witnessed a rapid growth in the L2TC research that addresses pronunciation issues (Baker, 2011; Baker, 2014; Baker & Burri, 2016; Macdonald, 2002). In the ESL context, for example, Macdonald (2002) examined eight ESL Australian teachers' reluctance to teach pronunciation. Findings demonstrated teachers'

hesitancy to teach pronunciation owing to their lack of knowledge, training and institutional resources. In a similar vein, Baker (2011) explored five ESL teachers' beliefs and classroom practices regarding the teaching of discourse prosody. Findings reported teachers' lack of confidence to teach certain English prosodic features despite studying pronunciation pedagogy during their graduate education. Similarly, Baker (2014) investigated five ESL teachers' cognitions and pedagogical practices. Findings demonstrated teachers' limited knowledge of communicative pronunciation techniques. More recently, Burri, Baker & Chen (2017) investigated the relationship between participants' teaching experience and learning to teach pronunciation by exploring the cognition development of two groups of teachers (student teachers and in-service teachers) about pronunciation instruction over a postgraduate pronunciation pedagogy course. The results indicated that while student teachers' cognition development was restricted, their awareness about the effectiveness of tactile and kinesthetic techniques developed. Student teachers were challenged to integrate pronunciation into language lessons; however, the beliefs of native English teachers with no pronunciation teaching experience were not developed. In contrast, a small number of studies have focused on teachers' cognition about pronunciation pedagogy in EFL contexts. For instance, Sifakis and Sougari (2005) found that 421 Greek EFL teachers preferred to present the native speaker accent to their students rather than non-native ones. The same tendency was confirmed by other studies (Jenkins, 2007; Timmis, 2002).

To sum up, most L2TC research about pronunciation has focused on English and no much is known about pronunciation instruction in other languages. To date, for example, no research appears to have been conducted to investigate Arabic teachers' cognition (beliefs & knowledge) about pronunciation pedagogy and their practices. Thus, the present study attempts to fill the lacuna in the existing literature by exploring the relationship between Arabic teachers' cognition and classroom practices. To this end, the following two research questions were addressed:

1. What cognitions do Arabic teachers have with respect to techniques of teaching Arabic pronunciation in their classes?
2. Do teachers' beliefs about their own pronunciation teaching practices match observed teaching behavior?

Context and Curriculum

The data was collected from an Arabic language program at a university in the US Midwest. The program has three levels of Arabic: Level 1 (Low & High beginning); Level 2 (low and high intermediate) and Level 3 (low and high advanced) and aimed to help learners to attain proficiency in the four language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking). The current study focused only on two classes: high beginning and low intermediate.

METHODS

Participants

There were two groups of participants. The first group includes two instructors of Arabic who voluntarily agreed to participate in the present study: Magd (High Beginning) and Zahra (Low

Intermediate)¹. They are native speakers of Arabic and hold Master's degrees in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). They have taught different levels of Arabic language courses seven or more years (Teacher1=7 years; Teacher2 = 9 years). The second group included 16 American English speakers who enrolled in their classes. Eight learners were at the novice high proficiency level (i.e., they had spent 8 months learning Arabic) and the other eight students were at the intermediate level (i.e., they had spent 12 months learning Arabic). They were 9 females and 7 males aged from 19-25 years (mean age= 21.4 years). Each student received course credit for participation.

Procedures

The two credit courses focused on developing learners' general language skills and used *Al kitaab fii taalum Al Arabia* textbook. While students in the high beginning course used part I of *Al kitaab* (Brustad, et al., 2011), their counterparts in the low intermediate course used its second part (Brustad, et al., 2013). Each class met four times a week for 50 minutes for approximately 14 weeks. Summative assessment occurred at the end of each chapter. To explore teachers' cognition and knowledge about pronunciation, several instruments were used to collect data: a questionnaire that teachers completed in week 1 (Appendix A); three semi-structured interviews (SSI) that took place at the beginning (week 1), middle (week 8) and end of the semester (week 14); and four classroom observations (two consecutive classes in week 3 and two consecutive classes in week 11) that were video recorded. The researcher transcribed all the interviews and class observations. Sample of interview questions are presented in Appendix B. Also, students in the two classes completed a questionnaire about their beliefs regarding pronunciation classroom practices that included several sections. However, this paper only reports on the question about the effective teaching techniques that their teachers used and helped them improve their pronunciation.

Data Analysis

Data from the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and the observed practices were analyzed following the same stages of transcription, segmentation and coding described in Baker (2014) that involved using the qualitative analysis computer program Transana.

RESULTS

Teachers' knowledge of pronunciation techniques

Teachers reported that pronunciation instruction is exhausting and is not well received by students, who prefer practicing vocabulary and grammar. In addition, the two teachers found it too difficult to practice pronunciation due to the lack of materials and their limited knowledge of Arabic pronunciation features other than segmentals (consonants and vowels). While Zahra reported having a pedagogical pronunciation course in her TESOL Master's program that made her confident with English pronunciation instruction, she expressed her unfamiliarity with the Arabic pronunciation features:

I know nothing about Arabic suprasegmentals and I therefore do not feel confident teaching them. It is my first language that I subconsciously speak without paying

¹ To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms are used.

attention to these rules, which I never learned. My knowledge of English pronunciation helped me design different activities for teaching Arabic segmentals though. SSI #2

In contrast, Magd received no education about pronunciation instruction but he confirmed using the textbook pronunciation activities: “Alif Baa² is an excellent book that provides various pronunciation activities accompanied with explanations”. He also believed that:

Pronunciation instruction is not necessarily needed beyond the first low level class as by then students would be able to accurately produce the language and thus classroom time should be used to teach other skills such writing and reading, but I only use pronunciation activities in higher level to address students’ pronunciation problems when they show up (SSI #1)

They also reported having no experience attending any Arabic-related conferences or pronunciation workshops. In this regard, however, Magd indicated that he attended a six-day workshop about the Arabic language for 21 teachers of Arabic that did not address Arabic pronunciation:

Last year I attended one of Al Batal³’s workshops for training Arabic teachers that presented various techniques for teaching Arabic language skills but pronunciation. I see that pronunciation instruction is not a serious issue that needs much attention. (SSI #1)

When asked about the kinds of activities they used, the two teachers said that they typically used Alif Baa activities (Brustad, et al., 2010) that mainly focus on teaching segmentals. Zahra further explained that no pronunciation materials are presented in the textbooks they used in their current classes:

Al Kitaab series does not include any pronunciation materials beyond Alif Baa that is used in the beginner low Arabic class. Unfortunately, there are no other sources. Therefore, I occasionally use some of its activities to revive pronunciation in my intermediate class and I sometimes create my own materials to address specific problematic sounds for my students. (SSI #2)

With respect to the first question, data from the classroom observations, teacher interviews and the student questionnaires revealed that Magd and Zahra used a limited number of pronunciation techniques that can be classified, based on Baker’s categorization (2014), into three main types: 6 controlled, 2 guided and 3 free. Table 1 shows the techniques used by each teacher as indicated by the interviews, observations and student reports. The two teachers believed that controlled techniques are more beneficial than the guided and free ones in helping students improve their pronunciation. Magd, for instance, said “controlled techniques are meaningful despite their limitations” and he further elaborated,

Although controlled practice is a stage in a lesson that should be followed by the other two, I find it alone too effective to teach pronunciation. (SSI #3)

² The textbook used in the first semester of Arabic course

³ One of the Authors of Al Kitaab series that are widely used in most Arabic courses in North America

Table 1 displays some differences between the data collected through the three research methods. For instance, the interviews showed two more activities for Zahra that were not observed in the four classroom observations (i.e., mutual exchange activity and games) and the observations showed four additional techniques for each teacher that they did not mention in the interviews. Students' questionnaires, however, reported a smaller number of pronunciation activities, especially for Magd where one of his students wrote:

We are not receiving an actual pronunciation instruction but just bits and pieces every now and then. (SQ)

Although students' reports are compatible with the two teachers' pronunciation teaching approach that aims to teach pronunciation when addressing specific pronunciation problems, the notion of the questionnaire question made students merely focus on those activities they found effective and this explains the small number of activities mentioned by students.

Together, the three data sources confirmed that pronunciation practice was restricted to very few classes in each course where students' opportunities to practice were mainly limited to unassigned textbook exercises that teachers used to address some pronunciation errors. This explains the absence of pronunciation activities in some of the classroom observations (two for Magd and one for Zahra). The data also displayed the two teachers' lack of knowledge of techniques for teaching pronunciation where each teacher used a small number of controlled activities. Furthermore, repetition and production practice activities were found to be the most common controlled drills that the two teachers used.

Table 1

*Pronunciation Techniques Used in the Two Classes*⁴

Technique	<u>Magd</u>			<u>Zahra</u>		
	TI SQ	O		TI	O	SQ
<u>Controlled activities</u>						
• Repetition drill activity	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Explanation & examples	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Listening text presentation		X			X	
• Production practice	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Review activity		X			X	
• Testing	X	X				X
<u>Guided Activities</u>						
• Mutual exchange activity	X	X		X		
• Preparation		X			X	
<u>Free Activities</u>						
• Drama		X			X	
• Game				X		
• Presentations	X	X	X	X		
				X	X	
				X		
Nb. TI= teacher interviews; O= observations; SQ= student questionnaires.						

Teachers' Beliefs and Classroom Practices

To answer the second research question, the data from the interviews, observations and the student questionnaires showed the compatibility between teachers' beliefs related to

⁴ All categorizations and codes are adapted from Baker's (2014) study

pronunciation techniques and their pedagogical practices except for some activities that teachers did not mention but they were observed in the lessons that were reported earlier. In their discussion of the rationale for using certain techniques, the data showed three different beliefs expressed by the two teachers that are discussed in this section.

Belief 1: Pronunciation chiefly means imitation. For Magd, pronunciation is a mere process of imitation for novel sounds. He believed that “studying pronunciation is less important than studying grammar and vocabulary”. This explains his inclination to use controlled activities that he found more useful than others. On the other hand, although Zahra agreed that imitation is an integral part of pronunciation, she believed that “pronunciation includes more than that and it is necessary”. Thus, unlike Magd’s students who presented memorized dialogues for their final projects, Zahra’s students performed novel skits they created.

Belief 2: Pronunciation is exhausting and boring. Magd and Zahra agreed that pronunciation is the most difficult skill to teach because of the lack of time, knowledge, and professional training. Zahra, whose master’s degree included a course on pronunciation pedagogy and who relatively used more activities than Magd, believed that the lack of materials is a challenge itself. She said:

Teaching Arabic pronunciation is very challenging and I sometimes find it too boring to repeat using the same activities. I am not that happy with the materials I use but creating new materials is very exhausting too. (SSI #3)

In contrast, Magd expressed his satisfaction with the Alif Baa textbook, and he found pronunciation instruction “boring and time consuming in comparison with other skills”.

Belief 3: attaining a nativelike pronunciation is an illusion. Both Magd and Zahra agreed that comprehensible speech is a feasible goal that Arabic learners could achieve. For Magd, “nativelike pronunciation does not exist but it was promoted by booksellers and private language centers to deceive language learners and get their money”. Zahra also said:

As long as learners’ speech is clear and they can deliver their messages to the listeners, then there is no problem. This is what I usually tell my students especially those who plan to study Arabic abroad. (SSI #3)

Overall, all these quotes were supported with classroom practices and the students’ questionnaires.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated teacher cognitions and practices regarding pronunciation activities in two different Arabic language classrooms. The qualitative analysis of the teachers’ interviews and class observations and the student questionnaires demonstrated two important findings. First, the dominance of the controlled activities in the two classrooms at the expense of guided and free activities can be explained in light of teachers’ lack of the appropriate pronunciation pedagogy training in the target language. While Magd lacked education in pronunciation pedagogy in general, Zahra’s knowledge of English pronunciation pedagogy did not help her teach all Arabic phonological features due to the differences between the two languages. By and large, controlled activities are useful classroom activities whose benefits are displayed in

previous research (Couper, 2003); however, they mainly lack the communicative interaction component available in free activities that can help students transfer their classroom learning to real life conversations (Saito & Lyster, 2012). For effective instruction, both controlled and free activities are indispensable. What Arabic instructors need is to learn how and when to use each type of these activities. Second, despite their different beliefs regarding pronunciation instruction and pronunciation activities, the two instructors seemed to emphasize the significance of comprehensible speech in their classrooms. Together, these findings provide preliminary insights into the nature of Arabic pronunciation instruction that seems to be partially taught in the Arabic classrooms due to the lack of teachers' confidence, appropriate resources and training.

In conclusion, this paper explores the experiences and perceptions of teaching Arabic pronunciation in the US context as seen by two teachers and their 16 students. Despite the study's limitations such as the small number of participants and the absence of teachers' responses to video recordings of their classroom behaviors, I hope it sparks further research on Arabic pronunciation instruction that not only gives a clear picture of the pronunciation pedagogy, teacher cognition and classroom practices but also presents teachers' and learners' needs. What might be of particular interest to explore is teachers' cognitions and actual classroom practices along with students' learning outcomes. Information on this issue is needed to better understand what teaching Arabic pronunciation entails and what best practices are that can inform teacher education programs.

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Appendix A: Teachers' Background Questionnaire

1. Age:
2. Highest degree earned:
3. Major:
4. Gender:
5. Native language:
6. What other language(s) do you know?
7. How did you learn them? Explain.
8. How well do you know them?
9. Are you a native Arabic Speaker of Arabic? Yes / No
10. How many years total have you taught Arabic as a foreign language?
11. Were any of your degrees related to the Arabic language?
12. What Arabic-related conferences do you usually attend?
13. How frequently do you attend pronunciation-related workshops or presentations?
Do you find them useful?
14. Which Arabic-related journals, magazines or newsletters do you voluntarily read?

Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions

1. What type of Arabic courses you teach?
2. Do you teach pronunciation in your classes? Why? Why not?
3. When you teach pronunciation, what kinds of activities you use? Can you describe them?
4. Which linguistic aspects do you usually teach (segmentals, stress, etc.)?
5. This semester, what features of Arabic pronunciation have you focused on?
6. For each of those features you listed, what activity do you use that is the most helpful for improving students' pronunciation?