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**Title:** *Phonetic Awareness to Enhance Learners' Speaking Confidence: The Case of EFL Algerian Learners*

**Abstract**:

English is seen today as a vital medium for international communication. To smooth the progress of the demands of newly emerged society, English teachers need to grant a special attention to the development of learners' communication abilities. However, it is often assumed that traditional approaches to language teaching seem to still dominate EFL classrooms. Therefore, language teachers should take a step forward towards helping learners grow with more speaking competence incorporated with confidence. The present research is conducted with first-year EFL students to develop their pronunciation and communicative competence. It investigates the factors that affect the learners' participation in the class and the ways pronunciation training may influence the learning behaviour of EFL students to improve their confidence to speak.

**Key-words:**

Phonetic Awareness, Speaking competence, self-confidence: EFL Algerian learners.

## 1. Introduction

Given the pervasive importance of English in this changing time of globalization, its learning and teaching as a foreign language seems to be a challenging effort for students whose goal is effective communication. It is often argued that grammar rules of English cannot always make sense, spelling can be difficult and at the discourse level, the nuances of rhythm, sentence stress and intonation are incredibly complex and difficult to master. One reason for the students' difficulty is the sound system of English. In many settings, areas like pragmatics and pronunciation may get pass over for vocabulary and grammar. This may be due to a lack of time or syllabus demands. Fortunately, this has paved the way for an intensive change in the area of English pronunciation.

For a long time, from the available literature, it would seem that pronunciation teachers in many EFL contexts have been using what some would characterize as a conventional methodology for teaching English pronunciation rooted in drilling and automatic exercises. The outcome of this reveals that many learners retain some critical deviant phonological forms which prove highly detrimental to successful communication in English.

In the last decades, and perhaps due to the effects of the globalization process as a worldwide phenomenon, there has been a steady growth in the attention to the magnitude of pronunciation training, as a general goal for teaching. This latter has primed the significance of effective use of the spoken language to establish successful communication. This, however, has brought about an emergent debate about the models, goals and, particularly, the methodology used for pronunciation skill teaching. For some, such changes

and the uncertainty of debate are puzzling. Hence, the present research work strives to resolve some aspects of the current pronunciation debates for a valuable contribution to the English language teaching profession. The study aims at investigating pronunciation training on first-year EFL students to enhance their speaking confidence.

Within the field of education, ideas on the value of teaching pronunciation are often at variance. Yet**,** in learning a foreign language, learners may acquire some basic skills, such as reading or writing, but still display difficulties in understanding a native speech in a conversation. In this line of thought, Levy (1997:53) stressed that: "*SLA research has concentrated primarily on explaining the acquisition of morphology and syntax, a little known about the acquisition of phonology"*. Similarly, Elliott (1995:96) has noticed that pronunciation does not enjoy the adulation it merits. In this respect, he claims that *"the acquisition of pronunciation has fallen to the wayside and has suffered from serious neglect in the communicative classroom".* Consequently, pronunciation instruction is still unduly neglected or ignored by many researches. It is argued that an English phonetic course is, to a large extent, left to chance or given no place in the teaching/ learning process.

Although research on foreign language teaching/learning has always been fascinating, the teaching of pronunciation and oral skills in general in foreign and second language classrooms has often been low on the list of priorities (Peterson, 2000). Joining this idea, Gilbert (1994:38) claims that: "*Pronunciation has been something of an orphan in English programs around the world. Why has pronunciation been a poor relation? I think it is because the subject has been drilled to death, with too few results from too much effort"*.

Speaking skills, on the other side of the coin, represents an important place in language profession. However, speaking has often been called the neglected strand since compared with the reading and writing strands, it is the most easily cast aside. Therefore, it is frequently claimed that oral skills have hardly been forgotten in EFL courses though there is a great deal of focus on the speaking methodological debate. Accordingly, advances in discourse analysis, conversational analysis, and corpus analysis in recent years have revealed a great attention on the nature of spoken discourse at a large extent. The mastery of the speaking skills seems to be a priority for many language learners. In this line of thought, a great number of researchers evaluate learners' success with regard to their effectiveness as far as their spoken language proficiency is concerned (Harmer, 2001; Richards, 1990). For instance, Nunan (1991:39) states: *"To most people, mastering the art of speaking is the single most important factor of learning a second or foreign language and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language".*

From a motivational perspective, and to further complete the picture, the most important psychological factor studied by (Clément, 1994; Gardner, 2001; and Dörnyei, 1999) is *self-confidence* which is, in general, one of the vital variants that may promote either failure or success in language learning. Noels (1994), in his part, expanded the applicability of the construct of self-confidence by demonstrating that it is also a crucial motivational subsystem in foreign language learning situations where there is little direct contact with the target language members. Thus, our aim in this paper is to link pronunciation training and raising phonetic awareness with learners' degree of self-confidence and thus, to their speaking achievements.

## 2. Method

### a. Subjects

This study is concerned with first-year students at Tlemcen University, Algeria. Twenty-four (24) of them were randomly chosen. The students involved in this investigation are in the age group of 17 to 20 years old, they are Baccalaureate holders from different streams (Life and Natural Sciences, Humanities and foreign Languages) who learned the English language since the first-year of foundation school, which makes a sum of seven-years before entering university. As they come from government schools, they share roughly the same educational background. Arabic is their mother tongue, French is their first foreign language and English is their second foreign language. First-year students are exposed to the basic knowledge about English as a consolidation to the knowledge already acquired at the secondary school. Along these lines, they are concerned with: Grammar, Oral Expression, Written expression, Phonetics, Linguistics, Reading comprehension, research methodology, ICTs. It is worth pointing, at this level, that the participants had taken some basic knowledge in pronunciation courses in oral expression or in phonetics course.

b. **Procedures and Selected Material**:

It has been acknowledged that the long-term solution to the problem of the neglect of pronunciation instruction is to *train* students accurate pronunciation and raise their phonetic awareness, offering them the strategies they may rely on for a better native-like pronunciation. In this line of thought, Ellis and Sinclair (1969: 16) states that: "*Learners' training aims to help learners consider the factors which may affect heir learning and discover the strategies which suit them best so that they may become effective learners and take responsibilities for their own learning*". Hence, the main aim of pronunciation training is to achieve what Abercrombie (1991:14) calls "*comfortable intelligibility*" which is pronunciation that can be understood with little or no efforts on the part of the listener.

Therefore, in this research, the goal is set in the beginning to improve the learners' pronunciation skill and therefore their self-confidence in order to speak competently. To do so, reading aloud was used to check learners' pronunciation problems before and after training.

## 3. Results

The researcher gave the opportunity for each learner to read aloud while the other students listen and pay attention to his pronunciation. This belief is shared by many researchers for working with other language learners will improve one's listening and speaking skills. Francis (1958) for instance, conceives that critical friends may in all probabilities stimulate, clarify and extend the learners' thinking and feel accountable for their own growth and their peers' growth.

It was observed that all entrants made random pauses while reading; this is may be, due to their hesitation and their thinking about having or not the correct word pronunciation, stress and intonation. Learners seem to be influenced by the French pronunciation for example, 'licence' was pronounced as /lisens/. This is may be because students conceive the English language as similar, seeing that they have the same homographs. The overall results seem to hint that few learners are equipped with the ability to distinguish between alphabets, speech sounds, silent sounds and pronounced ones, for example, 'could' was pronounced */kʊld/. Besides, 79.16% (i.e.,19 students) from the participants also do pronounce all final "ed" as /əd/. E.g., asked: */æs'kəd/, smiled: */smaɪləd/. The following bar-graph illustrates the students' success and failure in the 'ed' realisation.
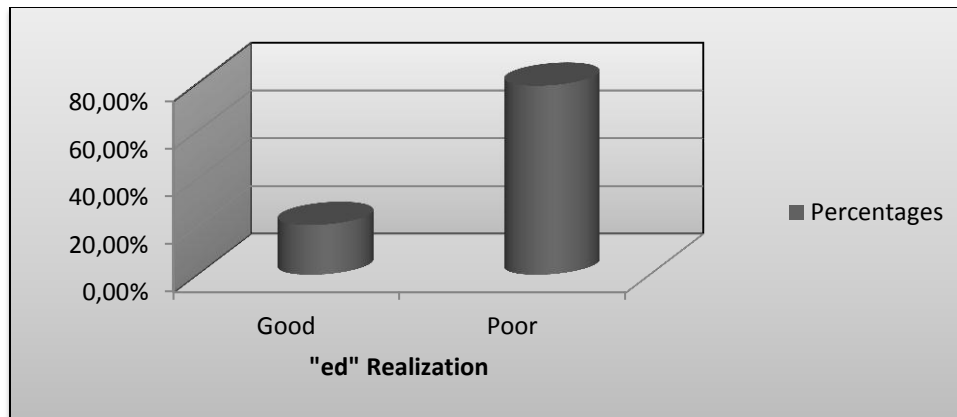
**Bar-Graph.** '*ed*' Realisation

As for the learners' speech sounds production, it appears that learners face major difficulties in terms of vowels rather than consonants. The following table summarises the data gathered inglobing the sum of speech sounds that most learners incorrectly pronounced. The researcher uses both the quantitative (using Standard Deviation, henceforth S.D) and qualitative approaches (to interpret the results) in analysing data as shown in the following table:

| Scores | test | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean $\overline{x1}$ | Mode | S.D |
| Out of 12 Vowels | 3.95 | 4 | **1.27** |

**Table**.1 Vowels Scores

From the above table, one needs to consider that S.D designates the way the means of the achieved scores are distributed around the mean of the target group. It is to be mentioned that a low S.D displays the proximity of the data scores to the group's means, whereas, a high S.D denotes the

dispersion of data over a large range of rates. To put it differently, S.D appears to put into question the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the group, i.e., if the S.D is high, the learners' means are far from the means of the group, therefore, the group is heterogeneous and vice versa. In this study, S.D was 1.27; the means of the group was 3.95 out of 12, the mode, representing the most spread score, was 4.  Hence, this denotes a low level of achievements. Additionally, one may observe that the marks varies from 7 to 2 this represents the heterogeneity of the group because the marks are not close to each other.

Applying a qualitative approach, one may notice that there are a number of speech sounds which all students mispronounced such as /ə/, all students pronounced it as /æ/, eighteen (18) students could not pronounce /ʌ/. Nineteen (19) students also mixed between the fricative and affricate /tʃ/ and /ʃ/, /dʒ/ and /ʒ /, and twenty others pronounced /θ/ as /t/ and /ð/ as /d/. Eight students mispronounced /ɪə/ and /u:/ and ten mispronounced /ʊ/.  The following bar-graph better clarify the results:
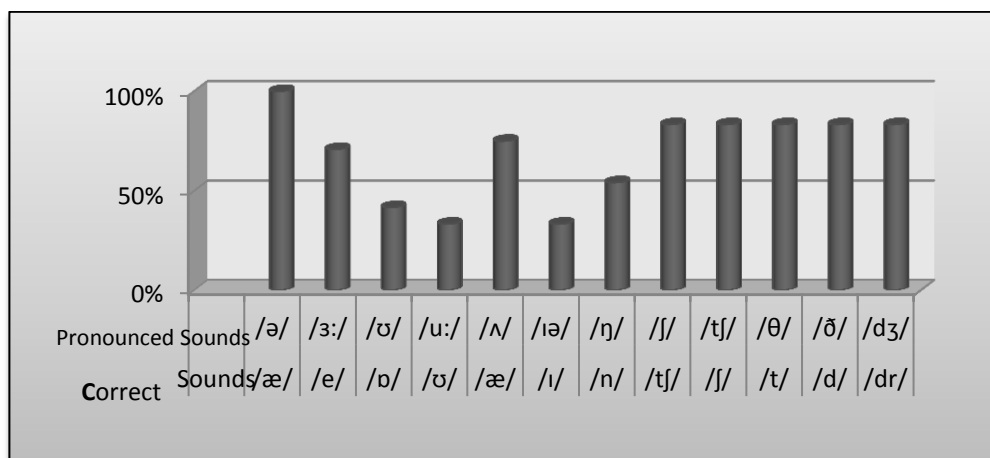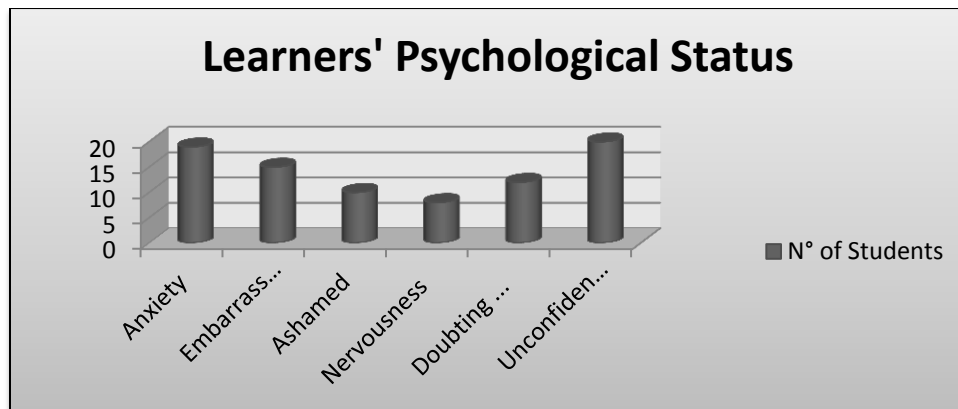


**Bar-Graph 2.** Tested Sounds

Self-confidence was thought to be raised along with pronunciation training, to do so an interview was used to diagnose learners' self confidence

while reading aloud. Most learners (19) stated they were anxious, stressed and unable to control this feeling while reading. In addition, twelve of them doubt about their background pronunciation knowledge, nervousness, shyness, redness … etc. The following graph illustrates this:



**Learners' Psychological Status**

Anxiety, Embarrass…, Ashamed, Nervousness, Doubting …, Unconfiden…

N° of Students

**Bar-Graph**  The Learners' Psychological Status

4. **Discussion**

To sum up then, and in the light of the results obtained from this study, one would first hold that the learners' difficulties lie basically on the production of vowels and some consonants in addition to intonation. A general remark may be drawn is that most participants failed to realize a number of vowels; this may be explained by considering the fact proposed by Avery and Ehrlich (1992:113) that *"Arabic has only one low vowel, /a/, and thus, Arabic learners encounter difficulty with all of these vowel distinction".* This assumption may also be due to their limited linguistic competence and their lack of strategy use and exploration.

Being unable to distinguish between speech sounds and letters, the majority of students pronounce the speech sound as it is written for example, 'about' is pronounced */æbaʊt/, agree */ægri/. The other important observation was

that 79.16% of the students (i.e., 19) failed in realising the 'ed', as shown before it is pronounced without any regard to its position within the verb.

## 5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the challenges facing the teaching/ learning of a foreign language have been greater as curricula are changeable and at variance. Hence, the present paper is an exploratory research on first-year students at ABU BEKR BELKAID UNIVERSITY which aimed at putting pronunciation into the bargain for a better speaking performance and a higher self-confidence. The scope of the study was on how may pronunciation training enhances the learners' self-confidence. In addition, this research strived to raise awareness of the importance of pronunciation learning strategies for better language achievement.

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