

EXPLORATION OF MARGINALIZATION OF PRONUNCIATION IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Abstract : Judy Gilbert described pronunciation as “something of an orphan in English programs around the world” (1994:38) and, a decade and a half later, she wrote that “pronunciation continues to be the EFL/ESL orphan” (Gilbert, 2010: 1). This statement confirms that although pronunciation being an inseparable aspect of the language has a great impact on communication but it is still ignored by a large number of facilitators of teaching English language, who rather pay attention to teaching lexis and grammar. The aim of this study is to explore the students’ and teachers’ perceptions of pronunciation in Qassim Private Colleges, Saudi Arabia. Specifically, it investigates attitudes towards the positioning of pronunciation in the Second language classroom and examines teaching and learning goals in this area. Mixed method research was employed for the study, both qualitative and quantitative techniques for triangulation purposes were observed using the following tools questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews – was used to acquire an enhanced perceptive of the students’ and teachers’ perceptions. The participants of the study were 10 English teachers and 30 students. The findings signify that there are significant differences in perceptions, particularly with regard to what constitutes pronunciation practice irrespective to the importance of Pronunciation in communication it is marginalized in tertiary education.

Index Terms - Pronunciation, EFL learners, EFL teachers, English language, Attitude

I. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is perhaps the linguistic feature most open to judgment. As a surface structure phenomenon that is most noticeable, one’s accent easily evokes people’s biases. It plays an essential role in successful communication, and gives the foremost impression of a speaker’s language skills. As Derwing & Munro (2005) claimed that, “Having good pronunciation of a language can help in normal communication, particularly intelligibility.” Pronunciation is a significant area of English language teaching (ELT). However, with the rise of the communicative approach to language teaching with the closure of the 1970s, pronunciation became “the orphan” (Gilbert 2010, Derwing 2010) or “Cinderella” (Seidlhofer 2001, 56) of language teaching. A latest review by a recent applied linguistics journals proposed for teachers also discloses that there are very limited articles on pronunciation, and an assessment of various current English Second Language teacher manuscripts illustrates minimal attention to pronunciation. Levis (1999), for instance, presents the disturbing observation that “present intonational research is almost completely divorced from modern language teaching and is rarely reflected in teaching materials” (p. 37). Listening and speaking skills are included in the curriculum but pronunciation is overlooked in the syllabus and in classroom activities since it is not tested and evaluated (Hawaldar, 2010; Rajadurai, 2001). According to Hughes (2006: 22), “there is no doubt that pronunciation plays second best to other aspects of language teaching in the classroom”. Indeed, as far as EFL/ESL course books are concerned, “all too often, pronunciation appears at the end of a unit, in the bottom right-hand corner of a page, which only serves to reinforce its lowly status as the thing most likely to be omitted if time is short” (Marks, 2006: 35). Further, Al Fallaj (2013) contributes his views that “conversation is also a challenge for learners of English Foreign language and it was found among EFL Saudi students while speaking”. He further indicated that English teachers who have linguistic background knowledge could help the students who face various pronunciation problems. Additionally, it showed that the English sounds that do not exist in the mother tongue were considered difficult for EL students in Saudi Arabia.

The view that pronunciation is a neglected aspect of ELT has been expressed by many scholars and researchers in the field of phonology and/or ELT as well as by many EFL/ESL language educators and materials’ writers to such an extent that, Setter and Jenkins, (2005) cited in Gilner, (2008: 93) stated that “training in pronunciation skills (perceptive and productive) does not have a secure place in most language curriculums” Sifakis and Sougari (2005) and Jenkins (2005) took the first step to investigate attitudes of teachers toward EIL pronunciation pedagogy. In their survey study on Greek EFL teachers, Sifakis and Sougari (2005) reported that the teachers’ practices and beliefs appeared to be paradoxical. As Madden and Moore (1997: 5) put it: “research on pronunciation is relatively scarce compared to that on other components of language learning, such as grammar, communicative competence, and sociocultural awareness”. The phonological differences between English and Arabic, which

affect Saudi EFL was noticed in many cases among Saudi students (Al Saidat, 2010). In addition, instructional, socio-cultural, institutional, and demographic factors indicate that EFL Saudi students are affected negatively and these factors lead to academic problems (Alrabai, 2016). Keeping the above view, the current studies main objective is pragmatically to investigate the present pronunciation proficiency of the students' and teachers' perceptions of pronunciation, and challenges faced by them at Qassim Private Colleges, Saudi Arabia. The study aims to answer the following research questions.

1. What are students' and teachers attitude towards pronunciation in the EFL classroom?
2. What are the challenges faced by the teachers and students in regard to pronunciation in the EFL classroom?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Role of pedagogy and curricula in pronunciation

An Approach to learning and teaching, more broadly refers to theory and practice of education. To have an effective communication one must be fluent in their pronunciation. Pronunciation is important for EFL/ESL learners' perception and production of oral discourse and, thus, it is disappointing that pronunciation is neglected in all areas of EFL/ESL; from research and teacher training courses to teachers' practices and course books used in class. In Saudi Arabia textbooks and materials with minimal level of linguistics features fail to meet the need of the learners and teachers. (Rahman, 2011). Appropriate course book need to be preferred which can develop the requisite basic skills of English language. The textbook is regarded as an indispensable mainstay in the teaching and learning process, one that is as effective as teachers themselves. Fareh (2010) argues: Teaching materials are, in general, culturally inappropriate and this may alienate learners and instigate them to develop negative attitudes towards learning this foreign language. Many textbooks are culturally biased although their authors claim that they are designed to meet the needs of the learners of EFL.

The role of curriculum in the development of language proficiency is certainly decisive. As MacDonald (2002), found that pronunciation did not have a position within the overall curricula examined in his study, a result that was interpreted to have contributed to teachers' lack of training and avoidance of teaching pronunciation. In relation to the role of teaching materials in pronunciation instruction, research has shown that there are relatively few textbooks devoted to pronunciation as compared to other language areas such as grammar and writing. And many of these books address phonetics and phonology without regard to the pedagogical part that teachers of pronunciation adhere to. Alghazo (2015) elsewhere shows that the language curriculum did not give pronunciation the attention it deserves as a primal indicator of language proficiency.

The role of pronunciation from Grammar translation Method to communicative approach has shifted considerably this approach appeared to marginalize the role of pronunciation teaching due to the priority given to the communication of a message rather than accuracy. As Communicative Language Teaching advanced, pronunciation approach again was highlighted due to its fundamental role in communication. Morley (1991), Kenworthy (1987), Pennington and Richards (1986), among others, all suggest ways of teaching pronunciation meaningfully, thus showing the renewed interest in phonology as an important element of language learning. However, there seems to be relatively little evidence to show whether this is carried through into the classroom.

2.2 Contingent treatment to pronunciation

There is sturdy indication in literature that communicative approaches may be a suitable method of teaching English language skills, particularly speaking. Hughes (2006) points out that the teachers' reluctance in teaching pronunciation "is not so much because teachers do not think it is useful but more because they are unsure of how to integrate pronunciation into their lessons". Saudi EFL learner's lack of exposure to pronunciation in the target language is due to the influence of their native language. Further, Khan (2011) reported that English in Saudi Arabia is treated as merely an academic subject because most Saudis communicate in their native language. He added that the lack of exposure to English in daily life activities hinders or even prevents Saudi students' from achieving a high level of English fluency and competence. A significant reason for this difficulty may also be communicating in the target language is the lack of sufficient opportunities to practice English in the classroom. Aljumah, (2011) argued that Saudi students find it inappropriate to speak in class—and even when they do, they speak very little. He explained that in EFL/ESL classroom interactions in Saudi Arabia, teachers and students are usually on opposing sides: teachers speak constantly, whereas students mumble and swallow their words or say nothing (p. 85). Knowledge of a foreign language is based on all the four skills of language. There are a number of aspects to speaking a language correctly, one of which is pronouncing words appropriately (Alsabaan, 2015). Another factor that is highlighted is students feel afraid from being humiliated to speak in English, as they not only lack confidence but also are shy, as if they speak and pronounce wrongly, they would be made fun of. This was justified by Hamouda, (2013) who found that 71.70% of Saudi learners are worried about their pronunciation when they speak in class and that 55.97% of subjects expressed embarrassment when they mispronounced words. The difference in learners linguistic knowledge between Arabic and English might cause various problems while pronouncing some English words. Whereas the definition of pronunciation according to Sudrajat, (2016) is the production and perception of the significant sounds of a particular language in order to achieve meaning in context to language use.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Population and Sample

The participants of the study were 10 English teachers and 30 students of Department of English, Qassim Private College. The students were selected on non-probability purposive sampling technique and EFL teachers were selected on the basis of availability sampling.

3.2 Data and Sources of Data

Mixed method research was employed for the study; both qualitative and quantitative techniques for triangulation purposes were observed. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) set out distinct research designs for mixed methods research. Their rationale is that 'mixed methods research provides strengths that offset the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research', that it 'provides more comprehensive evidence for studying a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative research alone' and that it 'helps answer questions that cannot be answered by qualitative or quantitative approaches alone'

3.3 Theoretical framework

In this study, quantitative exploration helped to provide a practically extensive understanding of students' and teachers' perceptions and the data collected from the Likert scale questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The data was schematized and calculated using percentile. The other tools were focus group discussions, it was basically for students and semi structured interviews with open ended questions were chosen as a relevant method to analyze the attitude of teachers, in-order to gather focused, qualitative textual data. – the following instruments were used to acquire an enhanced perceptive of the students' and teachers' perceptions. The data collected was transcribed and then coded and analyzed for significant themes.

3.4. Statistical tools

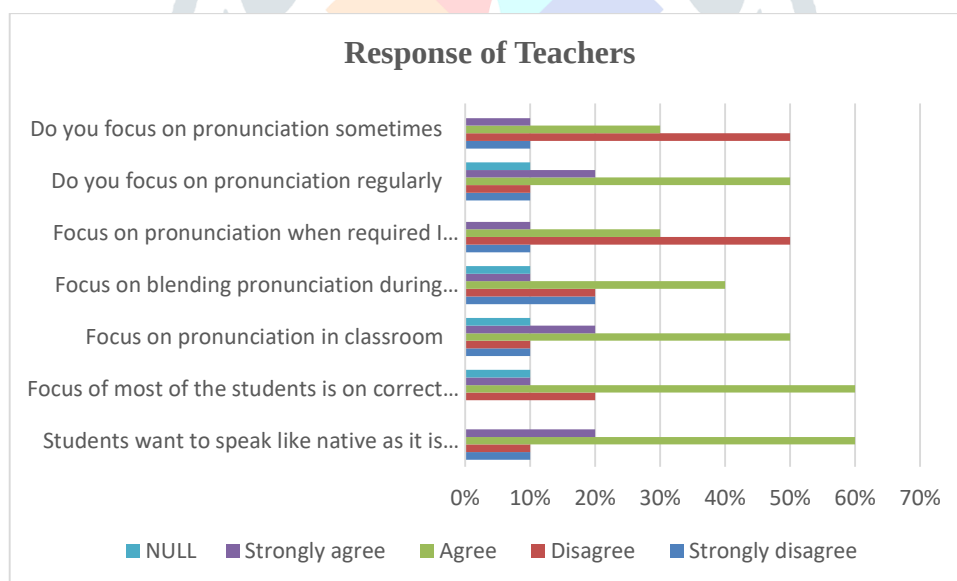
The research tools were questionnaires to collect quantitative data for both teachers and students, which was designed on 5 point Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) which are widely used to measure attitudes and opinions. The other tools were Semi Structured Interviews and focus groups which are the most common methods of data collection used in qualitative research. Interviews are used to explore the views, experiences, beliefs of individual participants whereas Focus groups are used for group dynamics to generate qualitative data.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained from the students and the teacher's questionnaire will be tabulated and analyzed followed by the quantitative data for the given questions

4.1 Result obtained from Questionnaires a Teachers questionnaire responses

The items of the data were based on 10 Teachers perception on pronunciation, attitude towards pronunciation in the classroom and challenges faced by them in regard to pronunciation

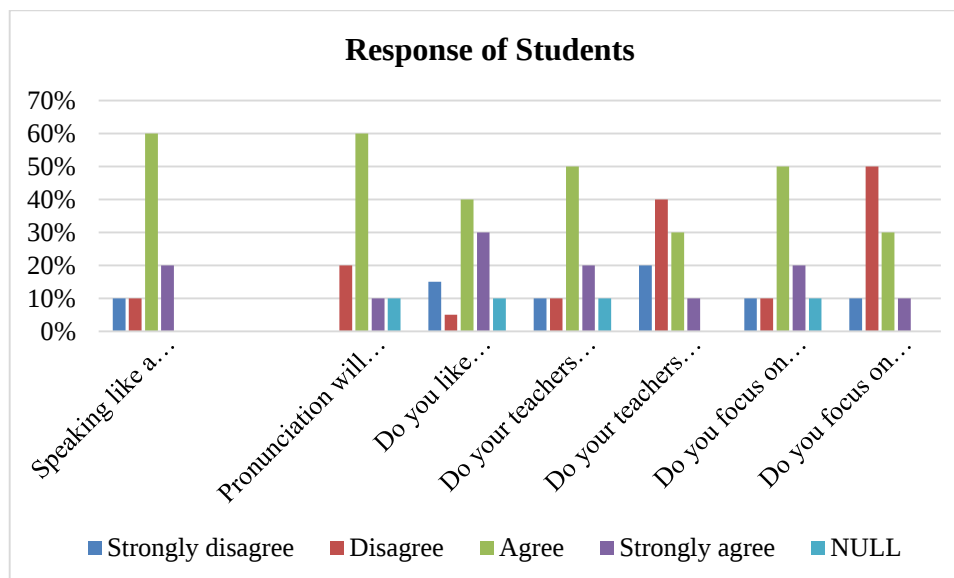


From the above responses 60% of teachers agreed that pronunciation is important and students want to speak like native speakers where as there was disagreement of almost 10% each in disagree and strongly disagree while none said that it's not important. Hence pronunciation can be seen as an essential element of interaction in which speakers present a reflection of themselves to others. In speaking English, one of important elements is pronunciation. Pronunciation is defined as production of sounds that we use to make meaning (Yates, 2002). To be able to speak English fluently or native-like for foreign learners becomes their expectation to achieve. One of important elements that support successful communication by means of English is pronunciation.

Item no 3 and 6 responses are nearly the same 50% agreement can be seen in each item that is focus of pronunciation in the classroom and focus on pronunciation regularly. Keeping in view that in pronunciation teaching, the goal is neither to help learners to attain native-like accents nor to promote comfortable intelligibility to native speakers, but to ensure mutual intelligibility among non-native speakers of English (Jenkins, 2000; McKay, 2002 as quoted by Moedjito, 2008). Item no 5 and 7, "Focus on pronunciation when required I correct the error", and "Do you focus on pronunciation sometimes" the responses are

same 50% disagreed to the statement whereas 30% agreed. Given that most teachers felt contented using pronunciation, it is uncertain what avoids other teachers from spending time on pronunciation. Hughes (2006) points out that the teachers' reluctance in teaching pronunciation "is not so much because teachers do not think it is useful but more because they are unsure of how to integrate pronunciation into their lessons" However teaching pronunciation is a contentious issue. Which is supported by Pardede (2010) that, mastering a foreign language pronunciation is not something impossible as far as the students and the teacher participate together in the total learning process?

b. Students questionnaire responses.



The findings are the responses from 30 students. From Item No 1 and 2 (Speaking like a native speaker of English is important to me and pronunciation is very important and Pronunciation will help me communicate effectively) it can be deduced that 60 % responses of the students agree and 10 % strongly disagree, i.e 24 (18 students agree and 6 strongly agree) students positively responded, whereas the teachers' responses also correspond with the results obtained from the students' responses. That pronunciation is important in speaking English and students like to speak like native English speakers. The responses from Item no 3, Do you like practicing pronunciation in class? A sum of Agree and strongly agree is 70% towards the sum of disagree and strongly disagree is 20%, although 10 percent did not give any response. From this it clearly shows that students are highly interested in practicing pronunciation in the classroom under the guidance of the teacher. Item 5 "Do your teachers correct pronunciation errors in the class?", to this 30% responses agreed and 10% strongly agreed while 40 % disagreed and 20% percent strongly disagreed. This clearly states that the teachers do not participate in correcting the pronunciation error irrespective of the reason and the results reflected in the teachers' questionnaire do agree with the same. Likewise, Gilbert (as cited in Howlader, 2010) also stated that, in spite of carrying an essential link to communication through listening and speaking, pronunciation is being overlooked in the syllabus, materials as well as in the classroom activities (p. 2). The fact as stated is moreover Maniruzaman (as cited in Mumeneen, 2011) also argued that, most of the EFL teachers avoid pronunciation instruction in the classroom by smart tricks because they do not have the idea of useful and effective strategies to teach pronunciation and which approach to follow when they meet a specific problem (p. 13-14). Moreover, Shuchi (2013) added that some teachers might have lack of qualification and that is why they might not be aware of their own English language (p. 9). Therefore the results obtained from the questionnaires clearly indicate that pronunciation being a very important feature is hardly been given a considerate place in teaching in the classroom. Reasons would be many as stated by Wei (as cited in Howlader, 2010) who argues that, some teachers have poor knowledge about the different strategies of teaching pronunciation and that is why they do not find it interesting. This reason often makes the students lag behind in better pronunciation and in achieving effective communicative competence (p. 4).

4.2 Focus Group Discussion

This is based on responses provided in the questionnaire, the participants were divided into 5 focus groups randomly, as it allows members of a group to interact and influence each other during the discussion and consideration of ideas and perspectives... the discussion was based on three categories first their personal experience, second it was the attitudes of students and their teachers towards pronunciation, and the third was the challenges faced by them. **Responses from the personal experience** facilitated to get participants' perceptions on the area of concerns involved in the process of learning English pronunciation as one of the responses from Group 3 said that *"she always wanted to be like native speaker of English language, so her focus on pronunciation and tongue twister was very much inclined towards learning the best way of pronouncing, but as she*

commenced she found that it had its snag and was very critical to understand and learn, being an Arab speaker.” to her statement other group members did agree as it was nearly the same for them too. One of the findings from group 5 was that **“Learning to pronounce English words correctly can be one of the difficult parts of learning English some English vowels make it really complex to know how to say a word. “Way,” “weigh” and “why” are all said in the same manner, for example, while “comb,” “bomb” and “tomb” dessert / desert, threw / through are all pronounced differently”**. Similar to this finding was the statement of group 3 that, **“I get confused with words like /pin/ and /bm/, /fan/ and /van/ and when it comes to writing I write them in the similar manner what I pronounce, apart from this one of the member from the same group said, Once she was conversing to someone said “ Jew know her? / Whatcha do?” whereas she had to say, Do you know her?/ What do you do? I end up in a very disgraceful situation”**. This testimony was fully supported by other group members as they too had the same difficulty and all agreed to the fact that learning the correct way of pronunciation is imperative. The English language has some sounds that the native language might not, so one has to learn how to make completely new sounds. The English language has many rules and exceptions to these rules. Arabic speakers learning English find it difficult to make a distinction between voiced and voiceless sounds. Hence, there is confusion in case of voiced and voiceless plosives. Hence by the findings are aligned with questionnaires and further as stated by Brown (1992) that “no one would deny the importance of pronunciation as a contributor towards learners’ proficiency in English”, and goes on to write that “learners are clearly aware that poor pronunciation represents a considerable barrier to their success in English” (Brown, 1992).. Further another scholar stated that “A gap in learners’ linguistic knowledge could interpret learners speaking ability of ESL/ EFL (Rabab’ah, 2016)

The second topic raised to the group was about theirs as well as their teachers’ attitude towards pronunciation. Group 1 reflected that **being from Arab background they hardly have exposure to Speaking English daily as most of their conversation is in their native language**. Intimating to the same group 4 said that, **in countries where English is spoken as a foreign language, it is challenging to improve their ability to speak because they do not communicate in English in and outside learning environment and on the other hand the teachers hardly take initiative to improve their pronunciation in the classrooms too although some teachers do try to combine pronunciation while teaching**. The other group members too agreed and gave their consent. Further group 3 said that **sometimes if needed the teacher teaches pronunciation or correct them but on whole there is no emphasis done to teach it within the curriculum**. Group 2 said, **“we are not perfect still learners and we do make lot of mistakes and we want that our teachers should correct us and guide us in appropriate manner”**. All these reflections when compared with the findings from the teachers and student’s questionnaire stood at par without contradiction. The attitude of any student is a main learning part and an important component of L2 pedagogy (Al-Jamal, 2014). The lack of English competence among students in Saudi Arabia is a main problem which is potentially created by teachers’ traditional methods especially in using Arabic to teach EL (Alhawsawi, 2013; Almutairi, 2015)

The third statement posted to the group was about the challenges that they faced towards learning pronunciation. All the five groups mentioned that their major limitation was anxiety and nervousness which considerably affected their progress in speaking the target language. This practice hinders them to avoid from oral interactions. The statement given by group 1 was that **“To speak fluently, we should have sufficient awareness of English through which we can improve our proficiency to pronounce sounds correctly and to avoid common mistakes that we bring along from our first language. Also, we have to be aware of features of speech such as stress, and intonation.”** Another Group 3 said that, **“in Arab countries where English is spoken as a foreign language, students find it difficult to improve their aptitude to speak because they do not communicate in English in and outside school”**. According to Alrashidi and Phan (2015) lack of exposure to English in daily life interactions is considered one of the language barriers which limit Arab students’ ability to achieve a high level of English fluency and competence. Group 5 gave an interesting declaration from a real life situation stating that, **‘pen’ is a very common expression used but we Arabic speaker pronounces it as ‘ben’ hereby replacing a sound by another as in case of the faculty’s name which is Deepika here to we replace it with Deeḃika and pronounce it incorrectly. This leads us to embarrassing situations**. Reflection on this statement is very true that the phoneme /p/ finds no place in Arabic, This is also supported by the findings of Jalal Ahmad (2011) and Al-Hattami (2010): Arabic mother tongue learners of English language find certain English consonant sounds difficult to pronounce. There are significant number of problems raised by the learners while pronouncing these specific consonant sounds e.g. /p/, /d/, /v/, /t/ and /ŋ/. /p/ is being pronounced as /b/ when it bobbed up at the initial and final position of a word.

Therefore, from the above findings it can be deduced that first language interference is a key issue with English pronunciation for the Arab learners of EFL. Researchers such as (Rabab’ah, 2003; Mahboob and Elyas, 2014 and Alrabai, 2014) also indicated that one of the major factors that led to the students’ low level of English is the lack of the target language exposure. Therefore, learners ought to be an active participant in real-life situations in order to develop their pronunciation skill.

4. 3 Semi structured interview with teachers

The interview was based on the following categories personal experience, attitudes towards pronunciation, and the challenges faced by them. All the teachers’ belief was that every student has to pay emphasis on the pronunciation skill as it is the foremost in English Language skill irrespective what their native language is. Based on the personal experience one of the teacher T6 made the following comment: **The learners face problems especially with vowels, as Arabic and English vowel and consonant clustering patterns are different in English and Arabic languages because of which few students tend to insert vowels between certain consonants. Therefore, it’s essential for them to learn the art of pronunciation in L2**. Teacher T10 also gave a remarkable response that **Pronunciation instruction is only effective for highly motivated learners. Some students resist altering**

their pronunciation in order to maintain their L1 identity irrespective to the fact that they want to be like native speakers. Four Teachers claimed that they even make students read aloud in the classroom so that they can improve their pronunciation. Whereas, some students hesitate doing so and try to find excuses.

To the inquiry about their attitude towards pronunciation, Most of the EFL teachers in the current study reported that they taught pronunciation to their students. One of the teachers' response was *"I always try to make my classes interactive. Even if I speak in English or give them much time to speak, they just shift from English to Arabic and always wants a translation"*, Another teacher said *she uses Audio and video recordings in the classroom to address this lack of exposure to native speakers and provide them with activities where they can improve their speaking skill*. 20% of the teachers said that they do not give pronunciation preference rather focus mainly in their teaching of pronunciation on activities presented in their textbooks as their main focus is to complete the curriculum. Whereas 6 teachers compiling to the previous statement said they rarely correct pronunciation errors of the students. Hence by these findings were in line with the results from focus group discussion and questionnaires. It has been acknowledged by the researchers that teachers' attitudes serve as a significant factor of how teachers feel about applying pronunciation in their instruction, and also their beliefs have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the process of pronunciation implementation.

Asking about their challenges the teachers responses were nearly the same that it's a big challenge for them to raise the learner's cognizance towards the importance of English pronunciation for ESL learners. As some students are hesitant, shy, incompetent, not interested. Apart from this the Saudi teachers *feel that the most widespread challenge for them is insufficient competence and inadequate training regarding pronunciation use comparatively to the other foreign language instructors*. One teacher mentioned *that there are no listening labs and off course classrooms are provided by computers, but they are not used by English teachers due to the lack of listening materials. Therefore, to improve language skills, students can benefit if appropriate materials are available, this will draw the students' attention and affect their performance definitely*. One of the common challenges what the teachers faced while correcting the pronunciation in the class was the difference of English and Arabic phonology related to sound and stress which do not exist in Arabic language for example some students pronounce the sound /p/ as /b/, e.g., the word 'play' /is pronounced as /Blei/ hence by, greatly influencing the students pronunciation. One of the teachers who teach Preparatory Year Program says that the PYP courses are premeditated to bridge the gap and promote the students' language proficiency to the desired level required for various specific courses. It is significantly related to the preferred efficacy of linguistic proficiency instructed. Further emphasized that *there is a large gap between PYP students' level and the curriculum they adopt with the the involvement of a fixed program during the semester which leads them as not to focus on pronunciation skills*. This observation is in line with the study of the following researchers Suleiman, (1983); Mukattash,(1983); Zughoul,(1983, 1984,1987) and Ibrahim, (1983) who mentioned that, the weakness of English language learners in general has been attributed to various factors: lack of knowledge on the part of school graduates when they join the university, school and English language department curricula, teaching methodology, lack of the target language environment and the learners' motivation.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Acquiring excellent and accurate pronunciation is the goal of both teacher and students' of Saudi Arabia irrespective of the fact that among the four language skills pronunciation gets the least consideration in classroom discussion. Many investigations have been made among EFL learners inside and outside Saudi Arabia. Saudi learners of English encounter many difficulties in learning process related to pronunciation, communication, attitudes, and teaching methods (e.g., Al Fehaid, 2015; Al Ma'shy, 2011; Al Aslam, 2015). However the position of pronunciation in the EFL Classroom has changed considerably over the last decade. The findings of the study aimed to fill the gap by providing a reflection of the current status of pronunciation teaching and learning process to investigate the students' and teachers' perceptions of pronunciation, and challenges in a Saudi EFL background, predominantly at Qassim Private Colleges. The responses gathered from the research instruments nearly acknowledged each other. Irrespective to the fact that pronunciation plays an important role in English communication for EFL learners has taken a back seat and this is deduced from the results obtained that both students and teachers showed lack of interest in the concerned field. The majority of participants' have positive attitude towards teaching / learning pronunciation; however, it does not have explicit relation to what they truly teach / learn in the classroom. Therefore, it is unambiguous that they know the importance of teaching / learning English pronunciation, but they do not teach / learn this language aspect as often as needed. Therefore if stakeholders such as teachers, learners, and institutes keep the drawback of problems and challenges of pronunciation in mind they can find solution to overcome the problems of pronunciation. For example, teachers may adapt to new teaching technologies to enhance and implement pronunciation skills in teaching. On the other hand colleges may introduce such a curriculum which may be beneficial in improving the skill, and the students be given enough instructions or opportunities to learn pronunciation within English language courses using modern digitalized technologies. Therefore, to improve the competence of Saudi learners in EFL needs strategies that should be systematic, contributing and extensive. These kinds of improvements should be inside and outside the classroom (Alrabai, 2016)

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