

Obstacles Faced By Students of First Year in English Department  
At Alassaba College in Pronouncing the English sounds /θ/ / ð /

المعوقات التي يواجهها طلبة السنة الأولى في كلية الآداب الإصابعة

بقسم اللغة الانجليزية في كيفية نطق الأصوات / θ / / ð /

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### **Abstract**

This Paper investigates the problem that EFL learners of First Year in English Department at Alassaba College commonly come across issues when pronouncing the th sounds /θ/ and / ð /.It is reported that they frequently substitutes /th/ for the voiceless sound /θ/ and /θ/ for the voiced sound / ð /. Researchers believe that learning the differences between these sounds can help the students of Arabic to be able to pronounce English consonants properly. This is due to the fact that first language can affect learning the second language. Whenever the differences are identified it will be easy for students to learn. The purpose of this study is to explore the interference of mother tongue in pronunciation field that was made by learners of English Department dealing with English sounds/θ/ and / ð . The participants were 30 EFL learners with Arabic background as their mother tongue. To help students overcome their difficulties, comprehensively instructing

the way to pronounce /θ/ and /ð/ sounds correctly, using minimal pairs with numerous examples, and creating an inspired learning environment for the students to practice pronunciation are recommended, and recording the students' pronunciation and analyzed using contrastive analysis.

### الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة المشاكل التي يواجهها طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية في السنة الأولى في كلية الآداب الأصابعه عند نطق صوتي /θ/ و /ð/. وقد ورد أنهم يستبدلون /th/ في كثير من الأحيان بالصوت غير الصوتي /θ/ و /d/ للصوت المسموع / ð /. نعتقد أن تعلم الفروق بين هذه الأصوات يمكن أن يساعد طلاب اللغة العربية على أن يكونوا قادرين على نطق الحروف الساكنة الإنجليزية بشكل صحيح. ويرجع ذلك إلى حقيقة أن اللغة الأولى يمكن أن تؤثر على تعلم اللغة الثانية. كلما تم تحديد الفروق، سيكون من السهل على الطلاب التعلم. الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو استكشاف تدخل اللغة الأم في مجال النطق الذي قام به طلاب قسم اللغة الإنجليزية الذين يتعاملون مع الأصوات الإنجليزية. كان المشاركون 30 من متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية مع خلفية كلغتهم الأم. لمساعدة الطلاب على التغلب على صعوباتهم، تم تعليمهم بشكل شامل كيفية نطق /θ/ يوصى بنطق / و / ð / بشكل صحيح، باستخدام أزواج قليلة مع أمثلة عديدة، وإنشاء بيئة تعليمية ملهمة للطلاب لممارسة النطق، وتسجيل نطق الطلاب وتحليله باستخدام التحليل التبايني.

## Introduction

A consonant is formed when the air-stream is stopped at some point between the vocal cords and the lips. A consonant can be defined as "a speech sound made by partially or completely stopping the flow of air as it passes from the larynx to the lips" (Roach:10).

It is important to consider pronunciation errors in order to better understand how language learners acquire phonetic knowledge. One crucial aspect of second language (L2) pronunciation that needs attention is the perception of speech sounds that are not present in the learner's native language (Munro, 2018). In Libyan dialects, certain speech sounds found in English are absent. For example, the voiceless "th" sound /θ/ (as in "thank" /θaŋk/ or "math" /mæθ/) and the voiced "th" sound /ð/ (as in "these" /ði:z/ or "mother" /mʌðər/) are not present in Libyan dialects. Because the th sounds /θ/ and /ð/ in English language are not pronounced properly by Libyan learners, many EFL learners in Libyan feel difficult to appropriately pronounce these sounds in English. From personal teaching experience, it is noticed that Libyan learners of English usually substitutes /t/ for /θ/ and /d/ for /ð/.

In Libyan contexts, Nguyen (2015) discovers popular challenges that Libyan learners of English have to face with when learning pronunciation. One of the explored difficulties is the problem with voiced and voiceless stops including the particular issue with /θ/ and /ð/. According to Nguyen (2015), speakers in Libyan usually make a strongly voiceless stop /t/ instead of a voiceless fricative sound /θ/. Nguyen explains that the sound /t/ is vocalized from the letter th of their mother tongue which is heavily pronounce /t/.

Bui (2016) also finds out problems in pronouncing the sounds /θ/ and /ð/ of adult

Libyan EFL learners. Bui determines that the consonant /θ/ is mainly replaced by /t/ in Libyan language and the /ð/ sound is regularly mispronounced as /z/. According to Bui (2016), the factors affecting the participants' pronunciation include the influence of Libyan , the learner's lack of native input exposure as well as the English speaking environment, and the limited instructions on the sounds.

#### Research Problem

First year Libyan university students in the College of Arts-Lassalha find difficulties in pronouncing /θ/ and /ð/ sounds.

#### Research Questions

1. What are the common challenges faced by the undergraduate students when pronouncing /θ/ and /ð/ sounds in English?

2. What are the possible causes of the challenges that the study participants face when pronouncing /θ/ and /ð/ sounds in English?

**Aim of the Study:** The Aim of this study is to find out difficulties that encounter First year students of English Department at Al- Assaba College dealing with English sounds/θ/ and /ð/.

**Significance:** The main objective of this study is to focus on how Students differentiate between /θ/ and /ð/. Sounds and pronounce them accurately. The foremost Significance of the study is to identify the /θ/ and /ð/. sounds errors that students likely commit in the pronunciation of English words.

**Scope of the Research:** The choice in the field of education generally and more specifically in First year University students of

English Department at Al- Assaba College, where our study is to be shown to those students, through examining and requesting then the Researcher will reach. to the result that to be tested carefully and significantly.

#### Methodology:

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how pronunciation of the th sounds /θ/ and /ð/ is difficult for EFL learners in Libya . The target population aimed to examine this language aspect are students from various English classes.

To collect the data, 15 students are randomly selected and asked to pronounce some

particular English words containing /θ/ and /ð/ sounds which appear in their textbooks.

using minimal pairs technique with numerous examples, and creating a inspired learning environment for the students to practice pronunciation, and recording the students' pronunciation.

#### Review of The Literature

Pronunciation problems and reasons explaining for the difficulties may be found in

a wide variety of research papers. Munro (2018) believes that the sound system of first language (L1) creates a considerable impact on how L2 pronunciation is acquired by English language learners. Based on the contrastive analysis hypothesis, According to Munru, (2018, p. 269) believes that “the structural differences between L1 and L2 are the source of learner difficulties.” On the other hand, Munro argues that other influences including learners' language proficiency and L1 use in the classrooms determine whether a learner can be successful with a particular sound of English or not.

Extensive research has been done in the field of interference of mother tongue. Pal (2013) attempted to identify interference of Hindi in the process of acquiring English. He found that the major problem met by the speakers of Hindi was fricative sounds, namely, [θ], [dθ],[z],[θ]. In agreement with that, Hu (2015) revealed that Chinese immigrants' mother tongue interferes in their English speaking. He explained that the interference happens because of the distinctions of phonological system between Chinese and English. In the same way, Bardakçi (2015) discovered that Turkish EFL teachers encounter dominant mispronunciation of the sound schwa [ə] along with other sounds such as [θ], [θ], and [æ]. The absence of the corresponding sounds of [θ] and [æ] in Turkish could be deemed the reason for such pronunciation problems.

A number of variables affect how a languages spoken and written systems relate to one another. According to Khansir (2021), spelling can be progressively changed to reflect changes in the phonological system, although pronunciation is rarely impacted by word spelling. Writing, according to Bloomfield (1933), "is not language but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks" (P.21). When it comes to identifying words in spoken forms, pronunciation is crucial. Therefore, mastering the correct pronunciation of English words is crucial for learning and teaching foreign and second languages, particularly for English language learners who are aware that the pronunciation is dilemma.

According to Harmer (2001), a lot of teachers do not play attention to English pronunciation. There are different reasons for this negligence. Many learners state that they do not need to learn pronunciation and learning pronunciation is a waste of time. They state

that just communication in English is enough and when they are understood, nothing else is important. Harmer (2001) emphasized that the main aim of teaching and learning in any language is to enable students to communicate in the target language and if this is the case, communication is an important term to explain communication means to understand and be understood. Many learners think that because they can talk to their teachers and other students so they can easily communicate in English.

### Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how pronunciation of the th sounds /θ/ and /ð/ is difficult for EFL learners in Libya . The target population aimed to examine this language aspect are students from first year of English department..

Research design: 15 students form first year of English department at Al-Assaba College are randomly selected and asked to pronounce some particular English words containing /θ/ and /ð/ sounds which appear in their textbooks.

The researcher using minimal pairs technique with numerous examples, and creating a inspired learning environment for the students to practice pronunciation, and recording the students' pronunciation.

Participants: The total Number is 30 students, so The researcher selected 15 students randomly to participate in this study.

Instruments: The Researcher will use minimal pairs technique with numerous examples, and creating a inspired learning environment for the students to practice pronunciation .An audio recording to investigate the students' errors in pronunciation.

#### Data analysis:

It appears that the influence of Libyan pronunciation is a major factor contributing to difficulties in pronouncing the th sounds /θ/ and /ð/. In the context of language teaching and learning in Libya, there is a belief that the sound /ð/ is similar to the sound /d/ in Libyan pronunciation. In the Libyan alphabet, there is the letter د / د which is pronounced similarly to /θ/ in English. For instance, the Libyan word دا (if دا is a noun, it means “banyan tree” in English; if دا is an adjective, it means “many” or “much” in English) is pronounced like /ددا/. Consequently, many Libyan learners of English often substitute /د/ for the th sound /ð/ in English. For example, the English article ‘the’ is frequently pronounced as /دد/ instead of the correct sound /ðد/. One reason for this is that the technique to pronounce /θ/ and /ð/ is completely different from the way Libyan sounds are pronounced. It’s not easy for EFL learners in Libya to place their tongue tip between their teeth when saying the sound /ð/. Therefore, some of them find it easier to pronounce this sound by placing the tongue tip against the back of the teeth. This is why the th sound /ð/ is sometimes pronounced like the sound /د/ instead. /د/ is familiar to Libyan people and much easier to pronounce. For example, the word “weather” /wedθr/ may be said as /دwedدr/ or /دwedد/ by Libyan students.

The proficiency level in a language is a significant factor in pronunciation learning and practice for students. This issue with pronunciation often occurs with students who have a low level of English proficiency, particularly elementary and pre-intermediate students. Students with an upper-intermediate or higher proficiency level can correctly pronounce the sounds of “th” (/θ/ and /ð/) when saying independent words or speaking slowly. However, if these students



pronounce “th” words quickly, the sounds may be replaced by similar sounds such as /t/ (instead of /θ/) or /d/ (instead of /ð/) in Libyan language. In order to produce the two “th” consonant sounds correctly, the tongue has to come through the teeth. The reason for the incorrect sounds of “th” may be due to insufficient time for the speakers to move their tongue forward.

To effectively teach students the proper pronunciation of the sound /θ/, teachers should advise them to place the tip of the tongue between the teeth, making sure it is visible to others. Since /θ/ is an unvoiced sound, students should blow air through the mouth without touching the tongue tip. Additionally, they should keep their lips in place without moving them when pronouncing /θ/. When pronouncing /θ/, the air passing through the mouth should make a piece of paper move forward. On the other hand, the sound /ð/ is voiced. The technique for pronouncing /ð/ is almost the same as for /θ/, except that this sound is made with the vocal cords. Using minimal pairs in teaching pronunciation is also an effective method to help students differentiate and practice the different sounds. Minimal pairs should consist of similar sounds that can easily confuse learners, such as /s/ and /θ/, /f/ and /θ/, /t/ and /θ/, /d/ and /ð/, /z/ and /ð/. Along with teaching minimal pairs, students should be provided with sentences and conversations containing these sounds to help them practice and apply them in authentic communication situations.

The Following Table explains the students errors in Sounds (/θ/ and /ð/)

English Word	Phonetic Transcription	Students Pronunciation
Think	/θɪŋk/	/Tiŋk/
Thought	/θɔ:t/	/Tɔ:ut/
That	/ðæt/	/dæt/
They	/ðei/	/ðey/
This	/ðis/	/dis/
Both	/bɔ:θ/	/bɔ:ut/

#### Discussion:

According to above table and as it indicated before , the Researcher noticed that students still have difficulty in differentiating between these two sounds, because these consonants are not pronounced properly in Arabic and this reason, caused trouble for the learners. There is no great emphasis on accurate pronunciation for many reasons, including students' low proficiency in the English language and their lack of knowledge of the importance of pronunciation. – Students' negative attitude towards their own learning process are also factor that reduces teaching effectiveness. The education environment is the lack of facilities which could help the teacher a lot. Laboratories (at least tape, recorders with a few preliminary instructional tapes), simple English books in libraries, and some other teaching devices, such as video- players, computers, DVD players, and like seem to be of great use and help in teaching English, especially in early intermediate classes.

#### Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, it has been observed that first-year students in the English Department often struggle with pronouncing the "th" sounds /θ/

and /ð/ in English. The factors contributing to these pronunciation difficulties vary, including the influence of the Libyan dialect, the difficulty in using the tongue and teeth to pronounce /θ/ and /ð/, and the low level of language proficiency among learners. Recognizing the students' difficulties in pronunciation can help teachers improve their English pronunciation instruction and assist students in enhancing their pronunciation skills. To effectively teach English pronunciation, English teachers need to provide comprehensive instructions on how to correctly pronounce the sounds, use minimal pairs with numerous examples, and create a supportive environment for students to learn and practice pronunciation

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