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PRODUCTION OF THE /TH/ SOUND BY AFGHAN DARI EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

The purpose of current study is to realize why Afghan Dari EFL learners have difficulty in pronouncing English /th/ digraph correctly. After a proficiency test, 24 Afghan Dari EFL learners were interviewed on the basis of their gender, age, proficiency level, and accuracy and respectively the data analyzed for further investigation to look whether voiced or voiceless dental fricative is more problematic. In fact, the data analysis enabled us to conclude that both voiced and voiceless dental fricatives are challenging for Afghan Dari EFL learners, but voiceless seems to be more problematic because while 92% of the voiced sound was articulated correctly, only 8% was articulated incorrectly; whereas; 61% of voiceless sound was articulated correctly, and 39% was articulated incorrectly. In addition, some factors such as age, duration of study, gender, and proficiency level of the participants seem to have an impact on the production of these phonemes. The main reason why English /th/ digraph is problematic for Afghan Dari EFL learner is that there is no corresponding sound in Dari language; therefore, Dari EFL learners substitute these sounds by close equivalent sounds in Dari language; specifically, they replace voiced dental fricative with /d/ or /ɖ/ and voiceless dental fricative with /s/ or /ç/. We suggest some further extensive investigations on this topic for more clarification in order to scrutinize and cure this fossilized pronunciation problem of Dari learners of English.

Keywords: Production, Pronunciation, Dari EFL learners, Gender, Age, Proficiency Level, and Accuracy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many studies have revealed that the speech-perception system is adjusted to the EFL learner's native language during their first few years of English education (Werker & Tees, 1984; 2005). Many learners experience different problems while learning English due to their different mother tongues, ages, cultures, accents, and the like (Roch, 2000). The focus of this study is the pronunciation problems they face with during the learning process. Ur (2000) explains three possible ways of error happening with pronunciation. First, there may not be that specific sound in learners' native language, so the EFL learners try to substitute that sound with closest equivalent that they have in their native language. Second, sometimes there is a sound in learners' first language, but the EFL learners do not consider it as a separate sound that has various meanings. Third, sometimes there is an actual sound in learners' first language, but the EFL learners have not learnt the stress pattern of the word or they have been using the intonation of their mother tongue. Biyaim (1997) has found some factors of pronunciation errors; he is sure that there is an interference of learners' native language, especially, in pronunciation, syntax, and idiomatic usage of words. He also claims that EFL learners sometimes do not have chance to use English in their lives. For instance, they do not have a real-world context to practice the language. Besides that, English lessons may not be a challenge for students which mean EFL teachers do not seriously apply the lessons in the classroom, so students become passive, shy, and irresponsible learners. This is why the EFL learners fail to pronounce a word correctly.

Swan and Smith (2001) agree to give a practical reference guide to the teachers who deal with specific phonological problems of students from twenty-three different language

Backgrounds. Roach (2000) suggests that all EFL learners should have the knowledge of phonetics and phonology of English in order to produce the correct speech sounds. It is significant to learn English pronunciation regarding phonetics rather than the alphabets; this is, because the nature of spelling is implicated. Furthermore, there is the discussion of accent that BBC Pronunciation has accepted that the accent which is used as pattern for EFL learner is acquired. Peter (2000) claims that the accent which has been used as the foundation of textbooks and pronunciation dictionaries is given an account of details than other accent of English. He also emphasizes that the language teachers should act as pronunciation coaches.

Morley (1991) claims that the methodologies of teaching should be turned from foregrounding separate elements of pronunciation to transcending – separate elements of pronunciation and from linguistic capability to communicative capability. One of the fundamental goals of teaching pronunciation in any course is understandable pronunciation which is an important component of communicative capability. Regarding speakers' achievement, Burns (2003) has found three necessary elements. Understanding that speakers can produce sound patterns which are recognizable comprehensible that listeners understand the meaning of what has been said. Interpretability that the listener can understand the purpose of the speech producing comprehensible and interpretable sound patterns is necessary skill (Burns, 2003).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the main factors that cause the /th/ sound pronunciation problem of the Dari learners of English and suggest some solutions in order to overcome that handicap the Afghan students face. The following research questions have been formed to find out some answers for this pronunciation problem:

1. Do Afghan Dari EFL learners pronounce /th/ sound accurately?
2. What /th/ sound; voiced or voiceless is the most problematic sound for Afghan Dari EFL learners?
3. What factors influence the production of /th/ sound by Afghan Dari EFL learners?
4. What place of the /th/ sound in the word is more problematic (initial, medial, or final)?



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of phonology has been the focus of many researchers in different languages. However, Dari is one of the languages in which few researchers focused on the phonological aspects of it. Similarly, there are some other languages in which few studies have been conducted from the phonological perspective. For example, according to Baptista (2002b, p.1), in Brazil “inter-phonology research is in the early stages.” Just like Dari learners of English, Brazilian EFL learners have problems with the pronunciation of certain phonemes including the/th/ one:

Major (1987) Ontogeny Model declares that the impact of conveying and growing factors cannot be ignored in the process of learning a new language sound system and also that while conveying decreases over time, growing factors first increase and then decrease as the learners become more proficient.

There is an example of one of the unusual contrasts between /θ/ and /ð/ can be heard in either /i.ð/ versus ether /i.θ/. There are some common fricative sounds in English such as /f/,/v/, /ð/ and /θ/. Dental fricatives are represented by /th/ in writing that has been the misfortune of ESL/EFL learners. Some fricative sounds like /s/ is really restrictive produce a high-frequency hiss and is sometimes called sibilants; therefore, this sound /s/ is in this category. (Adapted from the official IPA chart) IPA home page: <http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/IPA/ipa.html>.

Senel (2006) has proposed some useful methods. The first method takes into account of stress and intonation which can encompass the rising and falling intonations. The second method is to give specific direction for the difficult sounds such as (/ð/ / θ /) sounds for voiced and voiceless fricatives to increase the learner’s awareness on the particular sound itself indicating the basic facts on the board and follow up with significant exercise uttering the sounds.

Finally, Karakas and Sonmez (2011) have developed a sample lesson plan for instructors who teach pronunciation through Audio Articulation Method (AAM). As a result, they have made this lesson plan in order to help give to the teachers to use it as a device to cure fossilized pronunciation errors, especially, for those commonly problematic /th/ (/ θ/ / ð/) sounds.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

There are 171 Dari EFL learners in this research as the main participants who have been studying English literature at three different levels and they were randomly selected for proficiency test. Among these Dari EFL learners, 87 were sophomore, 37 were junior, and 47 were senior students who are all from Balkh University, Faculty of Literature and Humanities,

Departments of English Language. These Dari EFL learners include both genders, so there were 95 females and 76 males among these participants. These Dari EFL learners have gotten different background of English knowledge because 29% of these participants have got 1 – 3 years English background and 54% have got 3 – 5 years English background and finally 17% have got 5 – 7 years of English background knowledge.

3.2. Data Collection

Basically data collection had two sections using two different tools; written section and oral sections. The written section included two questionnaires. The first questionnaire has been provided for English Language Proficiency and was based on three criteria of the language focus such as, grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. The second questionnaire was based on personal information like gender, age, university level, native language, period of study, other languages, the length practice of language skills such



as; speaking, listening, reading, and writing and finally their job. The test was given in two separate days for participants'

Convenience. When they completed the proficiency test, the test papers were checked and scored based on a scale of 100 marks then; the participants were categorized into three levels on the basis of their proficiency levels. Students who got 60 to 70 out of 100 were marked as Pre- intermediate level, students who got 70 – 80 out of 100 were marked as Intermediate level and finally students who got 80 – 100 out of 100 were marked as Upper-intermediate level. Hence, based on the above criteria, there were 24 eligible Dari EFL learners selected for interview.

The oral test which was the interview included two types of questions; 5 personal questions and 5 general questions. The participants were individually asked to answer and talk about each specific question and each participant was given 5 – 10 minutes to answer the questions. The responses of the participants were recorded by a microphone, HP laptop, and Adobe Audition 1.5 software.

3.3. Data Coding and Analysis

At this point, the collected data which has been recorded by PS-810 microphone on a HP Povilion dv2000 laptop using Adobe Audition 1.5 software during the interview is ready for further analysis. After the interview and data recording completed, the recorded data was transcribed and coded using Voice Walker software version 2.0.0, on word document. Likewise, the researcher has analyzed the transcribed and coded data by using MS. Excel for further analytical review quantitatively. Here, the data was divided into gender, age, proficiency level, tokens, examples, /th/ position, symbol, and accuracy columns then for more details and specification, the researcher has utilized Pivot Table in MS. Excel to analyze the data in order to find the factors and problematic sounds and this analysis process occurred as the following.

3.4. Voiced and Voiceless /th/

The researcher has tried to analyze the data using the pivot table to see the exact number accuracy of English /th/ sound by EFL learners. English /th/ digraph pronounced in two ways voiced dental fricative and voiceless dental fricative. As a result, the researcher found that totally there are 359 voiced and voiceless sound, 251 voiced and 108 voiceless sounds then for more details see the discussion.

3.5. Age

This time the data is analyzed based on the age of EFL learners. Age covers four categories; A = 18 – 22, B = 23 – 27, C = 28 – 32, and D = 33 – 37, but the participants are in category A and B. The purpose of this analysis was to see if the age of participants is a significant factor in accuracy and proficiency of English /th/ digraph.

3.6. Period of Study

Period of study is also considered as a main factor in this research and there are four categories for this range; A = 1 – 3 years, B = 3 – 5 years, C = 5 – 7 years, and D = 7 – 10 years. This research just covers three categories; A, B, and C. this time the researcher analyzed the data to see if the period of study is a significant factor in both correct and incorrect articulation of English /th/ digraph.

3.7. Proficiency Level

Proficiency level of EFL learners is also a considerable factor in this research and there are three level proficiency; Pre-intermediate, Intermediate, and Upper-intermediate level. For further study, the researcher has determined the data in order to find which level is has more difficulty in articulation of both voiced and voiceless dental fricatives. There is an important factor in proficiency level of EFL learners. It is clearly described in the discussion chapter.

3.8. Gender

Consequently, the researcher has analyzed the data for further understanding. Gender is an important factor in this research because both male and females are given the same test and interview, so gender is considered as significant factor in this research though, there is very slight contrast between male and female performance. It is discussed in a wide range in discussion chapter.

3.9. Position of /th/

Finally, the researcher has analyzed the data based on the position of English /th/ digraph. Basically, this sound occurs in three position; initial, middle, and end positions. The purpose of this analysis was to see which position is problematic for Afghan EFL learners. The result showed that the voiced dental fricative does not occur in the end position because there are very uncommon words in this sound; therefore, Afghan EFL learners have used those words in their conversation since those word are not used daily. These words are such as; bathe, breathe and etc.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Since this research focuses on finding some factors that are problematic from the point of view of the researcher, there are six main factors to be looked into such as; overall accuracy, age, period of study, proficiency, gender and position of English digraph (th) found in this research and each factor is discussed in a separate table. English digraph (th) is problematic for Afghan EFL learners because it represents two dental fricative sounds one voiced (δ) and the other voiceless (θ) while there is no exact equivalent sound in Dari language, therefore, Afghan EFL learners try to replace these sounds with Dari phonemes; /d/ and /s/.

Overall Accuracy	Correct Percentage		Incorrect Percentage		Grand Total
δ	232	92%	19	8%	251
θ	66	61%	42	39%	108
Grand Total	298		61		359

Table 1. Count of Overall Accuracy of Voiced and Voiceless Dental Fricative Sounds (δ and θ).

Table 1 indicates overall accuracy of voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds articulated by the participants of this study. Totally there are 359 dental fricative tokens that 251

sounds are voiced and 108 sounds are voiceless. We believe that the voiceless dental fricative sound (θ) is more problematic than the voiced sound (δ) because 92% of the voiced sound is articulated correctly and 8% is articulated incorrectly whereas 61% of voiceless dental fricative sound is articulated correctly and 39% is articulated incorrectly. Therefore, most of the participants had problem with the articulation of voiceless dental fricative (θ) and there is 31% contrast between the correct articulation and 31% between incorrect articulations which is a considerable problem and the main factor is lack of this exact sound (δ) in the mother tongue.

(Dari Language). According to Ur's (2000) finding, this pronunciation problem rises due to the following reasons:

a) May be a particular sound doesn't exist in the mother tongue and the learners try to substitute the sound with a closest equivalent sound they know.

b) May be a particular sound exists in the mother tongue, but not as separate phoneme; learners don't perceive it as a distinct sound that makes a difference to meaning.

c) May be learners have the actual sound right, but have not learnt the stress pattern of the word or group of words or they may use the intonation of their mother tongue which is inappropriate in target language.

Secondly, the researcher analyzed the data based on the participants' age to investigate any significant differences in production of the two types of /th/ sounds.

/th/ sound correct and incorrect	18-22	Percentage	23-27	Percentage	Grand Total
ð	206		45		251
Correct	193	83%	39	17%	232
Incorrect	13	6%	6	32%	19
θ	77		31		108
Correct	54	82%	12	18%	66
Incorrect	23	55%	19	45%	42
Grand Total	283		76		359

Table 2. Count of Age (A = 18 - 22, B = 23 - 27).

Table 2 indicates the accuracy of both voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds based on the age of the participants. There is no doubt that age is one of the most important and effective factors in second language acquisition. EFL learners whose age is ranging from 18 - 22 (Category A) have excellent performance in both voiced /ð/ and voiceless/θ/ sounds that is they have correctly articulated 83% of voiced and 82% of voiceless dental fricative sounds whereas the EFL learners whose age is ranging from 23 - 27 (Category B) have correctly articulated 17% of voiced /ð/ and 83% of voiceless /θ/ dental fricative sounds.

Comparing category A with B, it is evident that younger EFL learners (category A) progress more rapidly and fluently than older do. Category A produced /th/ sound both voiced/ð/ and voiceless /θ/ better than category B. Similar finding suggested by Cochrane (1980; in Tohidian, 2009:5) that when there is discussion of pronunciation in second language acquisition, adults do not always progress more rapidly than children, as he investigated language ability of 54 Japanese children and 24 adults to discriminate English thrill (R and L) the children outperformed the adults. Hence, the age of ELF learners in second language acquisition is one of the main factors influence on pronunciation.

The third category the data analyzed is the period of learners being exposed to English or actively studied English. Table 3 presents analysis of the participants based on their period of English study either at university or school.

/th/ sound correct and incorrect	1-3	Percentage	3-5	Percentage	5-7	Percentage	Grand Total
ð	2		31		38		251
Correct	77	33%	123	53%	32	14%	232
Incorrect	5	26%	8	42%	6	32%	19
θ	23		64		21		108
Correct	16	24%	39	59%	11	17%	66
Incorrect	7	16%	25	60%	10	24%	42
Grand Total	105		195		59		359



Table 3. Count of Period of English Study.

There are three categories of period of study (A = 1 – 3 years, B = 3 – 5 years, C = 5 – 7 years). It indicates accuracy of both voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds based on the participants’ period of study and the language background. Comparing the three categories of participants in terms of their period of study, for Category C, the learners who are exposed to English between 5 – 7 years are least accurate in production of /th/ sound both voiced and voiceless sound comparing to category A and B. It is inferred that recent learners were exposed to more authentic language through the use of new technologies (e.g., access to internet) or their language teachers, while learners with more than five years of English study had less access to authentic language, so they automatized immature /th/ sound in their long- term memory. Once a sound is processed inaccurately to learners’ mind, it would be very challenging to reshape the mind to produce the correct form or sound (Micheal & Myle, 2007).

However, the period of the study is one of the main factors in second language acquisition because the more EFL learners practice, the better they should articulate. As Walqui (2000) claims, the more academic knowledge and the more proficiency ELLs in their first language will aid in learning a second language. It is demonstrated that the Afghan EFL learners with 3 – 5 years period of study have correctly articulated 53% of voiced and 59% of voiceless dental fricative sounds while the ones with 1 – 3 have correctly articulated 33% of voiced and 24% of voiceless sounds. Hence, the period of study has directly affected second language acquisition especially when pronunciation is concerned. The fourth step the data analyzed is the participants’ proficiency, as shown in Table 4.

Level of Proficiency	Correct	Percentage	Incorrect	Percentage	Grand Total
ð	232		19		251
Intermediate	76	90%	8	10%	84
Pre-intermediate	86	99%	1	1%	87
Upper-intermediate	70	88%	10	13%	80
θ	66		42		108
Intermediate	25	69%	11	31%	36
Pre-intermediate	23	70%	10	30%	33
Upper-intermediate	18	46%	21	54%	39
Grand Total	298		61		359

Table 4. Count of Overall Proficiency.

There are three level of participants based on their proficiency (P = Pre-intermediate, I = Intermediate, and U = Upper-intermediate). The accuracy of both voiced and voiceless sounds is based on the level of proficiency of the participants. Compared to voiceless /th/ sound (90%, 99%, 88%) produced by all proficiency level respectively, voiced /th/ sound is more challenging (69%, 70%, 46%). The reasons why the participants surpassed voiceless /th/ sound is due to the fact that words, as the data shows, produced with voiced /th/ sound are very common (e.g., the, this, that) while words with voiceless /th/ sound are not salient (e.g., through, think).

Proficiency has always been a major factor in second language acquisition because it contains not only the oral language and literacy but also metalinguistic development, training in formal and academic use of language, and knowledge of rhetorical pattern and variations in genres and style that affect second language acquisition, (Aida Walqui, September 2000). The level of proficiency of Pre-intermediate is 99%, Intermediate is 90%, and Upper-intermediate is 87, 5%. Although the level of proficiency of Pre-intermediate seems higher than Upper- intermediate is, the Upper-intermediate Afghan EFL learners have got a higher rate of performance than Pre-intermediate because there are special and proper words such as; through, think, and mathematics

utilized by Upper-intermediate whereas the Pre- intermediate EFL learners have utilized very ordinary words such as; they, the, and think. Hence, proficiency level of Upper-intermediate is considerably higher than that of Pre-intermediate and Intermediate levels.

The next category on which the data analyzed is gender difference. As Table 5 presents, there are two gender variation in this research; males and females. It illustrates the accuracy of the both voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds based on the participants' gender.

Row Labels	Correct	Percentage	Incorrect	Percentage	Grand Total
Female	161		33		194
ð	123	93%	9	7%	132
θ	38	61%	24	39%	62
Male	137		28		165
ð	109	92%	10	8%	119
θ	28	61%	18	39%	46
Grand Total	298		61		359

Table 5. Count of Gender (Males and Females).

The researcher has analyzed the data according to gender impact on EFL learners to see if there are any important differences between males and females' performance. Although gender differences are sometimes a challenging factor in second language acquisition, there is no significant difference in this research because the findings show a slight difference. Females have articulated 93% of voiced dental fricative correctly and males have articulated 92% correctly, so there is only 1% difference in both genders' performance. Similarly, both genders have equally articulated voiceless dental fricative /θ/ sound and both groups have got 61% correct and 30% incorrect. BN Madu, LA Kasanga (Vol.3 2005: 442-452) has stated that there is no apparent gender different in second language acquisition. He investigated 128 EFL learners (64 girls and 64 boys) and the result of this study showed no significant difference as well. Hence, genders have no considerable impact on the articulation of English voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds in this research. Finally, the researcher further analyzed the data based on /θ/ position to see if there are any significant differences between the two /θ/ sounds (θ, ð).

Count of Proficiency	End position	Percentage	Initial position	Percentage	Middle position	Percentage	Grand Total
ð			221		30		251
C	n/a	n/a	204	88%	28	12%	232
N	n/a	n/a	17	89%	2	11%	19
θ	24		62		22		108
C	19	29%	28	42%	19	29%	66
N	5	12%	34	81%	3	7%	42
Grand Total							
Total	24		283		52		359

Table 6. Count of Overall Position of Voiced and Voiceless Fricatives (ð and θ).

It can occur in three positions – End position, Initial position, and Middle position. Table 6 shows accuracy in position of both voiced and voiceless fricatives. In this research, voiced dental fricative (ð) only occurs in two positions; initial and middle, but not end position.

Since voiced dental fricative has not occurred in the end position in this research, just middle and initial positions are compared here to show the differences between voiced and voiceless dental fricatives. Hence, based on the finding, the participants have articulated 88% of voiced dental fricative correctly in the initial



position while they have articulated 89% of this same sound incorrectly. The reason why this happened is the lack of end occurrence of this sound. On the contrary, the EFL learners have correctly performed 29% in end position, 42% in the initial position, and 29% in the middle position. Therefore, the EFL learners have rapidly used both voiced and voiceless dental fricatives in initial position rather than other two positions of these two /th/ sounds.

5. CONCLUSION

Although many researchers conducted researches on second language acquisition, they have focused on pronunciation very less while pronunciation is the main component of both linguistic competence and communication performance. This paper basically tended to necessarily look into main factors of both voiced and voiceless English dental fricative sounds to see which one of these sounds is more challenging for Afghan Dari EFL learners and why they cannot articulate these sounds correctly. The researcher has collected the required data through a proficiency test and an interview then analyzed the data accordingly. As a result, there are five main factors found in this research to address this problem relatively. For example, these factors are; age, gender, period of study, level of proficiency, and accuracy. Age has a considerable effect in second language acquisition especially in pronunciation because younger EFL learners had excellent performance in this research. Gender is said to be more effective factor, but in this research it had very trivial impact due to the fact that there was 1% difference between male and female performance. Period of study is another factor found effective in this paper because Afghan Dari EFL learner with 3 -5 years period of study performed 53% articulation correctly whereas these learners with 1 -3 years period of study performed 33% articulation correctly and finally proficiency and accuracy had also some effect on articulation of English /th/ digraph, but most importantly this research has found that voiceless dental fricative is more problematic than voiced one. The main reason for this mispronunciation is that there is no exact sound in native language and they substitute them with close equivalent sound in their native language.

To help Dari EFL learners to pronounce English dental fricative correctly, both Dari EFL learners and Teachers need to apply some strategies that already suggested by some other researchers, as reviewed in chapter two. For example, Dari EFL learners can often practice these sounds as other language skills. Peter (2000) states that EFL teachers should act as pronunciation coach. They can apply the Audio Articulation Method suggested by Demirzen (2007) to cure the wrong articulation

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