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İNGİLİZCEYİ YABANCI DİL OLARAK ÖĞRENEN TÜRK ÖĞRENCİLERİN KARŞILAŞTIKLARI TELAFFUZ SORUNLARI

PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS OF THE TURKISH EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study examines the causes of the problems in pronunciation that Turkish EFL learners experience as English language learners. The participants in this study were freshman students studying in the ELT Department of Dicle University. In total, 43 students participated in the study and their English proficiency levels ranged from intermediate to upper-intermediate. In order to collect data, ten class sessions of the Listening and Pronunciation course were recorded and after the transcription of the data, the mispronounced words were listed by the researcher. Finally, an interview was conducted with the students, to learn the causes of their mispronunciations. It was found that, among other factors, English spelling played an important role in the students' mispronunciations. Because of the irregularities, students are unsuccessful when they try to guess the correct pronunciation of words. Another reason of the mispronunciations is the students' tendencies to make overgeneralizations. The results of the study may be useful for teachers trying to teach English to Turkish learners.

Key Words: EFL learners, English spelling and pronunciation

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları telaffuz sorunlarının nedenlerini incelemektir. Çalışmaya katılanlar Dicle Üniversitesi, İngilizce Öğretmenliği Anabilim Dalı, birinci sınıf öğrencileridir. Çalışmaya İngilizce yeterlikleri orta ve üst-orta seviyeler arasında değişen toplam 43 öğrenci katılmıştır. Veri toplama amacıyla, araştırmacı tarafından Dinleme ve Telaffuz dersinin işlendiği 10 ders saati kaydedilmiştir. Daha sonra bu derslerde öğrenciler tarafından yanlış telaffuz edilen kelimelerin dökümü yapılmıştır. Son olarak, öğrencilerin yanlış telaffuzlarının nedenlerinin öğrenilmesi amacıyla kendileri ile görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Başka nedenlerin yanı sıra öğrencilerin yanlış telaffuzlarında İngilizce kelimelerin yazımının önemli bir rol oynadığı sonucuna varılmıştır. İngilizcenin yazımındaki düzensizlikler nedeniyle öğrenciler kelimelerin gerçek telaffuzunu tahmin etmekte zorlanmaktadır. Telaffuz hatalarının diğer bir nedeni de öğrencilerin aşırı genelleme yapma eğiliminde olmalarıdır. Bu çalışmanın sonuçlarının Türk öğrencilere İngilizce öğretmeye çalışan öğretmenler için faydalı olacağı düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: İngilizce öğretimi, İngilizcenin yazımı ve telaffuz

1. Introduction

The emphasis on pronunciation has varied in language teaching due to various factors, such as the needs of the students or the teaching method being used. Teachers who use the Audio-Lingual or Direct Method pay extra attention to pronunciation (Jones, 2002). On the other hand, in methods such as Communicative Language Teaching, students are expected to speak fluently, but complete accuracy is not among the main goals of instruction (Larsen-Freeman, 2002).

Students in Turkey generally learn English as a foreign language. The biggest difference between a **foreign language** and **second language** is that the latter is normally learnt in the country in which the target language is spoken, whereas the former is learnt in the home country of the learner (Stern, 1983). For example, a person learning English in Britain is learning it as a second language. In a country in which the target language is spoken, the learners find the opportunity to listen and imitate the words. However, in Turkey, it is not possible for the learners to listen to the foreign language effectively. In fact, the Turkish system of language teaching is based on reading. In a study performed by Bekleyen (2007), university students stated that, during their high school education, aural-oral skills were ignored, and their language education was primarily based on reading. That means most words are learnt by reading, instead of through listening. Since listening and speaking skills are not included in some language tests conducted in Turkey (for instance, the UDS, KPDS and YDS), teachers find it unnecessary to spend time on pronunciation (Bekleyen, 2007). However, as suggested by Crystal (1997), pronunciation requires extra attention, since it includes components such as stress and rhythm. Words that are pronounced incorrectly impede communication of intended meanings. In spite of this fact, pronunciation is sometimes neglected and undervalued, in favor of grammar and vocabulary. It is thought that students should make individual efforts to improve their pronunciation, and so class hours are spent for subjects deemed more valuable by teachers.

English orthography is known for its irregularity, which makes it difficult for the students to guess the correct pronunciation of words. Yule (1996) stated that there is no reliable correspondence between sound and symbol in the English writing system. Therefore, it is not possible to identify regularity within English spelling. In order to understand the causes of the irregularity of English orthography, it is necessary to examine the historical development of the English language. It is easier to understand the importance of linguistic history if it is kept in mind that written languages change more slowly than do spoken languages. English

orthography has been influenced by the introduction of words from different languages. English words have Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Greek origins (Henry, 1987). People who are knowledgeable about the rules of Latin and Greek can be more successful in guessing the pronunciations of English words with these origins. As stated by Henry, if someone knows that **ch** is pronounced as /k/ in Greek, it will be easy for him to guess that **chemistry** will be pronounced as /ˈkemɪstri/. Another language that has influenced English is French. After the invasion of England by the Norman French in 1066, French was accepted as the official language in England for the next 200 years (Yule, 1996). This resulted in the borrowing of many French words, which made English spelling more complicated, because –just like the other borrowed words- French words also kept their original spellings (Chrisman, 1996). The orthography of the English language has also been affected by the mistakes made by the first printers of the language; these mistakes often lingered until they became standard (New, 1985).

Today, many people agree that English orthography is complicated and deceiving. This fact, which affects everybody trying to learn English, is particularly disturbing for Turkish learners of English. According to Bayraktaroğlu (2009), "Turkish orthography is to a large extent phonemic, i.e., employing a one-to-one letter-sound correspondence". Turkish students who are used to a system like this feel confused when they try to read English words, because in English, a total of 44 phonemes are represented by 26 letters (p. 2).

In a study performed by Aro and Wimmer, the reading success levels of English primary school students were compared to students with similar educational backgrounds in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, France, Spain and Finland (2003). The results indicated that students whose native languages were those other than English were highly successful in guessing the correct pronunciation of pseudo-words in their native languages. Their languages' regularity, along with other orthographic differences, was shown as the cause of this success. This shows that even native English speakers may find it difficult to guess the correct pronunciation of written words.

English is a stress-timed language, which means that "English makes use of stressed syllables produced at roughly regular intervals of time and separated by unstressed syllables." In contrast, Turkish is a syllable-timed language. In Turkish, "the syllables are produced in a steady flow" (Crystal, 1997: 171). For that reason, some English words have two different pronunciations: the *weak* one is used when the word occurs within a sentence, and the *strong* form is used when the word is pronounced alone (Gimson, 1994). Words that have two

different pronunciations are generally words with grammatical functions such as those of auxiliaries, pronouns or prepositions. A list of these words is given in Appendix.

The purpose of the present study is to determine the most commonly mispronounced words by Turkish EFL learners and the estimated reasons for the errors. In this study, pronunciation errors are limited to the following: a- the omission of a sound, b- the attachment of a sound and c- the usage of a different sound instead of the required sound. Errors that stem from the physical characteristics of the speech organs have been excluded. For example, the sounds that do not exist in Turkish are difficult to pronounce for the learners (Bayraktaroğlu, 2009). However, this study does not focus on the learners' ability. Instead, it focuses on the errors that stem from inaccurate information about the pronunciation, or the errors that may easily be corrected after the awareness is attained.

The following research questions are sought in this study.

1- What are the words that are mispronounced by Turkish learners?

2- What do the students think about the causes of these errors?

2.   Method

2.1. Participants

According to the curriculum implemented by the Council of Higher Education of the Republic of Turkey, it was determined that a Listening and Pronunciation course should be offered in the first years of the English Language Teaching (ELT) Departments of the Education Faculties in Turkey. The participants of the present study consist of ELT students in a state university in Turkey, who take Listening and Pronunciation course. Freshman students of the department in the educational year 2008-2009 were chosen as participants. The number of the participants was 43, consisting of 11 males and 32 females.

2.2. Instruments

In the present study, the researcher used two instruments. First, in the educational year 2008-2009, ten classroom sessions were recorded by the teacher. Then the recordings were transcribed and the pronunciation errors made by the students were listed. Second, at the end of the year, an interview was conducted with the students. The purpose was to learn why the students pronounced the words incorrectly. In the interview, the students were asked which of the listed words they had pronounced incorrectly before they took the course and they were asked the estimated reasons of their mistakes.

3.   Findings

As mentioned before, the problematic words were obtained by the transcription of the classroom recordings. After the interviews with the students, the causes of their errors in pronunciation were determined. The remaining part of this section will summarize these causes. The correct pronunciations are based on the British English and Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2008) is used for reference.

3.1. Phonemes that do not exist in Turkish

During the evaluation, students frequently mentioned problems caused by phonemes that do not exist in Turkish. Phonemes such as /ɒ/, /æ/, /θ/, /ð/, /ŋ/, /w/ do not exist in the Turkish language. The students found them rather difficult to pronounce. However, these errors did not include the focus of the study and for that reason, the problems caused by the difficult pronunciation of these phonemes were excluded.

3.2. The borrowed words with French, Latin or Greek origin

The examples below show some of the words of French origin that are mispronounced by the students. As noted by the following interviewee:

*How can I guess that I should pronounce **vague** as* /veɪɡ/?

As this example suggests, it is very difficult for the learners to guess the correct pronunciations of borrowed words, some of which are listed below.

	Correct pronunciation	*Incorrect pronunciation
mosque	/mɒsk/	/mɒskjuː/
technique	/tekˈniːk/	/tekˈniːkjuː/
vague	/veɪɡ/	/veɡjuː/

3.3. Words that may be pronounced in two different ways

Some English words are pronounced in two different ways, according to their roles within different sentences. For instance, the same word may be used as a verb and adjective without a difference in the written form, but the pronunciation will be different according to grammatical function. In *a live performance* students pronounce *live* as */lɪv/ instead of /laɪv/. As can be seen in the following examples, students should pay attention to the meaning or role of the word in a sentence in order to pronounce the word correctly.

content (v, adj) /kən'tent/

content (n) /kɒn.tent/

graduate (v) /grædʒ.u.eɪt/

graduate (n) /grædʒ.u.ət/

live (v) /lɪv/

live (adj) /laɪv/

tear (v) /teə(r) /

tear (n1) /tɪə(r) /

tear (n2) /teə(r) /

moderate (v) /mɒd.(ə)r.eɪt/

moderate (n, adj) /mɒd.(ə)r.ət/

present (v) /prɪ'zent/

present (n, adj) /prez.ənt/

record (v) /rɪ'kɔːd/

record (n, adj) /rek.ɔːd/

subject (v) /səb'dʒekt/

subject (n) /sʌb.dʒekt/

3.4. Silent Letters

In the spelling of some English words, one finds silent letters, which should not be pronounced by the speaker. Some students have problems with these silent letters. In the examples below, the underlined letters are pronounced by the students, although they should be silent. Since the students are accustomed to a letter-phoneme correspondence, they tend to pronounce these letters. Many students indicated that they had pronounced *guide* as */gwaɪd/ before taking the course.

answer /ɑːnt.sə(r)/

awkward /ɔː.kwəd/

building /bɪl.dɪŋ/

calm /kɑːm/

chalk /tʃɔːk/

climb /klaɪm/

comb /kəʊm/

debt /det/

doubt /daʊt/

drawer /drɔː (r) /

dumb /dʌm/

guard /gɑːd/

guest /gest/

guide /gaɪd/

guilt /gɪlt/

half /hɑːf/

law /lɔː/

receipt /rɪ'siːt/

scene /siːn/

scent /sent/

scissors /sɪz.əz/

soften /sɒf.(ə)n/

sword /sɔːd/

talk /tɔːk/

walk /wɔːk/

3.5. Two letters are pronounced as two different phonemes

As stated by a number of students, Turkish learners tend to pronounce each letter as a phoneme. As the following examples indicate, this tendency causes incorrect pronunciations, because in English, sometimes two letters correspond to just one phoneme. For example, the word **cause** is pronounced like **cows** by some students.

	Correct pronunciation	*Incorrect pronunciation
audience	/ɔː.di.ənts/	/aʊ.di.əns/
audio	/ɔː.di.əʊ/	/aʊdi.əʊ/
author	/ɔː.θə(r)/	/aʊθə(r)/
autumn	/ɔː.təm/	/aʊtəm/
cause	/kɔːz/	/kaʊz/
caution	/kɔː.ʃ(ə)n/	/kaʊʃ(ə)n/
pause	/pɔːz/	/paʊz/

The opposite of the situation given above can be seen in the following examples. Students, seeing only one letter in the examples below, will pronounce only one vowel, although they should pronounce a diphthong, /eɪ/. As a result, it is not easy for the listener to differentiate between **paper** and **pepper** or **taste** and **test**.

	Correct pronunciation	*Incorrect pronunciation
ancient	/eɪn.ʃ(ə)nt/	/en.ʃ(ə)nt/
capable	/keɪ.pə.bļ /	/ke.pəbļ/
change	/tʃeɪndʒ/	/tʃendʒ/
favourite	/feɪ.v(ə)r.ɪt/	/fevɔːr.ɪt/
flavour	/fleɪ.və(r) /	/fle.v ɔː(r)/
hatred	/heɪ.trɪd/	/hetrɪd/
nation	/neɪ.ʃən/	/neʃən/
native	/neɪ.tɪv/	/netɪv/
nature	/neɪ.tʃə(r)/	/netʃə(r)/
paper	/peɪ.pə(r)/	/pepə(r)/
taste	/teɪst/	/test/

3.6. Two words that share the same spelling

The students stated that, the irregularities in English spelling system caused some errors. The following examples exhibit similar problems.

	Correct pronunciation	*Incorrect pronunciation
face	/feɪs/	
surface	/sɜː.fɪs/	/sɜː.feɪs/
mine	/maɪn/	
determine	/dɪ'tɜː.mɪn/	/dɪ'tɜː.maɪn/
examine	/ɪg'zæm.ɪn/	/eg'zæmaɪn/
table	/teɪ.bļ /	
comfortable	/kʌmp.fə.tə.bļ /	/kʌm.fə.teɪbļ /
mate	/meɪt/	
climate	/klaɪ.mət/	/klɪ.meɪt/
able	/eɪbļ /	
capable	/keɪ.pə.bļ /	/kə.peɪbļ /

As can be seen above, the pronunciation of one word may influence another one. For example, students who learn a word such as **face** pronounce all words that contain this syllable similarly. The word **surface,** for example, was pronounced as /sɜː.feɪs/ by almost all of the participants in this study.

3.7. Words pronounced differently after derivation

According to the students, another cause of the errors was derived words. For example, after -er is added to the word *teach*, the pronunciation of the root word does not change much. The word /tiːtʃ/ becomes /tiːtʃə(r/. There is not a big difference between the two words except the addition of the last suffix. However, in the examples given below, there is an important difference between words which share a derivation. Generally, students find it quite difficult to guess the correct pronunciation of this kind of words.

	Correct pronunciation	*Incorrect pronunciation
analyse	/æn.(ə)l.aɪz/	
analysis	/ə'næl.ə.sɪs/	/æn.(ə)l.aɪsɪs/
resign	/rɪ'zaɪn/	
resignation	/rez.ɪg'neɪ.ʃ(ə) n/	/rɪ'zaɪneɪ.ʃ(ə)n/
sign	/saɪn/	
signature	/sɪg.nɪ.tʃə(r) /	/saɪnɪ.tʃə(r)/
repeat	/rɪ'piːt/	
repetition	/rep.ɪ'tɪʃ.(ə) n/	/rɪ'piːtɪʃ.(ə)n/
decision	/dɪ'sɪʒ.ən/	
decisive	/dɪ'saɪ.sɪv/	/dɪsɪ.sɪv/
refer	/rɪ'fɜː(r)/	
reference	/ref.(ə)r.(ə)nts/	/rɪfɜːr.ənts/

3.8. Weak and strong pronunciation of words

Some students mentioned the strong and weak pronunciations of the same word (Appendix). They were not accustomed to pronouncing a word in two different ways. These students stated that they learned the strong pronunciation of words in their English lessons as reflected by the following interviewee:

In high school, our teachers pronounced all the auxiliaries and prepositions strongly. When they spoke, I could hear these words clearly. I learned to pronounce these words in the same way, but now I see that this is not correct.

3.9. Other factors

• Some letter combinations symbolize different phonemes when they are used in different words. The letter combination **ea** provide a good example of this. As can be seen below, in some words they correspond to **/iː/**.

clean /kliːn/	treat /triːt/	breathe /briːð/
feature /fiː.tʃə (r)/	meat /miːt/	mean /miːn/

The participants of the study generally make an overgeneralization, and so they tend to pronounce **ea** as **/iː/**. The word **mean**, for example, is pronounced as /miːn/. A large number of students pronounce **meant** similarly, as */miːnt/. The words below were listed among mispronounced words by the participants in this study. They stated that overgeneralization was the main cause of these mispronunciations.

	Correct pronunciation	*Incorrect pronunciation
pear	/peə(r)/	/piː(r)/
bear	/beə(r) /	/biː(r)/
swear	/sweə(r) /	/swiː(r)/
wear	/weə(r) /	/wiː(r)/
dealt	/delt/	/diːlt/
meant	/ment/	/miːnt/
threat	/θret/	/θriːt/
deaf	/def/	/diːf/
heaven	/hev.(ə)n/	/hiːv.(ə)n/
jealous	/dʒel.əs/	/ʒiːl.əs/
measure	/meʒ.ə(r)/	/miːʒ.ə(r)/
ready	/red.i/	/riːd.i/
sweat	/swet/	/swiːt/
beard	/bɪəd/	/beərd/
great	/greɪt/	/griːt/

• Students may sometimes mispronounce words which contain **ou.** Some students pronounce the letters in exactly the same way that they are pronounced in Turkish *(e.g. /sɔʊθ/ instead of /saʊθ/). Others make overgeneralizations: for instance, because the word *south* is pronounced as /saʊθ/, they pronounce *youth* as */jaʊθ/.

	Correct pronunciation	*Incorrect pronunciation
south	/saʊθ/	/sɔʊθ/
without	/wɪˈðaʊt/	/wɪˈðɔːt/
wound (n)	/wuːnd/	/waʊnd/
youth	/juːθ/	/jaʊθ/
country	/kʌn.tri/	/kaʊn.tri/

• The word **cut** is pronounced as /kʌt/. On the other hand, **curl** is pronounced as /kɜːl/. Seeing examples like these, students tend to see letter **u** corresponding to the phonemes /ʌ/ or /ɜː/. As a result of this, the following words are pronounced incorrectly. For example, almost all students pronounce the word **bury** as */bɜːr.i/.

	Correct pronunciation	*Incorrect pronunciation
bury	/ber.i/	/bɜːr.i/
butcher	/bʊtʃ.ə(r)/	/bʌtʃ.ə(r)/
cushion	/kʊʃ.(ə)n/	/kʌʃ.(ə)n/
industry	/ɪn.də.stri/	/ɪn.dʌ.stri/
hurt	/hɜːt/	/hʌrt/

• Because of its usage in Turkish, when students see the letter **o**, they tend to pronounce it like the English phoneme /ɔː/. However, most of the time, the letter corresponds to a weak /ə/ phoneme. A large number of students pronounce the word **history** as */hɪs.tɔːr.i/ instead of pronouncing it as /hɪs.t(ə)r.i/. Similar examples are shown below.

	Correct pronunciation	*Incorrect pronunciation
consider	/kənˈsɪd.ə(r)/	/kɔːnˈsɪd.ə(r)/
develop	/dɪˈvel.əp/	/dɪˈvelɔːp/
error	/er.ə(r)/	/er.ɔːr/
history	/hɪs.t(ə)r.i/	/hɪs.tɔːr.i/
innocent	/ɪn.ə.sənt/	/ɪnɔːsənt/
purpose	/pɜː.pəs/	/pɜː.pɔːz/

• In Turkish orthography, each time the letter **j** is used, it corresponds to the sound /ʒ/. Since the following words are written with **j**, students read the letter as /ʒ/, in the same way it is pronounced in Turkish, although these words require the pronunciation of the phoneme /dʒ/.

	Correct pronunciation	*Incorrect pronunciation
Japan	/dʒə'pæn/	/ʒe'pən/
Jealous	/dʒel.əs/	/ʒɪːl.əs/
Jewel	/dʒuː.(ə)l/	/ʒuː.w(ə)l/
Joke	/dʒəʊk/	/ʒəʊk/
Justice	/dʒʌs.tɪs/	/ʒʌs.tɪs/

4.   Discussion

The results of this study show that students try to make generalizations when they pronounce English words. Since it is not possible to listen to the pronunciation of every word -or it is found unnecessary to do so- students try to guess the pronunciation of words by looking at the spelling. As shown in this study, English spelling system makes it very difficult for learners to pronounce the words correctly by relying on spelling alone. Sometimes they are successful, but generally they make a large number of errors because they over-generalize. At times, this is the result of internal irregularities in English, whereas some overgeneralization results from the differences between Turkish and English orthography. Bayraktaroğlu (2009) calls this orthographic interference.

In Turkey, language tests do not contain oral-aural components. This makes it unnecessary to teach pronunciation, for language teachers' own success is determined by the success of their students on language tests (Bekleyen, 2007). In their turn, students do not try to improve their pronunciation because they think it is unnecessary. The first thing that should be done is to make both the teachers and the students aware of the importance of pronunciation in learning a language, because incorrect pronunciation may lead to unintelligible speech (Hebert, 2002). Additionally, pronunciation problems may also affect listening performance in the classroom, since students who do not know the correct pronunciation of words are unable to recognize them in listening activities. As suggested by Field (2003), sometimes learners recognize words while reading, but not while listening to the spoken language. This produces comprehension problems in listening.

The findings of the study indicated that the weak and strong form of some words in English might also cause problems for the learners. This difficulty is confirmed by the answers given by the students who participated in this study. Turkish students are not accustomed to a language in which a word may have two different pronunciations. As stated earlier, English is a stress-timed language, whereas, Turkish is syllable-timed. If the students ignore the

alternative pronunciations of some words in English, and pronounce all the words strongly, their pronunciation sounds unnatural. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to give extra exercises that focus on the differences between weak and strong pronunciation. Field (2003) states that generally, language teachers prefer teaching the weak forms of the words listed in the Appendix. However, the results of this study show that in Turkey, the situation is the opposite: that is, most of the students claimed that their teachers taught the strong pronunciation of these words, especially for auxiliaries. The result of this instruction is that students pronounce these words unnaturally.

Every language teacher in Turkey may notice some of the pronunciation errors presented in this study. The participants in this study ranged from intermediate to upper-intermediate levels in language learning. In spite of this, they made a large number of pronunciation mistakes. One solution may be to deal with the causes of these problems in class. Teachers could present some of the examples given in this study in class and make students aware of the specific problems that hinder their progress in pronunciation.

5.   Limitations of this study

This study focuses on problems that are rooted in mainly the spelling system of the English language, as experienced by Turkish EFL learners. Other pronunciation problems are not addressed here, but may be examined in detail in future studies. The results of this study are limited to the students of the ELT Department in Diyarbakır. Different results might be found in primary schools, high schools or private institutions. However, the findings might be helpful for all language teachers and learners, since it is likely that other learners have similar problems.

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APPENDIX

English Words that have Strong and Weak Pronunciations (Gimson, 1994)

a	the	do
am	them	does
an	there	for
and	to	from
any	us	had
are	was	has
as	we	have
at	were	he
be	who	her
been	will	him
but	would	his
can	you	I
could	your	me
saint	some	must
shall	than	-n't
she	that	of
sir	our	