

EFL Students' Challenges in Pronouncing Inflectional Suffixes: A Case Study of Socotri Students of English

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Article information	Abstract
DOI : 10.25077/jds.1.2.102-110.2024 Correspondence : sainamer520@gmail.com	This study aims to measure the proficiency level of Socotri EFL students in pronunciation of inflectional suffixes, /d/ and /s/. Quantitative data were collected through a test from a group of 24 English language students from the first and second levels at the College of Education, Humanities and Applied Sciences in Socotra. The study results showed that the students scored accepted in the pronunciation test with 61.92%. Results also showed that Socotri students struggle with pronunciation, especially in the suffix /d/ more than /s/. The study also found differences in students' scoring in the tests in which male students scored (M=23.37) higher than female students (M=20.12) and second level (M=23.72) scored higher than first level (M=21.07), but they were not significant. The study recommends EFL teachers to focus on the practical aspect rather than the theoretical aspect while teaching pronunciation and speaking and listening skills. It is also important to choose teachers who are fluent in English language teaching.
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INTRODUCTION

Students face problems in learning English as a foreign language. Such a problem has been discussed all over the world. Among the many problems is pronunciation (Ahmed & Qasem, 2019; Bin-Hady & Hazaea, 2020; Saputra et al., 2020). To begin a global context, a study conducted by Saputra et al. (2020) shed light on the difficulties faced by Indonesian learners in pronouncing the present tense suffixes of verbs and the plural form of nouns. With the lesson in class, as emphasized by Gilakjani (2011), good pronunciation increases students' self-confidence because they are more able to participate in class discussions and interact with their classmates.

Pronunciation is one of the basic components of the English language and can be an obstacle for EFL learners when learning English (Gilakjani, 2011). Fraser (2000) asserted that the ability to speak English includes several sub-skills, including vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics, and that pronunciation is among the most important language systems. With good pronunciation, the speaker is clear despite other errors. Poor pronunciation may make it very difficult for the speaker to understand.

Problems that students face in learning English include using the mother tongue while learning the language. This is what we observed while teaching in schools. The teacher uses the mother tongue to translate vocabulary or sentences instead of using English as a medium of instruction or real-life examples, which helps the student understand the meaning without the interference of the mother tongue. Furthermore, the problem in pronunciation may be a result of the late teaching of English (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). This is the case in Yemen, where students do not study English till the 7th class as learning the subject. It is more correct to learn the language from the kindergarten stage, which gives the student a large vocabulary and makes dealing with the English language easier in the future in graduate studies. Also, the four language skills of the English language, especially listening and speaking, are not taught. Although textbooks contain lessons for listening and speaking, teachers neglect these two skills. When

the student arrives at the university, he faces problems in the listening subject.

Socotri students in the English language, faced difficulty in pronouncing some sounds such as [ð] and [θ] because these sounds do not exist in our mother tongue. This causes our mother tongue to interfere while we learn the English language. This creates a problem and difficulty for us in pronunciation. Previous studies found that Arab students find it difficult to pronounce because of their mother tongue. Farrah (2020) investigated pronunciation problems among students majoring in Palestinian English. Bin-Hady (2016) explored the teaching of pronunciation for Arab learners of English and suggested the use of Gilberts' prosody pyramid. Abd Elwahab (2020) analyzed the effect of local Arabic dialects on learning English language pronunciation. Among the pronunciation difficulties in Arab EFL students is suffix pronunciation.

Suffixes are a group of letters that are inserted in the ending of a word to form a new word (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2017). Suffixes are Changder (2024)" a letter or a group of letters that are added after root words to change the meaning of the word" (Changder, 2024, p. 50) Suffixes are of two types: the first is derivative: (forming a new word with a unique meaning), and the second is morphological: the word changes but its basic meaning does not change (plays) (Pittner, 2015). In our study we focus in the study on inflectional suffixes |d| and |s|. According to Mead (1993), inflection suffix changes the grammatical properties of a word within its syntactic category. For example, when we add the stuff -s to the word play to get [plays] the meaning of the word doesn't change; it just changes from singular to plural, also the same is with the stuff. Furthermore, when we add the suffix -d to the verb watch the meaning of the verbs still as it was just the aspect of the verb become past. The suffixes d and s have many pronunciations for example the stuff [d] is pronounced as /t/ when the verb ends with any of those letters (x, c, ss, ch, sh, p, k, f, gh), like asked, the d is pronounced /t/. The suffix [d] is pronounced as /d/ when the verb ends with any of those letters (l, n, r, g, v, s, z, b, m) like appeared. Finally, the suffix d is pronounced as /id/ when the verb ends with any of these two letters (t, d) like completed. Mohammed (2020) found that university students have different pronunciation problems about morphemic endings. The study showed that students believe that every regular past tense verb is pronounced as a /d/.

Al-Jarf (2022) conducted a study at Saudi Arabia to find out what types of mistakes Saudi students make and the strategies they use in producing the plural form in English. The results showed that the most difficult combinations are words ending in -s or -es. Mohammed (2020) explored the ability of Saudi university students to pronounce the -ed endings. The results showcased that these undergraduate students had many pronunciation problems: Cognitive problems around the ends of morphemes; they believed every regular time action in the past ends with -ed pronounced as /d/. Finally, Masroor et al. (2022) investigated the common related to pronunciation of consonants among Yemeni students. The results revealed that there is not much difference between male and female students in the pronunciation of the consonants.

During the preliminary research, the researchers found that students had trouble with pronunciation. For example, the word boxes. Most Socotri students pronounce the word as if no suffix had been added. Also, they pronounced the /ed/ in the verb watched as /d/ instead of /t/. Ibrahim (2024) recommended that students be taught the three differences in pronouncing the final -d. Bin Hadi (2016) also pointed out in his study that applying a top-down approach to teaching pronunciation begins by revealing the pronunciation. This problem is caused by the lack of interaction and participation among students. As this study contextualizes the Yemeni students, it focuses on some studies conducted in Yemen. Ahmed (2018) studied the challenges of teaching English pronunciation at basic and high schools. Furthermore, Ahmed and Qasem (2019) investigated the problems of teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in South Yemen, at Lahj Governorate. Bin-Hady and Hazaea (2020) explored the impact of flipped classrooms on Socotri EFL students' achievement in pronunciation.

Although some studies have investigated English education in Socotra, none of these has studied

the same target problem; namely, measuring how well EFL students at schools the region can pronounce morphological suffixes. This study focuses on the extent of pronunciation proficiency in English inflectional suffixes among Socotri EFL students by investigating the following two questions: Which English inflectional suffixes are most problematic for these learners? Are male or female Socotri EFL students at a higher level of education better equipped in terms of pronunciation proficiency? Through interrogating these questions, this study aims to figure out issues Socotri learners face in pronouncing English inflectional suffixes. The results are anticipated to provide useful implications for educators and linguists and would provide focused pedagogical strategies in teaching English pronunciation effectively among Socotri EFL students. This will consider the broader implications for language acquisition theory and pedagogical white practices in multilingual, multicultural settings ultimately strengthening English teaching on Socotra.

METHODS

Research design

This study used a quantitative design. The study was conducted in Socotra on students at two levels: the first university to the second level, at the English department, College of Education, Humanities and Applied Sciences, Socotra. The study took place in the second semester of 2024.

Participants

All first-level and second-level students were selected for the study. The participants studied the language for six years in basic education. They also studied English for one or two years at college. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years, most of whom were from Socotra. Most participants were male, 16 students and 8 females, most of whom studied (in institutes) and had experience in the English language. 13 students were selected from the first level and 11 from the second level.

Instrument

We checked the pronunciation of students using a pronunciation test. The test was prepared by researchers based on previous studies. We then sent the test to the two university professors in the college to check its validity (Appendix 1). Then we work on the professors' suggestions to modify the test. We demonstrated the test items on five students excluded from the study. Before starting to demonstrate the test, we got permission from the Dean of the Socotra College of Education, the vice dean, and the head of administration agreed to implement the test at the university (Appendix 2). Data were collected for five days, from May 8, 2024, to May 13. To check the reliability of the measure we used to evaluate students' pronunciation, we applied inter-rater reliability; two independent raters evaluated the pronunciation of 5 students, and we obtained a similarity percentage of (0.8). Among the research ethics, we emphasized that the students' names should not be shared in the research to preserve the students' confidentiality. After we informed them, the students agreed to share their answers in the research. The grades we used were 2 points for the correct pronunciation, the grade 1 for the close to correct, and the incorrect ones were given 0. To check the differences between the pronunciation of male and female students at the first and second levels, the researchers used the Independent Samples Test.

RESULTS

Proficiency scores of Socotri EFL students pronounce English inflectional suffixes

According to the Table 1, the students scored a mean score of 22.29 out of 36. This score is equal to 61.92%, which is considered accepted according to the University evaluation system (Hadramout University, 2020). The students' results varied, as some students' grades were less than the average (18). Some students got 12-17, from a full grade of 36, and some students' grades were more than the average, 18-22, and the rest of the students' grades were considered good, except for the students who obtained a perfect grade of 36.

Table1. Total Socotri students' scores in pronunciation

Students No	Total	Students No	Total
1	24	13	20
2	21	14	19
3	27	15	18
4	17	16	25
5	25	17	28
6	24	18	24
7	12	19	19
8	24	20	29
9	15	21	36
10	24	22	24
11	27	23	18
12	14	24	21
Average			22.29
Percentage			61.92

Table 2. Students' scores in pronouncing each word

Word	Correct	Near Correct	Wrong	Rank
Fixed	8	7	9	3
Asked	10	4	9	3
Dressed	7	10	7	5
Answered	9	9	6	6
Arrived	11	5	8	4
Completed	16	5	3	8
Consisted	11	3	10	2
Appeared	4	8	11	1
Corrected	12	2	10	2
Cabs	21	0	3	8
Cats	22	0	2	9
Cuffs	19	2	3	8
Beds	6	14	6	6
Eggs	3	17	4	7
Backs	2	16	7	5
Boys	10	9	3	8
Watched	21	0	3	8
Boxes	19	2	3	8

As shown in Table 2, it is clear that students face more difficulty in pronouncing the suffixes /d/ than the suffixes /s/, as the correct answers were that words containing the suffix s ranked first and ranked last among words that contain a smaller number of mispronunciations. In the word. The number of correct answers was 22 for cats, 21 for cabs, and 19 for cuffs. On the other hand, words containing the suffix d present difficulty in pronunciation for students, and the word *appeared* ranks first in the word containing many mispronunciations. According to Table 2, most students face a problem in pronouncing the word *appeared*, as the number of incorrect pronunciations of this word was 11. In second place are the two words: *consisted* and *corrected*, then come the two words *fixed* and *asked*, which were moderately difficult, followed by the word *arrived*, and then the two words *Dressed* and *Beds*. This was less difficult than the previous words, leading to the words that are considered the easiest to pronounce for students, which came in the last and lowest place, and they are *watched*, *boxes*, *cats*, *eggs*, *completed*, *cabs*, *cuffs* and *boys*.

Gender difference in Socotri EFL students' pronunciation

Table 3. The difference in Socotri pronunciation according to gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male	16	23.37	5.5			
Female	8	20.12	4.5	1.427	22	.168

Table 3 shows that the number of female students was 8 and the number of males was 16. The females got 20.4 and the males got 23.37. Although there are differences between males and females for the sake of males, they are not significant and the Sig. value was 0.16. Table 3. Table 3 shows that there are no statistically significant differences between the average scores of the study sample on the difficulties faced by the learners in pronunciation of the right, due to the gender variable (gender). (0.168) It is greater than the level of significance specified at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$), and this conclusion indicates that the gender variable does not affect the difficulties faced by the learners in the pronunciation of the right, meaning that males and females do not differ in the pronunciation difficulties of the inflectional /s/ and /d/.

Table 4. The difference in first and second level in pronouncing /s/ and /d/

Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
First level	13	21.07	5.05		22	.237
Second level	11	23.72	5.62	-1.216-		

Table 4 shows that the number of students at the first level was 13 students and received 21.07 out of 36 while the number of students at the second level was 12 students received 23.72 and 36. Despite the presence of differences between the two levels, Table 4 shows that there are no statistically significant differences between the average scores of the study sample on the difficulties faced by the learners in pronunciation of the right, due to the variable level, as the value of the T test (-1.216-) reached at the level of significance. (0.237) and it is greater than the level of significance specified at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$), and this conclusion indicates that the variable of the academic level does not affect the difficulties faced by the Socotra learners in the pronunciation of the later, meaning that the learners in the first and second level have the same difficulties that the Socotri EFL learners face in the pronunciation of the sounds /s/ and /d/.

DISCUSSION

The study explored three dimensions concerning the pronunciation of [s] and [d] inflections. Firstly, the study reported that Socotri EFL students' pronunciation level was accepted (61.92%). According to the distribution of the annual fair in all faculties of Yemeni Universities, the grade is acceptable from 50% to less than 65%. Their achievement would have improved if they were taught using a learner-centered approach. For example, Bin-Hadi (2022) found that whenever Socotri students were taught using a flipped classroom, they achieved high in the examination.

This study also showed that students have difficulty pronouncing suffixes. The study reported that Socotri EFL students had more trouble pronouncing the suffix [d] than the suffix [s]. The test results showed that the word *appeared* to rank first in the number of incorrect pronunciations, with 11 responses. The students could not distinguish between the pronunciation of the suffix [d], which is pronounced as [t], [d], or [id]. This result is consistent with the study of Ahmed (2021) on the pronunciation of the present tense among students of Northern Border University, Saudi Arabia. This study revealed that university students have different pronunciation problems with morphemic endings. Students believe that every past tense verb ending with d is pronounced as a [d] sound. While the number of Socotri students who correctly pronounced the suffix "s" was more than 20 responses, the students did not face much difficulty pronouncing this suffix. This result contradicts the study on difficulties in learning plural formation in

English by students of the College of English as a Foreign Language. Al-Jarf's (2022) study indicated that the most difficult plural forms to master are words ending in -s or -es. This contradiction can be justified in that our study relied on the pronunciation of words and did not depend on the actual use of suffixes. In conclusion, the results showed no significant differences between males and females in pronunciation. These results are consistent with the previous study investigating common pronunciation errors related to gender or level of education. There should have been a difference between first-level students and second-level students because second-level students studied more courses, but the result showed that there was no difference between them, and this could be due to poor education. These results agree with Masroor et al. (2022), who reported that no statistically significant differences were found between male and female students pronouncing consonants at Yemeni universities.

The findings suggest that English language teachers should focus on practical exercises rather than theoretical instruction, especially those who teach pronunciation to Socotri students of English as a foreign language (L2). In the College of Education and Human Sciences, the department head needs to take courses that are within a student's specialty available from freshman year through senior year instead of making those we have a subsidiary. Another challenge is that it is important to hire well-skilled teachers, especially for language pronunciation.

CONCLUSION

The current study delved into the challenges that Socotri students of English as a foreign language face in pronouncing suffixes. The study found that the students achieved acceptable levels in their pronunciation of words with suffixes added. The study found that the students faced more pronunciation problems in pronouncing [d] than pronouncing [s]. Finally, the study did not report significant differences in the pronunciation of Socotri students to the [s] and [d] attributed to their gender nor to their level of study. The study suggests that English language teachers apply teaching methods and techniques to help students develop their pronunciation. Teachers should also provide phonetic materials at the beginning of the semester to ensure students' pronunciation of suffixes and words and to train students to understand phonemes and focus on sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue. Language teachers will likely need some training in pronunciation. Especially since education is very weak in Socotra. Our research results are important for teachers to develop their teaching methods to improve students' English language pronunciation.

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Appendix 1

Dear referees

We are undergraduate students; we are doing a research project which aims to check the pronunciation challenge tha Socotri students face in pronouncing English suffixes specifict which ended with "d"and "t" .Our research also aims to check which suffixes make the most problem for the students. You are requested to check the following words of the test and whether they are suitable to collect data for the purpose of our study.

Fixed	
Asked	Caps
Dressed	Cats
Answered	Caffs
Appeared	Bads
Arrived	Eggs
Completed	Backs
Competed	Boys
Corrected	Watches
	Boxes

1Islam nammour website*

https://www.islamnammour.com/2018/06/ed_4.html?m=1

2Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. (2011). An Introduction to Language. Canada: Cengage Learning.

