

## **Pronunciation Difficulties Among EFL Learners: The Case of Undergraduate Students at Mascara University**

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### **Abstract**

Pronunciation is crucial in foreign language learning, aiding learners in both speech production and comprehension. However, EFL students often struggle with consonant and vowel pronunciation. This study investigates these pronunciation errors among first-year B.A. students at the University of Mustapha-Stambouli Mascara during the 2023-2024 academic year. Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews with seven teachers, a questionnaire answered by 101 English language students and 23 translation students, and a pronunciation test of 80 English words. The findings reveal difficulties with silent sounds and specific consonants such as [t], [ŋ], [z], [s], [ʒ], [tʃ], [θ], [ð], and [k], as well as vowels like [ʌ], [ə], [ʊə], [ɪə], [eə], [eɪə], and [əʊə]. Additionally, errors were found in long vowel pronunciations, including [i:], [ɔ:], and [a:]. These difficulties stem from lack of practice, mother tongue interference, French language influence, and mismatched spelling and pronunciation. Demotivation, being taught by less qualified teachers in middle and high school, and challenging classroom environments also contribute. Although pronunciation is taught in phonetics courses, the study recommends incorporating technology and laboratory resources to improve pronunciation skills. It also suggests including phonetics in the translation curriculum, emphasizing the importance of speaking in language learning.

*Keywords:* pronunciation, consonants, vowels, sounds, EFL, phonetics

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## Introduction

English has become an instrument for communication and education. It is the official language of 59 countries and the unofficial lingua franca of dozens (Mikanowski, 2018). Although the official language in Algeria is Arabic, English has begun to play a subsequent role in education. English is considered to be a foreign language (EFL) in Algerian schools. Therefore, students from 11 years of age study English in middle school. French is offered, however, to pupils from the age of nine in primary school. More recently, in 2022, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune considered an amendment to the educational programme by offering English to pupils from the age of nine (Rouaba, 2022).

Despite the President's attempt to strengthen the English language in the education program, students face difficulties in pronunciation, as they do not practice English outside the classroom. This pronunciation obstacle appears among students in English at the university level. Particularly among first-year English B.A. students at the University of Mustapha Stambouli Mascara, they find it hard to pronounce words in Received Pronunciation (RP).

Pronunciation is a significant aspect of foreign language learning. According to Yakout and Amel (2019), "Though grammar and vocabulary are very important elements in any language, they can be useless if the speaker cannot pronounce accurately" (p. 220).

Teaching pronunciation depends on two skills: the flow of speech, and the production of spoken language or fluency (Broughton et al., 2003). Acquiring these skills is based on constant practice of listening and speaking. In practising listening, students will listen to understand and imitate (Cruttenden, 2014, p. 5), but in terms of speaking, the proper use of the vocal organs to articulate sounds can help learners acquire the habit of perfecting their articulation of English words. Here, teachers can also help students acquire reasonable pronunciation by concentrating on sounds, showing the precise articulation of the sounds in the mouth, and making students aware of where words should be stressed (Harmer, 2001, p. 183).

On this subject, Broughton et al. (2003) pointed out that "Sounds used in a language are therefore distinctive so that words can be distinguished from each other when heard just as can be distinguished when written" (51). Hence, the significance of teaching pronunciation lies in achieving easy English that is not confusing to the listener, helping learners feel comfortable when speaking English, developing positive self-awareness as a non-native speaker of English, and monitoring strategies to help learners achieve correct pronunciation of the words in oral communication inside and outside the classroom (Yakout & Amel, 2019, p. 220).

This study focuses on tackling the obstacles to the pronunciation of English sounds among EFL learners. It also highlights the factors behind the difficulties encountered by students in pronunciation. The study, thus, seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Why do the students face pronunciation difficulties?
2. What are the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching pronunciation?

## Literature Review

While reviewing the literature on EFL learners' difficulties in the pronunciation of English sounds, this literature has focused on pronunciation problems, highlighting the factors of

difficulties in the pronunciation of English sounds among Arab learners (for example, AbdAlgane & Idris, 2020; Abdulwahid, 2023; Broughton et al., 2003; O'Connor, 1998). Abdulwahid (2023) was more concerned with examining the pronunciation of consonants and vowels among EFL learners by conducting interviews with teachers and questionnaires answered by students in the Department of English and Translation in Cihan University-Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq. The study concluded that in both departments, students had difficulties in pronouncing consonants that consist of two phonemes, such as /f/ and /tʃ/, /z/, and /dʒ/. As such, the students transcribed the word “jazz” as /zæz/ instead of /dʒæz/.

The findings of Jahara and Abdelrady (2021) are similar. In applying periodic recording assessment using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra LMS to test the pronunciation skills of thirty-two B. A. undergraduates at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia, Jahara and Abdelrady (2021) found that 50% of the research participants did not learn to differentiate between /p/ and /b/, as the former is not available in Arabic, which could be a significant barrier to Arab learners in distinguishing between voiced bilabial and voiceless bilabial sounds. Vowels also confused participants. The authors suggest that some participants were confused between /ɪ/ and /e/ and between /ɪ/ and /i:/. However, the authors pointed out that most participants failed to distinguish between /ʌ/, /e/, and /ɒ/ (Jahara & Abdelrady, 2021, p. 205). The pronunciation difficulties of vowels are also linked to their inconsistency of the English vowels. Students lack knowledge of the different pronunciations of English vowels.

In addition, the study by AbdAlgane and Idris (2020) assigns the pronunciation problems to the influence of spelling on pronunciation, which poses a major problem to EFL learners. Their study tested the English pronunciations of 100 students. Approximately 58% of participants strongly agreed that they faced difficulties in identifying silent letters in words. As such, students who did not learn how to pronounce the knee, knight, knife, know, and knot would pronounce them with /k/ (AbdAlgane & Idris, 2020, p. 197).

There is limited literature in the Algerian context and, with an odd exception (for example, Berrabah & Benabed, 2021; Ghounane, 2018; Yakout & Amel, 2019), in examining the pronunciation problems and the reasons behind those pronunciation problems among the first-year university EFL learners in Algeria. Therefore, to bridge this gap, this study examines pronunciation problems among EFL learners of first-year English B.A. at the University of Mustapha Stambouli-Mascara. It explores the factors behind the difficulties in achieving native-like pronunciation of English sounds. It also seeks to tackle the issue from the lecturer's perspective to explore the challenges encountered in teaching phonetics.

## **Methodology**

### **Data Collection**

This study utilized a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches for data collection. The qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with seven teachers—three specializing in phonetics for first-year English students, one in phonology, and three in Arabic-English and English-Arabic translation for first-year translation students. These interviews were designed to explore teaching methods, pronunciation proficiencies, and the challenges faced by phonetics instructors. On the quantitative side, data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 101 first-year English language students and 23 first-year translation students, all aged 18-25, with Arabic as their first language and

French as their second. Additionally, students participated in a pronunciation test of over 80 English words, with 19 translation students agreeing to this test.

## **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed to extract themes related to teaching experiences, pronunciation proficiency, and instructional challenges. The teachers' insights provided a deeper understanding of the difficulties students face in mastering English pronunciation. The quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using tables and graphs to illustrate students' opinions on their pronunciation abilities and the obstacles they encounter in speaking correctly. The pronunciation test results were examined to identify specific phonetic errors, which further enriched the analysis by highlighting particular areas of difficulty in English pronunciation among the students.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Results of the Semi-structured Interviews**

During the interviews, the teachers claimed that they were sometimes satisfied with their students' pronunciations during the lesson. Accordingly, the teachers believed that the students had to practice speaking in English and the English words' pronunciations. They also provided other reasons for the pronunciation errors among their students, such as the interference of the mother tongue and mismatching spelling with pronunciation. Those reasons are further discussed below in this study.

When the teachers were asked if they focused on pronouncing the words correctly, five teachers answered that they attempted to pronounce the words correctly during the lessons, as they saw that learning phonetics was essential for English pronunciation proficiencies. They also asserted that they corrected the students if they heard pronunciation errors. Only one teacher claimed he did not focus on English word pronunciations and students' fluency. He added that he sometimes corrected the students' pronunciation errors during the lecture, although he believed that the English pronunciation proficiencies were important for the students' careers.

Further, the teachers of phonetics explained the problems they were facing in teaching phonetics. The three teachers mentioned that the combination of phonetics and linguistics presented an obstacle to providing sufficient teaching hours for learning pronunciation of English sounds, as 1h30mn would be provided to teaching phonetics every week of each semester instead of 3 hours. One teacher explained that large classes also formed an obstacle in teaching phonetics, as he couldn't allow all students to practice the pronunciation of English words and hear the pronunciation errors they make.

In terms of teaching consonants and vowels, three teachers of phonetics saw that consonant sounds were easy to teach to the students, whereas vowels, including monophthongs, diphthongs, triphthongs, short and long vowels, were all plain. One teacher saw that consonant sounds were plain, while all vowels were challenging to students (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Teachers' Opinion on Consonant and Vowel Sounds' Difficulty Level*

Sounds	easy	plain	difficult	Total number of teachers of phonetics
Consonants	3	1		4
monophthongs		3	1	4
diphthongs		3	1	4
Short vowels		3	1	4
Long vowels		3	1	4

As already mentioned, the students of translation do not study phonetics. Therefore, the teachers shared their opinions about this issue. The teachers of phonetics and translation believe that translation students should learn phonetics for their pronunciation proficiencies in their careers. They also added that translation is related to the language's four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Speaking skills are strictly related to phonetics. According to a teacher of translation,

Students of translation are supposed to work in the field of interpreting, which relies, among others, on phonetics and pronunciation. There are many situations where the lack of phonetic skills leads to serious mistakes, especially when [translating speeches] from Arabic into English. (Anonymous, 2024)

The teacher also believes that the correct pronunciation of the words would deliver the message accurately to the listener. He explained,

The comprehension of a message largely depends on the ability to decipher what the speaker is saying; hence, vocabulary and lexis are not the only elements that exist but the way the speaker pronounces the utterance too. (Anonymous, 2024)

Overall, the semi-structured interviews highlighted three key elements. Firstly, the teachers found that the lack of practice, mismatching spelling and pronunciation, and the interference of the mother tongue were problems encountered by the EFL students. Secondly, the combination of phonetics and linguistics and large classes were perceived as challenges to the teachers of phonetics to deliver the lessons. Finally, the teachers recommend phonetics syllabus to the students of translation. Those students learn the translation from Arabic to English and from English to Arabic; therefore, they should develop an understanding of the English language fourth skill of speaking.

## Results of the Questionnaire

Table 2. shows that the answers to Question 1, "Are you satisfied with your pronunciation?" reveal that 47.50% of the students of the English Language and 52.1% of the students of translation believe that they are sometimes satisfied with their pronunciation, compared to those who claim that they are not happy with their pronunciation proficiencies. Meanwhile, question 2, "Do you think that you need to improve your English pronunciation?" indicates that 80.1% of English language students and 95.6% of translation students believe they must improve their English pronunciation (see Table 3 below). In Question 3, "Do you think that learning phonetics is important for your English proficiencies?" 81% of students of English and 69.50% of Translation students think that learning phonetics is significant for their

English Language proficiencies, compared to 5.9% among the students of English and 13% among the students of Translation who were not sure if learning phonetics would help them improve their English pronunciation (See Table 4 below).

**Table 2**

*Students' Satisfaction Towards Their English Pronunciation*

Question 1	Yes	No	Sometimes	Not sure
English students	27%	15.80%	47.50%	8.90%
Translation students	13%	13%	52.10%	21.70%

**Table 3**

*Students' Opinion on Improving Their Pronunciation Proficiencies*

Question 2	Yes	No	Sometimes	Not sure
English students	80.10%	1.90%	11.80%	5.90%
Translation students	95.60%	0%	4.30%	0%

**Table 4**

*The Importance of Learning Phonetics*

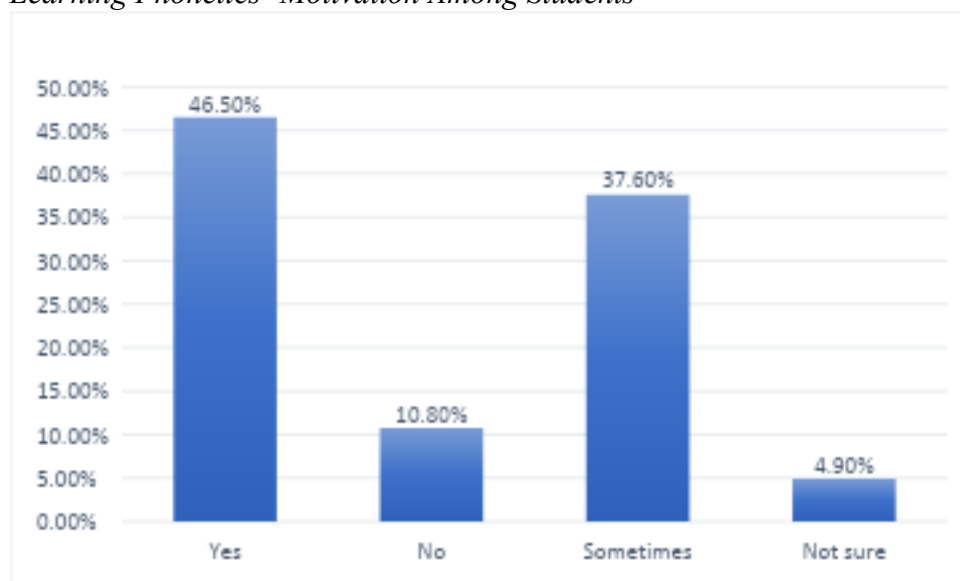
Question 3	Yes	No	Sometimes	Not sure
English students	81%	4.90%	7.90%	5.90%
Translation students	69.50%	8.60%	8.60%	13%

It is worth noting that the fourth question of the questionnaire deals with the motivation for learning phonetics. This question is only asked to the students of English, as the students of Translation do not study phonetics. Therefore, Figure 1. Shows that 46.5% of the students of English claim that they feel motivated when they study phonetics, compared to 37.60% among the students who are sometimes motivated during the lectures.

Question 4: Do you feel motivated when learning phonetics?

**Figure 1**

*Learning Phonetics' Motivation Among Students*



Further, the questionnaire examined the exposure to the English language and imitation of how native speakers of English pronounce the words. These aspects reflect Question 5, “Do you get exposed to English?” and Question 6, “Do you fear that your colleagues will mock you if you imitate a native speaker?” For question 5, 60.3% of English students and 65.2% of translation students claim that they get exposed to English through listening to music and watching movies in English (see Table 5). As for Question 6, students’ answers to the question clarify that about 47.5% of the students of English and 52.7% of the students of Translation claim that they do not fear if they get mocked by their colleagues if they imitate a native speaker when speaking English. (see Table 6 below).

**Table 5**

*Students’ Exposure to English Language in Movies and Music*

Question 5	Yes	No	Sometimes	Not sure
English students	60.30%	3.90%	26.70%	0%
Translation students	65.20%	4.30%	30.40%	0%

**Table 6**

*Students’ Fear of Using a Native-Like Pronunciation in the Classroom*

Question 6	Yes	No	Sometimes	Not sure
English students	17.80%	47.50%	26.70%	7.90%
Translation students	8.60%	52.10%	34.70%	4.30%

Other questions explored whether students check the pronunciation of the words they learn. This aspect reflects Question 7 “When you learn new words, do you check the correct pronunciation of those words?” 55.4% and 47.8% of English students and the students of translation, respectively, check the pronunciation of English words they learn. 35.6% of English students and 43.4% of translation students claim they sometimes examine the pronunciation of the words they learn (see Table 7 below). Question 8 explored the significance of pronunciation perceived by the students through the following question: Do you think that English pronunciation proficiencies are significant for your career? Table 8 shows that 97% of English students and 95% of translation students believe that English language pronunciation proficiencies are essential for their future careers.

**Table 7**

*Students’ Examination to Make Certain That Words They Learn Are Correctly Pronounced*

Question 7	Yes	No	Sometimes	Not sure
English students	55.40%	5.90%	35.60%	2.90%
Translation students	47.80%	8.60%	43.40%	0%

**Table 8**

*The Importance of English Pronunciation Proficiencies in the Students’ Career*

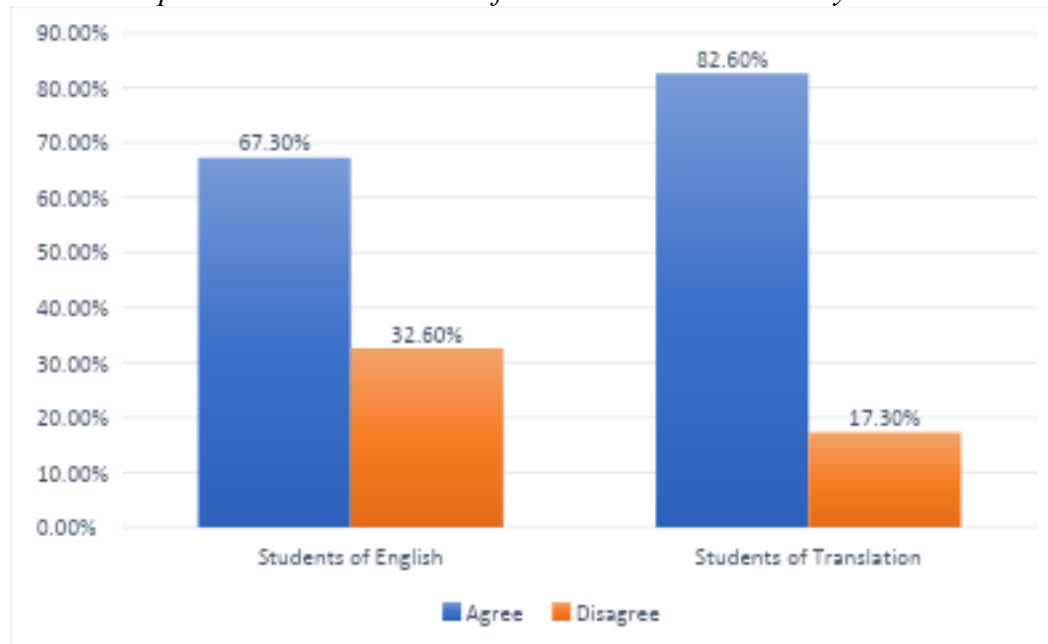
Question 8	Yes	No	Sometimes	Not sure
English students	97%	0%	1.90%	0.90%
Translation students	95.60%	0%	0%	4.30%

The last two questions reflected the students' influence by the pronunciation of the secondary school teachers and the reasons they considered behind their pronunciation difficulty. Question 9 included: Do you agree with the statement: “I have been taught by less qualified teachers in the middle and secondary schools who have pronunciation problems”. Figure 2

shows that about 67.3% of the English students and 82.6% of the translation students agree with the statement (see Figure 2 below).

**Figure 2**

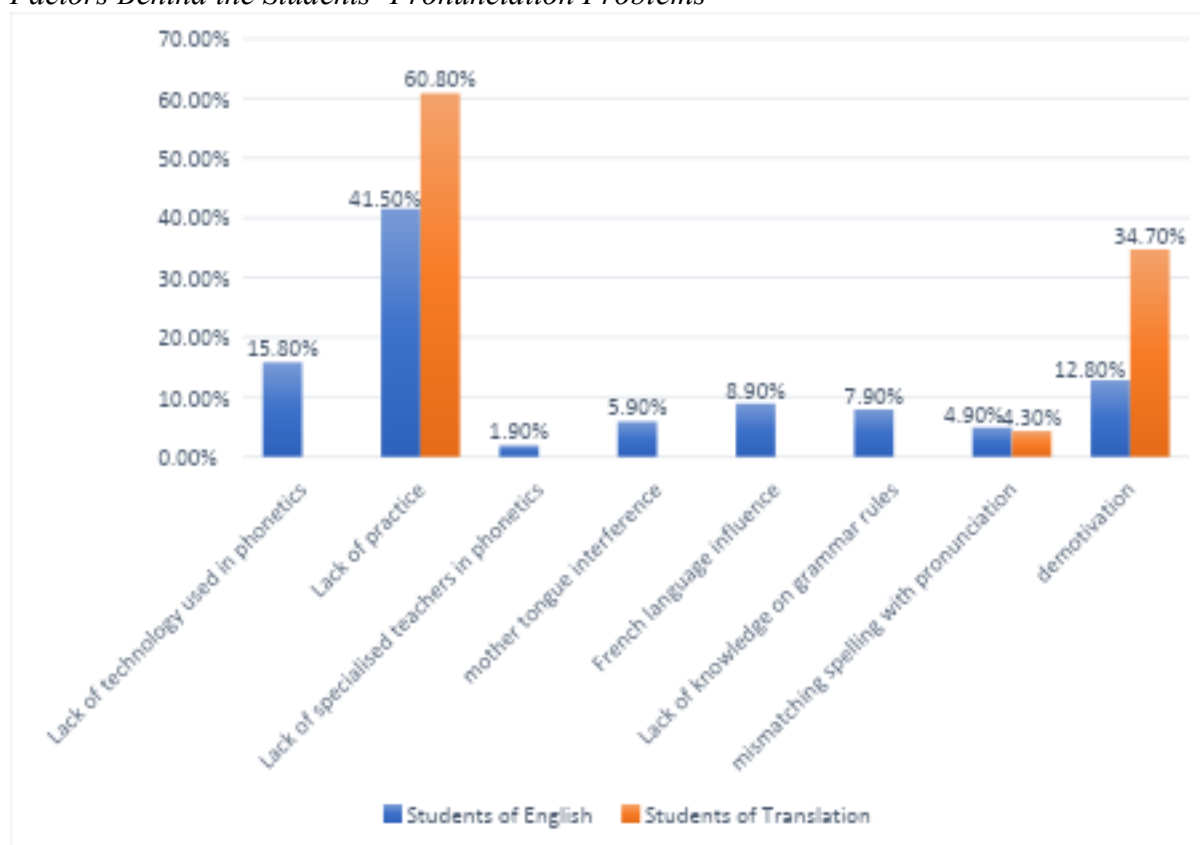
*Students' Opinion on Their Teacher of the Middle and Secondary Schools' Pronunciation*



Question 10 mentioned: What are the problems you are facing in improving your pronunciation? Figure 3 shows the reasons behind the pronunciation problems among the students. English students clarified that lack of practice (41.5%), lack of technology used in phonetics by the teachers (15.8%) and demotivation (12.8%) were among the reasons that influenced their pronunciation proficiencies. Meanwhile, the students of translation claimed that lack of practice (60.8%), demotivation (34.7%) and mismatching spelling with pronunciation (4.3%) were the factors behind their pronunciation difficulties (see Figure 3 below).



**Figure 3**  
*Factors Behind the Students' Pronunciation Problems*



### Results of the Pronunciation Test

The pronunciation test includes all the students who answered the questionnaire. The results are shown in tables to examine the correct and incorrect pronunciation of selected words with considerable pronunciation errors. The incorrect pronunciation section of each table shows the most common errors pronounced by English language and translation students.

Table 9. shows the words with silent sounds. The students failed to pronounce most of the words, such as pseudo, tomb, womb, limb, and hymn, except for “knock”, as 71 (70.2%) students of English and 7 (36.8%) students of translation succeeded to identify the silent /k/ in the word (see Table 9). Apart from “knock”, the students pronounced all the sounds in each word without recognising the silent sounds in the words (see Table 9).

**Table 9***The Pronunciation of the Words With Silent Sounds*

Words	Correct pronunciation	English students	Translation students	Incorrect pronunciation	English students	Translation students
Fasten	/fɑ:sən/	11	0	/fæsten/	90	19
Hymn	/hɪm/	4	0	/hɪmn/	97	19
Knock	/nɒk/	71	12	/knɒk/	30	7
Limb	/lɪm/	3	0	/lɪmb/	98	19
Moisten	/mɔɪ.sən/	10	0	/mɔɪstən/	91	19
Plumber	/plʌm.ər/	3	0	/plɪmbər/	98	19
Pseudo	/sju:.dəʊ/	3	0	/psɛɪdɒ/	98	19
Subtle	/sʌt.əl/	8	2	/sʌbtəl/	93	17
Tomb	/tu:m/	2	0	/tɒmb/	99	19
Womb	/wu:m/	0	0	/wɒmb/	101	19

While the students encountered difficulty in recognizing the silent sounds in the words mentioned, the pronunciation of consonant sounds also revealed that students made errors in pronouncing t, ɪ, z, s, ʒ, tʃ, θ, ð, and k in the words shown in Table 10 below. For example, [θ] and [k] were pronounced as [t] and [tʃ] in “thumb”, “alchemy”, and “anchor”. The students also made errors in pronouncing [k] in “archives” and “toothache” and [tʃ] in “chips” and “chew”. Both sounds were pronounced as [ʃ] in the words. Further, the students pronounced [ɪ] as [n] in “anchor”, “tongue” and “young”.

The Table also includes errors in pronouncing [t] and [ð]. The students pronounced [t] in “Thames” and “Thailand” and [ð] in “soothe” and “bathe” as [θ]. In terms of the pronunciation of s, z and ʒ, the students failed to recognise those sounds in “Oasis”, “Closet”, “Leisure”, and “Sabotage”. The students were confused between [s] and [z] in “Oasis” and “Closet” (see Table 10). Meanwhile, students pronounced [s] in “Leisure” as [z] and [ʒ] in “Sabotage” as [dʒ].

**Table 10***The Pronunciation of Consonant Sounds*

Words	Correct pronunciation	English students	Translation students	Incorrect pronunciation	English students	Translation students
Alchemy	/æɪ.kə.mi/	43	4	/æɪ. tʃə.mi/	58	15
Anchor	/æŋ.kər/	34	0	/æntʃər/	67	19
Archives	/ɑː.kɑɪv	5	0	/ærʃiːv/	96	19
Bathe	/beɪð/	1	0	/beɪθ/	100	19
Chew	/tʃuː/	7	1	/ʃəʊ/	94	18
Chips	/tʃɪps/	72	7	/ʃɪps/	29	12
Closet	/klɒz.ɪt/	16	0	/kləʊst/	84	19
Join	/dʒɔɪn/	94	17	/ʒɔɪn/	7	2
Leisure	/leɪz.ər/	21	2	/lɪzər/	81	17
Oasis	/əʊ ɛɪ.sɪs/	7	0	/aʊzɪs/	91	19
Sabotage	/sæb.ə.tɑːʒ/	9	0	/sæbuːteɪdʒ/	92	19
Soothe	/suːð/	5	0	/suːθ/	96	19
Thailand	/taɪ.lænd/	63	14	/θaɪlænd/	38	5
Thames	/temz/	18	1	/θeɪmz/	83	18
Tongue	/tʌŋ/	0	0	/tɒŋg/	101	19
Toothache	/tuːθ.eɪk/	28	0	/tuːtæʃ/	73	19
Thumb	/θʌm/	4	0	/tʌmb/	97	19
Young	/jʌŋ/	0	3	/jɒŋg/	101	16

Table 11 also shows that the English language and translation students faced difficulties in recognising the pronunciation of vowel sounds and articulating them. Table 11 highlights the errors found in the pronunciation test of the monophthongs, diphthongs, triphthongs, and long and short vowels. For example, the students pronounced [ʌ] and [uː] in “above” and “chew” as [əʊ]. The students also pronounced [ʌ] as [ɒ] in “Tongue” and “Young”. Further, the diphthongs were pronounced as monophthongs in “cure”, “lure”, “open”, and “sofa”. The diphthongs [ʊə] in “cure” and “lure”, and [əʊ] in “open” and “sofa” were pronounced as [uː]. In addition, [ɪə] in “clear” was pronounced as [iː], and [eə] in “stair” was pronounced as [æ]. Also, the students could not identify the shwa vowel, [ə], in “doctor” and “upon”.

Although most of the students did not face difficulty in pronouncing the triphthongs [ɔɪə], [aʊə], [aɪə] in “loyal”, “hour”, “fire”, many students did not pronounce the triphthongs [eɪə] and [əʊə] correctly in “lower” and “layer”. The students pronounced [eɪə] and [əʊə] in “lower” and “layer” as [aʊə] and [aɪə].

In terms of the short and long vowels, the students could not identify long vowels in “leave”, “law”, “door”, “car”, and “laugh”. The students pronounced [i:] as [ɪ] in “leave”, [ɔ:] as [ɒ] in “Law” and “door”, and [a:] as [æ] in “car” and “laugh”.

**Table 11***The Pronunciation of Vowels*

Words	Correct pronunciation	English students	Translation students	Incorrect pronunciation	English students	Translation students
Above	/əbʌv/	3	1	/əbəʊv/	98	18
Car	/kɑ:r /	0	0	/kær/	101	19
chew	/tʃu:/	7	1	/fəʊ/	94	18
confirm	/kən'fɜ:m/	15	1	/kɒnfirm/	86	18
cure	/kjʊər/	0	0	/kju:r/	101	19
Classroom	/klɑ:s.rʊm/	101	19	/	0	0
Clear	/kliər/	36	2	/kli:r/	65	17
Crowd	/kraʊd/	84	11	/krəʊd/	16	8
David	/deɪ.vɪd/	90	17	/dævɪd/	11	2
Doctor	/dɒk.tər/	3	5	/dɒktər/	98	14
Door	/dɔ:r/	38	5	/dɒr/	63	14
Doubt	/daʊt/	5	0	/dɒbt/	96	19
Draught	/dra:ft/	6	0	/draʊt/	95	19
Father	/fɑ:.ðər/	29	11	/fæðər/	72	8
Feather	/feð.ər/	16	0	/fi:ðər/	85	19
Fire	/faɪər/	91	15	/fɪr/	10	4
Found	/faʊnd/	89	18	/fɒnd/	12	1
Fragile	/frædʒ.aɪl/	2	0	/fræʒɪl/	99	19
George	/dʒɔ:dʒ/	33	6	/dʒɪɒrdʒ/	68	13
Hour	/aʊər/	92	14	/həʊər/	9	5
Join	/dʒɔɪn/	94	17	/ʒɔɪn/	7	2
Laugh	/lɑ:f/	16	1	/læf/	85	18
Law	/lɔ:/	9	2	/laʊ/-/lɒ/	92	17
Layer	/leɪ.ər/	53	0	/laɪər/	48	19

Leave	/li:v/	53	7	/lɪv/	48	12
Lower	/ləʊ.ər/	61	7	/laʊər/	40	12
Loyal	/ləɪ.əl/	99	17	/lə:jə/	2	2
Lure	/lʊər/	0	0	/lu:r/	101	19
Nuclear	/nju:.klɪər/	8	0	/nyklɪər/	93	19
Open	/əʊ.pən/	38	3	/u:pen/	63	16
Sofa	/səʊ.fə/	10	4	/sɒfæ/	91	15
Speck	/spek/	26	0	/spɪk/	75	19
Stairs	/steər/	57	9	/stær/	43	10
Tongue	/tʌŋ/	0	0	/tɒŋg/	101	19
Upon	/əpən/	18	1	/ju:pen/- /æpen/	83	18
Young	/jʌŋ/	0	3	/jɒŋg/	101	16

## Discussion

As seen, the students of the first-year English Language and the students of translation encountered difficulties in recognising the correct sounds in the words given to them in the pronunciation test. The students could not pronounce accurately the consonant sounds (t, ɲ, z, s, ʒ, tʃ, θ, ð, k), and vowel sounds. The students found difficulty in pronouncing the monophthongs (ʌ, u: and ə), long vowels (a:, ɔ: and i:), diphthongs (ʊə, əʊ, ɪə, eə) and triphthongs (eɪə, əʊə). Several reasons led to these pronunciation errors, such as lack of practice, the interference of the mother tongue, the interference of the French Language and mismatching spelling and pronunciation. Let's explore each one of them separately.

### Lack of Practice

Although the students claim that they get exposed to the English language, they believe that the lack of speaking English influences their pronunciation proficiencies (see Figure 3 above). Similarly, from the semi-structured interviews, the teachers see that the student's lack of practice posed a major reason behind pronunciation difficulty among the students, as it would affect the knowledge about the pronunciation of English words. Thus, the lack of time to practice pronunciation is also a reason leading instructors not to pay enough attention to English pronunciation (Harmer, 2001).

### Interference of the Mother Tongue

Another reason behind the pronunciation difficulty among students is the interference of the mother tongue. According to AbdAlgane and Idris (2020), "When speaking the target language, learners tend to rely on their native language [1] structures to produce a response" (p 196). They added that the native language (L1) and the target language (L2) have significantly different structures that lead to high frequency of errors to occur in L2, therefore, indicating an interference of L1 on L2 (AbdAlgane & Idris, 2020). This aspect is

present in the pronunciation of “thumb”. The students replaced [θ] with [t]; this sound does not exist in the dialect of Mascara. The word “join” serves as another example, as a few students replaced the initial sound [dʒ] with [ʒ] and pronounced the word as /ʒɔɪn/, as [dʒ] does not exist in their dialect. Thus, the use of a different sound corresponding to English sounds will contribute to performing a foreign accent (O’Connor, 1998).

### **Interference of the French Language**

The interference of the French Language appeared significantly in several words pronounced by the students in the pronunciation test. Perhaps the words “nuclear”, “fragile”, “chips”, and “archives” serve as examples of the interference of the French Language in the pronunciation of English among Algerian EFL learners. As such, “nuclear” /nju:.klɪər/ was pronounced as /nyklɪər/. The students replaced /ju:/ with /y/, a sound found in the French Language. Further, the students pronounced “fragile” /frædʒ.aɪl/ as /fræʒɪl/, as it is a borrowed word from French and not a native English word. The word “chips” /tʃɪps/ was pronounced as /ʃɪps/ and “archives” /ɑ:.kɑrvz/ as /ærʃɪ:v/. The students used French pronunciation for both words.

### **Mismatching Spelling With Pronunciation**

Spelling and pronunciation are two different aspects that represent an obstacle for EFL learners to pronounce English words correctly. According to O’Connor (1998), “In ordinary English spelling it is not always easy to know what sounds the letters stand for” (p. 7). The students confused between spelling and pronunciation during the pronunciation of the words with silent sounds, such as “fasten”, “plumber”, “hymn”, “subtle”, and “Moisten” (see Table 9 above). Also, students could not pronounce the consonant [k] in “toothache” and “Anchor” as they pronounced [k] as [ʃ] and [tʃ]. The former was pronounced as /tu:tæʃ/, and the latter as /æntʃər/. “Thames”, “leisure” and “bathe” represent other examples of students' mispronunciation of sounds, as they pronounced “Thames” as /θeɪmz/ instead of /temz/, and “leisure” /leʒ.ər/ as /lɪzər/, “bathe” /beɪð/ as /beɪθ/.

While the problem of mismatching spelling with pronunciation marked the pronunciation of consonant sounds among first-year EFL learners, vowels also reflected pronunciation errors among the students. For example, “sofa” /səʊ.fə/ was pronounced as /sɒfæ/, “George” /dʒɔ:dʒ/ as /dʒɔ:rdʒ/, “cure” /kjʊər/ as /kju:r/, “confirm” /kən fɜ:m/ as /kɒnfirm/, “layer” /ˈleɪ.ər/ as /laɪər/, “draught” /dra:ft/ as /draʊt/, and “tomb” /tu:m/ as /tɒmb/, “pseudo” /sju:.dəʊ/ pronounced as /psɛɪdɒ/, “spek” /spek/ as /spɪk/, and “lure” /lʊər/ as /lu:r/. The students attempt to pronounce every single letter in the word without considering that the spelt letters sound differently in the spoken form. According to AbdAlgene and Idris (2020), “Any time the student meets such words he will be confused to pronounce them correctly he just guesses the pronunciation by looking at the spelling of the word unless he has previous background” (p. 197).

### **Other Reasons**

Although the reasons mentioned above explain the pronunciation difficulty among the first-year EFL learners at the University of Mustapha Stambouli-Mascara, other reasons cited by the students in the questionnaire included being taught by less qualified teachers, demotivation and stress. The students of English and the students of translation agree that they were taught by less qualified teachers in middle and high school who themselves have

pronunciation problems (see Figure 2 above). Abdulwahid (2023) stated that, “The basic reason behind mispronunciation is caused by the teacher” (p. 27).

Students of the English language (12.80%) and translation students (34.70%) believe that demotivation is among the reasons for the pronunciation difficulties they face when learning the English language (See Figure 3 above). Demotivation can influence the student’s lack of practice and willingness to learn the English language pronunciation rules and check the pronunciation of words. Thus, students focus on grades and getting the certificate rather than improving their pronunciation. According to Abdulwahid (2023), “[Students] might not have self-esteem encourages them to develop their pronunciation since their main goal behind attending the university is to get a certificate” (p. 27).

Further, the students of English Language and translation students believe that they are sometimes stressed when speaking English in the classrooms in front of their colleagues and teachers. Students in large-scale classes experience noise and cannot get involved in the lessons. The teachers would not be able to listen to each student’s pronunciation errors and correct them.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this research highlights the pronunciation difficulties among EFL learners at the University of Mustapha Stambouli- Mascara Algeria, exploring the pronunciation errors and factors behind those errors among first-year EFL learners, specifically among English language and translation students. The students made errors in consonants, vowels and silent sounds due to the lack of practice, interference with the mother tongue, interference with the French language, mismatching spelling with pronunciation, and lack of knowledge related to vocabulary and grammar. Other reasons for this include demotivation and large and noisy classrooms.

Further, for the students to avoid pronunciation errors and for the teachers to improve their teaching experience, this study recommends that lectures on phonetics could include small groups of students to enhance their motivation and engage each student in the learning process. Phonetics also should be taught in laboratories to allow the teachers to use technology, such as providing each student with headphones to listen carefully to the audio on word pronunciation. Moreover, although phonetics is a sub-discipline of linguistics, this study recommends that phonetics and linguistics should be thought of separately. The students need sufficient time to understand the articulation of sounds.

Finally, this study recommends that the students of translation need phonetics in their curriculum. Translation students learn languages such as Arabic, French, and English. It is a significant part of learning language skills, which includes speaking. Therefore, pronunciation proficiencies play a fundamental part in understanding and delivering the translated message in the field of interpretation.

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