

Does Arabic Sound System Make Arabs' Accent Heavier in English?

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Introduction:

English language has been taught in Iraq since the British army mandated Iraq to attack the Ottoman Empire during World War I and after in 1918. English is taught in schools as a foreign language because it is a language of education, a language of references for research and other studies. Knowing English, students will obtain better jobs apposed to those who only know Arabic. Nevertheless, the Iraqi Arab learners of English have many weak points in producing English as grammar and as sounds. One of the weaknesses that this study deals with is students' pronunciation, an accent that is



as a spoken Language in the Iraqi schools.

Mosul University, English Department Class 1967

heavy to the ears of the English native speakers. As a teacher of English for 21 years in Duhok, I have observed efforts been made by a group of high linguists at the Iraqi Developing English Teaching Institute (IDELTI) while teaching English as a foreign language from 1970-1991 to improve the pronunciation issue and the strategies of teaching English

The background of this article:

Sponsored by the British Council and staff from the American embassy, IDELTI coordinated with the Ministry of Education to run regular courses for teachers of English language (1977). All the three (IDELTI, British Council, and Education Ministry all together designed new courses to teach pronunciation as content within the corpus of the textbooks.

To lessen learners' English accent, the staff and administration put special focus on the problems of pronunciation of 5th-10th graders in the primary and intermediate schools, taking into consideration the fact that their teachers were non-natives of English language. Using the available teachers of English to carry out the mission all over the country, the course and the staff practiced a lot of leniency in applying the process to let it go smoothly nationwide. They took into consideration the distance between the two sound systems: Arabic as the students' first language versus English as the foreign language target language in Iraq.

Despite the efforts and the funds spent on those programs, the pronunciation problem remained unimproved due to the teachers' ability as non-native speakers NNS

and the leniency practiced in English pronunciation in classes. Using their Arabic system to speak English, Arab students as learners of English tend to have an accent, which is sometimes too heavy to be clearly understood.

Why do I write this article now?

I want to raise the issue of phonology as part of the teaching process to help learners be aware of what is similar, slightly similar, and dissimilar between Iraqi sound system and the English. By doing so, I may come up with an analysis to tackle phonemes of both languages as experienced in the Iraqi schools for more than 12 years. The Iraqi textbooks were designed in a way that teachers learn from the textbooks before they go to the class and teach a language, English that is not their mother tongue. Can we do something similar in Defense Language Institute DLI for the students?

What are the problems that I discuss?

I start my analysis with segments: consonants, vowels, and diphthongs. Then I will touch supra segmental issues: clusters, stress, and intonation.

During phonological analysis, I try my best to find suggestions in which they may help learners who are in this case Arabic language learning English in the schools of Iraq.

Analysis

Consonants:

For consonants in the alphabet languages, voicing is one of the distinctive features of the phoneme in the Arabic language. In this way, we as learners distinguish /b/, which is voiced, from /p/, which is voiceless, though both are bilabial stops. In fact the voiceless bilabial stop does not exist in Standard Arabic language of the school, an obvious phenomenon of using an allophone of /b/ to produce the /p/ is common by Arabic speakers of English all over pan Arab countries.

/p/ versus /b/

	play	point	pump	stop
English natives:	/plei/	/point/	/p ^h mp/	/stap/ or /o/
Arabic NNs	/blei/	/boint/	/pomp/	/stob/

By voicing the stop, English learners as a foreign language tend mix words and add confusion to their meanings. Words with different phonemes convey different meanings because of this misplacement.

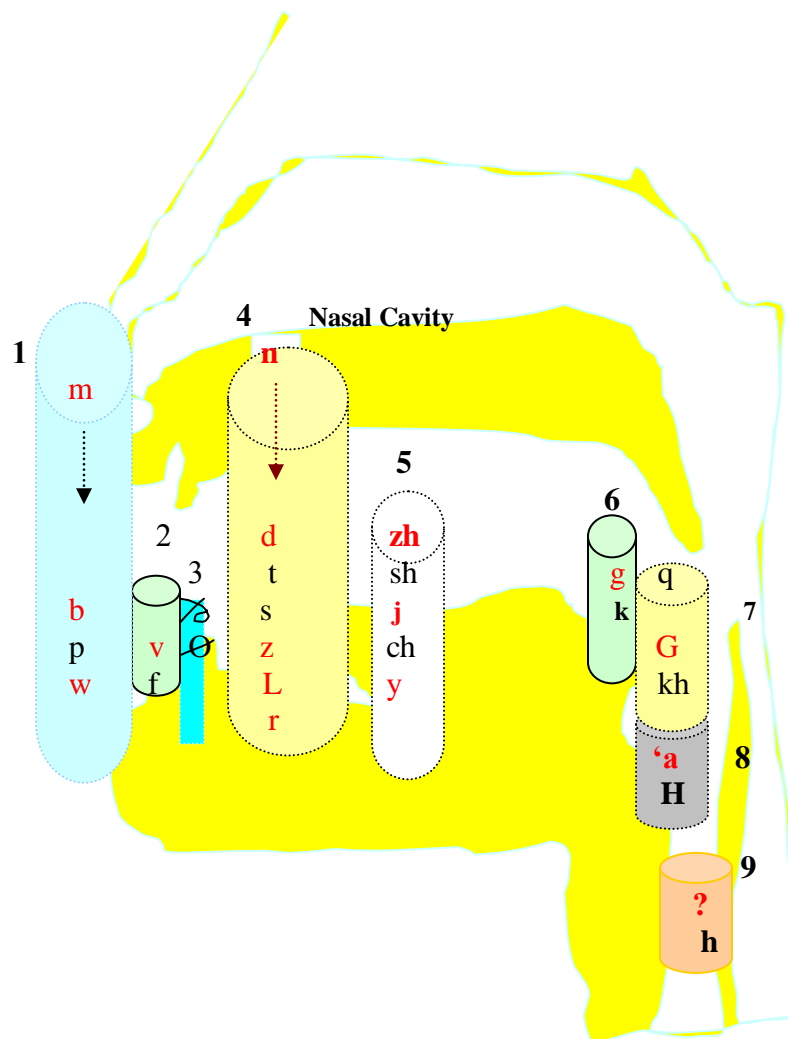
To make students aware of this pronunciation problem, minimal pairs have been designed in teaching materials to let students practice producing the two phonemes together. The meaning usually is written beside the words to draw the learners' attention to the fact that the voiced /voiceless distinction is important for meaning.

park	pair	pay
bark	bear	bay

Being able to produce both voiced and voiceless consonants, Arab students sometimes use one in the place of the other as in the following:

	Problem	probable	capable	possibility
English	/prabl̩ m/	/prab̩ bl/	/keipabl/	/pas̩ bil̩ ti/
Arab student	/bro p̩ l̩ m/	/br o: bab̩ l/	/keibap̩ l/	/bosip̩ l̩ ti/

The locations of the Iraqi consonants in the vocal apparatus





The Place of Articulation

1. bilabial **m b p w**
2. Labiodentals **v f**
3. Interdental **ʃ -θ**
4. Alveolar **n d t s z L r**
5. Alveolar palatals **zh sh j ch y**
6. Soft palatals **g k**
7. Uvula / velar **q G kh**
8. Pharynx **'a H**
9. Larynx **? h**

10. velarized alveolar **D T S ظ ط ص**

As a result of that the new text books designed for the first and second years of the Intermediate stage includes minimal pairs in the pronunciation part to give more opportunity to students to produce these /b/ versus/p/ since the second sound does not exist in Arabic, emphasizing the differences in meaning so that the understanding of the meaning will focus to link it to the phoneme. It is worth mentioning that students who used to live with families in the cities like Baghdad and Mosul were of less problem concerning the sound /p/ which people use in many distorted British English words (to mean the same thing) related to admin papers or car parts used by mechanics or words taken from other languages such as Kurdish, Farsi, or Turkish and have become authentic in the Iraqi dialect . Here are a few:

	Passport	Plate	pliers	pantaloons	pump	puncture
	/ basbort/	/ bleita/	/ bliars/	/ banTaluun/	/ b ^ mb/	/ banjar/
or	/ pasbort/	/ pleita/	/ pliars/	/ p ^ nT ^ ruun/	/ p ^ mb/	/ panchar/

Other languages

Paanka	parda	marpeech	paidaar	problem
Banka	barda	marbeech	baidaar	broblem

Fan	curtain	hose	paddle	(meaning)
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/p/ sound in sequence of phrases and sentences sometimes causes teachers problem of comprehension, but in most cases teachers apply tolerance while running classes. My point is that the Iraqi textbooks in 1977 designed an activity called Pronunciation, a few minutes to deal with students' pronunciation problems. In this section, minimal pairs were put to help teachers make students spend some time doing


pronunciation drills and this to an extent raised the awareness of the students to those issues and reduced their accent to a certain degree. Students in the years after 1977 were speaking English faster and clearer than their teachers because those drills were recorded by native speakers of English, remembering Mr. Wood and others, and students imitate tapes with the help of the non- native available class teacher of English.









The other consonant that the classical Arabic language does not have in its version is the voiced labiodental fricative /v/. The absence of this voiced fricative in the system of its language forces learners to use the voiceless /f/ to produce both sounds, regardless of voicing quality. Of course, this misplacement will lead to confusion or misinterpretation of the messages by the non-native speakers of English. Presenting minimal pairs of the two kinds of fricatives may help Arabic learners of English to distinguish between the two morphemes, if they are introduced in a way related to meanings.



/f/ versus/v/

surface	proof	fail	fan
service	prove	veil	van

Again Iraqi hear this voiced fricative because many Kurdish names have this sound like proper names: vian (love), haval (friend), sulaav (a name of a resort).




~~/θ/~~ versus /  /

In classical Arabic, people distinguish between interdental voiceless/  / and voiced /  /. What is interesting that the two sounds are represented by 2 different letters  ،  but no Arab classical linguist has mentioned this voicing quality as a difference between the two sounds. Nevertheless, not all can articulate the voiceless //  or   as sounds.

For Turkmen, they tend to replace this sound  ~~θ~~ by /t/. Kurds who have not studied the classical Arabic change the voiced  ~~ذ~~ to /z/ voiced again.

Third	thank you	thousand
/ te:rd/	/ tank yuu/	/ tauzind/

(Turkmen and Assyrians tend to do this misplacement)

there is	something	brother
/  e:r iz /	/ s ^ m si  /	/ bra  ar/

(Kurds in the remote villages who have not mixed with Arabs do this misplacement)

If the textbooks provide minimal pairs of words in which /O/ or /t/ makes a serious difference in meaning, awareness that the 2 sounds convey different meanings in the formation of words may help learners self correct or monitor themselves better. Mastery over producing the sounds come later after hundred of attempts the learners do to have it happen.

ɪŋ is not-ing for Arab learners

Arabic language speakers also pronounce fully with stress the grammatical endings of the words. One of the clear issues is the -ing at the end of the words. Instead of pronouncing it ɪŋ, they tend to pronounce -ing with a short vowel and two other consonants, giving it a syllable stress whereas, the English native speakers pronounce it as one sound like nasal / ɪŋ / .

	walking	speaking	shouting	playing
	/waki /	/speaki /	/ ʃ auti /	/plei ɪŋ /
Arabs	/ wo:king /	/ spi:king/	/ ʃ auting/	/ plajing/

Beause the stress is on all syllables in Arabic, the consonant clusters at the end of English words are separated by schwa / ə /, creating a new syllable at the end of the word.

	Convinced	pronounced	themselves	aids
	/ k ə nvinst/	/ pr ə naunst /	/ ð ə ms ə lvz/	/eidz/
Arab speakers	/ konvins ə d/	/ pronauns ə d/	/ ð ə ms ə lv ə z/	/eid ə z/

Schwa between the last 2 consonants

The other hard issue for an Arab to pronounce the American English /t/ in away it looks to be an allophone of /d/, a flap alveolar voiced sound similar to/ d/ which is usually located after a stressed vowel of the syllable followed by an unstressed syllable.

A: after a stressed vowel:

Bitter latter motor otter dirty

The vowel in the first syllable is stressed

B: before an unstressed syllable:

Waiter later writer hotter ninety

The last syllable is unstressed

In the speech of the Arabic Iraqi speakers of English, the sound is /t/ as far as they see the letter/t/ as explosive sound aspirated in Arabic language. It is therefore, hard to lighten it. If it happens, they try, they may tend to replace by another phoneme /d/ and not an allophone of/t/. If we, teachers, try to make our Iraqi students aware of distinguishing the stressed syllable and the unstressed one first. Let them next use a dark consonant/l/ and avoid rolling the/r/ with a larger resonance chamber in the mouth, students may figure it out and do it.

Clusters:

If the speaker is a classical Arabic-oriented person, English clusters will cause him /her a problem, since classical Arabic does not lend itself to a combination of clusters at the beginning or the middle or the end of the words (Altoma, 1969).

Classical Arabic Examples: (syllables are all stressed)

Kitaab kutub kaatib maktaba

If we analyze the Arabic classical sound system, we can see that every consonant is followed by either a long or a short vowel in pronouncing the word, though in written language consonants can be seen written one after the other. As a result of this system, if it happens that the speakers of English have clusters of two consonants to pronounce within a word, they either use the glottal before one consonant to make a short syllable out of it as in example(a) below or tend to insert the schwa/ ə / between the consonants as in example(b).

Three street plastic strong

Arabic speaker (a) usually Shiites:

/ʔi ʔ ri:/ /ʔistri:t/ /ʔiplastik/ /ʔistrong /

Arabic speaker (b)

/ʔ ʔ iri:/ /sitri:t/ /pilaastik/ / sitrong /

It is worth noting that in some Arabic dialects the language has initial clusters of two consonants. Speakers who tend to have a two-consonant cluster at the beginning of a word may have the skill to pronounce the English ones. Speakers of Lebanese and Iraqi dialects face fewer difficulties in pronouncing clusters in general because Arabic in these two countries has been greatly influenced by the indigenous languages in the area, Aramaic and Hebrew, which have consonant clusters at the beginning of the words.

Vowels

Arabic as a Semitic language does not start words with a vowel, a system that might force the Arabic learners of English to insert a glottal /ʔ/ at the beginning of every

word that starts with a vowel. This phenomenon sounds unusual to the ears of the native speakers of English.

	I	idea	understand	arm	open
English	/ai/	/aɪdi /	/ ^nd rstand/	/ a:m/	/oupen/
Arabic	/ʔai/	/ʔaɪdia /	/ʔ^ nderstand/	/ ʔaarm/	/ ʔoupen/

By using a glottal sound before the words that start with vowels, the Arabs tend to add extra syllables within the limit of one word, a reason that makes the accent in producing a sentence heavier than it might be with the pronunciation of one single word.

It is also worth mentioning that Arabic speakers tend to insert /j/ between the two short vowels when the two are successive and represent the nucleus of the syllables. In pronouncing, for example, the syllable / diya/ in the word (idea), Arabic speakers usually do not reduce it as a diphthong as /ia/. What they do is insert the semi vowel /j/ to move on from the short closed vowel /a/ because Arabic language speakers use 2 short vowels of the same length (not-glide on and nucleus as in English) to produce all English diphthongs. That phenomenon is another unusual case that impedes the fluency in the English of the Arabic language speakers.

Arabic vowels are of one type as short in(a) examples, but you can make them long in(b) examples by using 2 short ones one after the other.

(a) short: 1./a/ 2./i/ 3./u/ 4./O/ 5. /e/

(b) long: 6./aa/ 7./ii/ 8./uu/ 9. /O:/ 10./e:/

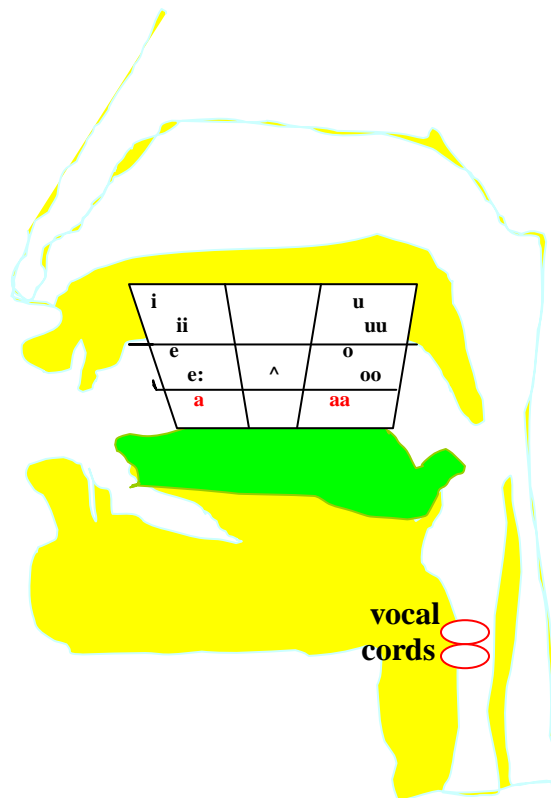
Since the Arabic vowels are either short or long, they are not identical to those of English, but Arabic speakers use them as alternatives to those of English (Avery & Ehlich, 1994) as shown below.

Arabic /i/ versus the English /e/ :

Arabic language speakers have difficulty differentiating between /i/ and /e/in English, an issue that is related to the tongue height rather than length. Iraqi textbooks of English, therefore, deal with this issue at the very early stage of teaching through minimal pairs, making students aware of the differences in meaning related to the sounds under pronunciation activity.

Pin bit sit pit
Pen bet set pet

Iraqi Dialect Vowels



	front	central	back
High “Close”	/i/ as in it /ii/ as in eat		/u/ as in book /uu/ as in boot
Mid	/e/ as in bed /e:/ as in bait	/ɔ̄/ as in ago /^/ as in cup	
Low “open”	/a/ as in at /aa/ as in hat		/o/ as in pot /oo/ as in bought

Arabic /a/ versus the English /ae/ , /ʌ/ , and the English long /a:/

Again minimal pairs are used to sensitize students to these three different vowels:

Cut	but	hut	mud	English /ʌ/
Cat	bat	hat	mad	English /ae/

The Arabic/o/ versus the American /u/ ,/u:/, and American/ a/

It is interesting to say that the English letter (O) in a word has many sounds , an impression that makes Arabic learners of English keep using their one short/u/ or/a/or/o/ for all the possibilities of English.

	Move	above	bought	bottom
English	/mu:v/	/ə bʌv/	/bo:t/ Amr/b t	/ b ^ t̄ᵽ m/
Arabic	/muv/	/ʔabov/	/bO:t/ Brt.	/bottom/

The Arabic vowel/O/ is also more rounded and less open than the American/ /, a variant that adds a lot to the accent of the speech, and it leads to confusion with a short open vowel/a/ to replace the American/ / with. So students whose first language is Arabic tend to use a bit longer /o/ or a longer/a/ as alternatives to the American ones.

	Comment	college	colleague	broccoli
Amr	/kament/	/kalij/	/kali:g/	/brakli/
Arb	/kaament/	/kaalij/	/kaaliig/	/braakli/
	/koment	/kolij/	/kol liig/	/brokli/

The Arabic long vowels are a repetition of the two short vowels, and thus the duration of producing them is a bit longer than that of English.

	Demand	depart	happiness	react
Amr	/ d̄ ma:nd/	/d̄ pa:rt/	/haepin̄ s/	/riaekt/
Arb	/dimaand/	/dipaart/	/ haapines/	/riʔaakit/

or /demand/ /depart/ as the letter is

As in classes all these pronunciation differences as they do not impair the meaning to the available teacher who checks that through asking the students to spell the word or correct

students' written material by means of dictation or writing short sentences through classes of guided composition.

The other problematic issue that was tackled in the textbooks was the pronunciation of the plural (s) or the 3rd person singular as pronunciation. Students pronounce all consonants fully and that created a more syllable during the articulation of the whole word or words in sequence.

He visits almost all streets.

Amr /hi visits a:lmoʊst a:lstri:ts/

Arb /hi: visitiz olmost ol sitriitiz/

For that reason courses focused on teaching teachers on how to pronounce the 3 s's pronunciation and books were designed to re-train teachers in the provinces to lessen their accent since they listened with their students to tapes done by English native speakers in the British Council Institute in Baghdad. The same thing was with the (ed) ending of the past tense verbs because that again created a more added syllable on each verb in a sentence and was mispronounced as well.

I mispronounced words

Amr. /ai misprəʊnəʊnst wɜ:rdz/

Arb /?ai mispronawnsid wordiz/

The 3 s's case was explained as three types in pronunciation: /s/, /z/, and /iz/ as in the examples below.

Stop+s = stops keeps /s/ because it is after a voiceless sound

Clean+s = kli:nz is pronounced /z/ because it is after a voiced consonant

Miss+s misiz is pronounced /iz/ because it is after /s/ and the same after/z/.

Stops = s

Cleans = z

Misses = iz

All English text books have this -ed suffix pronunciation key analyzed as /t/ or /d/ or /id/ if preceded by voiceless, voiced or vowel, or /d/&t/ in that order.

Examples : ask + ed = /askt/ t
 Clean=ed = /kli:nd/ d
 Demand +ed = /dima:ndid / id

For the sake of making the process of learning goes on smoothly and not hinders the lives of so many students who are good in other subjects been taught in schools. So,

for the non-native available teachers, any type of a long vowel that gives an intelligible message to the listeners is acceptable, since it is practical in learning English as a foreign language.

Supra-segmental

Stress, Rhythm, and Intonation:

In standard Arabic there is an even stress that goes on all the syllables of a word in isolation, a reason that certain syllables with long vowels seem to be stronger (Jaywood & Nahmad, 1982). The reason is the length of the vowel and not the stress. In reality, the speakers in Arabic language make no effort to emphasize any syllable at the expense of another (Jaywood & Nahmad, 1982). The Arabic speakers of English end to transfer these phenomena of articulating sounds and syllables into their English language. As a result of that, every sound of a word in English is also pronounced with no contractions or elision, putting more or less an even stress on all the syllables of a word or words of a sentence.

(A) Word stress

In general, English word stress is unpredictable except when the word belongs to a stress pattern to show the part of speech whether it is a verb or noun. The linguists call this a patterning stress to show that the word is a verb or a noun.

Examples:

Record(v.) present(v.) the 2nd syllable has the stress
Record (n.) the 1st syllable has the stress

The stem of the word in English usually receives the main stress whereas suffixes, or prefixes do not receive stress, this is why some linguists consider stress mainly predictable. Nevertheless, the stress changes when you have a sentence or the emphasis goes over new elements in a sentence. In Arabic all inflections of grammar are stressed equally, though they are prefixes, suffixes or endings. Students apply this Arabic way of clarity in pronouncing all syllables with the same stress, being sure that every letter is clearly pronounced.

Happy = stem

1st syllable is stressed

Derivation:

Unhappily

happiness

happily

2nd syllable
is stressed

English / ^nhap li /

/hapin s/

/ hap li/

Prefixes and suffixes are not stressed.

The stem has usually the stress and in this case is predictable within the boundary of words and in sequence as well.

Examples

stem	Prefix	suffix
Comfortable		-able
Un comfortable	un	-able
inability	in	-ity
Political		-cal

(B) Sentence Stress (Rhythm and Intonation)

This kind of stress misplacement on the syllables will certainly affect the rhythm of the intonation, if applied within the range of a sentence or sentences. Unlike, native speakers of English, Arabic speakers treat all the words of a sentence the same, regardless to whether they are content words (nouns, verbs, and adjectives) or functional ones (articles, pronouns, auxiliaries, prepositions, conjunctions, and wh-words).

English

They'll travel to Europe next week.

Stressed: travel, Europe, week (1st syllable)

Unstressed: they'll, to, next

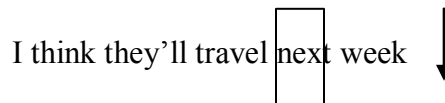
Statement tone: a falling one ▼

Arabic



All words are stressed and the rhythmic rule of English is violated and flat.

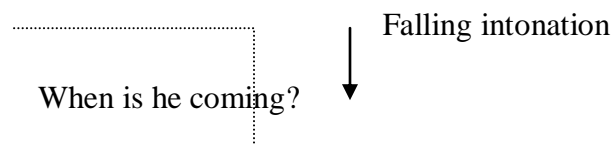
In English the new element of information takes the stress during the conversation. If, for example, somebody hears the speaker and raises a question like “When?”, the answer will have the stress on the new element of a sentence “next” rather than the suggested or repeated words .



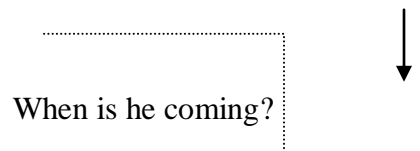
Of course, this type of stress and intonation brings about a sentence heavy Arabic accents into their English, a competence that they lack.

The other important issue is the falling tune or a rising tune in English goes differently in questions. The questions which start with wh-questions are said in a falling tune. Here is an example.

English



Arabic



All words are stressed with flat intonation falling when the sentence has come to an end.

Questions that start with auxiliaries end up with a rising intonation known as “rising tune”. Here are examples.

Auxiliaries

English

Would you open the door? ↑ Rising on the last word

Arabic

Would you open the door? ↑

Flat rhythm and falling intonation after the sentence is all finished.

English

Are you going to school? ↑ Rising on the last word

Arabic

Are you going to school? ↑

Flat rhythm and rising intonation after the sentence is all said.
Women have more ability to produce this rising intonation than men.

Conclusion

As consonants, Arabs who speak English compensate for what they do not have of consonants with what they have in their own language unless certain exercises for oral practice as pronunciation are set up in their textbooks to raise their awareness about what they are missing.

The insertion of schwa / ə / between consonants and before the past tense ending or 3rd person singular or plural (s's) were in the textbooks

of English in Iraq as drills for directly training students and indirectly teachers.

As for vowels, Arab students use their own rounded /o/ to articulate many /o/'s of English sounds as tongue height and openness differences. They use their /a/ for many similar ones of English such as /æ/, / ^/ , /a/, or /a:./

As stress, Arab speakers of English pronounce their sentences in a flat rhythm with no contractions or unstressed words whether they are functional or content words, a violation that makes the accent of the learners heavier for the native speakers of English to listen to comfortably.

Iraqi English textbooks were designed to have intonation, rhythm, and tune at the sentence level so that students would have a chance to listen to the tapes made by the English native speakers of English as experts and imitate the model. Those tapes were indirectly designed to teach the non-native teachers pronunciation before they used to go into their classrooms to teach English, helping them a lot to compare between what they listened to and what they are able to produce as of less accent to the ears of their students.

The process of inserting taped oral drills to students to work on their pronunciation needs a lot of time, money, and patience inside the classrooms. Further studies on this experience of reducing teachers' and learners' accent in their textbooks as foreign languages may accelerate students ability to pronounce with less accent if the drills are well designed into the textbooks and effectively applied by teachers in their classes.

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