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**INFORME FINAL DEL CURSO DE ESPECIALIZACIÓN:  
EN LINGÜÍSTICA.**

**TÍTULO DEL INFORME FINAL:**

PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS OF VOWELS AND CONSONANTS THAT AFFECT  
THE SPEAKING SKILL OF STUDENTS

**PARA OPTAR AL GRADO ACADÉMICO DE:**

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## RESUMEN

La pronunciación es lo más importante para dominar una lengua extranjera. Es la clave para el desarrollo de la producción oral y para lograr una comunicación más adecuada, fluida y eficaz. El objetivo de este estudio fue identificar los sonidos vocálicos y consonánticos específicos que comúnmente se pronuncian mal generando dificultades en la producción oral de los estudiantes. En esta investigación se empleó el método cualitativo bajo el diseño fenomenológico; se seleccionaron diez estudiantes de Tercer año de Licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas, se segmentó en dos grupos de cinco estudiantes del sexo masculino y cinco estudiantes del sexo femenino, y se recogieron los datos mediante una entrevista, que consistió en un cuestionario de diez preguntas semiestructuradas y abiertas sobre los sonidos vocálicos y consonánticos. Para la selección de la muestra se utilizó la técnica de muestreo intencional no probabilístico. Según el análisis realizado, los sonidos que los alumnos pronunciaban con más frecuencia de forma incorrecta eran las vocales (vocales anteriores, centrales y posteriores), las consonantes (plosivas, fricativas y africadas). Los resultados revelaron que el poco desarrollo de la competencia de la pronunciación de los sonidos consonánticos y vocálicos causa problemas en la producción de dichos sonidos, muchos de los alumnos omiten los sonidos al hablar. Además, los sonidos que causan mayor problema son los fricativos como /θ/ /ð/ /s/ /z/ /ʃ/, en el caso de las vocales diferenciar sonidos vocálicos similares como en el caso de /i/ y /ɪ/ que tienen una diferencia mínima en su pronunciación es un problema, al igual que las vocales centrales.

Palabras claves: problemas de pronunciación, producción oral, sonidos vocálicos, sonidos consonánticos, mal pronunciación.

## ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is the most important thing to master a foreign language. It is the key to the development of oral production and to achieve more adequate, fluid and effective communication. The aim of this study was to identify the specific vowel and consonant sounds that are commonly mispronounced generating difficulties in speech production in students. This research employed the qualitative method under the phenomenological design; ten students from third year of bachelor's degree in modern languages were selected, which was segmented into two groups of five male students and five female students, and data was collected by an interview, which consisted in a questionnaire of ten semi-structured and open questions about the vowel and consonant sounds. For the selection of the sample, the non-probabilistic purposive sampling technique was used. Based on the analysis conducted, the sounds that were commonly mispronounced by the students were vowels (front, central and back vowels), consonants (plosives, fricatives and affricates consonants). The findings revealed that the poor development of competence in the pronunciation of consonant and vowel sounds causes problems in the production of these sounds, many of the students omit these sounds when speaking. Furthermore, the sounds that cause the biggest problem are fricative sounds like /θ/ /ð/ /s/ /z/ /ʃ/, in the case of vowels, differentiate similar vowel sounds as in the case of /i/ and /ɪ/ which have a minimal difference in their pronunciation is a problem, as well as central vowels.

Keywords: pronunciation problems, speaking skills, vowel sound, consonant sound, mispronounced.

## INTRODUCTION

English is considered as an international language and is a significant language in the world especially in the world of language learning and teaching. Many people around the world want to learn English and increase their communication for either general or specific purposes such as getting a better job, going abroad, education, etc. A second language can be a challenging task because most students lack the necessary background knowledge to make progress.

The development of the English language is accomplished through the development of four linguistic skills, of which speaking is the most important one (Ur, 2000). Speaking skill is regarded as one of the most difficult aspects of language learning, because speakers should know many significant components like grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and the most important, pronunciation in order to communicate easily and effectively with other people.

Speaking English involves more than just releasing words. Students should also be aware of the importance of clear pronunciation when it comes to facilitating smooth communication. During the realization of this research, which was conducted at the Oriental Multidisciplinary Faculty, Department of Sciences and Humanities of the University of El Salvador, San Miguel with participants of third-year students of modern languages: Specialization in English and French; it could be observed that the pronunciation problems presented by the students were many, especially in the sounds of consonants and vowels due to differences between their target language and native language, and as a result, their communication capabilities is affected, since poor pronunciation leads them to pronounce the words incorrectly, causing misunderstandings.

(Rafael, 2019) emphasizes that pronunciation is one of the most important sub-skills in speaking skill. Speaking without considering the pronunciation will cause different interpretations in meaning among the speakers and listeners. There are many misunderstandings in the meaning of the words spoken caused by the inaccurately and wrongly pronunciation.

According to (Thornbury, 2005) pronunciation is the lowest level of knowledge learners typically pay attention to. In order to speak English accurately, learners should master phonological rules and they should be aware of the various sounds and their pronunciations.

In pronunciation there are two elements, namely segmental (vowel, consonant) and supra-segmental (stress, pitch, intonation) features, which can significantly affect the sound of words. A segmental feature system is the sounds that include vowel, consonant, cluster, and diphthong. The classification is based on the differences in the functions in utterance and their ways of production.

Both consonants and vowels are very important in order to pronounce almost every word in English, it would be impossible to talk without them. The consonants are crucial to words for two reasons. First, English is more easily understood thanks to consonants. Secondly, consonants are typically produced by a distinct interference of the vocal organ with the air stream, making it simpler to explain and comprehend. The types of consonants are plosive, fricative, affricate, nasal, lateral and glide consonants.

Vowels are produced when voiced air passes through various mouth shapes; the different mouth shapes are brought about by variations in the position of the tongue and lips. There are two types of vowels, namely pure vowel and diphthongs. Pure vowels are represented by a single character, consisting of long vowels and short vowels; there are only five vowels in the English language, but there are twenty vowel sounds in total. Out of the twenty, eight of them are called diphthongs.

One of the important problems faced by the students of English in general is that each English vowel has more than just one pronunciation. This causes many difficulties to the learners and leads them to a mispronunciation. That is the case of Malaysian students, according to the research: *Pronunciation Problems: A Case Study on English Pronunciation Errors of Low Proficient Students* made by Priscilla Shak, Chang Siew Lee, Jeannette Stephen. Malaysian students have problems with deciding whether to use long and short pure vowel sounds. This could be attributed to the fact that there are only six vowels in Malay, namely /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/, and /ə/ (Shak, 2016).



It is not simple for English language learners to know the exact sounds of the letters in a certain word (Hassan, 2014). The students, who do not have sufficient knowledge to differentiate the pronunciations of the vowels, get some difficulties, since they use different variants of their pronunciation. Moreover, (Hassan, 2014) also states that the inconsistency of English vowels causes difficulties for other language learners of English. For instance, if someone takes /o/ in some words as “some, move, home, women”, it has different pronunciation in each word, so the English learners who do not have the mastery of the pronunciation of such words will also face difficulties.

According to the research titled “The Pronunciation Problems Faced by Saudi EFL Learners at Secondary Schools” (Omer Elsheikh Hago Elmahdi, 2015) mentions that one of the obstacles to achieve acceptable English pronunciation for most Arab students is to know the differences between the sound structure of English and Arabic. Certain consonant sounds are difficult to pronounce for Saudi secondary school learners, they have problems while pronouncing the consonant sounds, /p/, /ʒ/, /ŋ/, /r/, /tʃ/, /t/, /ʔ/, /v/, /k/, /l/, /d/.

The most of English learners around the world have many difficulties in the pronunciation of consonant specially the fricative consonants, according to the research “Pronunciation Problems: A Case Study on English Pronunciation Errors of Low Proficient Students” made by Priscilla Shak, Chang Siew Lee, Jeannette Stephen. These students have problems with the sounds: the voiced TH /ð/ (then, other, they, and that) and voiceless TH /θ/ sounds (north) because they are not found in their native language (Shak, 2016).

If it is considered the nature of pronunciation problems involved in learning a foreign language, it will appear that each problem is different in nature, and accordingly, needs a different way of tackling by the student. According to (Ramelan, 1988), these problems are concerned with the identification of the foreign sounds, this means that they have to remember their acoustic qualities so that they will be able to directly identify them in utterance. Another of the main problems is directly related to the production of the foreign sounds by the organs of speech. Besides, the ability in hearing

and identifying the acoustic quality of the foreign sounds is prerequisite for the ability in producing them.

Therefore, the general purpose of this research was to explore the different pronunciation problems that affect the development of speaking skill of students. At the same time to establish the pronunciation problems of consonants that affect the development of students' speaking skills, and to identify the production of vowels that generate difficulties in speech production in students from Bachelor's Degree in Modern Languages at the University of El Salvador.

At the time the research was carried out, there were certain limitations that affected the research development process, such as: time student's limitations, it was difficult to get the students to answer the questions because they were in the midst of final exams. Moreover, teacher unwillingness, the programmed activities could not be carried out with the students because on certain occasions the classes were canceled by their teacher. Despite the difficulties encountered in the development of the research, the following results were obtained, the students presented big difficulties in the production of plosive (/k/ /g/ /t/) and fricatives (/θ/ /ð/ /s/ /z/ /ʃ/) consonant sounds, they did not pronounce these sounds correctly, and they omitted or did not make the distinction between the voiced and voiceless sounds. In the case of vowels, differentiate similar vowel sounds as in the case of /i/ and /ɪ/ which have a minimal difference in their pronunciation represent a challenge for the students as well as central vowels.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

The methodology used for this research was completely qualitative under the phenomenological design. Furthermore, this was cross-sectional and retrospective because the time it took was four months; and the data that was recognized were from events that had already occurred prior to the development of the project. The qualitative approach is used since it adjusts to the nature of the phenomenon to be studied, it intends to examine a problem or phenomenology of a subject experienced by subjects such as "behavior, perceptions, motivations and other holistic actions in a description" data descriptions derived from the experience of key informants (Sugiono, 2006).

Phenomenology aims to study the meanings that people give to lived experiences and attempts to describe and interpret these meanings in the way they emerge and are shaped by consciousness, language, our cognitive and no cognitive sensibilities, and by our pre-understandings and presuppositions (Given, 2008). Also, it is established that pure phenomenological research seeks essentially to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl, 1970). Specifically, as empirical research, which is defined as a "systematic approach for answering certain types of questions." Those questions are answered through the collection of evidence under carefully defined and replicable conditions.

The methodological approach of this study was based on a reflexive-relational vision; relational because the phenomenon under study is related to other factors that must be taken into account when approaching and studying it. These elements, which are relevant to the topic, played a key role in producing the study's intended finding. Reflective because it gave us the opportunity to consider the conceptions, we had of both the research and the topic of study; because from the outside a problematic reflection was made on this.

The place where the research was carried out was the Oriental Multidisciplinary Faculty, Department of Sciences and Humanities of the University of El Salvador, San Miguel. The participants that were taken into consideration to carry out this study were all the third-year students of modern languages: Specialization in English and French;

from that population, a sample of ten students was taken. For the selection of the sample, the non-probabilistic purposive sampling technique was used, since the individuals were selected directly and intentionally. The sample was delimited as follows: ten students of which five of them are female and five are male. These constituted a unit of analysis and were taken as a single case, forming a focus group.

For data collection, the interview and observation technique were used. According to (George, 2022) an interview is a qualitative research method that relies on asking questions in order to collect data. Furthermore, Interviews are an appropriate method when there is a need to collect in-depth information on people's opinions, thoughts, experiences, and feelings (Zarinpoush, 2006).

Observation in qualitative research "is one of the oldest and most fundamental research methods approaches. This approach involves collecting data using one's senses, especially looking and listening in a systematic and meaningful way" (McKechnie, 2008). Similarly, (Adler P. A., 1994) characterized observations as the "fundamental base of all research methods" in the social and behavioral sciences.

As an instrument to collect data was used the Questionnaire which could be used to collect quantitative and/or qualitative information. According to (Bhandari, 2021) questionnaire is a list of questions or items used to gather data from respondents about their attitudes, experiences, or opinions. It is the main instrument for collecting data in survey and interview research.

Basically, it was a set of 10 semi-structured and open questions on the topic that was asked to the individual face-to-face in order to observe facial expressions and other response behaviors. It was applied to the students with the previously requested consent for the audio-recording of their responses to be transcribed into text to ensure that all details are captured.

The data analysis was carried out based on all the information obtained from the instruments that were applied in the research. In this study, the data obtained from observations, student interviews, and theoretical framework were triangulated, to have sufficient information on the phenomenon of study and to validate the results.

## RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected from the interview revealed that the sounds of the consonants represent a great problem for the students at the moment to express themselves in English, since as expressed by the interviewees when they speak fast, they do not pronounce these sounds correctly, specifically the fricative sounds that are sounds that do not exist in their native language (Spanish). Based on the theory of (Omer Elsheikh Hago Elmahdi, 2015) who expresses in his research that it is much more difficult for English language learners to learn and use sounds that do not exist in their native language, since this makes it hard for them to memorize those sounds and reproduce them when speaking, it effectively shows us that it is much more difficult for the student who has a language other than English to produce sounds that are not similar to those of the native language.

It was identified that the consonants that are more difficult for students are mostly the plosives and fricatives consonants, since most of them have a similar sound, as was expressed by the students, as it can be noticed most of the students pointed out that from the plosive's consonants, they had more problems with the sounds /t/ /k/ /g/.

*Table 1*

*Percentage of students with production and identification problems of consonant sounds (Plosive, Fricative).*

Consonant sounds	Percentage
Plosive	
/k/	70%
/g/	40%
/t/	50%
Fricative	
/θ/ /ð/	70%
/s/ /z/	60%
/ʃ/	70%

*Source:* table based on the interviews.

Some students had a hard time pronouncing them properly. They expressed that if they want to produce these sounds well, they have to do it very slowly, mostly the /t/, especially when it is at the end of a word. Likewise, with the fricative consonants they had more difficulties with the sounds /θ/ /ð/ /s/ /z/ /ʃ/, since most of them omitted or did not make the distinction between the sounds voiced and voiceless.

The students expressed that most of the times they found it difficult or forgot to make the respective vibration when producing the sound /z/ distinctive and different from the sound /s/, likewise, in the case of the sounds /θ/ /ð/ they found it difficult to pronounce them and point out not knowing sometimes how to produce them correctly in some words, so when they speak they do not make the distinction of these sounds, many times for not knowing how to pronounce a word that includes these sounds, they do not express themselves fluently and correctly. In addition, they said that when speaking quickly they do not pay due attention to correct pronunciation or sound distinction and many times their pronunciation is affected which causes a misunderstanding of the words they want to express.

Referring to vowel sounds, the interview revealed that many of the students had problems with them, the students have expressed that most of the vowels have more than one pronunciation, which generates more confusion when trying to distinguish them and express themselves correctly. This causes many difficulties to the learners and leads them to a mispronunciation.

*Table 2*

*Percentage of students with production and identification problems of vowel sounds (Front, Central, Back).*

Vowel sounds	Percentage
Front vowel	
[i] [ɪ]	90%
Central vowel	
[ə] [ʌ]	90%
Back vowel	
[u] [ʊ]	80%
[ɔ] [ɑ]	60%

*Source: table based on the interviews.*

According to what the students expressed about vowel sounds, one of the biggest problems noticed was that many of them failed to differentiate similar vowel sounds as in the case of /i/ and /ɪ/ which have a minimal difference in their pronunciation. Students also expressed that they have problems specifically with central vowels, which they find difficult to differentiate when they see a new word or when these sounds are in the middle of words, they do not know how and when to produce them properly.

Although many of the students know the “theory” about the difference and the correct production of each vowel, it could be observed that when speaking they did not produce the vowel sound correctly, especially those in which there is a minimal difference in the sound as in the case of /u/ /ʊ/ /ə/ /ɔ/, due to an incorrect articulation at the time of producing them.

As they point out in the interview, they knew how most sounds should be produced but when expressing them orally in a conversation they find it complicated to produce them correctly.

## DISCUSSIONS

According to the result obtained in the research, one of the great challenges for those who learn any language, in this particular case the English language is not recognizing or pronouncing consonant sounds correctly. It was observed and corroborated that for the student population whose mother tongue is Spanish, they presented certain difficulties when pronouncing these sounds because they do not exist in their native language. As estimated and supported (Education, 2023), in the English language there are 25 consonant sounds while Spanish only have 16 - 20 consonant sounds of which only 14 phonemes are shared between both languages. Because the English language has more phonemes which are classified as fricative and affricative sounds, it is one of the main reasons why students are more likely to make mistakes in pronouncing them.

Also, when analyzing the data collected, it was found that among the problematic sounds, the voiced TH and the voiceless TH, cause a lot of conflicts to the students such as the sound /z//s/, most of the students omit or do not make the distinction between the sounds voiced and voiceless, these problems are faced by everyone who wants to learn English. (Omer Elsheikh Hago Elmahdi, 2015) exposes in his research that one of the obstacles to achieve acceptable English pronunciation for most Arab students is to know the differences between the sound structure of English and Arabic. Certain consonant sounds are difficult to pronounce for Saudi secondary school learners. They have problems pronouncing the consonant sounds because they do not exist in their language and they are not familiar with them.

As mentioned (Hassan, 2014) it is not simple to know the exact sounds of the letters in a certain word. The learner, who does not have sufficient knowledge of different pronunciations of the vowel, meets some difficulties, since he uses different variants of their pronunciation. Moreover, (Hassan, 2014) also states that the inconsistency of English vowels causes difficulties for other language learners of English. Clearly, third-year students have difficulty varying in pronunciation and producing or making the right contrast in a vowel sound that is still in the process of improving. It could be observed that students have problems specifically with central vowels ([ə] [ʌ]), and those in which



there is a minimal difference in the sound as in the case of /u/ /ʊ/ /ə/ /ɔ/. This can be equally related to the fact that in Spanish there are only five vowels while English has more. According to (Bradlow, 1995); (Clopper, 2005) the vowel systems of Spanish and AE differ both in the number of contrasting categories and in the number of cues necessary for the vowel sounds to be accurately distinguished. The vowel system in Spanish consists of five vowels (/i/, /e/, /a/, /o/, /u/), which is a small inventory compared to the 11 monophthong vowels of American English (/i/, /ɪ/, /e/, /ɛ/, /ɜ/, /ʌ/, /æ/, /ɑ/, /ɔ/, /ʊ/, /u/).

It was possible to identify that indeed for the students, an increase in the number of vowel sounds with which they were not familiar since their first years of life, is often an inconvenience and their oral production tends to be affected since a lack of mastery in these sounds causes students to fail to develop good speaking skills and limit their communication in the target language.

## CONCLUSION

Through the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained, it was possible to determine the difficulties that students experience in pronunciation when producing consonants and vowel sounds.

In the case of consonant sounds, it was possible to identify the problems in the production of two types of consonants: on one hand, the plosive consonant sound (/k/ /g/ /t/). Students tend to produce these sounds as they do in their native language (Spanish), since they do not have the knowledge of the correct place and mode of articulation in English or some students simply ignore it, this is more noticeable in words that have these consonant sounds at the end, especially the /t/ sound. On the other hand, fricative consonant sounds (/θ/ /ð/ /s/ /z/ /l/). Due to the nonexistence of these sounds in Spanish, it is difficult for students to know or differentiate in which words each sound should be used, especially those that have a minimal difference in pronunciation. Another problem is that students tend to forget and they do not make a difference in the pronunciation of voiced and voiceless sounds.

In the vowel sounds as possible to identify the vowel sounds that generate difficulties in speech production in students, all students agreed or rated that the fact that each vowel has more than one pronunciation generates confusion and problems when they try to use them to express themselves correctly. Those that cause the most confusion are similar vowel sounds between which the difference in pronunciation is minimal, as is the case of: Front vowel ([i] [ɪ]), central vowels ([ə] [ʌ]) back vowels ([u] [ʊ] [ɔ] [ɑ])

With the results of this study, it is shown that third-year students of Bachelor degree in Modern Languages: Specialization in French and English have problems with pronunciation of some consonants and vowels when speaking, which affects them evidently in the oral production.

Based on the data gathered in this study, it is suggested that students should perform various practice activities such as recording themselves while pronouncing, then listening to themselves and correcting any mistakes they may have made. In

addition, watching conversations, movies or videos in English and shadowing, imitating the pronunciation of the actor or character, will allow the student to recognize and identify how words should be pronounced correctly. Practicing daily with friends, colleagues or making small conversations with themselves will help to develop a better diction and gesticulation when speaking. Besides, repeating the vowel or consonant sounds that generate the problem as much as possible will help the brain, mouth, throat, teeth and tongue recognize and register these sounds, which subsequently becomes an unconscious and natural practice to improve oral production.

It is possible to help students to improve pronunciation with the right intervention. If students are exposed to and given the chance to practice the target sounds, it is thought that their pronunciation mistakes can be corrected. It is necessary that professors implement new strategies to help students with the consonants and vowels that present greater difficulty when speaking, as well as another type of pronunciation problems with voiced and voiceless sounds.

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