



أثر اللغة الام على نطق متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة اجنبية للأصوات العلة الانزلاقية
**The Effect of Native Language on Iraqi EFL Students' Articulation
of Gliding Vowel Sounds**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the capacity of Iraqi English foreign language (henceforth, EFL) students to articulate English gliding vowels. The problem is that Iraqi EFL students encounter certain challenges in learning English gliding vowel sounds, including limited exposure to native speakers and the influence of their native languages on English pronunciation. Additionally, there is a gap in the literature as well as the need for more context-specific phonetic research in this area since few studies have focused on gliding vowel sounds in relation to Iraqi Arabic. These factors contribute to difficulties in producing gliding vowel sounds effectively. It aims to examine the production challenges of gliding vowels and to investigate the extent to which their mother tongue affects these pronunciation patterns. It is firstly hypothesized that most diphthongs are correctly articulated by Iraqi EFL learners. Secondly, it is hypothesized that all triphthongs are incorrectly articulated by Iraqi EFL learners. To achieve this, (50) Iraqi students from third stage for the academic year 2025-2026/ Al-Shaheed Hassan Ali Al-Saadi for boys/ Baghdad Education Directorate/AL-Risafa3 were selected to participate in this study. It has been observed that the mother tongue has a major effect in articulating most of these sounds by the concerned sample. Thus, they do not have enough ability to pronounce gliding vowel sounds.

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Keywords: Native Language, Production Test, L1 Transfer, Triphthong, Diphthong, Learning.

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المخلص

تُركز هذه الورقة البحثية على قدرة طلاب اللغة الإنكليزية العراقيين (المُشار إليهم بـ "EFL") على نطق أصوات حروف العلة الانزلاقية. تكمن المشكلة في أن هؤلاء الطلاب يواجهون تحديات في تعلم أصوات حروف العلة الانزلاقية، بما في ذلك قلة التواصل مع الناطقين الأصليين وتأثير لغة الطلاب الأم على نطق أصوات اللغة الإنكليزية. فضلاً عن نقص في الأدبيات والحاجة إلى المزيد من البحث الصوتي المُخصص للسياق في هذا المجال، حيث ركزت دراسات قليلة على أصوات حروف العلة الانزلاقية وعلاقتها باللهجة العربية العراقية. إذ تُسهّم هذه العوامل في صعوبات نطق أصوات حروف العلة الانزلاقية بفعالية. يهدف البحث إلى دراسة التحديات المتعلقة بإنتاج الاصوات الانزلاقية واستقصاء مدى تأثير اللغة الأم على أنماط النطق. وتفترض الدراسة أولاً أن معظم حروف العلة المزدوجة (الثنائية) يُنطقها متعلمو اللغة الإنكليزية العراقيون بشكل صحيح. ثانياً، تفترض الدراسة أن جميع حروف العلة الثلاثية يُنطقها متعلمو اللغة الإنكليزية العراقيون بشكل غير صحيح. ولتحقيق ذلك، تم اختيار (50) طالباً عراقياً من المرحلة الثالثة للعام 2025-2026/ مدرسة الشهيد حسن علي الساعدي للبنين/ مديرية تربية بغداد/ الرصافة الثالثة للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة. وقد لوحظ أن للغة الأم تأثيراً كبيراً في نطق معظم هذه الأصوات لدى العينة المعنية، وبالتالي، فإنهم لا يمتلكون القدرة الكافية على نطق معظم أصوات العلة المنزقة.

1.Introduction

Learning a foreign language includes the development of various linguistic subsystems, involving phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Theories of language acquisition vary in emphasis, whether it is innate structures or environmental input.¹ However, linguists agree on the importance of exposure and practice. Among these subsystems, pronunciation is often considered one of the most difficult aspects for learners. It can be regarded as a marker of both linguistic identity and linguistic competence, particularly where the quality and quantity of linguistic input serve as a crucial factor in second language acquisition.²

Acquiring vowel sounds in a second language is one of the key challenges for second language (henceforth, L2) learners due to cross-linguistic differences in phonetic and phonological systems. L2 vowel acquisition involves the process of learning to produce and categorize vowel sounds that may not exist in a learner's first language (henceforth, L1). This challenge can be understood through several theoretical frameworks, such as the Speech Learning Model (henceforth, SLM).³

English language is taught as a foreign language in Iraq and is considered essential for academic and professional advancement. However, Iraqi EFL learners commonly have difficulties with intelligible pronunciation, especially in vowel systems.⁴ Arabic and English are significantly different in vowel inventory, particularly in gliding vowels, such as, diphthongs and triphthongs, which need spectral movement that Arabic vowels generally lack. As a result, Iraqi learners often substitute English diphthongs with L1 monophthongs or produce altered versions.⁵ Given the phonetic difficulties, this paper shows Iraqi EFL students encounter in articulating gliding vowels by answering the following questions: (1) to what extent do students face these problems, (2) how does the

L1 influence their articulation patterns, (3) to what extent are the first hypothesis regarding triphthong and diphthong production supported by the findings?

2.Literature Review

This section focuses on theories of speech production and gliding vowel sounds to state a basis for analysing problems with gliding vowel sounds that encounter Iraqi EFL students.

2.1 Speech Production Theories

Speech production is a complex process by which humans can effectively communicate through the spoken language. Such a process involves the interaction of cognitive, physiological, and linguistic factors altogether. Various theories have been developed to explain how speech is produced; each has different insights into various aspects of the same phenomenon. To further the present study, the following theories of speech production: are briefly reviewed:

1 .Motor Theory assumes that the brain is organizing speech based on the motions needed to be performed for articulation. According to this theory, listeners perceive the sounds of speech by mapping these to the articulatory gestures that produce them and not as discrete sound units. Motor theory emphasizes the importance of movement in understanding the processing of language. In particular, the theory has become quite influential in research into how infants are able to acquire their speech capabilities through imitation of the sounds they have listened to⁶.

2 .Linguistic Theory focuses on the structure and rules of language. This theory postulates that speech is generated from internalized knowledge of language, where speakers generate sentences or comprehend them by following grammatical or syntactic rules. It has been highly instrumental in developing natural language processing technologies and understanding how language is processed in the brain. In addition, it continues to make a quite vital contribution to studies on language acquisition, underlining how children learn to speak by internalizing grammatical structures⁷.

3. Cognitive Theory focuses on the mental processes involved in producing language. This perspective involves not only the physical act of speaking but also includes the cognitive mechanisms by means of which thought is translated into verbal expression. It explains the interaction between thought processes and speech production, hence making speech errors, slips of the tongue, and hesitation in conversation more understandable. It highlights how cognitive load impacts fluency and coherent speech production.⁸

4.Speech Learning Model (SLM): this model attempts to explain age-related factors on learners' ability to pronounce L2 sounds in a native-like manner.⁹ Since SLM focuses on the ultimate goal of L2 pronunciation, studies within SLM typically focus on learners who have been exposed to the L2 and may have been speaking it for years. Because of the extensive and intense exposure to the L1, learners' speech perception is attuned to the contrastive phonetic

elements of their L1, which means that these learners may not be able to distinguish phonetic differences between L2 sound pairs or between L2 and L1 sounds. While SLM does not strictly adhere to the idea of a "critical period," it recognizes that age impacts L2 speech learning, with younger learners often achieving greater phonetic accuracy.¹⁰

Thus, L1 speakers are able to recognize invariant phonetic categories in the presence of sensory variability through a cognitive mechanism known as equivalence classification, which will impact L2 learning. This process hinders native-like perception and production by preventing L2 learners from differentiating the subtle acoustic variations between comparable L1 and L2 sounds. Thus, SLM will be adopted in the present study because it effectively explains how new phonetic categories emerge over time during second language acquisition and is consistent with the participants' pronunciation patterns observed among Iraqi EFL students.¹¹

2.2 Gliding Vowel Sounds in Iraqi Arabic & RP English

The term "glide" is used for a vowel where there is an audible change in quality. Both diphthongs and triphthongs are types of gliding vowels.¹² On this respect, diphthongs are sounds that are created when two vowels are combined into a single syllable, or when a deliberate glide is made from one vowel position to another. In contrast, Arabic diphthongs only contain two sounds, such as, "ḍayf" /ḍeɪf/ (guest) and "qawl" /qəʊl/ (word), which do not have the /ɔɪ/ sound.¹³ It is affirmed that Arabic vowel sounds are composed of three primary vowel sounds: /a/, /ʊ/, and /i/ as well as two diphthong sounds: /eɪ/ and /əʊ/, which are a combination of /e/ and /i/ as well as /ə/ and /ʊ/.¹⁴

To illustrate, it is stated that diphthongs are made up of a glide or movement from one vowel to another. Similar to other phonemes, diphthongs are grouped based on where they are articulated. Because a central vowel known as "schwa" serves as the last point, centering diphthongs are referred to as "centering." Likewise, closing diphthongs are referred to as "closing" as shown in the following figure:¹⁵

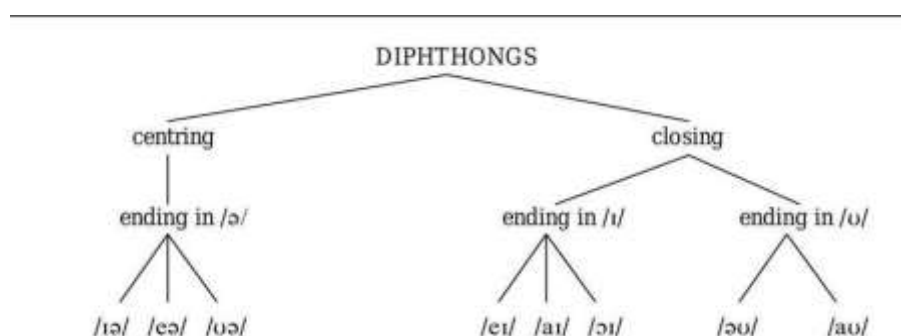


Figure (1): Categorization of Diphthong Vowel Sounds (Roach, 2009)

The following words are the best examples of diphthongs:

- 1) /ɪə/ : beard, fierce, ear, beer, tear
- 2) /eə/ : aired, cairn, scarce, bear, hair
- 3) /ʊə/ : moored, tour, lure, sure
- 4) /eɪ/ : paid, pain, face, shade
- 5) /aɪ/ : tide, time, nice, bike
- 6) /ɔɪ/ : voice, oil, boil, coin
- 7) /əʊ/ : home, most, bone, phone
- 8) /aʊ/ : gown, house, cow, bow

Consequently, the most intricate English vowel sounds are triphthongs. These need to smoothly transition from one vowel to another and subsequently to a third. RP has five triphthongs, each of which is made up of a final schwa sound and a closing diphthong. It is more probable that triphthongs will be regarded as monosyllabic sounds, like the word "tower" /taʊə/ or "power" /paʊə/. Nouns that contain a suffix, like player /pleɪə/ or lower /ləʊə/, are more likely to be interpreted as disyllabic sounds.¹⁶

In terms of length, triphthongs are similar to the long vowels described above. Additionally, triphthongs refer to a type of vowel where there are two noticeable changes in quality during a /to syllable, as in a common pronunciation of English fire and tower /faɪə/ and /taʊə/. Besides, there are five closing diphthongs with /ə/ added on the end which are:¹⁷

1. /eɪə/ as in "player"/pleɪə/
2. /aɪə/ as in "fire" /faɪə/
3. /ɔɪə/ as in "royal"/rɔɪə/
4. /əʊə/ as in "lower"/ləʊə/
5. /aʊə/ as in "power" /paʊə/

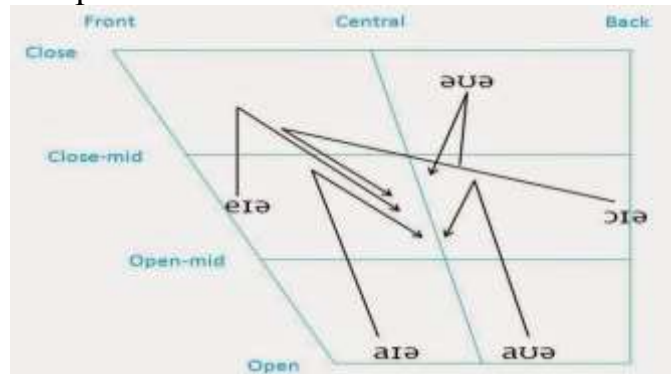


Figure (2): Categorisation of Triphthong Vowel Sounds (Roach, 2009)¹⁸

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study is quantitative in nature since it evaluates data scientifically and summarizes it in numerical indices using descriptive statistics. Since L1 transfer may influence how learners produce second language sounds, the study

design controls for this by selecting participants from the same dialect background. This helps explore how prior phonological knowledge affects their ability to produce sounds that are either present or absent in their native language.¹⁹

3.2 Participants

The sample of the study is randomly selected. It is comprised of (50) male students. They were all from Third stage during the academic year 2025-2026/ Al-Shaheed Hassan Ali Al-Saadi School for boys/ Baghdad Education Directorate/AL-Risafa3. The informants of this study are Iraqi non-native speakers of English with similar EFL backgrounds. Their average age is fourteen.

3.3 Validity and Reliability

For the purpose of making the research instrument more consistent and appropriately designed, it is useful to perform the two indispensable prerequisites of validity and reliability. The validity is the extent to which it measures what it is supposed to measure and nothing else. Tests should be as valid as their constructor can make them. The test must aim to provide a true measure of the particular skill which it is intended to measure.²⁰ To ensure this, the test was evaluated by jury members to confirm the test items. Their recommendations were taken into account to refine these items. Concerning reliability, it indicates "the degree to which a test consistently measures whatever it measures".²¹ The study used the inter-rater reliability method where the students' oral performances were assessed independently by two experienced evaluators. Thus, a test is said to be reliable if it gives the same results when it is given on different occasions or when it is used by different people.

3.4 The Production Test

To examine Iraqi EFL students' performance in articulating English gliding vowel sounds, an oral presentation test was designed to assess the students' ability to produce gliding vowel sounds. Students were tasked with presenting the words involving these sounds (see Appendix B). This test allowed the researcher to observe how they articulate them. To achieve this task, certain materials are needed that are mentioned below:

- Providing students with printed sheets that include the target words.
- Playing an MP3 that includes recording of native speaker's pronunciation.
- Providing a smart phone with high-quality Audio for recording students' pronunciation of the concerned words involving English gliding vowel sounds for the purpose of evaluation.
- Giving time to practice the target words by themselves.

3.5 Data Analysis and Discussion

3.5.1 Production of English Diphthong Vowel Sounds

Table (1) shows that the total number of correct responses (occurrences) are more than the incorrect ones (occurrences):

Table (1)
The Iraqi EFL Learners' Production of Diphthong

No. of Item	Correct Answers	Percentage	Incorrect Answers	Percentage
1.	10	4.6%	40	18.6%
2.	13	6%	37	17.2%
3.	30	14.1%	20	9.3 %
4.	34	15.8%	16	7.4%
5.	42	19.6%	8	3.7%
6.	40	18.6%	10	0.4 %
7.	27	12.6%	23	10.7%
8.	18	8.4%	32	14.9%
Total	214	100%	186	100%

Table (1) views that the total of correct answers of Iraqi EFL students of the sound /ɪə/ score (10) with the percentage of (4.6%) while the total of incorrect answers account (40) with the percentage of (18.6%). The lack of a similar movement in Arabic most likely resulted in misarticulation, either by emphasizing one part or completely removing the glide. As for the sound /eə/, students' correct answers record (13) with the percentage of (6%) while the total of incorrect answers account (37) with the percentage of (17.2%). While shorter than triphthongs, the mid-front to central glide is still absent in Arabic, making it difficult to perceive and pronounce. Concerning the sound /ʊə/, it scores (30)' correct answers with the percentage of (14.1%) while the total of incorrect answers account (20) with the percentage of (9.3 %). This diphthong was the most challenging for students. It involves a transition from a high back rounded vowel to a schwa, which is not seen in Iraqi Arabic, resulting in articulatory confusion or reduction. For the sound /eɪ/, it is about (34)'s correct answers with the percentage of (15.8%) while the total of incorrect answers account (16) with the percentage of (7.4%). This glide from mid-front to high front is rather simple and may mirror natural vowel variations in Iraqi Arabic, making it easier to learn and produce.

Consequently, the sound /aɪ/ correct answers score (42) with the percentage of (19.6%) while the total of incorrect answers account (8) with the percentage of (3.7%). The easiest gliding vowel for learners, most likely due to its frequent occurrence in common English words (e.g., I, my, like) and possible phonetic similarity to Arabic diphthong-like patterns. With reference to the sound /ɔɪ/, it scores (40)' correct answers with the percentage of (18.6%) while the total of incorrect answers account (10) with the percentage of (0.4 %). Although it is not found in Arabic, this diphthong exists in many commonly

used English terms, increasing exposure and, hence improving production. For the sound /əʊ:/, it is about (27)'s correct answers with the percentage of (12.6%) while the total of incorrect answers account (23) with the percentage of (10.7%). While tough, its slightly more known trajectory makes it more manageable than triphthongs. Finally, the sound /aʊ:/ scores (18)'s correct answers with the percentage of (8.4%) while the total of incorrect answers account (32) with the percentage of (14.9%). A common English diphthong without a direct Arabic equivalent. Learners may replace it with monophthongs or shorten the glide due to L1 influence.

3.5.2 Production of English Triphthong Vowel Sounds

Table (2) shows that the total number of incorrect responses (occurrences) are more than the correct ones (occurrences):

Table (2)

The Iraqi EFL Learners' Production of Triphthong

No. of Item	Correct Answers	Percentage	Incorrect Answers	Percentage
9	8	17.7%	42	20.4%
10	7	15.5%	43	20.9%
11	11	24.4%	39	19%
12	10	22.2%	40	19.5%
13	9	20%	41	20%
Total	45	100%	205	100%

Table (2) views that the total of correct answers of Iraqi EFL students of the sound /eɪə/ score (8) with the percentage of (17.7%) while the total of incorrect answers account (42) with the percentage of (20.4%). The transition from a mid-front vowel to a high front glide, followed by schwa, is a challenge for learners due to the centralization necessary in the last vowel. As for the sound /aɪə/, students' correct answers mark (7) with the percentage of (15.5%) while the total of incorrect answers account (43) with the percentage of (20.9%). Concerning the sound /ɔɪə/, it scores (11) correct answers with the percentage of (24.4%) while the total of incorrect answers account (39) with the percentage of (19 %). For the sound /əʊə/, it is about (10) correct answers with the percentage of (22.2%) while the total of incorrect answers account (40) with the percentage of (19.5%). The sound /aʊə/ correct answers score (9) with the percentage of (20%) while the total of incorrect answers account (41) with the percentage of (20%). These findings belong to the unavailability of vowel clusters in their mother tongue as well as the ineffective and poor strategies in teaching vowel system, in general, and its clusters, in particular, along with assigning particular period for teaching them.

4. Results

In the context of the current domain, the following points are observed:

1. The results in Table (1) verifies the first hypothesis where the total number of correct responses (214) exceeds the incorrect ones (186). This denotes that the students have performed a reasonable level of competence in producing most of diphthongs in the target words (See Appendix 1).
2. The results in Table (2) confirms the second hypothesis reflecting that the total number of incorrect responses (205) is higher than the correct ones (45). This verifies that the triphthongs constitute a near-universal difficulty for the students.
3. The production challenge is strictly dependent on the phonetic features of each sound. Diphthongs, such as /aɪ/, sharing some phonetic similarities with Arabic patterns denoted higher accuracy whereas centering diphthong and all triphthongs reflected the highest error clusters because of the absence of these vowel margins in the students' first language acquisition.
4. Iraqi EFL learners' tendency is to pronounce glottal stops rather than glides. This confirms that Iraqi Arabic phonology impacts on the articulation of English, especially when these glides do not present within a syllable in the mother tongue
5. In Iraq, English education usually prioritizes grammar and reading over pronunciation and listening exposing students to very few natural vowel glides. In such cases, L1 transfer is much more evident, as learners' resort to familiar native articulations due to a lack of corrective feedback.

5. Conclusions

The following points are concluded:

1. Some diphthongs, such as, /aɪ, ɔɪ, eɪ, ʊə, əʊ/, are correctly produced by the sample of the study". This reveals that the Iraqi EFL learners appear to be efficient in articulating these sounds.
2. Three diphthongs are not articulated accurately by the students since they acquire the phonological system in the FL that has been attributed to the factors, such as age of FL perceptual learning, quality and quantity of FL input, and interference from the mother tongue phonological system. These diphthongs include /aʊ, ɪə, eə/.
3. The study reveals that Iraqi EFL learners have the ability to articulate most diphthongs. Thus, the first hypothesis is verified, i.e., *most diphthongs are correctly articulated by Iraqi EFL learners*.
4. All triphthongs are not correctly produced by Iraqi EFL students. The results reveal that Iraqi EFL learners appear to be inefficient in producing all triphthongs because they have problems to control their speech organs or articulators to pronounce these sounds correctly. Yet, the target students failed to perform the phonological processes in producing these sounds.
5. The study also reveals that Iraqi EFL learners do not have the ability to articulate all triphthongs. Hence, the second hypothesis is confirmed, that is, *all triphthongs are incorrectly articulated by Iraqi EFL learners*.

Endnotes

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Appendix (1)

The Production Test

Instructions: The participants were asked to listen to the following list of words and pronounce them aloud. The examiner recorded their performance to assess the accuracy of their production of English gliding vowels.

List of Target Words:

1. /ɪə/ : beard, weird, fierce, ear, beer, tear
2. /eə/ : aired, cairn, scarce, bear, hair,
3. /ʊə/ : moored, tour, lure, sure, pure
4. /eɪ/ : paid, pain, face, shade, age, wait, taste, paper
5. /aɪ/ : tide, time, nice, buy, bike, pie, eye, kite, fine
6. /ɔɪ/ : void, loin, voice, oil, boil, coin, toy, roy
7. /əʊ/ : load, home, most, bone, phone, boat, bowl
8. /aʊ/ : loud, gown, house, cow, bow, brow, grouse
9. /eɪə/ . as in layer, player, slayer
10. /aɪə/ . as in lire, fire, tire
11. /ɔɪə/ , as in loyal, royal, employer
12. /əʊə/ , as in lower, mower, knower
13. /aʊə/ , as in power, hour, tour, flower

Appendix (2)

المديرية العامة للتربية في محافظة بغداد
الرصافة / الثالثة (مدينة الصدر)
قسم الإعداد والتدريب
(شعبة البحوث والدراسات التربوية)

العدد: ٤/٣/٣٦
التاريخ: ٢٠٢٥/١٠/٢

جمهورية العراق
وزارة التربية

الصادر

إلى إدارة متوسطة الشهيد علي حسن الساعدي

م/ تسهيل مهمة

تحية طيبة .

بناءً على الطلب المقدم من قبل السيدة (م. ايمان فرحان محمد)
الحاصلة على شهادة (الماجستير) تخصص (اللغة الإنكليزية)؛ يرجى
التفضل بتسهيل مهمتها عند زيارتها لكم؛ لغرض تطبيق الدراسة
المجتمعية الموسومة (The Effect of Native language on
EFL Iraqi Students' Articulation of Gliding vowel
(Sounds.
(أثر اللغة الأم على نطق متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية للأصوات
العلّة الانزلاقية) في متوسطة الشهيد علي حسن الساعدي.

مع الامتنان

أ.م.د. قاسم كاظم مزبان
مدير قسم الإعداد والتدريب
٢٠٢٥/١٠/٢٢

صورة عنه الى :-

- ❖ مكتب السيدة معاون المدير العام للشؤون الفنية/ للتفضل بالعلم مع الامتنان .
- ❖ قسم الإعداد والتدريب /شعبة البحوث والدراسات التربوية /للحفظ مع الأوليات.
- ❖ الموما إليها.

HONOR X9c