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## Difficulties in the Pronunciation of English Proper Nouns Encountered by Advanced Iraqi Learners

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### Abstract

This study is an attempt to tackle one of the problems that face Advanced Iraqi Learners (ALLs) of English. It examines their abilities in pronouncing English Proper Nouns (PNs). Two samples of subjects have been included; they are the fourth stage subjects and the M.A. subjects. After conducting the test, it was found that both of the two samples of the subjects encountered difficulties as far as the pronunciation of proper nouns is concerned; however, M.A subjects are somehow better than the fourth stage subjects .

الصعوبات التي تواجه المتعلمين العراقيين ذوي المستوى المتقدم في نطق أسماء العلم  
الانكليزية

### الخلاصة :

هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لتناول إحدى المشاكل التي تواجه المتعلمين العراقيين ذوي المستوى المتقدم في نطق أسماء العلم الانكليزية ، حيث تم اختيار نوعين من العينات : المرحلة الرابعة و مرحلة الدراسات العليا في جامعه البصرة ، كلية التربية ، قسم اللغة الانكليزية . وبعد اجراء الاختبار وجد ان كلا العينتين تواجه صعوبة في نطق اسماء العلم الانكليزية لكن ضلته الدراسات العليا كانوا نوعا ما أفضل من العينة الأخرى .

# **Difficulties in the Pronunciation of English Proper Nouns Encountered by Advanced Iraqi Learners**

## **1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The topic of pronunciation difficulties is one of the most widely investigated phenomena. In learning any foreign language, learners usually face a number of difficulties. Pronunciation difficulties have the priority over other difficulties. In this sense, Fries (1945:3) asserts that sound systems present an obstacle that any learner of a foreign language has to come across. Once a learner masters the sound system of a foreign language, he can overcome other difficulties.

## **2. The Problem**

Pronunciation difficulties of proper nouns (henceforth PNs) are one of the difficulties that face any foreign language learner. Such difficulties stem from a variety of reasons. The first of which stems from language transfer (interference). The other reasons can be attributed to one or a combination of the following: sound system, spelling system, spelling pronunciation, number of syllables and method of teaching.

## **3. The Hypotheses**

The present study is based on the following hypotheses:

- 1-Advanced Iraqi learners (the fourth stage students and the M.A students) face difficulties in pronouncing English PNs.
- 2-The stage variable plays an important role in the students' performance
- 3-The sex variable does not have any influence on the students' performance:

## **4. The Objectives**

The objectives of the study read as follows:

- 1-Identifying areas of difficulty concerning the pronunciation of English PNs.
- 2-Showing whether or not the sex variable has any significant influence on the students' performance
- 3-Testing experimentally the plausibility of the above stated hypotheses.

## **5. Definition and Features of English Proper Nouns**

Webster's dictionary (3<sup>rd</sup>ed) (1971:1818) defines a PN as "that which designates a particular being or thing". Also, Jespersen (1974:544) views a proper name as "an arbitrary label used to denote a certain familiar person or thing or a group of persons or things". Thus, PNs are the names of persons (Shakespeare), places (Milwaukee), countries (Australia), months (September), days (Thursday), holidays (Christmas), magazines (Vogue) and so forth.

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<sup>1</sup>This study is based on an M.A. thesis conducted by the second researcher and supervised by the first one.

Accordingly, the noun that is not proper is usually called a common noun. The main differences between common and PNs are as follows:

First, initial letters of PNs are conventionally capitalized in English whereas common nouns are not. Second, PNs can be used to point to different and unrelated items in a presentation ,i.e. the same PNs can be used to refer to different and unrelated individuals .In contrast, common names refer to sets of entities that are related by sharing certain properties. In other words, the latter have "intrinsic semantic" content and cannot be used in the relatively arbitrary way that proper nouns can be. Third, PNs can be used with / without a determiner (Schmitt,1997:3).

This paper is based on M.A study conducted by the first author and supervised by the second one.

There are several features that distinguish PNs from any other type of nouns .They are given below:

### **1- Proper Nouns With /Without 'the'**

There are four classes of PNs out of seven as Leech and Svartvik (1975:277) state that can be used with the determiner .They comprise the following :

**1.Plural names:** They always take the definite article, for instance, the Netherlands.

**2.Some Geographical names:** They can be divided into three categories:

a.rivers: The Thames

b.seas: the Pacific , the Mediterranean

c.channels :the Panama channel, the Erie channel

**3.Public Institutions:** They involve

a.hotels and restaurants: The Grand (Hotel), the Hilton

b.theatres, cinemas, clubs : the Globe

c.museums, libraries: the Tate (Gallery), the British museum.

**4. Newspapers :** Likewise , the Daily Express.

The other three PNs that do not take a definite article are as follows :

**1.Personal names:** especially in the singular form.

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### **2. Calander items:** which include:

- a.names of festivals:Christmas (day)
- b.names of the months and days of the week
- c.names of seasons

### **3.Geographical names :**They comprise :

- a.names of continents
- b.names of countries and states
- c. names of cities and towns
- d. names of lakes and mountains

However, some PNs may take the definite article due to foreign influences

### **2- Capitalization**

The second property that distinguishes PNs from any other kind of nouns is '**Capitalization**'. Every PN must start with a capital letter, but not every initially capitalized word is a PN.(Eckersley and Eckersley,1960:19); (Chalker 1984:33).

### **3- Uniqueness**

PNs are considered to have a unique reference in the sense that they do not permit a contrast between a/an and 'the' this is on the one hand, on the other hand,PNs are either singular or plural but not both (Chalker,1984:33-34).

### **4- Defying typical letter-to sound conversion rules**

The fourth property that distinguishes PNs from any other noun is that they appear to have no obvious or simple letter to sound mapping rules that can be used to generate the pronunciation. Deshmukh(1999:14)provides us with the reason that stands behind such a defying saying that "since proper nouns are derived from a number of languages ethnic roots; consequently, their pronunciation may contain phonemes that are not present but are unique to the language of origin".

### **6. The Reasons behind Committing Errors in pronunciation**

MacCarthy (1978:85) alleges that " pronunciation difficulties arise directly from the phonology of the languages". The learner may find no trouble when he pronounces individual consonants, but he may find a great difficulty when he

attempts to pronounce a combination of consonants within clusters (Hill,1967:56). In this concern, Lado (1957:17) observes that if sequences of consonant clusters are not found in the native language of the learner, this will make the pronunciation of a word more difficult. Kenworthy (1987:25) adds that "such a difficulty does not depend on the sequence itself but also on the position in which these sequences occur".

Vowels moreover, constitute a source of a serious problem of pronunciation to Iraqi learners of English. This stems from the view that English is richer than Modern Standard Arabic in vowels. Arabic has six simple vowels /i/, /i:/, /u/, /u:/, /o:/, and /a:/ and three diphthongs /ai/, /aly/, /aw/, whereas English has 12 vowels and 8 diphthongs (Othman, 1977:30).

Furthermore, English spelling is often described as being non-phonemic in the sense that there is no one-to-one correspondence between English letters and sounds (Potter, 1950:73; Whitehall, 1956:36). O'Connor (1980: 10) affirms that the letters' main job is to remind us of corresponding sounds but they cannot make us pronounce sounds which we do not already know, but they merely symbolize them.

Bowen (1979:476) attributes the difficulty in pronouncing written words to the variable of familiarity saying that "we sometimes see new words for the first time in print. The pronunciation of such new words may be difficult because one letter may stand for different sounds in different words". Politizer (1970:67) considers any case in which the learner is misled by the spelling as a case of spelling pronunciation. Pyles and John (1968:3) define spelling pronunciation as "a notion used by many literate people who fancy that English words should be pronounced as they are written". In this regard, Ward (1972:45) ascribes spelling pronunciation to words being seen written and not heard. This is clearly exemplified through places and family names since they are seen not heard; hence, they are frequently pronounced as they are spelt.

The number of syllables plays an influential role in determining the correct pronunciation of a PN. The larger the number of syllables, the more the difficulty will be. Bickerton (1971:137) believes that "differences in syllable structure stand behind differences in error rates". Thus, we agree with what Brown (1994:90) and Williams (2001:18) state that the native language facilitates the learning process when there is a similarity and impedes it when there is a difference.

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## **7. The Experimental Investigation**

### **7.1 The Subjects**

The subjects of this study compose two groups: the first of which represents fourth stage students and the second group represents M.A students. Both of them make up a sample of AILs of English enrolled in the academic year 2004-2005 at the University of Basrah.

The total number of the subjects is (78) distributed as follows: (60) subjects represent fourth stage students and (18) subjects represent M.A. students. They comprise 39 males and 39 females.

As far as their ages are concerned, they range from (20 to 22) years as regards fourth stage students and (23 to 30) years in respect to M.A. students. All the subjects have studied English for an average period of eight years. In addition, they have studied English Phonetics and Phonology at least for two academic years. None of the subjects has reported any speech or hearing impairments.

### **7.2 The Test material**

As far as the test material is concerned, it was collected from two sources: the first of which is a dictionary under the title of **BBC pronouncing Dictionary of British Names** (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). The second source is Roach's textbook **A Course in Phonetics and Phonology** in which Roach lists a number of geographical names which are supposed to be familiar to the subjects. Some of the PNs that are used in the test are foreign (i.e. non-English) names. It seems that they have been borrowed into English and they become no longer unfamiliar.

### **7.3 The Nature of the Test**

Regarding the test- sheet, it opens with instructions that ask the subjects to give their names, stages, and then start to read the listed PNs.

The test undertaken in this study contains (100) items. The items are distributed according to the following criteria: 1. frequency of use, 2. ease of pronunciation and 3. familiarity. Every (20) PNs are put in one sheet. These PNs are distributed according to the following percentages: 78% personal names and 22%

geographical names. The geographical names, in turn, are not equally distributed concerning countries, towns, cities, rivers, channels and islands. In other words, countries, towns and cities are eleven in number; while names of rivers are seven in number, and channels are four in number.

Two important points that need to be mentioned are the following : the PNs are not arranged alphabetically so as to avoid any confusion between sounds and letters. Moreover , some PNs like the names of months, days of the week, ..etc., are out of the study since such names are supposed to be familiar to the students and we believe that they face no difficulty in pronouncing them.

#### **7.4 The Recording Technique**

In this test, the researcher used somewhat a modern recording technique. She used the (Recording of MP3 Digital USB Flash RAM with (128M.B) In addition, she used a video CD that was in turn, linked to the headphone.

The MP3 Flash recorder was placed in one of the rooms in the Department of English / College of Education /Basra University. Each one of the subjects entered the room and sat in front of the recorder. Having heard the instructions from the researcher concerning the test(both in English and Arabic) so as to avoid any confusion on the part of the subjects, the subjects were given ten seconds to have a look at the test items(proper nouns).After doing so, each of the subjects puts, one at the time; on the headphone and the researcher operated the video CD pressing the bottom of the recorder for the USB Flash. Meanwhile, the subjects heard the native speaker requesting him/her to say his/her name, and stage. The subjects had to respond immediately by saying their names and stages. Then, the native speaker started numerating the items. Once the native speaker said one, the subjects had to pronounce the first PN and so on.

Further in this respect, the duration between one item and the following one was only five seconds. After each (20) proper nouns (items) there was a break for two minutes during which the subjects heard a song so as to relax. Then after finishing the break, again the native speaker continued his numeration, and the subjects continued their pronunciations.

The total pronunciation of each subject lasted (15) minutes. As a result, the whole recording task (the test) lasted one month that was distributed as follows: three weeks for the recording of the fourth stage subjects' pronunciations who were (60)in number and the fourth week was devoted to the recording of the pronunciation of the M.A students who were (18) in number.



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### **7.5 Analysis of the Results and the Statistical Interpretations**

Error Analysis is the technique that is used in this study .Stendhal (1973 :16) points out that "error analysis helps us to identify areas of difficulty that a learner may face " .For Corder (1957:205)" satisfactory classification begins with an analysis which assigns errors to levels of language description ". The test results were analyzed according to the following criteria :

The sound system involving both pure vowels as well as diphthongs i.e., taking into consideration vowel quality and quantity

b-Consonantal pronunciation (single consonants).

c- Number of syllables

The t -test is used in the statistical analysis of the results .The following statistical interpretations are concluded :

1-There are no significant differences concerning the sex variable of the general sample .This is because the calculated value (0.1333) was less than the tabulated value (1.645).See table (1), and figure (1), respectively .

1- The differences between the sub-samples are significant since the calculated value - 1.729 was larger than the tabulated value 1.645 .See table (2), and figure (2), respectively .

2- It has been found that the M.A male subjects scored higher than the fourth stage male subjects .In other words , the pronunciation differences are significant .see table (3), and figure (3).On the contrary , the differences in pronunciation between the M.A females and the fourth stage females are not significant: this is due to the fact that the calculated value ( - 1.599) was less than the tabulated value (1.645).See table( 4),and figure( 4), respectively .

3- Among the other findings revealed by this study is that the number of syllables plays an important role in attaining a correct pronunciation .As we examined the syllable proportion , we noticed that the larger the number of syllables , the less the correct answers .This is shown in table (5), and figure (5), respectively .

Table 1: The application of the t- test to the general sample performance (fourth stage subjects and M.A subjects)

Equal Variance assumed	t-test for Equality of means	Degree of freedom (df)	The level of significance (2-tailed)
	.133	198	.894

TABLE (2): THE APPLICATION OF THE T-TEST TO THE TWO-SUB SAMPLES PERFORMANCE (FOURTH STAGE SUBJECTS, AND THE M.A SUBJECTS)

SUB-SAMPLES	T-TEST FOR EQUALITY OF MEAN	DF	LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE (2-TAILED)
FOURTH AND M.A	-1.729	198	.085

Table (3) : The application of the t-test to the male's performance of both of the fourth stage subjects and the M.A subjects

Sex	Equal Variance assumed	t-test for Equality of Mean	df	Level of significance
Male		-1.786	198	.076

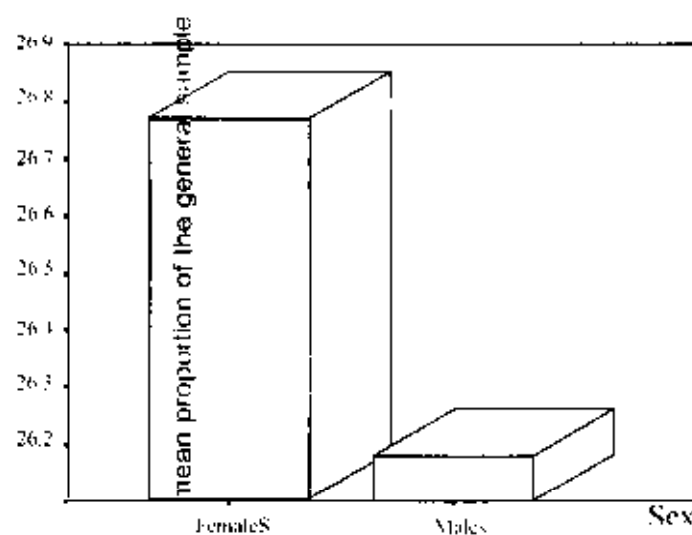
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Table (4): The application of the t-test to the females' performance of the fourth stage subjects and the M.A female subjects

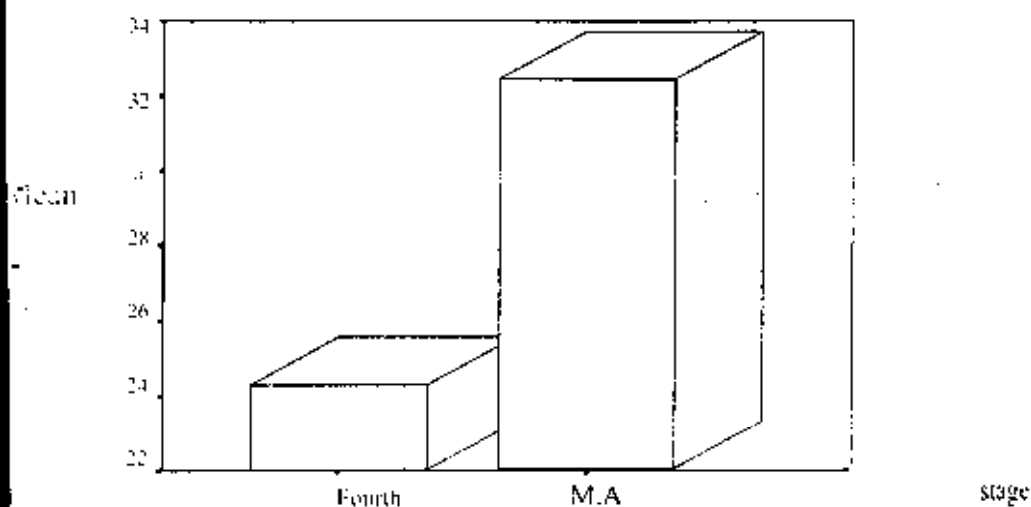
Sex	t-test Equality Mean	for of	d f	Level significance (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Female	-1.599		198	.111	-7.6667

Table (5): The effect of the number of syllables on attaining a correct pronunciation

	Number Syllables	of	The sum of correct responses	The total	Syllable %
	One-Syllable nouns		351	780	45
	Two-Syllable nouns		1207	4134	29.2
	Three-Syllable nouns		433	2340	18.5
	Four-Syllable nouns		64	546	11.72

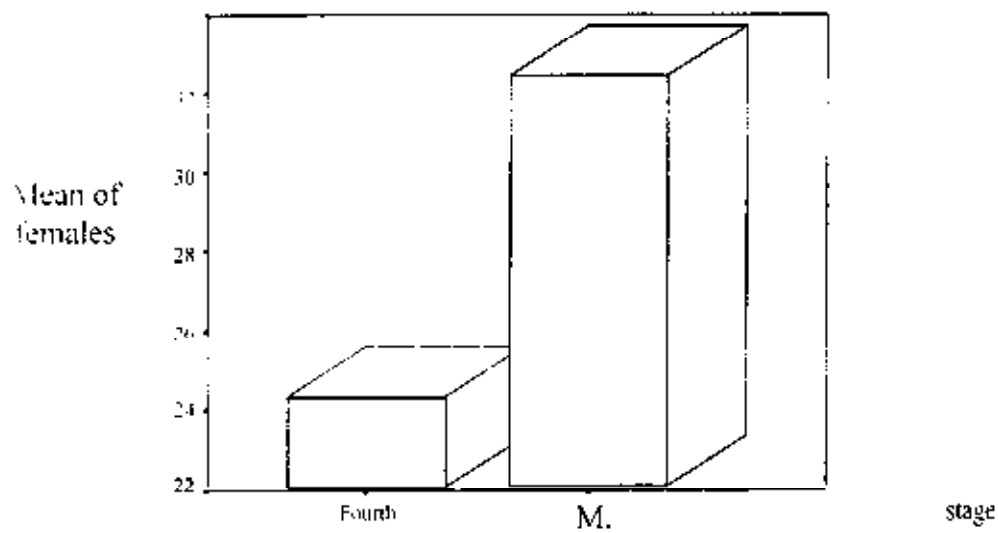


**FIGURE (1):** THE MEAN PROPORTION OF THE FEMALES AND THE MALES OF THE GENERAL SAMPLE

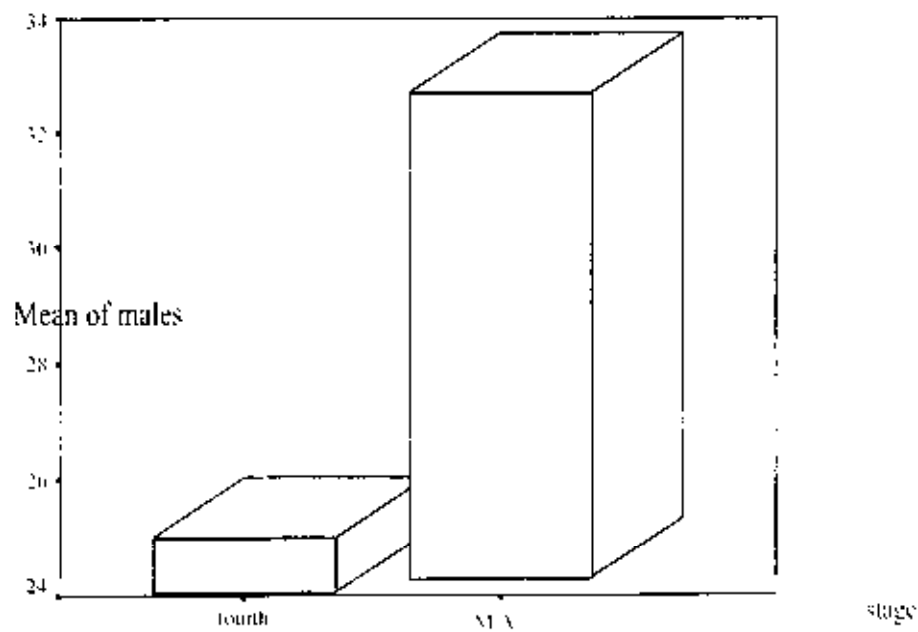


**Figure (2):** The pronunciation differences between the fourth stage subjects and the M.A subjects

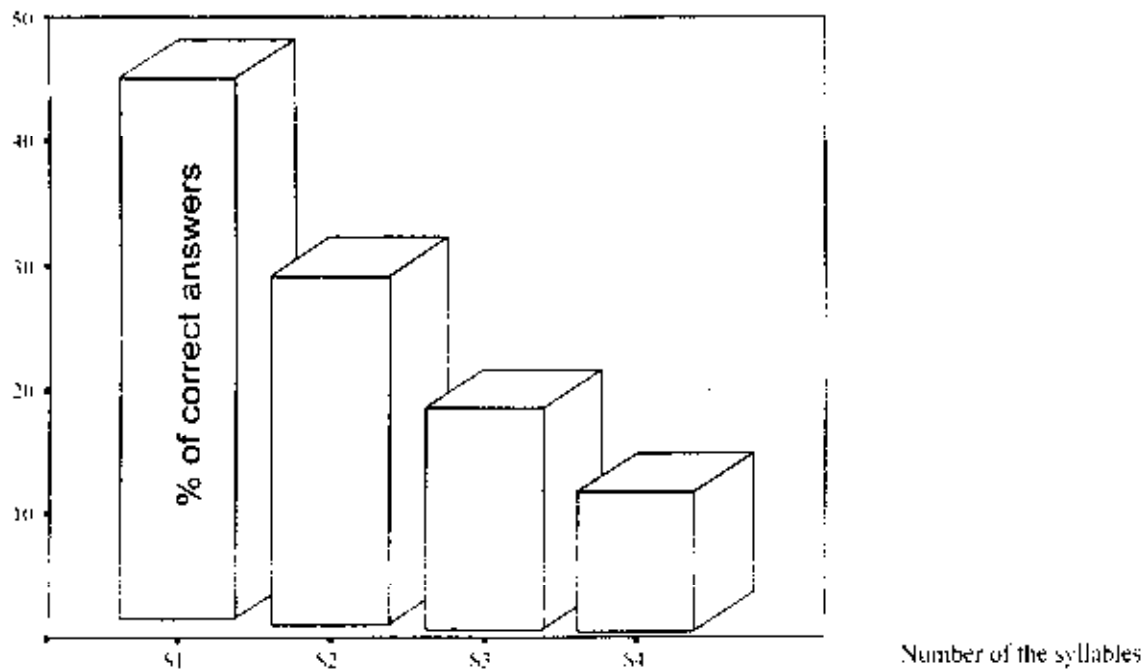
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**Figure (3):** Pronunciation differences between the females of the fourth stage subjects and the M.A females subjects



**FIGURE (4):** PRONUNCIATION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE MALES OF THE FOURTH STAGE SUBJECTS AND THE M.A MALES SUBJECTS



**FIGURE (5): THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NUMBER OF SYLLABLES AND THE PROPORTION OF CORRECT ANSWERS (PRONUNCIATIONS)**

## **8. THE CONCLUSIONS**

**THE MAIN CONCLUSIONS THAT CAN BE DRAWN FROM THE PRESENT STUDY ARE AS FOLLOWS:**

**1-AILS DO FACE DIFFICULTIES IN PRONOUNCING ENGLISH PNs.**

**2-THESE DIFFICULTIES IN PRONUNCIATION CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO ONE OR A COMBINATION OF THE FOLLOWING REASONS: LANGUAGE TRANSFER, THE ENGLISH SOUND SYSTEM, SPELLING PRONUNCIATION AND THE NUMBER OF SYLLABLES.**

**3-STAGE AS A VARIABLE PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN ATTAINING A CORRECT PRONUNCIATION OF PNs.**

**4-THE NUMBER OF SYLLABLES DOSE HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE PRONUNCIATION OF PNs.**

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**5-SPELLING PRONUNCIATION IS ANOTHER REASON THAT CAUSES A REAL AND A MAJOR PROBLEM IN READING OR PRONOUNCING PNs. THE LEARNER IN THIS CASE TRIES TO PRONOUNCE THE WORD AS IT IS SPELLED; THIS LEADS HIM TO COMMIT MISTAKES SINCE ENGLISH LETTERS ARE SOMETIMES SILENT LIKE THE LETTERS 'H', 'G', 'S' ETC., AS IN BELH, FRAMLINGHAM, JOUGET, ESNOUF, RESPECTIVLLY.**

### **APPENDIXES**

#### **APPENDIX ONE : THE ITEMS OF THE TEST**

Name:

Stage:

Sex:

**Pronounce the following Proper Nouns:**

1. Beatrice
2. Naesmith
3. Gymer
4. Foxt
5. Leicestershire
6. Pentrefoelas
7. Lywood
8. Quertier
9. Haldane
10. Shrewsbury
11. Aza
12. Nuthall
13. Tabor

14. Salzedo
15. Dunfermline
16. Cefn
17. Theobalds
18. Wacey
19. Raphael
20. Aberystwyth
21. Otham
22. Czerkawska
23. Izard
24. Pasley
25. Huddersfield
26. Kluth
27. Ianthe
28. Zeuner
29. Eynesbury
30. Polperro
31. Xavier
32. Titus
33. Maesycrugiau



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34. Fethaland
35. Basingstoke
36. Quartermaine
37. Wyrardisbury
38. Rosbotham
39. Okehampton
40. Dundee
41. Zinovieff
42. Justham
43. Vigo
44. Yeaxlee
45. Framlingham
46. Daborn
47. Jacobs
48. Amaury
49. Gaber
50. Glamorgan
51. Happisburgh
52. Mac Enteggart

53. Knipe
54. Xerri
55. Carlisle
56. Ugglebarnby
57. Jedrzejczak
58. De Carteret
59. Olumide
60. Ceiriog
61. Ungoed
62. Pagin
63. Sachs
64. Vialls
65. Lagan
66. Weiner
67. Radcliff
68. Zachner
69. Ythanbank
70. Belah
71. Sabin
72. Nygaard
73. Landrake

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- 74. Divell
- 75. Waveney
- 76. Eifion
- 77. Bodelwyddan
- 78. Hindmarsh
- 79. Euler
- 80. Yealm
- 81. Quoyburray
- 82. Gainsborough
- 83. Udale
- 84. Vaesen
- 85. Wye
- 86. Bachell
- 87. Meux
- 88. Lache
- 89. Keane
- 90. Spean
- 91. Idridgehay
- 92. Faslane

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93. Creigiau
94. Arthur
95. Nicholle
96. Xiberras
97. Yealmpton
98. Jouget
99. Esnouf
100. Greffier

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## APPENDIX TWO : THE CLASSIFICATION OF PROPER NOUNS

#	The Proper nouns	The Classification
1	BEATRICE	Personal name
2	NAESMITH	Personal name
3	GYMER	Personal name
4	FOXT	Personal name
5	LEICESTERSHIRE	Geographical name
6	PENTREFOELAS	Personal name
7	LYWOOD	Personal name
8	QUERTIER	Personal name
9	HALDANE	Personal name
10	SHREWSBURY	Geographical name
11	AZA	Personal name
12	NUTHAL	Personal name
13	TABOR	Personal name
14	SALZEDO	Personal name
15	DUNFERMLINE	Geographical name
16	CEFN	Personal name
17	THEOBALDS	Personal name

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18	WACEY	Personal name
19	RAPHAEL	Personal name
20	ABERYSTWYTH	Geographical name
21	OTHAM	Personal name
22	CZERKAWSKA	Personal name
23	IZARD	Personal name
24	PASLEY	Personal name
25	HUDDERSFIELD	Geographical name
26	KLUTH	Personal name
27	IANTHE	Personal name
28	ZEUNER	Personal name
29	EYNESBURTY	Personal name
30	POLPERRO	Geographical name
31	XAVIER	Personal name
32	TITUS	Personal name
33	MAESYCRUGIAU	Personal name
34	FETHALAND	Personal name
35	BASINGSTOKE	Geographical name
36	QUARTERMAINE	Personal name

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37	WYRARDISBURY	Personal name
38	ROSBOTHAM	Personal name
39	OKEHAMPTON	Personal name
40	DUNDEE	Geographical name
41	ZINOVIEFF	Personal name
42	JUSTHAM	Personal name
43	VIGO	Personal name
44	YEAXLEE	Personal name
45	FRAMLINGHAM	Geographical name
46	DABORN	Personal name
47	JACOBS	Personal name
48	AMAURY	Personal name
49	GABER	Personal name
50	GLAMORGAN	Geographical name
51	HAPPISBURGH	Personal name
52	MAC ENTEGGART	Personal name
53	KNIFE	Personal name
54	XERRI	Personal name
55	CARLISLE	Geographical name

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56	UGGLEBARNBY	Personal name
57	JEDRZICZAK	Personal name
58	DE CARTERET	Personal name
59	OLUMIDE	Personal name
60	CEIROG	River name
61	UNGOED	Personal name
62	PAGIN	Personal name
63	SACHS	Personal name
64	VIALLS	Personal name
65	LAGAN	River name
66	WEINER	Personal name
67	RADCLIFFE	Personal name
68	ZAEHNER	Personal name
69	YTHANBANK	Personal name
70	BELAH	Personal name
71	SABIN	Personal name
72	NYGAARD	Personal name
73	LANDRAKE	Personal name
74	DIVELL	Personal name



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75	WAVENEY	Personal name
76	EIFION	Personal name
77	BODELWYDDAN	Personal name
78	HINDMARSH	Personal name
79	EULER	Personal name
80	YEALM	River name
81	QUOYBURRAY	Personal name
82	GAINSBOROUGH	Personal name
83	UDALE	Personal name
84	VAESEN	Personal name
85	WYE	River name
86	BACHELL	Personal name
87	MEUX	Personal name
88	LACHE	Personal name
89	KEANE	Personal name
90	SPEAN	River name
91	IDRIDGEHAY	Personal name
92	FASLANE	Personal name
93	CREIGIAU	River name

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94	ARTHUR	Personal name
95	NICHOLLE	Channel name
96	XIBERRAS	Personal name
97	YEALMPTON	Personal name
98	JOUGET	Channel name
99	ESNOUF	Channel name
100	GREFFIER	Channel name

## **Difficulties in the Pronunciation of English Proper Nouns Encountered by Advanced Iraqi Learners**

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