

REVIEW

English Pronunciation for Arabic Speakers. By T. F. Mitchell and Shahir El-Hassan. Pp. vii + 161. London: Longman, 1989.

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On first inspection of this book one may be a little confused as to who exactly its intended audience is. The title of the book makes it sound like a work for Arabic-speaking students themselves, but the name of the series in which it appears, as well as the cover blurb, makes clear that it is designed for teachers of such students. This teacher-orientation is largely confirmed by one's reading of the book, in which the Arabic-speaking learners of English are generally described in the third person, with many remarks specifically addressed to teachers. However, the perspective of the book sometimes shifts so that parts read like a manual for students to use themselves; this is our impression, for instance when on page 137 we read the invocation: "Beware of the spelling; the vowel of 'foot' is short and that of 'boot' long." Likewise, the advice on p. 16 about how learners can improve through listening to native speakers seems to be addressed directly to them.

A second question which may be raised about the intended audience of this book concerns the nature of the teachers it is aimed at. In fact, the authors seem to have tried to combine both information which an Arabic-speaking teacher of English might find useful (perhaps even the warning about spelling quoted above is aimed at this group?) and material which will help teachers who are not themselves versed in Arabic at all. Remarks that seem oriented primarily towards non-Arabic speaking readers include, for instance, the claim about Arabic intonation on p. 62 which is qualified by "at least as far as its better known regional forms are concerned". Better known to whom, we may wonder? presumably to the outsider, for the better-known forms for any native speakers will doubtless be those they use themselves, in which case such a restriction seems irrelevant. In fact, one gets the distinct impression that the aim of the book may be as much to familiarise non-Arabic-speaking teachers with aspects of their students' native language as it is to familiarise the students with aspects of English. "Arabic pronunciation for English-speaking teachers" might almost be a plausible subtitle.

This slightly ambivalent orientation can be seen as both a strength and a weakness of the book. On the one hand, it does have something to offer to a variety of readers; while it may be of interest to both Arabic- and non-Arabic-speaking teachers of English, it will also reward a reading by advanced students. The drawback underlying this flexibility is that, considered purely according to the publishers' labelling, as a handbook for teachers, it seems to be rather lacking in pedagogical as opposed to theoretical content. While providing a very thorough survey of the aspects of English pronunciation which students need to master, with helpful predictions about likely sources of difficulty, the book does not make many suggestions about how the teacher can best help students to overcome these difficulties (indeed, on p. 16 the authors seem to suggest that self-tuition may be more profitable than classroom work). Inexperienced teachers who consult this book will be equipped with a useful body of information, but they may well get into difficulties in trying to impart all this information to their students.

For example, only relatively advanced students could be expected to cope with the extremely detailed descriptions offered here, and even then some of the technical terms which crop up regularly may seem daunting; opening the book at random on page 106, for instance, we meet the terms *median tongue-contact*, *rolled 'r'*, *frictionless continuant*, *retraction* and *weak breath force*. Admittedly, there is an index giving page references where explanations of technical terms can be found, and the book opens with

a brief account of some basic concepts (pp. 2-10), but even with the help of these some difficulties may be experienced by the reader who has little knowledge of phonetics (use of the index, for instance, did not lead us to any useful explanations of the terms *retraction* and *rolled 'r'*).

For less advanced learners, it seems likely that the teacher will need to select from the extensive descriptions provided those points which seem most important for an adequate pronunciation.

Mitchell and El-Hassan make one general recommendation which is relevant here, namely that more attention should be paid to features of connected speech (the subject matter of part 2 of the book) than to problems involving the articulation of individual sounds (Part 3). However, many teachers would certainly welcome more guidance than this; for example, in the discussion of individual phonemes, given the amount of detail provided, some suggestions could have been made as to which features deserve most urgent attention (e.g. because they are likely to interfere with communication) and which could if necessary be skipped over.

Whatever the level of the students, improvement of pronunciation will be achieved only through extensive practice. The authors provide many examples of minimal pairs, which can be used as a basis for practice, but again the book could have offered more, in the form of sample exercises or at least some advice to teachers on how to devise their own. One important procedure recommended by Mitchell and El-Hassan is that of learning by heart connected texts, which can assist the mastery of features of connected speech. While such texts can of course be drawn from any native speaker discourse available to teacher or students, a few sample texts, with their transcription and possibly a commentary drawing attention to particular details, would have formed a welcome appendix to the book.

Leaving aside for a moment the issues concerned with English, we would like to comment on the authors' use of the terms Arab and Arabic throughout the text. The first of these labels is evidently used as a shorter alternative to the label Arabic-speakers used in the title, but we feel that it is less than satisfactory for this purpose because it tends to receive a racial or national interpretation more often than a linguistic one. There are after all plenty of native speakers of Arabic who would not describe themselves as Arabs. Moreover, even the label Arabic sometimes suggests a homogeneity which is far from the truth. Mitchell and El-Hassan do at various points draw attention to the considerable differences which exist between the standard and various regional colloquial forms of Arabic, for example, in their discussion of the problems Arabic speakers have with consonant clusters, but there are many places where their claims seem a little too general, such as when they describe diphthongs as "essentially foreign to Arabic" (p. 141). Moreover, the authors, perhaps inevitably, seem to give more attention to the problems of certain groups than to those of others; the prototype Arabic speaker they have in mind is definitely a Middle Eastern one, and they seem to pay particular attention to Egyptian Arabic, with a tendency to neglect usage farther west (for instance, a claim about accentuation of vowels is hedged with "at least from Libya eastwards" (p. 21), but we are never told what happens west of Libya). Teachers in, say, Morocco or Algeria may find that many of the book's general claims about particular difficulties are not really valid for their students (and this may be traced not only to differences in their varieties of Arabic but also to other background differences, such as the fact that such North African learners usually already have a good mastery of French when they begin to learn English). Of course, given the diversity which exists within the Arabic-speaking world, we could hardly expect the content of such a book to be equally useful to teachers from all regions; however, we do feel that a few general remarks acknowledging this diversity and its limiting effect on generalisations might well have been placed at the beginning of the book.

Despite these few reservations concerning the intended audience and scope of the book, we feel that its description of English pronunciation is clear and concise, with plentiful and well-chosen examples; in fact much of the discussion could be equally useful even to teachers and learners with a non-Arabic background. The book includes a fairly clear account of rhythm and intonation, and there is a detailed description of each consonant and vowel phoneme, with information on allophonic variation and distribution. Of particular value are the discussions of phonological processes such as assimilation, elision and linking, which present extremely useful information in a reasonably non-technical way, with some particularly helpful comparisons with Arabic. Indeed, throughout the book, constant attention is paid to contrasts between English and Arabic, and on the basis of these the authors make predictions

about likely difficulties and suggestions of where positive transfers from Arabic can be exploited. On the whole, then, we feel that this is a practical and versatile book which has much to offer both students and teachers from a variety of backgrounds.