

University Students' Incompetence in Dividing Oral Contexts into Sound Prosodic Units

عجز الطلاب الجامعيين في تقسيم السياقات اللفظية الى وحدات نغمية سليمة

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ABSTRACT

This research paper intends to explore the Sudanese university Students' incompetence in dividing some selected syntactic structures into proper prosodic units while speaking or reading aloud. This study takes on the descriptive analytic method and the quantitative research is used to analyze the numerical data and compare the scores obtained. To achieve the aim stated above, the researcher selected a sample of 50 third year English language students from Sudan University of Science and Technology and Al-Neelain University to represent the target linguistic community of the study. Then a diagnostic production test consisting of (9) items was conducted to measure the study assumption. When statistical analysis carried out, the obtained findings showed that students' verbal production regarding most of the test items was poor. The paper suggested that, if data from larger and more varied samples are collected; further studies may obtain more accurate results.

Keywords: incompetence, oral contexts, prosodic units, university students

المستخلص

يهدف هذا العمل البحثي الى استكشاف عجز الطلاب الجامعيين السودانيين في تقسيم بعض التركيبات النحوية المختارة الى وحدات تنغيمية صحيحة اثناء التحدث او القراءة بصوت عالي. اعتمدت هذه الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي وقد تم استخدام طريقة التحليل الكمي لتحليل ومقارنة النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها. ولتحقيق الهدف المذكور انفاً، اختار الباحث عينة من (50) طالباً في السنة الثالثة، لغة انجليزية من جامعتي السودان للعلوم والتكنولوجيا والنيلين ليمثلوا المجتمع اللغوي المستهدف من قبل الدراسة. ثم تم اجراء اختبار تشخيصي مكون من (9) بنود لقياس فرضية الدراسة. عند اجراء التحليل الاحصائي، اظهرت النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها ان الانتاج اللفظي لدى الطلاب فيما يتعلق بمعظم العناصر المختبرة كان ضعيفاً. اقترحت الورقة انه في حالة جمع بيانات من عينات اكبر واكثر تنوعاً، فقد تحصل الدراسات المستقبلية علي نتائج اكثر دقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عجز، سياقات لفظية، مقاطع نغمية، الطلاب الجامعيين.

INTRODUCTION

Non-native of English language speakers involved into a conversation or a read aloud text with varying levels of intonation use mastery. Since, "intonation is long accepted to be a key role in effective spoken language"(Levis & Pickering 2004, p.505) and it is a powerful tool in the message of any linguistic exchange (Ramírez Verdugo, 2003), some speakers have excellent verbal performance and their perfect use of English intonation is in a way that allows them to produce intelligible discourse. However, those who are incapable to produce intonation

adequately to express their intents they usually end up with creating nonsense speech.

Although intonation has an essential role to play in learning a second language, regrettably not much attention has been given to this issue in EFL teaching. Therefore, this study is an attempt to contribute to that point. As prosodic or intonation units chunking is a key of speech clarification, the current work will highlight intonation from this angle so this paper chiefly aims to: explore the EFL university students' incompetence in dividing some selected syntactic structures into proper prosodic units while speaking or reading aloud.

From his observation as a practitioner of EFL teaching for many years, the researcher has noticed that, one of the basic problems in the students' oral production is to determine the units in which prosodic features are actualized so the current work sought to answer the following question:

1]: When conversing or reading aloud, to what extent can EFL students divide the verbal message into proper prosodic units competently?

To answer the question has been put forth, the researcher assumed that: dividing utterance into chunks would be a prosodic intricacy for EFL undergraduates. It is worthy saying that, the deep understanding of the research problem requires shedding light on the literature relevant to the linguistic phenomenon under study.

When we talk we do not talk in single words but in groups of words spoken continuously, with no break or pause; we may pause after a group, but not during it. (O.Connor, 1980, p.90). accordingly, native English speakers do not speak continuously without taking a breath. They take tiny, natural pauses between groups of words. This very short break between groups of words is called prosodic boundaries which give the addressee the chance to catch what has been said. The presence or the absence of these pauses, and their location, signals to the hearer the syntactic structure of the sentence. Sometimes this structure is potentially ambiguous, and the tonality can disambiguate it (Well, J. C. 2006, p.3). Moreover, these speech units can assist the hearer to process a large flow of words in an utterance easily (Celce-Murcia, 1996). The prosodic unit is characterized by an accentual pattern, (stress) a tonal contour (pitch) and a duration pattern (tempo) so the sound combination of all these components,

structures a perfect and meaningful utterance chunks.

The local and regional relatively research on English prosody has left a wide space for further research. Since nearly all of the research conducted has not itemized the intricacy of dividing prosodic units for EFL learners in a separated way, the current study is conducted to fill this gap. Based on a study conducted by, (Ahmed, 2015) the finding of that study showed that EFL university students did not know the idea of thought groups, and new and old information in conversation. Gaining this knowledge affected their choices towards choosing 'new information' in sentences as focus word. Moreover, another study conducted by (Khader.& Magdad., 2015), found out that EFL students had difficulty to identify the tone group boundaries by (weight mean=63.27), which is very closed to the pass mean, that equals 60. In a third study conducted by (Nagendra, 2014), it was found that, all the informants showed a decent degree of conformity to RP with respect to tonality where the percentage revealed that (57.91%) was close to the standard pattern (RP).

Methodology

Method

This study takes on the descriptive analytic method and it used the quantitative approach to analyze the numerical data collected and to interpret the statistical results obtained.

Method

Participants included 50 undergraduate-student volunteers whom were assumed to represent the sample of "the target linguistic community" were randomly selected from Sudan University of Science and Technology & Al-Neelain University, during the academic year 2017/2018.

For recording, each participant was requested to read aloud nine sentences forming the diagnostic production test utilized. Then these recordings were subjected to analysis in order to explore the erroneous intonation breaks they produced.

Materials

In order to construct the body of the diagnostic production test (DPT) nine of various scripted statements were selected from a book entitled *'Introduction to English Intonation'* by J.C. Wells (2006). Knowing that, the selected material has an either audio version or written version attached to, which made it easy for identifying errors when the obtained data matched to the original versions; additionally,

special attention was paid to these items topics and general impression, with the desire to make the selected material sound as natural as possible in order to be read without stuttering. Also the researcher bore in mind that the material must be relevant and must cover most of the contents to be measured as far as possible in order to achieve the main purpose of the study. Then, the reliability of DPT was checked by using Half Split Coefficient Method for measuring the internal constancy. The table (1) below shows that the general reliability for all DPT items equals 0.825 and the p-value (sig.) is less than 0.05 so this result assures that, the test is reliable.

Table 1: Half Split Coefficient Method

DPT Items	Person-correlation	P-Value	Spearman-Brown Coefficient
1	0.787	0.000	0.884
2	0.677	0.000	0.832
3	0.645	0.000	0.842
4	0.876	0.000	0.833
5	0.667	0.000	0.773
6	0.786	0.000	0.877
7	0.674	0.000	0.700
8	0.743	0.000	0.832
9	0.784	0.000	0.852
Mean	0.737	0.000	0.825

Results and Discussion

Before the quantitative analysis of data collected done, a model answer for each item is displayed in a form of a PRAAT figure showing the pitch contour and the boundary length to which collected data matched. Then the obtained results will be tabulated statistically in a form of frequency and percentage. We should pay attention to the fact that, prosodic units are characterized by

several phonetic cues: (i) coherent pitch contour, (ii) ending the movement of the final tone at slow pace (iii) the occurrence of pauses at the boundaries. However, in his analysis, the researcher will only deal with pitch contour and pauses length to identify the LPs of the test items as they are the most important ones of the three:

Figure 1: Item (1): When I cough, it hurts my throat

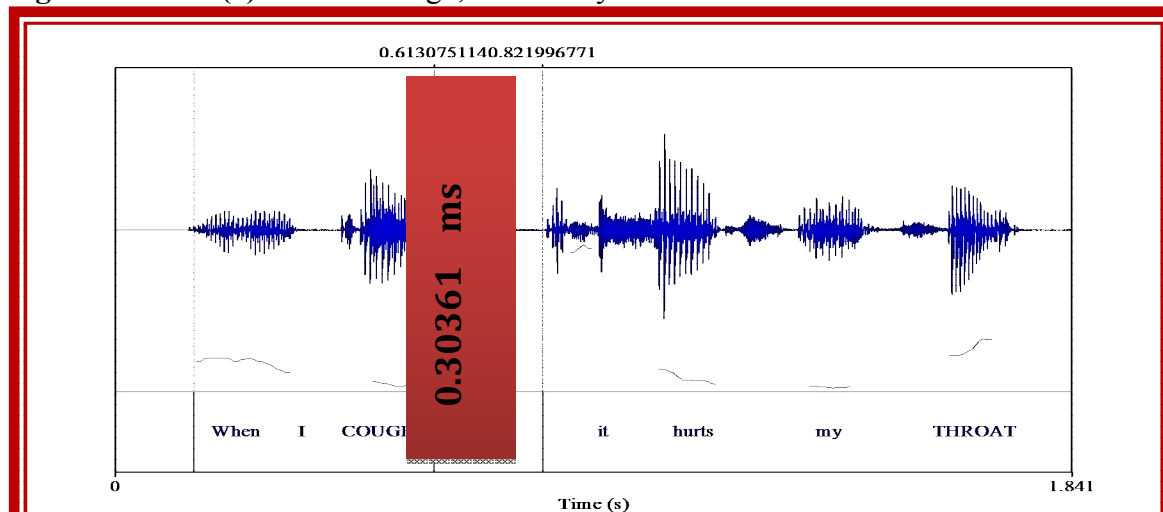


Table 2: Results of item one:

Sentence (1)	Correct LP		Incorrect LP		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
When I cough it hurts my throat.	<u>24</u>	<u>48%</u>	26	52%	50	100

Test item (1): "When I cough, it hurts my throat." This item is divided into two LPs as it consists of two clauses which each tends to be uttered as a separate LP, therefore, the intonation boundary or break must be inserted after the word (*cough*) as shown in the figure (1) at which the tone of the first LP ends and followed by a pause of (303610) milliseconds. This answer is taken as a model

to which the participants' responses were matched. Statistically, the above table demonstrates that the percentage of the erroneous responses identifying the prosodic unit concerning this item was (52%) in contrast to only (48%) of the correct responses. Accordingly, this percentage shows the students' incompetence in dividing such structures into proper LPs.

Figure 2: Item (2): We'll arrive at about ten; the children can come along later.

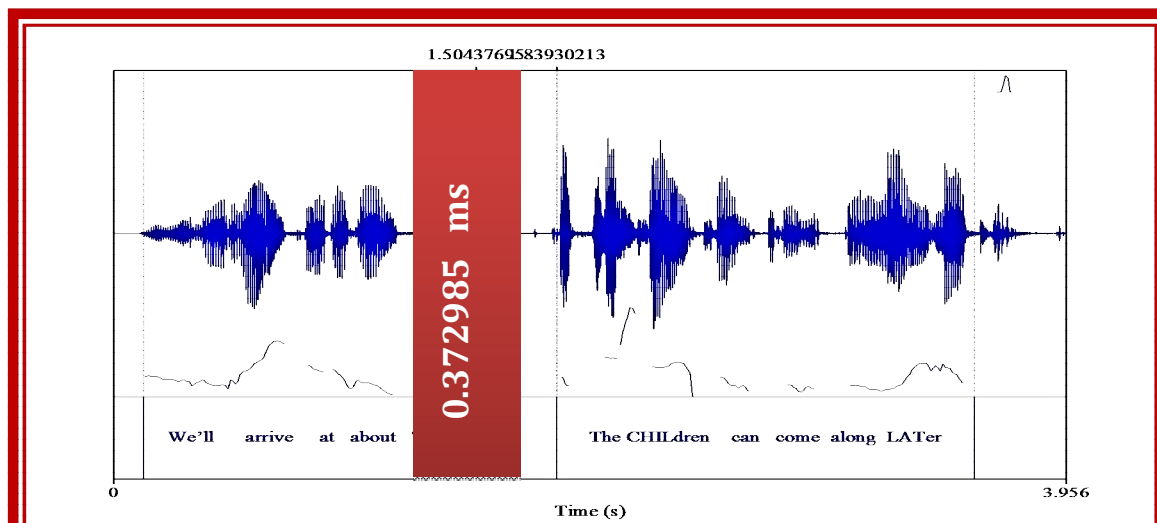


Table 3: Results of item two:

Sentence (2)	Correct LP		Incorrect LP		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
We'll arrive at about ten the children can come along later.	15	30%	35	70%	50	100

Test item (2): "We'll arrive at about ten; the children can come along later". As we can see from the figure (2) above, the first part of the item ends in final falling tone followed by a pause of (0.372985 ms) after which the pitch of the second part resets so obviously this item consists of two LPs. Then the fifty respondents representing the sample of the study were tested to read aloud this item and

their responses were matched to the PRAT model answer in order to explore the errors they might make. The statistical results came up from this analysis indicate that, the students' erroneous responses were by (70%) versus only (30%) for the correct responses which means that the result supports what had been assumed before.

Figure 3: Item (3): He turned round and a strange sight confronted him.

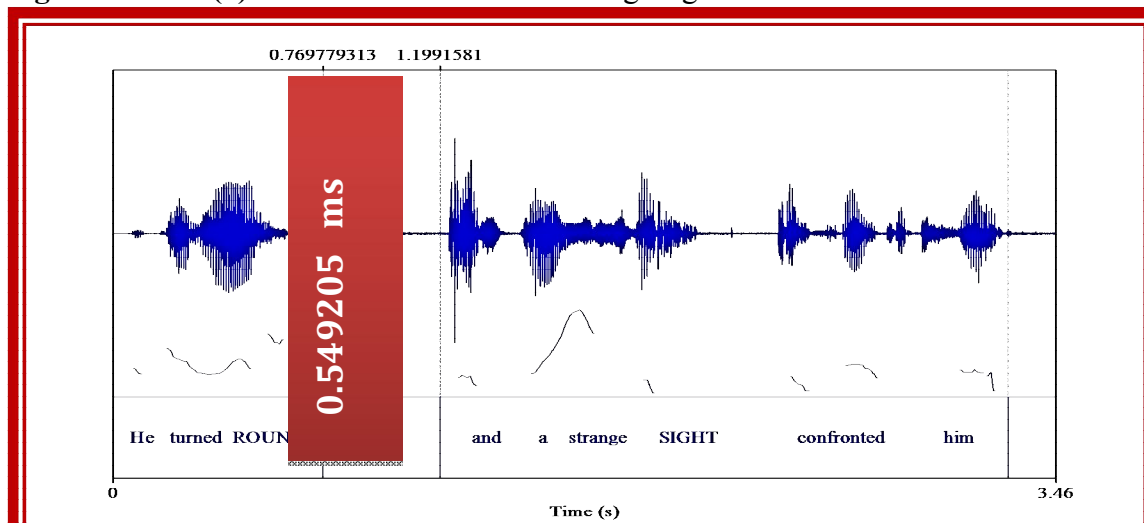


Table 4: Results of item three:

Sentence (3)	Correct LP		Incorrect LP		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
He turned round and a strange sight confronted him	<u>22</u>	<u>44%</u>	28	56%	50	100

Test item (3): "He turned round and a strange sight confronted him." As a rule there is usually an intonation boundary between coordinate clauses unless the subject of coordinate clause is ellipted. Based on aforementioned rule the item above has two LPs separated by a pause of (0.549205) milliseconds and pitch reset at the beginning

of the second LP as we can clearly see in the above figure. Then, this answer is taken as a model to which the participants' responses were matched. The statistics above show the results obtained from producing item (3) by the sample, in which (28%) represents the percentage of false responses and (44%) represents the percentage of correct ones.

Figure 4: Item (4): Jenny and Peter, I want you to take the left side.

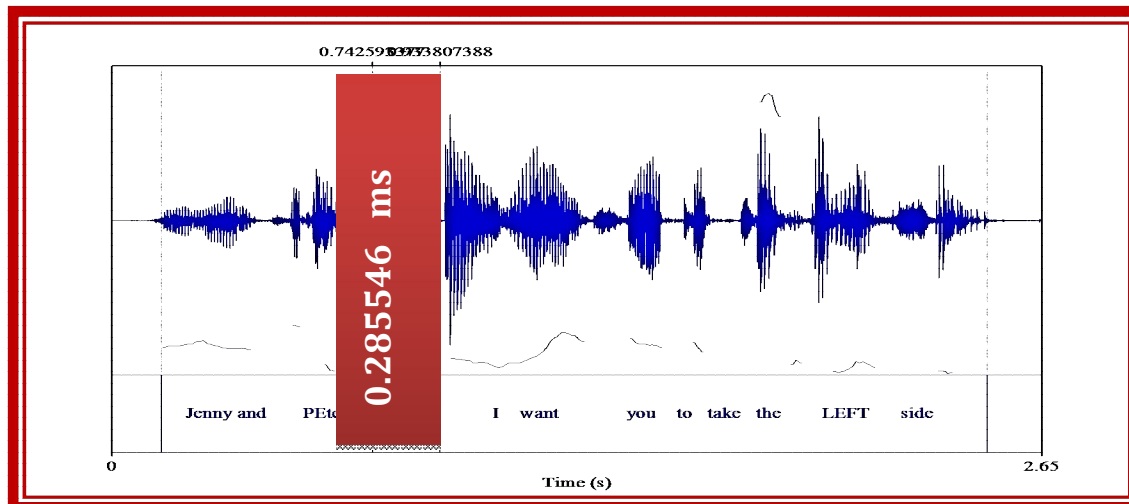


Table 5: Results of item four:

Sentence (4)	Correct LP		Incorrect LP		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Jenny and Peter, I want you to take the left side.	<u>23</u>	<u>46%</u>	27	54%	50	100

Test item (4): "Jenny and Peter, I want you to take the left side." With reference to this item, the first part (*Jenny and Peter*) which is a vocative tends to form a separate part. As a rule when vocatives take an initial position they form their own LP, accordingly, the above mentioned item has two LPs. As seen in the figure 4 there is a final falling tone of LP1 followed by a pause of (285546) milliseconds

after which there is a tone change, all these characteristics prove the existence of two LPs in the item concerned. Then the participants' responses to this item were matched to the model answer and the statistics came as follows: only twenty three (46%) of the responses matched the model answer while twenty seven (54%) did not.

Figure 4: Item (5): During the last three years our interests haven't increased at all.

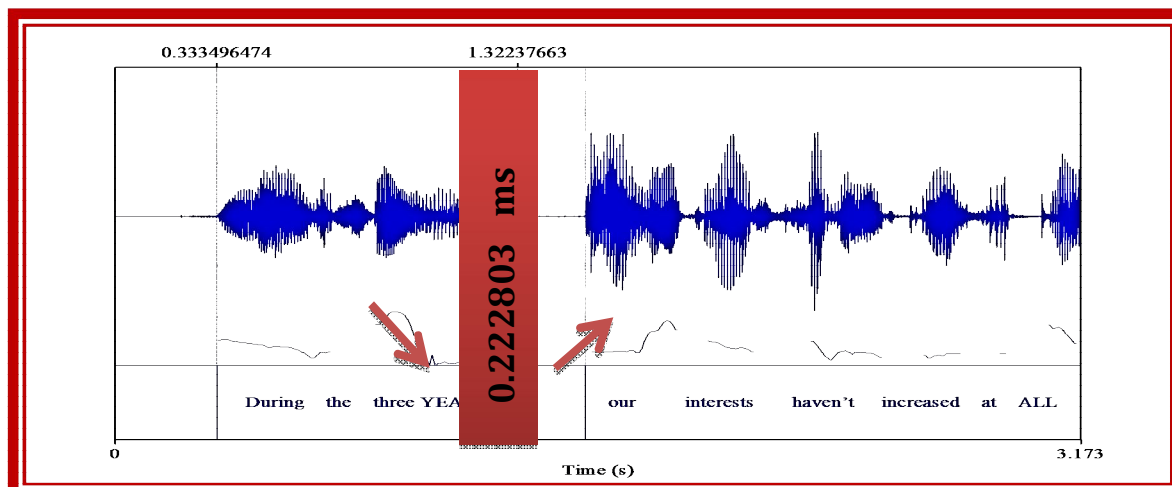


Table 6: Results of item five:

Sentence (5)	Correct LP		Incorrect LP		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
During the last three years our interests haven't increased at all	<u>19</u>	<u>38%</u>	31	62%	50	100

Test item (5): "During the last three years, our interests haven't increased at all." Based on the rule saying when the adverbial comes at the beginning of the clause it forms its own LP, we can say that item (5) consists of two LPs. With reference to the figure shown above, the final tone in the first part of the item is falling precedes a short pause of (0.241116) milliseconds and a pitch reset occurring after

that pause creating a new LP. After the participants were tested on that item their responses were matched to the model answer. The statistical process for the data collected showing that only nineteen responses (38%) were correct in contrast to thirty one (62%) incorrect responses and accordingly this result to great extent is in favour of the study.

Figure 6: Item (6): As for Jeremy he can do what he likes.

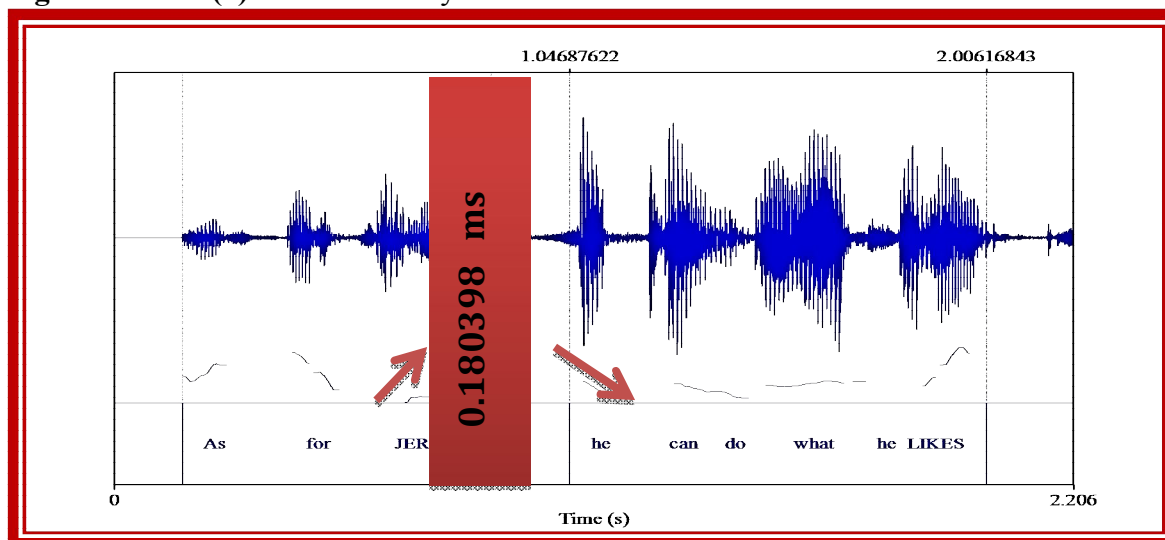


Table 7: Results of item six:

Sentence (6)	Correct LP		Incorrect LP		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
As for Jeremy he can do what he likes	25	50%	25	50%	50	100

Test item (6): "As for Jeremy he can do what he likes" The first element of this item is typically the theme, while the remainder is the rhyme therefore the first element is most often the grammatical subject that we signal its status by giving it a separate LP. Based on what said, it is obvious that the item concerned has two LPs and that is clearly illustrated by figure 6 above, in which the tonic syllable of the first LP is the last content word that followed by a pause of length (0.180398 ms)

and a pitch change that indicates a new LP. Accordingly, the study sample's responses concerning this item were matched to the model answer shown above and the statistics (7) show equality in percentages which were (50%) for the correct responses versus (50%) for the incorrect ones. Although the finding is not significantly in favour of the hypothesis concerned, it is not convincing according to the researcher since it did not exceed 60%.

Figure 7: Item (7): What they didn't like was the noise

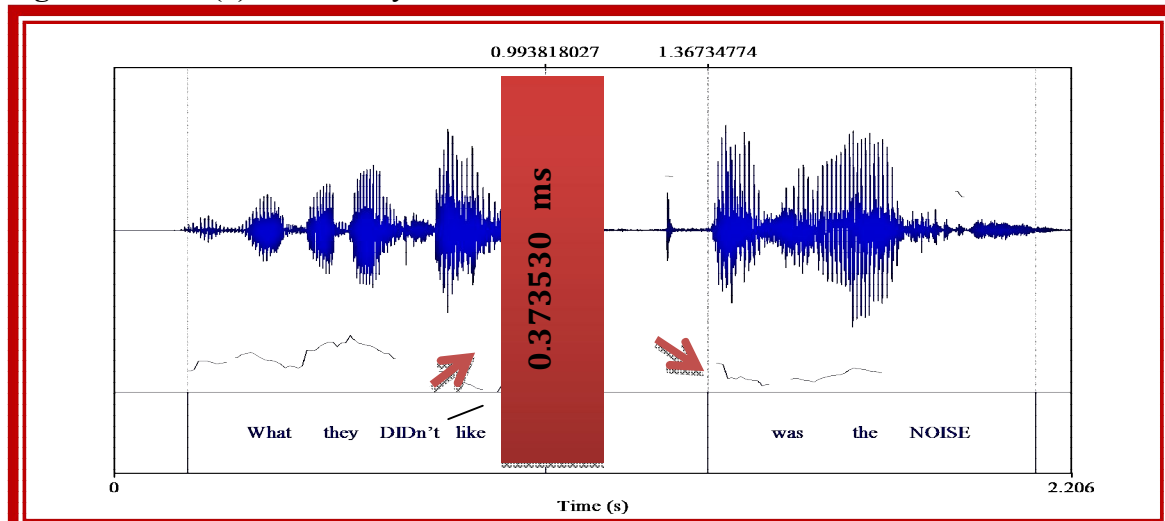


Table 8: Results of item seven:

Sentence (7)	Correct LP		Incorrect LP		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
What he didn't like was the noise	27	54%	23	46%	50	100

Test item (7): "What they didn't like was the noise" This item is called a pseudo-cleft sentence which is a kind of cleft sentences involving (*what*). There is usually an intonation boundary that divided it into two LPs. The above figure clearly shows this division. Based on that figure it can be seen that, the break separating the two LPs is in a duration of (0.373530) milliseconds and there is also a pitch reset occurs at the beginning of

the second element, which indicates that it is a separate LP. As for the participants' responses matched to this model, the obtained results were as follows: Based on the above table 8, it is observed that the correct responses had a higher percentage than those which were incorrect, (54% vs. 46%). Though the result was contrary to what was hypothesized, it can reflect the students' ability in performing such linguistic structures properly.

Figure 8: Item (8): We could do it tomorrow, couldn't we?

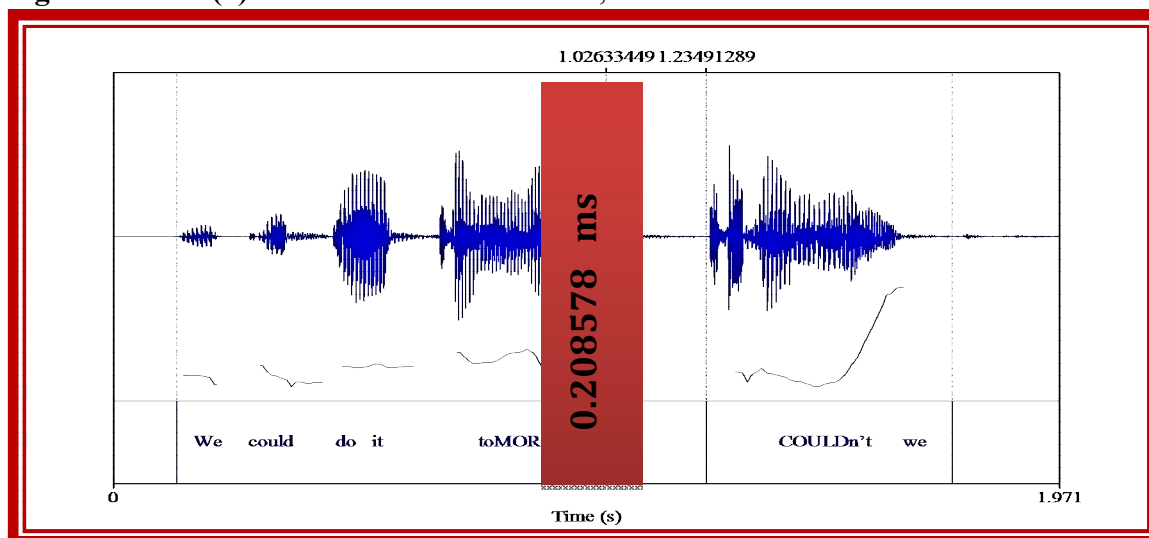


Table 9: Results of item seven:

Sentence (8)	Correct LP		Incorrect LP		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
We could do it tomorrow couldn't we?	25	50%	25	50%	50	100

Test item (8): "We could do it tomorrow, couldn't you?" This item has a reverse-polarity tag in which the tag is negative while the main clause is positive. In such structures, the tag tends to have its own LP and accordingly we can say that the aforementioned item consists of two LPs and the above figure shows a pause of (0.208578

ms) occurs between the two LPs besides a tone change occurring at the beginning of the second LP. In the light of the model answer shown in figure 8, the participants' different responses were matched and the results obtained showing equal percentages (50% vs. 50%) for both correct and incorrect responses.

Figure 9 Item (9): I want to buy some fruit, some milk and some bread

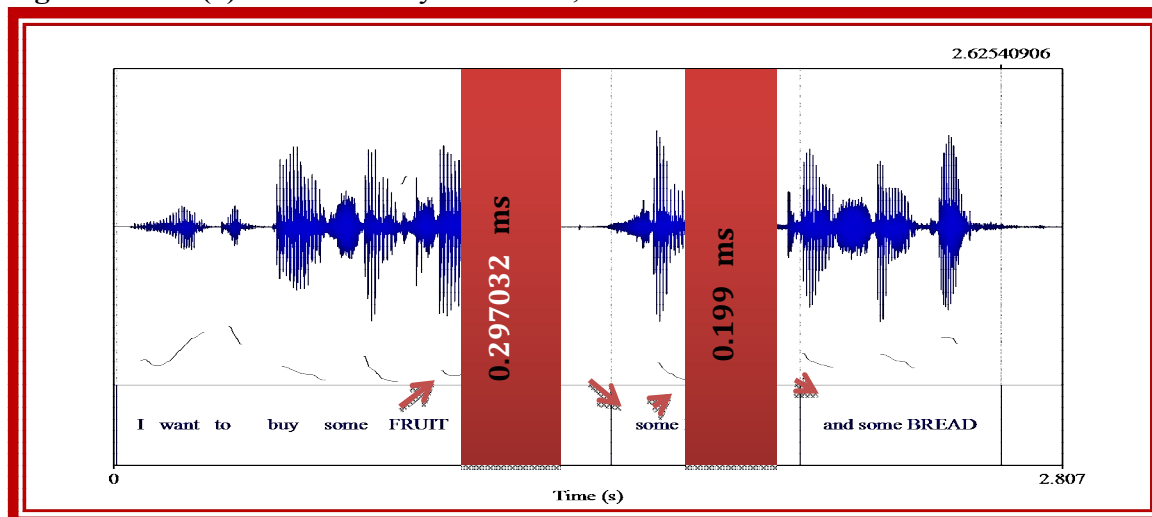


Table 10: Results of item eight:

Sentence (9)	No. of LPs	Correct LP		Incorrect LP		Total	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
I want to buy some fruit some milk and some bread	LP1	16	32%	34	68%	50	100
	LP2	20	40%	30	60%		
	LP3	34	68%	16	32%		
Overall percentage error		66.7%					

Test items (9): "I want to buy some fruit, some milk and some bread." This item is a parallel structure which means the repetition of the same pattern of words like (fruit, milk and bread) or phrases within a sentence to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance. With this kind of structures there is likely to be an intonation break after each component if there are more than two components or the components are heavy. According to what said, the above mentioned item must contain of three LPs. The PRRAT figure shows these expected LPs and the duration of the breaks between them besides showing the tone change occurred at the

beginning of LP2 and LP3. The above table shows the obtained results in relation to this test item. The distribution of the percentages for the three expected LPs was as follows: for LP1 and LP2 the respondents failed to determine the proper position of the intonation break (boundary) by (68% and 60%) respectively, while they responded correctly to LP3 by (68%). After calculating the percentage error concerning the three aforementioned percentages the overall percentage of errors was 66.7% which actually shows students' inability to chunk such structures into proper LPS.

Table 11: hypothesis testing by using chi-square test

Test Items	Overall Errors		Chi-square	Mean	Standard deviation	T-Test Value	Sig.
9	0.05	5%	16	8	2.8	14	0.000

From the above table (11), it is clear that the calculated value of T – TEST for the significance of the differences for the respondents' answers in the study hypothesis was (14) which is greater than the tabulated value of T – TEST at the degree of freedom (49) and the significant value level (0.05%) which is (2.34). This indicates that, the null hypothesis is rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis and that in turn means there are statistically significant differences at the level (0.05 %) among the answers of the respondents. This result is obviously serves the present work. From the statistics above also it is shown that the significant value (0.000) is smaller than the significant value (0.05) and this in turn does also support the acceptance of this hypothesis.

To sum up, the statistical results obtained in this context obviously assure that EFL Students fail to divide utterance into appropriate intonation phrases to convey the exact intended message.

Conclusions

Based on the findings obtained, prosodic units division is proved to be an intricacy for EFL undergraduates where the statistical results of the current work indicate that the Sudanese undergraduates whom tested did find it difficult to chunk most of the utterance items tested into correct lexical phrases. The researcher refers this declining to instructional reasons together with lack of familiarity of students with such prosodic features and the absence of practice. The grammar and reading instruction methods in earlier education stages do not really pay

more attention to supra-segmental features accompanying utterance especially chunking sentences into lexical phrases; teachers often focus on the lexicon sound production and verbs formation without showing any importance for utterance boundaries and other intonation components. Therefore, this finding is regarded as a unique contribution of the present study on intonation literature and in the light of this the current work suggests that, further studies in the area should shed greater light on this area and they should address the key mechanisms that help promoting this linguistic skill. Also forthcoming studies may obtain more accurate results if data from a larger and more varied university samples are collected.

In light of the current study outputs, the researcher recommends the following:

1- If we look forward to being fully satisfied with EFL students oral production or fluency, it will be worthwhile for all stake holders in English teaching to replace the impractical methods of teaching English used currently with an effective methodology that keeps learners interactive most of the time in order to help them develop their communicative and linguistic abilities in expressing their intents in an accurate way.

2- Since acquiring intonation is a long-termed process, encouraging self-learning, is recommended together with above mentioned. The best way for students to improve their intonation is simply to become more aware of it. By listening carefully to authentic dialogues and texts and repeating what they listened to.

3-English teachers should also consider local dialects as a variable that can affect a Sudanese speaker's English acquiring. .

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