Fossilization in the Pronunciation of weak-form words in English Committed by Sudanese University Students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the difficulties of English weak-form words that most Sudanese university students unable to pronounce correctly. The main goal, of this study was to evaluate the students' performance in pronouncing these forms. The instruments used for collecting data and information included were teachers' questionnaire and classroom observation. The results revealed that, almost the majority of the participants were unable to pronounce such forms. Moreover, this study provides some recommendations to improve the pronunciation of the English functional words.

المستخلَصُ:

قامتْ هذه الدراسةُ بالاستِ قصاء عن الصعوبات اللَّفظيِّة في نُطقِ الصِّيغ الانجليزيِّة الضّعيفة (الكلمات النحويّة)، و التي يَعجزُ طلاّبُ الجامعات في السّودان على نُطقِها بِصُورةٍ صحِيحة. فقدْ كانَ الهدَفُ الرّئِيسُ مِنْ هذه الدّراسَ ةِ هو تقْيِمُ أداء الطلاّبِ أثناءَ قيامِهِم بِنُطْقِ هذه الصِّيغ. و مِنْ أَجْلِ الحُصُولِ على المعلُومات و البيانات النّقيةَ اسْتَخدَمت هذه الدّراسة وسيلتَيْنِ هُ مَا، اسْتِبيانٌ يُ جِيبُ عَنْهُ أساتَذَة اللّغة الإِنْجلِيزيِّة في الجَامعات السّودانيّة، و وسِيْلةٌ أُخْرى هي الُملاحَظة الُمباشِرة مِنْ الباحِث لأداء طلاّبِه داخَلَ الفَصْلِ. أظْهَ رتْ النّتائُج أنّ أغْلبَ الُمشاركِينَ في هذه الدّراسة غيرُ قادِرين على النّطقِ الصّحيحِ لِهذه الصِّيغ. و مِنْ أَجْلِ ذلِك احْتَوتْ هذه الدّراسةُ على بّعضِ التّوصِياتِ لِلُمساهمة في تَطويرِ أَداءِ الطّلّابِ لـ نُطْقِ هذه الصِّيغ.

Background

Weak forms are syllable sounds that become unstressed in connected speech and are often then pronounced as a schwa (Roach 2001). English speakers use weak forms all the time and every single sentence is full of them. But students who are learning English usually use only strong forms which they sound very unnatural and they find it difficult to understand because they are not used to the weak forms and very often they don't even know they exist.

This study focuses on a small group of about 35 to 40 very common function words in English which are pronounced in mainly two different ways, a weak form and strong form. Weak forms are the normal pronunciations and for this reason learners of English should identify them and use them correctly.

1.1 Statement of the Study

Since practically all native speakers of British English use the weak-form words, learners of the language need to learn these weak forms to help them to understand what they hear (Roach 2001). It is very important to learn how weak forms of English are used since they appear early in any graded syllabus. It is a common feature of spoken English; however, in my teaching experience I've found that few Sudanese students at universities actually use the weak forms when they are speaking English.

1.2 Significance of the Study

Weak form words play a crucial role in both speech production and reception. Mortimer (1985) stated that "a good practical grasp of the weak forms of English is essential to good pronunciation and listening comprehension (1985: 4). Roach (2000) provides two reasons why EFL learners should learn the way weak forms are used. First, most native speakers believe that it is "unnatural" and "foreign sounding" to use the strong form of certain words. An "all-strong-form" pronunciation may sound incomprehensible and disrupt the rhythm of the language, bearing in mind that English is a "stress-timed" language. Because of the influence of their mother tongue (Arabic), the subjects of this study tend to pronounce every word strongly and very clearly which can disrupt the natural rhythm of spoken English.

2. English Sentence Stress

Stress is defined by Prof. Zapata (2009) as "the relative degree of force used by a speaker on the various syllables he is uttering". In connected speech, the same syllable or even the same word may be stressed or unstressed depending upon the context of a sentence and the degree of emphasis placed on a certain part of a sentence. According to Roca and Johnson, (1999: 315): "The reduction of stress-less vowels is one of the most characteristic traits of English". Therefore, the strong vowels in English grammatical words have a tendency to reduce to /ə/ when they occur in sentences. This has been observed to contribute immensely to the typical rhythm of Standard English where there is alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables Gimson (1975), Jowitt (1991), Hayes (1995), Roca and Johnson (1999). It has been commonly agreed that word stress in English does not operate regularly and it is largely not predictable. It is true that some English phoneticians and linguists have tried to work out rules for word stress patterns in English, but they have ended up with many exceptions for each rule (Gimson, 1991; Roach, 1993; Mitchell et al, 1989 among others).

3.0 Weak-form Words

Weak forms are limited in number but their occurrence, in terms of discourse frequency, is overwhelmingly more common than strong forms. They are among the most used and common words of the English language and they must be regarded as the foundation in the language learning activity. The strong forms of these words are used in certain positions, when they are stressed or said in isolation. Some of these words have more than one weak form, but only one strong form. In many of these function words, the vowel sound of the strong form is usually replaced by /ə/ or /i/ when the word is produced in its weak form.

For example, the article *the* is pronounced as /ði:/ when said in isolation, but in connected speech it is usually /ðə/ before consonant sounds and /ði/ before vowel sounds. Thus we say: (the house /ðə ˈhaus/) and (the orange /ði ˈorindʒ/). As the ultimate purpose of English learning is to acquire the fluency and understanding of the language, then the mastery of these weak forms becomes imperative for teachers to explain and use them properly in practical every day speech.

3.1 The /ə/ vowel ("schwa")

According to Skander and Burleigh (2000), "the term schwa comes from Hebrew, where it means 'emptiness' and designates a Hebrew vowel of the same quality" (cited in Mehmet Demirezen, 2010, p.1568). The schwa is a weak, unstressed sound and it occurs in many words. It represents a mid-central vowel in an unstressed syllable, such as the first syllable of "about". It is also represented as / ə/ in the International Phonetic Alphabet. The most frequency occurring vowel in English is ə, which is always associated with weak syllables. In quality it is mid (i.e. halfway between close and open) and central (i.e. halfway between front and back). It is generally described as lax – that is, not articulated with much energy (Peter Roach, 2009). Getting the schwa sound correct is a good way of making your pronunciation more accurate and natural. The phonemic symbol for this sound is /ə/. Any vowel letter can be pronounced as schwa and the pronunciation of a vowel letter can change depending on whether the syllable in which it occurs is stressed or not. In the word 'man' the letter 'a' has its full sound - represented by the symbol /æ/. In 'postman' the syllable 'man' is not stressed and the letter 'a' is pronounced as schwa, represented by the symbol /ə/. The sound schwa does not only represent a single letter. In some words it is the sound of several letters or even a whole syllable.

3.2 Structure or Function Words

Function words	Articles	Prepositions	Pronouns	Auxiliary (modal verbs)	Conjunctions	Miscellaneous
Examples	*a, an, the.*	*at, to, of, for, from*	*me, we, us, he, him, them*	*be, been, am, is, are, was, were, have, has, had, do, does, shall, should, will, would, can, could, must.*	*and, but, as, who, that, than.*	*some, there, not*

4. Previous Studies

Mitleb (1987) dealt with the issue whether the identification of weak form words evolves during a course they had in phonetics and phonology. The subjects were two groups of Yarmouk University English majors; each consisted of 15 students. The first group, "the inexperienced", received only segmental training. The second group, "the experienced", received supra-segmental training including use of weak form words. The subjects were presented with a set of 36 weak form words. Each word was used in both weak form and strong form in English sentences- a total of 72 sentences. The participants had to listen to the sentences and identify the stimuli with "weak" or "strong". The experienced group significantly performed better than the inexperienced at both weak and strong forms.

More recently, Sustarsic (2007) tried to analyze an archive of English native speakers' readings of a short text on the Internet. The text was accessed (read and recorded) by more than one thousand subjects, native and non-native (ca. 600) speakers of English, who belonged to more than 175 different mother tongues. The researcher's target was native speakers of English, however.

Sustarsic found that many native speakers used the strong form where the weak form was expected, particularly for the indefinite article "a", "at" and "and". This shows that even native speakers are not of one mind in respect of use of weak forms. Henrichsen (1984) conducted a research in which he examined the effects of reduced forms in learners' comprehension of spoken texts. Two dictations were administered; the first was a text pronounced with full forms and the second with reduced ones. The results showed that presence/absence of reduced forms affected the learners' listening comprehension. Based on such researches, several other experiments were conducted to see the significance of systematic instruction about reduced forms in developing learners' listening comprehension abilities.

Matsuzawa (2006) conducted an experiment over 20 Japanese learners of English hypothesizing that reduced forms do interfere with students' comprehension of spoken English. In a pre-test, participants were tested using a listening cloze in which they were required to write down the full forms of sentences after listening to them. Then, over a period of about four hours divided into seven sessions (30 minutes each), they were given lessons about reductions which included specific instruction about weak forms (definition, context of use, a sample of each) and listening cloze exercises, in addition to an explanation of bottom-up and top-down processing modes. A post-test was administered using the same technique applied in the instruction (listening cloze test) and the resulting scores indicated a significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test. Matsuzawa concluded that learners showed significant improvement in listening to reduced forms, noting that this "improvement did not relate to any specific English proficiency, that is, all participants benefited about equally from the instruction" (2006: 63).

Matsuzawa reported: The results show not only a serious lack of comprehension of reduced forms among participants but also an improvement in their listening comprehension after explicit instruction in recognizing and understanding reduced forms (2006: 59). Brown & Hilferty (2006) conducted a somehow similar research to find out the effectiveness of teaching reduced forms for EFL learners. The experiment included two groups of 16 learners in each. The first group (experimental group) received systematic instruction concerning the use of weak forms in addition to dictation-form exercises, all of which were given in ten-minutes daily lessons over a period of four weeks. With the same time-table form, the control group was given only pronunciation drills and sound discrimination exercises. A post test was administered after the lessons to measure the effectiveness of the instruction the experimental group had received. The scores showed significant difference between the two groups, that is, the learners in the experimental group had higher scores than the ones in the control group. This led them to conclude that teaching reduced forms does help listening comprehension. The results in these example experiments are significant in many ways. For the language teacher, they reveal the importance of weak forms' instruction in developing the learner' listening skills. They also suggest some teaching techniques that could be employed in developing the listening skill.

Mohamed Laoubi (2010) investigated the impact of third year students' ability to process some aspects of connected speech on their overall ability to understand naturally spoken English. The main concern was to evaluate the students' performance in listening to the weak forms of grammatical words. Classroom observation had revealed that students seemed to have problems in perceiving them as a result of the language teachers' focus in teaching such forms on the productive level rather than on the perceptive one.

The results confirmed that almost all the tested students were not only unaware of the significance of weak forms in listening, but also they were unable to perceive such forms.

5.0 Methodology of the Study

Ross (2005) states that, the descriptive research provides information about conditions, situations, and events that occur in the present. This study investigates the current situation concerning the participants' pronunciation efficiency level of English weak-form words. It tests the hypotheses, pursuing the obstacles, suggesting solutions and relevant recommendations and finally, processing the data collected, statistically.

5.1 Research Population and Sample

Berg (2004: 34) states that the logic of using a sample of subjects is to make interferences about some larger population from a smaller one (a sample). Sudanese university students are the population, though the sample of this study contained a group of 30 of the English instructors, who were responded to a written questionnaire.

5.2 Instruments

To confirm the hypothesis, to fulfill the aim of this study and obtain rich information, this study employs a questionnaire. Additionally, the researcher did classroom observation repeatedly, with many note takings to verify the collected data.

5.2.1 Questionnaire

The researcher used one of the most common research tools, a structured questionnaire to collect primary data. The questionnaire was prepared in collaboration with some English language experts. It is a list of written questions used to collect qualitative and quantitative data. A questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions and other prompts for the purpose of gathering information from respondents. (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: 1). It translated the information needed into a set of specific questions. These structured questions include (MCQs) multiple-choice questions and scales. Determining the wording of each question involves defining the issue, using ordinary words, using unambiguous words, and using clear statements.

It was organized in a way so that the participants (instructors) feel easy and comfortable to answer and express their opinions. The questionnaire was given to a number of 30 English instructors who answered the questions easily and they were taken as a sample and were analyzed. It contained 36 items, reflected the objectives of the research about the problems of English weak-form words that encountered by Sudanese university students. In the questionnaire each responder was asked to choose one answer according to the Tri Regression Measurement, which contains five levels: strongly-agree, agree, uncertain (unsure), disagree and strongly disagree. Computer specialists processed the collected data and the statistical procedures, in order to obtain very accurate results and findings and to make sure of the validity of the questionnaire.

5.2.2 Classroom Observation

Throughout the researcher's own experience of teaching English in some universities of Sudan (and outside Sudan), for many years, observing diverse pronunciation classes of university students (natural observation) and as a teacher of English language for, almost 25 years, he has always been concerned about his students' mispronunciation and how to correct it. The researcher saw a problem that despite the great efforts that English teachers doing, they could not obtain their objectives in the pronunciation lessons of the production of English weak-form words. The researcher used to take notes about the pronunciation of English weak-form words which were expected to be problematic for students or replaced by the strong-form words. In other words, classroom observation gave the researcher reasons for doing this research and then it helped him to test the validity of the data collected in the questionnaire. Hopkins, (1993) described classroom observation as a "'pivotal activity" which played crucial role in classroom research.

6. Data Analysis

The researcher, in this study used the descriptive analysis method to assess the performance of classroom observation and a questionnaire and then converted the teachers' responses, of the questionnaire into percentage and arranged them in tables and graphics. The assessment was done to find out the reasons behind the difficulties of the mispronunciation of English weak-form words committed by Sudanese university students. Thirty English teachers have been teaching at five different universities in Sudan, were asked to fill in a questionnaire that surveys their knowledge about pronunciation of strong and weak forms of functional words in English.

The questionnaire contains 36 items each of which is intended to target a specific kind of a student's ability to pronounce the English weak-form words with the major purpose which is to enable the researcher to know about their awareness of the rules that determines the use of strong and weak forms in natural connected speech.

7. Conclusion

The hypotheses, of this study estimated that Sudanese university students are not aware or familiar with the use of weak-form words of English and they are likely to have difficulty speaking or understanding speakers who do use weak forms. The research revealed that the subjects' overall tendency towards the strong form reduction was generally greater than expected. The subjects have a tendency to substitute the strong vowel sounds for the weak /ə/ sound of English in most cases. Consequently, this sound, which is the most common vowel found in the weak forms of Standard English grammatical words, is inaccessibly used by the Sudanese university students when they speak English. In, almost all the cases when the weak form should have been used, the participants intended to reduce the word in terms of length as well as quality. Elision, as the omission of a phoneme or more, which considers one of the characteristic traits of unstressed syllable in Standard English, is almost absent in the English of Sudanese university students. Where vowels could be totally elided in the weak forms of these grammatical words as in could /kəd/, then /ðən/, to /tə/, etc. All these confirm a preponderance of the strong forms of English grammatical words and a tendency to use strong vowels in subjects' speaking of English.

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This study revealed that there is no significant difference in terms of the vowel reduction between respondents with English phonetics and phonology knowledge, and those who had never been acquainted with weak forms of function words on a theoretical level.

Finally, one can easily conclude that Sudanese University Students did not do well in pronouncing weak form words; they failed to pronounce most of the items correctly.

This result supports the researcher's expectations that producing weak forms is very problematic for the subjects and it converges with those obtained by other researchers. Then, this problem was not, privately Sudanese student' dilemma, but many other EFL learners encountered similar difficulties.

8. The study recommends that:

i- The awareness of English weak-form words, within English language learning programs, can be the first step of understanding English native speakers.

ii- To know the difference between the sounds /ʌ/ and /ə/, students need to be given some drilling exercises related to such errors, so that they can be more aware of their tongue, mouth, lips and teeth positions and shape.

iii- The recurrent use of various listening aids is very important in improving the students' standard of pronunciation learning English as a foreign language.

iv- Students should be motivated to watch some English programs or learning films on TV, radio or any visual media. These programs may offer live exposure to English pronunciation learners.

v- Teachers should focus on giving systematic exercises and activities, to their students, from word, phrase, to

sentence level.

vi- Teachers can ask students to listen and read some popular song lyrics aloud to practice weak-form words.

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