

Difficulties in the Production of Weak-Form Words in English Encountered by Sudanese University Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to spotlight on the English weak-form words that most learners of a foreign or a second language unable to attain their goal of native-like production. Sudanese University Students SUS are an example; they encountered difficulties to produce the weak forms accurately. The major goal, of this research was to evaluate the students' performance in producing these forms (functional words). The instruments used for collecting data and information were classroom observation as well as pre- and posttests. The results confirm that, almost the majority of the participants were unable to produce such forms.

Key Words: Sudanese University Students - weak forms – functional words.

المستخلص:

تلقي هذه الدراسة الضوء على الصعوبات التي تواجه طلاب اللغة الانجليزية في الجامعات السودانية، وذلك عند تلفظهم للصيغ الانجليزية الضعيفة (الكلمات النحوية). فطلاب الجامعات السودانية كغيرهم من طلاب اللغة الانجليزية، يواجهون صعوبات في الإخراج الصحيح لتلك الصيغ الانجليزية الضعيفة وعليه، فقد كان الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تقييم أدائهم في الإخراج الصحيح لهذه الصيغ. فلقد استخدمت هذه الدراسة وسيلتين لجمع البيانات والمعلومات، هما الملاحظة الصفوية المباشرة لأداء الطلاب، بالإضافة لإجراء اختبارين، أحدهما قبل تلقي الطلاب دراسة وتطبيقاً حول هذا الموضوع، والآخر بعد ذلك. ولقد أتت النتائج مؤكدة لفرضيات هذه الدراسة، فقد كان أغلب الطلاب، الذين أجريت عليهم الدراسة غير قادرين على تحقيق النطق الصحيح لتلك الصيغ.

INTRODUCTION

It is of great importance for all learners of English to use the weak forms words in unstressed positions. It will improve their speech enormously, and will help them to acquire the characteristics rhythm of spoken English. Unless they use weak forms correctly their rhythm will never be right. Therefore, compressing or "weakening" some sounds is necessary to keep the rhythm of English (J. D. O'Connor 1979). 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.

2. The Problem of the Study

The subjects of this study are the Sudanese English university students who are likely face difficulties when they pronounce the weak-form words of English language in connected speech and not in citation form. The 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 and a strong forms. Weak forms are the normal pronunciations and for this reason learners of English should identify them and use them correctly.

3. Review of Previous Researches

Many researchers have conducted their studies on the difficulties that face English learners in the field of pronunciation, in general and while pronouncing and perceiving weak-form words in particular. Some studies in the field of Phonetics and Phonology offer opposing views on the teach-ability and learnability of this aspect of the English language.

On the one hand, some phoneticians -Ortiz Lira (1997), Underhill (1994), Celce Murcia et al. (1996), among others-maintain that mastery of weak forms is crucial not only to understand but also to produce connected speech effectively and appropriately. In a study conducted by Nancy & Maria (2008) focused on the students' perception and production of weak and strong forms of function words. The researcher collected and then analyzed data related to the feature in an attempt to determine whether these forms had been learnt after a period of tuition. This study does provide some insights about this phenomenon in the context examined. All in all, upon examining the empirical data collected from the two experimental situations –perception and production–, which showed that there is evidence that the frequency of occurrence of errors in weak forms is almost always higher than the error rates in strong forms. As regards listening, there was a greater difference (26%) between the percentages of correct perception of weak and strong forms when learners were exposed to a very structured situation like the minimal pair discrimination than in the cloze test where

the percentages of correctness were almost even. Mahdi al- Janabi (2014) investigated the mastering of the Pronunciation of Weak and Strong Forms of English function words. In accordance with the results of the analysis, this study can draw the following conclusions. The first year students at the Department of English-College of Arts/ University of Baghdad show poor performance in mastering the pronunciation of the weak and the strong forms of the English function words. Scoring the answers shows that only two students among twenty have gained successful marks. The students' answers were randomly done. There is no reasonable justification behind their choices. The students' poor knowledge in the fields of recognition and production of English weak and strong forms prohibits this study from reaching stable findings. Students' Arabic background reflects its effect on their performance.

4. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To build students' awareness of the importance of using English weak-forms.
- 2) To investigate how Sudanese university students SUS can use English weak-form words correctly.
- 3) To explore how EFL students can understand native speakers while communicating.

5. Rationale for the Study

Weak-form words of English language have to be studied for two reasons. First, studying weak forms can help the learners of English to improve their pronunciation of the spoken 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.

Second, being unaware of the weak-form words of English may inhibit students' comprehension of the English spoken by fluent speakers. Therefore, learning and practicing weak forms is important not only for learners' pronunciation of spoken English but also for listening comprehension.

6. Materials and Methods

The present study adopts descriptive analytical method. It investigates the current situation concerning the participants' production efficiency level of English weak-form words. Ross (2005) states that, the descriptive research provides information about conditions, situations, and events that occur in the present.

6.1 Research Population and Sample

The participants of this study were all the third year students of English Language who were under-graduated in the private college of Nahda (in Khartoum, capital of Sudan). They speak Arabic as a mother tongue. They were students with different English pronunciation abilities.

6.2 Instruments

To confirm the hypothesis and fulfill its aims, this study employs structured familiar sentences for testing the subjects (pre- & posttest). Additionally, the researcher did classroom observation repeatedly, with many note takings to verify the collected data.

6.2.1 Audio Recorded Tests (pre- & -posttests)

The pretest served as a tool for discovering students' level of the production of the weak-form words in controlled tasks, specifically reading a list of sentences. The sentences were given to the students to read individually, and they were told that

their pronunciation would be recorded and their recordings would be used in the research study. Adequate reading time was given to all subjects so that they could produce careful pronunciation rather than informal speech. All the recordings were made on the same day for the convenience of the students and the consistency of the study.

6.2.2 Classroom Observation

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.

7. Data Analysis

The researcher collected the data, of this study, analyzed and organized them very carefully. Firstly, he compiled the students' responses and arranged the numbers according to each statement in first table. Then he counted the total number of students' responses for each item with percentage and listed them in another table. The total numbers of the correct and the incorrect answers of each item, as well as their percentages are organized in a table for easy consideration. Then all students' answers in each part are checked and scored according to the criteria of the study mentioned previously.

8. Results and Discussion

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 plurality of the strong forms of English grammatical words and a tendency to use strong vowels in subjects' speaking of English. There are three major factors behind this problem; first, the use of some sounds instead of the schwa sound /ə/. In articles, students use /a/ instead of schwa sound /ə/, e.g. 'an' /ən/ pronounced as /æn/. In prepositions they use /æ/, /ɔ/ and /u/ instead of the schwa /ə/ e.g. the words 'at', 'from' and 'to', respectively. In pronouns, students use /e/ and /ʌ/ instead of the schwa sound /ə/, e.g. 'them' pronounced as /ðem/ and 'us' as /ʌs/ instead of /ðəm/ and /əs/. In conjunctions they use the sounds /æ/ and /ʌ/ instead of the schwa, e.g. 'and' /ən/ pronounced as /ænd/ and 'but' /bət/ as /bʌt/. In miscellaneous, students replace the schwa /ə/ by the sounds /ʌ/ in the word 'some' and the diphthong /eə/ in the word 'there'. In auxiliary verbs, students substitute the schwa by the sounds /æ/, /u/,

/ʌ/, /a:/, and /ə:/ in the words 'can', 'could', 'must', 'are', and 'were', respectively. This could be classified L1 Interference. Thus; the Arabic language has an impact on the pronunciation of weak-form words. A particular sound which does not exist in the first language poses a difficulty for the second language learners to produce. Second, the inconsistency of English vowels is another factor. Most of Arab learners of English, unless they have mastery of the pronunciation of each vowel sound, pronounce /e/, /ɔ/, /ʌ/ and /a/ in the place of /ə/. Because of their first background about each sound, students configure this thought in their minds as if each sound has only one kind of pronunciation. Learners need to understand that English is a non-phonetic language since there is no one-to-one correspondence between the graphemes and the sounds actually pronounced. Third, it seems rather clear that SUS lack understanding of English phonetics so they need to study the production of English vowels.

According to Han, lack of understanding is a potential cause of fossilization. In her book, she develops the idea of Perdue (1993) who sees that this factor can have negative impact on learners' motivation to learn (cited in Han, 2004).

9. Conclusion

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.

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