The Difficulties in Understanding Strong and weak forms, in Listening to Native Speakers in English Language.

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 Abstract

This study was conducted in University of Zalingei in (2017) aimed to investigate the impact of learning strong and weak forms perception in process of listening to native speakers, speech for third year students' ability in understanding such sounds of grammatical words in connected speech. The researcher used the analytical descriptive approach, first data collected through to audio test for (50) students who are listening to English native speakers. Second information from books and relevant sources and the researcher demonstrated the following outcomes.

80% of 3rd year students have some difficulties in listening to connected speech regarding the perception of weak forms of grammatical functional words in English Language.

60% of wrong answers of the respondents due to the lack of competence as their scores are very low in some sentences and high in others.

50% of their performance in answering the questions show that students are unaware of the reduction rules that govern the use of this category of words in natural spoken English.

55% methods of teaching always focus on the pronunciation level only and ignore the learning of these forms, which might have contributed to this state in English phonetics and phonology.

70% Of the third year students have problems of sound perception was the result of low exposure, familiarity, and training to listening of the connected speech sounds in English language learning.

Key word: difficulties of non-native students in perceiving weak and strong forms in phonetics and phonology of English.

المستخلص

أجريت هذه الدراسة في جامعة زالنجي عام (2017) يهدف تحقيق أثر تعلم وإدراك الأنماط القوية والضعيفة في عملية الاستماع لحديث أصحاب اللغة الإنجليزية ومقدرة طلاب السنة الدراسية الثالثة في فهم وتمييز تلك الأصوات في قواعد اللغة الإنجليزية في الحديث المتصل، حيث استخدم الباحث المنهج الوصفي التحليلي وجمعت البيانات الأولية عبر اختبارات سمعية للأنماط لعدد (50) طالب الذين يستمعون لأصحاب اللغة الأصليين، والمعلومات الثانوية من الكتب ومصادر ذات صلة بالموضوع وحقق الباحث النتائج التالية 80% من طلاب السنة الثالثة لديهم بعض الصعوبات في استماع الحديث بالأنماط المتصلة ما يخص إدراك الاشكال الضعيفة في كلمات الوظائف في نحو اللغة الإنجليزية 60% من الأجوبة الخاطئة لدى الطلاب ناتج عن عدم الكفاءة كما هو باين في التصويب الضعيف في بعض الجمل وعالية في البعض الآخر 50% من أداء الطلاب في أجوبة الأسئلة توضح بان الطلاب غير مدركين لقوانين الخفض الذي

يحكم استخدام طبقة الكلمات في الكلام الطبيعي لدي الأجانب55% من الأخطاء في طرق التدريس المعلمين يركزون على مستوى النطق فقط ويهملون هذه الاشكال الذي يساهم في معرفة الأصوات وعلمها في اللغة 70% من طلاب الفرقة الثالثة لديهم مشاكل إدراك الأصوات ناتجة من ضعف العرض، الإلفة والتدريب في استماع لأصوات حديث الأنماط المتصلة في اللغة الإنجليزية.

Introduction

English language spreads across the globe at the expense of its originality. One area greatly affected is pronunciation. This partly accounts for the non-native speaker varieties around the world. Kachru (1995) identifies three categories of English language users and classifies them as; The Inner, the Outer and the Expanding circles. He observes that, within these circles, some of the original and standard features of English are disappearing though it has official status.

ESL and EFL learners fall within the Outer and Expanding circles. Their speech is often generally characterized by English pronunciation problems. This observation holds true for Sudanese where English is used as a second/foreign language with an official status. Research shows that the situation is more complex due to the rising presence of two varieties. English-Speaking Sudanese speak the first variety referred to as Sudanese English (Simo Bobda2010, 1994, 1986; Simo Bobda and Chumbow 1999, Kouega 2000, 1991; Ebot 1999). The second variety referred to as Sudanese English (Safotso 2001, 2006; Kouega 2008) an appellation which Safotso (2012) considers to be more appropriate as opposed to Kouega's Francophone English is spoken by Arabic speaking Sudanese. English is a colonial heritage of Sudanese. The adoption of this language was followed by an adaptation to the use of the non-native speakers. Some of the features and aspects of the language are tamed by the genius of the local languages. This adaptation is characterized by the drop, addition or modification of some vital phonological features of English. (Safotso, 2012). Weak and strong forms are among the phonological features that are linked to English pronunciation problems faced by ESL/EFL learners in Sudan. From observation, it could be noticed that the population under study use only strong forms, thus having an impact on their spoken English. This phenomenon is due to some reasons; first, the learners do not have any contact with native speakers. Second, their syllabi and materials on English speech do not address these aspects. Third, the ESL teachers in Sudan ignore some phonological aspects and do not 'like' handling them in their teachings. Not only do the teachers ignore such vital aspects of English language, but also do not use them in their daily conversions in classrooms. (Tize and Garga, 2020). The above situations predispose ESL learners to the use of all-strong forms. The inappropriate use of strong forms influences the speech in two dimensions: phonologically and semantically. When a speaker uses only strong forms in his/her speech, the utterances become full of tense vowels, which disrupts the rhythm of the language. The speech loses its musicality and the speaker his/her listener. Semantically speaking, the all-strong-form use in speech mares its intelligibility. Reduction in English speech is a common and necessary process.

It saves energy in speech and leads to economy in sound production. Phonological efficiency in speech is required during conversation with speakers of English from countries considered to be of the Inner Circle to avoid frustrations and misunderstandings. In a stress-timed language such as English, stresses occur at regular intervals. The words, which are most important for communication of the message, that is, nouns, main verbs, adjectives and adverbs, are normally stressed in connected speech. Function words such as auxiliary verbs, modals, conjunctions, pronouns, articles, linkers and prepositions are not usually stressed, and are reduced to keep the stress pattern regular. Weak forms are syllable sounds that become unstressed in connected speech and are often then pronounced as a schwa. Structural words are often pronounced in their weak forms, since they do not carry the main content, and are therefore not normally stressed. Learners can find them difficult to hear and this interferes with understanding. Counting the number of words in a sentence, or sentence dictations can help raise awareness of weak forms. The weak forms are by far more frequent than the strong forms in formal, semi-formal, and informal speech. The strong form is the stressed pronunciation, which occurs in some rare instances; the following environments usually require the use of strong forms as stated by Bobda & Mbangwana (2008) and Roach (2000, 2009): Spoken English owes its rhythm and to an extent, its intelligibility to the appropriate combination of these two forms of pronunciation. The use of weak forms of the function word is also at the heart of connected and speech. They occur in formal, semi-formal and informal speech. Contrarily to function words, lexical words are always stressed in speech. Curiously,

ESL learners stress both function and lexical words in their spoken English, making them sound unnatural (Roach, 1983, 1991; Bobda & Mbangwana, 2008). An English surfeit with strong vowels can make native speakers bored (Bobda & Mbangwana, 2008); and consequently, frustration can overcome the speaker in turn due to his/her unintelligibility. For one to understand and be understood in English as an international language, the correct use of the stressed and unstressed forms is necessary. Thus, teaching these concepts is indispensable when learners do not have opportunities to acquire them otherwise. Learning to listen and speak connected speech is necessary for non-native English speakers (Brown & Kondo, 2006; Jenkins, 2000, 2004; Brown, 1977). Roach equally shares this idea as he thinks that the teaching of aspects of connected speech can help ESL learners improve their spoken English. This research is motivated by the desire to understand how ESL learners employ this aspect in their productions and how they can respond to its teaching. Before collection and analysis of data, the main assumption was that the learners know and use only strong forms and exposition to the weak forms can reverse the tendencies. Weak forms are an essential feature of English pronunciation in everyday speech. The words, which often receive weak pronunciations, are function or structural words (i.e. words that express grammatical relationships). They are generally unstressed, as opposed to content words (i.e. words that carry information), which tend to receive greater prominence in an utterance. Structural items, such as prepositions, pronouns, anomalous finites, conjunctions and some adjectival words, may have two pronunciations: a strong form and a weak form.

The use of either form depends upon three factors: accent, position and phonetic environment Function words may Lacabex, E., G.,& Leccumbri, L.,G.(2018). Exhibit different forms of reduction: a) loss of initial consonant, as in the pronoun. *him,* the adjective *his* or the anomalous finite *have,* when not initial, for example: *Give him his book*; b) loss of final consonant sounds, as in the conjunction, *and,* in the phrase *fish and chips*; and c) weakening of the unstressed internal vowels to /ə/, as in the preposition *for* in: *Thanks for doing it*. Vowel reduction plays an important role in the resulting rhythm of connected speech in English.

Literature Review

The complex nature of listening and the fact that it is a covert skill, it is not easy to arrive at a thorough definition of the whole of it. Different attempts made by cognitive scientists and linguists to define its range from the simplest broad ones, that consider listening as a mere perception of sounds, to the highly complex ones that figure listening as a multi-level process that involves a cluster of different criteria that is necessary to decode the meaning of the incoming data. Traditionally, listening considered as a 'passive skill' i.e. the listener makes no effort in order to get the meaning of the message. However, this view, was challenged through time and listening became to be seen "not only as active but very demanding" (Morley, 1991: 85). This shift was due to the growing research in related fields such as psycholinguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, semantics, cognitive science etc., from which research in listening comprehension drew a lot. As a result of this multi-disciplinary view, new terms became the core elements in describing and defining listening such as „predicting‟, „recognizing‟, „inferring‟, „interpreting‟, „processing‟,

„assigning‟, „participating‟, „responding‟…added to the previously-considered basic defining-terms such as those related to, and solely to, the sensorial phase of the whole process: „perception‟. What makes listening active is that when we listen to any speech, we do not only receive the acoustic signal. Anderson & Lynch argued against the traditional concepts about listening and stressed the need to "challenge the view that listening is merely „passive‟ or „receptive‟ they also suggested that listening is a process that involves more than language. Indeed, what we perceive in the form of speech sounds is important, and we must have the ability and knowledge that are sufficient to process the incoming data. However, the information we get after perception is 'raw' and does not count for the total understanding of the message. It is through the application of other information sources, linguistic or non-linguistic, that meaning could be reached. Rost (1990) gave a clarification of this idea. Who defined listening as an "…essentially inferential process based on the perception of cues rather than straightforward matching of sound to meaning. In the same way, Buck (2001) emphasized the role of the listener and stated that meaning is something actively constructed by the listener but not provided by the message. He gave a detailed definition of listening explaining that it is. A process [in which]…the listener takes the incoming data, acoustic signal, and interprets that using a wide variety of information and knowledge, for a particular communicative purpose; it is an inferential process, an ongoing process of constructing and modifying an interpretation of what the text is about, based on whatever information seems relevant at the time (Buck, 2001: 29).

When speakers speak, assume that the listener already knows some information they communicate. They drop this information from their utterances assuming that the listeners will rely on their knowledge to „infer" whatever information type that is not explicitly stated but communicated. An influential theory of the importance of non-linguistic knowledge that is necessary in the inference-making process is the notion „schemata". Lynch (2006) defined it as "the relevant packages of prior knowledge and experience that we have in memory and can call in the process of comprehension" A schema includes typical types of knowledge about different situations, events, sequences of events etc. all of which can be used in building expectations about what listeners will normally encounter. There are two types of schemata: content schemata and formal schemata. Content schemata includes different sorts of information that is stored in the mind about the topic, cultural knowledge, experience, social background; and formal schemata has to do with discourse forms such as the discourse type, rhetorical conventions, and the structural organization of prose (Peterson, 1991). Listeners rely heavily on these types of pre-existing knowledge to get a global understanding of the message.

Researcher sums up by saying that listening is an active process of building an understanding of a given message, initiated by the perception of acoustic signals and involves a cluster of mental operations guided by the application of the different sources of knowledge, which work for understanding the intended meaning. Listening and Language Processing: In the process of listening, assumed that there are two basic strategies that the listener applies in processing information in order to come out with an understanding of what is intended. These referred to as bottom-up and top-down Processes.

Bottom-up Processing Mode: A processing mode is perception-based. The language input is processed by decoding its components starting from the smallest speech constituent and moving gradually to higher stages to construct meaning. According to Peterson, (1991) "the lower level processes (bottom-up) are triggered by the sounds, words, and phrases which listeners hear as they attempt to decode speech and assign meaning. In other words, the message is decoded into phonemes which, themselves, form a new input that is used to identify syllables, which in their turn help to recognize words, then the same thing occurs with phrases, prepositions, clauses, until the whole utterance is perceived. After that, the listener uses whatever information sources available for him to construct a final understanding of the text. Thus, the meaning in the bottom-up view is arrived at from an external source, which is the incoming sounds that the listener perceives.

Top-Down Processing Mode The top-down processing mode involves the understanding of the message as a whole rather than the perception of individual sounds and words. In this mode, the key process is an inference (Nation & Newton, 2009). Listeners, according to this view, do not pass through consecutive stages in order to understand the text. They rather make inferences about the words, ideas, and structures, which the speaker is going to use. For instance, if we hear the sentence „she was so angry, she picked up the gun, aimed and ….," we need not to listen to the rest of the sentence in order to know what the missing word is (Buck, 2001).

The listener's knowledge and experience about such situations help him to predict the missing word. That is, listeners take advantage of different types of knowledge they have to „bypass" the acoustic signal in creating meaning and compensate for any failure in perception (Morley, 1991). Therefore, the starting point of processing in the top down view comes from an internal source rather than the acoustic signal. The types of knowledge that are applicable in this mode includes knowledge about the topic, situation, participants, shared knowledge, time and place. Background knowledge, sociocultural knowledge etc. what Ellis (2003) summarized as "schemata and contextual knowledge" These are all used to help the listener in making predictions about what normally the speaker is going to talk about in the form of 'chunks' of meanings rather than individual segments.

Simultaneous Processing: Many writers claimed that there is a problem with the view, which divides the listening process, and suggested that Top-down and Bottom-up processing occur simultaneously (Morley, 1991; Buck, 2001; Ellis, 2003). Listeners do not always rely exclusively on the sounds they hear, nor do they always make the right inferences about what the speaker is going to say. The higher levels of knowledge would not work individually if the stream of sounds were not decoded. In this case, the predictions that listeners make cannot be accepted or rejected unless they are checked by considering the incoming sound signals (Peterson, 1991). Similarly, in many cases, the failure in perception of some segments of the text does not affect the understanding of the meaning. Listening in the same situation requires the activation of both processes, which interact in a given order so that, a "lack of information on one level can be compensated for by checking against information on the other level" (Peterson, 1991: 110). This is because listeners, as already mentioned, take advantage of different types of knowledge they have to compensate for any failure in perception. Peterson stated that: Proficient listeners use their knowledge of lexis and topic to interpret the confusing sounds in the speech stream and to aid them in word recognition. On the other hand, they also use their basic decoding skills to check the progress of the argument and to determine whether the discourse is going in the direction, they had predicted.

Listening in Foreign Language Learning: In teaching the oral skills to foreign learners, the speaking skill gained very much attention for a long time. Listening on the other hand was given less priority and was taken for granted to the extent that it was described as the forgotten skill (Richards & Renandya, 2002). It is only recently that the importance of listening in language learning was recognized and the need to develop it as a skill on its own right was highly emphasized. By now, it is established that listening is a basic channel for language learning. It is, usually, the first type of language to which foreign learners are exposed and through which much of the language system is accessed and internalized. In this sense, cited in Peterson, 1991) distinguished between two types of listening sub-processes in the natural route of language learning which he called Passive Listening and Selective Listening. These two processes help learners to grasp the language system through the listening medium.

Passive listening (also called 'global listening') is a process through which the mind, with or without deliberate attention to learn, works on the language input and "assimilates, sorts, and stores" the features of that input so that a comprehensible image of the language meaning and form could be grasped in Peterson, 1991: 108). In this point, Nida seems to agree with what Harmer (1998) regarded as one of the reasons of teaching listening, explaining "Listening helps students to acquire language subconsciously even if teachers do not draw attention to its special features. Selective listening, on the other hand, is a process through which the learning of the linguistic system could be achieved but through conscious attention to learn. It is considered as a type of exercise in which learners instructed to focus their attention on one or more aspects of language during listening. It aims at raising students" awareness to language features. Hence, learners would make a conscious effort to learn the specific feature in question be it phonological, lexical, grammatical, syntactic etc. As a result, learners will notice the language feature, integrate it into their own interlanguage, and use it in their actual performance. In a related dimension of language learning, listening is regarded as the foundation of other language skills, namely speaking. It is through listening that the features of spoken language and pronunciation could be the best highlighted and taught to foreign language students. Interference from the first language system and the spelling form of words are only two examples of confusion sources, which could present salient influences on the learners, performance of the target language. That is why listening provides one of the most reliable sources for teachers who attempt to teach the pronunciation of spoken language. Dalton & Seidlhofer (1994) suggested "…as in practically every other area of pronunciation, learners need to perceive differences before they can be expected to produce them. Through listening, it is not only the pronunciation of individual words that can be highlighted. The teacher may focus on aspects of spoken language, sound modification, connected speech, rhythm, intonation…etc. All of which make a necessary part of the pronunciation of English. For these aspects, the listening medium gives the most natural and accurate examples of how native speakers use them in their production. Many scholars advocate the development of listening as a skill on its own right. For them, listening is a skill that needs attention just like the other language skills, and as we learn to write, to speak, and to read, the listening skill is no exception. For Morley (1991), if the focus in teaching is given to communicative purposes, then teaching the listening comprehension of spoken language is of primary importance. This is due to the fact that, if their listening ability is not adequately developed, learners will not be able to engage in a conversation with other speakers (e.g. with native speakers) even if they have a native-like pronunciation and way of speaking. By definition, a conversation is a two-direction way of communication in which the communicators exchange roles and they are required to „give" and „receive" information. Hence, in any communicative situation, there is no need to speak without being able to „receive". Belasco argued against the ignorance of listening in teaching the oral skills to for foreign language learners.

I was rudely jolted by the realization that it is possible to develop the so-called „speaking ability" and yet be virtually incompetent in understanding the spoken language…[students] were learning to audio comprehend certain specific dialogues and drills…but could not understand [the language]out of the mouths of native speakers. (Belasco, 1971; in Morley, 1991: 92) Therefore, because of its importance, the listening skill should not be underestimated in foreign language teaching, and it has to be developed both as a channel for language learning and as a skill on its own right.

Weak Forms: Weak forms belong to the closed class category of words that is called 'Functional

Words' 'Grammatical Words'. In English, as in all other languages, functional words do not have a dictionary meaning the way that content words do- those of the open class category such as verbs, adjectives, nouns - have. They are limited in number and include auxiliary verbs, pronouns, articles, conjunctions, prepositions etc. Their main function is to serve as „grammatical cement" holding content words together, as well as maintaining relationships between higher syntactic units such as phrases and clauses (Collins & Mees, 2003). Thus, they carry relatively very little meaning. Functional words may combine to form contracted forms e.g. he + will = he"ll. phonologically speaking, functional words undergo a set of modifications in natural speech. Nearly all functional words have two pronunciation forms; a strong form and a weak form. The strong form (also called citation form/ full form) is stressed and it is the pronunciation form that is usually found in the dictionary entry of the word (Brown & Kondo, 2006). It is the first form to

which foreign learners are usually introduced. The weak form (modified pronunciation) is unstressed, less prominent, and phonemically different form the strong form in both quality and quantity. The common way of weakening functional words is reduction in the vowel quality. This is done by the replacement of the word's central vowel by a weaker one, mainly the „schwa". In addition, weakening may result from the change of consonants and appearance of syllabic consonants (Selkirk, 1996). For Roach, this variance in pronunciation is a significant characteristic of the way English pronunciation is modified (Roach, 2002). Some functional words have more than one weak form. When the same functional word occurs in different contexts, the phonological environment exerts significant effects on the way it is weakened. For instance, the word „your" is pronounced /jə/ when it occurs before a consonant and /jᵊr/ before a vowel: „Take your time" teik jᵊ taim „On your own. In speech, the decision to use one form or another is rule-governed. Generally, this is related to the position where the word occurs, intended emphasis, and meaning. However, in spoken English, the weak pronunciation form is more frequent than the strong one, and it is described as the normal pronunciation of the word. According to Dretzke (1998), there are almost "forty weak forms which occur in the first two hundred most common words in connected speech. The use of weak forms is considered as one aspect of connected speech, which plays 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.

From the productive point of view, all native speakers use them regardless of the level of formality; and for foreign learners who want to speak as naturally as native the speakers, the learning of weak forms becomes obligatory. From the perceptual point of view and this is more important, the knowledge, which listeners have, about weak forms facilitates perception and comprehension.

Conclusion

It is a fact that listening comprehension as a language skill, as well as opposed to other language skills, has received very little attention in language curricula in many non-native speakers, countries. Foreign learners are taught to become proficient writers, speakers, and may be good readers too. The fact that these skills are the most noticeable from the students; performance during the acquisition of a foreign language and it has given them a kind of priority in both understanding and assessment of the phonemes in learning. Whereas, among other reasons, the imbedded nature of listening has greatly contributed to its, „ignorance‟ in language teaching. Consequently, foreign language learners whose listening skill is not adequately developed, properly undoubtedly will face difficulties in understanding natural spoken language. This ignorance is also the result of wrong concepts about listening perception, especially the one that considers listening as a passive skill. The need to change and challenge such view is extremely importance if a communicative aim in language teaching finds its application it will overcome the matter forever. This study had focused on one part of the completely listening comprehension process, which is the students‟ ability to decode the incoming sounds in chunks of sentences in natural spoken English. Moreover, this piece of research devoted to gain a thorough understanding of the effects of students, awareness on the importance of knowing weak and strong forms of function words in English language as well as the effects of their ability to perceive such words in comprehending native speakers, speech sounds of weak forms. In other words, the researcher's aim in this study is to know whether third year students face difficulties in listening to weak forms, and to treat this on the light of their awareness of the significance of such knowledge in listening or not. The hypothesis that the students who are not aware of the importance of weak forms from the perceptual point of view will face difficulties in perceiving them in natural connected speech. To test this, the researcher conducted a research that includes a test designed to identify the students'' concepts about weak forms, and a listening test through aimed in evaluating their ability in perception of reduced forms by audio test and other test on paper. The results of the data analysis confirmed the hypothesis, and further demonstrations that students have serious difficulty in listening to weak forms. When categorized, some reduced sounds found that some forms have been more difficult than others have. The researcher found that there are a number of factors that cause the students to misperceive the functional words such as the inability to hear the weak forms, failure to break down the utterances (lexical segmentation), and sound confusion. On the light of the findings, the researcher recommends that reduced forms teachers must take more attention in teaching in oral analyzing skills. It is true that the declarative knowledge concerning the rules of how to use of such words, which the students taught in phonetics and phonology is important.

However, this knowledge should have much development in the form of training for students to listen to connected speech focusing on the perception of weak forms; which will assist their ability to comprehend and communicate appropriately in real life situations. The integration of listening activities in teaching students such pronunciation forms. In addition to raising their awareness as to their importance in perception is highly recommended in this task. The researchers believe that it should be the subject of teaching in not only the phonetics module, but also in oral expression to non-natives from the beginning. To this end, the students can take training with a set of specific activities that will allow them to notice the modifications exerted over functional words in the speech; thus, realize the importance of knowing about them. Specific exercise types that are helpful in training the students. These include, namely, focus-on-form exercises that allow the teachers to highlight the pronunciation of functional words in running speech. Here the role of the learners is very important; they must have opportunities to ask about the subject and discuss it. These kinds of exercises will serve as an introductory task that targets the awareness of the students. To train the students to listen to reduced forms, it is an evidence that cloze tests and dictations help learners to improve their perceptual abilities. For the former, the teacher gives transcriptions of utterances to the students and instructs them to listen to these sentences (either spoken naturally by him/her or recorded). After the correction, the students will realize the errors committed and try to avoid them with further training. For the latter, the teacher just dictates to the student a text and, at the end, gives them the correct version so that they will compare their answers to the right ones. It is equally important that the students, perceptual abilities of reduced forms learning must have an automatized way by students. The extensive training needed to strengthen the decoding of the weak and strong forms to be an automatic pattern for the students; this automaticity will, consequently free their attention from been confused and focus on other higher levels of meaning while listening. In addition, students good training on how to use the bottom-up processing mode rather than the top-down mode.

Questions of the Research

1-	In what extent the understanding of strong and weak forms of English phonetics and phonology is difficult for non-native speakers.

2-	In what extent the tracing of phonetics and phonology is important for English language learners especially non-native.

Hypothesis of the study

Lack of teaching English phonetics and phonology, which negatively affects students in understanding the sounds of spoken words in English well, will lead to retarding.

Objective of the Study

To find out the problems of not tracing phonetics and phonology in understanding the sounds of spoken words in English language.

Methodology of the study.

In this study, the researcher intended to investigate the understanding of students' performance of listening to strong and weak forms of English functional words spoken by native speakers.

The reason was to evaluate their knowledge of the basic concepts of weak and strong forms giving them specific expressions using an audio-test of function and content words in English grammar. The study was conducted through giving two tests 3rd year students testing their ability in perception of weak and strong forms of sounds in English phonetics and phonology in University of Zalingei to a sample of (40) students and it was the best method to find out the information targeted in the students' knowledge. Also through questionnaire for (20) University teachers concerning the teaching methods with items regarding the perception of strong and weak forms of English functional words in grammar. Moreover, the researcher analyzed the data, and made a finishing with full details of the students, work, and found that their knowledge of

the basic concepts in weak and strong forms. It was efficient in listening comprehension in some areas of grammar, but there were many difficulties confronted the respondents to cope with understanding such words properly.

Data Analysis

A tool for collecting data used for students was a test that provided the answers for questions concerning the understanding of weak and strong forms, perception in listening to native speakers. In addition to audio test, the percentages clarified in the following tables. Below there are ten model diagrams of an ideal ten questions for each table will be analyzed contained function words. Moreover, the percentages of each word should be written in columns to all questions in accordance to the word category in its sound and position.

Q1- Who did you give **the** money away **to**?

Answers	Strong		Weak		Total
Words	To	The	To	The	
Frequency	31	8	9	32	40
Percentage	77.5%	20%	22.5%	80%	100%

This table shows the answer towards of the preposition (**to**) that 77. 5% of the respondents believe that is a strong form and 22.5 of the respondents believe it as a weak form. For definite article, it is found that 80% of the respondents explained that the definite article (**The**) is a weak form in this place. Therefore, when the function word or an article comes in the middle of the words in any sentence in English it is almost in a weak form and vice versa. However, using the functional words via non-native speakers is considered very complicated especially in the area of phonetics and phonology in non-speaking English Language countries.

Q2- What do you want **to** have a word with **me** about?

Answers	Strong		Weak		Total
Words	To	Me	To	Me	
Frequency	11	26	29	14	40
Percentage	27.5%	65%	72.5%	35%	100%

This table clarifies the answers towards the preposition (**to**) in column two 72.5% of the respondents identified as a weak form it is actually true. First, many students are wrong in saying that the pronoun (me) is strong because the word position is in the middle and most of

the cases when such functional words come between words in a sentence always pronounce it lightly so in this case is not true. Second the matter of confusion of the respondents in recognizing the sounds. Moreover, distinguishing the functional word's sound in the middle and at the end of the sentences is very difficult for third year students to determine in phonetics and phonology.

Q3- Who did **you** dance **with**?

Answers	Strong		Weak		Total
Words	You	With	You	With	
Frequency	24	28	16	12	40
Percentage	60%	70%	40%	30%	100%

This table explains the answers towards the pronoun (**you**) in column one that the 60% of respondents identified it as strong form and 40% of the respondents answered as a weak form. It is weak form; also, it found that 70% of the informants appointed to the preposition (**with**) as a strong form. Yes, they right according to its position.

Q4- What **do** you need five thousand pounds **for**?

Answers	Strong		Weak		Total
Words	Do	For	Do	For	
Frequency	16	29	24	11	40
Percentage	40%	72.5%	60%	27.5%	100%

This table expounds that the answers towards an auxiliary verb (**do**) 60% of the respondents have identified it is a weak form that is right. The same to preposition (for) 72.5%) are correct.

Q5- What **is** he writing **a** book about?

Answers	Strong		Weak		Total
Words	Is	A	Is	A	
Frequency	20	8	20	32	40
Percentage	50%	20%	50%	80%	100%

This table shows the answer towards the verb to be (**is**) 50% of the informants have identified that it is a strong form and 50% of them believe that it is a weak form the matter of guessing there is confusion due to their doubt. In addition, it found that 80% of the respondents identified that an indefinite article (**a**) in the second column is a weak form in this table. Both of them are weak forms according to their position in the sentence.

Q6- Who **did** you get a present **from**?

Answers	Strong		Weak		Total
Words	Did	From	Did	From	
Frequency	23	32	17	8	40
Percentage	57.5%	80%	42.5%	20%	100%

This table result shown the answers of respondents towards an auxiliary verb (**did**) 57.5% of the informants decoded it as a strong form but it is a weak form. However, it found that 80% of these respondents indicated that the preposition (**From**) is strong form, they are fully right.

Q7- Who **did** you buy **a** birthday card for?

Answers	Strong		Weak		Total
Words	Did	A	Did	A	
Frequency	34	6	6	34	40
Percentage	85%	15%	15%	85%	100%

This table classifies the answers of question seven towards an auxiliary verb (**did**) in the first column 85% of the respondents chose it as a strong form they actually are correct. Moreover, it found that 85% of informants in the second column classified an indefinite article (a) as a weak form it is true too.

Q8- What is **he** thinking **about**?

Answers	Strong		Weak		Total
Words	He	About	He	About	
Frequency	11	33	29	7	40
Percentage	27.5%	82.5%	72.5%	17.5%	100%

This table identifies the answers towards the subject pronoun (**he**) 72.50% of the respondents classified it as a weak form it is right. However, it found that 82.5% of the informants explained that a preposition (**about**) is a strong form also it is the right answer according to their positions of the both function words.

Q9- Where **do** you want me **to** give a lift to?

Answers	Strong		Weak		Total
Words	Do	To	Do	To	
Frequency	11	33	29	7	40
Percentage	27.5%	82.5%	72.5%	17.5%	100%

This table elucidates the answers of respondents towards an auxiliary verb (**do**) 72.50% of the students classified that it is a weak form and 27.50% identified it as strong form, also it is found that 82.50% of informants believe that the preposition (**to**) is a strong form both of them are incorrect because both words are weak forms. In addition, the third year students are not able to identify the categories of English language functional words in the use that fits the right place and how to classify them. As; The Inner, the Outer and the Expanding circles. The researcher observed that, within these circles, some of the original and standard features of English are disappearing though it has official status.

Q10- What do you want **me** **to** clean the sink with?

Answers	Strong		Weak		Total
Words	Me	To	Me	To	
Frequency	20	22	20	18	40
Percentage	50%	55%	50%	45%	100%

This table explicates the answers towards an object pronoun (**me**) 50% of the respondents identified it as a strong form. In second part 50% of them explained it as a weak form the matter of confusion it is weak, it also found that 55% of informants explained that the preposition (**to**) is strong form it is untrue also therefore both words are in the weak form position.

Discussion

The results obtained from the data analysis demonstrated that 3rd year students do have some difficulties in listening to connected speech regarding the perception of weak forms of grammatical functional words in English Language however they focused more on strong forms rather than weak ones. As for their knowledge concerning the basics of using weak forms, the questions from one to ten the results had, surprisingly, shown that almost all of them have a serious lack of competence as their scores were very low in some sentence and high in others. This is despite the fact that they had lessons concerning reduced forms in grammar in previous years. The analysis of the definitions have provided for weak forms reveal that they have very little knowledge about these words. In addition, their performance in answering the questions showed that many of them were unaware of the reduction rules that govern the use of this category of words in natural spoken English by natives especially the exceptions of rules made in English phonetics and phonology. As it expected, except for few students, many of the students did not know about the importance and use of weak forms when listening to native speakers due to confusion of sounds. Therefore, it means the teachers' always focus on the pronunciation level only and neglecting the teaching of these simple areas that might have contributed in helping to this state of English phonetics phonology. The student's answers concerning the significance of learning about weak forms all focused on the productive level, which accordingly made them grow unpredictable in studying such forms, which will boost their ability to articulate appropriately. The students who have answered fully many of them have studied in English institutes, understood something about weak forms, and practiced listening to these sounds so they knew the importance of listening perception in spoken English that made them to fulfil the highest score in the close test. Whereas, among the remaining students, many of the students had fulfilled the lowest average scores in the test. This suggests that a logical link between the students, awareness and their perceptual abilities proved to exist but need more effort to improve the understanding of both weak and strong forms. That is, the analysis of the data confirms the researcher's hypothesis for students work should aware of the importance of weak forms in listening which will perform the better use of those forms in their future. Some of the students had similar high scores in the test despite they were unaware of the importance of weak forms in listening. Therefore, they obtained low scores in the test. An interpretation to this has led the researcher to think of other variables, which could have played a role in facilitating the task for these students, rather than such degrees of exposure, familiarity, individual and training to listen to connected speech in English language learning.

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