

Investigating the Mastering of the Pronunciation of Weak and Strong Forms of English Function Words

استقصاء التمكن من تلفظ الصيغ الضعيفة والقوية للكلمات النحوية في اللغة الانكليزية

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Abstract

The weak and strong forms are so called because it is not their lexical content that primary matter, but the role they have in the sentence. The problematic confusion, our students encounter, in recognizing and producing the correct pronunciation of weak and strong forms of the English function words is the main incentive behind conducting this study. In order to gather the data, this paper used two types of tests: a recognition test and a production test. The general results reached through the analysis of the students' answers seem to conform to the researcher's assumption: students face a critical problem in recognizing and producing correct pronunciation of the weak and strong forms of the English function words.

1. Introduction

The process of teaching a second language means creating bilinguals in the sense that the learners can make an alternate use of more than one language. Therefore, the problems involved and the principles underlying this process are different from those relating to the teaching of a language to its native speakers. One of the areas of teaching English which has been either ignored or dealt with insufficiently is pronunciation.

Teachers of English Phonetics have always concerned about their students' pronunciation and how to improve it. They have always wondered what they might do to help them achieve a high level of performance.

All those who are concerned with language teaching know that language is speech, not writing. When they talk about speaking, they mean also pronunciation, because it is an integral aspect of speaking skill.

The problem of teaching accurate pronunciation cannot be solved without reconsidering the whole method of teaching English. Students need to be trained to master the English sound system so that they can understand the stream of speech, to distinguish the different sounds, and to produce them correctly.

Teachers of pronunciations in Iraqi departments of English often complain that their students consistently face a number of difficulties when dealing with recognition and production of the weak and the strong forms.

This paper looks at these difficulties as crucial and sets out to investigate the existing of this problem and to what extent the first year students at the Department of English - College of arts/ University of Baghdad have mastered the pronunciation of one joint of English sound system i.e., 'the pronunciation of weak and strong forms of the function words in English'. It tests the students' ability to recognize and produce these forms correctly. The focus will be on the reasons of the difficulties facing them and how to overcome them.

2. Theoretical Review

Hall (1973:35) states that speech is a twofold act: psychological and physiological. It starts with psychological process when the speaker links a thought he wants to transfer, and the set of sounds that symbolize it. The way in which sound meanings are correlated is not simple, but very complex, since several levels of organization are involved. This part of the speech act is immediately followed by the physiological process when, as a result of the brain's command, the vocal organs produce the audible sound sequence which is transmitted by physical sound waves to the listener's ear (Kadler, 1970:6).

The act of speaking involves not only the knowledge of vocabulary and language structure, but the way the speaking is done; that is the pronunciation of the utterance. Without this Knowledge, the speaker cannot convey his/her message to the listener accurately, because when the sounds produced "are peculiar and the voice rises and falls in unexpected places, and when rhythm is distorted, communication becomes difficult and even fails to take place"(Rivers, 1964:161).

The importance of correct pronunciation is not limited to the question of comprehension, but it also includes the act of communication itself. With distorted pronunciation it becomes difficult to carry on a conversation. On the contrary, we find that a good pronunciation can have a good effect on the listener since it brings "absence of distraction from the subject matter in hand leading to more effective and satisfactory communication" (McCarthy, 1978:9). Within the same sense Harmer (2001:183) emphasizes the important role of pronunciation, and state that "Pronunciation teaching not only makes students aware of different sounds and sounds features (and what these mean), but can also improve their speaking immeasurably."

2.1 Introducing Foreign Sound System

Two main different viewpoints have been used in introducing the sound system of the second language. The first allots several weeks of the language course to cover the sound system. The advocates of this approach think that introducing words and phrases first without mastering the sound system will bring errors since students are not well-prepared beforehand. Rivers (1964:129) asserts that students like the language lesson to "be lively and exciting and with active use of the language".

The second approach is teaching the sound system of the second language through the context. The advocates of this approach think that the only way to show the variation of each phoneme must be practically. Moreover, as Rivers (ibid.) points out, learning pronunciation "can be more effective through the contact or through singing songs with an incidental articulatory explanation where needed and occasional drilling in areas of special difficulty."

Glucksberg and Danks argue that before a child can learn the phonemic system of the second language, he must learn words because phonemes are defined in terms of the differences they make in word meaning. The language components; sounds, words, and sentences are inseparable (1975:123).

2.2 The Auditory Stage

Before producing the sounds of the second language, the student needs a kind of preparation or training to be able to identify clearly what he hears. All the phonemes that are new to the learner's ear, in the sense that he has never heard them before, are likely to cause auditory problems and will affect his production of these sounds. To overcome this difficulty, we should pick up these sounds in a certain order and listen to them with extra attention. This clearly means that a period of ear training should precede the production of the sound so that the student may acquire at the same time experience with the acceptable sequences of sounds in that language. This can also "help to build in connection between hearing and speaking" (Nida, 1957:33).

Oliver (1969) cited in Al-Taei (2000:1) states that the teaching of pronunciation is concerned with the formation and production of the correct sounds of the foreign language. The speaker has acquired the

sounds of the native language through constant repetition and imitation of the sounds made by other human beings in his immediate environment.

2.3 Weak and Strong Forms

One of the striking features of English pronunciation is the phenomenon known as gradation. By gradation is meant the existence in many English words of two or more pronunciations, a *strong form* and one or more *weak forms* (Jones, 1939:126).

Some words change their pronunciation in unstressed position. Usually the vowel sound moves to a neutral position and becomes a kind of murmur or weak moan [ə], or a long vowel sound is shortened. The consonant sounds are less subject to change (Haycraft, 1973:167).

Roach (1999: 102) explains that "Almost all the words which have both a strong and weak form belong to a category that may be called *function words*; words that do not have a dictionary meaning in the way that we normally expect nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs to have." These function words are words such as auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions etc., all of which are in certain circumstances pronounced in their strong forms but which are more frequently pronounced in their weak forms." It is important to remember that there are certain contexts where only the strong form is acceptable and others where the weak form is the normal pronunciation" (ibid.).

Roach (1999: 103) mentions that "there are some fairly simple rules; we can say that the strong form is used in the following case":

i) For many weak-form words, when they occur at the end of a sentence. For example, the word 'of' has the weak form [əv] in the following sentence:

'I'm fond of chips' aɪm 'fɒnd əv 'tʃɪps

but when it comes at the end of the sentence, as in the following example, it has strong form [ɒv]:

'Chips are what I'm fond of' 'tʃɪps ə 'wɒt aɪm 'fɒnd ɒv

ii) When a weak-form word is being contrasted with another word, e.g.:

'The letter's from him, not to him' ðə 'letəz 'frɒm ɪm nɒt 'tu: ɪm

A similar case is what we might call a co-ordinated use of prepositions:

'I travel to and from London a lot' aɪ 'trævl 'tu: ən 'frɒm 'lʌndən ə 'lɒt

'A work of and about literature' ə 'wɜ:k 'ɒv ən ə 'bʌt lɪtrətʃə

iii) When a weak form is given stress for the purpose of emphasis, e.g.:

'You *must* give me more money' ju 'mʌst 'gɪv mi 'mɔ: 'mʌni

iv) When a weak-form word is being "cited" or "quoted", e.g.:

'You shouldn't put "and" at the end of a sentence'

ju 'ʃʊdnt 'pʊt 'ænd ət ðɪ 'end əv ə 'sentəns

Roach (1999:103) points that another point to remember is that when weak-form words whose spelling begins with 'h' (e.g., 'here', 'have') occur at the beginning of a sentence, the pronunciation is with initial **h**, even though this is usually omitted in other contexts.

2.3.1 Words Occur in Both Weak and Strong Forms

Haycraft (1973:167) lists the following words which occur in both weak and strong forms. Notice that the same word at the end of the sentence has a fairly strong form without being strongly stressed.

Unstressed weak form	Stressed (or slow delivery) strong form
be [bi] He must be mad	[bi:] Be honest!
am [m, əm] I am hungry	[æm] I really am.

are[ə] So are you
is [z] So is he
was [wəz] There was nothing
were [wə] They were very old
been [bin] It's been wonderful

have [v, həv] I have got sixpence
has[həz] What has he get?
[z] He Has got money
[s]
had [həd] We had paid, you see

not [nt] He Hadn't

shall [ʃl] We shall see
will [l] I will think about it

should [ʃd] I should think

would [wəd] There would be candles

can [kʌn] He can have it!
could [kəd] He could have been
do [d] Do you know him?
does [dəz] What does 'eureka'

me [mi] He told me about it
you [ju] Did you hear?
he [hi] He is old
she [ʃi] She is old
her [hə] Give her some
we [wi] we are sorry
us [əs] Give us a hand
them [ðm] Give them a hand

a [ə] a woman
an [ən] an old woman
the [ðə] the woman
the [ði] the old woman

[a:] Are you?
[iz] Is he?
[wɔz] There he was.
[wə:] They really were.
[bi:n] He has just been.

[həv] So you have.
[həz] Has he?
[had] Had you?

[nɔt] Certainly not!

[ʃæl] Shall we?
[wil] Will you?

I shouldn't think so.
[ʃud] He should be there by now.
He should tell the truth.

Would you mind?
[wud] It would have been perfect
You would!
He wouldn't do that

[kæn] He can?
[kud] So he could.
[du:] What can I do?
[dʌz] He certainly does.

[mi:] He told you but not me.
[ju:] He said it was you.
[hi:] So is he
[ʃi:] So is she
[hə:] Her?
[wi:] So are we
[ʌs] He gave it to us.
[ðəm] You gave it to them?

[ei] I meant a woman, not woman
[æŋ] Remember: an old woman
[ði:] Ah, you mean the woman

For more details see O'Connor (1980:92-5) and Roach (1991:103-9).

3. Procedure

In order to fulfil the aim of this paper, this section presents its practical side within the description of the following:

- Determining the population
- Conducting the Tests
- Analysing the Results

3.1 Population

The population investigated was made up of twenty male and female students attending their first year at the Department of English- College of Arts/ University of Baghdad. All are around twenty years old, whose mother tongue is Arabic.

Assuming that the students have studied the use of English weak and strong forms, they were subjected to the tests on Monday, 13 of April, 2009.

3.2 Tests

Since the main aim of this paper is to evaluate first year student's mastering the pronunciation of weak and strong forms of the English function words, two tests are constructed for this purpose. These two tests are assumed to be appropriate to investigate the two domains of learning; recognition and production.

The face validity of both tests is checked and confirmed by a jury of five experts. The experts were requested to check the adequacy of these tests and to suggest any required modification.

The jury members were:

1. Prof. Abdullatif AL-Jumaily (Ph.D), College of Arts/ University of Baghdad.
2. Prof. Nidham Hameed (Ph.D), College of Arts/ University of Baghdad.
3. Prof. Riyadh Khalil (Ph.D), College of Language/ University of Baghdad.
4. Inst. Niseer Abbas (Ph.D), College of Arts/ University of Baghdad.
5. Inst. Muhammed Badiie (Ph.D), College of Education/ University of Tikrit,

3.2.1 Recognition Test

The Recognition test in this paper contains two parts. Part one aims at measuring the ability of the students in recognizing the correct pronunciation of the weak and strong forms. It contains five sentences, each with underlined function word. Each sentence is followed by four multiple choices. From these choices only one is correct and the student has to encircle the letter referring to it.

Part two aims at measuring the ability of the students in recognizing the strong forms. It contains five sentences each with underlined strong form. Each sentence is followed by four multiple choices. From these choices only one is correct and the student has to encircle the letter referring to it. (See Appendix One).

3. 2.2 Production Test

This test aims at measuring the ability of the students in producing the correct pronunciation of the weak and strong forms. It contains five pairs of (*a* and *b*). Each pair of sentences contains the same function word, but sentences marked with (*a*) contain the weak forms, while sentences marked with (*b*) contain the strong forms. The students have to transcribe each underlined word phonemically to show the

difference between the weak and strong forms for the same underlined function words. (See Appendix Two).

4. Results and Analysis

The two areas, recognition and production, covered by the two tests are traced through checking the answers of the students. All the correct and incorrect answers are counted and marked for the purpose of evaluating the student's performance. The following criteria are adopted in the process of checking:

- The total degree for the two tests is 100 marks (ms in abbreviation).
- The total degree for each test is 50 ms.
- The total degree for each part in each test is 25 ms.
- The total degree for each item is 5 ms.
- The results of each test are broken down in a separate table.
 - Working out a comprehensive table containing the numbers of the students' and a column for each item. The items in front of each student's number are marked with (✓) for the correct answers or (×) for the incorrect answers according to the students' answers. This table shows also the total numbers of the correct and incorrect answers of all the students. (See Appendix Three).
 - The averages of results are evaluated according to Carroll's (1980:143) model cited in Al-Darraj (2004:25). This model gives the following scale :

<u>Band</u>	<u>Learners Ability</u>
90-100	Expert user in pronunciation
80-89	Very good pronunciation
70-79	Good pronunciation
60-69	Competent pronunciation
50-59	Modest pronunciation
40-49	Marginal pronunciation
30-39	Extremely pronunciation
20-29	Intermittent pronunciation
0-19	Non-user pronunciation

4.1 Analysing Recognition Results

Each part of the recognition test is analysed separately. The student's answers in each part are checked and scored in accordance with the criteria mentioned in the previous sub-section. 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.

4.1.1 Part One

This part deals with measuring the ability of the students in mastering the recognition of the pronunciation of English weak forms.

Scoring the answers of the students shows the numbers of the correct and incorrect items as illustrated in the following table.

Table. 1 Assessing students' recognition of weak forms

No. of item	Correct		Incorrect	
	Total number	percentage	Total number	percentage

1	5	25%	15	75%
2	9	45%	11	55%
3	6	30%	14	70%
4	4	20%	16	80%
5	7	35%	13	65%
Average	6.2%	31%	13.8	69%

The above table demonstrates the students' poor recognition of all the items, though we can accept the result of item 2 (some). According to Corollo's scale this result is within the seventh level (Extremely pronunciation).

4.1.2 Part Two

This part deals with measuring the ability of the students in mastering the recognition of the pronunciation of strong forms of the English function words.

Scoring the answers of the students shows the numbers of the correct and incorrect items as illustrated in the following table.

Table. 2 Assessing students' recognition of strong forms

No. of item	Correct		Incorrect	
	Total number	percentage	Total number	percentage
1	9	45%	11	55%
2	3	15%	17	85%
3	8	40%	12	60%
4	6	30%	14	70%
5	5	25%	15	75%
Average	6.2	31%	13.8	69%

The above table illustrates the students' poor recognition of all the items, though we can accept the result of item 1 (of). The students face a big problem in recognizing the pronunciation of item 2 (at). According to Corollo's scale this result is within the seventh level (Extremely pronunciation).

The results of the two parts of the recognition test reflect the students' ignorance in recognizing the pronunciation of both weak and strong forms.

4.1.3 Analyzing Production Results

This test is of two parts. Part one deals with measuring the students' productivity of the pronunciation of English weak forms, while part two deals with the strong form.

The same procedure adopted in analysing the results of the recognition tests is adopted in analysing the production tests.

4.2.1 Part One

This part deals with measuring the ability of the students in mastering the production of the pronunciation of the weak forms of the English function words. The following table shows the results of scoring the student's answer and demonstrates the numbers of the correct and incorrect answers with their percentages.

Table. 3 Assessing students' production of weak forms

No. of item	Correct		Incorrect	
	Total number	percentage	Total number	percentage
1	2	10%	18	90%
2	7	35%	13	65%
3	0	0%	20	100%
4	3	15%	17	85%
5	2	10%	18	90%
Average	2.8	14%	17.2	86%

The above table indicates that the students face more problems in the production level than those facing them in the recognition level. The students show severe weakness in the production of all the weak forms. The average of the correct answerers is only 14%. According to Corollo' model this average lies within the lowest band which is assessed as "Non-user pronunciation".

4.2.2 Part Two

This part deals with measuring the ability of the students in mastering the production of the pronunciation of the strong forms of the English function words. The following table shows the results of scoring the student's answers and demonstrates the numbers of the correct and incorrect answers with their percentages.

Table. 4 Assessing students' production of strong forms

No. of item	Correct		Incorrect	
	Total number	percentage	Total number	percentage
1	5	15	15	75%
2	6	30	14	70%
3	2	20	18	90%
4	0	0	20	100%
5	3	15	17	85%
Average	3.2	16%	16.8	84%

The above table demonstrates the student's poor performance in the production of the strong forms which comes with an average of (16%). According to Corrolo's scale this average is within the lowest level i.e. "Non-user pronunciation".

5. Discussion the results

After considering the analysis of the answers of the two tests, the general results reached at in this paper can be illustrated in the following table.

Table 5. Assessing the students' performance

Type of form	Type of Test	Number of Tested forms	Correct Answers		Incorrect Answers	
			average	%	average	%
Weak Forms	Recognition	20	6.2	31	13.8	69
Strong forms	Production	20	3	15	17	85

In the light of the above obtained results, this paper affirms that the students subjected to the tests face critical weakness in the pronunciation of English weak and strong forms of the function words.

In answering the recognition tests, the students follow no reasonable rules in choosing the answers. Nearly all the answers have been done randomly. Most of the students show an observed inclination to use the sound [ʌ] more than other sounds. In answering the recognition tests, the students reveal their ignorance or rather their unfamiliarity with the sound [ə]. Investigating the students' illustrates that the students might judge the tested sounds according to their Arabic background.

Answers concerning the strong forms are not better than those concerning the weak forms. The students also show an inclination to choose the sound [ʌ] randomly. The average of correct answers is 31% while the average of the incorrect answers is 69%.

Investigating the answers of the production tests reveals a critical problem faced by the students in dealing with this area. The answers show surprising results which need a special scrutiny. In addition to the random answers, some answers have been left blank. Again the answers reveal the tendency of some students to use the sound [ʌ]. There is no slight clue that might lead to a certain criterion followed by the students in doing their answers.

5. Conclusions

In accordance with the results of the analysis, this paper can draw the following conclusions.

1. 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.
2. The students show weakness in both, the recognition and production levels.
3. Scoring the answers shows that only two students among twenty have gained successful marks.
4. The students' answers were randomly done. There is no reasonable justification behind their choices.
5. The students' poor knowledge in the fields of recognition and production of English weak and strong forms prohibits this paper from reaching stable findings.
6. Students' Arabic background reflects its effect on their performance.
7. The students are very poor in using the symbols of transcription.
8. The time allotted for teaching the pronunciation of the weak and strong forms of English function words might not sufficient.
9. The students need to know the difference between the sounds [ʌ] and [ə].

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Appendix One Recognition Text

Part One

Choose and encircle the letter representing the appropriate weak form for each underlined function word in the following sentences

	Sentences	a	b	c	b
1	Come <u>and</u> see.	ænd	ʌnd	ən	ən
2	Have <u>some</u> more tea.	səm	sʊm	sʌm	sem
3	Better <u>than</u> ever.	ðən	ð æ n	ðən	ðen
4	<u>But</u> why not.	bet	bʊt	bʌt	bət
5	I <u>must</u> tell him	mæ st	m əst	mest	m ʌ st

Answers

1. a b c d
2. a b c d
3. a b c d
4. a b c d
5. a b c d

Part Two

Choose and encircle the letter representing the appropriate strong form for each underlined function word in the following sentences.

	Sentences	a	b	c	d
1	Someone I've heard <u>of</u>	ɔ:v	uv	ɔv	əv
2	What's he shooting <u>at</u> ?	æ t	ɑ:t	ət	ʌt
3	I think John <u>does</u> .	dez	dʌz	d ɑ:z	d əz
4	Eat <u>them</u> .	ðem	ðm	ð əm	ð ɪm
5	I think we <u>can</u> .	kʌn	k ən	kɑ:n	k æn

Answers

1. a b c d
2. a b c d
3. a b c d
4. a b c d
5. a b c d

Appendix Two Production Test

Transcribe the underlined function words in the following sentences phonemically.

Notice: the function words with (a) are in weak forms, while those in the sentences with (b) are in strong words.

No.	Sentences	The Answers	
		Weak forms	Strong forms
1	a. Thanks <u>for</u> asking.	
	b. What's that <u>for</u> ?	
2	a. Shut <u>the</u> door.	
	b. Wait <u>for</u> the end.	
3	a. We <u>shall</u> need to hurry.	
	b. I think we <u>shall</u>
4	a. The price is the thing <u>that</u> annoys me.	
	b. <u>that</u> is my book.	
5	a. As much <u>as</u> possible.	
	b. That's what it was		

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المستخلص

سميت الصيغ الضعيفة والقوية هكذا، لان ما يعنينا بالدرجة الأولى هو دورها في الجملة وليس محتواها. ان الأرتباك الكبير ، الذي يواجهه طلابنا، في معرفة او انتاج لفظ صحيح للصيغ الضعيفة والقوية للكلمات النحوية الأنكليزية كان المحفز للقيام بهذه الدراسة. ومن أجل الحصول على المعطيات التحليلية، استخدمت هذه الدراسة نوعين من الأختبارات، اختبار المعرفة واختبار الأنتاج. وجاءت النتائج الاجمالية لتحليل أجوبة الطلاب متطابقة مع ما أفترضه الباحث وهو ان الطلاب يواجهون صعوبة كبيرة في معرفة وأنتاج لفظ صحيح للصيغ الضعيفة والقوية للكلمات النحوية في اللغة الأنكليزية.