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The Importance of Learning Strong and Weak Forms in Listening Comprehension

The Case of Third Year Students at the Department of English - Constantine University

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfilment for the Requirements of a Master's Degree in Applied Languages

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Dedication

This work would not have been completed without the precious support and care of many people whose contributions have been equally priceless, and to whom I am deeply indebted. I dedicate this work:

To my mother and father for their love and support. To my brothers and sisters for their help and patience, to all my relatives, and to the soul of my grandmother for her prayers.

To my close friends with whom I have spent the best moments during my studies; Abdellah, Abdennour, Abdesslem, Borhane, and Eldjemai. To my closest friends Abdelhak, Alaaddin, Adel, Hamza, and Said.

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to investigate 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 is to evaluate the students' performance in listening to the weak forms of grammatical words. Classroom observation has revealed that students seem 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. Furthermore, these forms are seldom used in the speech of teachers and the students lack awareness and training. Through a listening test, we have tried to depict the comprehension level of students regarding these forms and to elicit the perception difficulties that they are likely to face in listening to natives. The results confirm that almost all the tested students are not only unaware of the significance of weak forms in listening, but also they are unable to perceive such forms. As a practical contribution, the study leads to some recommendations concerning the teaching of weak forms and the aspects of connected speech in general.

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List of Abbreviations

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

LMD: Licence, Master, Doctorat

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Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Foreign language learning has always been regarded as the mastery of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening and reading are regarded as belonging to the same category, which is the receptive skills and speaking and writing to another category, which is the productive ones. All these skills are important; however, there is a tendency in teaching to give much more attention to the productive skills to the extent that the other skills are somehow neglected.

The main concern of this study is the listening skill. Definitions of listening range from simple ones which regard it as the simple recognition of speech sounds to the highly complex ones which consider it a process involving a wide range of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. In our study, we will work on the phonological knowledge as a part of the linguistic knowledge that is necessary in the process of listening. We will focus on the learning of weak forms of grammatical words as one aspect of connected speech which is as significant in listening as in speaking i.e. in production and in reception.

Students are taught basic concepts about the ways weak forms are used in different environments. The basic source of this information is generally the courses students are taught in the module of phonetics. The main focus of such courses is to show students different variations of pronunciation that each grammatical word has and the rules that govern their actual use i.e. the manner and the context of their use. That is to say, what students are learning is the 'production' of weak forms. This is significant in the sense that native speakers use them in speech, and since the students' aim is to speak as naturally as native speakers, the learning of these forms facilitates the task. In addition, the intelligibility of the language students produce will highly depend on their correct use of

these forms. More importantly, extensive work with weak forms will facilitate their perception in natural speech. Students, however, have poor performance as to the perception of these forms. Despite the fact that they have been exposed to the basic concepts that govern the use of weak forms, they still have problems with understanding them while listening to connected speech. The reason for this, as stated earlier, might be that the focus in teaching is given more to production rather than reception. It could be also that students are not aware of the importance of this aspect of connected speech in listening.

Aims of the Study

This study deals with the students' listening comprehension ability; the objective is to diagnose the students' performance in listening. We aim at understanding the problems that students meet while listening to natural native speech from the point of view of their perception of weak forms of grammatical words i.e. the reflections of any misperception of these forms on their actual comprehension of native speech. In our study, we will address the issue of directing the students' attention to the significance of weak forms in perception and in the listening comprehension process as a whole, and how their awareness of this will improve their listening comprehension abilities.

The findings will lead to recommendations as to what is needed to be taken into consideration in teaching this specific aspect of connected speech (weak forms) as part of listening (oral skill).

Background of the Study

The reason for trying to deal with this topic comes from the author's personal experience as a student. In the daily courses, it was noticed that students have difficulties in understanding stretches of natural speech where the weak forms are used. This recurrent phenomenon is very noticeable especially during dictations. When a teacher, who extensively uses weak forms in his speech, dictates, students show poor abilities to

understand the meanings of sentences and to break them down. Very frequently, students ask the teachers to repeat what they say, and it is almost always the weak forms that cause problems. The problem is usually solved as the teacher repeats what he said but with the use of full forms instead. As a matter of fact, students have been taught the rules governing the use of weak forms; but despite this, they are still unable to recognize them. This is why, in this research, we will try to question the sufficiency of knowing about these rules in the process of listening, and the importance of raising students' awareness to their significance in developing the listening skill.

Research Questions

In this study, the effects of perception and misperception of weak forms of functional words from the part of students on their listening comprehension will be addressed. In addition, the following questions will be addressed:

1. Are students aware of the importance of weak forms as an aspect of connected speech that is necessary in developing their listening skills?

2. Do Third year Students have problems in listening to reduced forms of functional words?

3. Is it sufficient to rely only on the basic concepts of the use of weak forms (learnt in phonetics) to enable students to recognize these forms in natural speech?

Assumptions and Hypothesis

This study is carried out with the assumption that the strong and weak pronunciations of functional words are taught only in the module of phonetics (in the context of the department of English). Our hypothesis is that if students are aware of the

significance of the weak forms and the rules that govern their use not only in production but also in reception, they will show better listening comprehension abilities.

Method

Materials and Procedure

In this study, we intend to measure two types of students' performance. The first is to measure their knowledge of the basic concepts of weak forms. This will be measured by the use of a questionnaire. The choice of the questionnaire is because it is the best method to specify the kind of information we intend to target in the students' knowledge. It will include multiple choice questions (MCQ), direct questions and sentences to be transcribed to measure the students' knowledge of the basic concepts of weak forms and to see their awareness concerning their significance in listening. We will see the effects of this knowledge in the students' listening comprehension.

The second type of performance we intend to measure is the students' listening comprehension abilities. This will be arrived at by means of a listening cloze test (in the language laboratory). Each student will be given the written form of a group of sentences to which they will listen, but the grammatical words, together with the word that comes before each of them, will be blanked out. The sentences will be carefully selected so that each one will include at least one grammatical word that is pronounced in its weak form. Students will be instructed to fill in the gaps on the basis of what they listen to in order to measure their perception/misperception of the weak forms.

In order to fill in the blanks in the listening cloze test, students might rely on co-text, context and many other information sources in order to guess the correct grammatical word that is blanked. This will result in many other variables which might influence the interpretation of the data. Thus, the sentences selected for the test will be of a limited co-text which is sufficient only to avoid ambiguity.

Subjects

Eighteen randomly selected third year students from the Department of English, University of Constantine will be the informants in this study. We assume that these students have the characteristics that we expect. First, they all have been studying English for at least 8 years including 3 years of graduation; this implies that they have a good proficiency of English. Second, they have studied phonetics for two years and have been given courses about the use of weak forms in both the first and the second year.

Structure of the Study

The study will be divided into two chapters. The first chapter will be devoted to deal with the theoretical basis of our present research. We will address the main issues related to listening comprehension and the approaches of the teaching of listening skills. The chapter will also include notions about weak forms as an aspect of connected speech that makes a part of the linguistic knowledge necessary in the process of listening comprehension. The second chapter will be practical and will deal with the data collection and analysis of the test and the questionnaire.

Chapter I

Weak Forms in Listening Comprehension

Introduction

In this chapter, we will deal with the problem of listening to weak forms of functional words in connected speech. A thorough understanding of the characteristics of functional words and of the English sound-system characteristics will help us to get a clear image of the reasons that stand behind the alternation in pronunciation exerted over this category of words –functional words- in spoken English. We will explore the rules that govern the use of functional words in English and raise some theoretical considerations about the characteristics of functional words which make them go un-noticeable in connected speech, especially from the part of foreign learners. Some experiments which dealt with the problem of listening to weak forms and connected speech phenomena in English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as Second Language (ESL) situations will also be reviewed. Before that, some basic notions about the nature of listening comprehension-the context of the problem- and the listening process will be first considered.

I.1. Listening

I.1.1 Nature of Listening

Because of 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 it 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 necessary to

decode the meaning of the incoming data. Traditionally, listening had been considered as a 'passive skill' i.e. the listener makes no effort in order to get the meaning of the message. This view, however, 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' " (1988: 06). 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 enough 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. A clarification of this idea was given by Rost (1990) who defined listening as an "…essentially inferential process based on the perception of cues rather than straightforward matching of sound to meaning" (1990: 30).

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, the 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, they assume that some of the information they communicate is already known by the listener. 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" (2006: 93). 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 include different sorts of information that is stored in the mind about the topic, cultural knowledge, experience, social background; and formal schemata have 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.

We can sum 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 the purpose of understanding the intended meaning.

I.1.2 Listening and Language Processing

In the process of listening, it is 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 are referred to as bottom-up and top-down Processes.

I.1.2.1 Bottom-up Processing Mode

It is a processing mode that is perception-based. The language input is processed by decoding its components starting from the smallest speech constituent and moving step by step 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"(1991: 109). 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.

I.1.2.2 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 inferencing (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 include 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" (2003: 45). 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.

I.1.2.3 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 is 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 due to the fact that 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 (1991: 10).

I.1.3 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, Nida (1957, 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 (Nida, 1957, 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 that "Listening helps students to acquire language subconsciously even if teachers do not draw attention to its special features" (1998: 96).

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 are 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 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 that "…as in practically every other area of pronunciation, learners need to *perceive* differences before they can be expected to produce them" (1994: 100).

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.

I.2 Weak Forms

I.2.1 Defining 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 content words- 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'. Also, 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' teɪk jə taim

'On your own' ɒn jər əʊn

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" (1998: 103). Table 1 shows 36 examples of such common words.

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 (1985: 4).

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.

I.2.2 The Use of Weak Forms

I.2.2.1 Strong vs. Weak

As stated before, there are rules that are used to identify where a functional word is to be used on its weak form and where the strong one has to be used. Since in English the weak forms are the normal pronunciation form of functional words, and they are more frequently used, it is a good way to focus on the exceptions where the weak form is not used in order to get a clear image of these rules. Hence, we will mention only the conditions under which the strong form is more suitable, which means that in almost all of the other conditions, functional words have to be weakened.

The strong form is used when the functional word occurs in isolation, i.e. out of context. The strong form is used when the word occurs in the final position of the sentence. Pronouns such as 'his', 'us' …may remain weak in final position.

Where are you from? /frɒm/

I'm home from work. /frəm/

Stay with him. /im/

When functional words are quoted, they are pronounced strongly.

The word ‘and’ is a conjunction /ænd/

When the word is emphasized in an utterance, it is stressed to show an intended meaning.

Is marry present? _ Yes, she *is* present

In connected speech, if a functional word precedes a pause, it is pronounced in its strong form.

It is a….er em it is a good idea. /ei/ /ə/

For auxiliary verbs, if they occur in their negative sense, they are always strong.

She has not found her keys yet. /hæz/

When the word ‘must’ is used in the sense of concluding something, it is usually stressed (Roach, 1998).

He does not reply to the phone calls. He must be in a meeting. /mʌst/

In addition to this, there are some functional words which are regularly stressed. These are particularly demonstratives (like ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘those’) and interrogatives (like ‘where’, ‘who’, ‘which’, ‘how’) (Collins & Mees, 2003). Interrogatives such as these do not have a weak form. If the word ‘that’ is used in a relative clause, it is not stressed. But as a demonstrative adjective, it ‘is’ stressed.

Who is that boy? /ðæt/

I told him that I was busy. /ðət/

Functional words	Strong form	Weak Form(s)	Examples	
			Strong Form	Weak Form
'A' 'An'	eɪ / æn	ə / ən	ɪːt ən æpl	riːd ə bʊk
Am	æm	əm	əz əʊld əz aɪ æm	waɪ əm aɪ hɪə
And	ænd	ənd/ən/nd/	ˈænd ɪz ə kəndʒʌnkʃn	kʌm ən siː /fiʃn tʃips
Are	ɑː	ə/ər	ðə smɪθs ɑː	hɪər ə ðə pleɪts
As	æz	əz	ðæts wɒt ɪt wəz səʊld æz	əz mʌtʃ əz pɒsɪbl
At	æt	ət	wɒt ə ju lʊkɪŋ ˈæt	aɪl siː ju ət lʌntʃ
But	βʌt	bət	aɪ sed ˈbʌt nɒt ˈæt	ɪts gʊd bət ikspensɪv
Can/Could	kæn/kʊd	kən/kəd	aɪ θɪnk aɪ kæn	ðeɪ kən weɪt
Do/Does	duː/dʌz	də du/dəz	sʌm piːpl duː	waɪ də ðeɪ lɪk ɪt
For	fɔː	fə/fər	wɒts ðæt fɔː	tiː fə tuː
From	ʌrɒm	frəm	weər ɪt keɪm frɒm	aɪm həʊm frəm wɜːk
Had	hæd	əd	aɪ θɔːt wi hæd	məʊst əd gɒn həʊm
Has	hæz	əz	aɪ θink ʃi hæz	wɪtʃ əz biːn best
Have	hæv	əv	jes wɪ hæv	wɪtʃ əv ju siːn
He	ɥi	i	hɪ keɪm leɪt	ai hɜːd ðət ɪ wəz ɪl
Her	hɜː(r)	hə/ə	ɪts ˈhɜː dɪsɪʒn	ɑːsk ə tə kʌm
Him	hɪm	ɪm	tɔːk tə ˈhɪm nɒt tə hə	lɪːv ɪm ələʊn
Must	mʌst	məs/məst	ʃi sɜːtnli mʌst	ju məs traɪ hɑːdə
Of	ɒf	əv/ɒv/v	sʌmwʌn aiv hɜːd ɒv	məʊst əv ɔːl
Shall/Shoul	ʃæl/ʃʊd	ʃəl ʃl/ʃəd	aɪ θiŋk wi ʃæl	wɪ ʃl niːd tə hʌri
She	ʃɪː	ʃi	huː iz ˈʃɪː	ʃɪ wəz bɪzɪ
Some	sɒm	səm	aɪv gɒt sʌm	hæv səm mɔː tiː
Than	ðæn	ðən	haʊ tə spel ˈðæn	hi ɪz tɔːlə ðən yuː
That	ðæt	ðət	lʊk ət ˈðæt	seɪ ðət ʃi wəz aʊtsaɪd
The	ðɪ	ðə	weɪt fə ði ˈend	ʃʌt ðə ðɔː
Them	ðem	ðəm/əm	jə əv tə lʊk fə ˈðem	lɪːv ðəm hɪə
There	ðeə/ðeər	ðə/ðər	pʊt ɪt ðeə	ðə ʃʊd bi ə ruːl
To	tuː	tə/tu/	tə ɪz ðə wɪːk fɔːm v ˈtuː	traɪ tə stɒp
Us	ʌs	əs	hi wəz tɔːkiŋ tu ʌs nɒt tu ɪm	raɪt əs ə letə
Was	wɒz	wəz	jes ʃɪ wɒz	ʃɪ wəz ʌpset
We	wɪː	wi	ˈwɪː ə gəʊiŋ	wi məs du ɪt
Were	wɜː	wə/wər	ðeɪ wɜːnt əz kəʊld əz wiː wɜː	θə peɪpəs wə leɪt
You	juː	ju/	haʊ ə juː	wɒt də ju θink
Your	jɔː	jə(r)	ɪts ˈjɔːz	weər ɪz jə kɑː

Table 1: Strong and Weak Forms of Common English Functional Words (adapted from Roach, 1998)

I.2.2.2 Manner of Phonological Modification

The way functional words are modified in speech depends on a number of factors. The same functional word may be reduced into two or more distinct forms if it occurs in different phonological environments. Sometimes the degree of reduction is bound to the level of formality. In formal styles, reduction tends to be lighter than in less formal ones. Sometimes, the degree of reduction is linked to factors such as fatigue and laziness, but there is no doubt that it is used in all styles. Here are some common patterns of reduction that are shared by weak forms of English:

a. Vowel reduction: this feature is found in almost all weak forms. The vowel of the citation form is replaced by another vowel which is weaker. There are three common weak vowel sounds in the English weak forms:

The /ə/ as in ‘from’, ‘but’, ‘and’. /frəm/ /bət/ /ənd/.

The /ɪ/ as in ‘bee’, ‘she’, ‘he’. /bɪ/ /ʃɪ/ /hɪ/.

The /ʊ/ as in ‘you’, ‘to’. /jʊ/ /tʊ/.

b. Sound loss: it is the diminution of the sound quantity of a word. This is done through the omission of sounds from the strong form. Technically this is called ‘elision’, and it has three types:

-Omission of initial consonant as in ‘has’ ‘them’; /əz/ /əm/.

The consonant /h/ is usually omitted in pronouns unless they occur at the beginning of the sentence. Hence, ‘him’ ‘his’ and ‘her’ will become /ɪm/, /ɪz/, /ə/ or /ər/ respectively.

-Omission of final consonant as in ‘and’, /n/ or /ən/.

-Omission of vowel sound as in ‘was’, ‘can’ /wz/ /kn/.

In addition to these common features, the weak form is affected by neighbouring sounds. Whether the next word starts with a consonant of a vowel makes a ’variable’ which specifies which weak form is to be used. For instance, the word ‘for’ has two weak forms:/fə/ and /fər/. If the following word begins with a consonant, the /fə/ form is more suitable. If it begins with a vowel, then the /fər/ form will be used instead.

For some words, reduction will result in the appearance of syllabic consonants (e.g. I can pile them). Also, like all the other words in connected speech, functional words may undergo different ways of assimilation, linking, and elision.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
				before vowel in next word:				
	weak vowel ə	weak vowel ɪ	drop h except at begining of utterance	ɪ/i → i	ə/u → u	add r	ə → i	ə → ən
prepositions								
at	x							
for	x					x		
from	x							
of	x							
to	x				x			
pronouns								
he		x	x	x				
him		x	x					
his		x	x					
she		x		x				
her	x		x					
we		x		x				
us	x							
you	x				x			
your	x					x		
them	x							
articles								
a	x							x
the	x						x	
conj.,adv.								
and	x							
as	x							
but	x							
some	x							
than	x							
that	x							
there	x					x		
aux. verbs								
are	x					x		
be		x		x				
been		x						
can	x							
could	x							
do	x							
does	x							
had	x							
have	x							
must	x							
shall	x							
should	x							
was	x							
were	x					x		
will	x							
would	x							

Table 2: Weak Forms' Reduction and the Effects of Phonological Environment (Adapted from Knútsson: 2009)

I.2.3 The Reasons for Weakening Functional Words

In connected speech, the normal pronunciation of functional words is the reduced form. Till now, our treatment of the notion of weak forms in English has been at the segmental level i.e. at the level of phonemes. We have explored the areas which determine how functional words are normally weakened and have stated the factors which specify how they are weakened such as the word class, phonological environment etc. It is not the phonological environment, however, nor the word class that count for the reason of reduction. The weakening is usually linked to supra-segmental aspects of the English phonological system.

English is a stress-timed language. By this is meant that, at the sentence level, the stress pattern is time-related, having equal intervals between stressed syllables. To maintain this regularity, some syllables have to be compressed in a way that fits this 'rhythm'. Because of that, functional words are normally reduced to achieve this rhythmic regularity. For Dretzke (1998), the rhythmic pattern of English is bound to the correct use of weak forms. He stated: "…the full pronunciation of [functional words] would distort the rhythmic pattern of English and could lead to constant misunderstanding" (1998: 102-3).

It means that the rhythm will be distorted as a result of choosing not to use the weak forms, and, therefore, the 'up and down' rhythmic model will become 'up' only. Hence, the use of weak forms is a logical consequence of the English rhythmic pattern.

Similarly, reducing functional words is a logical result of how English sentence-stress is established. Regular weakening of functional words helps the listener to perceive the prominent (stressed) words in the text and, thus, getting a correct interpretation of the intended meaning. If all the words are pronounced with stress, the prominence feature will

simply 'vanish' and there would be no distinction between stressed and unstressed words; likewise, the sentence-stress pattern will be lost. Dalton & Seidlhofer suggested that weak forms and sentence-stress are “as inseparable as two sides of a coin” (1994: 113). They further advocated the integration of the two in course-books by treating them simultaneously under the same heading; otherwise, the learners will miss the point.

Another reason for weakening functional words is to achieve a maximum ease of pronunciation. Speakers tend to modify the sounds in different contexts and in different ways in order to facilitate pronunciation (Brow & Kondo, 2006).The speed at which speakers deliver their message affects the way different words are articulated. Generally, in the stream of speech, there is a relatively limited time within which each word is to be pronounced. Given this, in moving from one sound to another or from one word to another, it would be difficult for the speaker to pronounce every word as accurately as it is pronounced in isolation. According to Buck, “The modification to pronunciation that takes place during fast speech is quite extensive. Hardly a word is left unaffected” (2001: 133). That is why words, namely functional words, are open to a considerable set of phonological modification.

If we consider the amount of meaning that functional words carry, we can notice the third reason for their weakening in speech. Compared to content words, functional words convey relatively very little information. Content words are stressed namely because speakers consider that they are more important than grammatical words which, in contrary, are often left unstressed. Take for instance the sentence;

I--- student--- University --- Oxford.

In this ‘sentence’, even if the functional words are omitted, we can understand its meaning. Content words convey almost all the meaning and are, consequently, more important. We can even use our knowledge about the grammar of English and about the speaker as compensatory types of knowledge - using the top-down processing mode- and guess the exact missing words (though this is not always possible). Therefore, the weakening of functional words in this case is a result of the amount of meaning they carry compared to content words. That is why most of the conditions under which the full forms are used are examples of emphasis in meaning.

I.3 Perception of Weak Forms

I.3.1 Weak Forms and Listening Comprehension

In dealing with the notion of weak forms and their importance in listening comprehension, it is inevitable to refer to aspects of spoken language, namely connected speech. This characteristic represents a big proportion of the difficulties which foreign learners are overwhelmed by while listening to naturally spoken English. As its name implies, words in connected speech are pronounced in chains without any noticeable gaps between them as provided in the written language (Buck, 2001). Words overlap between one another and they are linked in many different ways that are referred to as ‘aspects of connected speech’. These include, but are not limited to, ‘assimilation’, ‘linking’, ‘elision’, ‘juncture’, and so forth. These are examples of how the pronunciation of individual words alters in spoken language. Foreign learners usually fail to break down chunks of utterances in connected speech, and find it difficult to recognize even the words that they already know. According to Lynch (2009), “The major problem in listening to connected speech is lexical segmentation -recognizing where one word ends and the next one begins” (2009: 31).

Although weak forms are usually treated as a separate criterion in English pronunciation books, many scholars who have approached them stressed that they are one aspect of connected speech just like any of the ones we have just stated (Brown & Kondo, 2006; Dretzke 1998; Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994). In different realizations of the weak forms, there is at least one of the aspects of connected speech that is involved, and through which the reduced form is produced, or by which it is affected. Through the aspect of 'elision', we have seen how the sounds in the citation form are eliminated to create the weak form. The word 'and', for instance, is usually reduced by eliding the consonant /d/, the vowel /æ/, or both. Through 'assimilation', and this is more frequent, weak forms are modified by the neighbouring sounds. For example, the weak form of the word 'can' is usually listed as /kən/, but the last sound can be modified if the next word starts with a bilabial sound as in "I can by it" where the /n/ becomes /m/. In addition, weak forms are 'linked' to the words next to them especially using the /r/ sound as in 'for us' /fər'ʌs/.

Therefore, the weak form of any functional word can be treated from two perspectives. First, as we have just explained, it can be treated as one of any of the other words that occur in connected speech in which it is open to a wide range of modifications through assimilation, elision, linking etc. and, hence, the weak form contributes to the lexical segmentation problem that foreign language learners encounter. This is due to the fact that functional words are usually monosyllabic and, therefore, linking them to other words makes them sound as parts of words rather than words by themselves. Defining the words' boundaries, in this case, becomes extremely difficult for foreign learners.

Secondly, and more importantly, a weak form can be treated as an aspect of connected speech which by itself makes a barrier for learners in listening to spoken English. That is, weak forms have central characteristics which make them go unnoticeable

in spoken language. The main problem for learners is that they cannot perceive accurately the weak forms and fail to draw a link between the sound-form they hear and the citation form that corresponds to it, and which they already know. Weak forms are just everywhere- there is no conversation or discourse, be is short or long, that does not contain grammatical words. The fact that they are the commonest words in speech makes it necessary for foreign language learners to learn about their use. Otherwise, comprehension will be difficult (Lynch, 2009).

Many phoneticians have called for work on weak forms by foreign learners to enhance their listening ability (Brown & Kondo, 2006; Roach, 1998; Dretzke; Mortimer, 1984; Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994). Roach (1998) acknowledged that weak forms are important in both production and perception. However, he gave more importance to learning weak forms for perception rather than for production and supported this view by stating that learners would not find problems in producing utterances with full forms; their pronunciation would still be understood. However, according to him, any lack of familiarity concerning their use will result in difficulty in understanding utterances in which they are actually used. Hewings (2004) went one step further by giving priority for less advanced learners. He claimed that for this category of students it is more important to grasp the aspect of weak forms to improve the listening skill; and he suggested leaving the production part for more advanced learners by encouraging them to use this feature, along with other features of connected speech, in their actual performance.

Mortimer (1985) devoted an entire introductory unit to weak forms and emphasized the work on this aspect for listening comprehension. He suggested the 'practice' of reduced forms through activities including examples and recordings where students would be required to listen to and repeat those forms. Some see that since the use

of weak forms in connected speech has to do with the supra-segmental aspects of English, such as rhythm and sentence stress, it is imperative to teach them along with these aspects inseparably (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994).

Brown & Kondo (2006) used the term 'reduced forms' to refer to all connected speech phenomena including "citation and weak forms" (2006: 1) and claimed that there are many reasons because of which connected speech aspects should be taught. Among the reasons, they argued that learners need to make improvements in their overall interlanguage, and this can be achieved by the ability to understand and use connected speech. They added, "…the understanding of connected speech can…help language learners understand aural language input" (Brown & Kondo, 2006: 5). Rost (1990, cited in Lynch, 2009) considered the ability to discriminate strong and weak forms, and the phonemic change at word boundaries as an enabling skill in the process of listening to running speech.

I.3.2 Factors Influencing the Perception of Weak Forms

There are a number of factors that affect the perception of weak forms in English. According to Lynch (2009) "The fact that these …words are among the commonest in spoken English adds to the second language listeners' difficulty in segmenting running speech" (2009: 36). In addition to the frequency factor, there are other ones that that could be treated as factors of learner and factors linked to the characteristics of weak forms.

I.3.2.1 Factors Related to the Characteristics of Weak Forms

I.3.2.1.1 Phonological Modification

One of the factors that lead to confusion as to the perception of weak forms, and words in connected speech in general, is that they are phonologically modified. Weak forms are realized through a mere application of phonological rules that specify how they should be modified. Sounds of the full form are replaced, reduced, or simply dropped resulting in a 'new shape'. Phonologically speaking, there is no correspondence between the functional words' dictionary pronunciation and the modified shape that occurs in running speech. For instance, if the weak form of the word 'and' (/n/) occurs in isolation, it is impossible to identify it as a variation of 'and'. The fact that these forms are not identical makes it difficult for the foreign learner to recognize the modified shape as a model of a functional word. Learners are especially influenced by the written form of the words. As they listen to running speech, they wrongly expect to hear the full form - the one which they deduce from the way the word is written- and thus fail to perceive the weak form. Therefore the problem of perception that learners face is partly due to the sound modification exerted over functional words. According to Buck, "…it is not the sounds themselves…that cause the most comprehension problem but the way they vary in normal speech" (2001: 32).

In addition, weak forms are further modified by the words that occur around them. This means that even the weak forms will change in different environments and, therefore, resulting in a number of new variants that add more difficulty to foreign learners in segmenting speech and identifying functional words.

I.3.2.1.2 Physical Characteristics

From the acoustic point of view, the perception of weak forms is affected by their sound quality and quantity. Vowels and consonants are reduced, i.e. they are replaced by weaker ones or totally eliminated. Such reductions are done because, among other reasons, speakers tend to articulate with less trouble in connected speech by making sound simplifications. Field (2005) claimed that, "these simplifications would seem to make life easier for the speaker but harder for the listener" (2005: 132). As for the sound quality, speakers spend less energy in producing weak forms and this will affect their prominence in the utterance. For the quantity factor, given the fact that the majority of weak forms are monosyllabic, these reductions make them even shorter. Learners, as a result, will find difficulties in 'hearing' these words and identifying them from the flow of speech signal. According to Gilbert (2008):

> The fact that structure words are commonly reduced explains why learners often do not notice these words when they listen to others speak. Reduction obscures the words, making them difficult for learners to hear (2008: 13).

The schwa /ə/ is a common vowel that is found in the majority of weak forms. In English, whenever the schwa is the centre of a syllable, this syllable is considered weak. Characteristically, this vowel is relatively very short; its quality is mid and central (in the mouth cavity) and it is "generally described as lax, that is, not articulated with much energy" (Roach, 1998: 76). These characteristics make it obscured, lower in volume, and, thus, difficult to hear. For instance the sentence "they are playing around" is pronounced as /θeɪ ə pleɪɪŋ əraʊnd/ in natural speech. The fact that the weak sound /ə/ replaces /ɑ:/ makes the word un-noticeable, as if the learner heard only "they playing around". In

addition, the schwa is represented by so many letters and combinations of letters in written English. Learners who do not expect to hear such sound will not be able to notice it. Gilbert (2008) illustrated this point claiming that the schwa stands as a barrier for listening comprehension to learners who rely on the written language. Similarly, the weak forms that do not contain the schwa are reduced through the replacement of strong vowels by other weaker ones which are also difficult to hear like /u:/ and /ʊ/, /i:/ and /ɪ/, plus syllabic consonants which are the peak of weak syllables such as in /kæn/ and /kn/.

Grammatical words are weak in speech namely because they are unstressed compared to content words. Since stress in English is usually linked to prominence, it follows logically that weak forms are less or not prominent. That a syllable is stressed or unstressed is bound to the physical characteristics that can be perceived form the incoming sound signal. According to Roach (1998), among the characteristics of prominence, we find 'loudness' and 'length', which implies that non prominent syllables (weak forms) are shorter than and not as loud as other words. For instance, in the next sentence only the content words are written in bold:

> **I went** to the **market** and **bought** some **food** and a **couple** of **things** for the **poor woman** that I've **met** on the **street**.

This presentation is analogous to a great extent to the way this sentence is transmitted through the acoustic medium. The functional words will be less prominent and difficult to perceive from the part of the foreign learner, but not for a native speaker. This can be compared to a situation where two persons reading the same sentence from a board but from different distances. The one who is nearer- and in this case will represent the native listener who is equipped by other linguistic and non linguistic information sources - will be able to read the sentence with ease. The other one who stands in a farther position-

representing the foreign listener who has many linguistic constraints- will have difficulties in reading it.

I.3.2.1.3 Neutralization

In some instances the weak forms of different functional words are identical. That is to say, the same weak form may represent not only one, but a number of grammatical words. When such weak forms occur in different environments, listeners have to decide which functional word corresponds to the weak forms they heard. Generally, such decision cannot be made by relying solely on the sound. Listeners are obliged to use their knowledge about the context to eliminate non-suitable choices. That is to say, there is a need for the top-down processing mode to be activated. For instance, the pronoun 'her', and the article 'a' are commonly reduced as /ə/. In the sentence /ɪtsəkɑ:/ it is extremely difficult for the listener to guess the exact word if the sentence is used out of context. For foreign learners, this might cause a problem for them. According to Dalton & Seidlhofer,

> Non native speakers are often insecure in their judgments about the plausibility and relevance of the forms they are hearing. There is also a second kind of contextual information which feeds into the understanding of speech…non native speakers make up for their lack of competence …by being more analytical. They rely-often exclusively- on the acoustic information alone (1994: 27).

Dretzke (1998) has emphasized the importance of knowing about these similarities and suggested a list of regularly occurring neutralized functional words in speech. Sometimes, the listener may infer the right word even if it is used out of context. By applying the knowledge about the linguistic system, it is possible to realize that in the

sentence /teɪkəwɪθjʊ:/, the schwa /ə/ refers to 'her', but not to 'a'. The linguistic knowledge is, therefore, an enabling factor; but for most foreign learners, it is the major source of problem.

I.3.2.2 Factors Related to Foreign Language Learners

I.3.2.2.1 General Linguistic Knowledge

The linguistic ability of learners is an essential factor in listening. It is suggested that there are a number of linguistic information-sources that interact together in a systematic way and upon which the listener builds an interpretation of the text. Among the most important ones, Buck (2001) lists five types of knowledge: phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics and discourse analysis. Processing natural speech in real time requires from the listener to be proficient in almost all of these linguistic features, otherwise, comprehension might break down. For instance, the ability to perceive different words of an utterance is not sufficient in constructing the intended meaning. The understanding of the message should be supported by a parallel proficiency in other linguistic areas in addition to the knowledge about the phonological system. Foreign learners are in the first position to face comprehension problems caused by the insufficiency of knowledge about the target language system. As their linguistic system (interlanguage) is not adequately developed, it is common that they suffer greatly from the complexity of the language features and "more problems arise due to insufficient knowledge of the linguistic system." (Buck, 2001:48).

I.3.2.2.2 Knowledge about the Phonological System

Knowing about the phonological system is of primary importance in listening. Buck (2001) raised the problem of complexity of the phonological system claiming that it is important to learn in order to facilitate the listening task. He confirmed by stating that

"any lack of such knowledge is likely to be reflected in reduced comprehension". Martinez-Flor and Uso-Juan (2006) suggested that the phonological system is a basic requirement in listening comprehension because learners have to understand the supra-segmental aspects of speech in addition to the segmentation of words into sounds.

Since speech is encoded in the form of sounds, decoding depends heavily on the knowledge about phonology. Consequently, insufficient knowledge about the system – and this is true of the majority of language learners – will be reflected in a partial or even total breakdown in comprehending natural spoken language. As a matter of fact, each language has its own phonology (phonological rules) i.e. the relevant sounds and the acceptable combinations of these sounds differ from one language to another. For foreign learners, this difference could be a source of confusion in understanding and producing utterances in the target language. They face new sounds and new rules that could all hinder the perception of words, in addition to the interference of their mother-tongue sound system. Even worse, the modification of sounds in connected speech is just another major obstacle. Learners should be, of course, taught the sound system of the target language and understand that it is important to know about it just like the importance of knowing about the grammar of the language. Jordan (2006) claims that knowing about the sound system would be treated in the same way as the semantic features of the language. She adds,

> Phonological systems are elaborate dances that every human speaker and listener has to master and which usually determine habitual ways of producing and receiving speech sounds (2006: 80).

The rules that determine the use of weak forms are beyond any doubt important to master if comprehension of spoken English is aimed at. Learners must know about the

phonological properties of weak forms and how they are used in connected speech. Dalton & Seidlhofer (1994) claimed that weak forms are essential for the right sound of English and should not be separated from other aspects of the English sound-system. Learners need to know that weak forms are a necessary part of how the phonology of English works and understand that they occur in all types of spoken language regardless of the level of formality.

I.3.2.2.3 Familiarity and Exposure

The learners' lack of exposure to the spoken language stands as a barrier for understanding natural speech. Teachers usually try to adjust their pronunciation of words in a way that helps the learners in understanding them. Adjusted ways of pronunciation are kinds of 'unnatural speech' which native speakers do not use. Compared to adjusted codes, natural speech has many unique characteristics. First, it is fast and listeners have to be proficient in order to cope with its speed which is controlled by the speaker. Second, natural speech contains hesitations, pauses, repetitions, false starts etc. all of which add difficulty in segmenting words (Buck, 2001). Third, words in speech are not pronounced as clearly as they are pronounced in isolation due to aspects such as assimilation, elision etc. These characteristics are rarely found in adjusted pronunciations to which learners are exposed. Consequently, when learners come up to situations where they listen to native speakers, the natural speech will sound unfamiliar for them and they will not be able to understand it. As for the aspects of connected speech, unfamiliarity with weak forms is considered as a major source of difficulties for foreign learners who are usually 'shocked' when they go outside the classroom and listen to native speakers (Peterson, 1991).

I.4 Weak Forms in Language Instruction

I.4.1 Weak Forms in EFL-ESL Research

Research in second and foreign language learning has proved that learners do have problems in listening to speech where weak forms, along with other aspects of connected speech, are used (Brown & Kondo, 2006). Henrichsen (1984, cited in Ito 2006) 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.

For the purpose of finding the correlation between the presence of reduced forms in speech and the learners' listening comprehension, in addition to the effects of reduced forms instruction on the learners' listening comprehension, 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 learners' listening skills. They also suggest some teaching techniques that could be employed in developing the listening skill. For instance, specific instruction about the use of weak forms has been proved to be significant namely through integrating it with listening activities in contrast to giving only pronunciation drills. This may be a better

technique than relying only on giving rules to learners. For the processing modes in Matsuzawa's experiment, – bottom-up and top-down – even if their effect in the learners' performance is somehow vague compared to the effects of the exercises they had, many scholars noted the significance of raising learners' awareness to them in teaching listening (Morley, 1991; Peterson, 1991).

Equally important to the findings in these experiments are the techniques that were used in testing the learners' performances. We note two major ones; the listening cloze test and the dictation test. In the cloze test (also called gap-filling-test), the basic procedure is that test takers are given a transcript of a spoken text in which words are systematically, rather than randomly, deleted and in which they are required to fill in the gaps on the basis of a recording that they listen to. Buck (2001) noted that this type of test has unsurprisingly gained much attention due to its popularity. As for its reliability, Templeton reported that cloze tests have "high validity in both theoretical and practical grounds" (1977, cited in Buck, 2001: 69). The dictation test is also a common testing technique and "recent writers have also recommended it" (Buck, 2001). As its name implies, test takers are given a dictation text where they listen to naturally spoken language and are required to write -in the case of connected speech testing- the full forms in the answer sheet. According to Nagarja (1996),

> This technique acts as a bridge between the spoken and the written form. It integrates the skills of listening to writing. The sub-skills under listening include: understanding the content, identifying weak forms, contracted forms and pauses (1996: 150).

Therefore, dictation tests help the researcher to see whether test-takers are able to recognize words in their natural spoken form. It could also be used as a teaching technique.

I.4.2 Teaching Weak Forms

A common way of teaching weak forms is based on the idea of giving a list of functional words together with their strong and weak forms in addition to some illustrating practical examples (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994). This approach is significant in two ways. First, learners are introduced to the idea that weak forms as a characteristic of spoken language; and second, they will have some basic knowledge about the use of weak forms i.e. the manner and context of their use. Giving the rules only about the language feature, however, is not sufficient in enabling learners to use this feature. Many writers used the term 'declarative knowledge' to refer to knowledge about the language as opposed to 'procedural knowledge' which is the knowledge about how to use the language or, as Towel and Hawkins defined it, "knowledge about the mechanisms which make language work in production and comprehension." (Towel & Hawkins, 1994). This means that, in the case of learning weak forms, learners who are taught using the 'common way' which focuses only on giving the basic rules, are not trained to develop the procedural knowledge. Consequently, when it comes to 'using' weak forms, they will find difficulties in both pronouncing, and understanding them out of the mouths of native speakers. Recent views about the teaching of aspects of connected speech emphasize both declarative and procedural knowledge with more advantage given to the second one. According to Ringbom (2007), learners need a transition from declarative to procedural knowledge through a process called 'proceduralization' or 'automatisation'. When they are exposed to a language feature for the first time, learners need to pay conscious attention to that feature and then 'practice' it until it becomes natural and the ability to process it becomes automatic, faster, and with less effort. In the case of listening to weak forms, automaticity in processing will help learners to free their attention from the form and concentrate on other higher levels of meaning (Ellis, 2003). That is why many writers have acknowledged

the importance of the work on developing learners' automaticity in processing natural speech (Buck, 2001; Peterson, 1991; Ringbom, 2007).

Specific listening exercises have been suggested to teach features of spoken language that are important in listening such as weak forms and connected speech aspects in general. Such exercises focus basically on raising learners' awareness to those aspects. Lam (2002) claimed that "It is only when learners are aware of the unique characteristics of authentic listening input that they can be equipped with skills to handle real-life communication" (2002: 251).

For instance, Peterson (1991) suggested the use of "selective listening exercises" which are based on focusing learners' attention on language form while listening. He considers this type of exercises as a principle of listening comprehension in the classroom; and taking into consideration the fact that learners do not hear weak forms, articles, word endings etc., he argued that "selective listening points students' attention to details of form and encourages accuracy in generating the language system" (Peterson, 1991: 112). Through this type of exercises, learners will realize the importance of weak forms in listening and they will, consequently, understand the reason for learning them. For the goal of helping learners to recognize unstressed functional words, Peterson (1991) suggested the focus on bottom-up processing mode through the use of multiple choice questions. Learners will be asked to listen to sentences and choose one appropriate weak form out of three written ones on the answer sheet. In this case, the idea of bottom-up processing should be first introduced to learners. According to Nation & Newton (2009), "learners need to be proficient with those bottom-up processes and … learners can benefit from being taught how to listen" (2009:42).

Rost (1990) suggested 'intensive listening' tasks which are based on the principle of drawing learners' attention to language features such as phonological features. Contrary to Peterson's approach, Rost focused on the importance of meaning and suggested that learners have to focus their attention on language features after that meaning has been established. He also stressed the importance of the learners' participation by suggesting that learners should be given opportunities to discuss and ask about the feature in question. Similarly, Morley (1991) suggested the 'language analysis tasks' to give learners opportunities to analyze the aspects of fast speech. This, according to Morley, will enable them to develop some personal strategies that could help in coping with "natural contextualized speech" (1991: 92).

A technique based on teaching reduced forms by considering meaning in listening comprehension was proposed by Ito (2006) in his discussion of focus-on-form exercises. He proposed exercises which focus on the understanding of any utterance whose interpretation is bound to the accurate perception of reduced forms. That is, failure to perceive the reduced form will logically lead to comprehension beak down even if all the other words in the utterance are recognized.

Other types of exercises include what Ito (2006) calls 'classic activities' such as read-aloud exercises, cloze listening exercises, listen and repeat exercises which, according to him, are commonly used types. Some of these exercises have been proved to be significant in weak forms instruction in ESL, EFL research (c.f. Weak Forms in ESL-EFL Research).

The following is a summary of the main points to consider in teaching the perception of weak forms of functional words:

- Introducing the idea of weak forms and making learners understand that it is a feature of spoken language that is found in all styles.

-Raising students' awareness to the importance of weak forms in listening.

- Making use of focus-on-form exercises to enable learners to pay close attention to the use of weak forms.

- Using listening material with specific exercise types such as dictation and cloze tests in training learners.

-Focusing on Bottom-up processing and training students on how to use this processing mode.

- Working for automaticity in processing with the use of extensive training exercises.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have dealt with some theoretical considerations about listening comprehension and the concept of strong and weak form. We have highlighted some recent views about listening comprehension in foreign language learning especially the one that calls for challenging the concepts that see listening as a passive skill. We have also shed light on the characteristics of weak forms that make them obscured in running speech, and the possible difficulties that might be caused by them for foreign learners.

Chapter II: Field Work

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to test third year students' abilities in listening to naturally spoken English with a focus on weak forms of functional words. The study is made up of two parts; the first is a questionnaire designed to find out the students' information about the basics of using weak forms, and the second is a listening test that seeks to evaluate their ability to perceive the weak forms in natural connected speech and to identify them from among the other words in utterances. Likewise, we will check whether the students have problems in listening to reduced forms and question the sufficiency/insufficiency of the information they have learnt about these words in perceiving them. We will also try to diagnose the major obstacles (if any) that the students face in listening to such forms through the analysis of their performances.

II.1 Subjects

Our informants in this study are 18 third year students (5 males and 14 females) in the department of English- University of Constantine. All of them have received specific instruction about the use of strong and weak forms in both their first and second years of studying English, in the module of Phonetics. In addition, they have been studying English for at least eight years (including three years at the university/ LMD system) which implies that they have at least an average or above average proficiency of English.

II.2 Research Tools

Two major tools have been used in the current research: a questionnaire and a test. They have been administered to the same category of students to collect the relevant data.

The students have been given the questionnaire first and have been required to answer in the classroom in a period of about one hour. Then, they have been given a listening test. These two major tasks have been conducted in two separate rooms; the first in a classroom and the second in a language laboratory. Moreover the students have been informed that they would have a second task after having finished the first one but without specifying the type of task they would be given. The reason for doing this is avoiding making the students aware of the answers required in the questionnaire. More precisely, we have intended through the questionnaire to get a clear idea about whether the students are aware of the importance of weak forms in listening or not. In this way, the students' answers reflect in a better way their precise perception of weak forms. The second task has been shorter than the first one and has been conducted over a period of about 30 minutes.

II.3 Questionnaire

II.3.1 Description of the Questionnaire

The 18 students have been asked to fill in a questionnaire which surveys their knowledge about the use of strong and weak forms of functional words in English. It contains 16 items each of which is intended to target a specific kind of the students' knowledge, with one major purpose which is to enable us to know about their awareness of the rules that determine the use of strong and weak forms in natural connected speech. The questionnaire is divided into three sections.

II.3.1.1 Section One

This section contains two questions which target the students' general background knowledge about strong and weak forms. The students have been permitted to answer in whatever language would express their opinions. Item number one is a general

introductory question which is supposed to give the students an overview of the subject of the questionnaire, and to give us an idea of the students' familiarity of the concept in which we are interested. Question number two has a more specific objective which is to show us the students' ideas about the importance of strong and weak forms perception.

II.3.1.2 Section Two

This section consists of 11 multiple choice questions through which we intended to measure the students' knowledge about the rules that determine the use of strong and weak forms in connected speech. For each question, the students are given four choices (question number four, exceptionally, contains three) which contain only one correct answer imbedded within three other distracting wrong answers. Multiple choice questions help us to mark the students easily as the answers are already determined. They are also time-consuming, and their assessment is not affected by the students' ability to write. Students who do not know about reduction rules will find difficulties answering them and they may be distracted by incorrect answers.

II.3.1.3 Section Three

Section three consists of three practical questions which require from the students to 'apply' their knowledge in order to answer them. In the first question, the students are given three sentences and asked to transcribe them focusing on the correct use of weak forms. The answers will show not only the students' ability to transcribe the weak forms, but also their ability to use the correct weak form that fits a specific context if the functional word has more than one reduced form.

In the second question, the students are given three other sentences but written in the form of phonemic symbols that represent the way they are pronounced in connected

speech, without a clear cut between the words. The task is to rewrite the sentences using normal alphabet. Through this question, the students' ability to identify the weak forms and break down the 'chunks' of sentences will be measured. That is, the students are evaluated according to their ability to identify the weak forms from among the neighbouring words. The last question is more direct and aims at evaluating the students' basic knowledge about reduced functional words by asking them to write the weak forms of a list of functional words using phonemic symbols.

II.3.2 Analysis of the Questionnaire

II.3.2.1 Section One

In question number one, the students have been required to give a definition of the concept of strong and weak forms by providing examples. Our main concern in this question is to know whether or not the students are familiar with the concept we are dealing with. The Question has been stated as follows:

Question 1: Using examples, give a brief definition of the concept of strong and weak forms in English.

The next table presents the results of the students' answers grouped into categories depending on the elements on which each student focused.

Question N°= 1	Definitions	Number	Percentage
Using Examples, give a brief definition of the concept of S/W forms in English.	Functional words are Strong/ weak depending on the position where they occur in the sentence	4	22.22%
	The strong form is used in formal speech/ the weak form in informal speech	2	11.11%
	Strong form is stressed/ the weak form is unstressed	5	27.78%
	The strong form has a long vowel/the weak form has a short vowel.	2	11.11%
	Other 'definitions'	5	27.78%
	Total	18	100%

Table 3: Definitions of the Concept of Strong and Weak Forms

The results obtained from the answers reveal that students have given broad definitions about of the concept about which they have been asked. The definitions of five students (27.78%) have been out of context and cannot be considered as definitions or as answers for the question. The other students (72.22%) have given different definitions, each of which has been focused on only one characteristic of the use of strong and weak forms, context, style, or manner of reduction. It should be noted that, despite the fact that it has been clearly indicated in the question that students should give examples, only one

student have done so. In all, we can say that the majority of the students have general background ideas about the strong and weak forms but they are too broad.

Question 2: In your opinion, and on the basis of what you have learnt, what is the importance of learning about strong and weak forms in English?

The expected answer to this question is that weak forms are important in pronunciation. However, our aim is to know whether students are aware of the importance of weak forms in perception and listening comprehension in general. The next table shows the students' answers to the question.

Question N°= 2	**Students' Answers (Categorized)**	**Description of the Students' Answers**	**Number(N)**	**Percentage (%)**
In your opinion, and on the basis of what you have learnt, what is the importance of learning about strong and weak forms in English?	Pronunciation (production)	To make the pronunciation of sentences easy.	3	16.67%
		To know how to pronounce them correctly in speech.	9	50%
	Listening (perception)	To understand what the speaker wants to stress. (while listening)	1	5.56%
	Others	/	5	27.78%
	Total	/	18	100%

Table 4: Students' Awareness

The above results show that the majority of the students do know that weak forms play an important role in the pronunciation of English. By giving different justifications, 12 students (66.67%) have given credit to the importance of weak forms in production. However, only one student (5.56%) has answered that weak forms are important in listening (perception). This suggests that nearly all the students are not aware of that fact that reduced forms affect the process of listening to connected speech. The answers of the remaining 5 students (27.78%) have been unclear, and the decision to treat them under any of the previous categories -production or perception- cannot be easily made. For instance, we have found answers like "they are important in making the difference between the sounds", and "the importance is to distinguish between them"!

II.3.2.2 Section Two

This section consists of 11 multiple choice questions arranged form the most general to the more specific ones. Two of the questions deal with theoretical ideas about reduced forms in English. The first aims at knowing the students' opinions about the style in which weak forms are used, and the second deals with the frequency of their use. The remaining questions are more specific and deal with the contexts where one form or the other is to be used, in addition to the manner and regularity of reduction. In what follows, each question will be analyzed separately.

Question 3: The weak pronunciation of functional words is found in:

a. Informal speech b. Semi-formal speech c. Formal speech d. In all of them

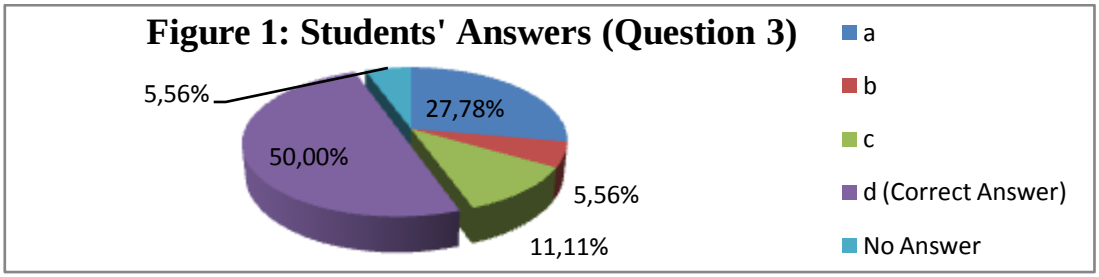
By asking this question, we intended to know the students' perception of the use of weak forms in speech. If students believe that weak forms are used in informal styles rather

than formal ones, they may refuse to learn about them or do not give them much attention. The results of their answers clarify this.

Answers	a	b	c	d	No Answer
Number	5	1	2	9	1
Percentage	27.78%	5.56%	11.11%	50%	5.56%

Table 5: Students' Answers to Question 3

The results show that 50 percent of the students believe that weak forms are not used in formal speech. 27% answered that weak forms are used only in informal speech, while 11.11% of the students linked the use of Weak forms to formal style only.



Question 4: In natural speech, which form is more frequent than the other?

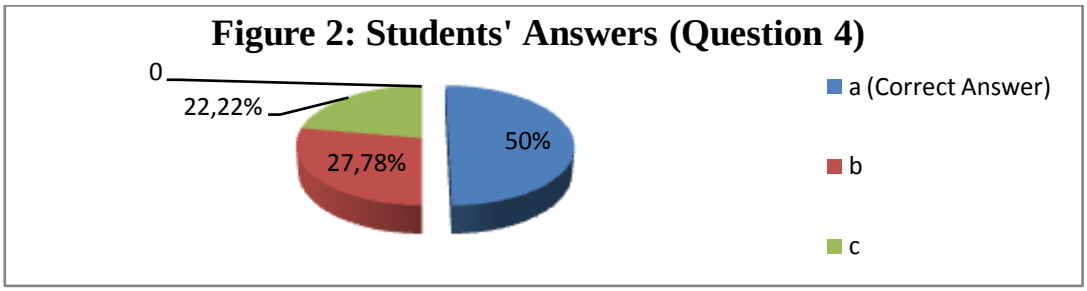
a. The weak form b. The strong form c. They have the same frequency

Question 4 deals with a general idea concerning strong and weak forms in English. Weak forms are the 'normal pronunciation' of functional words and are more frequent than strong forms.

Answers	a	b	C	D
Number	9	5	4	0
Percentage	50%	27.78%	22.22%	0%

Table 6: Students' Answers to Question 4

The table shows that only half of the students have been successful in their choice of the correct answer which is ‘a’ (c.f. definition of weak forms). The strong form is used only in a limited number of cases and thus both ‘b’ and ‘c’ are wrong.



Question 5: A weak form of a Functional word is used when:

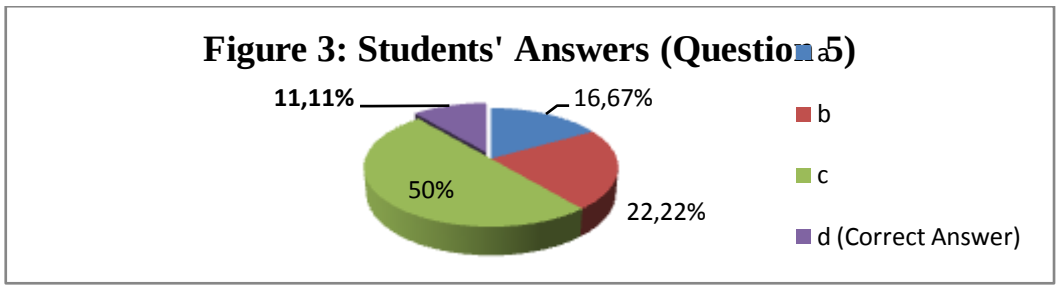
a. The functional word is quoted b. The functional word is used in isolation

c. In both ‘a’ and ‘b’ situations d. In none of them

Answers	a	b	c	d
Number	3	4	9	2
Percentage	16.67%	22.22%	50%	11.11%

Table 7: Students’ Answers to Question 5

Both answers ‘a’ and ‘b’ are instances where the strong form is used, and thus, they are incorrect. Answer ‘c’ is, consequently, incorrect, which means that‘d’ is the correct one. The results show that only two students (11.11%) have found the correct answer. This may be because the students have been distracted by answers ‘a’ and ‘b’ which are instances that determine whether or not the strong form is to be used.



Question 6: Functional words are usually pronounced strongly if:

a. They do not receive sentence stress b. They occur in sentence final position

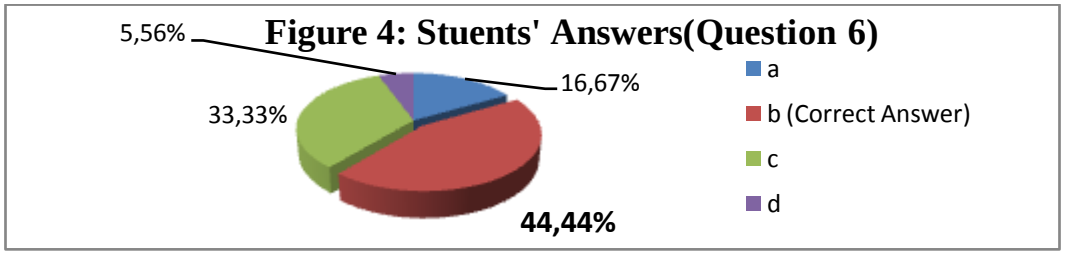
c. In both 'a' and 'b' situations d. In none of them

This question deals with the sentence position in which the functional word has to be stressed. In this case, the students' declarative knowledge concerning the rules of reduction is sough. That is, if they know the rule, they will be able to find the correct answer.

Answers	a	b	c	d
Number	3	8	6	1
Percentage	16.67%	44.44%	33.33%	5.56%

Table 8: Students' Answers to Question 6

The answers show that only 44.44% of the students have answered correctly. The remaining students' answers are divided between the other answers with unequal degrees. This may be because the majority of the students do not know the rule.



Question 7: In which situation is the word 'that' pronounced weakly?

a. When it I used in a relative clause. **b. When it is used as a demonstrative.**

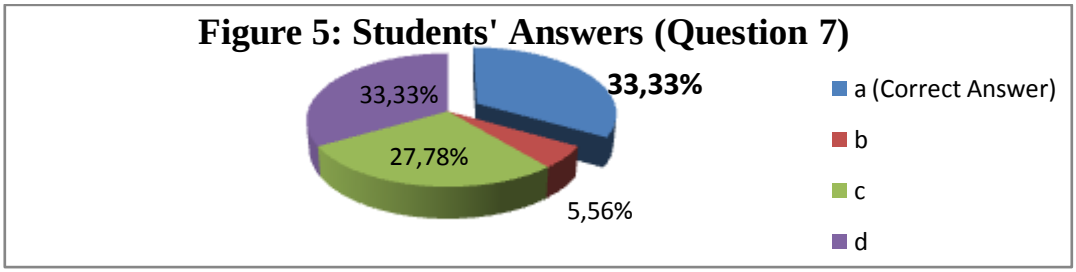
c. In both 'a' and 'b' situations. **d. In none of them.**

Answers	a	b	c	d
Number	6	1	5	6
Percentage	33.33%	5.56%	27.78%	33.33%

Table 9: Students' Answers to Question 7

Like the previous question, question 7 targets the students' awareness of the rules where the weak form is to be used. The word 'that' is an example of functional words which are regularly stressed depending on their grammatical category (c.f. Strong vs. Weak).

Only 33.33% of the students found the correct answer. On the other hand, the majority of the students (61.11%) chose answers 'c' and'd' (27.78% and 33.33% respectively). These choices could be interpreted as mere unwariness of the reduction of this specific item (that) or as a lack of knowledge about the word classes they are given (grammatical knowledge).



Question 8: The words 'her' and 'are' have a common weak form which is:

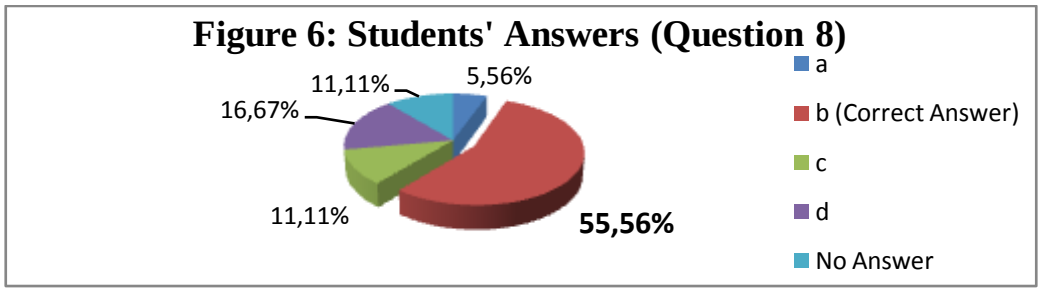
a. /r/ b. /ə/ c./eə/ d. /e/

Answering this question requires from the student to know not only the weak pronunciations of the words, but also the phonemic symbols that are used in transcribing such words.

Answers	a	b	c	d	No Answer
Number	1	10	2	3	2
Percentage	5.56%	55.56%	11.11%	16.67%	11.11%

Table10: Students' Answers to Question 8

As the table illustrates, the answers of 10 students (55.56%) are correct. The wrong answers represent 33.33%, in addition to 11.11% of the students who did not answer the question[1]. If we consider the students who have answered only, the correct answers will constitute 63%. This means that the majority of the students know the reduction rules for the two items about which they are asked. The remaining students have been distracted by the other answers especially 'c' and'd' which seem nearer to the pronunciation of 'her' and 'are'. We also note that this is the only question in which the correct answers are more than 50%.



[1] The questions which are not answered mean that the student does not know the answer, and they are marked as wrong.

Question 9: Which of the following functional words is regularly stressed (does not have a weak form)?

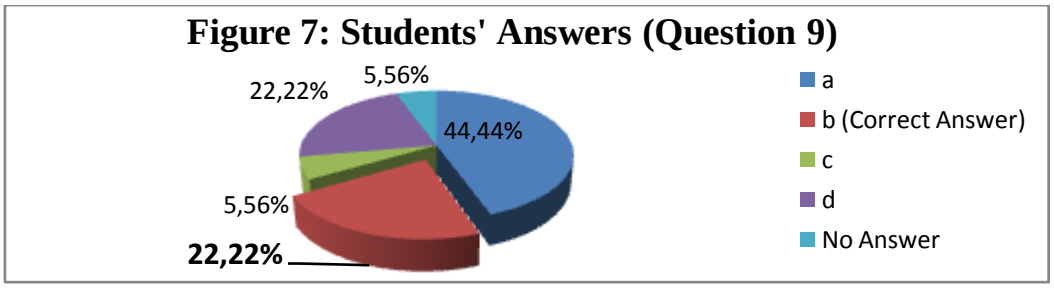
a. because **b. where** **c. for** **d. any**

The word 'where' is a functional word that is regularly stressed. In teaching the weak and strong forms, regularly stressed words are usually not listed. That is why, if the students do not know about this specific word, they must rely on the information they have concerning the other listed words in order to find the correct answer. The following are the results of their answers.

Answers	a	b	c	d	No Answer
Number	8	4	1	4	1
Percentage	44.44%	22.22%	5.56%	22.22%	5.56%

Table11: Students Answers to Question 9

The answers suggest that the majority of the students have not found the correct answer. Only 4 students out of 18 (22.22%) have answered correctly, compared to 14 (77.78%) whose answers have focused on the other options mainly on the words 'because' and 'any'. This may be interpreted as lack of information about the reduced forms of the functional words which represent the wrong answers in addition to the word 'where'.



Question 10: In which of the following examples is the word 'was' pronounced weakly?

a. I think he was. **b. She said that her car was broken down.**

c. You have written 'was' instead of 'were'.

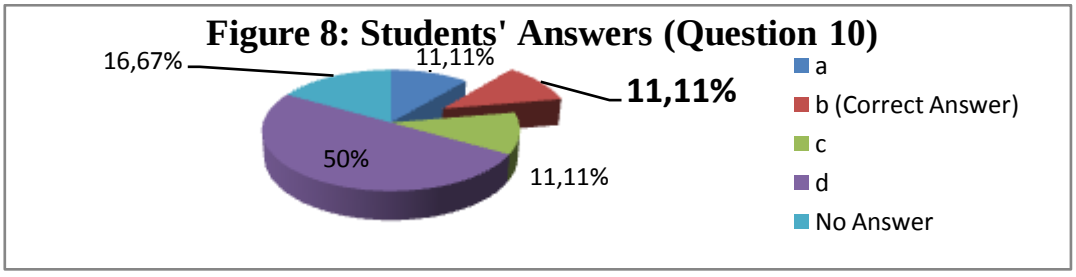
d. A: 'I didn't see you in the meeting?' B. 'I ˈwas there'.

In this question, the students are not asked about the rules as such but are required to apply the information they know (if any) about the rules in finding the correct answer. The rules involved have to do with the situations where the functional word is being emphasized or not, whether it is quoted, and the position where it occurs in the sentence.

Answers	a	b	c	d	No Answer
Number	2	2	2	9	3
Percentage	11.11%	11.11%	11.11%	50%	16.67%

Table12: Students' Answers to Question 10

The students' answers suggest that the majority of them are unaware of the rules, or they do not know how to apply them. The answers of 16 students (88.89%) were wrong compared to two correct answers only (11.11%). We notice that 50% of the students chose answer'd'. A possible interpretation to their choice could be that they have not considered the emphasized meaning that the word 'was' receives in the utterance which can be understood from both the context and the stress mark (ˈ) above the word. The remaining students' answers are divided equally between answers 'a' and 'c' (11.11% each).



Question 11: In which of the following sentences must the word 'have' be pronounced strongly?

a. My parents have bought a new car. **b. I think that they have something to present.**

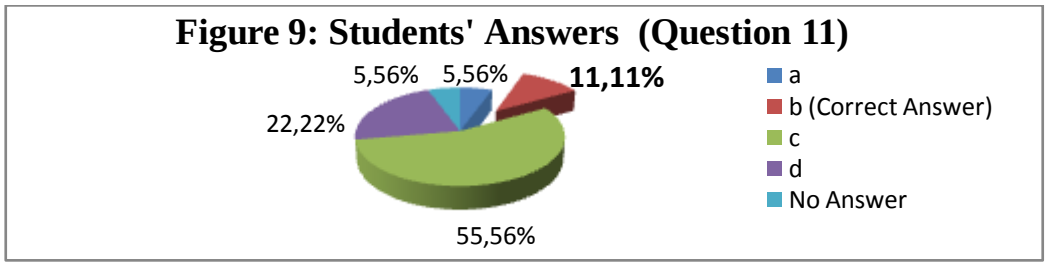
c. Have your teachers told you that? **d. In none of them.**

Words such as 'have' may be regularly stressed if they are used as the central verb in a sentence. In this question, students are required to identify the instance where the word 'have' must be stressed by relying only on its word class. By having a glance at the sentences, it will be clear that 'b' is the correct answer. In the other remaining sentences, 'have' is used as an auxiliary verb and is not emphasized. The following are the results of the students' answers.

Answers	a	b	c	d	No Answer
Number	1	2	10	4	1
Percentage	5.56%	11.11%	55.56%	22.22%	5.56%

Table13: Students' Answers to Question 11

As the table shows, 88.89% of the students have not found the correct answer. Among the wrong answers, 55.56% have focused on option 'c' where the word 'have' is used as an auxiliary verb and occurs at the beginning of the sentence. The position of the word in this sentence (initial) may be responsible for misleading the students. 4 students (22.22%) chose option'd' thinking that word 'have' is weak in all the sentences.



Question 12: Functional words are always strong when they precede:

a. Nouns b. Pauses c. Other weak forms d. Strong forms

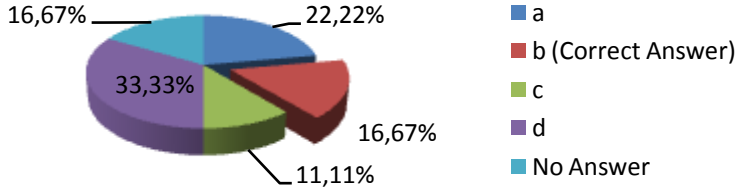
Before pauses, functional words are treated as if they are pronounced in isolation and they are, thus, strong. That is, answer 'b' is the correct answer. All the other answers contain misconceptions and students have to know the basic rule in order to eliminate them. It should be noted that 'a', 'b' and'd' may be correct answers in 'some' contexts, but the presence of 'b' excludes all of them as functional words are 'always' strong before pauses.

Answers	a	b	c	d	No Answer
Number	4	3	2	6	3
Percentage	22.22%	16.67%	11.11%	33.33%	16.67%

Table14: Students' Answers to Question 12

If we consider the students who have answered, we notice that only 20% have answered correctly. On the other hand, 40% of the students have answered that weak forms are strong when they precede strong forms. 4 students (26.67%) have answered that functional words are strong before nouns, and 2 others (13.33%) believe that they are strong if they occur before other weak forms. All in all, the majority of the students (83.33%) have not found the correct answer.

Figure 10: Students' Answers (Question 12)



Question 13: In which sentence should the word 'has' be pronounced strongly:

a. She has taken them from that box. **b. He has not yet prepared himself.**

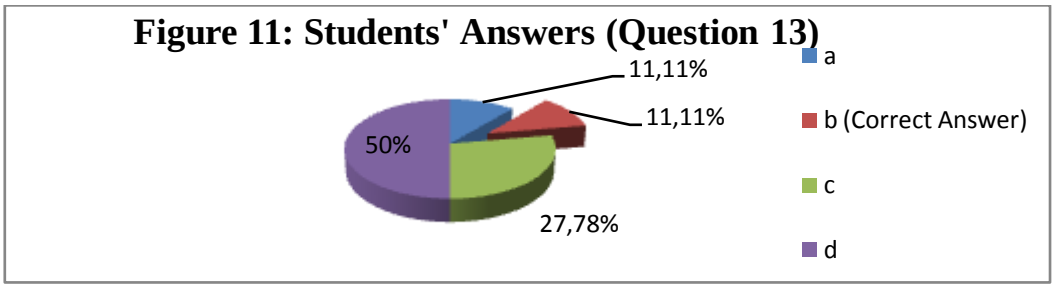
c. They announced that the file has disappeared. **d. In none of them.**

This question targets the students' knowledge regarding a specific reduction rule which has to do with auxiliary verbs. Whenever an auxiliary verb is used in a negative sense, the strong pronunciation form is used. That is, 'b' is the correct answer. In both 'a' and 'c', however, the word 'has' does not receive a sentence stress and it is, thus, pronounced weakly. The next table presents the students' answers to this question.

Answers	a	b	c	d
Number	2	2	5	9
Percentage	11.11%	11.11%	27.78%	50%

Table15: Students' Answers to Question 13

Only 2 students (11.11%) found the correct answer. 2 other students have chosen answer 'a'. 9 students (50% of the sample) have resorted to answer 'd' thinking that in all the sentences given, the word 'has' is weak including the sentence in 'b'. They may have applied the rule which states that the weak form is the 'normal pronunciation' if the words' meaning is not emphasized, and thus they have been unaware of the exception in this specific case.



II.3.2.3Section Three

Question 14: Transcribe the following sentences using the weak forms of functional words. I told him that John and his friend Bill were absent/ Talk to her at the end of the lecture/ I have met his wife.

Because of time constraints, the students have been asked to transcribe only the functional words taking into consideration the co-text (phonological environment) in their choices among multiple weak-form words. For instance, if the student writes /ðə/where /ðɪ/ is more appropriate, the answer is considered as wrong. Thus, students are marked by considering their correct/ wrong answers. The sentences contain 13 functional words. The following table shows the results of the students' answers.

Students	Correct Answers /13	Percentage
S1	8	62%
S2	4	31%
S3	4	31%
S4	2	15%
S5	5	38%
S6	2	15%
S7	3	23%
S8	2	15%
S9	5	38%
S10	4	31%
S11	10	77%
S12	7	54%
S13	3	23%
S14	3	23%
S15	4	31%
S16	4	31%
S17	5	38%
S18	7	54%

Table16: Students' Scores in the Transcription of Functional Words (Question 14)

As the table illustrates, the majority of student have shown poor performances as to the basics of transcribing functional words (the weak form). Only 4 students (22%) had

above average scores. The best among the below average ones is 5/13 (38%). The analysis of the students' papers reveals that they have a serious lack of information about transcribing weak forms in addition to the use of phonemic symbols.

Some functional words are easier for the student than others. The next table shows the rates of the correct/wrong answers for each functional word. It highlights the words which are easier for the students in transcription. On the one hand, words such as 'and',' to', 'her', and 'at' have been transcribed correctly by most of the students. On the other hand, the words 'him', 'have', 'of' are difficult for the students (15 answers were wrong for each of these words). The remaining words have different rates as the table illustrates.

Functional words		him	that	and	his	were	to	her	at	the	of	the	have	his
Correct answers	**Number**	3	6	11	5	4	10	10	11	5	3	6	3	5
	Percentage	17	33	61	28	22	56	56	61	28	17	33	17	28
Wrong answers	**Number**	15	12	7	13	14	8	8	7	13	15	12	15	13
	Percentage	83	66	39	73	78	44	44	39	72	83	67	83	72

Table17: Students' Total Responses for each Functional Word

Question 15: Write the following sentences using normal letters. The number of words in each sentence is written between brackets.

wɪməsgetsəmɔː (5) / aɪlɑːskətəkʌmtəðəmiːtiŋ (9) /wɪʃlniːdtəhʌrɪ (5)

The students' task in this question is to break down the sentences through identifying words with a focus on the weak forms which are transcribed the way they are pronounced in normal speech. In the evaluation of the answers, it is not only the weak form that is considered, but also the words that come before and after it.

Students	Number of Recognized words/8	Percentage
S1	3	38%
S2	3	38%
S3	6	75%
S4	3	38%
S5	6	75%
S6	6	75%
S7	6	75%
S8	7	88%
S9	6	75%
S10	7	88%
S11	8	100%
S12	8	100%
S13	5	63%
S14	4	50%
S15	4	50%
S16	4	50%
S17	6	75%
S18	6	75%

Table 18: The Numbers of Recognized Weak Forms by each Student (Question 15)

In this question, almost all the students have been able to recognize the weak forms in the sentences. Only 3 students have had less than average scores. Three others have recognized half of the number of weak forms (50%), while the remaining students have

had high scores. The co-text may have played an important role in helping students to identify the words. However, we note that almost all the students have been unable to identify two items. The first is /səm/ in the first sentence. The fact that this word is assimilated with the next one (more /səmɔ:/) may be responsible for the students' misrecognition of both of them ('some' and 'more'). The second word is /ə/ (her) in the second sentence. Again, the students have not identified this word and most of them have written the article 'a' instead of 'her'. A logical interpretation of this is that the two words 'her' and 'a' have a common neutralized weak form which leads the majority of students to be confused (cf. Neutralization).

Question 16: Write the weak forms of the following words: for, and, at, that, have, can, would, as, are.

Through this question, we aim at knowing the students' information concerning the most basic elements of reducing functional words. Their answers will show whether they know the weak forms of the words given, and whether they are able to transcribe them correctly. In case where a given functional word has more than one weak form, all the alternative answers are considered correct. The next table shows the students' final scores.

Students	Correct Answers/9	Percentage
S1	6	67%
S2	3	33%
S3	0	0%
S4	4	44%
S5	7	78%
S6	0	0%
S7	3	33%
S8	3	33%
S9	8	89%
S10	7	78%
S11	9	100%
S12	5	56%
S13	6	67%
S14	3	33%
S15	0	0%
S16	6	67%
S17	3	33%
S18	6	67%

Table 19: The Results of the Students' Transcriptions of Functional Words (Question 16)

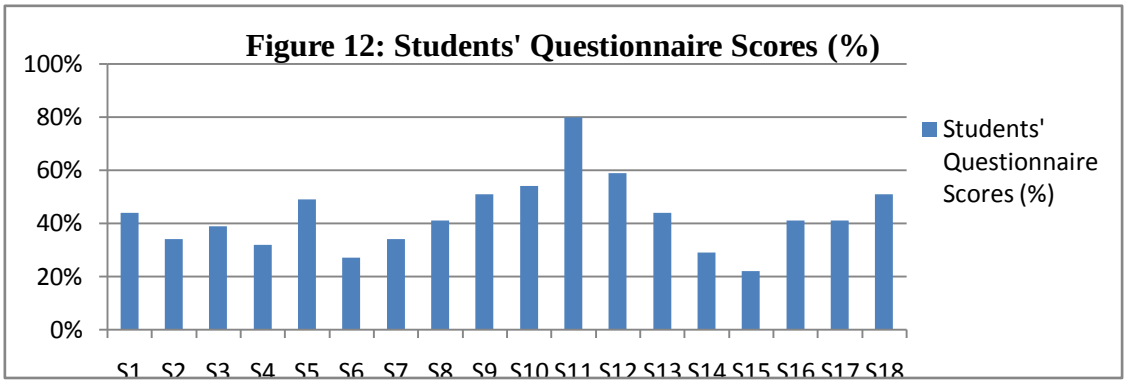
The results show a considerable difference between the performances of the students. Some students have got very high scores (up to 100%) while others have not obtained any correct answer. In general, the rates of those who have obtained above the average and those who have obtained below the average are equal (50% each). In the former, the highest score is 9/9 while in the latter 4/9 is the highest one.

II.3.3 Students' Final Questionnaire Scores

After having analyzed the students' performances in each question, we are now able to calculate the scores that each student has obtained in answering the questionnaire. It should be noted that since section one is intended to show us the students' opinions only about weak forms, the evaluation will not include it. We will focus on the students' answers to sections two and three, i.e. from question number 3 till question number 16. The next table shows the scores of each student.

Student	Scores/41	Percentage
S1	18	44%
S2	14	34%
S3	16	39%
S4	13	32%
S5	20	49%
S6	11	27%
S7	14	34%
S8	17	41%
S9	21	51%
S10	22	54%
S11	33	80%
S12	24	59%
S13	18	44%
S14	12	29%
S15	9	22%
S16	17	41%
S17	17	41%
S18	21	51%

Table 20: Students' Total Questionnaire Scores



II.4 Listening Test

II.4.1 Description and Procedure

The second part of this study consists of a listening cloze test which is designed with the purpose of testing the students' ability to perceive the weak forms of functional words in naturally spoken English. The test has been conducted in the language laboratory where the students have been able to listen all at the same time by means of head phones. They have been instructed to listen to a recording of 20 sentences spoken naturally by a

man and a woman. Each sentence contains at least one functional word pronounced in its weak form (Table 20). To know whether they are able to perceive the weak forms, the students have been given the transcript of these sentences but the functional words have been blanked out. The task is to fill in the blanks by writing the full forms of the grammatical words on the basis of what they listen to. Hence, the test's results will translate their ability to perceive the weak forms and to understand the sentences. According to Buck, "the ability to replace the blanks [in a cloze test] would be directly related to the degree of successful language processing" (2001: 69). To avoid any interference from the context on which the students might rely in guessing the correct missing item, the word that precedes each functional word has been blanked out too. In the evaluation of the students' performances, however, the functional words are the only items that are marked.

The audio version of the sentences is taken and adapted from different pronunciation exercises which focus on teaching connected speech and weak forms for intermediate learners of English (Roach, 2000; Hewings, 2004). We have selected 20 sentences from different listening exercises. To avoid wasting time in searching for each sentence during the test, the relevant audio sentences (from the number of sentences in each exercise) have been cut, copied, and grouped into one single audio track (using Windows M.M software). In addition, we have inserted a number before each sentence - that corresponds to the one in the answer sheet- to direct the students while listening. All the sentences are of a high sound quality without any background noise.

Because the students are not used to listening cloze exercises, we have devoted a pre-listening phase to explain the task. The students have been given three main instructions depending on their ability to recognize the missing words. First, if they

recognize the word(s), they have to write it/them down. Secondly, if they do not recognize the word(s), they are asked to draw a circle in the space provided. Thirdly, if they think that a given blank does not correspond to any word in the audio version, they have to put a cross (see appendix). During the test, the students are allowed to listen to each sentence only once, and for sentences with two blanks, they are allowed to listen twice. After listening to each sentence they have been given enough time to write down the words.

Word Class	**Functional word**	**Number of occurrences**
Prepositions	To	6
	From	1
	At	2
	For	5
Articles	The	2
	A	1
Auxiliary verbs	Was	2
	Been	1
	Were	1
	Are	4
	Shall	1
	Must	2
	Is	3
Conjunctions/Adverbs	Or	1
	As	2
	And	2
	Some	6
	There	5
Pronouns	His	1
	Her	4
	Has	1
	Him	3
	You	2
	Us	1
Total		59

Table 21: The Functional Words in the Test

II.4.2 Analysis of the Test

The evaluation of the students' performances in this test is based on the number of correct/ incorrect answers. We calculate the number of words that are correctly filled by each student (individually) and use the sum as a final score (x/59). The analysis of each students' answers is first done on the basis of the 'options' given. The numbers of recognized/ unrecognized items are calculated in addition to the numbers of crossed blanks. The next table shows the results of each student's raw answers.

Students	Recognized Items		Unrecognized Items		Crossed Blanks	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
S1	55	93%	4	7%	0	0%
S2	45	76%	14	24%	0	0%
S3	57	97%	2	3%	0	0%
S4	50	85%	9	15%	0	0%
S5	53	90%	5	8%	1	2%
S6	52	88%	7	12%	0	0%
S7	57	97%	2	3%	0	0%
S8	57	97%	2	3%	0	0%
S9	52	88%	3	5%	4	7%
S10	52	88%	5	8%	2	3%
S11	56	95%	3	5%	0	0%
S12	59	100%	0	0%	0	0%
S13	55	93%	0	0%	4	7%
S14	54	92%	5	8%	0	0%
S15	55	93%	3	5%	1	2%
S16	51	86%	8	14%	0	0%
S17	47	80%	12	20%	0	0%
S18	51	86%	8	14%	0	0%

Table 22: Students' Raw Answers in the Cloze Test

The above results show each student's personal evaluation of their ability to recognize the functional words. The answers indicate that all the students believe that they have recognized at least 47 words out of 59, i.e. 80% of the total number of grammatical

words. As for the unrecognized words, 16 students have drawn circles on at least two blanks in the answer sheet. Six of those students have not recognized from 7 to 14 weak forms, and ten other students have not recognized from 2 to 5 words. We note that there are some specific functional words which the majority of the students have reported that they have been unable to understand, and even the answers of most students who have thought that they have been able to recognize them are wrong. The next table shows the items which are most difficult for the students according to their personal views (for those who have reported that they could not perceive them), and answers (of those who have attempted to answer them).

Difficult Functional Words	**Context (Sentence)**	**Students' Answers**	
		Unrecognized	**Recognized but Wrong**
there /ðə/	Aren't there some letters	5	10
for /fər/	...letters for her to open	5	9
her /ə/	…for her to open	3	11
has /əz/	...number has been	11	3
been /bɪn/	…number has been…	11	3
must /məs/	….new books I must read	6	11
as /əz/	……as much as I want	4	8
from /frəm/	…was at home from	5	11
must /məs/	You must come over	3	14

Table 23: The Most Difficult Words for the Students in the Cloze Test

As the table shows, the weak forms of the words 'there', 'for', 'her', 'must', 'as' and 'from' are the most difficult items to perceive according to the students' personal judgments, and answers in this test. A possible interpretation to this is that all these words are reduced by the replacement of the central strong letter by the schwa /ə/ which is

difficult to hear due to some of its sound characteristics (c.f Physical Characteristics). 16 students have been unable to perceive the word ‘has’ which is, in this context, reduced by the omission of the initial consonant in addition to the reduction of the central vowel. The students have also faced a serious difficulty in recognizing the word ‘been’.

Some of the mentioned words have been easily perceived by the students when they occurred in other contexts. This may be linked to the phonological environment where the words have occurred, and which could have played a role in enabling/disabling the students to identify the weak forms. The remaining words have also caused significant difficulties for the students but with different degrees.

As for the crossed items, few students have wrongly crossed at least one blank which contains functional words. In the sentence “you must come over for dinner soon” three students have put a cross in the space that corresponds to the word ‘for’. That is, they have not only been unable to recognize the word, but also could not hear the sounds (/fə/). The other functional words that the students could not hear are ‘been’/bɪn/, ‘has’ /əz/, ‘as’ /əz/, and ‘must’ /məs/.

The functional words which the students thought that they have been able to perceive, and which they have attempted to fill are not all correctly answered. The analysis of their responses reveals the major problems that they have faced and the possible causes of these problems. In what follows, we will analyze the students’ answers about all the functional words, each within its grammatical category in addition to the context where it occurs. The students’ correct vs. incorrect answers to each word are calculated to highlight the items which are difficult and those which are easier for the students to perceive.

II.4.2.1 Prepositions

Prepositions		Correct		Incorrect		Unrecognized	
Items	**Context**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
To 6	1. Taking him to see her	9	50.00%	6	33.33%	3	16.67%
	2. ….went to her room	16	88.89%	2	11.11%	0	0.00%
	3. …letters for her to open	13	72.22%	4	22.22%	1	5.56%
	4. …wanted her to stay	16	88.89%	2	11.11%	0	0.00%
	5. …late to see him	17	94.44%	1	5.56%	0	0.00%
	6. …thing is to try later	16	88.89%	1	5.56%	1	5.56%
From 1	…at home from five o'clock	2	11.11%	11	61.11%	5	27.78%
At 2	1. I was at home…	4	22.22%	8	44.44%	6	33.33%
	2. ...see us at home	16	88.89%	2	11.11%	0	0.00%
For 5	1. Come over for dinner	9	50.00%	8	44.44%	1	5.56%
	2. They are for Jane	11	61.11%	7	38.89%	0	0.00%
	3. …asked him for some…	18	100.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
	4. …engaged for over an	16	88.89%	0	0.00%	1	5.56%
	5. …letters for her to open?	8	44.44%	6	33.33%	4	22.22%

Table 24: Students' Perceptions of Prepositions

The above table shows the prepositions included in the test and the results of the students' answers to each one. What is interesting about these results is the fluctuating rates of the correct/incorrect answers that the students have obtained in filling in the same functional words that occur in different environments. The word 'to', for instance, was easily recognized in almost all the contexts where it occurred except one. In the sentence '…taking him to see her', only 9 students (out of the 15 who have tried to answer) have been able to write the correct word in contrary to 6 others whose answers are wrong, and 3 who have reported that they have been unable to perceive the word. In the previous sentence, the occurrence of 'to' between two other weak forms could be responsible for

making it obscured and difficult to hear. Also, in all the instances where ‘to’ is reduced using the short vowel /ə/ rather than /ʊ/, the majority of the students has not perceived it. This supports the idea that the schwa sound is difficult for foreign learners to perceive compared to other vowel sounds (c.f. Physical Characteristics).

Similarly, the words ‘for’ and ‘at’ have presented a difficulty for the students. In some contexts only 44% to 61% of the testees have recognized the word ‘for’; whereas, in other context, 100% of them have successfully perceived it. The fluctuation is clearer in the word ‘at’ which 4 students have been able to perceive in the first sentence ‘I was at home’ compared to 16 students in the second sentence ‘…and see us at home’.

The weak form of ‘from’ has been the most difficult preposition to perceive compared to the other prepositions included in the test. Only two students (11.11% of the whole sample) have correctly filled this word. Of the remaining students, 5 have put circles in the blanks to indicate that they have not been able to recognize this word. As a general remark, the different prepositions included in this test are of a relative difficulty for the students in listening.

II.4.2.2 Articles

Articles		Correct		Misperceptions		Unrecognized	
Items	**Context**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
A 1	1. …were a lot not…	11	61.11%	7	38.89%	0	0.00%
The 2	2. …soup in the fridge.	14	77.78%	3	16.67%	1	5.56%
	I suppose the best thing…	15	83.33%	3	16.67%	0	0.00%

Table 25: Students Perceptions of Articles

The perception of articles is not much problematic for the students in this test. More than 70% of the students have identified the article 'the' in the first sentence and 83% of the students have recognized it in the second (Table 24). For the indefinite article 'a', a smaller number of students have perceived it, but the general percentage is higher than 50% (more than average). Recognizing 'a' in the sentence "There were a lot" could be achieved by relying on the higher levels of knowledge (rather than the sounds) and the fact that this article usually collocates with the word 'lot' which is not blanked in the answer sheet. That is, the students' inability to identify 'a' in this context means that they have relied exclusively on the incoming sounds and have not activated the top-down processing mode to predict what might precede the word 'lot'(c.f. Listening and Language Processing)

II.4.2.3 Auxiliary Verbs

Auxiliary Verbs		**Correct**		**Incorrect**		**Unrecognized**	
Item	**Context**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	N	%
Was 2	1. I was at home…	14	77.78%	1	5.56%	3	16.67%
	2. I thought it was great	8	44.44%	10	55.56%	0	0.00%
Has 1	…number has been	1	5.56%	3	16.67%	11	61.11%
Been 1	…has been engaged	1	5.56%	3	16.67%	11	61.11%
Were 1	There were a lot…	3	16.67%	15	83.33%	0	0.00%
Are 4	1. When Are you…	2	11.11%	15	83.33%	1	5.56%
	2. They are for Jane.	4	22.22%	14	77.78%	0	0.00%
	3. They are second…	1	5.56%	17	94.44%	0	0.00%
	4. There are some new..	2	11.11%	15	83.33%	1	5.56%
Shall 1	I shall take …	6	33.33%	12	66.67%	0	0.00%
Must 2	1. …books I must read.	0	0.00%	12	66.67%	5	27.78%
	2. You must come over.	1	5.56%	14	77.78%	2	11.11%
Is 3	1. There is some here.	10	55.56%	8	44.44%	0	0.00%
	2. There is some soup…	14	77.78%	4	22.22%	0	0.00%
	3. …thing is to try later.	6	33.33%	11	61.11%	1	5.56%

Table 26: Students' Perception of Auxiliary Verbs

The above table demonstrates that the students have had a serious problem in the perception of the weak forms of auxiliary verbs. More than 50% of the students have been unable to recognize the weak forms of almost all the words listed. We notice that the words 'was' and 'is' were somehow easy for the students compared to the other auxiliary verbs, and they are the only words successfully identified by more than half of the testees. All the remaining words, however, have been extremely difficult. The most difficult ones are 'has' and 'been' which not more than one student -from the total number of 7 students who thought that they could perceive them- has written their exact full form. The remaining 11 students (61.11%) have drawn circles in the spaces provided for these words (indicating that they could not recognize them). Similarly, the answers show that 'must' was difficult for the students to hear in the two contexts where it occurs especially in the sentence 'There are some new books I must read' where all the students have misperceived it.

In all the four sentences where 'are' was blanked, no more than 4 students (22.22%) have recognized it. In the sentence "they are second hand" all the students have attempted to write the full form of 'are' but no one has found the correct answer. The model verb 'shall' also has not been identified by 66.67% of the students whose answers have all been wrong.

II.4.2.4 Conjunctions/ Adverbs

Conjunctions/ Adverbs		Correct perceptions		Misperceptions		Unrecognized	
Item	**Context**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Or 1	…not just one or two.	17	94.44%	1	5.56%	0	0.00%
As 2	1. I shall take As much…	6	33.33%	8	44.44%	4	22.22%
	2. …as I want	11	61.11%	2	11.11%	5	27.78%
And 2	1. …book and write	10	55.56%	8	44.44%	0	0.00%
	2. …come and see us…	16	88.89%	1	5.56%	1	5.56%
Some 6	1. There is some soup in…	11	61.11%	7	38.89%	0	0.00%
	2. There is some here	18	100.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
	3. Aren't there some	9	50.00%	4	22.22%	4	22.22%
	4. …and write some notes.	8	44.44%	10	55.56%	0	0.00%
	5. ...him for some money.	15	83.33%	3	16.67%	0	0.00%
	6. There are some new…	10	55.56%	7	38.89%	1	5.56%
There 5	There were a lot	3	16.67%	15	83.33%	0	0.00%
	Aren't there some…	2	11.11%	10	55.56%	5	27.78%
	There are some new…	15	83.33%	2	11.11%	1	5.56%
	There is some here.	14	77.78%	4	22.22%	0	0.00%
	There is some soup…	7	38.89%	11	61.11%	0	0.00%

Table 27: Students' Perception of Conjunctions and Adverbs

The results show that the students' perception of conjunctions and adverbs is of a relative difficulty. For instance, among the six sentences where 'some' occurred, not more than 50% of the students have recognized it in the sentences 'Aren't there some letters' and '…and write some notes'; while in the remaining four sentences, the percentages of correct answers range from 55.56% to 100%. This means that the students' ability to recognize conjunctions and adverbs in this test has been partly linked to the context where each word occurs. Some of the remaining words in this category have had a similar pattern of fluctuation in the percentages of correct/incorrect answers from one sentence to another. These include the words 'as' and 'there' that have been identified by a majority of the

students in some sentences (61.11% and 83.33% respectively); whereas, in other utterances the number of misperceptions has been higher than the correct perceptions (66.66% and 83.43% respectively). As an exception, 'and' and 'or' are the easiest words for the students to perceive. For the former, more than 50% of the students have identified it in both sentences where it occurs while the latter has been recognized by 94.44% of the students.

II.4.2.5 Pronouns

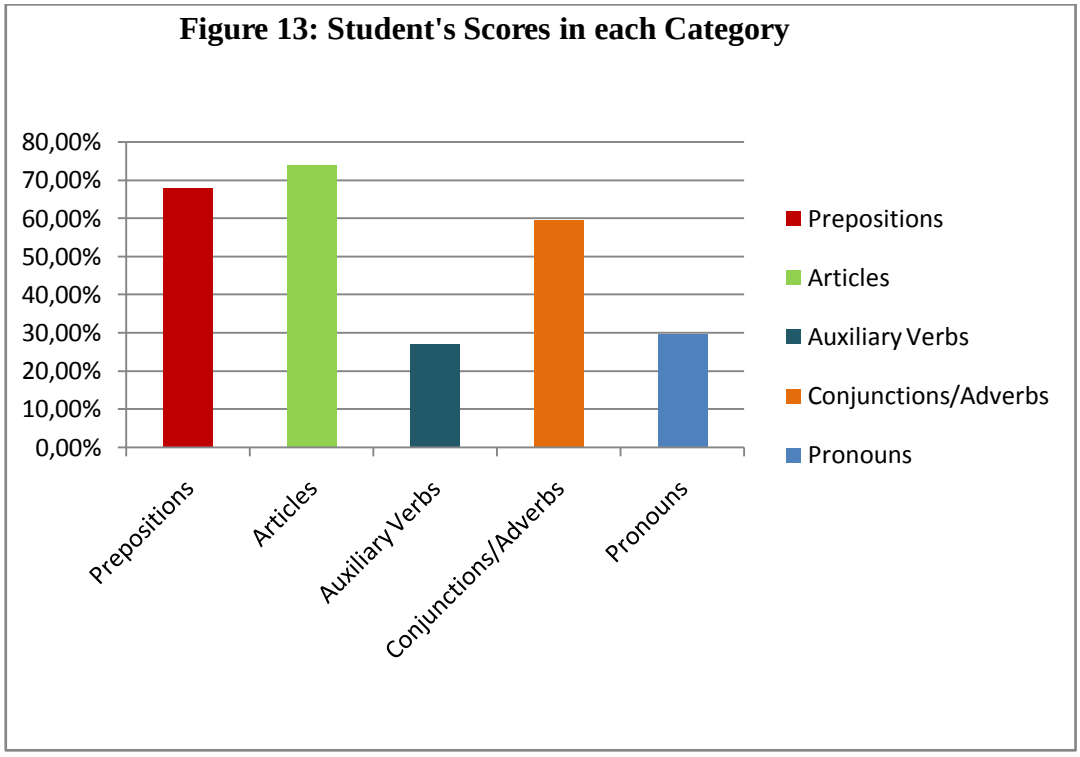
Pronouns		Correct perceptions		Misperceptions		Unrecognized	
Item	**Context**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
His 1	Read his book…	0	0.00%	16	88.89%	2	11.11%
Her 4	1. Taking him to see her?	5	27.78%	10	55.56%	3	16.67%
	2. …wanted her to stay.	4	22.22%	14	77.78%	0	0.00%
	3. …went to her room.	0	0.00%	18	100.00%	0	0.00%
	4. …for her to open.	2	11.11%	13	72.22%	3	16.67%
Him 3	1. …taking him to see…	3	16.67%	12	66.67%	3	16.67%
	2. …asked him for some…	7	38.89%	11	61.11%	0	0.00%
	3. …to see him today?	17	94.44%	1	5.56%	0	0.00%
You 2	1. When are you taking…	8	44.44%	9	50.00%	1	5.56%
	2. You must come over…	9	50.00%	7	38.89%	2	11.11%
Us 1	…and see us at home.	4	22.22%	14	77.78%	0	0.00%

Table 28: Students' Perception of Pronouns

Compared to the results obtained from the analysis of the answers concerning the previous functional-words categories, the results of the students' perceptions of pronouns reveal that they are the most difficult items for the students in this test. The only case where the number of students who have identified the weak forms is higher than average is in the sentence "…to see him today" in which 94.44% of the students have correctly

perceived the word ‘him’. However, if we calculate the sum of correct answers concerning this word in the three contexts where it occurs, we will end up with only 22.22% of correct answers. The pronoun ‘you’ is more or less easy to recognize compared to the other words in this category, and the numbers show that the percentage of correctly filled blanks for this word range from 44.44% to 50.00%. The remaining four elements, however, have been all problematic for the students and the highest percentage of the correct perceptions of each has not reached 39%. It should be noted that all the pronouns which are reduced by the omission of the initial ‘h’ have been difficult to understand by the testees. This might be linked to the remark that we have raised in the analysis of the questionnaire (section three) where the majority of the students could not identify the word ‘her’ which was reduced as /ə/ (aɪlɑ:skə̲təkʌmtəðəmi:tiŋ). That is, if the students cannot identify the written form of the schwa as a word that corresponds to ‘her’, they will obviously fail to recognize it in running speech. The pronoun which is the most difficult to hear in the test is ‘his’ which all the students (100%) have misperceived.

Figure 13: Student's Scores in each Category



II.4.3 Students' Final Cloze Test Scores

After having analyzed the students' answers to each grammatical category, we will move to the calculation of each student's correct answers to end up by their final scores. By doing this, we will be able to make a comparison between the total number of words that each student thought that they have been able to recognize (see table 21 above) and the total number of scores that they have obtained. In the next table, the second column (recognized items) will represent the number of words that each student believes to be able to perceive, while the third column will show the number of correctly filled items.

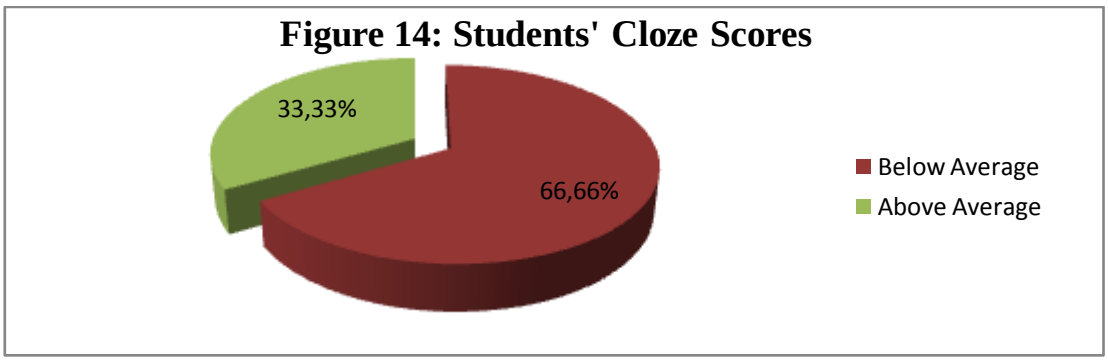
Students	Recognized Items[2]		Correct Answers	
	N	%	N	%
S1	55	93.22%	25	42.37%
S2	45	76.27%	17	28.81%
S3	57	96.61%	29	49.15%
S4	50	84.75%	18	30.51%
S5	53	89.83%	37	62.71%
S6	52	88.14%	26	44.07%
S7	57	96.61%	39	66.10%
S8	57	96.61%	47	79.66%
S9	52	88.14%	26	44.07%
S10	52	88.14%	31	52.54%
S11	56	94.92%	46	77.97%
S12	59	10.,00%	29	49.15%
S13	55	93.22%	39	66.10%
S14	54	91.53%	20	33.90%
S15	55	93.22%	21	35.59%
S16	51	86.44%	24	40.68%
S17	47	79.66%	22	37.29%
S18	51	86.44%	19	32.20%

Table 29: Students Final Cloze Test Scores

[2] This column represents the students' personal evaluation of their ability to perceive the weak forms.

The final cloze results demonstrate that the majority of the students in this test (about two thirds) have had less than average scores. To get a clear view of the students' performances in this test, we will divide them into three categories on the basis of the scores they have obtained. The first category represents one third of the participants whose scores have been above average, i.e. six students only out of eighteen have been able to perceive more than half of the functional words in this test. The percentages of their scores range from 52.54% to 79.66% (31 and 47 correct words respectively). This indicates that all the participants in this test have failed to perceive at least 19 functional words. The other two categories represent 12 students who have obtained less than the average scores. That is, two thirds of the participants in this study have misperceived the weak forms of more than 29 functional words out of the total number of 59 words included in this test. In the first category (which includes the weakest scores), we have the students who have recognized between 17 and 24 weak forms (28.81% and 40.68% respectively). The second category includes the students who have correctly answered between 25 and 29 functional words (42.37% 49.15% respectively).

Figure 14: Students' Cloze Scores



The students' personal judgments of their ability to perceive the weak forms have exceeded the actual scores they obtained in the perception of reduced forms in this test. One of the 'options' which have been given to them in this test is to draw a circle in the gap which corresponds to a given word that they cannot recognize. That is to say, if the

student chooses not to use the 'circle', it means that they believe that they have been able to hear the missing words. In the answer sheets, however, a few numbers of students have used this option and we have frequently found gaps which are filled only with content words. This adds another 'option' to our analysis of the answers, which refers to the instances where the students not only have failed to perceive the weak form, but also have not known that there is a functional word in the blank provided[3]. The first column of the above table refers to the numbers of functional words that each student has attempted to answer and has not indicated that he could not perceive. If we compare these numbers to the numbers of correct answers, we find that they are higher than the number of correctly perceived words. An illustration of this point is given in the next graph in which the two sets of attempted answers vs. correct answers are compared.

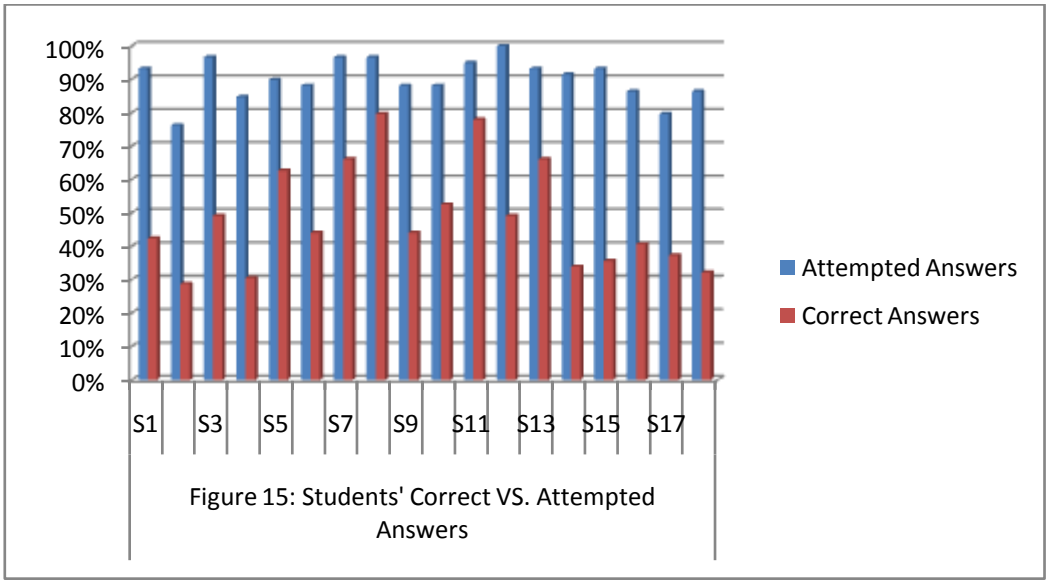


Figure 15: Students' Correct VS. Attempted Answers

[3] Such instances are marked as wrong answers.

As the above graph shows, the students have not correctly perceived all the words which they have attempted to fill. 11 students (61%) have not succeeded in filling in at least half of the words that they have attempted to answer. In some cases, the number of wrong answers has been more than that of the correct answers. This indicates that the overall performance of the students in this test has been weak, and that the students have had a serious difficulty in listening to reduced forms of functional words.

II.4.4 Misperception Factors

The analysis of the answers concerning each word has revealed that the students have had some common problems which have caused them to misperceive the weak forms. In some cases, we have found some common patterns of wrong answers concerning a specific functional word which the majority of the students have followed. Such patterns have been all taken and categorized to diagnose the contextual reasons which have caused the students to misperceive the weak forms. The results of this categorization have revealed some of the misperception factors that we have already discussed in the theoretical part. The next table shows some details of these patterns in addition to the students' typical answers.

Misperceptions		Examples of Students' Answers
Description	**Items**	
Lexical Segmentation Problems	They are for Jane /ðeɪəfəjein/	Therefore
	There are /ðerə/	Their
		there
	There is /ðerɪz/	These
		those
	Books I must read /bʊksaɪməsrɪ:d/	Science read/unless read/silent read
	To see her /təsɪ:ə/	This year/to the sea
Inability to Hear the Weak Forms	All The functional words included in the test except 'or', 'were', 'us' and 'a'.	X
Neutralization	Her	A
Sound Confusion	From	For
	To him	To seem
	There	The
	The	Do
	Has been	Is being
	There are some	There is some
	Shall	Should
	There is some	This seemed
	Asked him	Asking
	There were	They were
	They are /ðeɪə/	They were
	Her	It
		You
	As much as	Shoes
	For	From
		Before
		free
	Read his book	Reading spoken book
		Use this book

Table 30: Common Factors of Misperception

II.4.4.1 Lexical Segmentation

The inability of breaking down the chunks of sentences is one of the factors that has caused the misperception of weak forms. In many cases, the students' answers have indicated that they have been unable to hear the weak forms, and that they have been confused in filling them in. In some blanks which contain a content word (or words) and a functional word, the students have filled them using one single word whose pronunciation is somehow identical to the pronunciation of all the blanked words in combination. For instance, for the sentence 'They are for Jane', the majority of the students have written the word 'therefore', i.e. they have not been able to identify the word boundaries of each word in this sentence. Special word segmentation problems have been the combinations of 'are' and 'is' with 'they' and 'there'. In such instances, the majority of the students have written one single word such as 'there', 'their', and 'these' to replace them. Some students have relied on the context to guess the missing words. They have filled the blanks with words that fit the grammaticality of the sentence, but their predictions do not correspond to the sentences they have heard. In some other cases, the students' misperceptions reveal that they have relied only on the incoming sounds; the words that they have written do not fit the grammaticality of the sentence (e.g. 'There are some new books science read' instead of '….books I must read').

II.4.4.2 Inability to Hear the Weak Forms

One of the main factors that have caused the students to misperceive the weak forms is that they are obscured, and reduced in quality and quantity. Their answers reveal that they have been unable to hear the weak forms and, in almost many misperception cases, they have not known that the blank contains a functional word. This is clear from the answers that include only content words. Such instances have occurred frequently,

especially in the case of functional words that are reduced using the schwa sound. It should be noted, however, that all the functional words have caused this problem except ‘or’, ‘were’, ‘us’ and ‘a’.

II.4.4.3 Neutralization

Even if this has not been a major obstacle in perceiving weak forms in this test, the results have proved that students do have problems in listening to functional words which have identical weak forms. In their answers concerning the pronoun ‘her’, all the students (100%) have written the article ‘a’ instead. This is, of course, caused by the fact that the word ‘her’ in this context was reduced by the omission of the initial consonant /h/, and the replacement of the central vowel by a weaker one which is /ə/. The result is a reduced form /ə/ that is identical to the reduced form of the article ‘a’. The misperception in this case may also be interpreted as a lack of knowledge concerning the way the word ‘her’ is reduced (the omission of initial consonant).

II.4.4.4 Sound Confusion

A big number of wrong answers are not interpretable by any of the factors we have already mentioned. Some of them, however, have common features which demonstrate that the students have been, in a given way, confused in listening to weak forms. Such instances include the following:

1. Analogous Pronunciations: In this case, the students have been able to hear only one part of the weak form (e.g. the first sound of the word). Relying on this, they have tried to guess the rest of the word and filled in the blanks with functional words which are identical in pronunciation to the one they have heard. For instance, many students have written ‘from’, ‘the’, and ‘there’ instead of ‘for’, ‘they’ and ‘their’ respectively.

2. Neighbouring Sounds: in some cases, the words that precede and follow the functional word have exerted significant effects on the way students perceived the weak forms. The students have been unable to perceive both the content words and the functional ones, and their answers reveal that they have made combinations of some individual sounds that they have perceived (out of the total number of sounds) to form words that are not actually included in the blank. An example of this is the word 'shoes' which many students have written in the blank that corresponds to '…much as'. Another example is the word 'are' which many students have misperceived, and have written 'is' instead as a result of the confusion caused by the word that comes after 'are' which starts with a /s/ sound ('there are some' vs. 'there is some').
3. Other examples of sound confusion include the instances where the students have been confused and distracted by words that are in some way identical in their pronunciation to the weak forms they have heard such as 'shall' and 'should', 'been' and 'being', 'they' and there'.

It should be noted that whatever the factor is, the examples of students' misperceptions demonstrate that they have a lack of knowledge concerning the use of strong and weak forms of functional words in English, in addition to a limited experience in listening to naturally spoken language.

II.5 Summary and Discussion

The results obtained from the data analysis demonstrate that 3rd year students do have difficulties in listening to connected speech regarding the perception of weak forms of grammatical words. As for their knowledge concerning the basics of using weak forms, the questionnaire results have, surprisingly, shown that almost all of them have a serious lack of competence as their scores are very low. This is despite the fact that they have been

given lessons concerning reduced forms. The analysis of the definitions they have provided for weak forms reveal that they have very broad information about them. In addition, their performance in the questionnaire show that they are unaware of the reduction rules that govern the use of this category of words in naturally spoken English especially the exceptions of rules.

As it was expected, except for one student, all the students are unaware of the importance of weak forms in listening. The teachers' focus on the pronunciation level only with neglecting the perceptual one might have contributed to this state. The students answers concerning the significance of learning about weak forms have been all focused on the productive level which, according to their answers, boosts their ability to articulate appropriately. The only student who has answered that knowing about weak forms is important in listening have had the highest score in the close test. Whereas, among the remaining students, only five students have had above average scores (in the test) and all the others have had below average scores (see figure 15 below). This suggests that a logical link between the students' awareness and their perceptual abilities is proved to exist. That is, the analysis of the data confirms our hypothesis which is that the students who are aware of the importance of weak forms in listening will perform better than those who are not. Some of the students have had similar high scores in the test despite that they are unaware of the importance of weak forms in listening, and that they have obtained low scores in the questionnaire. An interpretation to this may lead us to think of other variables which could have played a role in facilitating the task for these students rather than others such as the degree of exposure and familiarity and individual training to listen to connected speech.

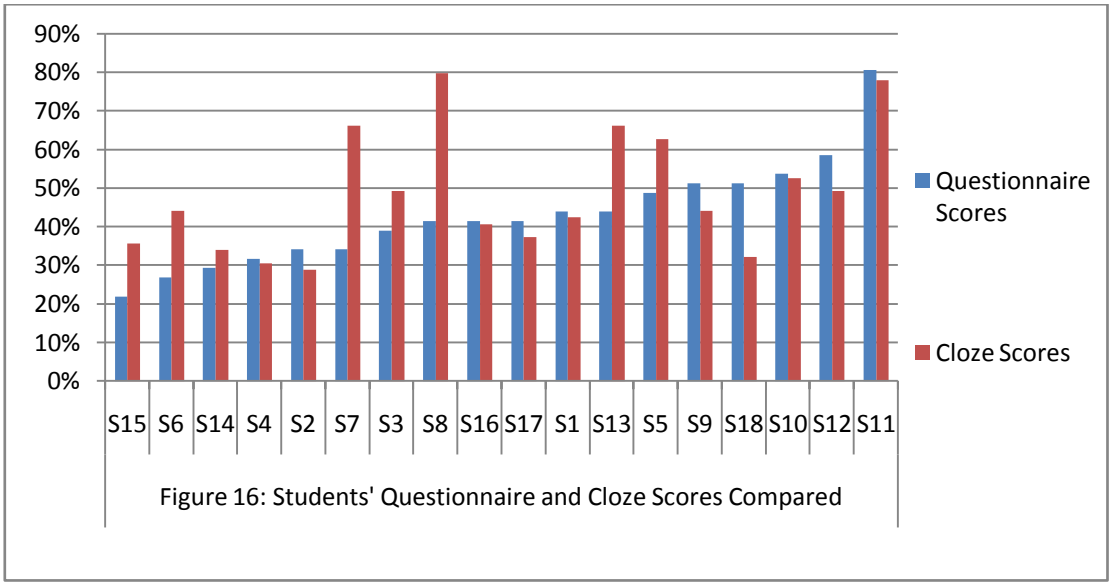


Figure 16: Students' Questionnaire and Cloze Scores Compared

The above figure shows that the percentages of the scores obtained by 9 students (50%) have been more or less similar in the two sets (S14, S4, S2, S16, S17, S1, S10, S12, and S11). We note that there is a possible link between knowing the rules, and the students' perceptual abilities; this is demonstrated by the low scores which these students have obtained in the test when their performance in the questionnaire is poor, and vice versa. This implies that the students' prior knowledge has played a role in raising the level of students' perceptual abilities, and thus, has been a significant variable in this test.

On the other hand, the knowledge about the rules has slightly affected the remaining students' performance in the test. This is elicited from the considerable number of cases (8 cases) where the students have had low scores in the questionnaire, but they have obtained better scores in the test (Figure above). This suggests that the declarative knowledge about reduced forms, alone, does not help the students to cope with the aspect of weak forms in naturally spoken English. In other words, it is not sufficient to rely on giving the reduction rules only for the students to enable them to perceive the weak forms and understand them out of the mouths of native speakers.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have dealt with the listening abilities of some 3rd year students concerning the perception of weak forms of grammatical words in naturally connected speech, on the light of their awareness of the significance of knowing about the use of these words in the listening process. In addition, we have questioned the sufficiency of knowing about the rules, only, to enable the students to cope with reduced forms in speech. The results show that the students do have difficulties in recognizing the reduced forms, and that they lack awareness of the significance of weak forms in listening. They also reveal that being aware is very significant in helping the students to cope with weak forms in naturally spoken English. This is added to other factors such as training, familiarity and exposure etc.

CONCLUSION

It is a fact that listening comprehension as a language skill, as opposed to other language skills, has received very little attention in language curricula. Foreign learners are taught how to be proficient writers, speaker, and may be good readers too. The fact that these skills are the most noticeable from the students' performance in the classroom has given them a kind of priority in both teaching and assessment. 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 will, undoubtedly, face difficulties in understanding naturally spoken language. This ignorance is also the result of wrong concepts about listening, 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 is sought.

This study has been focused on only one part of the whole listening comprehension process which is the students' ability to decode the incoming sounds of chunks of sentences in naturally spoken English. More precisely, this piece of research has been devoted to gain a thorough understanding of the effects of students awareness of the importance of knowing about weak forms and the effects of their ability to perceive such words in comprehending native speech. In other words, our aim in this study has been 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. We hypothesised 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, we have conducted a research that includes a questionnaire designed to show us the students' concepts about weak forms, and a listening test through which we

have aimed at evaluating their ability to perceive reduced forms. The results of the data analysis confirm the hypothesis, and further demonstrate that students have a serious difficulty in listening to weak forms. When categorized, some reduced forms have been more difficult than others. We have 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, we recommend that reduced forms should be given more attention in teaching the oral skills. It is true that the declarative knowledge concerning the rules of the use of such words which the students are taught in phonetics is important. However, this knowledge has to be developed in the form of training students to listen to connected speech focusing on the perception of weak forms; this will boost 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. This task, we believe, should be the subject of teaching in not only the phonetics module, but also in oral expression. To this end, the students can be trained with a set of specific activities that allow them to notice the modifications exerted over functional words in speech and, thus, realize the importance of knowing about them.

Specific exercise types are helpful in training students. These include, namely, focus-on-form exercises that allow the teacher to highlight the pronunciations of functional words in running speech. Here the role of the learners is very important; they should be given opportunities to ask about the subject and discuss it. This kind 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 has been proved that cloze tests and dictations help learners to

improve their perceptual abilities. For the former, the teacher gives a transcript of utterances to the students and instructs them to listen to these sentences (spoken naturally either 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 be automatised. That is, extensive training is needed so that decoding the weak forms will be automatic for the students; this automaticity will, consequently, free their attention from the form and focus on other higher levels of meaning (while listening). In addition, students should be trained on how to use the bottom-up processing mode rather than the top-down mode.

Further research on the subject would have to:

- Extend the scope of the subject to include other variables such as the degree of exposure.
- Deal with other connected speech aspects such as assimilations, illusions etc.
- Use other research tools and, possibly, an experiment that seeks to see the effects of systematic instruction about reduced forms on the students' abilities to perceive them.

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire serves as a data collection tool for a research project. You are kindly requested to answer this questionnaire by which we aim at checking some information about the use of strong and weak forms of functional words in English. We will be so grateful if you take the time and energy to answer it. The information gathered by this questionnaire will be strictly confidential. Please, DO NOT write your name. If you have any question, do not hesitate to ask. ***For section one, feel free to answer in any language that you want.***

Section One

1. Using examples, give a brief definition of the concept of strong and weak forms in English.

……

……

……

2. In your opinion, and on the basis of what you have learnt, what is the importance of learning about strong and weak forms in English?

.....

……

……

Section Two

For each of the following questions, circle the letter of the right answer. Choose only one answer out of the options provided.

3. The weak pronunciation of functional words is used in:

    a. Informal speech.

    b. Semi-formal speech.

    c. Formal speech.

    d. All of them.

4. In natural speech, which form is more frequent than the other?

    a. The weak form.

    b. The strong form.

    c. They have the same frequency.

5. The weak form of a functional word is usually used when:

    a. The functional word is quoted.

    b. The functional word is used in isolation.

    c. In both “a” and “b” situations.

    d. In none of them.

6. Functional words are usually pronounced strongly if:

    a. They do not receive sentence stress.

    b. They occur in sentence final position.

    c. If the preceding word is stressed.

    d. None of them.

7. In which situation is the word ‘that’ pronounced weakly?

   a. When it is used in a relative clause.

   b. When it is used as a demonstrative.

   c. In both ‘a’ and ‘b’ situations.

   d. In none of them.

8. The words ‘her’ and ‘are’ have a common weak form which is:

   a. /r/

   b. /ə/

   c. /eə/

   d. /e/

9. Which one of the following functional words is regularly stressed (does not have a weak form)?

   a. Because

   b. Where

   c. For

   d. Any

10. In which of the following examples is the word “was” pronounced weakly?

   a. I think he was.

   b. She said that her car was broken down.

   c. You have written ‘was’ instead of ‘were’.

   d. A: ‘I didn’t see you in the meeting?’ B: ‘I ‘was there’

11. In which of the following sentences the word ‘have’ must be pronounced strongly.

    a. My parents have bought a new car.
    b. I think that they have something to present.
    c. Have your teachers told you that?
    d. In none of them.

12. Functional words are always strong when they precede:

    a. Nouns
    b. Pauses
    c. Other weak forms
    d. Strong forms

13. In which sentence should the word ‘has’ be pronounced strongly:

    a. She has taken them from that box.
    b. He has not yet prepared himself.
    c. They announced that the file has disappeared.
    d. In none of them.

Section Three

14. Transcribe the following sentence using the weak forms of functional words.

    -I told him that John and his friend Bill were absent.

    ……

    ……

- Talk to her at the end of the lecture.

……

……

I have met his wife.

……

15. Write the following utterances using Roman alphabet. The number of words in each sentence is written between brackets.

wɪməsgetsəmɔ: (5)

……

aɪlɑ:skətəkʌmtəðəmi:tɪŋ (9)

……

wɪʃlni:dtəhʌrɪ (5)

……

16. Write the weak forms of the following words: for, and, at, that, have, can, would, as, are.

Section Four:

This is a transcript of 20 sentences that you are going to listen to. As you notice, some words are blanked out. You are required to fill in the blanks on the basis of what you listen to. If you think that a given blank does not correspond to any word in the recording, put a cross on that blank. For instance, if you hear "how are you" and you find in the paper "how…..are you", put a cross in the space provided. If you hear a word but you cannot recognize it, put a circle in the space.

A

1. ..... book ..... notes.

2. Aren't ..... letters ..... open

B

1. ..... soup ..... fridge.

2. I ..... great.

3. ..... Jane.

C

1. I ..... stay.

2. I ..... money.

3. ..... second hand.

4. We .....room.

D

1. I .....best ..... try later.

2. The ..... engaged ..... over an hour.

3. .....lot not just .....two.

E

1. ..... come over ..... dinner soon.

2. I ..... five o'clock.

3. When ..... taking .....

4 . ..... here.

F

1. ..... new books ..... read.
2. He wants to come ..... home.
3. .....take ..... want.
4. Why am I too late .....today?