Weak Forms: How Do Arabic-speaking Learners of English Use Them?

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Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate the way Arab learners of English deal with weak form items and the difficulty they encounter in using such grammatical items in context. This problem was approached from two different avenues. I therefore carried out two separate tests. The first test, the pronunciation test, showed that Arab learners have a serious problem with pronouncing weak form items. The second test, the identification test, also demonstrated that Arab learners had a problem with identifying weak form words in context.

Nothing may have inhibited them from correctly pronouncing and identifying weak form items but the absence of these items from Arabic and the lack of some basic lengthy training (formal or informal) in the use of weak form words.

Some of the present findings contradict Mitleb (1987) and other researches' findings that experience in the second language rules plays an important role in the evolvement of the perceptivity of the sound pattern, particularly the suprasegmental features.

I suggest that more attention is to be devoted to the teaching of the suprasegmental aspects which occur in English connected speech so that learners are enabled to employ these items correctly to maintain the rhythmic quality of the English language. However, the nature of experience required to help EFL learners master the use of suprasegmental aspects is an area which is still very much neglected by teachers, linguists and syllabus designers alike.

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1. **Introduction**

In the past, teaching pronunciation used to focus on identifying and practising the sounds of the language concerned but more recently there has been a shift of focus towards the aspects of connected speech, i.e. suprasegmental features, such as stress, rhythm, weak forms, intonation, etc. Such aspects are necessary in order to establish and ease effective communication between speakers and listeners (see Roach, 2000).

In this article, I am concerned not so much with learners' connected speech skills as with the identification and use of weak form words. In my opinion, before introducing the present empirical study, it is advisable to have a clear idea of what weak form words exist in English and the way these are dealt with by EFL teachers.

Weak forms are an indispensable component and real part of spoken English and their use is a common feature of natural English speech. In spoken English, some **phonemics** are pronounced in two different ways depending on the context (level of formality) in which they occur, with one **strong** form (item is prominent) and another **weak** form (item is not prominent). The majority of such items are subsumed under the category labelled as **grammatical** or **function** words. Function words serve a purely grammatical role and help the sentence 'function' syntactically as opposed to **lexical** or **content** words which carry the content of the sentence. But now what does it mean for a word to be weak?

A word is in its weak form if it is pronounced in an unstressed manner since weak forms relate to spoken rather than written English. The word *that*, for instance, has two forms: a weak form /ðət/ in 'I think that he's gone' and a strong form /ðat/ in 'That boy is my son'.

Phoneticians are not of one mind as to the number of weak form words. Some books list as many as 48 words; others present as few as 26 (cf. Knowles, 1987; Gimson, 1989; Gimson & Cruttenden, 1994 and Obendorfer, 1998). Weak-form words can roughly fall into the following categories:

1. Articles: *a*, *an*, *the*, *some*

2. Auxiliary verbs: verb "to be" (*am, are, be, been, is, was, were*), *can, could, do, does, had, has, have, must, shall, should, will, would*
3. Conjunctions: *and, as, but, than*
4. Pronouns and possessive adjectives: *he, her, him, his, me, she, them, us, we, who, you, your*
5. Prepositions: *at, for, from, of, to*

It should be noted that linguists distinguish between weak forms and *contracted* words which native speakers produce when they speak colloquially. Contraction means that one or two words (the linguistic form and its combination) are shortened, by means of reduction and contraction, to a single phoneme, e.g. (I + will) into *I'll*.

2. **Strong and weak forms**

One may ask whether the above categories are always used in their weak forms. Undoubtedly, when used in isolation, all function words are stressed and therefore occur in their strong forms. In connected speech, however, there are specific contexts where only the strong form is acceptable. The following are the special situations where some function words retain their strong form (see also Gimson, 1989 and Roach, 2000):

(1)When some function words occur at the end of a sentence:

'What are you looking **at**?' /ωʕt E φY λYκIN ℘τ/

'She certainly **must**' /ΣI σ©:τνλι m ʃst/

'All students **could**' /O:λ στφυ:δΕντσ kYd/

(2) When a function word is accented for the purpose of emphasis, i.e. given more stress; thus the word *the* in:

'Israel' refused to withdraw from **the** occupied Arab territories.

That's **the** thing! / ℘τσ ι: IN/

is pronounced in its strong varieties: /ðι:/ in the first sentence and / ε/ in the second.

(3) When a function word is being coordinated or contrasted with another function word then both words will appear in their strong form; for example:

'A girl who walked **to** and **from** school everyday'

/E γ©:λ ηY ωO:κτ τυ: Εν φρℜμ σκυ:λ εϖρIδεI/

(4) When a function word is being quoted or cited; for example:

'He used the word "**must**" several times in his speech'

/ηI φυ:ζδ E ω©:δ μ ∫στ σεϖρEλ ταIμσ Iν Iζ σπι:τΣ/

Here is an alphabetically ordered list of the common weak-form words along with a set of examples to illustrate them. Some, e.g. Ortiz Lira (1997), consider those asterisked items to be the most essential ones. It should be stressed, however, that sometimes "there are no clear rules as to when one as opposed to another of these forms is likely to occur" (Ladefoged, 1993:107)

strong form **weak form**(s)

1. ***a** /εI/ /ə/ before consonants: 'I read a book' /aI red E bUk/
   (the strong form is more frequent in formal contexts)
2. ***am** /℘m/ /Em, m/: 'What am I doing?' /wÂt Em aI du:IN/
3. ***an** /℘n/ /ən, n/: before vowels: 'Give him an orange'
   /gIv Im En ÂrIndG/
4. ***and** /℘nd/ /En, nd / (and maybe /End/ before vowels)
   'Come and join us' /kóm En jOIn ós/
   /n/ (after the sounds: *t, d, s, z,* Σ): 'wait and see' /weIt n si:/
5. ***are** /A:/ /ə/ before consonants: 'You are clever' /jU E klevE/
   /A:ρ/ /ər/ before vowels: 'They are at home' / eI Er Et hEUm/

6. ***as** /ɷs/ /əz/: 'Write as soon as you can'
/wr aIt Ez su:n Ez jU kan/

7. ***at** /ɷt/ /ət/: 'We arrived at noon' /wI Er aIvd Et nu:n/

8. **be** /bɪ:/ /bI/: 'You should be quiet' / jU Sd bI kwaIEt/

9. **been** /bɪ:n/ /bIn/: 'They haven't been away for a long time'
/ eI hEvnt bIn EweI f r E l ÂN taIm/

10. ***but**/b ʃt/ /bət/: 'But why didn't he come?' /bEt waI dIdnt I kóm/

11. ***can** /kɷn/ /kən/ and sometimes /kn/
'When can you help me' /wen kEn jU hel p mi:/

12. **could** /kYd/ /kəd/ (and sometimes /kd/)
'How could he be rescued?' /h aU kEd I bI r esk j u:d/

13. ***do**[1]/dʊ:/ /də/ before consonants and /dY/ before vowels:

14. ***does**/d ʃs//dəz, z, s/: 'Where does she hide?' /weE dEz SI h aId/

15. ***for**/fO:/ /fə/ before consonants: 'It is necessary for writing' /It s nesEs ri fE wr aItIN/
/fO:r/ /fər, fr/ before vowels:
'It is necessary for eating' /It s nesEs ri fEr i:tIN/

16. ***from** /frℜm/ /frəm/: 'He has come from that village'
/hIz kóm f rEm Et vIl IdG/

17. ***had** /hɷd/ /həd/ at the beginning of a sentence: 'Had he arrived?'
/hEd I Er aIv d/
/d/ after vowels and /əd/ in all other positions:

[1] Some linguists use the vowels /i/ instead of /ɪ/ and /u/ instead of /ʊ/ to represent the nucleus in (he, she, we) and (you, do), respectively (see Roach, 2000).

18. ***has** /hℊz/ /həz/ (initially in a sentence); /əz/ after /s, z, τΣ, δΓ, Σ, Γ/;

/z/ after all voiced sounds apart from /z, δΓ, Γ/ and

/s/ after all voiceless sounds apart from /s, τΣ, Σ/:

19. ***have** /hℊv/ /həv/ initially in a sentence; /v/ after personal pronouns and /əv/ elsewhere in speech

20. **he** /hɪ:/ /hI/ at the beginning of a sentence and /I/ elsewhere

21. ***her** /h©:/ /hə/ initially in a sentence; /ə/ before consonants and /ər/

Before vowels

22. ***him** /hIm/ /Im/ (this pronoun does not occur initially): 'She has

kicked him out' /SIz kIkt Im aUt/

23. ***his**/hIz/ /hIz/ at an initial position (before nouns):

'His car was stolen' /hIz kA: wEz stEUln/

/Iz/ elsewhere: 'He sold his car' /hI sEUld Iz kA:/

24. ***is** /Iz/ /z/ after all voiced sounds save /z, δΓ, Γ/:

/s/ after all voiceless sounds save /s, τΣ, Σ/:

(/Iz/ appears after /s, z, τΣ, δΓ, Σ, Γ/:

25. **me** /mɪ:/ /mI/: 'Show me this' /SEU mI Is/

26. ***must** used only	/m ʃst/	The weak forms /məst/ and /məs/ are
		when "must" is being used in its sense of obligation.
27. **not**	/nℜt/	/ντ, ν/: 'He can't come' /hI kA:nt kóm/
28. ***of**	/ℜv/	/əv/: 'He is very busy most of the time'
		/hIz veri bIzi mEUst Ev E taIm/
29. ***shall**	/Σ℘λ/	/Σəl/ or /Σl/: 'We shall visit you later'
		/wI Sl vIzIt jU leItE/
30. **she**	/Σι:/	/ΣI/: 'Is she there?' /Iz SI eE/
31. **should** /jU SEd brIN It/	/ΣYδ/	/Σəd/: 'You should bring it'
	/Σδ/ (when a vowel follows) 'he should eat' /hI Sd i:t/	
32. ***some** noun to mean	/s ʃm/	When *some* is used before a countable
		"an unknown individual" or "a certain quantity", it has the strong form /s ʃm/, e.g. 'Probably, **some** people destroyed it' /prÂbEbli sóm pi:pl dIstrOId It/ and 'the weak form variety /səm/ or /sm/ is used elsewhere.
33. ***than**	/ ℘ν/	/ðən/: 'Your car is cheaper than mine'
		/jE kA:z tSi:pE En maIn/
34. ***that** /hI ßINks Et SIz Il/	/ ℘τ/	/ðət/: 'He thinks that she is ill'
(as a demonstrative adjective or pronoun, *that* has the strong form)		

35. ***the** / ɪ:/&/ ɛ//ðə/ before consonants: 'The car has gone'/ E kA:z gÂn/

/ði/ before vowels: 'This should be the end of it'
/ Is SEd bI I end Ev It/

36. ***them** / ɛm/ /ðəm/: 'Give them a hand' /gIv Em E hand/

37. ***there** / ɛE/ When "there" functions as an existential, preparatory

subject, it occurs in its weak forms: /ðə/ before consonants and/ðər/ before vowels but when it is used demonstratively, "there" always occurs in its strong form: /ðeə/ before consonants and /ðeər/ before vowels.

38. ***to** /tʊ:/ /tə/ before consonants: 'He wants to play'

/hI wÂnts tE pleI/

/tY/ before vowels: 'He works hard to earn more money' /hI wã:ks hA:d tU ã:n mO: móni/

39. ***us** / ʃs/ /əs/: 'Send us an e-mail' /send Es En i:meIl/

/s/ only in let's: 'Let's meet them there' /lets mi:t **ðəm**

ðeə/

40. ***was** /wℜz/ /wəz/: 'He was late' /hI wEz leIt/

41. **we** /wɪ:/ /wI/: 'Can we call later?' /kEn wI kO:l leItE/

42. ***were** /w©:/ /wə/ before consonants and /wər/ before vowels

43. **who** /hʊ:/ /hY or ʊ: /: 'There are men who speak French'/**ðərə men**

hU **spi:k frent**S/

44. ***will** /wIl/ /λ← / after consonants other than /l/; /əl/ after vowels plus

/l/ and /l/ after (I, he, she, we, you, they

45. ***would** /wYd/ /wəd/ at the beginning of a sentence and /d/ (after I, he,

she we, you, they): 'I would visit him' /a**Id** vIzIt Im/

46. **you** /φʊ:/ /jY/: 'I bought you another shirt' /aI bO:t jU Enó E S ã:r t/

47. **your** /φO:/ /jə/ before consonants and /jər/ before vowels

It was clear that the weakening of the above mentioned words is effected by substituting /I/ for all of /ι:/; /Y/ for /ʊ:/ and /E/ for /æ, e, ©:, ʃ, A:, ɛI, ɛE and Y/. Moreover, /ə/ sometimes totally disappears in some words, e.g. *had* /d/, *has* /z/ or /s/. Then, the 'weakening' process involves reducing the length of the sounds, obscuration of vowels towards /E, Y, | I/ and the elision of some vowels and consonants.

3. **The importance of weak form words**

Those words which are usually weakened or even swallowed in connected speech result in comprehension and intelligibility problems on the part of EFL learners. Weak forms which are frequently used by native speakers tend to be under-deployed by most EFL learners. In my teaching experience, I have noticed that very few foreign learners would use them and this might occur unconsciously. Disappointingly, a great number of EFL learners might not be aware of the presence or possibly the importance of such forms. But how important are these forms for EFL learners?

A great number of EFL learners may believe that using weak forms is a characteristic of careless speech and therefore do not appreciate that the retention of the strong forms of some function words may sound unnatural. Ladefoged (1993:109) contends that:

> "There is, of course, nothing slovenly or lazy about using weak forms …. Weak forms and assimilations are common in the speech of every sort of speaker of both Britain and America. Foreigners who make insufficient use of them sound stilted".

Roach (2000) provides two reasons why EFL learners should learn the way weak forms are used. First, most native speakers believe that it is "unnatural" and "foreign sounding" to use the strong form of certain words. An "all-strong-form" pronunciation may sound incomprehensible and disrupt the rhythm of the language, bearing in mind that English is a "stress-timed" language. According to Ortiz Lira (1997), this means that in some contexts the use of weak forms is compulsory and failure to employ them will often result in a foreign accent and excessive formality. Richard et. al (1992:63) believe that "Educated native speakers of a language normally use colloquial speech in informal situations with friends, fellow workers, and members of the family". And they go to say that "It is often difficult for language learners to realize that in certain situations colloquial speech is more appropriate than extremely formal speech".

Second, foreign learners encounter some difficulty in understanding speakers who use weak forms. It is likely that the lack of knowledge of weak forms may inhibit learners' mastery (comprehension and production) of spoken English. It is believed that encouraging foreign learners to use weak forms may help them improve their production and fluency and this would prevent obscuring the meaning of some essential words.

Not only a large number of EFL learners might be indifferent or perhaps reluctant to use weak form items but also some teachers mistakenly believe that using weak forms is a slovenly habit and it may sound colloquial.

Those teachers are unaware that English is a stressed-timed language wherein speakers make the intervals between stressed syllables

equal and this gives their utterances rhythm; this, of course, cannot be achieved without the use of weak forms.

In a nutshell, weak forms play an important role in English speech since they tie up connected speech structurally. In my experience of working with a great number of Arab learners of English (Syrians, Jordanians, Saudis, Omanis and Emirates), I've found that very few students employ weak forms in their spoken English. Possibly, these might have never been taught such items or might have found them difficult to produce. Therefore, this study has been conducted to explore the way Arabic-speaking learners of English deal with weak form words, particularly whether they can identify and produce these terms.

Mitleb (1987) dealt with the issue whether the identification of weak form words evolves during a course they had in phonetics and phonology. The subjects were two groups of Yarmouk University English majors; each consisted of 15 students. The first group, "the inexperienced", received only segmental training. The second group, "the experienced", received suprasegmental training including use of weak form words. The subjects were presented with a set of 36 weak form words. Each word was used in both weak form and strong form in English sentences- a total of 72 sentences. The participants had to listen to the sentences and identify the stimuli with "weak" or "strong". The experienced group significantly performed better than the inexperienced at both weak and strong forms. This was attributed to the fact that the experienced group did a course which covered suprasegmental aspects of English. Both groups however did better with strong forms. Other researchers, Flege (1984) and Mackain et al. (1980), found that experienced learners did better at the segmental level.

Unfortunately, the number of subjects in Mitleb's study was not large enough to help generalize the results. Moreover, although the stimuli were used in sentences to contexualise them but the two sentences themselves might have decontexualised the items where each sentence contained only one weak form item. Possibly, if the items were presented in a text where two or more weak forms were used in each sentence, different results might have been revealed. Moreover, the great number of sentences, 72, the subjects had to listen to might have confused them.

More recently, Sustarsic (2007) tried to analyse an archive of English native speakers' readings of a short text on the Internet. The text was accessed (read and recorded) by more than one thousand subjects, native and non-native (ca. 600) speakers of English, who belonged to more than 175 different mother tongues. The researcher's target was native speakers of English, however. All recordings were transcribed and analysed and what concerns us here is his analysis of the weak form of function words. Sustarsic found that many native speakers used the strong form where the weak form was expected, particularly for the indefinite article "a", "at" and "and". This shows that even native speakers are not of one mind in respect of use of weak forms.

Although Sustarsic in this research had not been interested in EFL pronunciation, I examined the pronunciation of those Arab learners in his archive and found that most of them failed to produce weak form words correctly

4. **Aim of the study**

This study aims at

1. Examining whether Arab learners of English can correctly produce weak form words in context and whether knowledge of weak forms enables them to successfully produce these items. According to many teachers' experience (Wenxia, 2003) and findings from prior research into use of weak form words (Mitleb, 1987 and Sustarsic, 2007), most subjects will fail to produce the weak form words correctly. Subjects are expected to accent most function words.
2. Revealing whether Arab learners of English can in the first place identify weak form words in context. In view of previous research, ARA may succeed most of the time. This should be due to receipt of some training in the use of such forms.
3. To verify the claim that receipt of some training in the use of weak forms enables learners to use these correctly and to probe the possible reasons for any pattern of behaviour they might manifest in their (mis)identification and (mis)pronunciation of weak form words, if any. The complete absence of such forms from Arabic

and the absence of training in the use of such forms may be the chief reasons.

These issues will be addressed by providing subjects with a text containing a large number of common weak form words and assigning them the task of reading the text aloud and then underlining the weak form words. The number of the incorrect pronunciations will reflect the volume of the problem Arab learners have with weak form words.

5. **Material**

Stimuli were 22 function words with 34 occurrences of weak forms existing in a text with five sentences of different lengths. Six words which I called 'anchor' items, i.e. *her, and, the, of, as* and *for* were intentionally repeated in the text to ascertain that subjects treated them consistently. I believed that if subjects' pronunciation and identification of these 'anchor' items varied widely, this would mean that subjects were answering haphazardly. Two extra function words (*there* and *have*) expected to be produced in their strong forms were incorporated into the text to ascertain that students systematically distinguished weak and strong form items

The text was an 'elicitation paragraph' used in the speech corpus maintained by Steven Weinberger at the Department of English, George Mason University, Virginia, USA and was selected on the grounds that it was a simple short text with some weak form words. The original included only 11 function words with 22 occurrences of weak forms since some function words were used more than once. Then, the present text is a modified version of that used in the speech corpus but mine contained a greater number of function words. The chief reason for modification was to provide as many occurrences of weak forms as possible without distorting its coherence or cohesion.

The text was examined by three native English teachers and all agreed that the stimuli would be expected to be weakened.

6. **Subjects**

The subjects were two groups of English majors in the department of English at Damascus University. The first group consisted of third-

year students (hereby ARA). These were selected on the grounds that they had taken a course in phonetics and phonology where they might have received some training in the way weak form words were produced. To get an able and homogeneous group of learners, I used Meara's (1992) *EFL Vocabulary Tests*. This set of tests has been devised to measure six proficiency levels of foreign learners of English. My subjects did test (314), i.e. No.14 at level three. Scores below 75 were dropped because subjects with such scores were unlikely to belong to the homogeneous group I wished to examine. The mean score of the remaining subjects, 45, on the above test was (92.5 out of 100, Sd 4.3). The second group consisted of 45 first-year English majors (hereby ARAcon). These were assumed not to have taken any course in phonetics and phonology because according to the Department Course Plan for English majors, this course is introduced in the second year. (Phonetics and phonology is covered in Language III using Roach's **English Phonetics and Phonology**).

7. **Procedure**

The text was neatly typed on a sheet of paper and handed to the subjects. Instructions were given orally in English and in Arabic. Subjects were instructed to read out the full text as correctly as possible at a rapid speaking tempo (the way they hear native speakers produce their utterances) without prior knowledge of the purpose of this research. An MP3 and a sound recorder on a laptop were employed to record subjects' reading of the text. I met the subjects individually but it was not until they had finished their tests that I told them that they were recorded in order to avoid the effect of eagerness on their part to please the researcher. For practical reasons, the time taken to perform the task was not recorded but this did not exceed 50 seconds in any case.

Following this first task, ARA only took the identification test. Participants were required to circle all the words they thought would be produced with a weak form. I felt that there was no need for ARAcon to take this test because other researchers had found a significant difference between the performance of the "experienced" and "inexperienced" groups when it came to weak-form identification.

The sheet also contained one question for the subjects to tick to indicate whether they acquired some knowledge of weak forms.

Regarding the first issue, i.e. subjects' (ARA and ARAcon) production of weak form words, the total number of subjects' correct pronunciation and identification of weak form instances was computed using Minitab. 1530 operations of function-word pronunciation were performed. I computed the proportion of correct pronunciation of individual subjects and correct pronunciation of individual function words. To this end, I relied on my auditory judgment. I transcribed and rated all subjects' recordings and handed them to three experienced native English linguists and EFL teachers to assess my ratings, i.e. judge the transcription and match it with students' pronunciation. The judges were instructed to focus on the pronunciation of the function words in the passage under scrutiny. There was a high agreement among their evaluations. An interrater reliability of about 95% agreement was obtained. To determine how successful subjects were at producing the correct form of the function word, their mean scores for the correct responses were computed. Each correct answer was awarded one point. An answer was considered correct if the function word was produced with its weak form. It goes without saying that the two function words produced in strong forms were excluded here.

Concerning the second issue, i.e. revealing whether ARA can identify weak form items, I computed the mean scores for their successful identifications of weak form items. Each item successfully identified was given one point.

8. **Results**

This study attempted to provide an answer to three questions. First, whether ARA could produce weak form words correctly. Table 1 summarises the mean scores for subjects' correct pronunciation. The figures show the mean number of times subjects correctly produced those function words in the text with their weak forms. As I suspected, ARA failed to produce the stimuli correctly more than half of the times. Actually, they did not do better than chance level.

Table 1. Mean score for subjects' correct pronunciation of weak form items (max. 35)

	ARA	ARAcon
Mean	6.33	5.75
Sd	3.15	2.44

A t-test was administered to assess whether there existed any significant difference between the performance of the two groups. The result found was not significant ($t=-0.97$, $p<.0.334$ with 82 df). This was due to the fact that both ARA and ARAcon did not do well on this test. No difference existed between the performance of those who received some training in the use of weak forms and those who did not. Calculating the correlation coefficient, it appeared that no relationship existed between subjects' knowledge of weak forms and their results on the pronunciation test.

With regard to the second question and as shown in table 2 below, the mean score for subjects' identification of weak form items was better than that for their pronunciation of those items. A cursory inspection of the data showed that ARA performed 938 correct identification operations out of 1530. This, however, was not in line with my expectations and it did not corroborate the findings from other researches.

Table 2. Mean score for subjects' correct identification of weak form items (max. 35)

	ARA
Mean	20.84
Sd	8.72

Regarding to the third issue concerning whether subjects had some knowledge of weak forms, all subjects claimed that they had taken this course. To study the relationship between success at producing the appropriate variety of the weak form word and training in the way weak

form words are produced, it was appropriate to divide subjects into two groups: higher scorers (those who scored 20 and above, i.e. more than 60%) and lower scorers (those who scored less than 20). To my disappointment, there were no higher scorer; the highest score was 14 out of 34. The information subjects know about weak form words seemed not to make them capable of producing the stimuli correctly. The success rate was well below expectation.

Evidently, most ARA are lower scorers in both the pronunciation and identification tests. Most probably, ARA did not receive enough information and training, both theoretically and practically, on how to produce weak from items.

9. **Discussion**

From a quick look at table 1 and 2, one can easily conclude that ARA did not do well either in pronouncing or in identifying weak form items. The subjects failed to pronounce most of the items correctly. This result supports my expectation that producing weak forms is very problematic for ARA and it tallies with those obtained by other researchers. Then, this problem was not Arab learners-exclusive; many other EFL learners encountered similar difficulties. Such findings were very much anticipated since some EFL teachers complain about their learners' problems with using suprasegmental features in general and pronunciation of weak forms in particular. However, common sense suggests that a strong relationship existsed between subjects' scores and the training they had received in the use of weak form items. The present data, however, does not demonstrate that there existed any association between success at pronunciation or identification of items and receipt of training in the use of weak form items.

Examining individual subjects' responses, I noticed that Arab learners' correctly produced items ranged between 3 and 14. At first sight, table 3 below shows the exact behaviour of participants concerning the pronunciation of individual weak form words. Obviously, subjects fared best with the indefinite article "a" and the definite article "the" where 91% and 88% of the participants, respectively, produced these correctly (cf. Sustarsic, 2007). This is an interesting result. ARA might have been accustomed to producing these items correctly for these were

the two most frequently used items in English and in their weak form varieties. However, individual subjects did not behave systematically on most occasions. For example, whereas only 64% of the subjects produced "the1" correctly, 71% and 88% produced "the2" and "the 3", respectively, correctly. All subjects failed to correctly produce any of the function words "her2", "from", "as1", "as2", "them", "and4" and "will"; all these items were accented all the time. It happened that all subjects produced the words 'there' and 'have' correctly; this means that they accented these. Apparently, subjects tend to accent all function words. Nothing can be said to account for subjects' behaviour except that they were producing these items at random although some instances indicated that participants' tended to be consistent. Table 3 shows that almost the same proportion of subjects produced the anchor items similarly. Take for example the word "her" where 9%, 0%, 13% and 9% produced "her1", "her2", "her3" and "her4", respectively, as weak form items. To a large extent, this does not hold true to the same items in the identification test. Subjects were less consistent when it comes to almost all 'anchor' items. ARA were no exception; even native speakers seemed to have problems with weak forms.

Table 3. Number and proportion of correct pronunciations and identifications of individual weak form items (Max 45) (Numbers beside items indicate the order of occurrence of this item in the text)

Weak form items	No. of subjects' Successful pronunciations	%	No. of subjects' successful identifications	%
That	14	31	17	38
Is	6	13	38	84
Would	4	9	30	66
her1	2	4	34	75
and1	4	9	29	64
her2	0	0	20	44
To	21	46	22	49

Us	4	9	28	62
Some	2	4	34	75
From	0	0	26	58
the1	29	64	13	29
Must	2	4	26	58
of1	5	11	34	75
of2	3	6	27	60
and2	2	4	24	53
as1	0	0	39	86
as2	0	0	29	64
Could	4	9	45	100
for1	4	9	28	62
her3	6	13	20	44
Are	5	11	36	80
of3	13	29	25	56
A	41	91	18	40
and3	2	4	20	44
An	8	18	38	84
for2	4	9	19	42
the2	32	71	14	32
Can	6	13	37	82
Them	0	0	23	51
and4	0	0	27	60
Will	0	0	39	89
her4	4	9	25	55
At	18	40	23	51
the3	40	89	17	38

Although subjects fared better when it came to identifying weak form words, their score was on the whole not high enough to help validate our hypothesis and claim that they are good at identifying weak form items.

A close scrutiny of individual subjects' responses showed that subjects' correctly identified items ranged from 6 to 31. Table 3 shows the exact behaviour of participants concerning the identification of individual weak form words. Subjects highest scores were for "is" (84%), "would" (66%), "her1" (75%), "some" (75%), "of1" (75%), "as1" (86%), "could" (100%), "are" (80%), "an" (84%), "can" (82%) and "will" (89%). These proportions do not tally with those obtained for the same items in the case of the pronunciation test. That is, even though ARA recognised these items as weak forms words, they failed to pronounce them as such.

Once more, the results of this test suggest that Arab learners of English did not derive a good amount of benefit from the information they received about the use of weak forms. Not surprisingly, subjects were not systematic in their identification of individual weak form items. For instance, 75% of the subjects recognised "her1" as a function word produced with a weak form variety whereas "her4" on the one hand and "her2" and "her3" on the other were recognised as such by 55% and 44%, respectively.

It is likely that the overall proportion disguises the actual behaviour of individual subjects. A thorough inspection of the data showed that individual subjects were not systematically pronouncing the repeated expressions the same way. Table 4 shows the behaviour of the first three subjects in respect with pronunciation and identification tests. It is clear that the first subject produced "her1" correctly whereas all other occurrences of "her" were mispronounced. The second subject, however, produced "her3" correctly but mispronounced the other three occurrences. This holds true to the identification test. Table 4 substantiate this claim and shows that subject No.1 was able to recognise the word "her" as a weak form item two times but failed to do so with the other two occurrences, i.e. "her2" and "her4". Likewise, subject No.1 identified the second and third occurrences of "of" but misidentified the first.

Obviously, the proportion of successful pronunciation and identifications varied from one weak form item to another. No single expression was pronounced or identified correctly by all subjects. Therefore, not only subjects' responses, as a group were sometimes random, but most individuals' behaviour was also arbitrary.

Table 4: The behaviour of the first three subjects (0 and 1 stand for wrong and correct answers, respectively)

	Pronunciation			Identification		
Item	s1	s2	s3	s1	s2	S3
That	0	1	0	0	0	0
Is	0	0	0	0	1	1
Would	0	0	0	1	1	1
her1	1	0	0	1	0	1
And1	0	0	0	1	1	0
her2	0	0	0	0	0	1
To	1	1	1	1	0	0
Us	0	0	0	1	0	1
Some	0	0	0	1	1	1
From	0	0	0	1	0	1
the1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Must	0	0	0	1	0	0
of1	1	0	0	1	0	1
of2	1	0	0	0	0	1
And2	0	0	0	1	0	0
as1	0	0	0	1	1	1
as2	0	0	0	0	1	1
Could	0	0	0	1	1	1
for1	0	0	0	1	0	0
her3	0	1	0	1	0	1
Are	1	0	0	1	0	0
of3	1	0	0	1	0	1
A	1	1	0	1	1	1
And3	0	0	0	1	0	0
An	0	0	0	1	0	1
for2	0	1	0	0	0	0

the4	0	1	0	1	0	1
Can	0	0	0	1	1	1
Them	0	0	0	1	0	1
And4	0	0	0	1	0	1
Will	0	0	0	1	1	1
her4	0	0	0	0	0	1
At	0	0	1	1	0	0
the5	0	1	1	1	0	1

On the face of it, table 4 shows that some ARA tended to correctly identify most of the weak form items. If we assume that correctly identifying more than 80% of the expressions represents a systematic identification strategy, we find that only 30% of ARA fall under this classification. This proportion is not high enough to allow us to distinguish between two types of subjects within this sample. According to the above assumption, the performance of 67% ARA was unsystematic. In essence, subjects' answers were more hit-or-miss than being affected by their previous knowledge of the use weak form items.

A further enquiry into whether the participants had some working knowledge of weak form items was conducted. Brief interviews with some participants after having explaining to them the purpose of this research and the way the text should be read showed that the had not been taught the use of weak form items properly. They argued that stressing all words in an utterance creates a more favourable impression on the part of the listeners. Subjects tended to believe that the use of weak forms is a sign of *lazy*, *sloppy*, *careless* English (see also Brown, 2006). As has been clarified earlier, many phonologists and linguists believe that this claim is not true. It should be noted that some complained about the way native speakers talk on films and chat shows. Their hunch was that speaking slowly is an indicator of highly educated people who they aspire to talk in a similar way to theirs. The questions which remained unanswered nonetheless are "What type of instruction in the use of weak forms is required and how can we maximise the benefit derived from this instruction?"

It was difficult to speculate about the reasons for the occurrence of such rather odd behaviour. Probable interference from L1 is to be ruled out because Arabic has no such items as those English weak form items. It is not irrelevant nevertheless to claim that the fact that Arabic lacks weak form words may be a main factor that deflected them from answering correctly and this accounts for the subjects' rather poor and inconsistent performance on both tests. But it could be relevant to suggest that subjects' failure on both tests was due to the difference between Arabic and English stress patterns (see Al-Ani, 1970 for more information about Arabic stress patterns). One more reason which may account for this failure is subjects' ignorance of the importance of weak forms and the role they play in the smoothness, spontaneity and rhythm of English.

One however cannot assume that the text itself might have hindered the subjects' fluency in reading the text because all the words used were frequent apart from *scoop,* which might not be known to all subjects. It is worth mentioning that none mispronounced this particular word.

10. **Conclusion**

The results we got here showed that ARA had a serious problem with the production and identification of weak form items. These items were found to be also problematic for other EFL learners and native speakers. I believe these results obtained above require two solutions which need to be implemented simultaneously; otherwise phonetics and phonology courses will be ineffective means of teaching the correct pronunciation of English.

First, book writers and teachers should focus on weak forms at an early stage of ELT and these are to be introduced one by one over a sufficient period of time so that EFL learners can master them and make their speech intelligible. EFL teachers must be well- trained and prepared to teach these forms and raise learners' awareness of the importance of such forms if a fluent English is targeted. It is believed that if students know the rationale for using weak forms, then they will be motivated to learn them.

The second solution is to give Arab learners meticulous attention and guidance regarding weak forms for these do not exist in their mother tongue. They should be exposed to and taught more information about weak forms than what we traditionally offer them. Use of tape recordings and drills may work well (see Mayer, 1981). A lot of benefit may be derived utilising Colin Mortimer's The Cambridge ***Elements of Pronunciation*** series and Mark Hanncock's ***English Pronunciation in Use*** dialogues and conversational phrases.

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