

استخدام الاشكال الضعيفة في الكلمات الوظيفية الانجليزية كما يلفظها المتعلمون العراقيون  
لغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية في الجامعة: دراسة وصفية

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**The Use of Weak Forms of English Functional Words as Made by  
Iraqi EFL Learners at the University Level : A Descriptive Study**

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#### Abstract

The current research paper attempts to investigate the capacity of Iraqi EFL learners in pronouncing English weak forms . It describes the differences between strong and weak forms . When Iraqi EFL learners have the chance to speak to native speakers of English , they find certain difficulty in understanding them . This is because native speakers of English speak quickly and they use different varieties of language and different styles of speech . So , Iraqi learners of English find difficulty in pronouncing weak forms .

**Keywords: Weak forms , Functional words , Strong forms , Iraqi EFL learners**

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#### المستخلص

يهدف البحث الى محاولة لتحقيق القدرة الحقيقية للمتعلمين العراقيين في لفظ الاشكال الضعيفة في الكلمات الوظيفية في اللغة الانجليزية . يصف البحث ايضا الاختلافات في اللفظ بين الاشكال الضعيفة والاشكال القوية . عندما يمتلك المتعلمين العراقيين للغة الانجليزية الفرصة للتحدث او الاستماع الى المتكلمين الاجانب سوف يواجهون مشاكل عديدة في فهم الكلمات و الجمل وذلك بسبب ان المتكلمين الاجانب يتكلمون بسرعة ويستخدمون انواع واشكال مختلفة من الكلام .

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الاشكال الضعيفة ، الكلمات الوظيفية، الاشكال القوية ، العراقيون المتعلمون للغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية

## 1. PRELIMINARIES

### 1.1.Introduction

Pronunciation is the manner which clarifies how words, syllables, phrases, and language are uttered and spoken correctly. Good pronunciation is a basic element of learning a language in full swing .Weeren and Theunissen ( 1986:2 ) emphasized this view point as they pointed out that “ first of all , with a good pronunciation one can

make oneself better understood . It gives one's oral production a certain redundancy and this can help a speaker to get his message across more easily . Secondary , pronunciation is quite attractive as a learning objective because of its high pay-off . The number of sounds , sound cluster and intonation patterns in a language is finite , just like the alphabet once the system has been mastered it can be applied in one's future performance , thus giving it fundamentally an infinite scope” .

There are famous English words that can be pronounced in two different ways. These words are called strong and weak forms . Strong form can be defined as one of two possible pronunciations for a word , in the context of connected speech . The strong form is that which is the result of being stressed . For instance , most of the grammatical words of English occur in both forms , e.g. I want bacon and /ənd /eggs V. I want bacon- and / ænd /eggs ( Crystal , 2008: 457).

### 1.2.The Problem

Foreign learners of English encounter the dilemma of in pronouncing weak forms of English functional words and Iraqis are no exception .When Iraqi learners of English have the chance to talk with English native speakers , they face certain difficulties in understanding them . One of these difficulties is that native speakers speak rapidly . The second difficulty is that native speakers speak with various types of languages (accents ) .The third one is that native speakers use various styles of speech according to various situations . So , foreign learners of English should learn all features of pronunciation and connected speech in order to be able to communicate with native speakers .

### 1.3. Hypothesis

This research is based on the hypothesis that Iraqi learners of English does not pronounce weak forms of English functional words correctly due to certain difficulties.

### 1.4. Aim

The purpose of the current study is to identify certain difficulties in pronouncing weak forms of English functional words faced by Iraqi learners of English .

### 1.5. Limits

The present paper is limited only to show the Iraqi students ability in pronouncing weak forms of English functional words through the performance of third year students / Department of English / College of Education / University of Misan .The total number of the students is 50 .

### 1.6. Procedures

The study follows the following procedures:

- 1-Organizing one experiment which aims at showing the Iraqi EFL learner's ability in pronouncing English weak forms of English functional words .
- 2-Providing the students with a notebook which shows the sentences that are written in a spelling forms .
- 3-Proving an answer sheet in order to write the phonemic transcription for weak forms .

## 2. THE THEORETICAL PART

### 2.1.Strong and Weak Forms

English words consist of two main kinds , i.e . function words and content words .Function words are words that do not have a dictionary meaning in the way that we normally expect nouns , verbs , adjectives and adverbs to have . Function words are words such as auxiliary verbs , prepositions , conjunctions , etc. , all of which are in certain circumstances pronounced in their strong forms but they are more frequently pronounced in their weak forms ( Roach , 2009 : 89 ) . They are called grammatical words or structured words . All determiners pronouns , prepositions , conjunctions , and

auxiliary verbs are grammatical words , but not all of them have strong and weak forms . The words ( it ) and ( mine ) are both pronouns , but each has only one form /ɪt / and /maɪn / . Many grammatical words are polysyllabic , as the preposition ( above ) /əbʌv / and the conjunction ( whereas ) /weərəz/; they cannot have strong and weak forms . There is occasional exception , like the conjunction ( because ) which has the strong form /bɪkɒz/ and the weak forms /bɪkəz / and /kəz / . The number of grammatical words that do have strong and weak forms is put at around fifty ( Skandera and Burleigh , 2005 : 80) .

One the other hand , content words are words that include nouns , verbs , adjectives and adverbs . They convey semantic content ( Carr , 2005 : 89) .There are several well-known English words that can be pronounced in two different ways . These are called strong and weak forms . As an example , the word ( that ) can be pronounced /ðæt / ( strong form ) or / ðət / ( weak form ) . The sentence ( I like that ) is pronounced /aɪ laɪk ðæt / ( strong form ) ; the sentence ( I hope that she will ) is pronounced /aɪ həʊp ðæt ʃɪ wɪl/ ( weak form ) ( Roach , 2009 :25 ) .

Almost all the words which have both a strong form and a weak form belong to a category that may be called function words .

## 2.2. The Use of Strong Forms

Strong forms are used in the following rules :

1. When a word occur at the end of a sentence , like , the word ( of ) in (chips are what I'm fond of) / ʃɪps ə wɒt aɪm fɒnd ɒv / .
2. When a word is being contrasted with another word ; for example ( the letter's from him not to him ) / ðə letəz frəm ɪm nɒt tu: ɪm / .
3. When a word is being quoted ; for example ( you shouldn't put "and" at the end of a sentence ) / jʊ ʃʊdnt pʊt ænd ə ðɪ end əvə sentəns /
4. When a word is given stress for emphasis , as in ( you must give more money ) / jʊ 'mʌst 'gɪv mɔ: 'mʌni / .
5. When two prepositions are co-ordinated , for example , ( I travel to and from London ) / aɪ trævəl tu: ən frəm lʌndən ə lʊt /

The next list consists of the most popular strong and weak forms .

### 1. Articles

#### a. " the "

' the ' is pronounced / ðə / before consonants as in ( shut the door ) /ʃʌt ðə dɔ: / . ' the ' is pronounced / ðɪ / before vowels as in ( wait for the end ) /weɪt fə end / .

b. " a "

' a ' is pronounced / ə / before consonants as in ( read a book ) / ri:d ə bʊk / .

#### c. " an "

' an ' is pronounced / ən / before vowels as in ( eat an apple ) / i:t ən æpəl / .

### 2. Conjunctions

#### a. " and "

' and ' is pronounced / ən / ( sometimes n after / t , d , s , z , ʃ / ) , for example ( come and see ) /kʌm ən si: / , ( fish and chips ) /fɪʃ n ʃɪps / .

#### b. " but "

' but ' is pronounced / bət / , for example ( it's good but expensive ) / its gʊd bət ɪkspensɪv / .

#### c. " that " ( conjunction + relative pronoun )

The word ( that ) only has a weak form when used in a relative clause. But ; when it is used with a demonstrative sense it is pronounced in its strong form .

Weak form / ðət / , for example ( the price is the thing that annoys me ) / ðə praɪs ɪz ðə θɪŋ ðət ənɔɪz mɪ / .

d. “ than ” is pronounced / ðən / , for example ( better than ever ) / betə ðən evə / .

e. “ as ”

‘ as ’ is pronounced / əz / in the following example ( as much as possible ) / əz mʌtʃ əz pɒsəpl / . It has its strong form / æz / for example ( that’s what it was sold as ) / ðəts wɒt ɪt wəz səʊld æz / .

### 3. Pronouns

a. “ his ”

‘ his ’ ( when it occurs before a noun , it has its weak form / ɪz / as in ( take his name ) / teɪk ɪz neɪm / . It is pronounced / hɪz / at the beginning of a sentence ( his was late ) / hɪz wɒz leɪt / .

b. “ her ”

‘ her ’ is pronounced / ə / before consonants, for example ( take her home ) / teɪk ə həʊm / . ‘ her ’ is pronounced / ər / before vowels , for example ( take her out ) / teɪk ər əʊt / .

c. “ your ”

‘ your ’ is pronounced / jə / before consonants , for example ( take your time ) / teɪk jə tæɪm / . It is pronounced / jər / ( before vowels ) , for example ( on your own ) / ɒn jər əʊn / .

d. “ she ”

‘ she ’ is pronounced / ʃɪ / , for example ( why did she read it ? ) / wæɪ dɪd ʃɪ ri:d ɪt / .

e. “ he ”

he ’ is pronounced / ɪ / and / hɪ / at the beginning of a sentence , for example ( which did he choose ? ) / wɪtʃ dɪd hɪ tʃu:z / and ( he was late ) / hɪ wəz leɪt / . ‘

f. “ we ”

‘ we ’ is pronounced / wɪ / , for example ( how can we get there ? ) / həʊ kən wɪ get ðeə / .

g. “ you ”

‘ you ’ is pronounced / ju / , for example ( what do you think ? ) / wɒt də ju θɪŋk /

h. “ him ”

‘ him ’ is pronounced / ɪm / , for example ( leave him alone ) / li:v ɪm ələʊn /

i. “ her ”

‘ her ’ is pronounced / ə / , for example ( ask her to come ) / a:sk ə tə kʌm /

‘ her ’ is pronounced / hə / when it comes at the beginning of a sentence , for example ( her brother helps me ) / hə brʌðə helps mɪ / .

j. “ them ”

‘ them ’ is pronounced / ðəm / , for example ( read them ) / ri:d ðəm / .

k. “ us ”

‘ us ’ is pronounced / əs / , for example ( write us a letter ) / raɪt əs ə letə / .

### 4. prepositions

a. “ at ”

‘ at ’ is pronounced / ət / , for example ( I’ll see you at lunch ) / aɪl si: ju ət lʌntʃ /

b. “ for ”

‘ for ’ is pronounced / fə / before consonants , for example ( tea for two ) / ti: fə tu: / ,

‘ for ’ is pronounced / fər / before vowels , for example ( thanks for asking ) / θæŋks fər a:skiŋ / .

c. “ from ”

'from' is pronounced / frəm / , for example ( I'm home from work ) /aɪm həʊm frəm wɜ:k / .

d. "of"

'of' is pronounced /əv / , for example ( most of all ) / məʊst əv ɔ:l / .

e. "to"

'to' is pronounced /tə / before consonants , for example ( try to stop ) /traɪ tə sli:p / . to is also pronounced /tʊ / when it comes before vowels , for example ( time to eat ) / taɪm tʊ i:t / .

#### 5. Auxiliaries

a. "can"

'can' is pronounced / kən / , for example ( they can wait ) / ðeɪ kən weɪt / .

b. "could"

'could' is pronounced /kəd / , for example ( he could do it ) /hi: kəd du: ɪt / .

c. "have"

'have' is pronounced /əv / , for example ( which have you seen ? ) / wɪtʃ əv ju: si:n /

'have' is pronounced / həv / when it comes at the beginning of a sentence , for example ( have any been lost ? ) /həv æni bi:n lɒst /

d. "has"

'has' is pronounced / əz / , for example ( which has been best ? ) / wɪtʃ əz bi:n best /

'has' is pronounced / həz / initially , for example ( has he come ? ) / həz hi kʌm /

e. "had"

'had' is pronounced / əd / , for example ( most had gone home ) / məʊst əd gɒn həʊm / .

It is pronounced / həd / when it comes at the beginning of a sentence , for example ( had anyone left ? ) / həd əni wʌn left /

f. "shall"

'shall' is pronounced / ʃəl / , for example ( we shall need to hurry ) / wɪ ʃəl ni:d tə hʌri / .

g. "should"

'should' is pronounced /ʃʊd / , for example ( so you should ) / səʊ ju: ʃʊd / .

h. "must"

'must' is pronounced /məs / before consonants , for example ( I must go soon ) / aɪ məs gəʊ su:n / .

'must' is pronounced / məst / before vowels , for example ( he must eat more ) /hi məst i:t mɔ: / .

i. "do"

'do' is pronounced /də / before consonants , for example ( why do they like it ) /waɪ də ðeɪ laɪk ɪt / . It is pronounced / dʊ / before vowels , for example ( why do all the cars stop ) / waɪ dʊ ɔ:l ðə ka:z stɒp / .

j. "does"

'does' is pronounced / dəz / , for example ( when does it arrive ? ) / wen dəz ɪt əraɪv / .

k. "am"

'am' is pronounced /əm / , for example ( why am I here ? ) / waɪ əm aɪ hɪə /

l. "are"

'are' is pronounced /ə / before consonants . It is pronounced / ər / , for example ( the coats are in there ) / ðə kəʊts ər ɪn ðeə / .

m. "was"

'was' is pronounced / wəz / , for example ( he was here a minute ago ) / hi wəz hɪə ə mɪnɪt əgəʊ /

n. "were"

'were' is pronounced / wə / before consonants , for example ( the papers were late ) / ðə pɛɪpəz wə leɪt / . It is pronounced / wɜr / before vowels , for example ( the questions were easy ) / ðə kwɛstʃənz wɜr i:zɪ / .

5. Other words

a. " some "

' some' is pronounced / səm / , for example ( I think some animal broke it ) / aɪ θɪŋk səm ænɪməl brəʊk ɪt /

b. "there "

'there' is pronounced / ðə / before consonants , for example ( there should be a rule ) / ðə ʃʊd bi ə ru:l / . It is pronounced / ðɜr / before vowels , for example ( there is ) / ðɜr ɪz / .

### 3. The Experimental Part

In order to achieve the aim of the study , an experiment has been made as an attempt to investigate the capacity of Iraqi EFL learners of English at the university level in pronouncing weak forms of English functional words ( writing the phonemic transcription of weak forms ) . The test is composed of several sentences that contain grammatical words in order to show weak forms . The sentences are written on a notebook in their spelling forms . So , students can see the sentences when they transcribe them. All the sentences are taken from a popular reference . They are taken from (Roach , 2009 : 34 ) . The answers of the subjects are scored . Each term with right transcription was given one mark . Each term with transcription was given zero mark .

#### 3.1. Statistical Test

T-Test is the statistical method used in the experiment . The level of significance of the test is 0.05 . Siegel ( 1956: 96 ) showed that " the level at which the research choose to set and should be determined by his estimate of the importance or possible practical significance of his finding" .

#### 3.2. Analysis of results

##### 3.2.1. The performance of each subject for all words

Table (1): percentages of the students' performance

| Subjects | Percentages |
|----------|-------------|
| 1        | 38%         |
| 2        | 40%         |
| 3        | %36         |
| 4        | %32         |
| 5        | %35         |
| 6        | %31         |
| 7        | 33%         |
| 8        | 41%         |
| 9        | 23%         |
| 10       | %38         |
| 11       | %30         |
| 12       | %34         |
| 13       | %32         |
| 14       | %38         |
| 15       | 33%         |

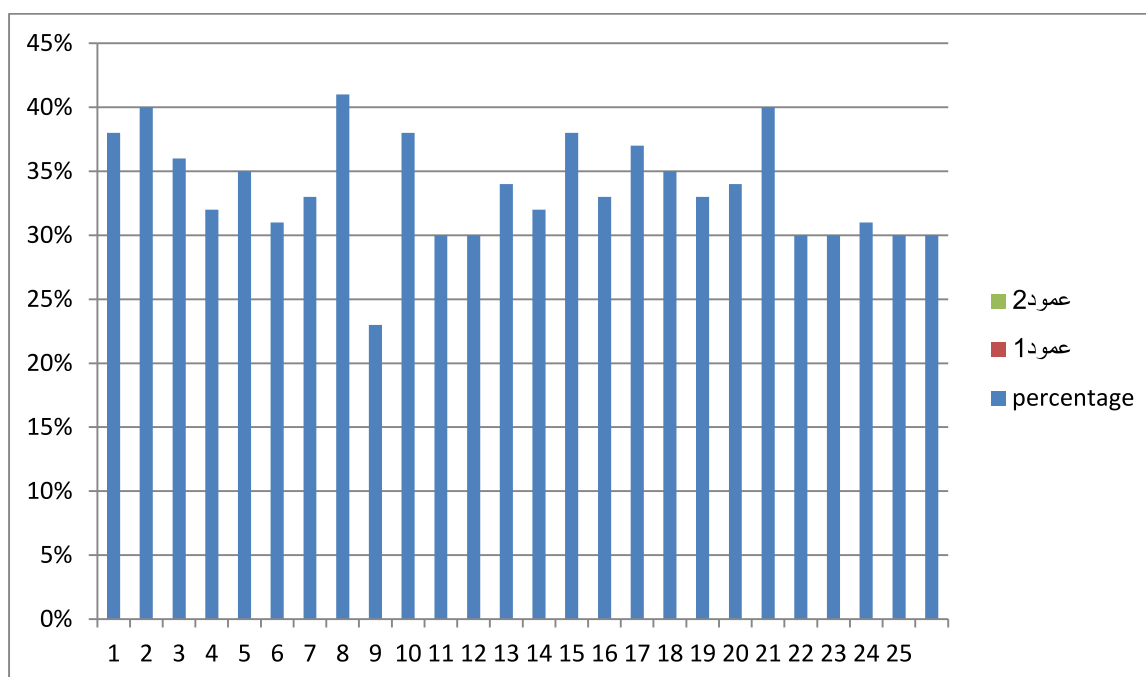
|    |     |
|----|-----|
| 16 | %37 |
| 17 | %35 |
| 18 | %33 |
| 19 | %34 |
| 20 | 40% |
| 21 | %30 |
| 22 | %30 |
| 23 | %31 |
| 24 | %30 |
| 25 | 30% |

Table (2) : Means , Std Deviation and T-value of the student's performance

| No. | Mean  | Std Deviation | T-Value            |                   | Significance |
|-----|-------|---------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|
|     |       |               | Calculated t-value | Tabulated T-Value |              |
| 1   | .7711 | 0.340         | 2.516              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 2   | 1.760 | 0.334         | 6.867              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 3   | 1.766 | 0.333         | 8.167              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 4   | 1.556 | 0.345         | 3.030              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 5   | 1.540 | 4310.         | 2.218              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 6   | 1.766 | 0.321         | 8.168              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 7   | 1.833 | 0.232         | 13.822             | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 8   | 1.806 | 0.232         | 10.013             | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 9   | 1.853 | 0.133         | 13.822             | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 10  | 1.850 | 0.215         | 9.038              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 11  | 1.763 | 0.140         | 13.833             | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 12  | 1.826 | 0.171         | 11.015             | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 13  | 1.654 | 0.162         | 10.112             | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 14  | 1.545 | 0.409         | 2.316              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 15  | 1.863 | 0.251         | 3.856              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 16  | 1.809 | 0.394         | 5.521              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 17  | 1.672 | 0.478         | 2.882              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 18  | 1.662 | 0.458         | 2.882              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 19  | 1.518 | 0.384         | 3.690              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 20  | 1.617 | 0.344         | 3.770              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 21  | 1.680 | 0.469         | 3.319              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 22  | 1.866 | 0.342         | 9.279              | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 23  | 1.933 | 0.251         | 14.944             | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 24  | 1.906 | 0.292         | 12.026             | 1.96              | Sig.         |
| 25  | 1.906 | 0.251         | 14.944             | 1.96              | Sig.         |

Figure (1) :Histogram of the Subjects' Performance





## Discussion

Iraqi EFL learners of English tend to use the strong forms in all times . They find a problem in pronouncing weak forms . This is so clear through their answers . They illustrated little difficulty in the article ‘ a ’ . Further , they also faced a great obstacle in pronouncing conjunctions especially ‘that’ and ‘than’ .

According to pronouns , the subjects found little hardship in pronouncing them . The huge one focuses in the pronouns ( him) and ( her ) . The subjects failed to pronounce all the prepositions . This means that the prepositions represent great strain to the subjects . Iraqi learners of English also encountered a very much difficulty in pronouncing some auxiliaries such as ( was ) , ( must ) , (should ) , ( can ) ,and ( could ) .

We can infer that from the results presented here , Iraqi EFL learners use strong forms more than weak forms . The main reason is that weak forms do not exist in Arabic language, their mother tongue . Since the vowel is reduced to / ə / in unstressed positions and / ə / doesn't exist also in Arabic . According to Bakir's findings ( 1994) , he displayed that “ the vowel / ə / is one of the most difficult for Iraqi learners to identify . This is because of its absence in Iraqi Arabic phonological system , as well as because of its frequent occurrence in English unaccented syllable ” . James ( 1989 : 337) explained that “stressed or full , i.e. strong syllables are produced .. before unstressed or reduced , i.e. weak , syllables in words and utterances” .

## Conclusion

Iraqi EFL learners of English find difficulty in pronouncing weak forms . They tend to use strong forms . There are certain words that are so difficulty to Iraqi learners of English . These words are certain pronouns such as ( we , and he ) , auxiliaries such as ( was , should , could ) , conjunctions such as ( that , and than ) . The main reason behind that is the non-existence of weak forms in Arabic language . There are some recommendations .Since the use of weak forms don't exist in Arabic language , teachers of English should focus on the proper use of weak forms . In order to develop the pronunciation of these forms , language laboratories are so useful . The subjects should



practice the pronunciation of weak forms not only in the classrooms but also in everyday situations .

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### Appendix

Dear Students ,

Transcribe the following sentences phonemically .

- 1.Read a book
- 2.Better than ever
- 3.The prince is the thing that annoys me
- 4.Take her out
- 5.Leave him alone
- 6.He must eat more
- 7.He was here a minute ago
- 8.I should forget it
- 9.They can wait
- 10.He could do it