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Investigating the Difficulties Encountered by Students of English Department at Elmergib University Using Assimilation Processes

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دراسة الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة المرقب عند
 استخدام عمليات الإدغام الصوتي

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة للتحقق من أداء طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية لعمليات الإدغام الصوتي في اللغة الإنجليزية وهي إحدى العمليات الصوتية التي تحدث في اللغة لتيسير النطق بصوتين متماثلين متجاورين وذلك عند تمييز مستويات مختلفة لفهم الصعوبات التي يواجهها هؤلاء الطلاب. كما تهدف هذه الدراسة الى الاطلاع على آراء المحاضرين حول نفس المشكلة لغرض الحد من المشاكل التي تواجه الطلبة عند الإدغام الصوتي. وقد تم استخدام الطرق الاتية لجمع البيانات وهي طريقة بحث وصفية واجراء مقابلة واختبار وذلك لعرض المتغيرات التي تحدث عند استخدام الكلام المتصل.

وبحسب النتائج التي توصل إليها البحث فإن أغلب الطلبة لا يملكون المعرفة الكافية حول الكلام المتصل بصفة عامة ويعود هذا الأمر للقصور في استيعابهم لهذه المفاهيم أثناء دراستهم الجامعية. هذا ويواجه أغلب الطلبة تحديات ومشاكل في استيعاب ظاهرة الإدغام وأنواعه المتمثلة في كل من الإدغام التقدمي والإدغام التراجعي والصوت الناتج من عملية الإدغام.

وأخيرا يوصي الباحثين بترجيح الأدوات التعليمية من خلال عرض برامج مكثفة واستخدام معامل لغة متطورة للتغلب على هذه الصعوبات.

Abstract:

This study aims at investigating Libyan students of English language performance in the area of assimilation as a feature of connected speech at recognition and production levels in order to understand the difficulties they face, and to investigate instructors' views in the same area in order to limit these difficulties. To demonstrate the changes that occur in connected speech, a descriptive method was used, as well as an interview and test to collect data.

According to the findings of this study, the majority of English as a foreign language (EFL) Libyan students at Elmergib University lack the proper knowledge of connecting speech in general. Because of their lack of knowledge during their university studies, most of the participants have difficulty grasping the phenomenon of assimilation, recognizing the regressive and progressive types of the phenomenon, and showing the created sounds. The researchers recommend that educational institutions prioritise the subject by offering intensive programmes and utilizing advanced language laboratories.

Key words: connected speech, assimilation.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Background of the Study:

When a skilled (EFL) user chooses words and following English grammar rules, one significant characteristic that sets him or her apart from a speaker of English as a first language is the inability to follow some Standard English connected speech requirements. The rhythm of connected English speech is derived from these requirements. One of the most essential components of spoken English, according to some linguists, is rhythm. It has been acknowledged that suprasegmental aspects of spoken language, such as word and sentence stress, rhythm, and related speech processes, are important in second language learning classroom (Soguro, Olufumbi, 2014).

The most crucial feature that sets one language apart from another is its ability to produce speech, as each language in the world possesses unique qualities for doing so. The English language has a unique manner of making sounds because it is a timed-stressed language. Sound properties in the English language vary depending on whether it is produced during continuous speech or in conjunction with other words. This phenomenon of continuous speech is referred to as connected speech. This is because sounds in continuous speech have completely different characteristics.

One important suprasegmental component of pronunciation is connected speech processes (CSPs). They refer to phonological processes including linking, weak forms, elision, assimilation, and

contraction that occur in continuous chains in spoken language. Words spoken in context differ greatly from those said in isolation due to these processes. CSPs may change, delete, or add sounds to words e.g., 'aren't' instead of 'are not', leave their sounds relatively intact, or result in drastic changes to the connected words e.g. 'wouldjou' instead of 'would you' (Alameen, 2014).

This study examines assimilation, a frequent cross-linguistic phenomenon that occurs when sound changes depending on its phonological surroundings. It can happen within word boundaries or within a word level. It can also take many different forms, such as voicing, place, manner, progressive, and regressive. For example, in a phrase such as "good girl" /,ɡʊd 'gɜ:l/ the alveolar plosive /d/ acquires a velar closure by accommodating to the velar consonant /g/ when it is placed before it.

1.2 The Statement of the Problem:

Libyan students of English language encounter difficulties in what concerns their communication as native speakers. They lack a lot of details in communication, and have a very low awareness of connected speech phenomena which hinders their role in interacting, and improving their language.

Consequently, this study examines the neglected use of one of the aspects of connected speech, assimilation, in actual language

classroom, and presents the typical response of learners to the operations in order to highlight the problems as well as find creative solutions for it.

1.3 The Significance of Study:

The significance of this study comes from the importance of spoken language, which measures the competence of language users in understanding and using foreign language properly. In other words, if non-native speakers know the role of connected speech in helping them to deal with language properly. Also, this in turn can improve the skills of listening and speaking.

The results of this study enhance students' understanding of features of rapid and casual speech, and help them understand the ways in which sounds can affect or modify each other when they meet. It also raises students' awareness of the direction of the sound changes, i.e. progressive vs. regressive assimilation, and to familiarize them with assimilation of voicing, place of articulation, and manner of articulation.

1.4 Research Questions:

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Do Libyan students use assimilation when they speak?

2. Which type of assimilation that Libyan students have problems with? And which type is used more?

2. Literature Review:

This section presents a summary of the previous overviews, theories and a review of literature related to the current study.

2.1 Connected Speech Processes:

"The changes which conventional word forms undergo due to the temporal and articulatory constraints upon spontaneous, casual speech". That is how Hieke (1984) described connected speech processes (p. 41). These are the transformations that words go through when their border sounds are combined with nearby sounds. Among them are contraction, elision, intrusion, connecting, liaison, and assimilation. This indicates that the way consonant and vowel sounds are spoken in running speech frequently varies from how they are pronounced in isolated speech, or citation form (Lass, 1984).

In order to preserve regular flowing speech tempo, CSPs in English primarily serve to promote the regularity of English rhythm by compressing syllables between stressed parts and enabling their pronunciation. Prepositions, pronouns, and conjunctions are a few examples of closed-class words that are rarely stressed and frequently appear in these unstressed contexts in a weak form. As

such, they are reduced through several processes to maintain the language's rhythm. The law of economy, which states that speakers should minimize their effort by eliding sounds to avoid difficult consonant sequences, can also be linked to reduced speech. To save time, the speech organs tend to link sounds together rather than assuming a new location for each sound (Clark & Yallop, 1995).

There are two important difficulties to consider when considering connected speech: nomenclature discrepancies and the paucity of pertinent research. Researchers and material designers may not always agree on how to classify CSPs; for example, they may use different terminology (such as sandhi variants, reduced forms, or absorption) for them. The majority of studies and textbooks describe CSPs as a set of distinct processes, each with its definition and list of examples. This, however, may be an oversimplified representation of what occurs to words when they are pronounced together, particularly in informal speech. (Berleight, 2011).

Because variables in connected speech experiments are typically unpredictable and it is hard to predict how many tokens a given process will elicit, conducting experimental studies can be intimidating for researchers. This makes applying statistical measures challenging or impossible. Because of this, the problem has only been worked on by a small number of individuals and even then, only seldom (Shockey, 2003).

Allerton (2000) claimed that various studies have explored and quantified a variety of related speech phenomena in native speaker production. These studies looked at processes such as assimilation and palatalization deletion, contraction, liaison, linkage, and nasalization. Such studies give essential context for any investigation on L2 perception and pronunciation.

Other characteristics, such as social distance, influence the frequency with which such events occur. When the speaker and the listener are both members of the same social group and use similar speech patterns, the listeners' cognitive load is lowered, allowing them to pay less attention to distinctive articulation. Indeed, some CSPs are entirely appropriate in formal circumstances (e.g., assimilation), while others are less acceptable (e.g., gonna for going to). (Ofulue et al, 2010).

2.2 Assimilation:

Assimilation occurs frequently in all human languages, and it is especially common for nasal sounds. Thus, sounds in the presence of other sounds, cross morphemes, and word boundaries are based on a variety of phonological modifications known as phonological processes (Ofulue et al, 2010). Assimilation is the process of making one sound more like another in the same or next word in a continuous utterance (Oxford dictionary, 2008).

However, believed that assimilation varies in extent according to speaking rate and style; it is more likely to be found in rapid, casual speech and less likely in slow, careful speech (Roach, 1998). Furthermore, it happens either across or within word boundaries. When it appears within a word, the consequent pronunciation is the only option, as in tens /tenz/ (Berleigh, 2011).

2.3 Types of Assimilation:

It is observed that there are three different ways that consonants differ from one another: in place of articulation, in manner of articulation and in voicing. As such, when one sound assimilates with another, the place, style, and voicing of the resulting new sound vary according to the characteristics of the surrounding sounds.

2.3.1 Assimilation of Place:

Assimilation of place refers to the process by which a sound shifts from its original place of articulation to a new one. The place of articulation of the nearby sounds determines this shift in location. There are three types of assimilation of place: alveolar stops, alveolar fricatives and alveolar syllabic nasals (Lecumberri & Maidment, 2000).

1) Alveolar stops assimilation:

This type of assimilation is known as regressive assimilation (Roach, 1998).

a) The alveolar /t/ becomes /p/ if it comes before bilabial /p,b,m,w/.

Examles: That person /ðæt pð3:sn/ → /ðæ**p** pð3:sn/

Light blue /laɪt blu:/ → /laɪ**p** blu:/

b) The alveolar /d/ becomes /b/ if it comes before bilabial /p,b,m,w/.

Examples: good boy /gʊd bɔɪ/ → /gʊ**b** bɔɪ/

Hard play /ha:d pleɪ/ → /ha:**b** pleɪ/

c) The alveolar /n/ becomes /m/ before bilabial /p,b,m,w/.

Examles: ten papers /ten peɪpəz/ → /te**m** peɪpəz/

ten men /ten men/ → /te**m** men/

d) The alveolar /t/ becomes /k/ if it comes before velar /k,g/.

Examles: that girl /ðæt ɡɜ:l/ → /ðæ**k** ɡɜ:l/

quite good /kwɑɪt ɡʊd/ → /qwaɪ**k** ɡʊd/

e) Alveolar /d/ becomes /g/ before velar /k,g/.

Examles: bad guys /bæd ɡaɪz/ → /bæ**g** ɡaɪz/

red colour /red kʌlə/ → /re**k** kʌlə/

f) Alveolar /n/ becomes velar /ŋ/ if it comes before velar /k,g/.

Examles: ten keys /ten ki:z/ → /te**ŋ** ki:z/

Pan cake /pæn keɪk/ → /pæ**ŋ** keɪk/

2)Alveolar fricatives assimilation:

a) The alveolar /s/ becomes post alveolar /ʃ/ if it comes before /f/ and palatal approximate /j/.

Examles: nice shoes /naɪs ʃuːz/ → /naɪʃ ʃuːz/

This year /ðɪs jɪə/ → /ðɪʃ jɪə/

b) The alveolar /z/ becomes post alveolar /ʒ/ if followed by palatal approximate /j/ and /f/ (Roach,1998; Lecumberri & Maidment 2000).

Examles: Those shops /ðəʊz ʃɒps/ → /ðəʊʒ ʃɒps/

Those years / ðəʊz jɪəz/ → / ðəʊʒ jɪəz/

2.3.2 Assimilation of Manner:

Assimilation of manner refers to a phonological process where one sound influences another in terms of their manner of articulation. It can be either regressive or progressive and is typically spoken in a casual or fast-paced manner (Burleigh, 2011):

1. Progressive Assimilation of Manner: Occurs when a sound influences the following sound, causing it to share similar articulatory characteristics. For example, "handbag" it is pronounced as /hæmbæg/ due to the influence of the /n/ sound.

2. Regressive Assimilation of Manner: This occurs when a sound being influenced by the preceding sound. An example is seen in words like "incredible" where the nasal /n/ sound is assimilated to the following plosive /k/ sound, resulting in a velar nasal /ŋ/.

More examples of this type:

good night /gʊd naɪt/ → /gʊn naɪt/ the final plosive becomes nasal if it is followed by nasal.

that side /ðæs saɪd/ → /ðæs saɪd/ the final plosive becomes fricative if it is followed by fricative.

2.3.3 Assimilation of voice:

Several languages, including English, find it challenging to form consonant clusters with distinct voicing values for the consonants, especially when those consonants are obstruent's (fricatives or plosives) (Nathan, 2008). In the coda, two consonants must agree on whether to be voiced or voiceless. In other words, when two consonants are clustered together and have different voicing, the second consonant must have the same voicing as the preceding one (Fortson, 2005).

Examples:

the voiceless /s/ in the word cats /kæts/ becomes /s/ to agree in voicing with the voiceless /t/.

legs /legz/ the voiceless /s/ becomes voiced /z/ to agree with the voiced /g/.

liked /laɪkt/ the voiceless /t/ agrees in voicing with the voiceless /k/.

Knight (2003) stated that in English, assimilation occurs only regressively when a voiced word's final consonant is followed by a voiceless word's initial consonant across word borders. In other words, if the final consonant is voiced and the initial consonant is voiceless, then it will become voiceless.

Examples: Voiced /b,d,g/ + voiceless /p,t,k/ → voiceless

Rob Peter /rɒ:b pi:tə/ → /rɒ:**p** pi:tə/ ===== /b/ + /p/ = /p/

bad team /bæd ti:m/ → /bæ**t** ti:m/ ===== /d/ + /t/ = /t/

big car /big ka:/ → /bi**k** ka:/ ===== /g/ + /k/ = /k/

3. Methodology:

In this study, we collected data through testing some students of third year with different gender backgrounds. Additionally, five teaching staff members were interviewed to investigate their attitudes about problems encountered by students when using assimilation.

3.1 The Sample of the Study:

For the oral test, a sample of fifteen students was randomly chosen from third-year students in English Department, Faculty of Arts at El-Mergib University. They were ten females and five males. All of them were from the age group 19-22 and shared the same social and cultural background.

For the interview, the sample comprised from five teachers who have taught the course of phonetics before, three of them were females. They are teaching in English department, at El-Mergib University, with a different year of experience in teaching English language.

3.2 Research Design:

Both descriptive and qualitative methods are used to collect the data of the study (tests and interviews) and to show the changes that happen during the phenomena of assimilation of connected speech by investigating some constituents and their roles in connected speech.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures:

3.3.1 Students' Test:

A test was set up for students. It was formed of two questions and each question consisted of eight items. The first question was about the kind of assimilation. In this question, students were required to find out the kind of assimilation and write the created sounds for the given sentences. In the second question, the students were asked to identify features of assimilation as a connected speech, in terms of (place, manner or voice), and illustrate how the change took place. The main aim of the test was to find out the problems of missuses of the phenomena of assimilation that faced by EFL students.

3.3.2 Teachers' Interview:

In order to fulfill the aim of the study, the researchers constructed face to face interviews with five teachers in the department of English in El-Mergib University. Each interview lasted about 15 minutes. It consisted of five open-ended questions, addressing the missuses of assimilation processes.

4.Data Analysis:

Trying to identify the underneath reasons behind the neglect use of assimilation as an aspect of connected speech, appropriate responses to the research questions were found by

means of two methods; a test administered to 15 students and an interview for 5 teachers.

4.1 Research Questions' Answers:

This part of the current study is mainly devoted to answer the research questions that are previously raised by the researchers' in the research questions. The suggested answers are mainly based on the practical study and recorded results.

1. Do Libyan students use assimilation when they speak?

According to the data collected from the test, it can be confirmed that the majority of the students use the phenomena of assimilation only in written forms, if they were asked to apply it in tasks in the class, with a poor knowledge of the phenomena.

In addition, all the teachers who were interviewed said that they do use the phenomena of assimilation in the class, and they do encourage their students to use the aspects of connected speech.

2. Which type of assimilation that Libyan students have problems with? And which type is used more?

According to the findings of this study, we found that most of the participants have problem regarding the phenomena of assimilation and its types whether (regressive or progressive).

Here are some of the examples that are collected from the students' test.

Example1: *Bright color* / *braɪt kʌlə*/ → /*braɪk kʌlə*/

Most of the participants and about 80% did not recognize that the final alveolar /t/ sound becomes /k/ before a velar consonant, and they were not able to illustrate that this type is a regressive assimilation of place.

2. *the shop is open* /*ðə ʃɒp ɪz ʌpən*/ → /*ðə ʃɒp s ʌpən*/

The majority of the participants answered this item wrongly, whereas about 25% of them realized that the voiced fricative /z/ becomes voiceless fricative /s/, because it occurs after the voiceless plosive /p/. In addition, they were able to illustrate that this type was a progressive assimilation of voice.

3. *Ten players* /*ten pleɪəz*/ → /*tem pleɪəz*/

Only 20% of the samples recognized that the alveolar /n/ becomes bilabial /m/ before bilabial /p/ and they were able to identify the type of assimilation (regressive).

4. *Next year* /nekst jɪə(r)/ → /nekstʃɪə(r)/

Most of the samples and about 80% answered this item wrongly, in which the final /t/ and the initial /j/ are changed to /tʃ/.

5. *good night* /ɡʊd naɪt/ → /ɡʊn naɪt/

40% of the participants identified the produced sound of this item in which the final plosive /d/ becomes nasal /n/ because it is followed by nasal /n/, and they recognize the kind of assimilation accurately (regressive assimilation of manner).

6. *ten keys* /ten kɪːz/ → /teŋ kɪːz/

The minority of the participants and about 14% recognized that the alveolar /n/ becomes velar /ŋ/ if it comes before velar /k/.

7. *Unity is strength*

None of the participants noticed that there is assimilation in this item.

5. Finding of the study:

The results showed that the majority of EFL Libyan students are not conscious enough to the factors, which form the connected speech in general and their role in the changes, which happen during the speech.

Most of respondents showed an unawareness of, or difficulty in understanding the phenomena of assimilation, thus about (80%) of them have difficulty in distinguishing between kinds of assimilation whether it is regressive or progressive assimilation.

Based on the results that obtained from students' test, (86%) of students face difficulties identifying the features of assimilation in terms of (either place, manner or voice), and identifying the created sounds. A possible reason for this deficiency is the lack of attention paid to connected speech phenomena in general and to assimilation in particular.

As we assumed at the beginning of the study, the production of the feature of assimilation among students is low, so the expectations are confirmed, Libyan students do not include as much features as they should.

5.1 Recommendations:

On the basis of results and general observation during the preparation of this study the researchers recommend with following:

5.1.1 Recommendations for the Teachers:

- Teachers have to teach phonology from the beginning of the course of phonetics and phonology.
- Teachers should present intensive programs in studying the aspects of connected speech, in addition to different methods in testing and examining the students.
- The necessity and importance of language laboratories in educational institutions.
- Students should expose themselves to intensive and continuous practice and exercises of listening and investigating the field of phonology. This can help students to understand the nature of this field by having continuous activities that will enable them to get satisfactory outputs for better performance.
- Instructors should strongly encourage EFL students to use the reduction processes at all times on the grounds that their pronunciation should resemble that of the native speakers when they speak in a natural, fast way.

5.1.2 Recommendations for the Students:

- Students have to pay more attention to the features of connected speech by practicing more exercises in assimilation and connected speech.
- Exercises and drills through the media and other recorded tapes provide the students with necessary knowledge and help them finding out the difficulties they face, besides helping them to improve their knowledge and performance.
- Students should apply the features of connected speech in their speaking to acquire natural and fluent speech.

5.2 Suggestions for Further Research:

- The researchers believe that exposing the learners in an early age to the field of phonetics and phonology will help them gain a better understanding of English language in their future education by reviewing the syllabus and curricula and improving English syllabus.
- It is suggested to study how features of connected speech affect the pronunciation of English words.

5.6 Summary and Conclusion:

To conclude, this study attempted to answer critical questions in the field of connected speech perception and production. The study also provided valuable empirical data about the types of problems that EFL students encounter in connecting words and understanding connected speech.

According to data collection, the study showed that the majority of EFL Libyan students lack the proper knowledge of connecting speech in general. Because of the poor knowledge during their study in the university, most of the participants face difficulties understanding the phenomena of assimilation, and identifying the regressive, progressive kinds of the phenomena, and problems illustrating the produced sounds.

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Appendix A

Students' Test

Q1 – Find out what kind of assimilation each sentence belongs to, and then say the created sounds:

1- This job will allow me to buy the camera I ever wanted.

.....

2- One boy wrote me love notes daily during these years.

.....

3- She had younger children than me.

.....

4- This shoe is very small, it is hurting my foot.

.....

5- Is that mam Michael? –No, / I think is not him, but that person looks very similar.

.....

6- That girl robbed my wallet yesterday.

.....

7- One car crashed into the wall of the school.

.....

8- My son is a good boy.
.....

Q2 – In connected speech some sounds undergo a change and sometimes they are connected to a sound in the neighboring word. Your task is to identify what features of connected speech included in the following items is assimilation (of either place, manner or voice) and illustrate how the change takes place.

1- Bright color.
.....**2- This shop is open.**
.....**3- Ten players**
.....**4- Next year**
.....**5- Unity is strength.**
.....**6- Good night.**
.....**7- Ten keys.**

8- Would you.

Appendix B

Teachers' Interview

- 1- Do you ever encourage your students to use the aspects of connected speech?
- 2- Do you teach aspects of connected speech (elision, linking, assimilation, weak forms)? If yes, please specify (which and why, how, how often, what materials) .
- 3- Do the students have serious recognition problem with sound assimilations in the perception of assimilation in words?
- 4- Do you think students require remedial assistance to achieve perception of assimilation in words?
- 5- Do you think the aspects of connected speech is ignored by Libyan teachers? Why?