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M. A. Thesis in TEFL

Iranian EFL Learners' Familiarity with Reduced Forms in
Spoken English based on their Proficiency Level from
Teachers' and Learners' Perspectives

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January 2014



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**DEDICATED TO MY BELOVED
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Iranian EFL Learners' Familiarity with Reduced Forms in Spoken English based on their Proficiency Level from Teachers' and Learners' Perspectives

Abstract

Researchers maintain that reduced forms have a significant influence on understanding spoken language. Reduced forms are important aspects of spoken language which have been undervalued in materials development, teaching, and testing. This problem is further aggravated in an EFL setting like Iran. In an attempt to delve into this issue, this study set out to examine the familiarity of Iranian EFL learners with reduced forms as well as the relation between the proficiency level of language learners and their familiarity with reduced forms. Moreover, the study reflected the attitudes of teachers and language learners toward RFs and the hurdles they faced in the actualization of these forms. The study consisted of two phases. In the initial phase, a test of RFs on listening comprehension was developed based on the literature and findings of a pilot study. Afterward, 306 English language learners were chosen from two cities of Shiraz and Ahwaz based on multi-stage cluster sampling to participate in the study. In the second phase, two semi-structured interviews were applied to investigate the viewpoints of teachers and language learners toward RFs. Two groups of participants consisting of 21 teachers and 15 language learners were interviewed. The first group was selected randomly while the second group was chosen purposefully to take part in interviews. The results of this study indicate that Iranian EFL learners are not familiar with RFs in spoken language; however, in contrast to earlier findings, there was a significant difference between the performance of advanced and intermediate learners on their familiarity with reduced forms. The results of the interviews demonstrated that teachers and language learners posited that all components were of crucial importance for implementing reduced forms. The findings indicated that teachers and language learners believed that it was necessary to teach these forms due to their undeniable role in understanding NSL, and they perceived the problems related to pedagogical setting, teachers' and learners' challenges as the major hurdles they faced in implementing these forms.

Keywords: Iranian EFL Learners' Familiarity, Reduced Forms, Spoken English, Proficiency Level, Teachers' and Learners' Perspectives

Table of Contents

Contents	Page
ABSTRACT	I
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	II
LIST OF TABLES	III
LIST OF FIGURES.....	VII
LIST OF ABBRIVIATIONS	VIII
 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	
1.1 General background	1
1.2 Statement of the problem.....	3
1.3 Significance of the study.....	5
1.4 Aims and Objectives	5
1.6 Definition of Key Terms	7
1.7 Outline of study	
 CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 Theoretical Viewpoints on Reduced Forms	8
2.3 Cognitive Processes in Listening Comprehension	10
2.4 Reduced Forms	13
2.4.1 Defining reduced forms	13
2.4.2 Aspects of Reduced Forms	14
2.5. The Role of Reduced Forms in Listening Comprehension	15
2.6. Assessing Reduced Forms in Spoken language	22
 CHAPTER THREE: METHOD	
3.1 Introduction	26
3.2 Design of the study	26
3.3 First Phase	27

3.3.1 Instrumentation	
3.3.2 Item-generation	28
3.3.3 Materials	30
3.3.4. Choosing the Type of Listening Test on Reduced Forms	32
3.3.5. Time Interval between	33
3.3.6. Scoring Procedure	36
3.3.7. Initial piloting	37
3.3.8. Final Piloting	38
3.3.9. Main study	41
3.3.9.1. Sampling procedure and participants of the main study	41
3.4 The Second Phase	42
3.4.1 Participants and sampling procedure	43
3.4.2 Instrumentation	44
3.4.3. Data collection procedure	46
3.4.4. Data analysis procedure	47

CHAPTER FOUR: Results and Discussion

4.1. Introduction	49
4.2 Results and Discussion of the First Phase of the Study	49
4.3 Results of the Second Phase of the Study	56

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Introduction	92
5.2 Summary	92
5.3. Implications of the study	94
5.4. Limitations and of the study	96
5.5. Suggestions for further research	96

REFERENCES	98
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Test of Reduced Forms in Listening	123
Appendix B: An Interview with Language Teachers	127
Appendix C: An Interview with Language Learners	128
Appendix D: Test Item Rating for Setting Cut-Off Score	129
Appendix E: Frequency and Percentage of Themes indicating the Components of Teachers' and Learners' Attitudes	
Appendix F: Frequency and Percentage of Themes illustrating Cor of Problems of RFs	

List of Tables

Contents	Page
Table 3.1. Sections and item numbers in listening test on reduced forms	28
Table 3.2. Items and Each Section Included	29
Table 3.3. Reduced forms of Auxiliaries with You in Yes/No Phrases (adopted from Seong, 2011, p. 59)	29
Table 3.4. High Frequency Reduced Forms (adopted from Seong, 2011, p. 60).....	30
Table 3.5. The Time Assigned to each Blank in Second-per-letter Approach	36
Table 3.6. The Time Assigned to Each Blank in Second-per-letter Approach	36
Table 3.7. Item Analysis.....	39
Table 3.8. Number of participants in each proficiency group and number of tests for each group.....	42
Table 3.9. Demographic Information on the Participants (Language Teachers)	43
Table 3.10. Demographic information on the Participants (Language Learners).....	44
Table 4.1. Demographic information on the judges	50
Table 4.2. Reliability of RFs Test	51
Table 4.3. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient among Judges' ratings	52
Table 4.4. Cronbach's alpha (Coefficient Alpha) of Judges' Ratings.....	52
Table 4.5. Familiarity of Iranian EFL Learners with RFs on SL	53
Table 4.6. Familiarity of Advanced Iranian EFL Learners with RFs on SL	54
Table 4.8 Basic statistics for the scores of participants on reduced forms listening test.....	54
Table 4.9 Group Statistics	55
Table 4.10 Independent-samples t-test.....	55

List of Figures

Contents	Page
Figure 4.1 Attitudes toward RFs	59
Figure 4.2 Problems in the implementation of RFS	64

ALM = Audio Lingual Method
ANOVA = Analysis Of Variance
EET= English teachers who spoke English as their L1
EFL = English as a Foreign Language
ESL =English as a Second Language
GLC =General Listening Comprehension
GTM = Grammar Translation Method
IELTS = the International English Language Testing System
IGT = the Integrative Grammar Test
KET = English teachers that spoke Korean as L1
L1= First Language
L2 = Second Language
M. A. = Master of Arts
NLS = Natural Spoken Language
PBT = Paper-based Test
Ph. D. = Doctor of Philosophy
RFs = Reduced Forms
SD = Standard Deviation
SLA = Second Language Acquisition
SPSS = Statistical Packages for Social Sciences
SVE = the Sandhi-Variation Exercise
TEFL = Teaching English as a Foreign Language
TOEFL = Test of English as a Foreign Language

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. General background

Language teaching has developed since the time of traditional methods like GTM. According to Rosa (2002), when approaches such as GTM and ALM came under attack, language teaching was viewed as a more communicative process with an emphasis on meaningful and authentic materials as the most effective way to teach a language. Despite this new emphasis on authenticity and using language communicatively, language learners still face difficulties understanding native speakers' natural conversations.

In recent years, a number of studies have been conducted on listening comprehension processes, and specifically on teaching listening comprehension. In general, there are two processes involved in listening comprehension: “bottom-up” and “top-down”. Bottom-up processing refers to decoding the sounds of a language into words, clauses, sentences, etc. It also refers to using one's knowledge of grammatical or syntactic rules to arrive at meaning. However, top-down processing has to do with using previous knowledge of a situation, context, or topic to interpret meaning (Morley, 2007). That is, we use our previous knowledge and experience to anticipate, predict, and infer meanings.

Nowadays, listening comprehension classes deal with helping language learners ameliorate top-down skills by providing them with an opportunity to perform tasks in recognizing relevant information only. In

order to help language learners tackle the tasks more successfully, teachers mostly define the task, speakers, situation, and topic. In addition, teachers give their students a list of unknown words that they might face before doing the main task. However, in spite of all these provisions, understanding spoken language is disappointing for most students. Researchers ascribe this problem to the lack of enough attention to the phonological characteristics of informal speech. There is general agreement that reduced forms are a main source of this problem. Students do not recognize words they know while listening (Chen, 2002; Goh, 2000). Moreover, Sun (2002) stated that students are not able to segment speech, which makes listening difficult.

The problem is further aggravated in EFL contexts since most of teachers are non-native. Students are taught grammar and vocabulary, and practice conversations to learn a new language. Language teachers speak clearly and provide listening materials that are full of clearly pronounced speech (Rosa, 2002).

As Rosa (2002) states, language learners develop their listening and speaking skills based on this adapted English speaking style. On the contrary, when they face natural spoken language, speak with native speakers or listen to real-life English in movies and news, they discover that native speakers speak quite differently from the way they have learned language in their classrooms. In other words, native speakers seem to speak fast while EFL students are unable to recognize word boundaries, words, and phrases. Ur (1987, p. 10) points out, "students who do not receive instruction or exposure to this type of real, naturally occurring language, are going to have a very rude awakening when they try to understand native speech in natural communicative situation."

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Reduced forms are considered as one of the aspects making listening comprehension difficult since most of students' previous learning experiences are through exposure to "formal textbooks" which have no resemblance to natural spoken language (Brown, 2004, p. 2). The English language is considered as a foreign language in Iran, and most of Iranian language teachers are not native English speakers. Iranian English teachers' emphasis is mainly on teaching grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, they frequently try to use articulated language so as to convey information more completely.

However, reduced forms play an important role in listening comprehension. Native speakers speak in a way in which words seem joined together while Iranian language instructors speak clearly. Moreover, they adapt their speech in phonology, lexis, syntax, and discourse to get the message across to their students. Students also adjust their listening and teaching skills based on the way in which language has been presented to them.

Brown (2006) points out, "students who come from English learning backgrounds in which they got used to slow speech are often shocked when they find themselves in a situation in which native speakers are talking to each other" (p. 6). Even advanced EFL students have problem in interpreting natural spoken language since they have learnt their English through their eyes. EFL learners try to understand each sound precisely while native speaker instead of focusing on their output, focus on the message.

It is important for students to learn to apply reduced forms instead of clearly enunciating words in their speaking because their speaking sounds overformal and sometimes stilted. Language learners learn English "through the eye" (Steele, 2005, p. 1); therefore, they face difficulty in

understanding natural spoken English by native speakers who do not check their output. Students try to enunciate every sound precisely while for native speakers this way of speaking is only a stylistic device. Steele (2005) puts, for native speakers, articulatory precision is a stylistic device, a conscious choice if they want to emphasize a point, is insistent or threatening. In normal social interaction though this is not usually the case and articulatory imprecision is the more natural and functional option.

Therefore, according to the above mentioned reasons, the present researcher intended to examine the familiarity of Iranian EFL learners with reduced forms, and the effect of their proficiency level on their familiarity with these forms in listening comprehension. The study sought to delve into teachers' and learners' point of views concerning the effect of reduced forms on listening comprehension of advanced and intermediate level learners to find out whether these forms should be taught and to further explore the problems they face in teaching and learning these forms.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The present study is significant in that it is one of the first attempts to identify learners' familiarity with reduced forms, the effect of their proficiency level on their familiarity with these forms, the attitudes of EFL teachers and learners toward this significant aspect of language teaching, i.e. reduced forms, and its role in the listening comprehension of English learners. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this issue has not been investigated in Iran in spite of the fact that researchers have long attested to its importance in listening comprehension. The results of the study are of benefit to material developers and syllabus designers. It helps them come up with appropriate tasks and materials for teaching reduced forms in English classrooms so that learners can better understand how native speakers really speak the language. The findings are also expected to be of

great help to language teachers and test developers to teach and test this very important aspect of the target language. In addition, the development of this particular test on reduced forms for the first time, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, is also a point of significance.

1.4 Aims and Objectives

This study aimed to determine how familiar EFL learners were with reduced forms in spoken language. The study also ascertained the effect of EFL learners' proficiency level on their familiarity with reduced forms in listening comprehension.

In the second phase of the study, to explicate the current situation of EFL classrooms regarding reduced forms, English teachers' and learners' attitudes toward reduced forms were investigated. The possible difficulties facing English teachers and learners to teach and learn reduced forms were also identified. Thus, the following research questions were posited in this study:

1. How familiar are Iranian EFL learners with reduced forms in spoken English?
2. What is the effect of EFL learners' proficiency level on their familiarity with reduced forms in listening comprehension?
3. What are the EFL teachers' and learners' perspectives on the role of reduced forms in listening comprehension and teachers' instruction?
4. What problems do EFL teachers face with respect to the instruction of reduced forms?
5. What problems do EFL learners face in learning reduced forms?

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

Iranian EFL Learners' Familiarity: It is the close acquaintance with or knowledge of Iranian English learners as a Foreign Language.

Reduced forms: Reduced forms are the spontaneous pronunciation changes in adjacent words or sounds spoken at a natural speed (Weinstein, 2001).

Spoken English: English language transmitted through a conventional system of sounds is called spoken English.

Proficiency level: A good level of ability, skill, etc. deriving from practice and familiarity is called proficiency level. Proficiency is a coherent orchestration of discrete elements, such as vocabulary, discourse structure, and gestures to communicate meaning in a special context (Canales, 1994, p. 60).

Teachers' and Learners' Perspectives: The state of teachers' and learners' ideas, the facts known to them, etc., for the purpose of having a meaningful interrelationship is called their perspectives. Perspectives are opinions, beliefs, or ways responding regarding some sets of problems (Johnson & Johnson, 1998).

1.6 Outline of the Study

This study is organized and presented in five chapters. Details of each chapter are as follows:

Chapter Two includes a review of literature and theoretical viewpoints on the subject, which offers a picture of the works carried out on the subject of the study. Conclusions are drawn at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Three demonstrates the method adopted in the study. It provides a detailed account of the participants, design, instrumentation, standardization procedures of the instruments, data collection procedures, and the techniques employed in the analysis of the data.

Chapter Four reports the results of the data analysis. It further interprets these results and discusses them in light of the related literature.

Chapter Five concludes the study by summarizing the major findings of the present study and their implications. Limitations faced in conducting the study are explained and recommendations for further research are presented.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher presents a review of the most relevant literature concerning reduced forms. Therefore, in this review, theoretical and cognitive processes involved in the listening comprehension specifically reduced forms will be discussed.

2.2 Theoretical and Empirical Viewpoints on Reduced Forms

Brown and Hilferty (1986) were apparently the first to use the term *reduced forms* while other researchers like Mittere and McQueen (2009) apply the term "continuous speech" interchangeably with reduced forms (p. 244). They state that continuous speech refers to the noncanonical pronunciation of words. Reduction, assimilation, and deletion are different aspects of continuous speech. Mittere and McQueen (2009) added that reduced forms occur during the speech production, and that they change the realization of words. On the other hand, other researchers used the term "connected speech" to refer to the same phenomenon (Celc-Murcia, 2010; Masahiro, 2012; Mittere & McQueen, 2009). As Celc-Murcia (2010) pointed out, "connected speech is a combinatory articulatory phenomenon in which words are not pronounced in isolation but run together" (p. 163).

In an EFL setting like Iran, most learners encounter problems in listening comprehension due to little exposure to the natural language and the inefficacy of instruction they have received. In spite of the claim of