
THE PRODUCTION OF WEAK FORMS OF ENGLISH FUNCTION WORDS AND THE TRAINING EFFECTS ON ESL LEARNERS IN CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT: *This study set out to investigate the practical use of weak forms by ESL learners and to assess the extent to which they can respond to explicit teachings on this phonological aspect. From observation, the strong form of English function words features prominently in the speech productions of the population under study as opposed to the weak form. The use of all- strong- form has negative consequences on their performances. It is therefore imperative to find out whether the improper use of this phonological feature can be dealt with, and the extent to which learners can respond to explicit instructions on the aspect. The investigation targeted 20 randomly selected subjects in Lower and Upper Sixth Arts of Government Bilingual High School Maroua, Far North Region of Cameroon. They were subjected to a pre- and post-teaching reading and listening test. The analysis of data supported by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, in the pre-teaching test revealed that respondents lack both theoretical and practical knowledge on the concept of weak and strong forms. However, results from the post-teaching test revealed that the informants' performances improved significantly: they could identify and produce the right situation of occurrence of weak and strong forms in English words. This is an indication that despite the difficulties imposed by the differences between the phonological systems of their L1 and English language, learners can perform better if they are well drilled on the use of this phonological feature.*

KEYWORDS: weak forms, strong forms, stress, function words, content words

INTRODUCTION

English language spreads across the globe at the expense of its originality. One area greatly affected is pronunciation. This partly accounts for the non-native speaker varieties around the world. Kachru (1995) identifies three categories of English language users and classifies them as; The Inner, the Outer and the Expanding circles. He observes that, within these circles, some of the original and standard features of English are disappearing though it has official status. ESL and EFL learners fall within the Outer and Expanding circles. Their speech is often generally characterised by English pronunciation problems. This observation holds true for Cameroon where English is used as a second/foreign language with an official status. Research shows that the situation is more complex due to the rising presence of two varieties. The first variety referred to as Cameroon English (CamE) (Simo Bobda 2010, 1994, 1986; Simo Bobda and Chumbow 1999, Kouega 2000, 1991; Ebot 1999), is spoken by English-Speaking Cameroonians. The second variety referred to as Cameroon Francophone English (CamFE)

(Safotso 2001, 2006; Kouega 2008) an appellation which Safotso (2012) considers to be more appropriate as opposed to Kouega's Francophone English (FrancoE), is spoken by French-speaking Cameroonians. English is a colonial heritage of Cameroonians. The adoption of this language was followed by an adaptation to the use of the non-native speakers. Some of the features and aspects of the language are tamed by the genius of the local languages which are more than 250 (Ethnologue 2000). This adaptation is characterised by the drop, addition or modification of some vital phonological features of English. (Safotso, 2012).

Weak and strong forms¹ are among the phonological features that are linked to English pronunciation problems faced by ESL/EFL learners in Cameroon. From observation, it could be noticed that the population under study use only strong forms, thus having an impact on their spoken English. This phenomenon is due to some reasons; first, the learners do not have any contact with native speakers. Second, their syllabi and materials on English speech do not address these aspects. Third, the ESL teachers in Cameroon ignore some phonological aspects and do not 'like' handling them in their teachings. Not only do the teachers ignore such vital aspects of English language, but also do not use them in their daily conversions in classrooms. (Tize and Garga, 2020)

The above situations predispose ESL learners to the use of all-strong-forms. The inappropriate use of strong forms impacts the speech in two dimensions: phonologically and semantically. When a speaker uses only strong forms in his/her speech, the utterances become full of tense vowels which disrupts the rhythm of the language. The speech loses its musicality and the speaker his/her listener. Semantically speaking, the all-strong-form use in speech mares its intelligibility.

Reduction in English speech is a common and necessary process. It saves energy in speech and leads to economy in sound production. Phonological efficiency in speech is required during conversation with speakers of English from countries considered to be of the Inner Circle to avoid frustrations and misunderstandings.

In a stress-timed language such as English, stresses occur at regular intervals. The words which are most important for communication of the message, that is, nouns, main verbs, adjectives and adverbs, are normally stressed in connected speech. Function words such as auxiliary verbs, modals, conjunctions, pronouns, articles, linkers and prepositions are not usually stressed, and are reduced to keep the stress pattern regular. Weak forms are syllable sounds that become unstressed in connected speech and are often then pronounced as a **schwa**. Structural words are often pronounced in their weak forms, since they do not carry the main content, and are therefore not normally **stressed**. Learners can find them difficult to hear and this interferes with understanding. Counting the number of words in a sentence, or sentence

¹ The alternation between weak and strong forms is closely related to the notion of rhythm: strong forms correspond to forms of function words when they have prominent position in the sentence while weak forms are used when there is no emphasis on auxiliaries, articles, conjunctions, pronouns and prepositions. This causes these forms to appear in their reduced shapes. Simo Bobda (2008 p 179).

dictations can help raise awareness of weak forms. The weak forms are by far more frequent than the strong forms in formal, semi-formal, and informal speech. The strong form is the stressed pronunciation which occurs in some rare instances; the following environments usually require the use of strong forms as stated by Bobda & Mbangwana (2008) and Roach (1983, 1991):

- when in isolation, as in: *Who?* /hu:/;
- when being quoted, as in: *she said "of", not "off"* /ɒv/ not/ɒf/;
- at the end of a phrase or sentence, as in: *What are you looking for?* /fɔ:/;
- as the first of two consecutive auxiliary verbs without a full verb, as in: *would have liked* /wɒd/;
- in coordination, as in: *he travels to and from Edinburg* /tu:/, /frɒm/;
- in contrasts, as in: *a present from Clarkson, not for Clarkson*/frɒm/, /fɔ:/;
- when used to emphasize a particular aspect of the message, as in: *he is the wanted man*/ði:/.

Spoken English owes its rhythm and to an extent its intelligibility to the appropriate combination of these two forms of pronunciation. The use of weak forms of the function word is also at the heart of connected and speech. They occur in formal, semi-formal and informal speech. Contrarily to function words, lexical words are always stressed in speech. Curiously, ESL learners stress both function and lexical words in their spoken English, making them sound unnatural (Roach, 1983, 1991; Bobda & Mbangwana, 2008). An English surfeit with strong vowels can make native speakers bored (Bobda & Mbangwana, 2008); and consequently, frustration can overcome the speaker in turn due to his/her unintelligibility. For one to understand and be understood in English as an international language, the correct use of the stressed and unstressed forms is necessary. Thus, teaching these concepts is indispensable when learners do not have opportunities to acquire them otherwise. Learning to listen and speak connected speech is necessary for non-native English speakers (Brown & Kondo, 2006; Jenkins, 2000, 2004; Brown, 1977). Roach equally shares this idea as he thinks that the teaching of aspects of connected speech can help ESL learners improve their spoken English. This research is motivated by the desire to understand how ESL learners employ this aspect in their productions and how they can respond to its teaching. Before collection and analysis of data, the main assumption was that the learners know and use only strong forms and exposition to the weak forms can reverse the tendencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A fairly significant proportion of researchers have investigated on aspects of connected speech in general and weak forms in particular. Most of these investigations are carried out on non-native speakers of English. The positive response to the teaching of weak forms recorded among learners goes in line with the wide claim in the literature of teaching pronunciation that EFL/ESL learners can improve their speech production and perception after teachings and/or exposure.

Sanchez (2019) writing on the teaching of reduced forms established that Japanese ESL learners' difficulties in pronouncing function words can be overcome through listening and singing of songs as well as explicit teaching and gamification. In a similar study, Azi'abi (2017) exploring the Arab EFL learners' production of weak forms stated that it is widely believed amongst researchers that weak forms of English grammar words play essential roles in language acquisition and competent language use; and this is more specific to the acquisition of the phonology as a second language. From the perspective of EFL/ESL learners, the issue of weak forms of function words has been a systematic problem. He discovered that learners were not expected to use the unstressed pronunciation of the English grammar words thus attributing the all-strong-vowel use by the Arab EFL learners to the fact that teachers neither teach them nor use them in their daily use of English. His investigations show that Arab EFL teachers had a low performance in the production of weak forms. This causes a problem in the use of ESL/EFL.

Lacabex & Leccumberri (2018) investigated on the use of weak forms amongst Spanish EFL learners. They focused on the response of these ESL learners who have Spanish as their L1 to the instruction of the weak forms of function words. The subjects were made up of 34 Spanish English learners. After a specific pronunciation training on perception and production of weak forms (reading aloud and imitating), they reported instruction had a beneficial effect on the learners' production and perception of weak forms. Significant differences were also observed between the reading and the imitation task for the two experimental groups, always favouring imitative task for both the pre-test and post-test. A positive response to the teachings of weak forms was recorded amongst the Spanish EFL learners.

Gobway et al (2016) investigating on the mastery of English vowel reduction among EFL teachers in Italian high schools, established that there is a close relationship between gender, academic levels, working experience as a teacher and vowel reduction in derivatives and function words. Contrarily, Akinjobi (2009) used Yoruba native speakers as case study to prove that non-native speakers of English used strong forms in the expected position of weak forms, while the strong vowels from mother tongue were substituted for the weak sound schwa /ə/ which is the commonest sound found in the weak form of function words.

Underwood & Wallace (2012) studied the efficiency of instruction in reduced forms on the performance of low-proficiency EFL university situation. This was based on the observation that the presence of the reduced forms made the comprehensibility of the oral input for the non-native learners of English more difficult. As other literature in this research line suggested, the features of authentic speech pose some remarkable challenges to both ESF/ESL learners due to the scarcity or absence of appropriate materials in the curriculum. The students' inability to cope with natural English in international situation due to the inefficiency of the curriculum or the teaching process is what they termed 'disservice' to their students. After an instruction session, results showed that the participants' overall perception and production of the reduced forms had significantly improved to the extent that the sample of the Japanese learners could use, recognise and understand the reduced forms in peer conversation; and they suggested that

a longer and more intense training may have more consistent effects on the learners' performances. This can be generalised to their linguistic area and other EFLS/ESL settings. Besides, he suggested learners could also access the authentic English, containing the features of fast speech, in other sources like the Internet, media, music, and films, etc.

Literature on the study of weak forms in Cameroon is limited as at the time of this study. Tize & Garga (2020), motivated by the observation that weak and strong forms are absent in the lessons of secondary school learners in the far north region of Cameroon, embarked on a study of these aspects to determine their impact on learner's performances and to propose some solutions to the problem. Data collected through pre- and post-teaching tests revealed that learners lack both theoretical and practical knowledge on the concept of weak and strong forms.

Among the items that make up the discussion of Simo Bobda's (2008) Introduction to English speech, the notion of rhythm features prominently. He points out that weak and strong forms are closely related to the notion of rhythm. Simo Bobda (1994) and Safotso (2012), investigating on Cameroon English phonology (CamE) and Cameroon Francophone English (CamFE) respectively, both analyse some aspects of English pronunciation of English-speaking and French-speaking Cameroonians to show that this variety of New Englishes has stable features. Some of their major findings include the fact that although some features of these varieties of new Englishes are common to all Cameroonian learners/speakers of English as well as to many other world Englishes, there are some hallmarks proper to CamE and CamFE.

The importance of teaching English weak forms to ESL learners.

The proper use of weak forms is essential for the correct pronunciation of English. It is one of the most difficult features of English pronunciation for non-native learners to acquire. Foreign speakers generally have an almost irresistible tendency to use strong forms in their place. Laoubi (2010), as cited in Jones (1976).

It is possible to use strong forms only and some second language learners of English do this. Usually they can still be understood by other speakers of English so the question arises as to why is it important to learn how weak forms are used. Jones (1976) suggests that there are two main reasons to teach the weak forms to non-native speakers of English:

- Most native speakers of English find an 'all-strong-form' pronunciation unnatural and foreign sounding.
- The second and most important reason is that the speakers who are not familiar with the use of weak forms find it difficult to understand speakers who use weak forms. So, it becomes compulsory from a practical point of view to learn weak forms (Jones, 1976).

In dealing with the notion of weak forms and their importance in listening comprehension, it is inevitable to refer to aspects of spoken language, namely connected speech. This characteristic represents a big proportion of the difficulties which foreign learners get

overwhelmed while listening to naturally spoken English. As its name implies, words in connected speech are pronounced in chains without any noticeable gap between them as provided in the written language (Buck, 2001). Words overlap between one another and they are linked in many different ways that are referred to as ‘aspects of connected speech’. These include, but are not limited to, assimilation, linking, elision, juncture, and so forth. These are examples of how the pronunciation of individual words alter in spoken language. Foreign learners usually fail to break down chunks of utterances in connected speech (lexical segmentation), and find it difficult to recognize even the words that they already know. According to Lynch (2009), ‘The major problem in listening to connected speech is lexical segmentation, that is, recognizing where one word ends and the next one begins.’ This is partly due to the fact that the teaching of phonology is limited to drillings on single sounds. This is typical to the teaching of English phonetics to ESL learners in Cameroon.

METHOD

Having as aim to investigate the use of weak forms and to assess learners’ response to the teachings of this concept, the research consisted in testing, teaching, and testing to obtain facts that were used to analyse and draw conclusions. The study explores reading and listening activities to gather quantitative data. Some teaching and testing was carried out before and after the above activities for a period of six weeks. To elicit the data, twenty subjects; 14 from Lower Sixth Art (LSA) and 06 from Upper Sixth Art (USA) of G.B.H.S Maroua, were made to read a passage into a voice recorder. In the pre-teaching test, the performance of the reader with the highest number of strong forms for each function word was considered as the model, while in the post-teaching test, the reader who articulated more of the unstressed pronunciation of each function word was considered as the model. In the listening test, the subjects were made to listen to the sound track of a video wherein two native speakers; a male and a female are conversing and were requested to fill in the missing function words extracted from its transcripts on the test papers distributed. In both cases (Pre- and post-teaching tests), the occurrences were counted and converted into simple percentages in statistics tables, analysed and conclusions drawn based on the outcome.

Data analysis from the reading activity (pre-teaching test)

The data from this task was gathered by randomly selecting 20 (40%) of the overall informants to read a prepared text into a voice recorder. This was done to ensure that the specific language items under investigation would be produced by the subjects. This technique helps to sample their daily speech habits. However, the extraneous variable of naturalness was taken care of by designing the text in a manner that the respondents were not aware of the specific language items being investigated. The respondents’ outputs were transcribed and sorted out accordingly.

The data was analysed perpetually by counting the overall number of strong forms and weak forms occurrences of each function word in the students’ renditions of spoken English. The

items were converted to simple percentages and for each word, the variant with the highest percentage was taken as the model.

Table 1: Prepositions in unstressed positions in the passage

Prepositions	Weak form occurrences	R.P.	Weak form in the respondents' productions	Standard deviations in the respondents' productions
For	08	/fə/	/fə/0%	/fɔ:/0%
				/fɔ:r/ 100%
At	02	/ət/	/ət/0%	/æ/100%
Of	28	/əv/	/əv/0%	/bɒ/0%
				/ɒf/100%
To	16	/tə/	/tə/0%	/tu:/ 100%
From	04	/frəm/	/frəm/0%	/frɒm/ 100%

Based on the data collected, **For** in its first appearance is followed by a vowel sound, the determiner **a** here has an unstressed position and was expected to be produced as /fə/, but 100% of the subjects realised it as /fɔ:r/ in all the 08 instances of occurrence. **At** appears twice in the passage. None of the subjects could realise it as /ət/; 100% of them put its two occurrences in the strong form /æ/. **Of** appears twenty-eight (28) times in the passage but none of the subjects in no instance could give one of the standard pronunciations, that is, /bɒ/ (the strong form) or /əv/ (the weak form). All of them deviated and read it in all the instances as /ɒf/. **to** appears sixteen (16) times all in unstressed positions. All the respondents gave a 100% stressed pronunciation of it. **From** appears four times in the passage. The four instances of occurrences are unstressed, but all the subjects realised all the instances in the strong form.

Table 2: Conjunctions, particles and determiners in unstressed positions in the passage

Words	Weak form occurrences	R.P.	Weak forms in the subjects' productions	Standard deviations in the subjects' productions
And	30	/ən/ /ənd/	/ən/ 0% /ənd/0%	/æən/0%
				/æənd/100%
As	04	/əz/	/əz/0%	/æz/0%
				/æs/100%
That	04	/ ðæt/	/ ðæt/ 0%	/ ðæt/ 100%
A	12	/ə/	/ə/83.33%	/ə/83.33%
				/eɪ/16,66%
An	01	/ən/	/ən/0%	/æən/100%
The	43	/ ðə/	/ ðə/81.39%	/ði:/0%
				/ ðeɪ/ 18.6%

And appears thirty (30) times in the passage and was expected to be produced as /ən/ or /ənd/. But none of these variants of its weak form could be detected in all the performances of the learners. The subjects' realisation of **as**, which occurred four times in unstressed positions in the passage, deviated from the standard. All the twenty readers produced it as /æs/. None of the variants of its weak form (/əz/ or /æz/) could be found in their performances. Besides, the subjects' realisation of **that** were all strong forms. They all realised the four instances as / ðæt/.

The highest score for the production of the weak form of **a** (/ə/) is 83.33% and **a** as /eɪ/ was realised 16,66%. **An** appears once and none of the respondents realised it as /ən/. **the** appears forty-three (43) times in the passage. The highest realisation as / ðə/ is 81.39% and the highest deviation as / ðeɪ/ is 18.6%; as /ði:/ is 0%.

Table 3: Pronouns, modals, and auxiliary verbs in unstressed positions in the passage

Words	Weak form occurrences	R.P.	Weak forms in the subjects' productions	Standard deviations in the subjects' productions
Could	01	/kəd/	/kəd/ 0%	/kʊd/ 0%
				/kʊld/ 100%
Would	01	/wəd/	/wəd/ 0%	/wʊd/ 0%
				/wʊld/ 100%
Had	04	/həd/	/həd/ 0%	/hæd/100%
Have	01	/həv/	/həv/ 0%	/hæv/ 100%
Be	03	/bi/	/bi/ 0%	/bi:/ 100%
Were	02	/wə/	/wə/ 0%	/wɜː/ 0%
				/wer/ 100%
Was	07	/wəz/	/wəz/ 0%	/wɒz/ 71,43%
				/wæz/28,57%
He	05	/hi/	/hi/0%	/hi:/100%
Him	01	/him/	/him/100%	/ɪm/0%
His	15	/hə/	/həz/ 0%	/ɪz/0%
				/hɪz/ 100%

could and *would* each, has one occurrence in the passage; The learners deviated in the pronunciation of both words. Statistics gathered from the reading passage in the above table

shows that not only did they fail to produce the weak forms of the function words as expected, but also the silent /l/ was heard in their pronunciation, which is true to their daily speech habit.

Be and *were* respectively appear thrice and twice. The former was realised 100% as /bi:/ by all the readers in all the three instances. None of the subjects realised neither the first nor the second appearance of *were* as /wə/ which is the weak form or as /wɜːr:/, the strong form; hence they all deviated in their realisations in all the instances as /wer/. *Was* appears seven times in the text. The weak form realisation is 0% for all the respondents. The least deviation in the production of ‘was’ recorded as /wæz/ was 28.57%. The highest realisation in the strong form as /wɒz/ recorded 71.43%. For all the instances, *he*, *him*, and *his* were all realised in their strong forms in all the instances of appearance by all the respondents.

The notion of silent letters, though an aspect worth treating apart, is part of speech reduction and worth discussing here. It plays the same role as contraction, and deletion which are more frequent in informal speech (the most dominant register); therefore, the use of silent letters was normally expected in the respondents’ productions. Some standard deviations were also recorded in the reading of some function words through the insertion or substitution of some unexpected sounds in the realisations of some words. This exposes the vacuums that the learners had in the inputs in the teachings of English sounds in their previous classes. This can also suggest the learners’ inexperience in fast speech as an aspect of English speech.

Data analysis from the listening activity

This listening test was given in order to measure the learners’ ability to perceive the unstressed pronunciation forms of function words through a practical exercise. As such, a gap filling test was designed from the transcript of the sound track of video wherein a female (interviewee) and a male (the host TV journalist) are conversing. The task was to fill in the blank spaces with the function words that were removed as they follow the conversations. The number of function words they can jot down gives an idea about the challenges they face.

The table below shows that the test papers were administered to fifty subjects who returned them immediately after. Eight (08) out of thirty-four (34) from Lower Sixth did not return their papers. This leaves the total number of subjects who took part in the listening test to forty-two (42).

Table 4: Respondents' performances in focussed listening

Number of function words perceived	0-30 (retarded in listening)	31-50 (less than average in listening)	51-70 (fairly average in listening)	71-90 (Average listening)	91-104 (Advanced listening)	Total
Levels						
LSA	13	06	06	01	00	26
Percentage	30.95%	14.28%	14.28%	02.38%	00%	61.90%
USA	03	03	07	03	00	16
Percentage	07.14%	07.14%	16.66%	07.14%	00%	38.09%
Total	16	09	13	04	00	42
Total of percentages	38.09%	21.42%	30.95%	09.52%	00%	100%

A look at the above table quickly reveals that 38.09% of the subjects are retarded in listening; 21.42% are less than average, 30.95% are fairly average. An insignificant number of the informants are average in the listening activity (09.95%); none of the respondents could get all or most of the function words.

After the presentation of statistics for pre-teaching tests on the speaking and listening activities, the information that follows is a presentation and analysis of data from the tests which was gathered after teachings on the use of strong and weak forms.

Data analysis from the reading activity (post-teaching test)

It is imperative to highlight here that the procedure for the collection of data for the Pre-teaching test was strictly followed in the post-teaching test, while maintaining the same number of subjects. The highest occurrences of weak forms for each structural word in the reading of individual subjects were counted. These were converted into simple percentages and presented in the table as follows;

Table 5: Prepositions in unstressed positions in the passage (post-teaching test)

Prepositions	Weak form occurrences	R.P.	Weak forms the subjects' productions	Standard deviations in the subjects' productions
For	08	/fəʔ/	/fəʔ/75%	/fɔ:/25%
At	02	/ət/	/ət/ 100%	/æt/0%
Of	28	/əv/	/əv/71.42%	/ɒv/ 17.85%
				/ɒf/10.71%
To	16	/tə/	/tə/62.5%	/tu:/ 37.5%
From	04	/frəm/	/frəm/100%	/frɒm/ 0%

In the post-test reading activity, the highest production of *for* in its unstressed position is /fəʔ/ 75%. The same speaker produced 25% of the overall occurrences as /fɔ:/. There is a 100% production of 'at' as /ət/ which appears twice in the passage. *Of* which appears 28 times in the passage was pronounced as /əv/ 71.42%, which is the highest /ɒv/ 17.85%, /ɒf/ 10.71%, /ɒf/10.71%. The highest weak form production of *to* is 62.5%; *from* appears four (4) times in the passage and in all the four occurrences, the subjects rendered them as /frəm/ (100%) which is of course the highest production.

Table 6: Conjunctions, particles and determiners in unstressed positions in the Passage (Post-teaching test)

Words	Weak form occurrences	R.P.	Weak forms in the subjects' productions	Standard deviations in the subjects' productions
And	30	/ən/ /ənd/	/ənd/83.33%	/æn/0%
				/ænd/16.66%
As	04	/əz/	/əz/50%	/æz/0%
				/æs/50%
That	04	/ ðæt/	/ ðæt/ 50%	/ ðæt/ 50%
A	12	/ə/	/ə/100%	/eɪ/0%
An	01	/ən/	/ən/100%	/æn/0%
The	43	/ ðə/	/ ðə/93.02%	/ði:/0%
				/ ðeɪ/ 6,97%

And appears thirty (30) times in the passage and was produced as /ənd/ thus yielding 83.33% of the overall occurrences. **As** and **that** each appear four times and two instances of each of them (50%) were realised in the weak forms. **a** appears 12 times and the highest production in the unstressed form is 100%. **An** appears once and nearly all the informants picked its weak form pronunciation. **The** appears 43 times; the highest unstressed production as /ðə/ goes up to 93.02%. With some trials and errors, stopping and continuing, the informant deviated in some 06,97% as it was pronounced as /ðeɪ/.

Table 7: Pronouns, modals, and auxiliary verbs in unstressed positions in the passage (post-teaching test)

Words	Weak form occurrences	R.P.	Weak forms in the subjects' productions	Standard deviation in the subjects' productions
Could	01	/kəd/	/kəd/ 100%	/kʊd/ 0%
				/kʊld/ 0%
Would	01	/wəd/	/wəd/ 100%	/wʊd/ 0%
				/wʊld/ 0%
Had	04	/həd/	/həd/ 75%	/hæd/25%
Have	01	/həv/	/həv/ 100%	/hæv/0%
Be	03	/bɪ/	/bɪ/ 0%	/bi:/ 100%
Were	02	/wə/	/wə/ 100%	/wɜː/ 0%
				/wer/ 0%
Was	07	/wəz/	/wəz/ 71,43%	/wɒz/28,57%
He	05	/hi/	/hi/0%	/hi:/40%
Him	01	/ɪm/	/ɪm/0%	/hi:m/ 100%
His	15	/hə/	/həz/ 0%	/ɪz/0%
				/hɪz/ 100%

Could, *would*, *have*, and *him* each appear once in the passage. A majority of the subjects produced their weak forms. *Had* appears four (04) times and the highest production as /həd/ is 75%. *Be* appears thrice but none of the respondents could realise its unstressed form as /bɪ/. The two occurrences of *were* all produced as /wə/. The highest unstressed production of *was*

/wəz/ which occurs seven (07) times is 71.43%. *His* appears 15 times; its highest weak form production is 46.66%.

It should be noted that weak forms of some function words could not be found in all the subjects' productions. The words include: *be, him, his*. This can be attributed to some factors which include the diehard habits in their use of the items or the slight difference between the strong and weak forms of these structural words.

Generally, more weak forms had been recorded in the subjects' readings in the post-teaching test than in the pre-teaching test. Words with fewer occurrences were mostly realised 100% in their weak forms; those with high occurrences were realised in their unstressed forms in greater percentages. The weak forms of some few structural words ('be', 'he', and 'him') could not be realised by the subjects in the post-teaching test. This positive change in performance is the immediate impact of the drillings conducted on the articulations of the weak forms of the structural words when teaching on the target aspects of speech.

5.4. Data analysis from the listening activity (post-teaching test)

This task was given to the subjects again to assess how the drillings in the teaching process have trained their ears to perceive more weak forms of the function words. Instances of progress recorded here are compared with their performances in the pre-teaching-test.

Table 8: Subjects' listening performances (post-teaching test)

Number of function words perceived Levels	0-30 (retarded in listening)	31-50 (below average in listening)	51-70 (fairly average in listening)	71-90 (Average in listening)	91-106 (Advanced in listening)	Total
LSA	04	06	01	13	02	26
Percentage	09.52%	14.28%	02.38%	30.95%	04.76%	61.90%
USA	00	00	01	12	03	16
Percentage	00%	00%	02.38%	28.57%	07.14%	38.09%
Total	04	06	02	25	05	42
Total of percentages	09.52%	14%	04.76%	59.52%	11.90%	100%

The table above shows that there are significant changes recorded in post-test listening performances. 10 LSA learners are below the average, one is average and two are advanced

where there was none before. In the USA, no student is below the average; one is average and 12 are above the average. Three (03) have advanced in listening.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Encounter with the natural speech was necessary for learners to measure their personal abilities and assess the underlying challenges in following the speech of native speakers. It turned their ignorance into awareness of the challenges, intricacies, and necessities of listening and producing connected speeches wherein vowel reduction brings unstressed forms. These practical assignments enabled to measure the students' aural and oral speech production through a gap filling test and a reading test. In the listening test, they were asked to listen and fill in the missing function words. This exercise revealed the existence of some difficulties by learners to follow the native speakers' speech. In the reading passage most of the learners read the majority of the function words in their strong forms except 'the' and 'a' which were read in their weak forms to satisfactory percentages (81.39% and 83.33% respectively).

In the post-teaching tests, function words with lower occurrence in the passage were pronounced in their weak forms in all the instances of appearance. The ones with higher occurrences were pronounced in their weak forms in most instances of occurrence. Therefore, the gap between the results of pre-teaching and post-teaching tests marks a significant progress in the students' performances. Precisely, the average percentage of weak form production in the pre-teaching test stands at 12.48%, as opposed to the post teaching test which stands at 71.93%. Scholars acknowledge that non-native learners face a lot of difficulties in following the native speakers' speech since they expect the use of strong forms like they do. But findings show that the aspects can be acquired by the learners as their speech productions show vowel reduction which marks the integration of weak forms. In the listening activity, their listening performances in post-teaching test were far better than the ones in the pre-teaching test.

Drillings are one of the commonly used techniques in teaching phonological points. Looking at the nature of concepts under investigation, drillings were indispensable to train the learners ears and enhance their oral productions. These practices enhanced the learners' performances as indicated by the post-teaching test result. The positive response of the subjects to the drillings on the articulation of schwa /ə/ predicts the practical acquisition of economy in speech which is central to the formation and/or production of weak forms. The awareness about the abundance of schwa can help to remedy the situation wherein ESL learners transfer their trainings in their mother tongues into the target language or second language (TL/SL). This adds more supporting evidence to the fact that the L1 prevents ESL learners from producing weak forms and to say unequivocally that it is the L1-L2 differences that imposes the challenges on them en route to the acquisition of the phonology of English language. Besides, it is the lack of teachings to train them on the use of the concepts that keeps the learners in the undesired situation.

CONCLUSION

The results recorded in this research proved the possibility of acquiring weak forms by ESL in Cameroon. The results are the immediate impacts of the teachings on the performances of the learners. Amongst some of the tangible changes in the learners oral productions are; vowel reduction, use of schwa, and elision which are all part of the formation of unstressed forms. The pertinence of this research lies in its aim at finding out the phonological flaws of the spoken English of the target population and suggesting some ways in which they can improve. Its findings have proved the learnability of the aspects of weak forms by ESL learners. Knowing that the aspects of weak and strong forms, vowel reduction, sentence stress, and rhythm were not integrated in learners' lessons on speech, there is need to integrate and implement them in classroom teachings for better usage. These neglected features make non-native learners' English speech void of the right rhythm. This differentiates both ESL and EFL learners' English from the native speakers' usage. Mastering them does not only help to be fluent and sound native like, but also help them to have a respectable level of the spoken language which can sustain the listeners' attention in a conversation. Teaching weak forms to non-native learners is challenging and apparently complex. But the results obtained after teachings in one month and a half showed a significant change and reverse of tendency in the students' performances in this study. All the educational stake holders are recommended to take necessary measures and actions for the integration of this aspect of spoken English in the programme for a better use of the language among ESL learners in Cameroon.

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