

Improper Pronunciation of the Vowel /ə/ in Trisyllabic Words by Kurdish EFL Learners

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Abstract

Identifying the pronunciation of the vowel schwa /ə/ within English words, in particular trisyllabic words, seems entirely confusing and difficult because of the fact that there are no explicit phonetic or phonological manifestations which determine where to exactly pronounce this vowel. Consequently, identifying where to pronounce /ə/ within trisyllabic words has been an issue of confusion and overlapping to learners, and, in particular, Kurdish EFL learners. The current paper investigates the improper pronunciation of /ə/ in such words by 30 university learners majoring English as a foreign language. Those learners are instructed to read a list of words which contain 30 trisyllabic words containing the vowel /ə/ in different syllables and are also instructed to transcribe each. The study explicitly demonstrates that Kurdish learners improperly and, to a certain extent, excessively replace this vowel with other vowels whether simple or diphthongs. The improper replacement is mainly the result of specific phonological attributes including the improper estimation of the qualities of the vowels within the syllables of the trisyllabic words and the improper reliance on the spelling and other related attributes.

Keywords: pronunciation, vowel, schwa /ə/, syllable, trisyllabic words, improper pronunciation

المخلص

أن معرفة اللفظ الصحيح لصوت العلة (ə) في كلمات اللغة الانجليزية و على وجه الخصوص في الكلمات ذات المقاطع الثلاث يشكل صعوبة بالغة و ذلك لعدم وجود اثباتات صوتية مخرجية تدل على وجوب تلفظ هذا الصوت. و عليه فان المعرفة الحثيئة لهذا الصوت في الكلمات ذات المقاطع الثلاثة كان احد الصعوبات الصوتية للمتعلمين و بالتحديد للمتعلمين الاكراد الدارسين اللغة الانجليزية لغة اجنبية. يُحقق البحث الحالي في اسباب اللفظ الغير المناسب لهذا الصوت في مثل هذه الكلمات لثلاثين طالبا جامعيا. و تتركز منهجية البحث على اعطاء هؤلاء الطلبة قائمة تتضمن هذه الكلمات التي يتوزع فيها هذا الصوت في كل من المقطع الاول و الثاني و الثالث حيث يتم قراءتها من قبلهم و كذلك فان عليهم كتابة الوصف الصوتي لكل منها. تبين الدراسة ان الطلبة الاكراد لا يستطيعون لفظ هذا الصوت بصورة مناسبة و في بعض الاحيان فانهم يستبدلونه بصوات علة اخرى غير مناسبة. و هذا بسبب عدم ادراكهم بنوعية هذا الصوت المهم و الاعتماد على الاحرف و ليس على الاصوات مما يشكل خلا واضحا في طريقة لفظ هذا الصوت.

الكلمات الرئيسية: التلفظ ، صوت العلة، /ə/، المقطع الصوتي، كلمات المقاطع الثلاثة، التلفظ غير المناسب

پوخته

ناسینهوه و دهستنیشانکردنی چوښتی گوگردنی څاؤلی شوا /ا/ له نیو وشه ی نینگلیزیدا و به تاییه ت وشه سی برګه ییبه کاندای کاریکی قورس و سرلیش یوینه ره، چونکه هیچ نیشانه یه کی فوڼه تیکی یان فوڼولوژی ناشکرا نیه بو دیاریکردنی چوښتی گوگردنی نه و څاؤله. بویه دهستنیشانکردنی شوینی گوگردنی نه و څاؤله له نیو وشه سی برګه ییبه کاندای بابه تیکی سهخته و له گهل گرفتت تر دای به یه کدا چونی زوره به تاییه تیش بو خویندکارانی کورد که زمانی نینگلیزی وه که زمانی بیانی دهوینن. نه م توپوژینه وه یه به هله گوگردنی څاؤلی شوا /ا/ ده خاته به رباس له لایه ن 30 خویندکاری زانکو که زمانی نینگلیزی وه که زمانی بیانی دهوینن. نه م خویندکارانه ناراسته ده کرین که ییستیک وشه بخویننه وه که 30 دانه وشه سی برګه یی له خوده گریت و هه ریه که یان څاؤلی شوا-ی تیدایه له شوینی جیاجیادا و پاشان شیوه ی فوڼه تیکیان بو بنوسن. توپوژینه وه که به روونی نه وه دهرده خات که فیرخووانی کورد به هله و تا نه ندازه یه کیش به زیاده روپی نه م څاؤلی شوا- یه لاده بن و څاؤلی تر یان دیفسونگی له شوین داده نین. نه م به هله دانان و نالوگورکردنه به پله ی یه که م له نه نجامی هه ندی تاییه تمه ندی فوڼولوژی یه وه له وانه ش به هله خه ملاندنی تاییه تمه ندی څاؤله کانی نیو برګه کانی وشه سی برګه ییبه کان و به هله پشت به ستن به سپیلینگ و هه ندی تاییه تمه ندی تره وه.

کلپه وشه کان: گوگردن، څاؤل، شوا، برګه، وشه سی برګه ییبه کان، هه له گوگردن

1. Introduction

Pronunciation might be considered as an essential part when learning a foreign language and, thus, it promotes the learners' proficiency as far as using the target language is concerned. An efficient and clear pronunciation, not at all like a native one, would facilitate the process of learning in general and the opposite would lead to the other way around (Gilakjani, 2012). After all, the most significant purpose of learning a language, as Hamer (2001) emphasizes, is to enable learners to have an acceptable amount of proficiency of that language, and this proficiency is reflected by the fact that learners are capable of communicating efficiently. Hence, being an essential part of the process of learning, communication means to be able to understand and to be reasonably understood and this indeed requires an efficient and acceptable use of pronunciation of the words of that language. Consequently, an efficient and acceptable communication would be entirely subject to an efficient and, at least, acceptable pronunciation, without which, language, metaphorically speaking, would struggle to get peace but would finally get nothing but struggle. This view is clarified by Yates (2002, p.1) when he states that "learners with good pronunciation in English are more likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, whereas learners whose pronunciations are difficult to understand will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect". As, Almutalabi (2018, p. 17) stated that "It is beyond dispute an axiomatic manifestation that pronunciation is the essential vehicle for communication that learners should highly take into consideration if an efficient and successful communication is the goal".

As far as the main concern of the current paper, only vowels are taken into consideration. Phonetically, vowels are "sounds articulated without a complete closure in the mouth or a degree of narrowing which would produce audible friction; the air escapes evenly over the center of the tongue" (Crystal, 2008, p. 517). Additionally, vowels are classified in accordance with other qualities as their inherent features exhibit, in other words, they are to be distinguished or even compared according to (a) the position of the lips – whether rounded, spread, or neutral; (b) the part of the tongue raised, and the height to which it moves. Relatively slight movements of the tongue produce quite distinct auditory differences in vowel (or vocalic) quality. Because it is very difficult to see or feel these movements, classification of vowels is usually carried out using acoustic or auditory criteria, supplemented by details of lip position (Roach, 2009). What this illustration, concerning the classifications of vowels, indicates is that vowels are closely produced since a slight movement of the tongue may result in pronouncing different vowels as with the words "pit, pet, pat, pot, put". Being in a range of articulatory closeness, a difficulty may arise due to the existence of slight difference between a vowel and another.

Ladefoged and Johnson (2010, p. 87) point to another problem concerning acquiring vowels efficiently which is "There are no distinct boundaries between one type of vowel and another". The case is entirely different, just to signify the learning of vowels, when talking about consonants where the classification is by far clearer and more reliable in being entirely distinct. To raise the significance and difficulty of vowels in learning English language a little bit more, it is clearly noticeable that a large number of words contain more than one vowel but the pronunciation might be totally different relying on specific phonetic and phonological estimations. For example, the initial sounds of the words 'attend' and 'arrow' are pronounced /ə/ and /æ/ respectively (Oxford, 2010). The most important question to posit at this level of analysis is how to identify that there is a difference in the pronunciation. Furthermore, when learners academically master rules of pronunciation, would it suffice and be applicable to all instances they may encounter? The study aims at investigating whether Kurdish learners are capable of identifying efficiently the pronunciation of the vowel /ə/ in such types of words; i.e. words which contain more than one vowel, trisyllabic words or whether they encounter specific difficulties.

2. Literature review

Whenever a reference is made to words containing more than one vowel, it is beyond dispute a prerequisite to introduce syllables since the vowel forms the center of a syllable along with other optional consonants which may appear with. In other words, a syllable must contain a vowel and/ or a consonant (s) in most cases. This vowel is called the peak, as an obligatory element,

which may be preceded or followed by non-obligatory elements; an onset and a coda respectively (Roach, 2009). So in a word like 'sharpen', there are three syllables since there are two vowels /ɑ:/ and /ə/. Accordingly, there are words which contain three syllables often termed trisyllabic words trisyllable referring to "a unit, typically a word, consisting of three syllables, such as consequence and happily" (Crystal, 2008, p. 497).

Recalling the fact that vowels are close in the way they are produced and the sameness of production results into difficulty, it is worth mentioning that a large number of words of this syllable structure contain the vowel /ə/ which is perhaps the widely found vowel in many English words (Roach, 2009). A closer and a detailed description of this sound is needed for a better understanding of how and when to pronounce it efficiently and exactly. Recalling the fact of the way vowels are classified, Roach (2009) classified vowels according to certain variables including that of tongue position (or movement) when a vowel is produced clarifying that a vowel is described according to the distance between the tongue and the roof of the mouth (called the palate). In such classification, vowels are either close, mid or open. But in the case of schwa, which makes it rather an overlapping vowel, the tongue is "between the positions half-open and half-close" (Cleghorn and Rugg, 2011, p. 350). In addition, it is a central vowel which entails that when it is produced the central part of the tongue is raised towards the roof of the mouth (McMahon, 2002). This vowel is indeed the most common sound in English language and, hypothetically, identifying where to exactly pronounce it, in which syllable, assists to a large extent spoken English sounds more spontaneous and fluent. Gerst and Peralejo (2011) lists a number of characteristics which emphasize its distinguished significance in the pronunciation of words among which is the fact that, as stressed by most phoneticians, it is the most collective sound in English which is only found in weak unstressed syllables. The most interesting point that they clarify is that this particular vowel is a neutral vowel which could be pronounced when the vowel letters (a, e, i or u) or it can be a combination of vowels. This is by far the crucial fact about this sound; how to identify that this vowel letter is to be pronounced /ə/ particularly in trisyllabic words. To get a better estimation of this significant point, it is worthy to consider, for example, the two words 'atmosphere' and 'attendance' which are made up of three syllables relying on the phonological analysis of the presence of a peak (a vowel). What might cause confusion is that the initial sounds of the two words are different: the first having a simple short vowel /æ/ whereas the other /ə/. Orthographically, they are identical and this is the difficulty with identifying the pronunciation of such sound; the letter 'a' is pronounced as /æ/ in the first word and as /ə/ in the second. Taking into consideration the phonetic behavior of sounds to arrive at a plausible justification of distinguishing the two pronunciations, it is clear that, in the two cited words, the two vowels are followed by a plosive

consonant /t/. As far as the phonological view is concerned, the two words contain three syllables belonging to the same grammatical category (both are nouns) which according to Roach (2009) may influence the use of deciding which syllable is stressed. This is not at all confined to the two words cited; there are a lot of instances of this sort. Indeed, since this vowel is unstressed and described as a weak vowel, its perception in words might be of certain difficulty as it is pronounced quickly and softly. Moreover, Non-native English speakers tend to pronounce unstressed vowels as full vowels when they should be pronounced as schwa and this definitely results into improper pronunciation of the words. In addition, trisyllabic words vary as far as the occurrence of this weak vowel is concerned.

For example, the second syllable of the adjective 'interesting' contains /ə/ manifested by the letter 'e' occurring after 'r' whereas it occurs in the third syllable of the adjective 'intimate'. What can be clearly observed is that there are no orthographic explicit manifestations which show that this letter is to be pronounced /ə/ in addition to the fact that the same letter is sometimes pronounced /ə/ and sometimes other kinds of vowels. To reveal more about this crucial point practically, the following table can be considered, relying on British transcription only:

Table 1

Words Containing the Sound /ə/

Orthographic letter representations	The words	The transcription
a	<u>a</u> llow <u>a</u> nce	/əlaʊəns/
e	prom <u>e</u> nence	/prəˈmɪnəns/
o	com <u>o</u> sition	/kəmˈpəzɪʃn/
i	impos <u>i</u> ble	/ɪmpəˈsəbl/
u	s <u>u</u> pporter	/səˈpɔ:tə/

Examining deeply the cited words in the table would certainly results into generalizing the fact that this vowel has a variety of orthographic representations and this is certainly unfamiliar, and this raises the difficulty for EFL learners in general where it is entirely impossible to attach it to a specific orthographic representation. In other words, the difficulty for learners, including Kurdish EFL learners, springs from phonetic behaviour of schwa where many English written words have a variety of its representations and not fixed ones. In a number of related studies, it can be clearly demonstrated that this particular and important vowel arises a number of challenges and difficulties for EFL learners as that conducted by Geylanioglu and Dikilitaş (2011) on a number of Turkish EFL learners concerning the identification of pronouncing schwa. They state that the pronunciation

of this vowel seems to be quite inappropriate because students are fully unaware in which syllable or which letter should be pronounced so. The reason, as they claim, is that this vowel could be presented by different orthographic representation and this poses difficulty for students to recognize the schwa sound in the word pronunciation. Thus, schwa is confusing and problematic to learners because, in English, it can be represented by many vowel letters (or orthographic letter representation) and the learners do not know the sound combining rules or the phonotactics, (Avery and Ehrlich, 1992), whereas in some languages, pronunciation is exceedingly constant by giving one sound to one letter (Kenworthy, 1987). Moreover, the vowel schwa is considered a cause for interference and difficulty due to the fact that the native language of EFL learners does not have an exact equivalent of this vowel (Amer, 2012). It might be an explicit estimation; hypothetically, Kurdish EFL learners in particular, will have difficulty in mastering the proficiency of vowels especially those which do not have equivalence in their own native language. Consequently, learners may disregard, due to the attributes mentioned earlier, vowel variations when pronouncing English words and use the strategy of replacing them with sounds which do exist in their native language.

In general, though Kurdish learners may have a good amount of exposure to this sound, it is still challenging and confusing due to the fact that exposure for a certain period is not to be considered reliable for a future continuous competence. Simultaneously, this particular vowel is itself difficult due to its frequent occurrences, various representations and the delicacy of its articulation. For EFL learners, more and more is needed if this vowel is to be pronounced efficiently within words and in particular within trisyllabic words where it might influence the entire pronunciation of such words.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

In fulfilling the aim of the current study, 20 EFL learners majoring English as a foreign language at the Department of English/ Cihan University-Slemani were chosen to be the sample of the study. The sample contained 15 males and 15 females and was all at the third level of their education for the academic year 2018- 2019. The main reason behind choosing the third level is that they covered four semesters of phonetics and phonology in the first and second years so they were supposedly aware of English vowels, including the vowel schwa, syllables and other related aspects. While having the courses in phonetics and phonology in the two semesters, they tackled in detail syllable structure, stress placement, weak vowels and all of such materials were totally under the British accent (R.P and BBC) as far as the model recorded CDs and transcriptions are concerned.

Hence, they had enough exposure to the related field. The range ages of the learners were between 19- 26 years.

3.2. Materials

The main aim of the current study is to verify whether Kurdish EFL learners can identify the exact syllable which contains the vowel schwa in three syllable words or not. In other words, the paper seeks to verify whether those learners are phonetically and phonologically aware of where to exactly pronounce this vowel in trisyllabic words or not. Hence, a test is conducted which mainly included 30 trisyllabic words from (Oxford, 2010). The reason behind choosing this dictionary is that learners were highly exposed to British pronunciation and transcription which were the core study of the chosen learners. Further, those trisyllabic words were classified according to the positional occurrence of the vowel schwa. The first group, the first ten words, contains schwa in initial position, that is, in the first syllable. The second group contains this vowel in the second syllable and the third group in the third one. Although there are many words which contain schwa in more than one syllable within the same trisyllabic word, only the words which contained this vowel in one syllable are chosen. The words were also chosen with their counterpart transcriptions for the purpose of comparing them later to those made by the learners. The following table shows the chosen words as the material of the study.

Table 2

Trisyllabic Words Containing /ə/

/ə/ 1 st Syllable	Transcription	/ə/ 2 nd Syllable	Transcription	/ə/ 3 rd Syllable	Transcription
according	/əko:diŋ/	atmosphere	/ætməsfɪə/	prominent	/prəminənt/
amazing	/əmeiziŋ/	magazine	/mægəzi:n/	impossible	/ɪmpəsəbl/
astonish	/əstəniʃ/	monarchy	/mənəki/	intimate	/ɪntɪmət/
attractive	/ətræktɪv/	sensitive	/sensətɪv/	informant	/ɪnfɔ:mənt/
attorney	/ətɜ:ni/	analyse	/ænəlaɪz/	abductor	/æbdʌktə/
obedient	/əbi:diənt/	intellect	/ɪntələkt/	difficult	/dɪfɪkəlt/
obsessive	/əbsesɪv/	fabulist	/fæbjəlɪst/	confidence	/kɒnfɪdəns/
obliging	/ə'blaiɪdʒɪŋ/	saturate	/sætʃəreɪt/	dominance	/dɒmɪnəns/
offending	/əfendiŋ/	columnist	/kɒləmnɪst/	manageable	/mænɪdʒəbl/
oppressive	/əpresɪv/	impolite	/ɪmpəlaɪt/	insurgent	/ɪnsɜ:dʒənt/

3.3. Procedures

All the related steps of the test were conducted in the laboratory of the Department of English. The participants were given the list of the trisyllabic words so as to pronounce them one by one and all their readings were tape-recorded. To ensure the objectivity and reliability of the test, and thus ensuring an objective and reliable analysis, the participants were asked to transcribe immediately each word that they pronounce. The purpose was certainly to make sure where exactly they mispronounced the vowel /ə/ though all their pronunciations were recorded. Percentages of failure were calculated and each mispronunciation was given a separate percentage. All the improper pronunciations along with their percentages were thoroughly analyzed so as to clarify the phonetic and phonological attributes behind such improper pronunciation of this vowel within the given list of the trisyllabic words. The attributes of failure were discussed and analyzed in each group of the trisyllabic words starting from schwa in the first syllable moving to the second and finally to the third. The percentages of each improper pronunciation in each group of the trisyllabic words are calculated according to the formula:

$$\frac{\text{Frequency of errors in each category}}{\text{Total number of errors}} \times 100\%.$$

The duration of the test lasted for three hours in the aforementioned laboratory.

4. Results and discussions

The results of the test are discussed thoroughly, objectively and elaborately so as to arrive at plausible and explicit estimations of the improper identification of the syllable which comprised the vowel schwa. Not being capable of identifying the exact occurrence of the vowel schwa (in which syllable) resulted into mispronouncing this sound which was mainly due to three main attributes that largely contributed to the mispronunciation. For a better and comprehensive discussion of the obtained results, the analysis of the mispronunciation attributes is divided according to the occurrence of the vowel schwa within the three syllables.

4.1. Schwa mispronunciation in the first syllable

When analyzing the mispronunciations of the vowel schwa in the first syllable, it can be observed that the learners were enormously unable to identify that there was a schwa in the first syllable. Apparently, they seemed to lack phonetic and phonological knowledge concerning the proper identification of the exact syllable which contained /ə/. But, in comparison to their earlier academic studies where they experienced related topics for two years including four semesters of phonetics and phonology, this hypothetical explanation is entirely unjustifiable. Yet, they did show awkward pronunciation of this vowel in this position which may enhance the estimation that

intensive exposure to pronunciation for certain period during the academic studies are not enough at all if a better and efficient long-term pronunciation is to be achieved. This means that learners' memory concerning the exact identification of this vowel is weakened for a reason or another, which is not the main concern of the current study, and, thus, they used alternative improper strategies to pronounce it. Such inappropriateness was of course due to specific attributes. The first, and perhaps the most important of which, was what might be described as orthographic-sound symbol correspondence or letter-sound correspondence.

According to this correspondence, learners were highly influenced, according to the data, by the fact that the letter represented its correspondent sound. In other words, learners relied on the misassumption that the pronunciation of the sound is exactly similar to its letter so the letter 'a' is to be pronounced /æ/, 'o' is to be pronounced/ ɒ/ and so on. This resulted into complete deviation as far as the efficient pronunciation is concerned. Moreover, the whole pronunciation of the word was deformed and changed into an entirely different version of the proper pronunciation of the given trisyllabic words. The mispronunciation of the vowel schwa by replacing it with a sound corresponding to the letter not only influenced the syllable which contained schwa but also other syllables within the word since with such improper pronunciation, the stressed would be on the first syllable whereas it shouldn't be stressed at all because schwa is weak. Thus a syllable would contain two stressed syllables and a secondary one or perhaps stress would be, ironically, on the three syllables. Hence the letter 'a' was pronounced /æ/ in the first syllable instead of required /ə/ as in /ækwɔːdɪŋ/ and such pronunciation would definitely results into ambiguity while using it in communication. The point to be raised is that acceptable pronunciation does not mean at all that the sounds are to be produced whatsoever as clarity of words needs the minimum acceptable way of pronouncing the sounds.

Moreover, in words, such as attorney, when pronounced as /ætɜːni/, the meaning will be completely obscure and needs time consumption so as to arrive at mutual understanding knowing that communication doesn't include one word only. This also applies to the letter 'o' where it was pronounced /ɒpresɪv/ and again the entire pronunciation due to this deviation was unclear. This is not to imply at all that the learners' improper pronunciation was confined to this vowel only; many pronunciations represented by reading the trisyllabic words along with their transcriptions revealed awkward and inefficient pronunciations concerning various vowels including simple vowels and diphthongs. Since the current paper is entirely devoted to the analysis of schwa, all other mispronunciations are not considered.

In addition to letter-sound correspondence, the data revealed that learners tend to replace /ə/ with other improper vowels and, as the data analysis demonstrated, two main groups of improper vowels replaced schwa; simple vowels and diphthongs. The improper simple vowels which replaced schwa were most noticeable /ʌ/ and, to a less extent, /ɪ/. In the case of the latter, it might be argued that learners tended to follow the strategy of easing the articulation of the vowels particularly when such improper pronunciation was followed by pronouncing all other vowels in the second and third syllables with the same vowel /ɪ/ as in 'according' pronounced as /ɪkɪdɪŋ/, 'attractive' pronounced as /ɪtrɪktɪv/. The use of this improper vowel was also noticed in words starting with the letter 'o' following the same strategy of easing the articulation as in 'obedient' pronounced as /ɪbɪdɪnt/ and 'oppressive' pronounced as /ɪpɪsɪv/. The process of easing the articulation might be an improper phonetic attribute in the pronunciation of trisyllabic words when EFL learners were fully unaware of how to pronounce the words properly.

Concerning the use of the other vowel, /ʌ/, the data analysis revealed that learners surprisingly replaced schwa with this vowel. A plausible interpretation can be attributed to the consideration that learners realized that the letters 'a' and 'o' are not to be pronounced as letter-sound correspondence, yet, they used a sound which might resemble the articulatory features of /æ/ and /ɒ/ respectively as far as the tongue position and distance to the palate are concerned. That is, they were partially tempted by the fact that although they were aware that 'a' and 'o' are not to be pronounced /æ/ and /ɒ/ respectively, they used a vowel that is close to each one in specific sense; /ʌ/ has an open lips while produced similar to /æ/ and it is also a close (distance between the tongue and the palate) vowel similar to /ɒ/. However, the pronunciations of the trisyllabic words according to this improper replacement resulted into a complete deviation as in /ʌmeɪzɪŋ/, /ʌfendɪŋ/ and so on. The other improper replacement that the data revealed was the use of the diphthongs /eɪ/ and /əʊ/ instead of the required /ə/. The first two diphthongs were used in trisyllabic words starting with 'a' and the second with those starting with 'o'. Learners replaced the schwa with diphthongs because they seemingly wanted to make their pronunciation, with these diphthongs, as a distinctive strategy reflecting their own desire and pretense of native-like pronunciation particularly when they tried to over exaggerate the pronunciation of such diphthongs. This is to a certain extent justifiable as both diphthongs, when pronounced in certain way, reflect varieties of English accent. Applying such false strategy resulted into unclear and awkward pronunciations which also influenced the other syllables by assigning them improper pronunciations as in /eɪkɜːdɪŋ/, /əʊpruːsɪv/ and the like. The third attribute which the data revealed concerning the improper pronunciation of /ə/ was due to the influence of the mother tongue. Usually, the influence of L1 pronunciation is deemed negative when the target sound is altered with a sound reflecting L1 phonetic system and not that of the

target language. On such basis, some learners, when attempting at pronouncing this vowel, were much influenced by a close similar sound found in their language.

The following table illustrates the percentages of the improper pronunciation of schwa in the first syllable due to each attribute:

Table 3

Schwa mispronunciation in the first syllable

Mispronunciation attribute	Frequency	Percentage
Letter-sound correspondence	112	49.55%
Improper vowel replacement	81	35.84%
L1 negative transfer	33	14.60%
Total	226	99.99%

The table clearly shows that the highest percentage of improper pronunciation was due to letter-sound correspondence; learners were highly tempted by the false pronunciation assumption that the pronunciation of a letter correspondence to the way it is written.

4.2. Schwa mispronunciation in the second syllable

Within the second syllable, similar improper manifestations occurred just like those which occurred in the first syllable of the first trisyllabic words. First of all, learners relied on the false phonetic assumption that the pronunciations of the sounds correspond to their orthographic representation; letter-sound correspondence. In the second syllable, the realization of /ə/ varied since the orthographic representations, which represent its pronunciation, varied and, thus, it was pronounced through (o, a, i, e and u respectively). That is, in the second syllable, those letters were to be pronounced schwa but learners pronounced each according to the orthographic representation. Thus, the letter 'e' was pronounced /e/, 'i' was pronounced /i/ and the like. As would be noticed later, the frequency of the improper pronunciation was to a certain extent, lesser than those found in the first syllable as far as this improper attribute was concerned. Concerning the second attribute, according to what was revealed by the data analysis, learners tended to replace the schwa with long simple vowels which were /ɔ:/ and /u:/ only. Such mispronunciations were identified in words like atmosphere pronounced as /ætmo:sfɪə/, fabulist /fæbu:lɪst/. On the other hand, the improper replacement of schwa with a diphthong occurred in this position and was largely noticed.

The diphthongs which were pronounced included /aɪ/, /eɪ/, /ɔɪ/. This, indeed, reflects a tendency of those learners to excessively use diphthongs in the second syllable instead of /ə/ as in 'atmosphere' pronounced /ætmaɪsfɪə/, 'monarchy' pronounced /mɒnɑ:ki/, intellect as /ɪnteɪlekt/.

impolite as /ɪmpəˈlaɪt/ and the like. As far as the third attribute, the influence of L1 phonetic system was not noticed at all in the pronunciations of the words. Once again, the above analysis does not mean at all that the mispronunciation was only confined to schwa as there were many phonetic deviations but since the study only tackles this vowel, no considerations of other mispronunciations are considered. The following table illustrates the percentages of the improper pronunciation of schwa in the second syllable due to the two clarified attributes:

Table 4*Schwa mispronunciation in the second syllable*

Mispronunciation attribute	Frequency	Percentage
Letter-sound correspondence	100	59.17%
Improper vowel replacement	69	42.82%
Total	169	101.99%

The table clearly shows that the highest percentage of improper pronunciation was due to letter-sound correspondence and, although it differs in percentage with that of the first group, it demonstrated that this mispronunciation had the largest impact on such improper performance of schwa.

4.3. Schwa mispronunciation in the third syllable

The data analysis revealed identical schwa improper attributes in the third syllable with those of the first and second. The letters at this position which were supposed to be pronounced /ə/ were also pronounced as letter-sound correspondence in some cases only. Replacing schwa with other vowels also occurred but to a very limited extent. Taking the percentages of mispronunciations into consideration, it can be stated that this vowel is by far less problematic for Kurdish EFL learners when it occurs at the third syllable. The following table illustrates the percentages of the improper pronunciation of schwa in the second syllable due to the two clarified attributes:

Table 5*Schwa mispronunciation in the third syllable*

Mispronunciation attribute	Frequency	Percentage
Letter-sound correspondence	63	58.87%
Improper vowel replacement	44	41.12%
Total	107	99.99%

CONCLUSION

Through data analysis of the recordings matched with their counterpart transcriptions of trisyllabic words, the current study explicitly reveals that Kurdish EFL learners encounter difficulty in identifying where exactly the vowel schwa is to be pronounced in trisyllabic words. In many cases, they demonstrate that they severely lack competent knowledge about the pronunciation of this particular and important sound in such words mainly due to orthographic negative influence and improper vowel replacement. In addition, the analysis reveals that the negative phonetic L1 transfer is another attribute resulting in such mispronunciation but to a lesser extent. Most problematically, mispronouncing this vowel was particularly observed in the first syllable. With high percentages, the improper pronunciation was due to letter-sound correspondence false assumption. Though exposed to vowels, syllables and exercises of transcriptions, the results proved that exposure to vowels in general and to this vowel in particular for a certain period of time does not assist at all in improving the process of input and by no means reliable if an efficient and acceptable long-term pronunciation is to be achieved. Developing skills of pronunciation needs longer periods than assigned academically and all defects, inefficiencies and deviations shouldn't be ignored or unchecked. Indeed, mastering vowels plays a major role in making communication understandable and efficient, poor knowledge or inefficient training would certainly results into awkward performance and, at this level, learners would struggle a lot to convey various messages and would sound entirely intelligible to native speakers.

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