

Suzan Makhloof (PhD Linguistics)

'DeYa understand?': A phonological study of ESL Arab learners' listening comprehension of English weak forms

Listening comprehension of English is the most challenging language skill that ESL Arab learners (especially emerging adolescents and adults) encounter in Australian high schools, due to the presence of weak forms of function words in native English connected speech. Perception and production are, in many cases, distanced from each other. The precedence of perception (listening) over production (speaking) does not receive its due attention from ESL teachers in Australia.

This research is a quasi-experimental study that aims to investigate the relative effect of processing input-based instruction (PI) and traditional output-based instruction (TI) of English weak forms on Arab ESL learners' English listening comprehension skills. It explores the relationship between competence in English rhythm and listening performance of English as a second language. The target subjects will be chosen from Syrian Arab ESL emerging students in Newcastle high schools, aged 15-17. The participants' age group is debated among critical period theorists to be within or beyond the critical period of second language acquisition.

The PI treatment consists of explicit information on weak forms, effective processing strategy, followed by input-based activities. Conversely, the TI treatment will include explicit information on weak forms without effective processing strategy, followed by output-based drills. The subjects' ability to understand native spoken English before and after this instructional treatment will be assessed with a pre-test and a post-test, which will include production and perception tasks. This study hypothesises that Arab ESL learners' exposure to either PI or TI on weak forms in English boosts their ability to understand native spoken English.