

تقويم قدرة متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية  
في استخدام الأصوات المقطعية

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**Assessment of EFL Learner's Ability to  
Produce Syllabic Consonants in  
English**

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## المستخلص

ان في اللغة الانكليزية بعض السواكن والتي من الممكن ان تكون لوحدها كمقاطع. هذا غالباً ما يحدث نتيجة للكلام الغير الرسمي او السريع. عندما يعتبر معظم المتكلمين الأصليين للغة الانكليزية هذه المسألة كقضية مثيرة للجدل. فأنه سوف يكون من المعقول أن يتوقع بأنه سيواجه المتعلمين الاجانب الكثير من الصعوبات عند نطق الاصوات المقطعية.

بينما يتقصى هذا البحث استخدام الاصوات المقطعية الصحيحة في اللغة الانكليزية (اللام والنون) من جانب المتعلمين للغة الانكليزية من العراقيين، فان نتائجه تم استعمالها لغرض تحديد فيما اذا كان المتعلمون يستطيعون او لا يستطيعون استخدام الاصوات المقطعية الصحيحة في اللغة الانكليزية. يسلط البحث الضوء على الاخطاء المرتكبة من قبل المتعلمين العراقيين ذو المستوى الجامعي. هذه الاخطاء التي تمت ملاحظتها من طرف الباحث حفزته لتنظيم هذا البحث. وان الهدف الرئيسي لهذا البحث هو لغرض اكتشاف المشاكل التي يواجهها متعلمو اللغة الانكليزية في نطق الاصوات المقطعية. وقد تم تصميم اختبار تجريبي وتقديم عينة مؤلفة من خمس وعشرون طالباً من المتعلمين العراقيين الدارسين للغة الانكليزية في المرحلة الثالثة في الجامعات العراقية للسنة الدراسية ٢٠١٣. اظهرت النتائج بأن المتعلمين العراقيين يميلوا الى حشر حركة بين صوتين ساكنين ومتعاقبين لغرض تسهيل نطقهما. وعلى هذا الاساس تم تحليل اخطاء الطلاب وتحديد الاسباب الممكنة لهذه الاخطاء وبناءً على نتائج البحث تم التوصل الى الاستنتاجات الكفيلة.

## Abstract

English has some consonants which can stand by themselves as syllables. This usually occurs as a result of casual or rapid speech. Since most native speakers of English regard this issue as a problematic matter, it would be reasonable to expect that foreign learners will face more difficulties in producing English syllabic consonants.

As this investigates the production of English syllabic consonants, namely /l/ and /n/ on the part of Iraqi learners of English, its results are used to decide whether or not the learners are able to produce English syllabic consonants.

The study sheds light on the errors committed by Iraqi learners of English at the university level. These errors observed by the researcher motivated him to conduct this study. The main purpose of this study is to find out the difficulties the learners of English encounter in the production of syllabic consonants. A test was designed and administrated to twenty – five students.

They are the third – year students of the academic year 2013. The results show that Iraqi learners tend to insert a vowel between two successive consonants of facilitate their articulation.

The subjects' errors as well as the possible causes of their errors were identified and analyzed, and accordingly conclusions were drawn.

## Introduction

The English phonemic inventory consists of forty – four sounds: twenty vowels and twenty four consonants. The vowel has an important role in constructing the basic unit of speech, i. e., the syllable. But, in certain cases some consonants can function as syllabic. That is, some consonantal sounds can take up the position of which is normally held by vowel sounds.

It is a well – known fact that due to, for instance, dialectal differences, native speakers themselves often pronounce the same word differently. In addition, they may articulate the same word in a different way on a different occasion (Lado and Fries, 1954: 54). Consequently, a foreign learner should be aware that in order to learn another language, a whole system of articulatory habits should be replaced by a new system (Malmberg, 1963: 107).

As this study is concerned with English syllabic consonants, it is necessary to present syllable structure, syllabification and other issues which serve to understand the nature of syllabic consonants.

Gimson (1989: 55) confirms that syllabic consonants in English are defined as syllables in which /l, r/ and the two nasals /n, m/ function as the centre of the syllables instead of the vowels for example, speech sounds are classified into two classes: nuclear sound which occupy the centre of the syllable and they are usually vowels, and marginal sound which are mostly consonants. In phonetic terms speech sounds can either be syllabic or non syllabic. Still, we cannot consider the term syllabic consonants as synonyms. Under certain phonetic circumstances, some consonants could function as syllabics. But it is difficult to determine the nature of phonons in distributional terms. Words such as button /b t n/ and middle /midl/ which end with the sequences /-tn/ and /-dl/ are considered to have final syllabic elements.

The researcher thinks that the real problem encountered by advanced Iraqi learners of English is their failure to distinguish syllabic consonants from non – syllabic consonants. The learners are unaware of the fact that due to this difference, syllabic consonants could be considered as separate phonemes. The researcher also thinks that the learners may tend to insert a vowel before these sounds. For instance, the word happen is pronounced by many subjects as /hapin/ instead of /hapn/ because most students are often misled by the spelling of the English word.

The present study tackles one of the difficulties faced by Iraqi learners when producing English syllabic consonants, namely /l/ and /n/. The main objectives of this study is to investigate the students' ability to pronounce syllabic consonants correctly. Then, detecting sources of difficulty in articulating these consonants by advanced Iraqi learners of English.

Mossa (1998) has conducted a study in which, behavior and phonological features of syllabic consonants are investigated both in English and Arabic. He has hypothesized that syllabic consonants in Arabic are less than their counterpart in English. In addition, he has made a comparison between English syllabic consonants and Arabic syllabic consonants.

He found that the results of his study show that the syllable is an important linguistic unit which undergoes basic phonological operations, and it is not an easy matter to decide the number of syllables in a word. He concludes that English syllabic consonants occur in different positions; whereas in Arabic they occur at the end of words and when there is a pause. Mossa found out that Arabic speaking students tend to insert a vowel sound usually /ə/ before English syllabic consonants so to overcome the difficulty encountered in their pronunciation.

The significance of the present study lies in the fact that the investigation of the difficulties concerning the production of English syllabic consonants may offer an insight to those who consider them a problem. Moreover, the findings of this study will be of great importance for instructors in general and syllabus designers in particular when developing teaching materials. The present study exclusively deals with the production of English syllabic consonants, namely /l/ and /n/ because they are the most frequent English syllabic consonants.

Wells and Colson (1971: 101) propose that the English syllable structure has the structural formula  $C_0^3VC_0^4$ ; i. e., from zero to three initial consonants,

and from zero to four final consonants. For instance an  $C_0^3$  syllable may begin with up to three consonants.

It pit spit split

But no morpheme begins with more than three consonants, e. g.,

\* Splrit

Abercrombie (1976: 40) points out that a syllable has three phases:

- (i) The starting, by a chest pulse, of a small amount of air on its way out from the lung;
- (ii) The passage of this air through the vocal tract;
- (iii) The conclusion of the movement of this coinciding, often, with beginning of another pulse.

These three phases are called the release, the vowel and the arrest respectively. This division agree with that of Lass (1981: 225) and Roach (1999: 73) who argue that the syllable consists of an onset, a rhyme which in its turn consists of a peak and a coda. All these elements except peak are optional.

The question of syllabification has been considered as a very problematic issue. Depending on the number of syllables, English words can be classified into mono syllabics, disyllabics and trisyllabics. Words with more than three syllables are called polysyllabic ones. The division of the syllable of monosyllabic words is easier than that of polysyllabic ones. In this respect, O'conner and trim (1973: 252) affirm that if it is possible to analyze words in terms of discrete units containing one vowel unity only, preceded and followed by a number of consonants units, then the structure of such unit, is best investigated by an examination of the one vowel word. But spelling may, sometimes, be misleading, e. g., a word like button is pronounced with no vowel between /t/ and /n/, however it is heard as consisting of two syllables (Roach et al, 1992: 476). Therefore, it is not only difficult to define the term syllable but also to identify the number of syllables that a word contains. The number of syllables can be estimated by counting the number of vowel phonemes which are considered the open sounds. It is obvious that this rule has failed to account for cases in which words contain syllabic consonants e.

g., in a word such as castle /kasl/ there is no vowel between /t/ and /l/, but it is pronounced with two syllables (Knowles, 1987: 66).

Distribution of English syllabic consonants namely /l/ and /n/. From phonological point of view, /l/ is considered a non syllabic consonants because it initiates and terminates a syllable. But phonetically there are certain cases in which /l/ functions as a separate syllable and thus becomes syllabic. Syllabic /l/, which is usually dark, can be distinguished from its non syllabic cognates in terms of duration. When the lateral /l/ is preceded by one of the alveolar consonants/ t, d, n, s, z/ as in bottle /botl/ or middle /midl/, then the sides of the tongue are lowered when /l/ is formed. The lateral /l/ can occur in all positions. Syllabic /l/ occurs in medial and final positions. It also occurs after alveolar consonants /t, d, n/ as in cattle /katl/, muddle /m^dl/ an tunnel /t^nl/. It may be heard after sibilant and affricate sounds: /s,z, t^, d^/ as in missile /misl/, sizzle / and vigil /vid^l. It may follow bilabial stops /p, b/ as in trouble /tr^bl/, couple /k^pl/ or velar stops 'k, g/ as in struggle /str^gl/.

The articulation of /n/ involves that the tip of the tongue is located against the alveolar ridge which results in a blockage in the vocal tract. The alveolar nasal /n/ occurs in all word positions. As syllabic, it occurs in medial and final positions. Where the vowel is deleted, e. g. tonight /tnait/, hidden /hidn/, mutton /m^m/, student /stju:dnt/. Syllabic /n/ may exist after the affricatives /f, v, s, z, t^, d^/ in words such as often /ofn/, lesson /lesn/, mission /mi^n/.

In the light of the literature and the problem and objectives of the study, it is hypothesized that Iraqi learners of English tend to insert a vowel sound between two consonants when they produce English syllabic consonants.

## The Test

### 2 – 1 Introduction

The main objective of this study is to examine whether or not advanced Iraqi learners are proficient to product English syllabic consonants efficiently, namely /l/ and /n/. Other syllabic consonants will be excluded from the present study.

The aims of the test are to diagnose the individuals' specific strengths and weakness. Accordingly, a test, consisting of (50) items, was designed. The subjects' pronunciation is recorded while reading the test items which are selected to measure a particular area in their production of syllabic consonants

in relation to what is mentioned in the introduction. It was taken into consideration that the number of items with syllabic /l/ was equal to those with syllabic /n/ which in their turn were equal to their non – syllabic counterparts.

## 2 – 2 The Sample

A Sample of Iraqi learners of English at the undergraduate level constitutes the population of the final administration of the test. The subjects were third year students at the department of English, college of arts, university of AL – Iraqia were chosen. The total number of the sample is (25) boys and girls. The reason behind choosing them is that they are supposed to be at advanced level, and their ability has developed to certain extent that enables them as sophisticated students to produce syllabic consonants correctly. The test was given to five experts specialized in English to ensure its suitability (Allen and Yen, 1997: 113). The jury agreed that the test items were appropriate to measure the purposes of the study except for some modifications which were taken into considerations in the refined version of the test it was found that the majority of the test items were performing well. Person correlation formula was used to compute the correlation coefficient. It was corrected by Spearman Brown formula in order to get the reliability coefficient. It was found to be 89. (Richard et al, 1985: 66).

## 2 – 3 The Administration of the Test.

The test is administrated in the language laboratory of English Department, college of Arts at the end of the Academic year 2012. The students production of each item was recorded individually. The students were given enough time to read the test items silently several times. They were given serial instructed to mention their numbers before starting to read, then each student was to read the test items aloud in order to be recorded.

## 2 – 4 The Scoring Scheme

The subjects' production of the test items are compared with that of simi – native speaker (the researcher himself) and scored on the right – wrong basis.

Each correct item was given two marks and incorrect one was given a zero. The entire test had been scored out of (100).

## 2 – 5 The Results of the Test.

This section presents and discusses the subjects answer when using syllabic consonants. The errors were identified and their percentages were computed. In addition, the results were analyzed to determine the possible sources of these errors in order to get some insights into the nature of the difficulties they usually encounter in this area. After analyzing the subjects' performance, the final results were used to verify or refute the hypotheses put forward.

The results of the study (table 1) below, show the ability to produce syllabic consonants is unsatisfactory and they face certain difficulties when producing them.

Table one: Subjects' Performance in Using Syllabic Consonants

Item	Correct	Percent%	Errors	Percent%
1	4	8	46	92
2	4	8	46	92
3	6	12	44	88
4	2	4	48	96
5	4	8	46	92
6	6	12	44	88
7	2	4	48	96
8	6	12	44	88
9	8	16	42	84
10	6	12	44	88



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11	4	8	46	92
12	10	20	40	80
13	10	20	40	80
14	2	4	48	96
15	2	4	48	96
16	4	8	46	92
17	10	20	40	80
18	8	16	42	84
19	8	16	42	84
20	10	20	40	80
21	6	12	44	88
22	6	12	44	88
23	2	4	48	96
24	4	8	46	92
25	6	2	44	88
26	4	8	46	92
27	4	8	46	92
28	10	20	40	80
29	3	4	48	96
30	44	8	46	92
31	46	92	4	8
32	44	88	6	12
33	46	92	4	8

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34	38	76	12	24
35	44	88	6	12
36	50	100	-	-
37	40	80	10	20
38	44	88	6	12
39	46	92	4	8
40	48	96	2	4
41	16	32	34	68
42	14	28	36	72
43	16	32	34	68
44	12	24	38	76
45	10	20	40	80
46	28	56	22	44
47	30	60	20	40
48	30	60	20	40
49	10	20	40	80
50	12	24	38	76
Total	790	31.60%	1712	68.48%

Table (1) reveals that the results obtained show the subjects' erroneous responses are more than their correct responses for most of the item of the test. The overall results indicate that the total number of errors mad by the subjects in producing /n/ and /l/ is (68.48%) (I). Such percentage indicates that the subjects' ability to produce syllabic consonants, namely /n/ and /l/ is disappointing. For example, the majority of subjects were unsuccessful in producing the syllabic consonants /l/ and /n/ in the words especially, tonight,

personal, vigil, burden. The subjects pronounce the words especially /ispəɔ̃əli/, tonight /tənaɪt/, personal /pə:sənəl/, vigil /vidɔ̃il/, burden /bədɪn/ in stead of /ispəɔ̃əli/, /tənaɪt/, /pə:sənəl/, /vidɔ̃il/, /bədɪn/ respectively. In general, the subjects who make errors may tend to insert a vowel between the syllabic consonants and the preceded one. Most of the subjects' performance in producing syllabic consonants are very wrong and they face certain difficulties in using them. This can be realized from examining the subjects' pronunciation found in table (i). The subjects' incompetence to produce English syllabic consonants, namely /l/ and /n/ is obvious from the number of their erroneous pronunciation as shown in table (I). Accordingly, the hypothesis which states that most of Iraqi learners tend to insert a vowel sound before syllabic consonants namely /n/ and /l/ is verified.

It also appears that subjects' performance in producing non – syllabic consonants is better than their performance in producing syllabic consonants. For example, all subjects' were successful in producing non – syllabic consonants in the words listen /lɪsn/, lesson /lesn/, and /ænd/, dwindle /dwindl/, handle /handl/, wheel /wi:l/ loval /loɪəl/, fields /fi:ldz/, column /kɒləm/, condemn /kəndem/ (see table one).

The overall results of the above table clearly show that subjects were better at producing English non – syllabic consonants that producing English syllabic consonants. The high percentage of the subjects' incorrect responses in producing /l/ and /n/ means that Iraqi learners of English face difficulty in mastering English syllabic consonants. The researcher thinks the errors may be referred to insufficient sophisticated teacher whose improper pronunciation influences the subjects' performance. Therefore, in order for the English syllabic consonants context of learning to be rewarding, it should provide the learner with genuine contextual materials with focus on the problem. Subjects' bad performance is related to the notion of teaching – induced errors. One should not neglect the fact that the teacher is the cornerstone for any class activity. It seems quite reasonable to relate errors in the pronunciation of syllabic consonants to the improper model (the teacher himself). Most teachers of English do not concentrate on this aspect of English phonology. It was found that fluctuation of errors in producing the syllabic consonants may be due to insufficient practice to second language rules.

## Conclusion

The study reveals that Iraqi learners are weak at producing syllabic consonants. In the light of the study results, the paper comes out with following conclusions.

1- Iraqi learners of English at the university level are varied considerably with respect to their abilities to produce the two English syllabic consonants, namely /l/ and /n/.

2- They are found to be more such successful in producing the syllabic consonants. This may suggest that they face some difficulty in producing them. Still, the good performance of some of the students could be attributed to guessing rather than their sharp distinction between syllabic and non – syllabic consonants. For instance, a subject may produce a word that ends with the sequence /-den/ such as hidden (hidn/ as having a syllabic consonant /n/, while the same subject produces a word like sullen /s^ln/ as containing non – syllabic consonant /n/.

3- It is obvious from the results of the test that Iraqi learners of English at the university level have tendency to insert a vowel sound before syllabic consonants, namely /l/ and /n. thus, they say, for instance, hidden /hidin/ in stead of /hidn/, bushel /bu□il/ in stead of /bu□i/, frighten /fraitin/ in stead of /fratin/, handle /handil/ in stead of /handl/. This is evident from the percentage of errors of their incorrect pronunciation (1712, 68.48%).

4- English phonetics and phonology should be considered as a basic subject and the prescribed textbooks have to pay great attention to this skill.

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## Appendix

### Test Items

Please read the following items carefully:

1	People	/pi:pl/
2	Bottle	/botl/
3	Couple	k^pl/
4	Especially	/ispə□li/
5	Personal	pə:snt/
6	Written	/ritn/
7	Tonight	/tnait/
8	Hidden	/hidn/
9	Student	/stju:dnt/
10	Often	/ofn/
11	Cattle	/kætl/
12	Coddling	/kodli□/
13	Missile	/misl/
14	Vigil	/vid□l/

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15	Pistol	/pɪstl/
16	Listen	/lɪsn/
17	Occasion	/əkeɪn□/
18	Mutton	/m^tn/
19	Mission	/mi□n/
20	Risen	/raɪzn/
21	Sizzle	/sɪzl/
22	Satchel	/sæt□l/
23	Finely	/faɪnli/
24	Petal	/petl/
25	Bushel	/bu□l/
26	Lesson	/lesn/
27	Frighten	/fraɪtn/
28	Important	/ɪmpo: tnt/
29	Burden	/bə: dn/
30	Person	/pə: sn/
31	And	/ænd/
32	Ignore	/ɪɡno:/
33	Handle	/hændl/
34	Ribbon	/rɪbn/
35	Dwindle	/Dwɪndl/
36	Wheel	/wi: l/
37	Powerful	/paʊəfl/
38	Loyal	/loɪəl/
39	Alive	/əlɪv/
40	Fields	/fi: ldz/
41	Column	/kɒləm/
42	Condemn	kændem/
43	Autmn	/o: təm/
44	Damn	/dɑm/
45	Hymn	/hɪm/
46	Talk	/to: k/
47	Walk	/wo: k/
48	Chalk	/t□o: k/
49	Folk	/fo: k/
50	Calf	/ca: f/