

## The Influence of Function Words on Oral Proficiency Among First Semester EFL Students at the University of Benghazi

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### تأثير الكلمات الوظيفية على الكفاءة الشفهية بين طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية طلبة الفصل الدراسي الأول بجامعة بنغازي

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#### Abstract:

Speaking English properly is a sign of a good mastery of English. Some grammatical elements in English are frequently encountered, yet, they might be difficult to master and apply. Consequently, they hinder students' speech flow and affect their speaking accuracy. The main aim of this study was to investigate this problem of frequent function words use in speaking in terms of three-dimensional questions: What, how, and why questions. In other words, this study tried to find what the most frequent function words in students' oral production were, and it described how these function words occurred in students' speech alongside giving possible reasons for why some frequent function words were used in some occasions of students' oral production. Students' samples of oral speech were collected using interviews; then their speech was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The research findings indicated that the most frequently used function word among students was the subject pronoun "I," while the least used was "you." The usage of function words fell into three categories: correct use, hesitation use, and misuse. Notably, "I" was the most correctly used function word, whereas "you" was the least correctly used. In terms of hesitation, "I" was again the most frequently used, while "it" was the least. The definite article "the" was identified as the most misused function word, with "you" being the least misused. The study concluded that to help learners improve their oral production of function words, these should be taught in communicative contexts using varied teaching methods. Additionally, teachers should be aware of their students' linguistic levels when introducing function words.

**Keywords:** Speaking, Content Words, Function Words, Grammatical Accuracy.

#### الملخص

يعد التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية بشكل صحيح دليل على إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية بشكل جيد. يتم استخدام العناصر النحوية في اللغة الإنجليزية بشكل متكرر، ومع ذلك، قد يكون من الصعب إتقانها وتطبيقها. وبالتالي، فإنها تعيق حديث الطلاب وتؤثر على دقته. كان الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو التحقيق في مشكلة الاستخدام المتكرر للكلمات الوظيفية في التحدث

من حيث الأسئلة ثلاثية الأبعاد: ماذا وكيف ولماذا. بعبارة أخرى، حاولت هذه الدراسة التعرف على أكثر الكلمات الوظيفية شيوعاً في الإنتاج الشفهي للطلاب، ووصفت كيف حدثت هذه الكلمات الوظيفية في كلام الطلاب إلى جانب إعطاء أسباب محتملة لاستخدام بعض الكلمات الوظيفية المتكررة في بعض سياقات الإنتاج الشفهي للطلاب. تم جمع عينات من الكلام الشفهي للطلاب باستخدام المقابلات؛ ثم تم تسجيل كلامهم ونسخه وتحليله. أشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى أن أكثر الكلمات الوظيفية استخداماً بين الطلاب كانت ضمير الفاعل "أنا"، بينما كانت أقلها استخداماً هي "أنت". واندراج استخدام الكلمات الوظيفية في ثلاث فئات: الاستخدام الصحيح، والاستخدام المتردد، والاستخدام الخاطئ. والجدير بالذكر أن "أنا" كانت أكثر الكلمات الوظيفية استخداماً بشكل صحيح، في حين كانت "أنت" أقلها استخداماً بشكل صحيح. وفيما يتعلق بالتردد، كانت "أنا" مرة أخرى الأكثر استخداماً، في حين كانت "هو" الأقل استخداماً. وتم تحديد أداة التعريف "ال" باعتبارها أكثر الكلمات الوظيفية استخداماً بشكل خاطئ، حيث كانت "أنت" هي الأقل استخداماً بشكل خاطئ. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أنه لمساعدة الطلاب على تحسين إنتاجهم الشفهي للكلمات الوظيفية، يجب تدريسها في سياقات تواصلية باستخدام أساليب تدريس متنوعة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يجب أن يكون المعلمون على دراية بالمستويات اللغوية لطلابهم عند تقديم الكلمات الوظيفية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** مهارة التحدث، كلمات المحتوى، الكلمات الوظيفية، الدقة النحوية.

## Introduction

Speaking is essentially an act of communication (Clark & Clark, 1997; Almalti, 2007; Lindblad, 2011; Kumar, 2013; Harmer, 2015). One of the most important signs of learning a language is the ability to speak it (Ur, 1996; Scott, *et al.*, 2004). Speaking is the skill which allow learners to communicate to express opinions, provide reasons, clarify thoughts, and convey information (Myers-Scotton, 2006; Savile-Troike, 2012; Kumar, 2013; Harmer, 2015). The emergence of English as the global lingua franca has greatly heightened the demand for English language learning around the world. For learners, proficiency in English is crucial not only for achieving academic success but also for effective interpersonal communication. Their aspirations for higher education and career advancement often necessitate attaining a sufficient level of English proficiency. They need to engage with diverse communities to access advancements in various fields. Furthermore, their ability to speak English opens up good opportunities for them in several areas, including education and other job prospects. All of the previously mentioned purposes could be successfully accomplished through clear accurate speaking skill of English. What is meant by accurate speaking skill is the ability to produce correct grammatical sentences. Accuracy in speaking is the degree of grammaticality and correctness in learners' performance of speech; That is, "*accuracy is a characteristic of performance*" (Patriaca, *et al.*, 2007:2) by which learners' produce correct grammatical sentences. One way of an accurate use for sentences in speech is accomplished through a correct accurate use of function grammatical words in those sentences.

This study aimed at analyzing students' oral speech in terms of the most frequently used function words in their oral speech. It tried to describe how these function words occurred in students' oral productions as well as figure out the reasons behind misusing these words. It also presented a number of solutions for using them correctly while speaking English. The participants in this study were asked to answer some questions in English. Their speech was collected, transcribed, and analyzed in accordance with function grammatical words.

## Literature Review

Speaking is a productive activity that essentially involves oral use of language (Savile- Troike, 2012:171; Cameron, 2001: 40). In order for a learner to speak a language, two processes are involved: A bottom-up process and a top-down process. At the later, a learner brings knowledge of content (topic), context (setting), and culture in the production of his/her speech. While in the bottom-up process a learner brings knowledge of the language system that he/she has learned. This language system includes different levels of vocabulary, morphology, phonology, syntax, and discourse.

According to Stroik (2012) the vocabulary level is the most important level for learners to acquire. Vocabulary knowledge enables speakers to participate properly in speaking activities. At the vocabulary level, there are two kinds of words: Content words and function words. Content words (i.e., nouns, main verbs, adjectives and adverbs) are words that have semantic meaning (content) when compared to function words (e.g., auxiliary verbs, pronouns, article, and prepositions) which have grammatical meaning. In order to speak accurate grammatical English, learners access words and combine them into phrases and clauses in order to form accurate grammatical speech of English. The formation of these clauses and phrases needs knowledge of those grammatical elements which combine words together and make up the grammatical meaning of clauses and phrases. These grammatical elements are the function words of a language that is responsible for the arrangement of

words in that language. Savile-Troike (2012: 146) described them as “*the core words in every language.*” They are limited sets of words that carry grammatical meaning and essentially denote grammatical relationships between words in sentences.

Function words in English include: determiners (the, this), prepositions (such as *in, to*), conjunctions (*and, but*), pronouns (*I, you, it*), auxiliary verbs (*is, was*). Although limited in number, these function words are the base upon which the grammaticality and accuracy of oral production of English is built. Pennebaker (2011) states that although function words account for less than one-tenth of one percent of learners' vocabulary, they make up nearly 60 percent of the words used in everyday communication. This highlights the significance of these small but essential words, such as pronouns and prepositions, in shaping language and conveying meaning. Savile-Troike (2012: 146) describes function words as “*the most frequently used words in spoken (but not written) English.*”

Learning function words could be challenging for most English language learners. Savile-Troike (2012: 86) notes that “*some of the most frequent words in English, including the most frequent, „the“ are relatively late to appear, and among the last to be mastered.*” And this difficulty in learning function words can cause problems in the production (and interpretation) of English. Putri (2010: 13) states that “*One factor of influencing the students' speaking skill is the function grammar, the fact shows that the students sometimes want to speak with other people but they have lack of functional grammar.*” Many studies (e.g., Hicks, 2006; Irmawati, 2020; and Le Normand & Thai-Van, 2022) have been conducted to reveal the importance of function words in building learners' language knowledge. Chung & Pennebaker (2007:347) points out that “*Despite rarely paying them any conscious attention, function words have a powerful impact on the listener/reader and, at the same time, reflect a great deal about the speaker/writer.*”

This study aimed at adding to the literature by offering some solutions for teaching function words to learners of English as a foreign language. These solutions would help to overcome misuses of function words in the oral production of English as a foreign language.

## Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive analytical study which aimed to answer the following questions: **What** are the most frequent function words used by the first semester students of the English department in their speech production of English? **How** do these frequent function words occur in students' speech production?

The study employed a descriptive analytical research design to analyze a set of 25 speech samples of the first-semester students in the English Department at Benghazi University. These students were pre-intermediate language level of English as stated by the administration of the English department after conducting a placement test prior to the start of their academic classes. The participants were all females and they were informed that the interviews were not a part of their assessment. Their consent to be recorded was obtained. Second, the researcher used the non-reciprocal mode of speaking, as proposed by Savile-Troike (2012:176), was utilized to reduce real-time processing demands on the participants. Each Participant was asked three questions in a row: Why it is important to learn English? What are the advantages and disadvantages of learning English? What does learning English help you to do? There was unlimited time for students' responses. Students were given plenty of time until they stopped speaking at their own discretion. Third, students' responses were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed in terms of *what, how, and why* dimensions proposed by Savile-Troike (2012) in accounting for any SLA phenomena; These dimensions were: (a) Identification of **what** were the most frequent function words used by students" in their speech production, (b) Description of **how** did these function words occur in students' speech, and (c) Explaining the reasons for **why** some students misused some function words in their oral production.

## Findings

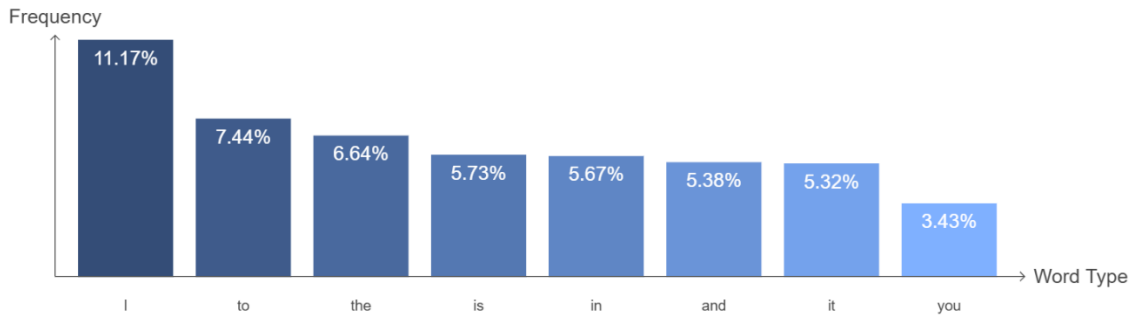
### Descriptive Statistics

The findings of this study revealed the most frequently used function words in the oral production of English by first-semester students, which are as follows:

- **I** was the most frequent, used 11.17% of the time.
- **To** was the second most frequent, used 7.44% of the time.
- **The** was used 6.64% of the time.
- **Is** was used 5.73% of the time.
- **In** was used 5.67% of the time.
- **And** was used 5.38% of the time.

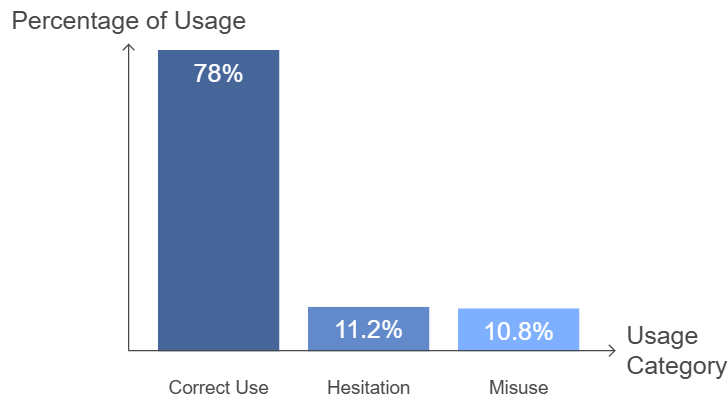
- **It** was used 5.32% of the time.
- **You** was the least frequent, used only 3.43% of the time.

The highest number of frequent use (11.17%) was observed in the use of the first-persons subject pronoun (I), followed by the use of the preposition (to) (7.44%). Meanwhile, the frequent use of the definite article (the) was (6.64%), followed by the frequent use of the auxiliary verb (is) (5.73%), frequent use of the preposition (in) (5.67%), frequent use of the conjunction „and“ (5.38%), and the frequent use of the pronoun (it) (5.32%). The lowest number of frequent use was the use of the pronoun (you) (3.43%).



**Figure 1.** The Percentage of the most frequent Function Words

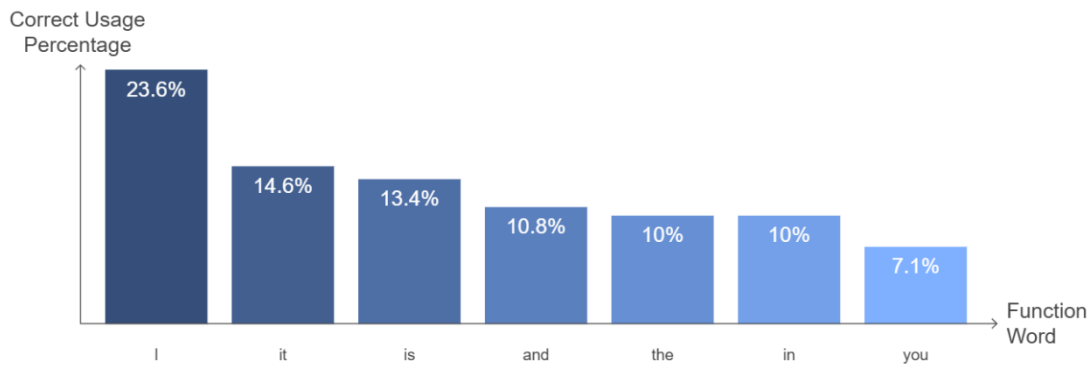
The findings of this study also revealed **how** these most frequent function words occurred in students' speech. As illustrated in the chart below, it was observed that (78%) of the frequent use of function words was in correct use to express grammatical meaning in sentences, and (11.2%) of the frequent use of function words was in hesitation (self-repetition). The lowest percentage of frequent use of function words was in the misuse of these function words (10.8%).



**Figure 2.** The Percentage of Different Uses of Frequent Function Words.

### The Correct Use of Function Words

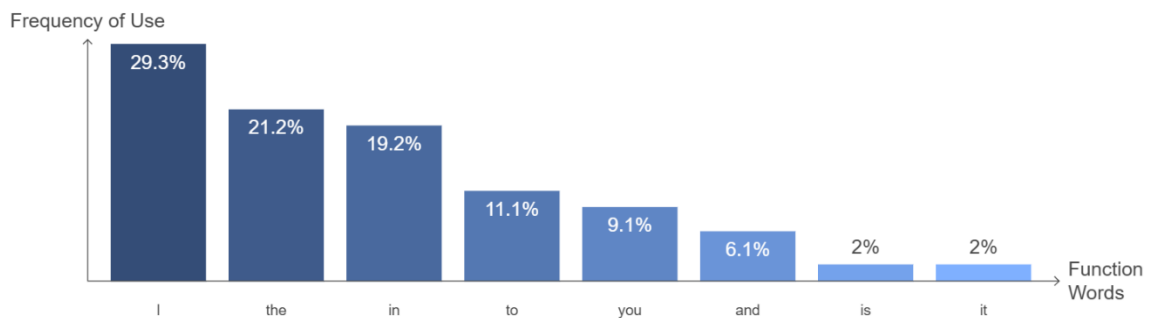
The findings of this study illustrated that the highest number of the correct use of function words was observed in the use of the pronoun (I) with a percentage of (23.6%), followed by the correct use of the preposition (it) with a percentage of (14.6%). Meanwhile, the correct use of the auxiliary verb (is) was (13.4%), followed by the correct use of the conjunction (and) (10.8%). Both the definite article (the) and the preposition (in) had a correct usage rate of 10%. The lowest number of the correct use was the use of the pronoun (you) with a percentage of (7.1%)



**Figure 3.** The Percentage of the Correct Use of Frequent Function Words.

### The Hesitation Use of Function Words

This study found that the pronoun "I" was the most frequent function word used during hesitation in speech, occurring 29.3% of the time. The definite article "the" followed closely at 21.2%. The preposition "in" was used in 19.2% of hesitations, followed by "to" (11.1%), "you" (9.1%), and "and" (6.1%). The least frequent function words during hesitation were the auxiliary verb "is" and the pronoun "it," both occurring in only 2% of cases.



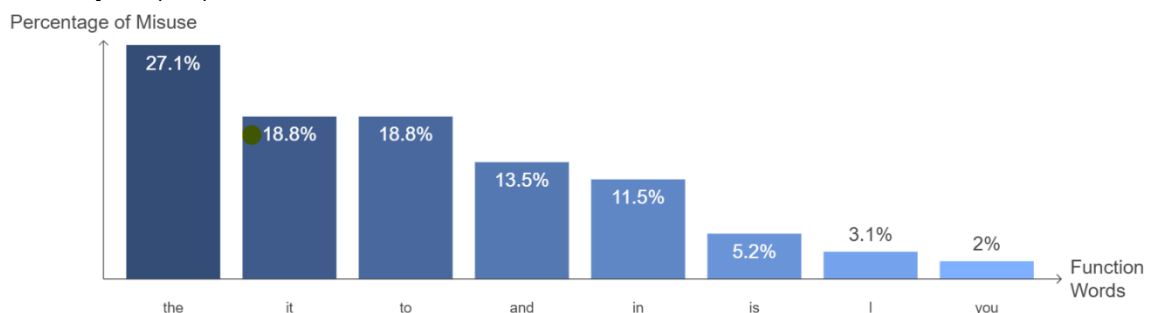
**Figure 4.** The Percentage of the Hesitation Use of Frequent Function Words.

### Causes of Hesitation

It was observed that learners of English use function words in hesitation or self-repetition. This might be because these words are generally very short (usually 1-3 letters) and spoken quickly (at a speed of 100 – 300 milliseconds, the rate usually used in laboratory studies, Van Petten & Kutas, 1991). Function words might be employed by learners as a means of creating pauses, providing them with time to arrange their thoughts and plan their speech

### Misuse of Function Words

This study found that the definite article (the) was most frequently misused, occurring in 27.1% of cases. The pronoun (it) and the preposition (to) were both misused in 18.8% of cases. The conjunction (and) was misused in 13.5% of cases, followed by the preposition (in) at 11.5%, the auxiliary verb (is) at 5.2%, and the pronoun (I) at 3.1%. The lowest number of misuses of function words was for the pronoun „you“ (2%).



**Figure 5.** The Percentage of the Hesitation Use of Frequent Function Words.

### Misuse of the Definite Article (the)

In English, the definite article 'the' is used before a noun when the listener is already familiar with that specific noun. This includes situations where the noun has been previously mentioned or is otherwise

known to the listener. Regarding the misuse of *the* article in this study, learners used (*the*) before nouns that their identity was not clear for the listener and they were not mentioned previously. Learners inserted the definite article (*the*) before any noun they pronounced such as: *\*some people listen to the songs to learn English. \*English helps me in the skills.*

As noted above, the words (*songs, skills*) were mentioned for the first time and their identity was not clear to the listener. However, learners treated them as already known nouns to the listener and assigned them a definite article. The reason behind this could be attributed to learners limited knowledge governing the use of the definite article. In addition, they may have assumed the listener was already familiar with all the nouns they mentioned, leading them to mistakenly use 'the' before every noun

Another type of misuse of the definite article was the use of (*the*) before proper nouns. In English, the definite article (*the*) is not used before proper nouns (nouns which refer to a particular being or thing). For instance, in this study learners pronounced: *\*I like the English because it helps me a lot. \*the Arabic is good but the English helps me more today.*

As noted above, both *English* and *Arabic* are proper nouns. Learners treated them as common nouns and used (*the*) with them. This might be because they cannot differentiate between proper and common nouns.

A further kind of misuse of the definite article in this study is the use of (*the*) simultaneously with another indefinite article. In this study learners said: *\*English help me with the a lot of things.*

As illustrated above, learners used two articles (*the, a*) before the noun phrase (*lot of things*). This error likely stems from a lack of understanding of the basic rule in English that only one article can be used before a noun or noun phrase.

Another error observed in this study was the use of 'the' before verbs. In English, articles cannot modify verbs. They do not appear before verbs in sentences. However, some learners in this study incorrectly used 'the' before verbs such as *\*English help me with the teach when I'm teacher.*

Moreover, learners in this study used (*the*) article with the comparative form of adjectives, for example they said: *\*English is the bigger speaking language than Arabic.* This would be because they overgeneralized the rule of superlative adjectives in which (*the*) is used and applied it in the use of comparative adjectives.

The last type of the misuse on the definite article in this study was in the use of (*the*) before demonstratives. In English, articles and demonstratives are both determiners, they are never used simultaneously before nouns. The learners in this study committed errors such as *\* English can help me in this century.* It is clear in the example that learners inserted two determiners (*the / this*) before the noun (*century*). In English, two words of the same category (determiners) never used simultaneously before a noun. The reason for committing such an error could be attributed to learner's lack of knowledge.

### **Misuse of the Preposition (to)**

In English, the preposition (*to*) is used with certain verbs to indicate the person or thing that receives the action of these verbs. For instance; the preposition (*to*) is used after the verbs (*like, Decide and talk*) *to* indicate the recipients of the verbs (e.g I talk to Ali, I like to drive, and I decide to learn English). However, in some examples, learners omitted the preposition (*to*) in sentences require its presence. Learners in this study pronounced: *\*I like speak English because it is nice. \*I decided go to learn English in university.* Learners did not use the preposition (*to*) after the verbs (*like and decide*). The reason behind this could be attributed to learners limited knowledge of the proper use of the preposition (*to*).

Another kind of misuse of the preposition (*to*) in this study was the production of (*to*) before verbs. In English, when used with verbs, prepositions must be positioned after verbs. However, learners in this study placed the preposition (*to*) before verbs such as: *\*I will not to talk in English in Libya. \*I will not to contact people in Arabic.* Such a misuse might be attributed to learners incomplete mastering of the rules of using prepositions with verbs.

Another type of misuse observed in this study involved the confusion between the prepositions 'to' and 'in'. Certain verbs in English require certain prepositions. For example; the verb (*interested*) requires the preposition (*in*) to illustrate the direction of interest. However, some learners in this study used the preposition (*to*) instead of (*in*), such as: *\*I am interested to learn English.* This could be attributed to their lack of knowledge of the type of prepositions that accompanies certain verbs in English.

Another type of misuse of the preposition (*to*) in this study was the misuse of (*to*) in phrase instead of the use of (*with*) preposition. In English, the phrase (*connected to*) expresses physical connection as in the example (*my computer is connected to the printer*). While the phrase (*Connected with*) expresses non-physical connection as in the example (*I was connected with my students*). Students in this study committed errors such as: *\*English help me to connect to people.*The

reason could be because of students' overgeneralization of the use of the preposition (to) with verbs to mean both physical and non-physical connection.

#### **Misuse of the Pronoun 'it'**

The students in this study produced the pronoun (it) with its antecedent in one syntactic position in a sentence. For instance; they committed errors such as: \* *English it will help me in future.* \* *the advantage of English it is important.* \* *The language it is French because I like French but difficult.*

As illustrated above, the students located the pronouns (it) in the sentences above simultaneously with their antecedents: *English*, *the advantage of English*, and *the language* respectively. Apart from rhetorical devices, this is not syntactically accepted in Standard English. This misuse of the pronoun „it“ could be attributed to learners' insufficient mastery of the syntactic rule of using the pronoun (it) in English sentences.

This study also revealed errors in noun-pronoun agreement. In English, singular nouns must be accompanied by singular pronouns. For example, the pronoun 'it' must agree in number with the noun it refers to. In some cases, in this study, learners did not provide proper number agreement when using the pronoun 'it' to refer to nouns. For instance, students committed errors such as:

\* *English and Arabic I can speak in it.* \* *English and Arabic it is very important the languages.*

In the above examples, learners incorrectly used the singular pronoun 'it' to refer to 'English and Arabic,' which are two nouns. This demonstrates a lack of understanding of noun-pronoun agreement. When a sentence has a compound subject (like 'English and Arabic'), the pronoun should be plural. This error likely stems from a lack of knowledge of the syntactic rule that requires plural pronouns to refer to plural subjects. This study also discovered errors in the use of the pronoun "it" regarding its antecedent. While "it" is gender-neutral and can refer to both masculine and feminine antecedents, it is typically used to refer to inanimate objects, abstract concepts, or ideas. However, in this study some students incorrectly used 'it' to refer to people. For example, a learner said, \* *You can communicate people when it is not from same country.*

#### **Misuse of the Conjunction "And"**

One of the misuses in this study was the misuse of the conjunction 'and'. Generally speaking, 'and' as a conjunction is used to join two words, phrases, or clauses that are grammatically equal. It is a crucial coordinator since it reveals the organization and cohesion of speech while speaking. However; some learners in this study misused 'and' at the early beginning of their speech before they mention anything to be coordinated. For instance; a learner said: \* *and I learn English because it help me.* This would be because the learner's ignorance of the specific uses of the conjunction 'and' and overgeneralized using it in all occasions.

Additionally, learners misused „and“ to coordinate grammatical items which are not equal. For example: \* *when I a child I like English and beautiful language.* The students used the conjunction 'and' to join a verb phrase (I like English) with a noun phrase (beautiful language). Elements within a coordinate structure should be of the same grammatical type, such as two nouns (NPs) or two verbs (VPs). Learners' difficulties with coordination may be due to a lack of knowledge regarding these syntactic rules. Another learner misused 'and' to coordinate an adjective (important) with a noun (learning), she said: \* *English is very important and learning.*

#### **Misuse of the Preposition 'In'**

Another area of difficulty was the use of the preposition 'in'. In English, 'in' is used to link nouns, pronouns, and phrases with other words in a sentence. However, the use of 'in' can be challenging for learners since there is no definite rule for choosing it. Therefore, learners in this study misused it in many cases such as \* *I like English and I like read English story in the night.*

The misuse of the preposition 'in' might be attributed to interference of learners' first language (Arabic). Another error identified was the misuse of the preposition 'in' with the verb "talk." The phrasal verb "talk in" usually refers to the manner of speaking, such as voice quality or the language used. In contrast, "talk with" describes the act of communicating with someone. However, some learners in this study incorrectly used "talk in" to refer to communication, as illustrated by the example: \* *English helps me talk to anybody I want talking.* This mistake likely arises from learners' difficulty in distinguishing between the meanings of "talk in" and "talk with."

Another instance of misuse involved the preposition "in" with the verb "talk." Some students in this study incorrectly said, \* *I learn English and I like talking in myself in English.* They used "talk in myself" to describe self-dialogue, while the correct phrase would be "talk to myself." This error suggests a lack of understanding between the phrasal verbs "talk in" (referring to the manner of speaking) and "talk to" (referring to the act of communicating with someone)

Another misuse of the preposition was in replacing 'it' with 'at' such as \* *when I speak English people smile in me.* The students used 'smile in me' instead of saying 'smile at me'. The reason behind this might be because of learner's lack of knowledge of uses of the preposition 'in'.

### Misuse of the Auxiliary Verb 'Is'

The misuse of the auxiliary verb „is“ was also committed by students in this study. In English, "is" as an auxiliary verb is used (as a helping verb) to help the main verb to express tense, mood, or voice. The auxiliary verb "Is" is used with singular subjects (subject-verb agreement). However, learners in this study used that singular auxiliary verb with plural nouns: *\*English and Arabic is giving me good things in future. \*grammar and pronunciation is not helping me for English, it is difficult.* The examples illustrate that the auxiliary verb was used to refer to two coordinated nouns in the subject position (English and Arabic / grammar and pronunciation) respectively. The reason behind this could be because learners might treat the two coordinated nouns in the subject position as one singular subject. This might be because learners were not familiar that in English, coordinated nouns in a subject position are treated as plural nouns and are assigned a plural auxiliary verb.

This study also identified instances of misuse involving the auxiliary verb "is." In English, "is" usually precedes the subject in questions but follows the subject in affirmative sentences. However, some students incorrectly placed "is" before the subject in affirmative sentences, as demonstrated in the example: *"Is English good for me because it helps me in the future"* This error indicates that learners may require further practice with affirmative sentence structure.

### Misuse of the Pronoun 'I'

Another common error identified in this study was the misuse of the first-person singular pronouns "I" and "me." These pronouns refer to the speaker, with "I" serving as the subject pronoun (e.g., "I speak Arabic") and "me" functioning as the object pronoun (e.g., "English helps me to find a job"). However, the findings of this study revealed that some students did not consistently differentiate between these two pronouns. For example, some learners incorrectly constructed sentences such as *"\*English help I to work.*

Another misuse of the pronoun "I" in this study was that some students used "I" in the object position instead of using the pronoun "me" such as in the following example: *\*English for my sister and I is important because we travel.*

### Misuse of the Pronoun 'you'

The lowest frequency of misuse was in the pronoun "you". Some learner failed to use the pronoun you properly in speaking. However, some students showed difficulty in using "you" correctly. In particular, some students demonstrated difficulty in distinguishing between the subject pronoun "you" and possessive pronoun "your" such as in *\*you can speak you Arabic language.*

This might be attributed to the overgeneralization of the rule regarding this pronoun.

### Factors Contributing to Misuse

This study tried to figure out **what** were the most frequent function words used by first-semester students at Benghazi University, and **how** these function words were used in students' speech. It also attempted to answer questions on **why** certain misuses were committed and possibly traced the sources of these misuses. Based on the results of this study, there are number of reasons behind the misuse of function words. And in order to provide full-spectrum picture of these reasons, multidisciplinary questions of **what**, **how**, and **why** were presented to account for the misuses of function words.

1. Some reasons behind the misuses of function words could be attributed to **what** learners' knowledge and understanding of these words:
  - Learners' relatively limited knowledge of function word could be attributed to the difficulty of learning these words. This difficulty lies in the fact that the use of function words is constrained by complex grammatical relationship between function words and other content words in a sentence. For instance, the use of the pronoun "it" is restricted to singular impersonal previously identified content word; While the use of the pronoun "you" requires singular or plural personal directly identified content word.
  - Learners' knowledge of function words might be confused and disturbed by grammatical exceptions of uses of function words which might make them difficult to understand and apply.
  - Learners' limited knowledge of function words might not go beyond their oral use in sentences; some learners were not able to recognize contextual constrains of function words. For example; the use of different prepositions with one verb (e.g talk in, talk to, talk about, and talk with) is contextually determined.
2. Other reasons of misuse of function words could be related to **how** learners used function words in their oral production.
  - Learners' increased repetition of function words in hesitation could be attributed to their desire to fulfill slots in their oral speech.
  - Other learners use of function words in hesitation might be attributed to their inability to



rapidly recognize grammatical constraints and rules of function words while speaking.

- Reason for why some learners were more successful than others in the mastery and use of function words could be attributed to the diverse learning experiences those successful learners had been exposed to. Mastery of function words is not only influenced by the frequency with which learners encounter them. Instead, it is the variety of learning experiences—such as reading, classroom activities, and real-life communication—that plays a major role in their learning. Words that are learned in a wide range of learning situations would be more efficiently learned and used than those presented in a limited range of settings. (Adelman, et al, 2006).

### **Solutions and Strategies for Learning and Teaching Function Words**

Learning function words and their accurate appearance in learners' oral production seems to be a major problem for most learners of English as a foreign language. These grammatical words are essential to convey grammatical meaning necessary for sentences interpretations. Some learners lack knowledge of function word uses; others made complete ignorance of these rules. While some learners made incomplete application of rules; others had overgeneralized these rules. Some solutions can be summarized as follows:

- Function words should be presented in communicative situations for EFL learners in order to focus students' attention on the communicative uses of function words.
- Quality of instructions would make differences in learning function words. Adopting a combination of different strategies and techniques of teaching could widen students' limited knowledge of function words in particular and in language in general.
- Placing important emphasis on communicative activities that expose learners to function words in a variety of contexts would enhance students' oral production and extend their understanding of these words.

### **Conclusion**

The process of data analysis used in this study showed **what** were the most frequent function words used in learners' oral production. The most frequently used word was the pronoun "I" (11.17%), followed by the use of the preposition "to" (7.44%). The definite article "the" was used frequently (6.64%), followed by the auxiliary verb "is" (5.73%), the preposition "in" (5.67%), the conjunction "and" (5.38%), and the pronoun "it" (5.32%). The pronoun "you" had the lowest frequency of use at 3.43%. The findings of this study also revealed **how** these most frequent function words occurred in students' speech. It was observed that (78%) of the frequent use of function words was in correct use to express grammatical meaning in sentences, and (11.2%) of the frequent use of function words was in hesitation (self-repetition). The lowest percentage of frequent use of function words was in the misuse of these words (10.8%). The study identified several reasons why students misuse function words in their oral speech. The most important of which is that grammatical rules for using function words are difficult to learn. Second, grammatical exceptions of uses of function words make them challenging for learners to understand and apply. Third, learners sometimes fail to recognize contextual constraints for certain uses of function words. Finally, learners' use of function words in hesitation was to gain time for self-correction and planning.

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