The English Strong, Weak and Contracted Forms and the Related Language Problems of Congolese EFL

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Abstract: This study investigates the problems Congolese students have when learning English as a foreign language, specifically regarding the acquisition and utilization of English strong, weak, and contracted forms, elements crucial for natural-sounding and comprehensible spoken English. The research problem centers on the tendency of these learners to over-rely on literal pronunciation, neglecting the nuances of vowel reduction, stress patterns, and contractions, leading to communication difficulties. Employing observational and interview-based methodologies, the study analyzes the pronunciation patterns of Congolese EFL learners to identify common errors and underlying causes, including spelling pronunciation, overgeneralization, a lack of vowel reduction, and interference from previous languages. The conclusions highlight the need for targeted pedagogical interventions that emphasize phonetics instruction, practice with audiovisual materials, and exposure to native speaker language through immersion or media, and awareness of common orthographic errors. The importance of this work comes from its potential of informing EFL teachers teaching practices in the Congolese context, ultimately improving learners' pronunciation, fluency, and overall communicative competence, thus supporting the Ministry of National Education's efforts to integrate English into the national curriculum.

Keywords: *Contracted Forms, Strong Forms, and Weak Forms.*

I. INTRODUCTION

English is a widely spoken language around the world, and its complexity can pose challenges for English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly those from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Brown, 2007; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). One aspect of English that often presents difficulties for Congolese EFL learners is using both full and shortened versions of words. These versions play a crucial role in English grammar and pronunciation, and mastering them is essential for effective communication in the language (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010; Levis, 2005).

The strong form refers to the full pronunciation of a word, while the weak form involves the reduction or omission of certain sounds in connected speech (Underhill, 1994; Roach, 2009). Contracted forms, on the other hand, are shortened versions of words or phrases, such as "can't" for "cannot" or "I'm" for "I am". Understanding and using these forms correctly can significantly enhance a learner's fluency and comprehension in English (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010).

Research has shown that EFL learners often struggle with the correct usage of strong, weak, and contracted forms in English. Furqan Abdul-Ridha (2022). Congolese EFL learners likely face similar challenges. And this can lead to misunderstandings, miscommunications, and a lack of confidence in speaking the language. Therefore, it is crucial for educators and language instructors to address these learning problems and provide targeted support to help Congolese EFL learners overcome these challenges.

In a study by Mwepu (2020), it was found that Congolese EFL learners tend to rely on literal translations from their native language when using English strong, weak, and contracted forms. This can result in errors in pronunciation, grammar, and syntax, hindering their entire language proficiency. By understanding the specific difficulties faced by Congolese EFL learners in mastering these forms, educators can tailor their teaching strategies and materials to better support their learning needs.

The English strong, weak, and contracted forms present unique learning challenges for Congolese EFL learners. By addressing these challenges through targeted instruction, practice, and feedback, educators can help improve the language proficiency and communication skills of Congolese EFL learners. It is essential to recognize the importance of mastering these forms in order to facilitate effective language

learning and promote successful communication in English.

Nadya Khoirunnisa et al. (2022) In addition, to be able to communicate, foreign language learners must master speaking which is one of the most important basic language skills, (Dewi, Kultsum & Armadi, 2016). Hence, speaking is needed to communicate effectively in different contexts. In line with this, Leong & Ahmadi (2017) states that to explain something and convey information, people needs communication.

II. FIELD OF STUDY

Our field of study is '*English pronunciation'* including phonology and phonetics on the one hand and language variation on the other hand.

➤ Aim and Objectives
The ministry of national education has decided to introduce English in the Congolese curriculum. This shows that it is necessary for Congolese to learn English together with French and other vehicular languages.

This paper deals with the English strong, weak and contracted forms and the related learning problems encountered by Congolese EFL learners.

Our main intention in researching on this topic turns around:

The examination of the different uses of the English weak, strong and contracted forms in order to determine the major pronunciation difficulties encountered by EFL learners.

The proposal of some practical ways of teaching and improving English pronunciation classes, insisting on how weak and contracted forms are used.

➤ Problem and Hypothesis
EFL learners tend to pronounce fully the English function words, on the hypothesis that there should be no difference between strong and weak pronunciation of these words. Consequently their English will sound strange and unnatural to the native speakers.

➤ Methods and Approaches
The methods and approaches that we are going to use here are the following:

- Observation.
- Interviewing and listening to non-native speakers' speech.

➤ Organisation of the Study
A part from the general introduction, this paper or study will be subdivided into two major parts. The first part deals with the definition, description and uses of the full, shortened, and clipped forms in English; and the second part will deal with the problems encountered by EFL learners and remedies proposed, followed by general conclusion.

➤ Part I: Definition, Description and Uses of Full, Shortened, and Clipped Forms in English

- ### General considerations and description of the full, shortened, and clipped forms in English.
The use of strong or weak forms does not only depend on the meaning of the sentence, but especially on the circumstances in which it (the word) is pronounced.

An academic speech or a declaration, will present fewer weak forms than a common (familiar) conversation.

In spoken English, grammar words (like 'the,' 'a,' 'is,' etc.) can sound two different ways: strong or weak. Think about how you say a word if someone asks you directly what it is – that's the strong form. Or if you're emphasizing a word to contrast it with something else, that's also strong.

However, when those same grammar words are just part of a normal sentence, and you're not emphasizing them, they usually sound weaker, as Akinjobi & Adenike (2009) pointed out.

These weaker forms often happen because the vowel sound gets reduced; usually to that neutral 'uh' sound we call a schwa (/ə/). So, where a word might have a clear vowel sound when said strongly, it gets softened to a schwa when it's said weakly within a sentence, according to Akinjobi & Adenike (2009)

According to Kassiani (2023), "contractions are words or phrases that have been shortened by omission of one or more letters."

- ### Vital Importance of Teaching Pronunciation
When you're speaking a foreign language, people need a bit of time to really get a feel for your grammar and vocabulary. But pronunciation? That's instant. Just a few words, and they know right away if you're nailing it or totally off. And let's be real, first impressions matter *a lot*, and they're super hard to shake! (Jolanta, 2015)

But it's not just about making a good first impression, though that's important. Clear pronunciation is crucial for actually communicating effectively. If you're messing up the sounds, it can lead to confusion and even completely break down the conversation. Think of the tourist in London who wanted *soup* but mispronounced it as "*soap*" and ended up getting directions to the bathroom! That's the kind of trouble bad pronunciation can cause.

To show how much important it is to master pronunciation, Jolanta (2015 opcit) in his book 'Pronunciation In EFL Instruction, told the story about his conversation with a Polish student, the latter was talking concerning her life experience and was saying it over and over how much she hated somethinbg at school. Jolanta was totally stumped! Was she talking about the *staff*, like the teachers? Or the *stuff* they were learning, like the curriculum? In that situation, either one could have made sense.

And that's just one example! There are tons of stories out there – some funny, some serious, even some downright tragic – that show why one *needs,* clear pronunciation. Probably the most shocking is the Tenerife airport disaster in 1977, where two planes collided, killing over 200 people, as mentioned by Jolanta. The investigation pointed to a misunderstanding between the pilot and air traffic control caused by the pilot's poor English pronunciation. Talk about a high-stakes mistake!

- *Pronunciation in Classroom is Often Neglected*

You know, it's funny, but almost every book or article about teaching pronunciation starts out the same way: by pointing out how neglected it is! People often call pronunciation the "Cinderella" of English language teaching, like it's the overlooked stepchild as it's pointed out by (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996; Kelly, 2000)

Hewings (2004) even says that even though a lot of students really want good pronunciation and are willing to work for it, teachers just don't seem to make it a priority. Derwing and Munro (2005) feel the same way, complaining that pronunciation is basically pushed to the sidelines in language studies.

It's not just one or two people saying this, either. Lots of experts agree, whether they're talking about teaching English as a second language or as a foreign language. This proves that this isn't just a local problem; it's a global thing! (20125, opcit)

If pronunciation class is often neglected as quoted by jolatan (2015, opcit) is for some reasons. First off, let's be honest: pronunciation is often seen as the hardest part of learning a new language to really nail. You see tons of people who get super good at the grammar and know a ton of words in their second language, but their pronunciation? Still needs a lot of work.

Secondly, as argued by Elliot (1995) «teachers tend to view pronunciation as the least useful of the basic language skills and therefore they generally sacrifice teaching pronunciation in order to spend valuable class time on other areas of the language».

Jolanta (2015, opcit) gives another big reason why a lot of non-native English teachers might shy away from really diving into pronunciation is that they're not super confident in their own pronunciation skills. Basically, if a teacher's got a strong grasp of how English sounds, they're way more likely to focus on helping their students with pronunciation. And yeah, the opposite is true too.

So, if you don't train teachers well in pronunciation basics, they're either going to ignore it altogether or just do a really bad job of teaching it.

- *Contracted Forms*

The use of weak form gives place to some contractions that can affect the orthography or spelling.

A contraction as explained Rachel Smith (2015) is basically taking two words and squeezing them into one shorter word. For example, instead of saying "did not," you smush it together to get "didn't."

You'll hear them everywhere, from formal writing to casual chats. Some students avoid them, thinking they're not clear enough. But that's totally wrong! They're perfectly clear, and honestly, if you want to sound natural and American, you have to use them.

So, why do we even bother with contractions? Well, they help us make our speech flow more smoothly. They chop down some of those less important words and make them shorter. It's kind of the same reason we reduce certain function words – it gives us shorter sounds to play off the longer, more important words and syllables, creating a nice rhythm.

➤ *N'T Contractions*

- **Is not** = isn't [ˈɪz ənt│]: Isn't it nice?
- **Are not** = aren't [ɑɪnt│]: We aren't late.
- **Was not** = wasn't [wʌz ənt│]: It wasn't bad.
- **Were not** = weren't [wɜɪnt│]: We weren't there.
- **Have not** = haven't [ˈhæv ənt│]: I haven't seen it.
- **Has not** = hasn't [ˈhæz ənt│]: He hasn't seen it.
- **Had not** = hadn't [ˈhæd│ənt│]: We hadn't heard that.
- **Will not** = won't [woʊnt│]: I won't go.
- **Would not** = wouldn't [ˈwʊd│ənt│]: I wouldn't say that.
- **Could not** = couldn't [ˈkʊd│ənt│]: I couldn't see.
- **Should not** = shouldn't [ˈʃʊd│ənt│]: I shouldn't say this.
- **Do not** = don't [doʊnt│]: Don't say that.
- **Does not** = doesn't [ˈdʌz ənt│]: It doesn't say.
- **Did not** = didn't [ˈdɪd│ənt│]: We didn't know

➤ *The use of Dual Pronunciation for Function and Contracted Words*

Here we are going to have a quick look at the use of dual pronunciation for function words and contracted words.

Peter Roach (1998) makes a good point: basically, most of the words that can be said in a strong or weak way are what we call "function words." These aren't like nouns or verbs that have a clear dictionary definition. Instead, function words are words like auxiliary verbs, prepositions, and conjunctions. While you can pronounce these words in their full, strong forms, they're usually said in their weaker forms. It's key to remember that there are times when only the strong form makes sense, and other times when the weak form is the standard way to say it. There are some pretty straightforward guidelines, though. We generally use the strong form when:

- For many weak-form words, when they occur at the end of a sentence.
- When a weak-form word is being contrasted with another word. For instance 'The letter's from him, not to him (ðə 'letəz 'from im no 'tu: im.
- When a weak-form word is given stress for the purpose of emphasis. (e.g. You *must give me more money. Ju mʌst giv mi mɔː mʌni*

- *When a weak-form word is being '' cited '' or "quoted''. (You shouldn't put 'and' at the end of a sentence. 'Ju*

'ʃudnt put 'ænd ət ði 'end əv ə 'sentence.

- Here are some words having a double pronunciation.

Table 1 Words with Dual Pronunciation

Nouns	Land	lænd	lənd
	Man	mæn	mən
Pronouns	Him	Him	Im
	Her	hɜ:	ər
	Them	ðæm	əm
	Your	jɔ:	jə
	Us	ʌs	əs
Prepositions	For	fɔ:	fə
	From	frɒm	frəm
	To	Tu:	tə
	At	Æt	ət
Conjunctions	And	ænd	ən
	But	bʌt	bət
	Nor	nɔ:	nə
	Or	ɔ:	ə
Auxiliaries	Have	hæv	həv
	Be	Bi:	Bi
Modals	Should	ʃud	ʃəd
	Could	kud	kəd
	Will	wil	Wl

- *Strong vs. Weak pronunciation*

This part is concerned with the difference between strong and weak pronunciation. The strong form of a word is the pronunciation it has when said by itself or in isolation; this form is used in connected speech whenever the words is stressed; it is also used in certain cases when the word is 'unstressed'. Whereas the weak form of a word is used only in unstressed positions. Now the words possessing strong and weak forms occur much more often in unstressed than in stressed position ; it follows that the weak forms of these words are much more frequent than their strong forms-indeed it might be said that in connected speech (but not in reading a list of separate words) forms.

Throughout this part the term 'stressed'= strongly stressed, and the term 'unstressed' weakly stressed.

A weak form of a word differs from its strong form through either a change in vowel sound or the omission of a sound (vowel or consonant). When there is a difference of vowel sound, it is found in most cases that the weak form has [ə] where the strong form has some other vowel : example : for fɔ :, but that is for you/ ðæts fə 'ju :

The following words are the chief ones in which the weak form, has [ə]: - a, an, and, are, as, at, but, can, do, (before consonants), for, from, had, has, have, must, of, sir, some, than, that, the them, to, was, were.

Some words that use the [i:] sound in their strong form have a weak form that uses the [i] sound. The following are the chief words having an important weak form with i : be [bi :, bi] been [bi :n, bin] me [mi :, mi] the ði :, ði] (before vowels).

Let's note that English people differ considerably from one another in their use of weak forms, and individual speakers are often by no means, consistent in their own pronunciation.

The only safe procedure is to train yourself to observe how English people really speak. And through native speakers of English may be inconsistent in their use of weak forms, the foreigner will be advised to submit to the guidance of rules wherever such can be formulated.

In general foreigners tend to employ the strong forms of words in all cases, and they have the greatest difficulty in using weak forms correctly.

Excessive use of strong forms can make spoken English sound unnatural. Fluent English requires a good understanding and consistent use of weak forms, ideally learned from the beginning for it is a great mistake to imagine that the use of weak forms will come naturally later on, when speech habits, some of them faulty, have become firmly fixed.

Those who have already learnt to speak some English and have acquired the strong form habit will be in a position to begin to break down the habit after a careful study of this part. i.e. weak and strong form pronunciation ; they may then form correct habits by reading extensively from phonetically transcribed texts.

The use of too many strong forms in connected speech, besides being an obstacle to fluency, produces upon the English ear the impression that all the unimportant words are being strongly stressed and so made to stand out unduly; consequently, the important words in a sentence do not stand out in the way they should. This is a potential source of much actual misunderstanding when foreigners try to speak English.

- *Rules*

    All the prepositions, nouns, articles, pronouns, auxiliary verbs, adjectives, etc. are stressed when ending a sentence. e.g. Where do you come from ?

- When they are in the middle of a sentence, they are only stressed if the speaker wants to draw the attention of their listeners. E.g. I come from Goma.
- List of the fifty (50) words subject to full and reduced pronunciation

This part is concerned with one of the most remarkable features of English pronunciation; it deals with a group of about fifty very common words of one syllable which have more than one pronunciation in the speech of single individual, depending on their position in a sentence, the degree of stress which they bear, and other factors. These words have what is called a "strong form" and one or more "weak forms", PETER A.D, McCarthy (1944).

Table 2 Fifty Words Subject to Full and Reduced Pronunciation

Word	Strong form	Weak form
A	Ei	ə
An	Æn	ən, n
Am	Æm	əm, m
he	Hi:	I
Are	ɑ:	ə (ər before vowels)
Was	wɒz	wəz,
Were	weər	wə
Be	Bi:	Bi
As	Æz	əz
At	Æt	ət
To	Tu:	tə, 't
For	fɔ:	fə
Of	ɒv	əv
And	Æn	ən, n
Or	ɔ:	ə (only before a consonant
Nor	nɔ:	nə
Her	hɜ:	ə (only final)
Him	Him	Im
From	frɒm	frəm
But	bʌt	bət
Do	Du:	də, (before consonant) 'd (before unstressed word)
Is	Iz	Z (after a voiceless sound)
His	Hiz	Iz
Me	Mi:	Mi
Must	mʌst	məst, məs
Not	nɒt	Nt, n
Can	Kæn	kən, kn
Have	Hæv	həv, əv (not initially) v (only after a vowel)
Has	Hæz	həz əz (not initial) z (after a voiced sound)
Had	Hæd	həd əd (not initially) d (only after a vowel)
Been	Bi:n,	Bin
There	ðeər	ðə
The	ði:	ði, ðə
Till	Til	Tl
Us	ʌs	əs
Your	jɔ:	jə
Will	Wil	Wl, l
Would	Wud	wəd, əd, d
Land	Lænd	lənd

Man	Mæn	mən
Men	Men	mən
Penny	Peni	Pni
Sir	sɜː	sə
Some	sʌ	səm, sm
Than	Ðæn	ðən, ðn
That	Ðæt	ðət
Should	ʃud	ʃəd
Shall	ʃæl	ʃəl, ʃl, ʃ
Saint	Seint	sənt, snt, sən, sn
could	Kud	kəd

➢ *Part Ii: Problems Encountered by Efl Learners and Remedies Proposed*

• *Efl Learners' Difficulties in Acquiring the English Strong, Weak and Contracted Forms.*

Throughout this part we are going to see difficulties encountered by EFL learners in acquiring the English strong, weak and contracted forms. And what we or anyone specializing in the English language can do in order to help them.

• *Spelling Pronunciation*

Because non-native or EFL learners have a tendency to pronounce the words as they are spelled (i.e. letter by letter/ word for word), so they produce such errors as:

✓ I could/ ai kuld/ instead of / ai kud or kəd/
✓ I would /ai wuld/ instead of / ai wud or wəd/
✓ Look at him/ lu kat him/ instead of /luk ət im/
✓ Will you have some coffee? / wil ju have same kɔfi/ instead of/ wil jə hæv səm kɔfi/
✓ I am not very well /ajəm nɔt veri wel/ instead of /aim nɔt veri wel/
✓ We have no time to spare/ wi had no taim tu sper/ instead of / wid nou taim tə spɛər/
✓ I often/ ai oftən/ instead of /ai ɔˈfn/
✓ Psychology/psi: kolodji/ instead of/ saikɔlədʒi/
✓ Psychiatrist/ psi: ʃiatrist/ instead of/ sai kaitrist/

Let's note that EFL learners have doubt about spelling pronunciation; so they pronounce words as they come to their mind or automatic thinking. This is why their sentence is full of mispronunciation, because they cannot tell if a pronunciation is a true spelling pronunciation.

Let's note also that despite the vast amount of EFL research available, spelling has been surprisingly neglected. This oversight is concerning, given the significant impact of spelling errors on EFL students.

English orthography exhibits a significant lack of phonemic correspondence. The phoneme /f/, for instance, can be represented by multiple graphemes (e.g., "f," "ph," "gh"). Spelling errors in EFL learners are thus attributable to both this inherent orthographic inconsistency and L1 transfer – the application of their native language's spelling rules.i.e. they spell as they pronounce, overlooking the difference between English spelling and pronunciation as pointed out by Ehsan Mohammed (2019) in his article on Challenges of Teaching

English Communication to Arabic Students, the author found the same thing with Arabic students.

• *Overgeneralisation*

Overgeneralization as pointed out by Alycia K.: English Language tutor, happens when someone applies a regular grammar rule in a situation where it doesn't fit. Think of examples like "we runned," "they hitted," or «mom buyed," «dad sayed." In these cases, the "-ed" ending, which usually makes a verb past tense, is being added to irregular verbs like "run," "hit," "say", and "buy." Even though these words aren't correct, they're actually interesting!

So it is the same thing we find with EFL learners, they have some difficulties in acquiring the weak and contracted forms. So they have a tendency to apply the rule in all situations (even in exceptions). For instance the pronunciation of 'from' as spelled [frɔm], they use it every time, even when it should be pronounced [frəm] as in the sentences:

✓ I come from church, pronounced as [ai kʌm frɔm tʃɛː tʃ].
✓ It comes from there, pronounced as [it kʌmz frɔm ðəer]

▪ *The pronunciation of the Preposition [to]*
▪ e.g. I go to school, pronounced as [ai gou tə skul]
▪ *The conjunction [and], pronounced as [ən]*
▪ e.g. You and I [ju ən ai]
▪ *The preposition [for], pronounced as [fə]*
▪ e.g. It's for you [its fə ju]

Note that there are several forms of overgeneralization used by EFL learners use at one time or another.

• *No Vowel Reduction in Unstressed Syllables, All Syllables Being Equally Stressed and Fully Pronounced*

Another problem encountered by EFL learners, is vowel reduction in unstressed syllables. A language is like a tune or melody i.e. every words don't sound the same, the reason why we have unstressed and stressed syllables.

But when an EFL learner or a non-native speaker of English speaks, we hear that all syllables are equally stressed and fully pronounced i.e. there is no such a reduction. We have "to remember, however, the general tendency of 'schwa' to replace any English vowel in unstressed syllable" (Hayes 2009). Whereas full vowels are distinguished by height, backness, and roundness.

Here are some examples given by professor BUSAKI (2010) in his class of 'English phonology and morphology' for second undergraduate students:

[u]=[ə] ; furniture, Saturday, measure, difficult, suppose, figure [o]=[ə] : color, oppose, season, lemon, chocolate, comfortable, history

- *Interference from Previous Languages*
BUSAKI ONKEN (2010, opcit), due to the interference of their mother tongues or previous languages, many foreigners and EFL learners tend to pronounce some English words with the accent from the previous languages they know.

Each language has its own permissible sounds combination to form syllables. The rules that govern these allowable and non-allowable syllable structures in languages are known as its phonotactic constraints.

A part from phonotactic constraints there is also the problem of phonotactic interference, i.e. tendency for speakers of a given language to transfer their language's phonotactic habits into the target (English) language.

The result is strange foreign accent which might develop into major…or borrowing difficulties.

e.g. when Lingala speakers pronounce the word '*milk*', which is borrowed from English, as [miliki], they are applying two Lingala phonotactic rules : one which forbids consonant (especially final) clusters (CC#) preferring a consonant

+vowel sequence (CV#) instead; the second which does not allow Lingala words to end in consonants (-c#), but nearly always in vowels. This leads our Lingala speakers to insert a (epenthetic) vowel between the two consonants so as to break what would be an unfamiliar sequence (cc) i.e. a consonant followed by a consonant, and still add another final vowel (generally the same as the immediately preceding vowel to concord the 'vowel harmony' constraint rule) to annihilate the occurrence of a final consonant.

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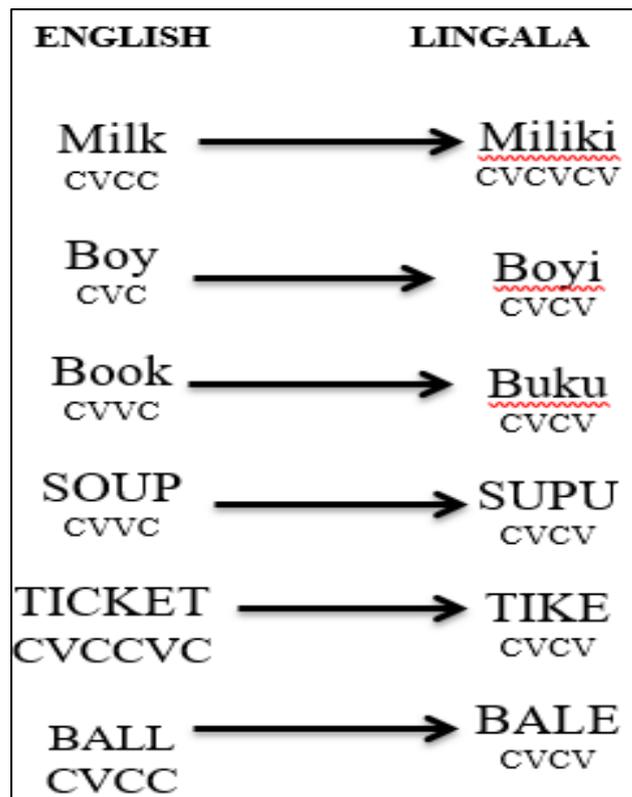harmony' constraint rule) to annihilate the occurrence of a final consonant.

Fig 1 Phonotactic interference between English and Lingala

- *Remedial Proposals*
What is a remedy? According to OED (Oxford English Dictionary) remedy is any medicine or treatment for a disease, or something to correct a wrong or an evil.

In short for those EFL learners who suffer from the difference between content and function words, we just want to propose some remedies in order to help them acquire the intelligibility that is the most important element in pronunciation.

- ✓ Teachers of English to speakers of other languages, have to provide some classes on spelling pronunciation.
- ✓ To teach the phonetics transcription of weak and strong forms.
- ✓ Insisting on the use of weak forms and vowel reduction
- ✓ To teach the language with some audiovisual materials
- ✓ To give (a) scholarships to EFL learners in order for them to visit some English speaking countries, especially England and the United States of America in order to practice the language freely with native speakers.
- ✓ EFL learners have to do their best to listen to some English songs, every day, until they reach some knowledge or the mastery of content and function words.
- ✓ EFL learners have to be encouraged to speak English every single chance they get.
- ✓ EFL learners have to be taught by good and qualified teachers.
- ✓ EFL learners got to exercise much on tongue twisters in order to reach some kind of fastness while speaking

- ✓ EFL learners got to read a lot of English books
- ✓ First, EFL teachers should pinpoint the *specific* spelling errors their students commonly make – create a personalized "error inventory." Then, design dictation exercises that directly target these problem areas. Adapt existing dictation materials, or create new ones, replacing difficult words with a blank space for students to fill in after careful study of the original paragraph.
- ✓ To help students navigate the inconsistencies between English pronunciation and spelling, teachers should actively highlight these differences. Make learners aware of words that sound alike but are spelled differently. A useful approach is to categorize frequently misspelled words based on specific spelling patterns *before* presenting them. For example, using the error inventory, create a list of words containing the /f/ sound, classifying them according to their spelling ("f," "gh," or "ph"). Then, dictate words and have students identify the correct spelling category.
- ✓ Address additional challenges inherent in word classification, such as homophones (words sharing pronunciation but differing in spelling, like "plane" and "plain," or "right" and "write") and homographs (words with identical spelling but different meanings or pronunciations, such as "bear" as an animal versus "bear" as a verb). Consistent practice with these types of words can help separate spelling from pronunciation, a beneficial outcome when working to improve spelling skills.
- ✓ Emphasize the critical role dictionaries play in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. A dictionary should act as a constant resource during writing, empowering students to produce accurate written work from the outset. This approach aligns with the audio-lingual principle, which suggests that learning stems from correct responses rather than errors. However, reliance on a dictionary should be balanced to avoid hindering the learning process or creating undue delays.
- ✓ Avoid introducing new vocabulary solely through pronunciation. Educators should consistently present the spoken form of new words alongside their written form, as previously mentioned. This simultaneous approach helps EFL students connect the sounds of words to their spellings, facilitating both conscious and subconscious acquisition of English orthography.
- ✓ Promote attentive reading habits in EFL learners, urging them to actively address any instances of misreading. By encouraging this mindful approach, teachers can help students visualize the words they read and connect them to their corresponding written forms.

III. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this research on Congolese EFL learners and their difficulties with English strong, weak, and contracted forms, several implications are drawn. Primarily, the persistent reliance on spelling pronunciation, overgeneralization of rules, and the absence of vowel reduction in unstressed syllables present significant obstacles to achieving natural and comprehensible English pronunciation. These issues, compounded by interference from previous languages (as shown in the examples of phonotactic adaptations) highlight a critical need for pedagogical shifts.

Therefore, EFL educators in the Congolese context should prioritize explicit phonetics instruction, incorporating practical exercises and visual aids that focus on the nuances of English pronunciation, including the contrast between strong and weak forms and the appropriate use of contractions. Moreover, the integration of authentic audiovisual materials (songs, movies, native speaker recordings) is crucial for exposing learners to real-world examples of spoken English and improving their listening comprehension. Teachers should encourage active engagement, providing ample opportunities for students to practice speaking and receive targeted feedback. Further, they should create a learning environment with an emphasis on phonetics and practical use of the language. To help students develop a mastery of English, the research suggests teachers address potential spelling issues, as spelling is often the source of pronunciation errors and provides the students with exercises.

Ultimately, by addressing these specific pronunciation challenges, this research informs and enhances EFL teaching practices in Kinshasa, paving the way for improved language proficiency and successful communication among Congolese EFL learners, thereby furthering the goals of the Ministry of National Education in integrating English into the national curriculum.

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