

# *An Assessment of EFL Learners' Ability to Produce Semi Vowels*

*Hatem Jasim Khudhair*  
Aliraqia University  
College of Arts

## **ملخص البحث**

لا يستطيع متعلم اللغة الأجنبية أن يستخدم الكلمات بشكل انفرادي أو حتى الأقوال بشكل صحيح بدون السيطرة الكاملة على النظام الصوتي لهذه اللغة. بينما يتقصى هذا البحث استخدام أشباه الحركات في اللغة الانكليزية من جانب المتعلمين اللغة الانكليزية من العراقيين، فان نتائجه تم استعمالها لغرض تحديد فيما إذا يستطيع المتعلمون أو لا يستطيعون استخدام أشباه الحركات في اللغة الانكليزية.

يتقصى هذا البحث استخدام أشباه الحركات من جانب المتعلمين العراقيين للغة الانكليزية.

البحث يسلط الضوء على الأخطاء المرتكبة من قبل المتعلمين العراقيين ذو المستوى الجامعي. دفعت هذه الأخطاء الباحث لتنظيم هذا البحث. وان الهدف الرئيسي لهذا البحث هو لغرض اكتشاف المشاكل التي يواجهها المتعلمين للغة الانكليزية في استخدام أشباه الحركات ثم تحليل أخطاء الطلاب وتحديد الأسباب الممكنة لهذه الأخطاء وبناءاً على نتائج البحث تم التوصل إلى الاستنتاجات الكفيلة.



## 1- Introduction:

Semi- vowels are defined as independent vowel-glides in which the speech organs start by forming a close or fairly close vowel and immediately move to another vowel of greater prominence, the initial vowel- position is not held on for any appreciable time. It is the rapid gliding nature of these sounds, combine with the use of rather weak force of exhalation, that renders them consonantal. In English there exist two semi vowels; they are represented phonetically by the letter **W** and **J** (Johns, 1936: 19).

Ladafoged (1975: 209) shows that a semi- vowel is a kind of approximant consisting of a nonsyllabic vowel occurring at the beginning or end of a syllable. When at the beginning of a syllable, It usually consists of a rapid glide from a high vowel position to that of the following vowel. The semi- vowels /w/ and /j/ are like nonsyllabic versions of the English high vowels /i/ and /u/ respectively.

Despite the fact that semi- vowels are generally vocalic, they are treated within the consonant class, mainly because their function is consonantal rather than vowel- like, i.e, they have marginal rather than a central situation in the syllable. /j/ and /w/ occur initially or in an initial cluster preceding a syllabic sounds, e.g, [j+i] **Yiddish** /j i d i ʃ/, [w+i] **wit** /wit/, [j+ið] **year** /j i ə/, [w+iə] **weir** /wið/. The most important feature is that characterize semi- vowels is that they are phonetically like vowels but phonologically like consonants. From the phonetic point of view the articulation of /j/ is practically the same as that of a front close vowel such as /i:/, but is very short. Similarly the production of /w/ is closely related to /u:/ (Gimson, 1980: 211).

The use and evaluation of semi-vowels could be problematic for Iraqi English foreign language learners. In other words, Iraqi student's learning English as a

foreign language encounter pronunciation problems arising from the fact that semi- vowels may be mispronounced by many English students. For example, word **dune** may be pronounced by subjects as /du:n/ instead of /dju:n/. This would lead to distort the shape of the word for an English hearer and he as a result may have a difficulty in recognizing the word.

As such, the word **tune** /tju:n/ is pronounced as /tu:n/. One of the possible reasons for such a problem is the ignorance of these semi- vowels by the learners because of the inadequate knowledge and insufficient teaching on the part of the teacher.

Trask (1996: 68) points out that in English the semi- vowels glide from positions of approximately /i:/ (with spread or neutral lips) and /u:/ (with rounded lips, e.g. **year** /jiə/, **west** /west/. The actual point at which the essential vocalic glide begins depends on the nature of the following sound, e.g, the glide of /j/ to /i:/ in **yeast** /j i: st/ has a closer beginning than that of /j/ to /o/ in **yacht** /jo:t/, and the starting point of /w/ before /u:/ in **woo** /wu:/ is closer than that of /o/ in **what** /wot/. When /j/ is followed by a back close vowel as in **you** /ju:/ or /w/ by a front close vowel as in **we** /wi:/. The starting point need not be as close as in **yeast** and **woo**, since in the first cases the glide is essentially of a front to back direction, rather than a movement of close to more open as in the latter cases.

According to Roach (1983: 110) the starting point varies slightly with different speakers and according to the following vowel, but for the purposes of practical teaching /w/ may be considered to be a variety of /u/. the position of this starting point may be described as follows: the lips are closely rounded; there is raising of the back of the tongue in the direction of the soft palate; the vocal cords are made to vibrate so that that voice is heard. On the other hand, /w/ is that consonantal sound of the letter **w**. it is used when the letter **w** occurs at the

beginning of a syllable except in the group **Wr** in which the **w** is silent or is preceded by a consonant, e.g. **wait** /weɪt/, **twelve** /twelvə/. The letter **U** is generally pronounced /w/ when preceded by **q**, e.g. **quite** /kwaɪt/ and often when preceded by **g**. unstressed syllables, e.g. **language** /lɑŋgwɪdʒ/. This makes a problem for Iraqi students, e.g. the words **quich** /ki:f/, **quay** /ki:/ may be pronounced by many subjects as /kwi f/, /kwei/. as a result, the learners of English as a foreign language may fail to produce /w/ accurately. The researcher sees that this aspect is given no or little attention by the teachers and learners. So, Most subjects may be misled by the spelling of the English word. For example, the words **acquaint**, **conquest** may be pronounced by subjects as /əkweɪnt/, /kɒŋkwest/ instead of /əkweɪnt/, /kɒŋkwɛst/ respectively. The sound /w/ is problematic to many students, especially to Iraqi students. They generally replace it by a different kind of sound, namely one in which the lips are kept flat or rounded.

The sound /w/ causes difficulty to many foreigners, especially to Germans. They generally replace it by a different kind of bilabial fricative consonant, namely one in which the lips are kept flat instead of being rounded and pushed forward and in which the tongue is in neutral position. The sound /w/ causes a difficulty to Africans, many of them have a similar sound in their own language. Most received pronunciation speakers use an ordinary /w/ in words like **what** and **when** and thus make no distinction in their speech between **which** and **witch**, and between **while** and **wile** and so on. Moreover, many Africans, when they attempt to say /hw/, are apt to make the /h/ element much too marked or even to say /kw/, which sounds quite wrong.

Rogers (2000: 103), on the other hand, assumes that the formation of /j/ may be expressed shortly by defining the sound as an unrounded palatal semi-vowel. The

actual sound used in particular words depends to some extent on the nature of the following vowel. The sound /j/ is always closer than the following vowel. Thus, It is very close indeed before /i:/, as in **yield** /ji:ld/ but much less close before sound as /a/ as in **yard** /ja:d/. the distinction may be ignored in the practical teaching of English. The volcanic allophones of /j/ are articulated by the tongue assuming the position for a front half- close to close vowel. The lips are generally neutral or spread, but may anticipate the lip- rounding of the following vowel in such cases as **You** /ju:/. When /j/ follows a fortis, devoicing takes place especially when /j/ follows accented /p, t, k, h/. when /j/ is the final element of accented clusters, only /u:/ or /u/ may follow /j/.

When /j/ is the final element of accented clusters only /u:/ or /u/ may follow /j/. This make a problem for Iraqi students, e.g, the words **pew** /pju:/, **cure** /kju:/, **opulent** /əpjulənt/ may pronounce by many subjects as /pu:/, /ku:/, /əpulənt/. As a result, the learner of English may fail to produce /j/ accurately. So, many subjects may mislead by the spelling of the English word. The sound /j/ is problematic to many students especially to Iraqi students. They generally replace the sound /j/ by the nearest vowel sounds such the front vowel sound /i/ and the buck vowel sound /u/.

The investigation of English semi- vowels that will be carried out in this study is hoped to provide an adequate information about one of the basic problems faced by Iraqi EFL learners. The test will be conducted, will include statistical analysis that may lead to a more satisfactory findings in this area. As to the practical side, the results of the present study may be very helpful to teachers of English, text- book writers, test designers, and they may contribute in evaluation of the materials devoted for the teaching of English.

The situation regarding the difficulties confronting Iraqi learners in so far as the production of English semivowels is concerned necessitates further investigation in this area. A valid explanation to this situation may be attributed to the fact that most teachers of English do not concentrate on this aspect of English phonology and also because accurate pronunciation teaching materials based on analysis have not yet been adequately designed.

The main purpose of the present study is to shed light on the amount of errors committed by Iraqi students of English at the university level. The above mentioned purpose can be realized through the following hypotheses:

- 1- Subjects' performance in producing the semi vowel /w/ is better than their performance in producing the semi vowel /j/.
- 2- Iraqi subjects tend to replace the two semi vowels /w/ and /j/ by a different kind of sound such as /u/ and /i/.

## ***The Test***

### ***2-1 Test objectives***

The objectives of the test are to identify the difficulties faced by Iraqi learners in producing semi-vowels. More specifically, the objectives of the test are:

- 1- Identifying EFL learners' errors in producing semi- vowels in English.
- 2- Finding out the sources of errors that might be felt behind the incorrect usage of semi-vowels.

### ***2-2 Description of the Test***

A Test is constructed to prove what have been hypothesized in the introduction. Accordingly, test, consisting of one question comprising (50) items, have been prepared to be administrated to third year students at the Department of English, College of Arts, University of

Al-Iraqia university. The test is recorded. The subjects' pronunciation is recorded while reading the test items. Each item in the test is selected to measure a particular area in the subjects' production of semi- vowels.

### ***2-3 The Sample***

A sample of Iraqi learners of English constitutes the population of the final administration of the test. For this purpose, third year students at the Department of English, College of Arts, university of Al-Iraqia have been chosen. The total number of the sample is (25) boys and girls. These are the third- year students of the academic year 2013. the reason behind choosing third year students is that they are supposed to be at advanced level, and their ability has developed to certain extent that enables them as experienced students to use semi-vowels correctly.

### ***2-4 Reliability of the Test***

A reliable test is defined as one that gives the same results consistently on different occasions when the conditions of the tests are the same (Harris, 1969; Al-Hamash et al, 1982: 173 and Madsen, 1983: 179). One of the methods that can be used to find out reliability is test-retest method. According to this method, the test is reliable when the scores of both administrations are correspondent. Thus, 25 students of third- year were randomly chosen.

### ***2-5 Validity of the Test***

Gronlund (1976: 79) shows that the most important types of validity are face validity and content validity.

#### ***2-5-1 Face Validity***

Ebel (1972L 55) shows that face validity means the way the test looks to the examinees, test administration, educators and the like. Thus, in order to ensure face validity, the test items are examined by a number of

experts who are known as having profound knowledge in English language.

### **2-5-2 Content Validity**

Gipps (1995: 58) states that the coverage of appropriate and necessary content that tends to be based on professional judgments.

The test of the present study is designed on the basis of a careful analysis of the subjects under investigation that is semivowels in English.

### **2-6 The Administration of the Test**

The test is administered in the language laboratory of English Department, college of Arts at the end of the Academic year 2012.

25 students /third year students/ are recorded in the laboratory individually. The students are given enough time to read the test items silently several times. The students are given numbers from one to twenty five and they are instructed to mention their numbers before starting to read. Then each student is asked to read the test items aloud in order to be recorded. It was taken into consideration the number of words with /w/ was equal to these with /j/.

### **2-7 The Scoring Scheme**

The subjects' production of the test items are compared with that of semi-native speaker (the researcher himself) and scored on the right- wrong basis. Each correct item was given two marks and incorrect one was given zero. The entire test has been scored out of hundred.

### **2-8 The Results of the Test**

The test concerns with the presentation and discussion of the subjects' pronunciation in using semi-vowels. The errors were identified and their percentage

were computed. In addition, attempts were made to determine the possible sources of these errors in order to get at some insights into the nature of the difficulties that EFL college students face in using semi-vowels. After examining the subjects' performance, it was found that they face many difficulties in producing the semi-vowels. The extent to which the subjects encounter these difficulties is indicated in terms of raw score and percentages of errors to verify or refute the hypotheses proposed in the outline of the present study (see table one).

***Table (1): Subjects' Raw Scores of the Test***

Item	Correct	Percent %	Errors	Percent %
1.	10	20	40	80
2.	12	24	38	76
3.	6	12	44	88
4.	10	20	40	80
5.	5	10	45	90
6.	50	100	-	-
7.	25	50	25	50
8.	2	4	48	96
9.	25	50	25	50
10.	6	12	44	88
11.	8	16	42	84
12.	12	24	38	76
13.	14	28	36	72
14.	6	12	44	88
15.	10	20	40	80
16.	30	60	20	40
17.	4	8	46	92
18.	34	68	16	32
19.	20	40	30	60
20.	-	-	50	100
21.	16	32	34	68
22.	10	20	40	80
23.	16	32	34	68

24.	16	32	34	68
25.	20	40	30	60
26.	50	100	-	-
27.	50	100	-	-
28.	50	100	-	-
29.	6	12	44	88
30.	10	20	40	80
31.	2	4	48	96
32.	50	100	-	-
33.	40	80	10	20
34.	48	96	2	4
35.	2	4	48	96
36.	48	96	2	4
37.	8	16	42	84
38.	44	88	6	12
39.	48	96	2	4
40.	2	4	48	96
41.	2	4	48	96
42.	4	8	46	92
43.	6	12	44	88
44.	8	16	42	84
45.	40	80	10	20
46.	10	20	40	80
47.	4	8	46	92
48.	40	80	10	20
49.	36	72	14	18
50.	50	100	-	-
	1025	41%	1475	59%

**Table (2): Subjects' Performance in Using the Semi-Vowel /w/**

Item	Correct	Percent %	Errors	Percent %
3	6	12	44	88
5	5	10	45	90
6	50	100	-	-
7	25	50	25	50
9	25	50	25	50
10	6	12	44	88
13	14	28	36	72
16	30	60	20	40
18	34	68	16	32
21	16	32	34	68
23	16	32	34	68
24	16	32	34	68
26	50	100	-	-
27	50	100	-	-
28	50	100	-	-
32	50	100	-	-
34	48	96	2	4
36	48	96	2	4
37	8	16	42	84
38	44	88	6	12
39	48	96	2	4
42	4	8	46	92
43	6	12	44	88
46	10	20	40	80
47	4	8	46	92
Total	663	26.52	581	23.24%

**Table (3): Subjects' Performance in Using the**

*Semi-Vowel /j/*

Item	Correct	Percent %	Errors	Percent %
1	10	20	40	80
2	12	24	38	76
4	10	20	40	80
8	2	4	48	96
11	8	16	42	84
12	12	24	38	76
14	6	12	44	88
15	10	20	40	80
17	4	8	46	92
19	20	40	30	60
20	-	-	50	100
22	10	20	40	80
25	20	40	30	60
29	6	12	44	88
30	10	20	40	80
31	2	4	48	96
33	40	80	10	20
35	2	4	48	96
40	2	4	48	96
41	2	4	48	96
44	8	16	42	84
45	40	80	10	20
48	40	80	10	20
49	36	72	14	18
50	50	100	-	-
Total	362	14.48	840	33.60%

After checking the results of the test, it is obvious that the subjects' knowledge of semi-vowels is very shallow and they face certain difficulties in using them.

Table (1) reveals that the results obtained show the subjects' erroneous responses are more than their correct responses for most of the items of the test. The overall results indicate that the total number of errors committed

by the subjects in producing /w/ and /j/ is (59%) as presented in table (1). Such percentage indicates that the subjects' ability in producing semi-vowels are disappointing, e.g, all subjects were unsuccessful in producing the semi vowel /j/ in the word **duo** /diu:əu/. The subjects pronounce the word **duo** as /du:/ in stead of /dju:əu/. In general, the subjects who make errors may tend to replace /w/ and /j/ by their correspondent ones such as /u:/, /u/ and /i:/, /i/, e.g, the word **dew** is pronounced as /du:/ in stead of /dju:/, **distinguish** is pronounced as /distingij/ in stead of /distingwiʃ/. However, the lowest point was (8%) and the highest point was (100%) (see table I). according to tables (2 and 3) above, it has been found that errors committed in producing /w/ are less than those committed in producing /j/. This can be realized from examining the subjects' pronunciation found in tables (2) and (3). It appears that subjects' performance in producing /w/ is better than their performance in producing /j/. the mean score of producing /w/ was (23.24%); while the mean score of producing /j/ was (33.60%). The difference between the two means was so remarkable. Accordingly, the first hypothesis which states that most of subjects' performance in producing /w/ is better than their performance in producing /j/ is verified (see table 2 and 3). The high percentage of the subjects' in correct responses in producing /j/ means that Iraqi learners of English face difficulty in mastering semi-vowels. Moreover, errors are considered as a result of insufficient teaching model whose improper pronunciation influences the subjects' performance. Therefore, in order for the English semi-vowels 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 semi-vowels to the improper model (the teacher himself).

Most teachers of English do not concentrate on this aspect of English phonology. It was noted that many subjects may have the ability to use semi-vowel /w/ when it occurs at the beginning of the word. Table (2) shows that the majority of subjects use the semi-vowel /w/ correctly at the beginning of the words, e.g, **whine** /wain/, **whistle** /wisl/, **weed** /wi:d/, **wet** /wet/, **wage** /we:dʒ/. thus, the subjects have low difficulty in producing /w/ in these words (see appendix). The results also show that the subjects face more difficulty in using /w/ in medial positions, e.g, the words **quotation** /kwəteɪʃn/ **quid** /kwɪd/, **choir** /kwaɪə/, **quack** /kwak/, **squad** /skwɒd/ are pronounced as /kuteɪʃn/, /kɪd/, /kaɪə/, /kuk/, /sku:d/. it was found that fluctuation of errors in producing the semi-vowel /w/ may be due to insufficient practice to second language rules (see table 2). It seems clear that the subjects tend to replace the semi-vowels /w/ and /j/ by other sounds such as /u/ and /i/. table (3) shows the percentage of errors in producing the semi-vowel /j/. the total number of errors which is (33.60%) shows the subjects' incompetence in using the semi-vowel /j/. for instance, the words **phw** /fju:/, **pew** /pju:/, **Dune** /dju:n/ **queue** /kju:/, **peculiar** /pɪkju:liə/ are pronounced as /fu/, /pu/, /hu:/, /dun/, /ki:/, /pɪkuliə/. The subjects' incompetence to produce /j/ is obvious from the number of their erroneous pronunciation as shown in table (3). Accordingly, the second hypothesis which states that most of Iraqi EFL learners replace the semi-vowels /w/ and /j/ by /u/ and /i/ is verified.

## Conclusion

A learner of a foreign language cannot produce individual words or even utterances correctly without having full mastery of the phonetic system of that language. And as this paper investigates the production of English semi vowels /w/ and /j/ on the part of advanced Iraqi learners of English, its results have been used to decide whether or not the learners are able to produce English semi-vowels. The paper comes out with the following conclusions:

1- Iraqi learners of English of the university level have varied considerably with respect to their abilities to produce the two English semi-vowels /w/ and /j/.

2- Iraqi learners of English are found to be more unsuccessful in producing these semi-vowels. 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 /w/, /u/ and /j/, /i/.

3- Iraqi learners of English of the university level tend to replace /w/ and /j/ with a different kind of sounds, namely /u/ and /i/. So, most subjects are misled by the spelling of the English word. For example, the word **conquest** is pronounced by subjects as /konkist/ in stead of /konkwest/. Therefore, learners of English should be exposed to drills similar to these of minimal pairs which involve the use of words with semi-vowels. This can be good practice that enables the subjects to use these two phonemes.

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

### ***Bibliography***

- 1- Ebel, R.L. (1972). **Essentials of Educational Measurement**. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- 2- Gimson, A.C. (1980). **An Introduction to the pronunciation of English**. London: Edward Arnold, L+d.
- 3- Gipps, V. (1995). **Beyond Testing: Toward A Theory of Educational Assessment**. London: The Falmer Press.
- 4- Hamash, Al. K. I. (1982). **A Contrastive Study of the Sound System of Iraqi Arabic and Standard English**, Baghdad: Al-Shab press.
- 5- Harries, D. (1969). **Testing English as A Second Language**. New York: McGraw- Hill.
- 6- Johns, D. (1963). **An Outline of English Phonetics**. Cambridge: CUP.
- 7- Ladofoged, P. (1975). **A Course in Phonetics**. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanvish, Inc.
- 8- Madsen, A. (1983). **Manual of Phonetics**. London: North Holland Publishing Company.
- 9- Roach, P. (1983). **English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course**. Cambridge: CUP.
- 10- Rogers, R.H. (2000). **The Sounds of Language: An Introductory Survey**, London: Longman.
- 11- Trask, R.L. (1996). **A Dictionary of Phonetics and Phonology**, Longman: Routledge.

## *Appendix*

### Test Items

Please read the following items carefully:

1	Obscure	/əbskjʊə/
2	Muscular	/mʌskjʊlə/
3	Choir	/kwaɪə/
4	Queue	/kju:/
5	Quench	/kwentʃ/
6	Qwick	/kwɪk/
7	Language	/lɒŋgwɪdʒ/
8	Hew	/hju:/
9	Square	/skweɪ/
10	Squash	/skwɒʃ/
11	Argue	/ɑ:ɡju:/
12	Endure	/ɪndjʊə/
13	Whine	/wain/
14	Cue	/kju:/
15	Abuse	/əbju:z/
16	Dwarf	/dwo:f/
17	Pew	/pju:/
18	Whistle	/wɪsl/
19	Humour	/hju:mə/
20	Duo	/dju: du/
21	Squeal	/skwi:l/
22	Phew	/fju:/
23	quack	/kwɒk/
24	Squad	/skwɒd/
25	Mule	/mju:l/
26	Weed	/wi:d/
27	Wet	/wet/
28	Twig	/twɪɡ/
29	Duke	/dju:k/
30	Curfew	/kɜ:fju:/
31	Dew	/dju:/
32	Quick	/kwɪk/

33	Beauty	/bju:ti/
34	Wage	/weidʒ/
35	Occupation	/okju:peɪʃn/
36	Whale	/weɪl/
37	quid	/kwɪd/
38	Weir	/wɪə/
39	Queen	/kwi:n/
40	Opportunity	/opɔ:tʃu:nɔ:ti/
41	Peculiar	/pɪkjʊ:liə/
42	Squirrel	/skwɪrəl/
43	Squadron	/skwɪdrən/
44	Dune	/dju:n/
45	Museum	/mjuziəm/
46	Distinguish	/dɪstɪŋgwɪʃ/
47	Quotation	/kwɔ:teɪʃn/
48	Pure	/pjʊə/
49	during	/dʒʊrɪŋ/
50	you	/ju:/