Supra-segmental Features of Assimilation During Rapid English Speech [A Diagnostic Study in Problems of Assimilation of English Sounds among Ajdabiyan Students]

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Abstract: Phonological changes very often make combinations of sounds easier to pronounce in each language. In other words, one of the key motivations for speakers to change a sound or assimilates one sound to another one is ease of articulation. After years of English education in the schools, the students still face a number of phonological problems while speaking. This study is made to investigate the errors of Libyan students in English Department in the university of Ajdabiya with regard to specific aspects of supra segmental features namely 'assimilation". Thus the hypothesis of this study originates at this point. Does the process of assimilation occur consciously among the English speaking students of Ajdabya University?

The population of this study was 30 students, who have passed phonetics, phonology and pronunciation exams. The researcher has adopted two tools to collect the information a questionnaire and an oral diagnostic test.

The achieved results show that majority of the target speakers of English who have a low fluency in rapid speaking lacked the phonological awareness such as assimilation, while speaking; and those who have a comparatively better fluency in rapid speaking neglected phonological rules while speaking. The main reason behind this was the deficiency in their fluency.

Keywords: *Phonology, assimilation, progressive, regressive, place, manner, voicing.*

Introduction

According to *Encyclopaedia of Communication and Information* (2002) Language is organized hierarchically, from phonemes to morphemes to phrases and sentences that communicate meaning. Linguistics is that branch of knowledge which attempts to make a scientific study of language. Here the term scientific implies a well-organized, comprehensive and systematic study of language. Language is a system of symbols and rules that is used for meaningful communication. (*Encyclopaedia*, 2002)

"A system of communication has to meet certain criteria in order to be considered a language: A language uses symbols, which are sounds, gestures, or written characters that represent objects, actions, events, and ideas. Symbols enable people to refer to objects that are in another place or events that occurred at a different time". (Language *and Communication,* 2002*)* A language is meaningful and therefore can be understood by other users of that language. In order to understand the language by the listener, the speaker's accent and

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pronunciation is of great importance. Most of the foreign speakers face difficulty in accent and pronunciation in English speaking because there is vast variation in its written form and spoken form. Pronunciation is a very essential component of speech and, in fact, acquisition of good pronunciation in learning a new language is vital.

According to *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (William J. Frawley, 2003) *Assimilation* is a phonological process in which a segment changes to resemble its neighbors more closely. Assimilation has a very precise meaning when it's related to studies of languages. It is a common phonological process by which the phonetics of a speech segment becomes more like another segment in a word. In other words it's when a letter (sound) is influenced by the letter (sound) before or after it so that it changes its sound and/or spelling. The word assimilation itself it's said to be assimilated; it is derived from the Latin prefix *ad-* meaning *to* and *simil-* meaning *like* but, instead of being *adsimilated*, it has the easier pronunciation of *assimilated.* A common example of assimilation is "don't be silly" where the /n/ and /t/ are assimilated to /m/ by the following /b/, in many accents the natural sound is "dombe silly".

1.1 Statement of the Problem:

After seven or eight years of English education in the schools, the students of Libya enter for University education. 'Linguistics' is a compulsory course and they undergo the courses of phonetics, phonology and pronunciation. But most of the students still face a number of phonological problems while speaking especially, in the area of supra segmental. This study is made to investigate the errors of Libyan students in English Department with regard to specific aspects of supra segmental features namely 'assimilation"

1.2 Hypothesis:

This study takes into account the investigation of assimilation of some consonant sounds in English. The hypothesis of this study originates at this point. Does the process of assimilation occur consciously among the English speaking students of the Ajdabya University?

1.3 Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to analyze the process of assimilation across different speaking rates in English among the students of the University of Ajdabya. It chiefly aims at observing and characterizing the process of assimilation when two consonants that have a different phonological specification for pronunciation co-occur across word boundaries. This study

proposes to evaluate current descriptive framework in order to see how they account for the data obtained in the experiment.

2. The Sound System of English Language

English language has twenty six alphabet letters but the speech sounds they represent are forty four. "Speech sounds should therefore be represented by special phonetic symbols where each and every sound is represented by one and only one phonetic symbol and every phonetic symbol represents one and only one speech sound."(Roach, 2003) The whole set of sounds in English language may be divided into two broad categories. Consonants and Vowels depending upon the obstruction caused at some points in the passage of air-stream.

2.1 Consonants:

Consonants are sounds produced in the air passage with friction. Each consonant sound must have certain distinctive features on the basis of which it should be separated from the other sounds. For the sake of finding out the distinctive feature of a consonant sound, the following parameters can be taken into account. (Roach, 2003)

i. The nature of the air-stream mechanism

ii. The state of glottis (voicing)

iii. The position of the velum or soft-palate (oral/nasal)

iv. The articulators involved (active/passive)

v. The nature of stricture (obstruction of the air-stream)

Generally consonants are classified on the basis of the following three dimensions: (The three-term labels for consonants)

i. Being voiced or voiceless

ii. Their place of articulation (which speech organ)

iii. Manner of articulation (how the air passes)

Consonants:

Place ► ---------- Manner ▼	Labial	Labio-Dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palate-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glotal
Plosive	/p/, /b/			/t/, /d/			/k/, /g/	
Fricatives		/f/, /v/	/θ/, /ð	/s/, / z/	/ʃ/, /ʒ/			/h/
Nasals	/m/			/n/			/ŋ/	
Liquid				/r/, /l/				
Glides	/w/					/ j /		
Affricates					/tʃ/, /dʒ/			

Figure. 1. Consonants: place/manner of articulation

2.2 Vowels:

Vowels are sounds produced in the air passage without friction. In the production of vowel sounds, the articulators do not come very close together as in consonants, and the passage of the air-stream is relatively unobstructed. Vowel sounds may be specified in terms of the position of the highest point of the tongue and the position of the lips. (Roach, 2003) Vowels can be classified in terms of three factors:

i. The highest point of the tongue; (high/low or close/open on the vertical axis). According to the cardinal vowel theory, four tongue positions are assumed: high, mid high, mid low, and low.

ii. The front-back position of the tongue on the horizontal axis. Three positions are specified: front, central, and back.

iii. The degree of lip-rounding, spread, neutral, and rounded.

Vowels:

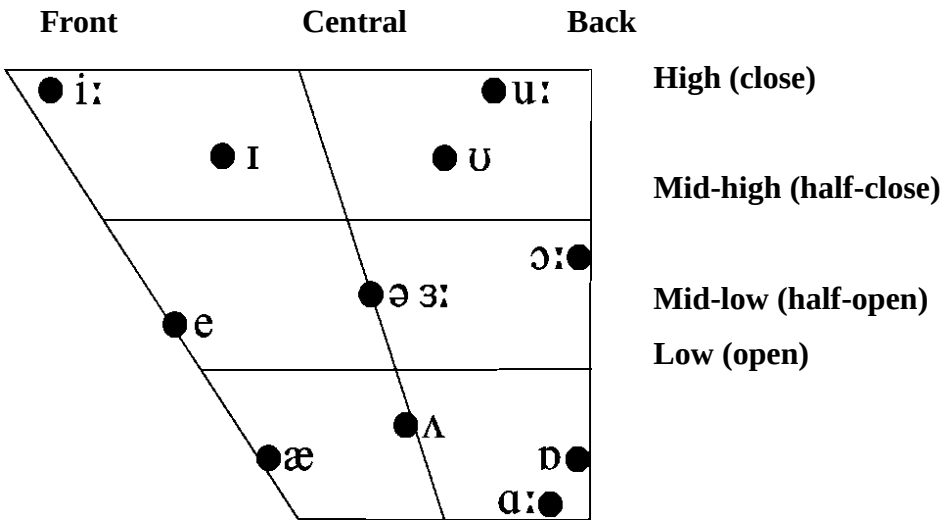

Figure. 2. The vowel chart of English

2.3. The Concept of Assimilation:

Assimilation is a general term in phonology for the process by which a speech sound becomes similar or identical to a neighboring sound. (Richard Nordquist, 2018) A significant difference in natural connected speech is the way that the sound belonging to one word can cause changes in sound belonging to neighboring words; we call this instance of assimilation (Roach, 2003)

Assimilation is something which varies in extent according to speaking rate and style; it is more likely to be found in rapid, casual speech and less likely in slow, careful speech. There are two types of assimilation: Regressive and Progressive. Assimilation occurs in a case of connected speech where two words are combined, the first of which ends with a single final consonant and the second of which starts with a single initial consonant. If the final consonant of the first word changes to become like the initial consonant of the second word, the assimilation is called regressive. If the initial consonant of the second word changes to become like the final consonant of the first word, it is called progressive.

The main differences between consonants are of three types:

i. Assimilation of place of articulation

ii. Assimilation of manner of articulation

iii. Assimilation of voicing

2.3.1 Assimilation of place:

Assimilation of place occurs when an alveolar sound in final position is followed across a word-initial position (Graham Williams, 2015. Roach, 2003)

For example; Final consonant in word *that* /ðæt/. In rapid speech, the /t/ will become /p/ before bilabial consonant as in *that person* /ðæpp**ɜ:sn/** (Roach, 2003)

1. /t/ changes to /p/ before /b/ or /p/

Front bench /frʌntbɛntʃ / changes to /frʌnpbɛntʃ/

Set back /sɛtbæk/ changes to / sɛpbæk/

2. /d/ changes to /b/ before /m/ /b/ or /p/. Alveolar sound changes to bilabial

Good morning /gʊdmɔ:nɪŋ/ changes to /gʊbmɔ:nɪŋ/

Bad pain /bædpeɪn/ changes to /bæbpeɪn/

3. /n/ changes to /m/ before /m/ /b/ or /p/

Green belt /gri:n belt/ changes to /gri:m belt/

In blue /ɪnblu:/ changes to /ɪmblu:/

4. /t/ changes to /k/ before /k/ or /g/

That case /ðætkeɪs/ changes to /ðækkeɪs/

Short cut /ʃɔ:tkʌt/ changes to/ʃɔ:kkʌt/

5. /d/ changes to /g/ before /k/ or /g/

Hard cash /hɑ:dkæʃ/ changes to /hɑ:gkæʃ/

Bad girl /bædgɜ:l/ changes to /bæggɜ:l/

6. /n/ changes to / ŋ/ before /k/ or /g/

Open court /əʊpənkɔ:t/ changes to /əʊpəŋkɔ:t/

Action group /ækʃəngru:p/ changes to /ækʃəŋgru:p/

7. /s/ changes to /ʃ/ before /ʃ/ or /j/ followed by rounded vowel

Nice shoes /naɪsʃu:z/ changes to /naɪʃʃu:z/

Nice yacht /naɪsjɒt/ changes to /naɪʃjɒt/

8. /z/ changes to / ʒ/ before /ʃ/ or /j/ followed by rounded vowel sound

Cheese shop /tʃ i:z ʃɒp/ changes to /tʃ i:ʒʃɒp/

Where is yours? /weəzjɔ:z/ changes to /weəʒjɔ:z/

9. /θ/ changes to /s/ before /s/

Birth certificate /bɜ:θsətɪfɪkət/ changes to /bɜ:ssətɪfɪkət/

Earth science /ɜ:θsaɪəns/ changes to /ɜ:ssaɪəns/

(http://www. Btinternet.com/ tedpower/assimilation.html#as01)

2.3.2 Assimilation of Manner:

"Assimilation of manner is much less noticeable and only found in the most rapid and casual speech. Generally speaking, the tendency is again for regressive assimilation and the changes in the manner is the most likely to be awards or easier consonant, one which makes less obstruction of air flow". (Roach, 2003, p.140) It is thus possible to find cases where a final plosive becomes a fricative or nasal:

That side /ðætsaɪd/ →/ðæssaɪd/

Good night /gʊdnaɪt/ → /gʊnnaɪt/

In one particular case we find progressive assimilation of manner, when a word-initial ð follows a plosive or nasal at the end of a preceding word. For example:

In the /ɪnðə/ → /ɪnnə/

Get them /get ðəm/ → /get tem/

Read these /ri:dði:z/ →/ri:ddi:z/

2.3.3 Assimilation of Voice:

"Another type of assimilation which is very important is that of voicing. The vibration of the vocal cords is not something that can be switching on or off very swiftly, as a result of a group of a consonant tend to be either all voiced or all voiceless". (Roach, 2003) Assimilation of voice is found, but again only in a limited way. Only regressive assimilation of voice is found across word boundaries, and then only of one type.

In a compound word, if the final consonant of the first word is voiced and the initial consonant of the second word is voiceless, it is often found that voiced consonant has no voicing; this is not very noticeable case of assimilation, since, initial and final voiced consonants usually have little or no voicing anyway. (Roach, 2003)

If consonant final is voiceless and initial consonant is voiced, a context in which in many languages, the final consonant would become voiced, assimilation of voice never takes place;(Roach, 2003) for example:

'I like that black dog'/ aɪlaɪkðætblækd**ɒ**g/

It is typical of many foreign learners of English to allow regressive assimilation of voicing to change the final 'k' to g, the final 't' to d and the final 'k' to g.(Roach, 2003)

If in a syllable-final consonant cluster a nasal consonant precedes a plosive or a fricative in the same morpheme, the place of articulation of nasal is always determined by the place of articulation of other consonant;(Roach, 2003) thus:

bump' /bʌmp/

'tenth' /tenθ/

'hunt' /hʌnt/

'bank' /bæŋk/

It could be said that this assimilation had become "fixed" as part of the phonological structure of English syllables. A similar example of type of assimilation that has become fixed is the progressive assimilation of voice with the suffixes s and z; (Roach, 2003) thus:

'cats' /kæts/ 'dogs' /dɒgz/

'jumps' /dʒʌmps 'runs' /rʌnz/

3. Literature Review:

Authors have worked on different aspects of assimilation, some of which are mentioned in the following. Pavlik Radoslav (2009) offered a detailed catalogue of assimilation processes occurring in connected speech. John J. McCarthy (2003) in his book discusses assimilation in phonological theory and gives some examples for each category. Jaye Padgett (1994) in his work, *Stricture and Nasal Place Assimilation*, explains about the assimilation of nasals to stops and fricatives. Terry Crowley (1997) explains about anticipatory assimilation to a contiguous segment, anticipatory assimilation at a distance, lags assimilation to a contiguous segment, lag assimilation at a distance, as well as Coalescence (fusion), and gives some examples for each type of assimilation. Donca Steriade (2000) in his paper, explained about observed regularities in the direction of place assimilation. Antony Arlotto (2005:95-101) in his book explains about assimilation and its different categories and associates them with historical linguistics. He also elaborates on consonant assimilation, one of which is concerned with the assimilation of a consonant when appearing between two vowels. He also gives some examples for each kind of assimilation. (2005:95-101)

A large body of research has linked deficient phonological awareness, specifically phonemic awareness. (Blachman, 1997) Although not all speakers with poor phonological awareness have difficulties learning to read, most do. "Assimilation is one of the most obvious phonological rules. A phonological rule is a formal way of expressing a systematic phonological or morpho-phonological process or diachronic sound change in language". (Crystal, 2003) Phonological rules are commonly used in generative phonology as a notation to capture sound-related operations and computations the human brain performs when producing or comprehending spoken language.

4. Methodology of the study:

4.1 Population and Sample:

The populations chosen for this study were undergraduate students from the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Ajdabiya University, who have passed phonetics, phonology and pronunciation exams. They were all native speakers of Arabic. The number of the students chosen in this study is thirty.

4.2 Instrument:

The researcher has adopted two tools to collect the information of this study. Questionnaire and diagnostic test are used as primary tools for data collection. A questionnaire was designed based on the questions of the study. It was distributed to students in checking their point of views in terms of this issue. The researcher distributed the questionnaire on determined study sample (30), and constructed the required tables for collected data. This step consists transformation of the qualitative (nominal) variables (yes or no) to quantitative variables (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) respectively

A format of diagnostic test, which was the second tool, has been adopted on the analysis of the assimilatory process among the students of the University. The test consisted of four tasks. The total number of the items in the test is twenty. Each task consists of five sentences. Task one is a recognition task whereas tasks two three and four are production tasks.

4.3 Procedures:

Each student was given two papers on which the instructions of the test and the sentences had been typed. In task 1students were asked to rewrite the sentences in regular spelling and then to read them, whereas in task 2, 3 and 4, they were asked to read the sentences only with normal speed. Each student was asked to read them silently first in order to be aware of the nature of the test and to be familiar with the material. Then the test items were recorded on a phone recorder in the language laboratory individually. They were told to pronounce each task once loudly as possible with a normal speed. The recording took about ten to fifteen

minutes. The total period of testing continued for three days. Then After two days, the same students were given the questionnaire to answer them.

5.Data Analysis

5.1. Analysis of the Questionnaire:

The respondents' answers were processed and used for estimating the awareness of assimilation and for confirmation or disproving of the hypotheses. Results connected to each question in the questionnaire are the following:

Answer to the first question proved that (20%) were sure they could speak English fluently. From the answers of the second question, it is clear that all the respondents have the awareness of phonology and assimilation. For Q.3, all the students agreed that the majority of non-native speakers neglect the using of assimilation during the course of speech.. For q. 4, 5, 6 and 7, all the students answered "no" which means that even though the students are aware of the term "assimilation" they are not able to identify it or its practice in rapid English speech. For the 8th question all the students answered "yes" which means supra-segmental mistakes obstruct and hinder understanding and the aesthetic value of speech. For Q 9, All students agree that comprehensive knowledge of phonological constituents help in understanding the nature of connected speech. Answer to Q.10, illustrates (95%) of the samples agree that intensive exercises and drills help non-native speakers to improve their knowledge and performance of assimilation.

5. 2 Analysis of the oral diagnostic test

Each correct answer was added up to provide a total number. The total numbers of accurate pronunciation were noted for each test. These numbers were analyzed according to assimilation of place, manner and voicing. .

The percentage of the tables is divided into three main sections. The first section begins with the analysis of the diagnostic test of assimilation of place. The second section presents of pronunciations related to assimilation of manner. The third section is related to assimilation of voicing.

5.2.1. Table: 1. Analysis of the Diagnostic Test:

Student NO	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Total
1	5	0	0	15	20
2	0	0	5	15	20
3	0	0	0	15	15
4	0	0	5	0	5
5	0	0	0	10	10
6	0	0	0	10	10
7	10	10	5	25	50
8	0	0	0	15	15
9	5	5	5	15	30
10	0	5	0	15	20
11	0	0	5	15	20
12	5	5	5	25	40
13	0	0	5	15	20
14	10	0	5	25	40
15	0	5	5	10	20
16	0	0	0	15	15
17	5	0	0	20	25
18	0	0	0	20	20
19	0	5	5	15	25
20	0	0	0	5	5
21	0	0	0	15	15
22	5	0	0	20	30
23	5	0	0	15	20
24	0	0	0	20	20
25	5	5	5	20	35
26	10	10	5	25	50
27	5	0	0	15	20
28	0	0	5	20	25
29	5	5	10	25	45
30	0	0	5	15	20
Mean	1.7	0.9	1.6	9.8	
percentage	0 %	0 %	0 %	83.33	

5.2.2 Table: 2. Assimilation of place

Assimilation of place	mean	percentage
Question 1	1.7	0
Question 2	0.9	0

In assimilation of place, most of the students neglected their performance in accuracy in the recognition and production of the assimilated sounds because they pronounced each word

in isolation. It is also appeared that the performance of the students in the recognition task was a little better than the production

task in assimilation of place.

5.2.3. Table: 3. Assimilation of manner

Assimilation of manner	mean	percentage
Question 3	1.6	0

In assimilation of manner, regardless to their mistakes, students could not recognize this type because it is much less noticeable and only can be found in the most rapid speech which makes less obstruction to the air flow

.

5.2.4. Table: 4. Assimilation of voicing

Assimilation of voicing	mean	percentage
Question 4	9.8	83.33

Voicing assimilation sustained progress because students considered the fact that only the combination tend to be either all voiced or voiceless.

5.3 Results:

The achieved results show that majority of the target speakers of English who have a low fluency in rapid speaking lacked the phonological awareness such as assimilation, while speaking; and those who have a comparatively better fluency in rapid speaking neglected phonological rules while speaking. The main reason behind this was the deficiency in their fluency.

6. Recommendation:

On the basis of the conclusions of the present research, the following recommendations can be put forward:

a. Teachers are recommended, while teaching assimilation, to use laboratories rather than just providing them with rules.

b. What students really need, as the researcher recommends, is a concentration on pronunciation. When students find themselves obliged to speak, they will gradually learn to improve themselves and acquire native like pronunciation.

c. The researcher also recommends that exposing the learners in an early age to the field of phonetics and phonology will help them in better understanding of English connected speech.

الادغام كظاهرة من الظواهر الفوق صوتية اثناء التحدث باللغة الانجليزية بسرعة
دراسة تشخيصية لمشاكل ادغام اصوات اللغة الانجليزية بين طلاب جامعة اجدابيا

الملخص: تؤدي التغييرات الصوتية ، في كثير من الأحيان ، إلى جعل التركيبات الصوتية أسهل في نطقها في كل لغة. وبعبارة أخرى ، فإن أحد الدوافع الرئيسية لمتحدثي اللغة لتغيير الصوت أو ادغام صوت واحد إلى صوت آخر هو سهولة النطق. بعد سنوات من تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس ، لا يزال معظم الطلاب يواجهون عددا من المشاكل الصوتية اثناء التحدث باللغة الانجليزية. أجريت هذه الدراسة للتحقق من أخطاء الطلاب الليبيين في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة أجدابيا فيما يتعلق ببعض الظواهر الصوتية وهي "الادغام". و تقوم فرضيةالدراسة على التساؤل التالي: هل تحدث عملية الادغام بادراك و معرفة جيدة بين الطلاب الناطقين باللغة الإنجليزية؟

كان عدد عينة هذه الدراسة ثلاثين طالبًا ممن اجتازوا اختبارات المواد التالية: Phonetics, Pronunciation Phonology. تم استخدام أداتي لجمع البيانات: استبيانا و اختبار تشخيصي شفوي.

وقد أسفرت الدراسة عن بعض النتائج وأهمها أن الطلاب الذين لديهم طلاقة منخفضة في التحدث السريع يفتقرون إلى الوعي الصوتي مثل الادغام. وأولئك الذين لديهم طلاقة أفضل نسبيا أهملوا القواعد الصوتية أثناء التحدث. السبب الرئيسي وراء هذا هو النقص في طلاقتهم اللفظية.

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Appendix I

Q1. Re-write the following sentences in regular spelling and then read them with a normal speed.

1. / dɒnt let je hænbbæg in ðə kɑ:/……..
2. /gʊbmə:nɪŋ, evribɒdi/ …….
3. / ʃi nɪəli ɔ:lwəz dresiz ɪmblu ……
4. / ðə dɒg həz bi:n ə bæggɜ:l/ …….
5. / aiv bɔ:t naɪʃʃu:z/ ……

Q2. Read the following aloud with a normal speed.

A

6. I own ten pairs of socks.
7. Can you print out a hard copy?
8. This yacht is beautiful.
9. Would you like some tea?
10. I'd love to live in Paris.

B.

11. A man stood watching me from that side of the road.
12. Good night, see you tomorrow.
13. Elections will be held later in the year.
14. I forgot my keys. I went back into the office to get them.
15. Read these instructions carefully before you start.

C.

16. I could hear dogs barking.
17. The number 61 bus runs to the city Centre.
18. Every day he jumps the gate to meet me.

19. We have a very little money in the bank.
20. She's always out with her friends.

Appendix II
The questionnaire

1.. Do you speak English fluently?

YES NO

2. While studying phonology, have you studied "assimilation"?

YES NO

3. Do you think that the majority of non-native speakers neglect the using of assimilation during the course of speech?

YES NO

4. Have you noticed any kind of "assimilation" while you speak English?

YES NO

5. While speaking, are you conscious of regressive assimilation?

YES NO

6. While speaking, are you conscious of progressive assimilation?

YES NO

7. Can you notice any mistakes in pronunciation while others speak and are you able to name them?

YES NO

8. Do you think that supra-segmental mistakes obstruct and hinder understanding and the aesthetic value of speech?

YES NO

9. Do you think that comprehensive knowledge of phonological constituents help in understanding the nature of connected speech?

YES NO

10. Do you think that Intensive exercises and drills help you to improve your knowledge and performance of connected speech?

YES NO