

Charles University in Prague

Faculty of Education

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## **Bachelor Thesis**

Weak forms of function words with special focus on  
the word *that* pronounced by Czech learners

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and that no other sources were used than those listed on the works cited page.

Prague, 2013

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## Abstract

This thesis deals with strong and weak forms of grammatical words in the English language. The theoretical part focuses on the function of weak forms in spoken English as well as the rules for their occurrence. Furthermore, it outlines different approaches to teaching weak forms in EFL context. The practical part of the work examines the pronunciation of the strong and weak form of the word *that* in the speech of advanced Czech learners of English and assesses the degree to which they reduce the strong form into its weak counterpart in required environments.

## Key Words

weak forms, function words, vowel reduction, rhythm, Czech learners

## Anotace

Tato práce se zabývá silnou a slabou formou výslovnosti funkčních slov v anglickém jazyce. Teoretická část je zaměřena na funkci slabých forem výslovnosti a popisuje pravidla jejich výskytu. Dále také nastiňuje různé přístupy lingvistů k důležitosti slabých forem pro nerodilé mluvčí anglického jazyka. Praktická část práce zkoumá výslovnost silné a slabé formy slova *that* u českých studentů a zjišťuje, do jaké míry silnou formu v odpovídajících situacích korektně redukuje.

## Klíčová slova

slabé formy, funkční slova, rytmus, samohlásková redukce, čeští studenti

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## Introduction

I once had the privilege of meeting Tommy Emmanuel, possibly the greatest guitarist and most humble celebrity to ever walk the planet. When the door of his small dressing room in the Lucerna Concert Hall opened, I asked the smiling man a simple music-oriented question: What was the hardest piece you have ever had to learn? Tommy's face turned slightly serious when his wise voice said: Life is our school, our teacher, and if we are smart enough we learn the lesson. One of the hardest things I have ever had to learn was patience and trust in what I am doing. I think it is really hard to be patient.

On the way home I kept thinking about his words and my life, and as a student of the English language I questioned my attitude to studies, too. It was back then that I had understood for the first time the reason of my fascination for the phonetic aspect of languages and my casual ignorance of their grammatical and lexical components. I had no patience to study and memorize new vocabulary, whereas pronunciation had always come to me as a natural, almost game-like feature and also as a skill whose at least partial mastery can be reliably verified through the most valuable function of any language: oral interpersonal communication.

The choice of the theme of this work was thus a result of my generally positive attitude to the phonetic aspect of languages. While a great number of papers focus on various pronunciation phenomena, the issue of weak forms has generally eluded the attention of researchers. This thesis concerns the phenomenon of weak forms of function words in the English language and aims at exploring Czech learners' production of the word *that*.

The theoretical part firstly describes the nature of weak forms, clarifies the role they take in creating natural English rhythm and specifies the rules regarding their occurrence and usage. Secondly, a group of words whose strong and weak form distribution depends on their grammatical function is introduced. Special attention is paid to the word *that*. Finally the theme is approached from a didactic perspective. Potential difficulties of Czech learners of English in relation to the perception and

production of weak forms are discussed and current research dealing with weak forms and vowel reduction is summarized.

The practical part of the thesis presents the preparation and execution of a research designed in order to examine Czech learners' ability to reduce the strong form of the word *that* according to its grammatical function. A text containing the target word in different roles was devised and recordings of advanced learners of English reading it aloud were made. The subsequent analysis of the data revealed to what extent *that* is reduced and what problems Czech speakers face.

Hopefully, this thesis will help current and future teachers with the focus of their pronunciation lessons and will serve as a source of inspiration for further research in the area of weak forms of function words.

# Theoretical Part

When listening to a foreign language, one does not need to understand the meaning of the utterance to be able to hear a certain rhythm of the perceived sound. For a person overhearing two different conversations in a noisy room, one Spanish and the other one English, it is not necessary to discern a single word of the discussions for them to be able to tell the two apart. This is, among other reasons, due to different rhythmical patterns that the two languages follow.

## 1. Rhythm

### 1.1 Stress-timed vs. syllable-timed rhythm

Linguists have described the occurrence of stressed and unstressed syllables as an important feature of every language (Celce-Murcia 208). Gimson notes that over the last 70 years phoneticians have mainly tended to describe English as a stress-timed language claiming that the time interval between two neighbouring stressed syllables in an utterance tends to be the same and does not depend on the number of unstressed syllables occurring between them (264). According to this theory the time between the corresponding stressed syllables in the following two sentences will be of roughly the same length. Additionally, the stressed syllables *within* a sentence will also occur at approximately regular intervals:

                  MAN  DRINKS  BEER.  
The          MAN  might have been  DRINKing  the BEER.

While languages such as Dutch, German, Russian, Arabic, Mandarin, Thai (Lane 48; Setter 765) share the isochrony observed in English, others, for example Spanish, French, Italian, Korean, Cantonese (Lane 46) seem to follow a different pattern referred to as syllable-timed rhythm. In such languages the intervals between two neighbouring stressed syllables are directly proportional to the number of unstressed syllables between them. This is mainly caused by the fact that both unstressed and stressed

syllables occupy approximately the same amount of time, unlike in stress-timed languages where the stressed syllables, compared to the unstressed, are prominent not only in pitch and loudness but also in length (Celce-Murcia 208; Roach 121).

## 1.2 English as a stress-based language

It is important to note that even though the stress/syllable-timed classification of languages is a widespread and generally accepted theoretical division of languages, “the evidence for the existence of the stress-timed rhythm is not strong” (Roach 123). There have been many attempts among phoneticians to empirically prove the above mentioned theory using modern technology and various measurement methods, nevertheless, “it has not been possible to show a real difference between ‘stress-timed’ and ‘syllable-timed’ languages” (Roach 123). Since no unquestionable proof has been available to support the stress-timed and syllable-timed dichotomy, some linguists (e.g. Dauer) suggest a different and perhaps more accurate approach saying that languages should be divided into those that are stress-based and those that are not (Celce-Murcia 208). As Pardo claims, the regularity of the occurrence of stressed syllables in English has never been confirmed (12), whereas many studies have proved the fact that the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables in pitch, loudness and length is much more considerable in English than it is in Spanish and other syllable-timed languages (Dalton and Seidlhofer 34).

The variety in linguistic approaches to rhythm and the rather unsuccessful attempts to empirically prove the proposed theories only suggest that language rhythm is, to a considerable degree, a subjectively perceived phenomenon. Volín notes that several experiments proved the unreliability of human senses when processing and evaluating the regularity of rhythmical beats as well as the duration of the intervals between them. As he states people often show a tendency to “hear as stronger or weaker something that is actually of identical strength” or “as longer or shorter something that is actually of the same length” (*Patterns* 281). Consequently, Volín is of the opinion that “rhythm is the impression *induced* by regular acoustic events but it is not their direct reflection” (*Patterns* 279). Isochrony thus seems to be a perception phenomenon.



## 2. Weak forms

Regardless of whether one considers English a stress-timed or stress-based language, it is obvious that the alternation of stressed and unstressed elements is a key feature of the native speakers' oral communication as they "maximize the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables" (Dalton and Seidlhofer 42). This contrasting has a simple basic rule: native speakers tend to stress lexical words carrying most of the meaning, usually nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, whereas they normally do not give prominence to those words which only express grammatical relationships in the sentence, that is grammatical (function, structural) words such as certain pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs etc. (Roach 102). Most English structural words can have at least two different pronunciation variants: a more usual reduced form and a fully pronounced citation form. It is important to realize that although the unstressed, reduced forms are more frequent, in some cases (see 2.3 for detailed discussion) even function words can occur under stress and thus receive their full pronunciation often called the *strong form* (e.g. when the speaker wants to emphasize them). However, in the sentence *It is old but handy*, the word *but* will not be pronounced with the full vowel quality /bʌt/. Since the conjunction *but* belongs to the category of function words and as such does usually not receive stress, the vowel will be reduced to /bət/. Similarly, in *Look at me*, the strong form /æt/ of the preposition *at* will undergo a vowel quality reduction with the resulting sound being /ət/. The unstressed variants of function words, such as /bət/ and /ət/ in the given sentences, are called *weak forms*. A list of all commonly used weak forms compiled from text books by several authors, among others Roach, Celce-Murcia, Kelly, O'Connor, Swan, with newly added example sentences is to be found in Appendix 1.

### 2.1 The function of weak forms

While there are areas of the English language where one may talk about the redundancy of some features, whether it is the relics of older grammatical structures or multiple synonymy, it is hardly ever the case when dealing with pronunciation. Most phonetic phenomena have a pragmatic background and a specific function, and this also applies

to weak forms. Kelly notes that instead of labelling the English language as stress-timed, it might be more accurate to place it on an axis “with tendencies to stress-timing at one end and syllable-timing at the other. A language like English has more of a tendency than some other languages to reduce vowel length and quality in unstressed syllables, and so tends to the stress-timing end of the continuum” (Kelly 71). It is only logical that in order to achieve or at least approach the regularity of stress occurrence, the unstressed syllables need to be squeezed in between the stressed beats. As a result of this compression their vowels often undergo both quality and length reduction. The function of weak forms can therefore be understood as enabling regular stress patterns and highlighting the prominence of lexical words by the speaker, which may possibly lead to easier deciphering of the core information by the listener.

## 2.2 Vowel reduction and elision

Gimson states that “since Old English, it has always been a feature of the structure of English words that the weakly accented syllables have undergone the process of reduction, including loss of vowel and consonants. The same process of reduction, with resultant contraction, may be observed in operation in Present English” (249). In other words, when a syllable receives neither primary nor secondary stress, its vowel is likely to be reduced and in some cases sounds can be completely omitted.

The process of vowel reduction may be considered an omnipresent feature in the English language. Due to rhythmical reasons (see 1.) native speakers often tend to shorten the unstressed syllables and thus intensify the contrast between stressed and unstressed elements (Flemming 30). Consequently, the unstressed vowels are usually reduced in terms of both the length as well as the quality of the sound. For instance, whereas in the word *Japan* /dʒə'pæn/ the second syllable receives primary stress and its peak is formed by the low-front vowel /æ/, in the adjective *Japanese* /dʒæpə'ni:z/ the primary stress shifts leaving the second syllable unstressed. Consequently, the low-front vowel /æ/ is reduced to the *schwa* sound /ə/. The very same process of vowel reduction occurs in the weak form words and affects sounds in all positions. The resulting vowels can generally obtain the quality of:

a) /ə/; e.g. /kæn/ → /kən/ as in *He can* /kən/ *dance*.

b) /i/; e.g. /hi:/ → /i/ as in *Why did he /i/ come?*

c) /ɪ/; e.g. /bi:n/ → /bɪn/ as in *I have been /bɪn/ sick.*

d) /ʊ/; e.g. /du:/ → /dʊ/ as in *Where do /dʊ/ I begin?*

It should be clarified that although the vowels /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ may occur in unstressed syllables, they are considered to be strong vowels since they can frequently be heard in stressed syllables, too. On the other hand, the vowels /ə/, /i/ and /u/ are called weak vowels as their occurrence is restricted to unstressed syllables only (Tench 33). Moreover, the symbols /i/ and /u/ aim to reflect the current tendency among English native speakers to pronounce the /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ sounds in unstressed syllables at the end of a word and in the mid-word position when preceding a vowel as short but qualitatively somewhat similar to the long counterparts /i:/ and /u:/. Nevertheless, Setter mentions “that using the symbols /i/ and /u/ is based on native speaker intuitions of vowel quality in the positions mentioned earlier and that they have no phonemic validity” (Setter 772).

Unlike vowel reduction which may be observed in spoken English of any pace, sound elision is rather associated with a fast, colloquial speech. Roach explains elision by saying that “under certain circumstances phoneme might be realized as zero” (127). This simply means that there are situations when a sound or sounds disappear. For instance, native speakers sometimes omit the first vowel in the word *tomato* and substitute it with intensified aspiration of the plosive /t/. Instead of /tə'mɑ:təʊ/ with weakly aspirated /t/, the perceived sound will then be [t<sup>h</sup>'mɑ:təʊ] (Roach 127).

Weak forms always occur in unstressed positions (see 2.1) and as such can undergo the process of elision, too. While vowel reduction affects all weak forms, elision influences only certain words. Possessive adjectives, personal pronouns and auxiliary verbs such as *he, him, her, who, whose, have, has, had* are often heard without the first consonant: *When did **he** go?* /'wen dɪd **ɪ** 'gəʊ/. Another case of elision is the loss of the final /t/ sound when the weak form of the modal verb *must* precedes a consonant: *I **must** go.* /aɪ **məs** 'gəʊ/. Furthermore, in the weak form of the verb *can* the peak vowel /ə/ may also disappear. In that case, its function is substituted by the syllabic consonant /ŋ/: *They **can** run* /'ðeɪ kŋ 'rʌn/.

Both discussed features can be characterized as vitally important in the process of converting strong forms to their weak counterparts.

In theory contracted forms of function words such as *he'll* /hi:l/ instead of *he will* or *we've* /wi:v/ instead of *we have* could also be considered as weak forms of words that have undergone the process of sound elision and some phoneticians do include them in the Weak Forms chapter of their publications. On the other hand, others (e.g. Roach) claim that the use of contracted forms has become so consistent that “they are represented differently in informal writing” (102) which is the reason why some authors decided to treat contracted forms as a separate group. This thesis follows the latter approach and leaves the contracted forms to others’ further examination.

### **2.3 The rules of strong and weak forms occurrence**

Function words, which carry rather grammatical than lexical meaning, are often pronounced differently when cited separately and when used in a sentence. In the letter case their vowel can lose its length and quality and a sound can even be omitted. Weak forms are very frequent in the English language. As Gimson notes, words such as *a, and, as, be, but, her, of, shall, them, we* and some others have over 90% weak form occurrence (266). There are, nonetheless, certain circumstances in which the fully pronounced, strong form of a function word should be maintained. The following list of situations where the strong form is usually used was compiled from works of Roach, Gimson, Wells, Lane, Kelly and Tench:

#### **a) a function word at the end of a clause**

When a function word occurs at the end of a clause, it is in most cases likely to be heard in its strong form. Auxiliary verbs as well as short prepositions such as *at, for, from, of, to*, although commonly reduced in the middle of a clause, normally retain their full pronunciation in a clause-final position.

*We have* /əv/ *been very busy.*                    **x**                    *Have you done it? – Yes, I have* /hæv/.

Wells claims that when function words are syntactically stranded from the element which they are related to, they will be pronounced strongly despite being unstressed:

*He slooked at /ət/ my sister.*                      x                      *The girl he looked at /æt/ was my sister.*

The preposition *to* has a special position among other short prepositions as it is rarely heard in its strong form /tu:/ and mostly occurs in its reduced form /tu/, even when it comes at the end of a clause: *Who were you talking to /tu/?* It should be said that the preposition *to* can have two possible weak forms, /tu/ and /tə/, but native speakers perceive the latter pronunciation as unnatural in the final-sentence position (Roach 106).

Similarly, pronouns can be seen as a partial exception to the above mentioned rule as they “are the only weak forms which can end sentences” (Gimson 268). In the sentence *I’ve heard him* the weak form /ɪm/ sounds perfectly acceptable to a native speaker’s ear. Roach would probably disagree with the word *only* in Gimson’s statement, he adds that *there* can also be heard in its weak form /ðə/ at the end of a sentence (107).

#### **b) a function word contrasted with another word**

In the sentence *I got the present for him, not from him* the speaker’s goal is to contrast the two possible situations – buying the present **for** somebody and obtaining the present **from** somebody – and thus avoid or clarify a potential misunderstanding. Therefore, both prepositions will be stressed and will receive their full pronunciation, in spite of their mid-sentence position: /aɪ 'gɒt ðə 'prezənt 'fɔːr ɪm nɒt 'frɒm ɪm/

Another situation where function words are usually pronounced strongly due to the contrast is the case of a co-ordinated use of prepositions (Roach 103):

*He flies to and from Prague every week.* /hi 'flaɪz 'tuː ən 'frɒm 'praːg 'evri 'wiːk/

#### **c) emphasis**

When a person desires to emphasize a certain piece of information, he or she stresses the particular word using a louder voice, higher pitch and clearly pronounced vowels. This tendency naturally includes function words which must be pronounced strongly.

When a puzzled wife, whose husband has just told her he does not love her any more, desperately replies *But you must love me!*, she probably pronounces the word *must* strongly /mʌst/ instead of using the weak form /məs/ as a consequence of the emphasis given to the modal verb.

#### **d) a function word being quoted**

When a function word is being cited or quoted, it usually occurs in its strong form:

*Unfortunately, most of you lost some points because of writing 'and' instead of 'or'.*

In the given sentence, *and* and *or* will be heard as /ænd/ and /ɔː/ although they otherwise frequently occur in their weak form /ənd/ and /ə/. This rule applies to all cases where a function word is quoted and thus loses its usual grammatical function. In the example above, *and* and *or* do not serve as coordinating conjunctions but rather refer to a lexical/grammatical mistake the teacher is talking about.

Wells also mentions a situation when a preposition occurs in the middle of a clause between a weak syllable and a pronoun. Even when such preposition is neither accented nor quoted, it tends to be pronounced in its strong form in order to contribute to regular rhythmical patterns: *I'm looking at you.* /aɪm 'ləʊkɪŋ æt ju/ x *Look at me.* /'ləʊk æt mi/

### **2.4 Words whose weak/strong form occurrence is determined by grammar**

There is a small group of function words in English whose strong and weak form occurrence does not follow the above listed rules: *some, there, that, who*. In the case of these words, it is their particular grammatical function that governs the distribution of the strong and weak pronunciation. The individual words will be now introduced and followed by a brief commentary.

#### **SOME**

As Roach (106) and Gimson (267) state, *some* can have the following different meanings:

a) *some* before a countable noun meaning *an unknown individual* – strong form /sʌm/

*Some /sʌm/ drunkard must have broken the window.*

*Some /sʌm/ student has probably crawled in and turned on the lights.*

b) *some* before an uncountable noun meaning *an unspecified amount of* and before a countable noun in plural meaning *an unspecified number of* – weak form /səm/

*I'd like some /səm/ water, please.*

*We've seen an elephant and even some /səm/ dolphins.*

c) *some* as a pronoun

Gimson reduces the rules concerning the word *some* by stating that *some* “does not occur in a weak form when used as a pronoun” (267). Although this statement might appear slightly simplified, its core information is valid.

*Would you like some coffee? – Yes, I'd love some /səm/.*

*Some /səm/ might say that you were cheating.*

d) *some* expressing anger or a positive experience

*Some* will be pronounced fully /səm/ when the speaker wants to express his or her anger, discontent or disappointment as well as when talking about a strongly positive experience.

*I met some /səm/ nice people. x Some /səm/ people just won't shut up.*

*Let's have some /səm/ lunch, shall we? x Well, I must admit that was some /səm/ lunch!*

## **THERE**

a) *there* as a demonstrative adverb

Roach claims that when *there* has a demonstrative function, its pronunciation is never reduced to the weak form (106). The only correct pronunciation is /ðeə/ or /ðeər/ before vowels.

*Look! There /ðeər/ it is!*

*Don't worry, we'll go there /ðeə/ tonight.*

b) *there* in existential sentences

Native speakers have a strong tendency to pronounce *there* in existential sentences in its weak form /ðə/ or /ðər/ before vowels.

*There /ðər/ are some twenty people in the dining hall.*

*There /ðə/ must be someone who can help us.*

c) *there* as an exclamation

*There* is sometimes used as an exclamation expressing the speaker's satisfaction (*Cambridge Dictionary*) as shown in the following examples. In such case *there* is

pronounced strongly /ðeə/. The pronunciation /ðeər/ is not so frequent as there is usually a short pause between *there* and the following word.

*There /ðeə/! He managed to fix it at last.*

## WHO

Some authors, for instance Roach and Kenworthy, do not list the word *who* among the most frequent weak forms in English. Others (Gimson, Swan, Tench) do mention the weak forms /u:/, /hu/, /u/ but do not provide any closer details of their use. Wells describes the weak forms of *who* as occasional and says that they “are used, if at all, only for the relative (not the interrogative)” function of the word.

It is obvious that the weak forms of *who* are used with greater variability than those of *some*, *there* and *that*, and they depend to a larger extent on the speaker’s preference as well as the pace of the utterance. The weak form is, nevertheless, never used in an interrogative meaning.

*Who /hu:/ is he talking to? X That’s the girl who /hu:/ gave me freedom.*

*That’s the girl who /u:/ gave me freedom. (Gimson 268)*

*That’s the girl who /hu/ gave me freedom. (Swan 604)*

*That’s the girl who /u/ gave me freedom. (Tench 114)*

## THAT

There are certain differences concerning the depth to which the weak/strong form usage of the word *that* as well as some of the words mentioned earlier is analysed. While Roach only mentions the weak form of *that* used in a relative clause, Swan states instead that the weak form should be used when *that* occurs as a conjunction. Gimson, on the one hand, covers both previous possibilities but on the other hand does not list all situations in which the strong form of *that* must be used.

The following classification supplements the already mentioned authors with relevant information from Well’s *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* and from *Cambridge Dictionary*:

a) *that* as a demonstrative adjective and as a demonstrative pronoun

In both cases *that* will only occur in its strong form /ðæt/.



*Can you see that /ðæt/ building?*

*That /ðæt/ Paul you are talking about seems to be a nice guy.*

*Have you seen that /ðæt/?!*

*Dear, you don't have to do that /ðæt/.*

**b) that as an adverb**

When *that* is an adverb it will also be pronounced strongly /ðæt/.

*Come on, is it really that /ðæt/ bad?*

*He couldn't have done it, he is not that /ðæt/ crazy.*

**c) that as a conjunction**

When *that* functions as a subordinating conjunction and serves as a syndetic link between two clauses, it is most likely to receive the reduced, weak form /ðət/.

*He finally understood that /ðət/ there was no perfect girl in the world.*

*I've always believed that /ðət/ there must be life on another planet.*

**d) that as a relative pronoun**

When *that* introduces a nominal or adnominal relative clause, it will be pronounced weakly /ðət/.

*Is it the same car /ðət/ that you crashed last year?*

*The things that /ðət/ you like are never those you have.*

The structural word *that*, the feature examined in the practical part of the thesis, has two possible pronunciation forms, /ðæt/ and /ðət/. These forms are distributed according to the grammatical function of the word. When pronounced strongly, *that* contains the low-front vowel /æ/ which undergoes the process of vowel reduction when the weak form is produced. Sound elision does not occur in this particular case. While the rules of weak forms usage (see 2.3) may be applied to most function words, in the case of the word *that* students are also confronted with a more demanding task of assessing its grammatical role.

### **3. Czech learners and weak forms**

Jane Setter carried out a research among English learners in Hong Kong trying to analyse the length of the weak, unstressed, stressed and tonic syllables in their speech. Over three years she collected recordings of 20 university students. When she examined the obtained data and compared the speech of Hong Kong students to that of native speakers, she discovered that while the number of the detected tonic and stressed syllables was roughly the same in both cases, the proportion between unstressed and weakened syllables differed drastically. Compared to native speakers, Hong Kong respondents used nearly twice as many unstressed syllables, but on the other hand, their data contained only a half of the weak syllables detected in the native speech (Setter 779). Setter estimates that although the English learners from Hong Kong had no difficulty with unstressed syllables, due to the very low incidence of syllable weakening in their native language Cantonese they were not able to weaken the syllables in English either (Setter 779). The transfer from their mother tongue to English was also revealed in that the differences in the length of weakened, unstressed, stressed and tonic syllables were considerably smaller than those observed among native speakers (Setter 780).

Researchers generally agree on the fact that apart from other factors such as the amount of exposure to the English language or the age of the learner, the mother tongue (L1) has a large impact on the acquisition of the target sound system. Being familiar with the pronunciation features of L1, it is, to some extent, possible to predict which areas will be potentially problematic for the learners due to negative transfer. When there is a sound in English that does not exist in the students' L1, they might have troubles both recognising and producing it and they might tend towards substituting it with a wrong sound (Kelly 8). It is only logical that different patterns of the L1 rhythm and intonation compared to those in the English language, may also lead to problems with mutual understanding (Kelly 68).

In case of Czech learners there are several obstacles their mother tongue places in the way to mastery of weak forms in English. If in section 1.2 of this text English is being referred to as a stress-based language, Czech would belong to the category of languages in which the contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables does not play a vital role. This does not mean that there is no stress in the Czech language, but it almost

exclusively falls on the first syllable of the words and does not play an important semantic role. Consequently, Czech native speakers are not used to giving much prominence to the stressed syllables and more importantly, they never reduce those that do not occur under primary stress – one of the key characteristics of weak forms. Volín summarizes the difficulties of Czech learners in the acquisition of English weak forms using the example of the reduced English vowel *schwa* /ə/. Apart from the absence of vowel reduction in Czech, he adds that since *schwa* “has not a phonemic status in Czech . . . and can be represented by one of the available vowel letters, the typical Czech mistake is its replacement with other so called full vowels” (*Transcription* 39). In his research, Volín demonstrated that “there is a clear lack of durational reduction” in Czech English (*Patterns* 291).

It would be foolish to say that Czech students of the English language are disadvantaged compared to learners of other nationalities. No matter which country the pupils come from, their L1 always builds certain barriers to the process of a foreign language sound system acquisition. It is true, however, that for some Czech learners the absence of vowel reduction in their first language makes the native-like use of weak forms a highly ambitious, if not unachievable goal.

#### **4. Different approaches to weak forms teaching**

Gimson claims that unlike grammar or vocabulary where there is a certain consensus as to what the students should learn, pronunciation teaching shows a larger variety in this respect, leaving the decision about priorities and features to be taught to the teacher’s discretion (315). Weak forms and their relevance to the curriculum are of no exception to Gimson’s statement as there seems to be a considerable diversity in phoneticians’ and teachers’ approach to this phenomenon.

Jenkins conducted an extensive research on non-native speakers’ communication in order to establish those pronunciation features that are vital for mutual understanding. As a result of her findings she created a list of these features which she called *Lingua Franca Core*. Weak forms of function words do not appear on this list and moreover, “Jenkins designates them as noncore” (Celce-Murcia 476). She states that she is “not at all convinced by the argument that it is necessary to weaken an unimportant item in

order to highlight an important one, provided that the latter is adequately stressed” (Jenkins 146). Her data would suggest that weak forms and their teaching are of little importance, however, it should be noted that her research examined only non-native speakers’ interactions. When one focuses on communication including native speakers, the opinions on this matter begin to vary significantly.

Most teaching experts deal with weak forms of function words not only in their extensive studies, they also incorporate them in their English teaching text books, which would suggest that they find this phenomenon of certain importance to foreign learners. However, while some linguists acknowledge the significance of weak forms at both passive (perceptive) as well as active (productive) level, others agree with the weak forms being introduced for the purpose of better understanding to native speakers, but they do not insist on the active weak form usage by the learners.

Roach, for instance, talks about the relevance of elision, one of the possible processes involved in the change from strong to weak forms (see 2.2 for details), and he recollects that it “is something which foreign learners do not need to learn to do, but it is important for them to be aware that when native speakers of English talk to each other, quite a number of phonemes that the foreigner might expect to hear are not actually pronounced” (Roach 127). Roach even specifically mentions weak forms in this respect. According to him “speakers who are not familiar with the use of weak forms are likely to have difficulty understanding speakers who do use them” (Roach 102).

Kelly agrees that “it is important that the learners are taught the possible forms of these words when they are introduced” (73) but he does not mention whether the students should also learn to use them actively. Kenworthy, on the other hand, focuses on the importance of correct stress placement and consequently the active usage of weak forms by the learners:

If the learner doesn’t stress one syllable more than another, or stresses the wrong syllable, it may be very difficult for the listener to identify the word . . . Weak forms should be introduced after the basic points about word stress, rhythm and sentence stress have been covered . . . Not only should learners be able to cope with the weak forms they hear, they must use them when speaking English. (Kenworthy 18, 36, 79)

Volín appears to be of a similar opinion as Kenworthy. His experience with weak forms teaching “shows that students who do not learn how to pronounce them and how to recognize them in real spoken English are often confused or confuse their communication partners” (*Transcription* 28). He complements this statement with a concrete example of the absence of the *schwa* /ə/ sound not only in the case of weak forms but the English language in general. He notes that “the speech with not enough /ə/ sounds has unnatural rhythm and illogical emphasis on certain syllables, which can be unpleasant to listen to and often even difficult to understand” (Volín, *Transcription* 39).

Examining the various opinions on the incorporation of weak forms to the pronunciation curriculum, one finds it only logical that there should be such diversity in the proposed attitudes to this feature as it goes hand in hand with the variety of students’ motivation to learn the English language. The pronunciation priorities of a Korean teenager who only uses English to communicate with his Chinese friend will probably be considerably different compared to those of a Korean senior manager leading a native-speakers’ team in an English company. Gimson says that the teacher should always clearly establish a pronunciation model that he or she will make his students follow (315). He mentions three such models: RP English, Amalgam English and International English.

According to Gimson RP English (or any native-like English variety) should be a model for students who often communicate with native speakers, whether at work or their free time. In this case, Gimson finds both the passive as well as the active mastery of weak forms vital (323).

Amalgam English, Gimson believes, should be a pronunciation model for those who aim at “easy intelligibility by native speakers rather than aiming to sound like a native speaker” (325). This model shares a number of pronunciation features with RP English but may contain “some variations produced by the intrusion of features of the local language into English” (325). The most commonly occurring weak forms in English should, nonetheless, definitely be maintained in this model (325).

Similarly to Jenkins, Gimson claims that in the case of International English, that is a model suitable for non-native speakers’ interaction with no native speakers involved, weak forms are of no importance and may be casually ignored (332).

It is apparent that the role of weak forms in the English language text books is not very clear and pronunciation teachers' approaches towards this question often lack uniformity. However, that does not imply that some experts are right and others wrong, it only shows that the significance of weak forms depends on many factors including the teacher's competence and most importantly the students' ambition for future English usage.

In conclusion, it appears to be advisable for English teachers of elementary and intermediate levels to introduce the most common weak forms in their lessons, nevertheless, the insistence on their active usage by the students seems to be rather questionable. On the other hand, considering their future social and working environment, advanced and proficiency learners as well as future English teachers should aim at the active incorporation of weak forms to their spoken English. Especially in the case of future teachers, this ought to be a part of their consistent effort to approximate a native-like accent.

## Practical Part

This part of the thesis focuses on a research designed exclusively for the purpose of this work. It examines the pronunciation of the word *that* in the speech of Czech learners. Its aim is to reveal whether Czech students reduce the strong form /ðæt/ into its weak counterpart /ðət/ in suitable contexts – when the word is used as a relative pronoun or a subordinate conjunction – or whether they do not discern between the two possible pronunciation variants in their production. Further, the objective of the research is to find out whether students who attended English phonetics and phonology courses in their past use the strong and weak forms of the word *that* more accurately than those who have never been acquainted with the theoretical background of this pronunciation feature.

Considering the absence of both the reduced vowel /ə/ as well as the low-front vowel sound /æ/ in the Czech phonemic inventory, and keeping in mind the usual time limitation of phonetics and phonology courses, three basic hypotheses were formulated prior to the execution of the research:

- 1) Czech students will show little tendency towards the reduction of the vowel /æ/ in the word *that*.
- 2) Students will tend to pronounce the mid-front vowel /e/ instead of both the reduced vowel /ə/ and the low-front vowel sound /æ/, and their speech will display little difference between the strong and the weak form of the word *that*.
- 3) Prior attendance of an English phonetics and phonology course will have an insignificant influence on the correct pronunciation and distribution of the examined phenomenon.

### 5. Method

A simple production test was performed among Czech students of English in order to analyse the feature in question. Firstly, two different texts, both of which contained a certain incidence of the word *that* in its weak and strong form, were carefully

composed. Secondly, 20 respondents were recorded while reading the created texts. The obtained recordings were then repeatedly listened to, after which the vowel of the word *that* was evaluated and assigned one of the following sound qualities: /æ/, /ə/ and /e/.

In order to verify the correct pronunciation of the target word resulting from the theoretical part of this thesis, two English native speakers, both from the south-east of England, were asked to record themselves while reading the same texts, and their recordings were evaluated in the way described above, too.

## 5.1 Material

For the purpose of the research, two original texts were composed by the author. In order to prevent or at least minimize the readers' focus on mechanical reading itself rather than natural speech production, the first text (Text 1) was authored as a coherent short story whose plot was intended to help the respondents forget about the objective of the recording. Furthermore, a great amount of direct speech was incorporated in the text so as to approximate the readers' natural, spontaneous speech rather than monotonous academic reading.

The following story is the exact text as it was given to the respondents. The strong and weak forms of *that* have been colour coded: **red** means *that* is used as a demonstrative adjective or a demonstrative pronoun and should be pronounced in its **strong** form /ðæt/, **green** and **yellow** colour represent the use of *that* as a relative pronoun and a subordinate conjunction and suggest the **weak** pronunciation /ðət/. Naturally, the respondents were given a version without this encoding.

I will tell you a short story **that** happened to a very old friend of mine.

A greedy merchant by the name of Phil was walking through a forest, desperately looking for a big treasure **that** had been hidden there many years ago. When he reached a wide meadow, he suddenly noticed **that** there was an old man sitting under a tall apple tree.

*"Hey! You! I am looking for a big treasure buried in **that** forest,"* said Phil and looked over his shoulder. *"Do you know anything about it?"* - *"Yes, I know everything about it,"* answered the old man. *"If you climb this tree*



and bring me **that** big red apple on the top, I will tell you everything I've heard about the treasure you have been searching for" he said. "Which apple?" said Phil eagerly as there were no fewer than 20 apples on the tree. "The one over there?" he asked and pointed at a small apple **that** wasn't any higher than three meters from the ground. "No, the big red one on the top," said the old man. "Oh, **that**..." mumbled Phil disappointedly knowing **that** he would have to climb all the way to the top. (The old man, however, knew **that** Phil was well aware of **that** from the very beginning).

After two minutes – he wanted the treasure so bad it took him no longer than **that** – Phil was back down with the big red apple. "Now tell me everything you heard about **that** treasure!" he cried rudely and gasped for breath. "I will tell you," said the old man smiling as he was chewing his apple. "I have heard nothing about it."

The stress placement in the last sentence was observed while evaluating the collected recordings and the results suggest that only few respondents understood the actual point of the story. It is for this reason that a short discussion about Text 1 is to be found in Appendix 2. Table 1 clearly shows the incidences of the strong and weak forms of *that* in Text 1.

WEAK		STRONG
Conjunction	Relative Pronoun	
3	3	6
6		

**Table 1.** The occurrence of the strong and weak forms of the word *that* in Text 1.

The second text (Text 2) composed for the purpose of the research served as another source of data for further analysis. Unlike Text 1, it consisted of separated sentences, each of which contained the target feature. One of the main purposes of involving the sentences was to examine the pronunciation of the word *that* in common expressions such as *apart from that* and *other than that*. We also covered the use of the word *that* as

a part of frequent multi-word subordinators *assuming that* and *suggesting that* (Dušková 303).

The sentences were colour coded following the same logic as in Text 1:

1. Assuming **that** he would come late we simply began to eat.
2. We both played football but other than **that** we had hardly anything in common.
3. The book **that** my mother gave me is utterly boring.
4. You were accepted? **That's** great!
5. It may seem **that** I don't like him but I really do!
6. You say she's pretty. Well, I believe **that** apart from **that** she is not stupid either.
7. A well written song is a song **that** you need to listen to many times before you like it, but once you fall for it you'll love it forever.
8. Excuse me, are you suggesting **that** I knew everything about it and didn't say a thing?
9. Don't do **that** to yourself, don't push me away, you know you cannot bear loneliness.

Table 2 shows the incidences of the strong and weak forms of the word *that* in Text 2, table 3 displays the total incidence of the same phenomenon in Text 1 and Text 2:

WEAK		STRONG
Conjunction	Relative Pronoun	
4	2	4
6		

**Table 2.** The occurrence of the strong and weak forms of the word *that* in Text 2.

WEAK		STRONG
Conjunction	Relative Pronoun	
7	5	10
12		

**Table 3.** The total number of the strong and weak forms of the word *that* in both texts.

## 5.2 Respondents

When the material was prepared, 20 Czech native speakers were chosen to record themselves while reading the authored texts. All participants had been studying English for a minimum of 10 years and were at least upper-intermediate English learners, the majority of them, however, exceeded this level significantly.

In order to examine the impact of prior attendance of English phonetics and phonology courses on the correct usage of the examined feature, the recordings were divided into 2 separate sets. Group A consisted of data obtained from 10 university students pursuing their Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English teaching and Anglophone studies. All 10 respondents, namely 5 girls and 4 boys at the age of 21-24 as well as a 48 year-old female English teacher, had attended and successfully passed an English phonetics and phonology course – a compulsory component of their education.

Group B consisted of 10 people at the age of 23-35. All the respondents, 5 women and the same number of men, were mostly advanced learners with a great amount of experience with spoken English. They had spent a minimum of 5 months studying in an English speaking country or working for an international company with English communication on a daily basis. None of them had, however, attended an English phonetics and phonology course prior to our research.

## 5.3 Procedure

Once the texts were prepared and the respondents chosen, we proceeded to the actual act of recording. Since the participants in the research attended several different educational institutions and various international companies as well as due to the rather

hectic exam period in which the recording took place, finding a date convenient for all the respondents and moreover securing a sound proof room seemed to be an overly ambitious goal. Instead, the respondents were sent the material for recording via e-mail, accompanied with uniform detailed instructions.

Each participant received the same set of instructions on how to create the recording of the two texts. First, they were assured that the whole process and its results were completely anonymous and no personal data of the respondents would be mentioned in any part of the thesis. Further, the readers were explained the difference between both texts – one being a coherent short story with a continuous plot and the other containing a set of unrelated sentences. The respondents were also asked to read each text at least once and no more than twice before the recording itself in order to get familiar with the plot and potentially surprising or unknown vocabulary. They were, however, encouraged not to worry about the exact pronunciation of possibly unfamiliar words. The purpose of allowing the respondents some time for readings the texts prior to the process of recording was simply to ensure a certain level of fluency and naturalness of the performance. Afterwards, the readers were asked to read the texts aloud while recording themselves on a digital recording device, a mobile phone with a high-quality integrated microphone or a laptop/desktop, using an external recording device. Once the whole process was finished, the respondents were encouraged to save the recordings, possibly in the audio .wav format, and send them back to the author.

The data we collected from the respondents was partly recorded using Audacity software in combination with a SHURE PG48 voice microphone, several recordings were made with an integrated recording device of a HTC Desire X and a SONY Xperia T mobile phones, and 6 respondents who managed to agree on one date for a group meeting were recorded in an empty room using a SONY ICD-PX312M digital dictating machine.

Although the above mentioned conditions of the research did not make it possible to guarantee uniform quality of the data acquired from the respondents, one of the vital priorities was that the examined phenomenon be clearly discernible and that the sound quality have no influence on its correct evaluation. It was for this reason that recordings

of poor or questionable sound quality were returned to their authors who were lent a SHURE PG48 microphone and asked to record the texts one more time.

Once the data had been gathered and the recordings complying with our requirements selected, the next stage of the research was their careful evaluation. For that purpose all 20 recordings were converted into the audio .wav format and divided into 4 distinct sets. Groups A1 and A2 were formed by recordings of Text 1 and Text 2 collected from respondents who had attended an English phonetics and phonology course prior to our research. Groups B1 and B2 consisted of recordings of the same texts gathered from readers with no specialized phonetics and phonology education. First, all 4 groups were evaluated as a whole after which a partial analysis of Group A and Group B as well as A1, A2, B1 and B2 was performed.

The listening and evaluation process was realized using a lap top, VLC software and high-quality q-Jays in-ear monitors. In order to ensure the reliability of the assessment of the data, each recording was examined at least twice with a one week interval between either listening. Furthermore, all the recordings whose assessment after the first and the second round of evaluation differed were consulted with an unbiased person who did not partake in the research.

It is important to mention that any attempt to de-stress and shorten the word *that* was evaluated as a use of its weak form, although a native speaker assessed it as a rather non-native like realization. Similarly, anytime the word *that* was stressed and the length of the vowel was not reduced, it was evaluated as strong even though it did not contain the native like /æ/ sound and the phonetic realization was close to the Czech front vowel /e/.

## **6. Results**

After all the data was collected and evaluated (see 5.2 and 5.3), the results were analysed from two different perspectives. Firstly, the respondents' tendency to reduce the strong form in required environments was observed. Secondly, the actual phonetic realization of the peak vowel was examined with special focus paid to the Czech /e/ sound.

## 6.1 Reduction

Table 4 presents the frequency with which all 20 respondents weakened the strong form of *that* depending on its grammatical function in the sentence. With 20 speakers partaking in the research and the incidence of the word *that* reaching the number of 22 per speaker, the total number of the examined phenomenon occurrence was 440.

	WEAK		STRONG
	Conjunction	Relative Pronoun	
Native Speakers	140	100	200
	240		
Czech Learners	87	64	176
	151		
% correct	62%	64%	88%
	63%		

**Table 4.** The number of correctly used strong and weak forms of the word *that* with different grammatical functions – both texts, all respondents.

Table 4 shows that in 63% of cases, the respondents tended to correctly reduce the strong form /ðæt/. The success rate of using the unreduced pronunciation in required situations reached 88%.

Although upper-intermediate and advanced Czech learners of English are not familiar with the use of the reduced forms of grammatical words from their mother tongue, they do show certain tendency towards using the weak form of the word *that* in English. However, Table 4 displays that in comparison with native speakers, Czech learners only use the weak form in approximately two thirds of required cases. The numbers also suggest that although the use of the weak form was by no means random and the readers mostly tended to reduce the word *that* functioning as a relative pronoun or a conjunction, in 12% of cases the respondents used the weak form in situations in which its strong counterpart should usually be maintained.

In order to examine whether prior attendance of an English phonetics and phonology course has any significant impact on the reduction of *that* and its correct distribution, we separated the results of Group A and Group B. With 10 respondents in each group the total incidence of the word *that* per group reached the number of 220.

	WEAK		STRONG
	Conjunction	Relative Pronoun	
Native Speakers	70	50	100
	120		
Group A (phonetics)	43	36	84
	79		
% correct	61%	72%	84%
	66%		
Group B (no phonetics)	44	28	92
	72		
% correct	63%	56%	92%
	60%		

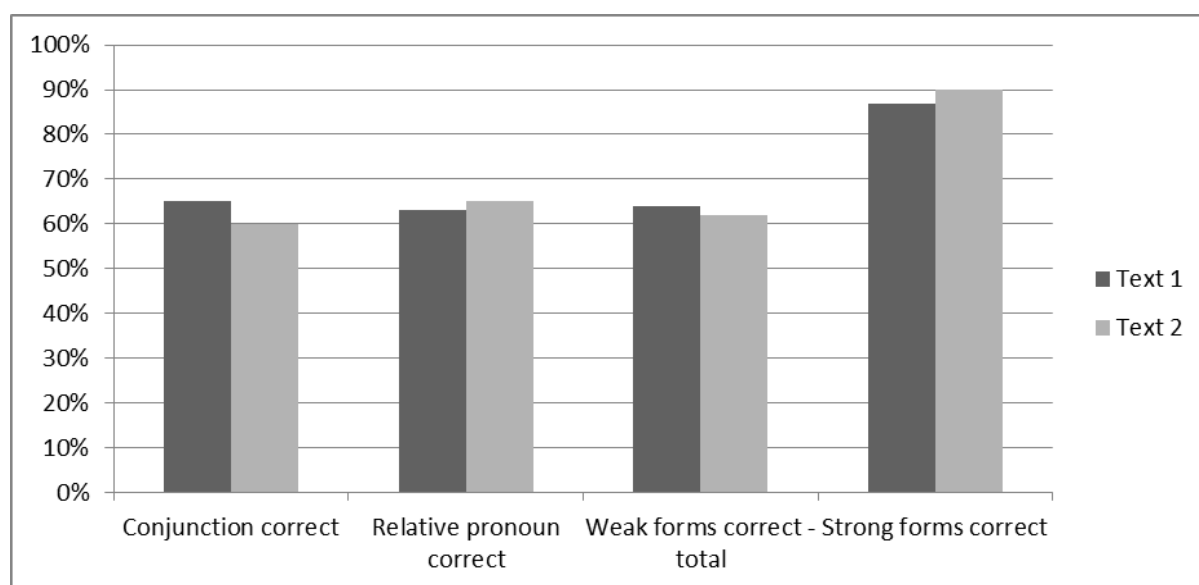
**Table 5.** The number of correctly used strong and weak forms of the word *that* with different grammatical functions in both texts – comparison of Group A and Group B.

Looking at Table 5 one may observe that students from Group A, who successfully passed an exam in English phonetics and phonology before our research, used the weak form of the word *that* in suitable situations with a slightly higher frequency than those from Group B. On the other hand, while they used the reduced form when *that* functioned as a relative pronoun in 72% of cases compared to 56% of correct usages of their colleagues from Group B, the numbers were approximately even for both groups when *that* played the role of a subordinating conjunction.

Moreover, the greater reduction tendency of Group A had a negative influence on situations in which *that* served as a demonstrative adjective or a demonstrative pronoun and as such should have retained its strong form. Group A incorrectly used the weak pronunciation in 16% of cases whereas readers from Group B committed the same error in only 8% of the strong form incidences. Generally speaking, although our study

reveals that Group A shows a slightly stronger overall inclination to reduce the word *that*, the differences between both groups do not seem to be of great significance.

Figure 1 displays that when we compared recordings of Text 1 with those of Text 2, there was only very little difference to be observed in the strong form reduction. When the respondents read the coherent short story the number of the weak form incidences was fractionally higher than in the case of the separate sentences in Text 2. However, given the limited sample of 20 readers and the little variance in the data, it would be rather questionable to draw a significant conclusion from the comparison.



**Figure 1.** The correct usage of the strong and weak forms of the word *that* with different grammatical functions – comparison of Text 1 and Text 2.

## 6.2 Phonetic realization

After the initial evaluation of the results, a native speaker was asked to listen to the recordings and tell her opinion on the pronunciation of the investigated word. The conclusion she reached was that while there was an obvious tendency of the respondents to reduce the strong form or on the contrary to stress the word when functioning as a demonstrative, the readers' phonetic realization of both the weak vowel /ə/ as well as the low-front vowel sound /æ/ was often far from that of a native speaker.

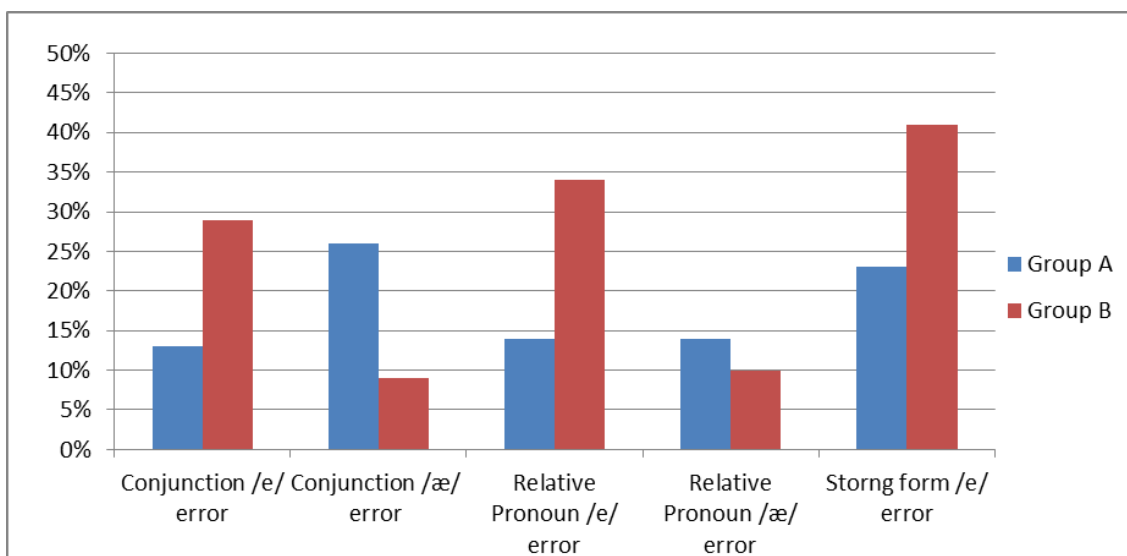


	WEAK		STRONG
	Conjunction	Relative Pronoun	
<i>Native Speakers</i>	140	100	200
	240		
<b>Czech Learners</b>	87	64	176
	151		
<i>/e/ error</i>	29	24	64
	53		
<b>% /e/ error</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>32%</b>
	<b>22%</b>		

**Table 6.** Czech speakers' mispronunciation of the word *that* with different grammatical functions – both texts, all respondents.

Table 6 confirms the native speaker's impression. In 22% of cases where the weak form should have been used and in 32% of situations in which the strong counterpart should have been retained, Czech learners pronounced the mid-front vowel quality instead.

Figure 2 shows the differences between Group A and Group B regarding the Czech /e/ pronunciation. Furthermore, it also reveals how often both groups pronounced the word strongly /ðæt/ with the low-front vowel in a position in which the weak form should have been used instead. The figure clearly reflects the difficulty the respondents from Group B experienced when trying to pronounce the English low-front vowel /æ/ correctly. Their phonetic realization of the peak vowel in the strong form resembled the Czech /e/ sound approximately twice as often as in the case of Group A.



**Figure 2.** Comparison of Group A and Group B – incorrect phonetic realization and distribution of the strong and weak forms of the word *that* with different grammatical functions.

The figure, on the other hand, reveals another important feature. While learners from Group A seem to be more experienced than their colleagues from Group B when imitating the native-like /æ/ sound, this does not automatically mean that their speech will be more easily understood as they do not always use the strong form /ðæt/ in suitable position. Examining the first four columns of Figure 2, one may come to the conclusion that in approximately the same number of cases in which Group B pronounced the word *that* with the Czech vowel /e/ instead of the reduced *schwa* sound, speakers from Group A incorrectly used the strong form with almost native-like or native-like pronunciation. For a native speaker, this error might potentially be even more confusing than the foreign-sounding phonetic realization with /e/ sound. When a learner says *I believe that...* and takes time to decide how to continue the subordinate clause, strong pronunciation of the subordinating conjunction may confuse the listener. The latter is likely to believe that the speaker has already finished the sentence with a demonstrative pronoun at the end: *I believe that*.

## 7. Discussion

Before the research was carried out among Czech learners, three main hypotheses were formulated.

The first hypothesis estimated that Czech students would only show little tendency towards the reduction of the vowel /æ/ in the word *that*. The research revealed that the respondents' overall tendency towards the strong form reduction was generally greater than expected (see Table 4). In 63% of cases when the weak form should have been used, the participants intended to reduce the word in terms of length as well as quality. Although the resulting sound was not always identical with that produced by a native speaker, it undeniably differed from the strong, unreduced form. While the first hypothesis did not prove to be entirely true as the number 63% is by no means inconsiderable, the research revealed that the reduction of the word *that* and its distribution in the text were far from being systematic and would certainly deserve further attention.

The respondents showed quite a significant inclination to discern between the strong and the weak form of the word *that*. However, the distribution of the two forms was often incorrect and the phonetic realization of the vowels in both variants frequently resembled the mid-front vowel /e/ (see Table 6 and Figure 2). In more than one quarter of *that* occurrences, Czech /e/ was pronounced instead of either the low-front vowel /æ/ or the reduced, weak vowel sound /ə/. Looking at the data it may be concluded that the second hypothesis was confirmed partially: the absence of the vowels /æ/ and /ə/ in the Czech language did result in frequent use of the Czech vowel sound /e/ instead as predicted, but on the other hand, the degree to which the respondents discerned between the two pronunciation forms exceeded our original expectations.

The last hypothesis suggested that prior attendance of an English phonetics and phonology course would only have an insignificant influence on the correct pronunciation and distribution of the examined phenomenon. The results of our research indicate that the distribution of the strong and weak forms of the word *that* in the speech was similar in case of both groups. Nevertheless, it is obvious from Figure 2 that the respondents in Group A were significantly more accurate when pronouncing the English low-front vowel /æ/, and furthermore, compared to Group B they only mispronounced the word *that* using the Czech vowel /e/ in approximately half of the cases.

When the above mentioned native speaker, a 25-year-old Cambridge graduate, was asked to listen to the recordings and comment on the readers' pronunciation of the word

*that*, the few respondents whose pronunciation she described as almost native-like were all readers with a high level of fluency. Considering this fact as well as the results of our research, we believe that in case of most participants the reduction of *that* was not a consciously intended, systematically distributed process based on theoretical knowledge, but rather a secondary product of a general attempt for fluency and approaching a native-like pronunciation.

## Conclusion

This thesis concerned the phenomenon of weak forms of function words in the English language.

The first part of the work aimed at accenting the importance of weak forms to natural communication among native speakers and presented the most frequent approaches to teaching the target phenomenon. Apart from a detailed classification of the rules which the occurrence of weak forms follows, the most common difficulties Czech students have to overcome while learning this pronunciation feature were mentioned.

The practical part of the thesis focused on a research carried out among Czech students of English at an advanced level. It aimed at analysing the frequency of the reduction of the word *that* according to its grammatical function. The research was namely concerned with the degree to which they distinguished between those cases in which the word *that* served as a conjunction or a relative pronoun and should have been pronounced weakly /ðət/, and those when *that* had a demonstrative function and ought to have retained its strong form /ðæt/.

The results of the research showed that in approximately 63% of suitable cases the respondents correctly reduced the strong form of the word *that* into its weak counterpart. Further division of the participants revealed that there was no significant difference in terms of the vowel reduction between respondents with English phonetics and phonology knowledge (Group A) and those who had never been acquainted with weak forms of function words on a theoretical level (Group B).

A considerable difference was discovered between the two groups, however, in the phonetic realization of the strong form of *that*. Students from Group B had a significant difficulty in approaching the native-like pronunciation of the low-front English vowel /æ/, the sound of the mid-front vowel /e/ occurring in Czech was frequently detected instead. On the other hand, even though Group A's phonetic realization of the strong form was closer to that of native speakers, the distribution of both forms was no more accurate than that of Group B. The results of the comparison of both groups may stem from the usual time limitation of phonetics and phonology courses. While a great

amount of time is dedicated to the pronunciation of individual sounds, the phenomenon of weak forms is only touched upon with little opportunity of thorough practice.

The results of our research correspond with a study performed by Leánez and Waasaf. They examined both the perception as well as production abilities of Spanish students regarding the most frequent English weak forms. The comparison of their findings with ours suggests that the numbers of cases in which Spanish learners of English used the weak forms and the respondents in our research reduced the word *that* were similar. Furthermore, almost no difference was observed in the correct usage of strong forms. It should be emphasized, however, that while Leánez and Waasaf's research dealt with the phenomenon of weak forms as such, the focus of our study was more restricted as it examined one specific word.

In conclusion, was discovered that Czech students of the English language at an advanced level show a certain tendency to reduce the strong form of the word *that* in required contexts. However, we believe that in the case of current and future English teachers, the frequency of using the weak form of *that* correctly appears to be insufficient. Hopefully, this thesis will serve as a useful source of information to all English students who are endeavouring to improve their oral performance. Ideally, both the theoretical as well as the practical part of this work will remind English teachers of the often overlooked yet significant phenomenon of weak forms, and will provide them with better understanding of the difficulties and needs of their students. The research shows that the correct usage of *that* results from a general exposure to the English language rather than theoretical knowledge. It would thus be advisable to incorporate speaking activities focusing on the most frequent expressions containing the word *that* in the pronunciation lessons. This shall help to make the use of *that* automatic without the necessity of analysing its grammatical function.

### **Future research suggestions**

It should be a priority for every student of the English language to work on his or her pronunciation in order to make the interpersonal communication as effortless as possible. Although weak forms of function words are usually seen as a phenomenon not vital for mutual understanding, their knowledge and correct active usage may largely

contribute to a smooth and fluent interaction between English students and native speakers. The practical part of this thesis restricted its scope to the pronunciation of the word *that* among Czech students, nevertheless, it would be advisable for further researches in the area of weak forms to be carried out so as to discover and subsequently avoid the main rhythmical imperfections of Czech students' spoken English.

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## Appendix

### 1.

	<b>WEAK FORM</b>			<b>STRONG FORM</b>
<b>a, an</b>	/ə/ before consonants <b>/ən/</b> before vowels	<i>He was a man.</i> <i>Draw an egg.</i>	/hi wəz ə 'mæn/ /'drɔ: ən 'eg/	/eɪ/, /æɪn/
<b>am</b>	<b>/əm/</b>	<i>What am I doing?</i>	/'wɒt əm aɪ 'du:ɪŋ/	/æm/
<b>and</b>	<b>/ən/</b> (sometimes after /t/, /d/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/ - /ŋ/)	<i>Hide and seek.</i>	/'haɪd ɪ 'si:k/	/ænd/
<b>any</b>	<b>/əni/</b>	<i>Do you have any sweets?</i>	/də ju əv əni 'swi:ts/	/eni/
<b>are</b>	/ə/ before consonants <b>/ər/</b> before vowels	<i>How are you?</i> <i>The plates are in the kitchen.</i>	/'haʊ ə 'ju:/ /ðə 'pleɪts ər ɪn ðə 'kɪtʃən/	/ɑ:/
<b>as</b>	<b>/əz/</b>	<i>As soon as I can.</i>	/əz 'su:n əz aɪ 'kæn/	/æz/
<b>at</b>	<b>/ət/</b>	<i>Look at me.</i>	/'lʊk ət mi/	/æt/
<b>be</b>	<b>/bi/</b>	<i>That will be my brother.</i>	/'ðæt wɪl bi maɪ 'brʌðə/	/bi:/
<b>been</b>	<b>/bɪn/</b>	<i>Have you been smoking?</i>	/həv ju bɪn 'sməʊkɪŋ/	/bi:n/
<b>but</b>	<b>/bət/</b>	<i>It's old but beautiful.</i>	/ɪts 'əʊld bət 'bju:tɪfəl/	/bʌt/

<i>can</i>	<b>/kən/</b>	<i>You can try.</i>	<i>/'ju kən 'traɪ/</i>	<b>/kæn/</b>
<i>could</i>	<b>/kəd/</b>	<i>We could drown.</i>	<i>/'wi kəd 'draʊn/</i>	<b>/kʊd/</b>
<i>do</i>	<b>/də/</b> before consonants <b>/du/</b> before vowels	<i>What do you think?</i> <i>Where do I begin?</i>	<i>/'wɒt də ju 'θɪŋk/</i> <i>/'weə du aɪ bɪ'ɡɪn/</i>	<b>/du:/</b>
<i>does</i>	<b>/dəz/</b>	<i>What does he mean?</i>	<i>/'wɒt dəz i 'mi:n/</i>	<b>/dʌz/</b>
<i>for</i>	<b>/fə/</b> before consonants <b>/fɔr/</b> before vowels	<i>It's for my mother.</i> <i>He bought it for us.</i>	<i>/'ɪts fə maɪ 'mʌðə/</i> <i>/hi 'bɔ:t ɪt fɔr 'ʌs/</i>	<b>/fɔ:/</b>
<i>from</i>	<b>/frəm/</b>	<i>She comes from Bilbao.</i>	<i>/ʃi 'kʌmz frəm bɪl'baʊ/</i>	<b>/frɒm/</b>
<i>had</i>	<b>/əd/</b> <b>/həd/</b> in initial position	<i>He had gone fishing.</i>	<i>/'hi əd 'gɒn 'fɪʃɪŋ/</i>	<b>/hæd/</b>
<i>has</i>	<b>/əz/</b> <b>/həz/</b> in initial position	<i>She has come.</i>	<i>/'ʃi əz 'kʌm/</i>	<b>/hæz/</b>
<i>have</i>	<b>/əv/</b> <b>/həv/</b> in initial position	<i>What have you done?</i>	<i>/'wɒt əv ju 'dʌn/</i>	<b>/hæv/</b>
<i>he</i>	<b>/i/</b> <b>/hi/</b> in initial position	<i>Where did he go?</i>	<i>/'weə dɪd i 'gəʊ/</i>	<b>/hi:/</b>

<b>her</b>	/ə/ before consonants	<i>Let her go.</i>	/ˈlet ə ˈgəʊ/	<b>/hɜː/</b>
	/əɪ/ before vowels	<i>Let her ask him.</i>	/ˈlet əɪ ˈɑːsk ɪm/	
	<b>/hə/ (/hɛr/)</b> in initial position			
<b>him</b>	<b>/ɪm/</b>	<i>I saw him yesterday.</i>	/aɪ ˈsɔː ɪm ˈjestədeɪ/	<b>/hɪm/</b>
<b>his</b>	<b>/ɪz/</b>	<i>She lost his hammer.</i>	/ʃi ˈlɒst ɪz ˈhæmə/	<b>/hɪz/</b>
<b>me</b>	<b>/mi/</b>	<i>Give me a break.</i>	/ˈgɪv mi ə ˈbreɪk/	<b>/miː/</b>
<b>must</b> <i>(obligation)</i>	<b>/məs/</b> before consonants	<i>I must go.</i>	/aɪ məs ˈgəʊ/	<b>/mʌst/</b>
	<b>/məst/</b> before vowels	<i>You must eat.</i>	/ju məst ˈiːt/	
<b>of</b>	<b>/əv/</b>	<i>Most of them came.</i>	/ˈməʊst əv ðəm ˈkeɪm/	<b>/ɒv/</b>
<b>St (saint)</b> <i>(title)</i>	<b>/sənt/</b>	<i>St Peter</i>	/sənt ˈpiːtə/	<b>/semt/</b>
<b>shall</b>	<b>/ʃəl/</b>	<i>We shall try harder.</i>	/wi ʃəl ˈtraɪ ˈhɑːdə/	<b>/ʃæl/</b>
<b>she</b>	<b>/ʃi/</b>	<i>Where has she gone?</i>	/ˈweə əz ʃi ˈgɒn/	<b>/ʃiː/</b>
<b>should</b>	<b>/ʃəd/</b>	<i>You should call her.</i>	/ju ʃəd ˈkɔːl ə/	<b>/ʃʊd/</b>
<b>sir</b>	<b>/sə/</b> before consonants	<i>Sir Beckham</i>	/sə ˈbekəm/	<b>/sɜː/</b>
	<b>/sɛr/</b> before vowels	<i>Sir Andrew</i>	/sɛr ˈændruː/	
<b>some</b>	<b>/səm/</b>	<i>I'd like some chees.</i>	/aɪd ˈlaɪk səm ˈtʃiːz/	<b>/sʌm/</b>
<b>such</b>	<b>/sətʃ/</b>	<i>It's not such a big mistake.</i>	/ɪts ˈnɒt sətʃ ə ˈbɪg mɪ ˈsteɪk/	<b>/sʌtʃ/</b>

<b>than</b>	<b>/ðən/</b>	<i>He is better than that.</i>	/hi ɪz 'betə ðən 'ðæt/	<b>/ðæn/</b>
<b>that</b>	<b>/ðæt/</b>	<i>We think that she's right.</i>	/wi 'θɪŋk ðæt ʃɪz 'raɪt/	<b>/ðæt/</b>
<b>the</b>	<b>/ðə/</b>	<i>Can you see the dog?</i>	/'kæn ju 'si: ðə 'dɒg/	<b>/ði:/</b>
<b>them</b>	<b>/ðəm/</b>	<i>Let them win.</i>	/'let ðəm 'wɪn/	<b>/ðem/</b>
<b>there</b>	<b>/ðə/</b> before consonants <b>/ðɜ:/</b> before vowels	<i>There should be some milk in the fridge.</i> <i>No, there is none left.</i>	/ðə ʃəd 'bi: səm 'mɪlk ɪn ðə 'frɪdʒ/ /'nəʊ ðɜ: ɪz 'nʌn 'left/	<b>/ðeə/</b>
<b>to</b>	<b>/tə/</b> before consonants <b>/tu/</b> before vowels	<i>It's time to go.</i> <i>It's time to enter.</i>	/ɪts 'taɪm tə 'gəʊ/ /ɪts 'taɪm tu 'entə/	<b>/tu:/</b>
<b>us</b>	<b>/əs/</b>	<i>They have sent us home.</i>	/ðeɪ əv 'sent əs 'həʊm/	<b>/ʌs/</b>
<b>was</b>	<b>/wəz/</b>	<i>I was exhausted.</i>	/'aɪ wəz ɪg'zɔ:stɪd/	<b>/wɒz/</b>
<b>we</b>	<b>/wi/</b>	<i>What can we do?</i>	/'wɒt kən wi 'du:/	<b>/wi:/</b>
<b>were</b>	<b>/wə/</b> before consonants <b>/wɜ:/</b> before vowels	<i>They were sitting at the table.</i> <i>They were at home.</i>	/ðeɪ wə 'sɪtɪŋ ət ðə 'teɪbl/ /ðeɪ wɜ: 'ɔ:səm/	<b>/wɜ:/</b>
<b>who</b>	<b>/hu/, /u:/, /u/</b>	<i>The man who told her</i>	/ðə 'mæn hu 'təʊld ə/	<b>/hu:/</b>
<b>would</b>	<b>/wəd/</b>	<i>What would you like to drink?</i>	/'wɒt wəd ju 'laɪk tə 'drɪŋk/	<b>/wɒd/</b>

<i>you</i>	/ju/	<i>Where did you go?</i>	/'weə did ju 'gəʊ/	/ju:/
<i>your</i>	/jə/ before consonants	<i>Give me your hand.</i>	/'gɪv mi jə 'hænd/	/jɔ:/
	/jər/ before vowels	<i>Close your eyes.</i>	/'kləʊz jər 'aɪz/	

## 2.

In Text 1, Phil asks the old man whether he *knows* anything about the treasure. The old man replies that he *knows* everything about it but promises to tell Phil everything he has *heard* about the treasure as long as he brings him the red apple. The point of the story is that the old man *knows* everything about the treasure as he is the person who hid it in the forest. At the same time, however, he has really *heard* nothing about it since nobody has ever *told* him anything regarding the treasure. When Phil climbs the tree and brings down the red apple, the old man keeps his promise and tells the truth when he says “I have *heard* nothing about it.”

The lack of additional stress given to the word *heard* in the last sentence suggests that most respondents did not fully understand the point of the story.

3. A CD with the recordings used for the research is attached to the thesis.