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## Recognition of Syllable Number by Saudi EFL Learners: A Case Study of Al-Baha University

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### Abstract

This study aims to investigate the ability of Saudi EFL learners to recognize the syllable number in various types of words. The study sample consisted of Saudi male and female students at Al-Baha University majoring in English Language. These students had completed many of the program courses; among which were the courses of 'Phonetics' and 'Phonology'. The researcher adopted the descriptive analytic method to conduct the study. To collect the data, a test was constructed containing various types of words and sent to the participants using a link of Google forms. 30 respondents sent back their responses which composed the data to be analyzed. The researcher used the program of Google Forms to come out with Pie Charts displaying the performance of the participants. The data were analyzed to answer the study questions. The findings revealed that Saudi EFL learners showed acceptable performance in recognizing the syllable number in English words. It is also noticeable that longer words with four syllables or more might be more difficult to account for than shorter ones.

**Keywords:** Saudi EFL Learners, Syllable, Syllabic, Syllable Number, Syllable Structure.

## I- Introduction

When English users produce words, they should rely on the phonological structure of these words to avoid mispronunciation segmentally and supra-segmentally. Any word consists of one or more than one syllable. There are monosyllabic words, two-syllable words, three-syllable words, etc. In order to pronounce words correctly, EFL learners ought to recognize the structure of the syllable and hence the number of word syllables. Supra-segmental phonology is concerned with features such as stress and intonation. English words contain strong and weak syllables, and stressed and unstressed syllables. Without recognizing the number of syllables in a word, it is hard to place the stress on the right one. Thus, it is a must on EFL learners to be able to count the number of syllables in English words so as to pronounce them correctly.

The syllable is defined as “a unit of pronunciation typically larger than a single sound and smaller than a word” (Crystal: 2008, p.467). Also, the sounds that are produced from the human beings form what is known as syllable (Birjandi & Salmani-Nodoushan: 2005). In its smallest form, a syllable may be only a vowel; this is what can be termed minimum syllable (Roach: 1991).

## Objectives of the Study

This study aims at investigating the ability of Saudi EFL learners at Al-Baha University to recognize the syllable number in various words. The participants were asked to count the syllable number which is a necessary skill needed to differentiate between weak and strong syllables as well as stressed and unstressed ones in their pronunciation. The study helps learners, educators and academics to recognize the types of words that might be hard to deal with as far as their syllable structure is concerned. To address these objectives, the researcher formulated the following questions and Hypotheses:

## Questions of the Study

1. To what extent are Saudi EFL Learners at Al-Baha University able to recognize the syllable number in various types of words?
2. What types of words are difficult to count their syllables?

## Hypotheses of the Study

1. Saudi EFL Learners at Al-Baha University are expected to perform well in recognizing the syllable number in various types of words.
2. The more syllables in words, the more difficulty is experienced by Saudi EFL Learners at Al-Baha University when counting the syllable number.

## II- Literature Review

Adetugbo (1993, p.66) defines the syllable as “a unit of pronunciation larger than a single sounds but smaller than a word but that a single sound like any of the vowels can constitute a syllable”. According to Roach (1991), the consonants /m, n, ŋ, l and r/ are syllabic which mean that they constitute the syllable center like vowels. In conclusion, pronouncing one vowel or one syllabic consonant alone can produce a minimum syllable. Adding consonants before, after or at both sides of a vowel or syllabic consonant results in one syllable since there is only one center. Hence, EFL learners are advised to focus on syllable centers to recognize the number of word syllables.

As stated by Joddle (2021), counting the number of syllables inside a word is hard for some EFL learners. The major reasons for this difficulty are:

- Firstly, the length of English syllables varies. Some of them are short and some are long. This could be different to how syllables operate in your native language. Take for example the words ‘a’ and ‘strengths’. Remarkably, both words are

monosyllabic although the former is just one sound, a vowel while the later consists of seven phonemes: one vowel and six consonants.

- Secondly, the widely taught clapping technique for counting syllables doesn't always work. Syllables have various lengths.
- Thirdly, relying on the word spelling might be misleading. This leads learners to pronounce words according to the number of vowel letters found in the spelling of a word, which often doesn't match the right pronunciation. A good example of this is found in the one-syllable word 'called' /kɔ:ld/, which many students mispronounce as /kɔ:lid/ (two syllables).
- Lastly, learners suffering from audio processing difficulties find it more difficult to divide words into syllables. This is because they 'hear' sounds differently, which makes the boundaries between syllables seem unclear.

Some previous studies tackled the English Syllable Structure. Understanding the syllable structure helps EFL learners recognize the syllable number in words and hence deal with supra-segmental phonology features properly.

The first study considered here was conducted by two Iraqi academics (Abdulaziz & Habeb, 2010). The study entitled 'Difficulties Faced by Iraqi EFL College Students in the Area of English Syllables' hypothesized that Iraqi EFL College Students faced difficulties in the Area of English Syllables. The study sample included both instructors and students. The students were 50 EFL learners at their third stage, Department of English, College of Education, University of Diyala. An achievement test was constructed by the two researchers for the students. One of the tasks in the test is to recognize the syllable number in English words. Although the students faced difficulties in other three tasks, their performance in recognizing the syllable number in English words was satisfying.

Another study was entitled ‘Exploring Students’ Understanding on English Syllables at University of Muhammadiyah Sorong. Four researchers conducted this study (Yasmin, et al, 2024). 17EFL Indonesian students majoring in English language participated in the study. The test was a vocabulary list and the students were asked to divide the words into syllables using symbol (-). The number of syllables ranged from one to seven. The performance of the students was considered to be low.

### III- Methodology

#### Participants:

The participants were 30 male and female students majoring in English language. They had their classes at the Department of Foreign Languages, College of Arts, Al-Baha University. Their mother tongue is Arabic and therefore they are considered to be EFL learners. All the participants had completed the courses of ‘Phonetics’ and ‘Phonology’ before they responded to the study test.

#### Data Collecting Tool:

A test was constructed to collect the data needed to complete the present study (Appendix 1). The participants were asked to count the number of syllables in various types of words. They are offered four options to select one: 1 syllable, 2 syllables, 3 syllables or 4 syllables. There were 16 words divided into four types. Each type is composed of a group of four words. The first group is monosyllabic; the second is two-syllable; the third is three-syllable and the fourth is four-syllable. So the number of syllables ranged from one to four so as to examine the ability to deal with words having a variety of lengths.

### IV- Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

After collecting the necessary data for the study, the researcher carried out an analysis to come out with the results. Below are the analysis and the major findings:

**- Monosyllabic Words:**

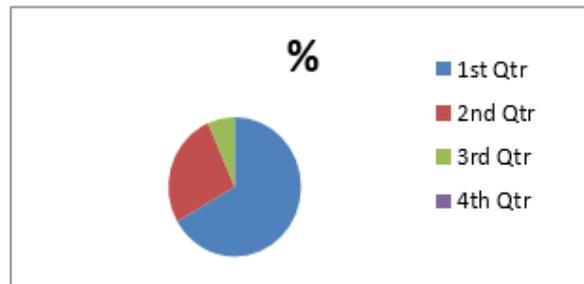


Chart (1): Number of Syllables in the Word 'School'

20 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word 'school' which is one. As displayed in the chart, 66.7% of the study sample are aware of the syllable structure found in this word. 8 students said that the word has got two syllables and 2 students thought that it has got three syllables. No student said that the word has got four syllables. The percentages of failures were 26.7% and 6.6% respectively. No one said that the word has got four syllables. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable structure of this monosyllabic word.

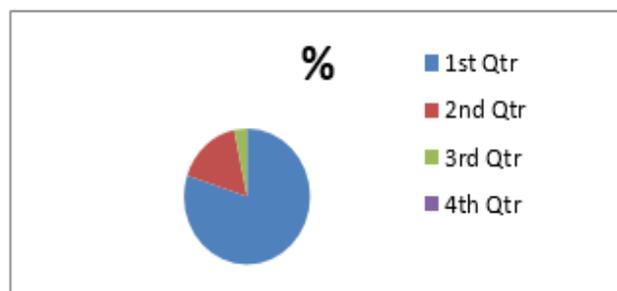


Chart (2): Number of Syllables in the Word 'Sport'

24 out of 30 students were able to recognize the number of syllables in the word 'sport' which is one. As displayed in the chart, 80% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 5 students said that the word has got two

syllables and 1 student thought that it has got three syllables. No student said that the word has got four syllables. The percentages of failures were 17% and 3% respectively. No one said that the word has got four syllables. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this monosyllabic word.

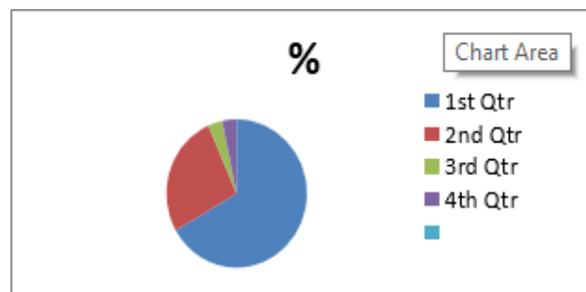


Chart (3): Number of Syllables in the Word 'Street'

20 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word 'street' which is one. As displayed in the chart, 66.7% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 8 students said that the word has got two syllables. 1 student thought that it has got three syllables and 1 student said that the word has got four syllables which is unexpected since the word looks short. The percentages of failures were 26.7%, 3.3% and 3.3% respectively. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this monosyllabic word.

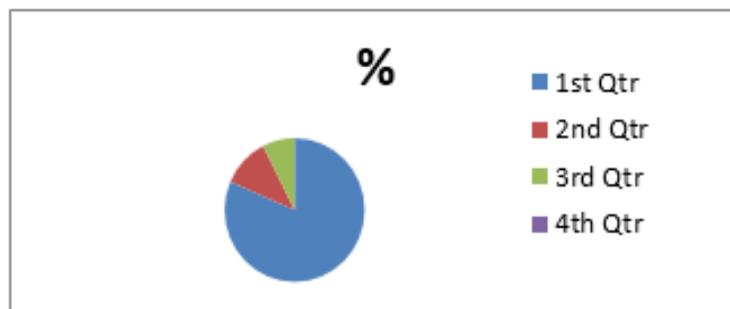


Chart (4): Number of Syllables in the Word 'Crowd'

22 out of 30 students were able to recognize the number of syllables in the word ‘crowd’ which is one. As displayed in the chart, 73.3% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 6 students said that the word has got two syllables and 2 students thought that it has got three syllables. The six students might be misled by the spelling because there are two vowel letters in the word. The percentages of failures were 20% and 6.7% respectively. No one said that the word has got four syllables. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this monosyllabic word.

Table (1): Recognition of Monosyllabic Words

No.	Word	Pass	Percentage	Failures	Percentage
1	School	20	66.7%	10	33.3%
2	Sport	24	80%	6	20%
3	Street	20	66.7%	10	33.3%
4	Crowd	22	73.3%	8	26.7%
<b>Average</b>		<b>21.5</b>	<b>71.7%</b>	<b>8.5</b>	<b>28.3%</b>

Table 1 shows the results concerning all the monosyllabic words contained in the study. Almost 22 participants were successful regarding recognition of the number of syllables in the four words. In contrast, about 8 participants failed to recognize the number of syllables in the same group of words. The percentages of success and failure are 71.7% and 28.3% respectively. The word ‘sport’ gets the highest score of success. It can be said that it is not hard to recognize the number of syllables in monosyllabic words by most Saudi EFL learners.

#### - Two-syllable Words:

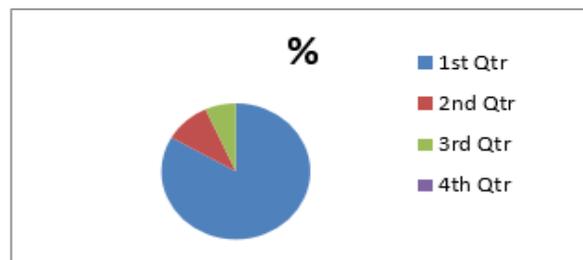


Chart (5): Number of Syllables in the Word ‘Modern’

25 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word ‘modern’ which are two. As displayed in the chart, 83.3% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 3 students said that the word has got one syllable and 2 students thought that it has got three syllables. The percentages of failures were 10% and 6.7% respectively. No one said that the word has got four syllables. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this two-syllable word.

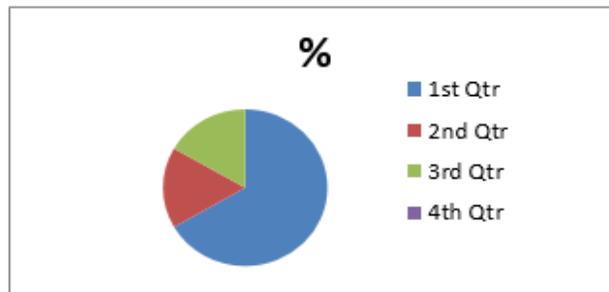


Chart (6): Number of Syllables in the Word ‘Biscuit’

20 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word ‘biscuit’ which are two. As displayed in the chart, 66.7% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 5 students said that the word has got one syllable and 5 students thought that it has got three syllables. The percentages of failures were 16.7% and 16.7% respectively. Saying that the word has got one syllable is unreasonable but saying that it has three ones is reasonable because of the spelling. No one said that the word has got four syllables. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this two-syllable word.

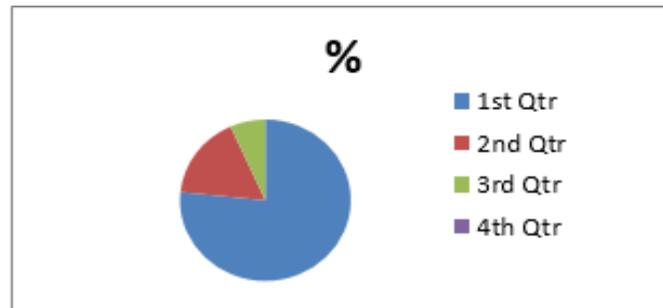


Chart (7): Number of Syllables in the Word 'Record'

23 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word 'record' which are two. As displayed in the chart, 76.7% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 5 students said that the word has got one syllable and 2 students thought that it has got three syllables. Both responses are unjustifiable. The percentages of failures were 16.7% and 6.7% respectively. No one said that the word has got four syllables. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this two-syllable word.

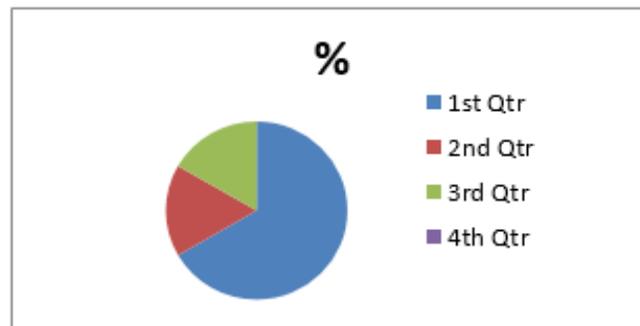


Chart (8): Number of Syllables in the Word 'Physics'

20 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word 'physics' which are two. As displayed in the chart, 66.7% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 5 students said that the word has got one syllable, the letter 'y' may confuse them, and 5 students thought that it has got three syllables, which is unexpected. The percentages of failures were 16.7% and

16.7% respectively. No one said that the word has got four syllables. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this two-syllable word. It is noted that these are the same results obtained for the word 'biscuit'.

Table (2): Recognition of Two-syllable Words

No.	Word	Pass	Percentage	Failures	Percentage
1	Modern	25	83.3%	5	16.7%
2	Biscuit	20	66.7%	10	33.3%
3	Record	23	76.7%	7	23.3%
4	Physics	20	66.7%	10	33.3%
<b>Average</b>		<b>22</b>	<b>73.3%</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>26.7%</b>

Table 2 shows the results concerning all the two-syllable words contained in the study. 22 participants were successful regarding recognition of the number of syllables in the four words. On the contrary, 8 participants failed to recognize the number of syllables in the same group of words. The percentages of success and failure are 73.3% and 26.7% respectively. The word 'modern' gets the highest score of success. It can be said that it is not hard to recognize the number of syllables in two-syllable words by most Saudi EFL learners as the case with the monosyllabic ones.

### - Three-syllable Words:

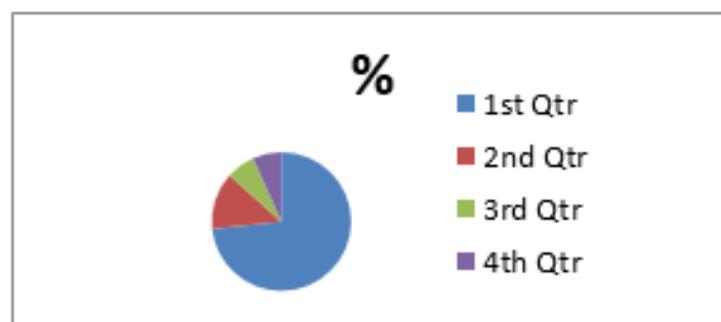


Chart (9): Number of Syllables in the Word 'Difficult'

22 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word 'difficult' which are three. As displayed in the chart, 73.3% of the study sample are

aware of the syllable number found in this word. 4 students said that the word has got two syllables. 2 students thought that it has got four syllables and another couple of students said that it has got only one syllable. The three groups of failures provided unjustifiable responses. The percentages of failures were 13.3%, 6.7% and 6.7% respectively. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this three-syllable word.

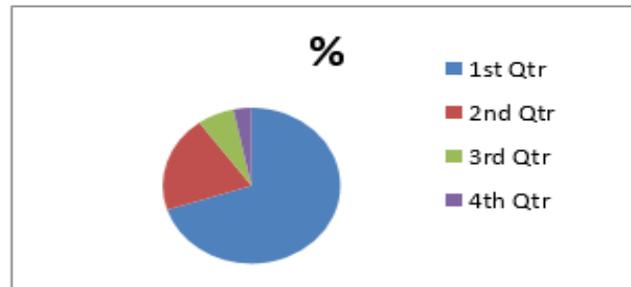


Chart (10): Number of Syllables in the Word 'Restaurant'

21 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word 'restaurant' which are three. As displayed in the chart, 70% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 6 students said that the word has got two syllables which is not expected. 2 students thought that it has got four syllables, which might be due to the number of vowel letters in the word, and only one student said that it has got one syllable, which is absolutely unexpected. The percentages of failures were 20%, 6.7% and 3.3% respectively. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this three-syllable word.

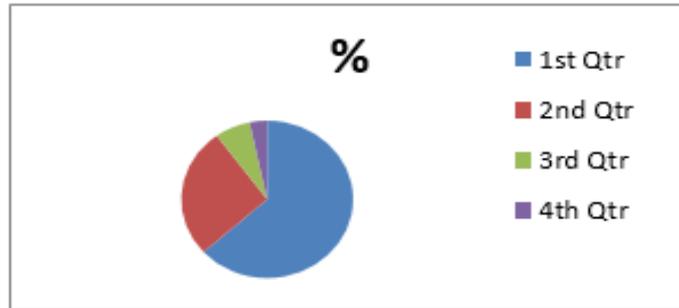


Chart (11): Number of Syllables in the Word 'Pollution'

19 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word 'pollution' which are three. As displayed in the chart, 63.3% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 8 students said that the word has got two syllables whose responses are unexpected because there are not only two vowel letters in the word to accuse the spelling. 2 students thought that it has got four syllables, which is reasonable because of the spelling, and only one student said that it has got one syllable, which is totally unreasonable. The percentages of failures were 26.7%, 6.7% and 3.3% respectively. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this three-syllable word.

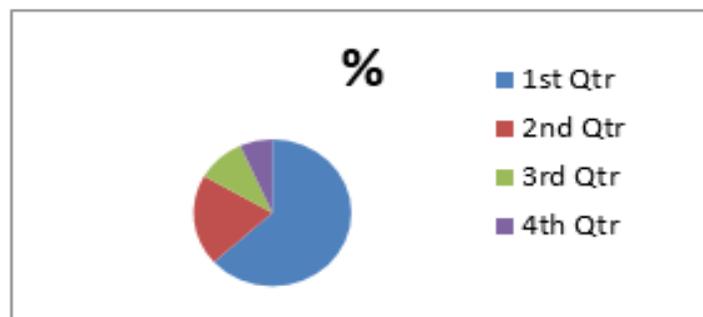


Chart (12): Number of Syllables in the Word 'Inflation'

19 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word 'inflation' which are three. As displayed in the chart, 63.3% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 6 students said that the word has

got two syllables, which is unexpected. 3 students thought that it has got one syllable, which is extremely unreasonable, and 2 students said that it has got four syllables, may be due to the word spelling. The percentages of failures were 20%, 10% and 6.7% respectively. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this three-syllable word.

Table (3): Recognition of Three-syllable Words

No.	Word	Pass	Percentage	Failures	Percentage
1	Difficult	22	73.3%	8	26.7%
2	Restaurant	21	70%	9	30%
3	Pollution	19	63.3%	11	36.7%
4	Inflation	19	63.3%	11	36.7%
<b>Average</b>		<b>20.3</b>	<b>67.5%</b>	<b>9.7</b>	<b>32.5%</b>

Table 3 shows the results concerning all the three-syllable words contained in the study. Almost 20 participants were successful regarding recognition of the number of syllables in the four words. In contrast, about 10 participants failed to recognize the number of syllables in the same group of words. The percentages of success and failure are 67.5% and 32.5% respectively. The word ‘difficult’ gets the highest score of success. It might be said that it is not hard to recognize the number of syllables in three-syllable words by most Saudi EFL learners. There is a little difficulty here compared with the other two groups of words.

#### - Four-syllable Words:

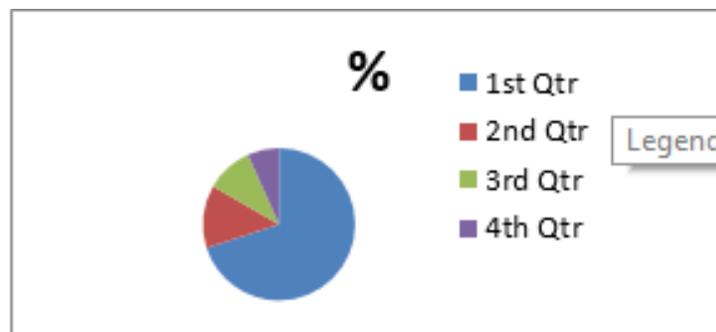


Chart (13): Number of Syllables in the Word ‘Development’

21 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word ‘development’ which are four. As displayed in the chart, 70% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 4 students said that the word has got three syllables. 3 students thought that it has got two syllables and 2 students said that it has got one syllable. These two groups of responses are unexpected since the word looks long it has got four vowel letters. The percentages of failures were 13.3%, 10% and 6.7% respectively. This means that the majority of the respondents are aware of the syllable number of this four-syllable word.

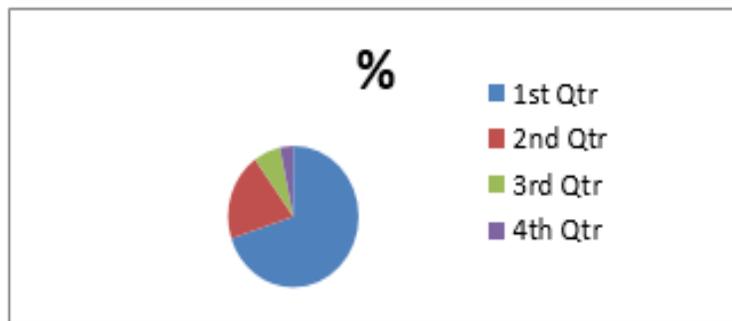


Chart (14): Number of Syllables in the Word ‘Beautiful’

Only 2 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word ‘beautiful’ which are four. As displayed in the chart, only 6.7% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 21 students said that the word has got three syllables. This large group of students might be misled by the spelling which is very confusing. 6 students thought that it has got two syllables and 1 student said that it has got one syllable. Both groups of responses are unexpected since the word contains a big number of vowel letters. The percentages of failures were 70%, 20% and 3.3% respectively. This means that the majority of the respondents are not aware of the syllable number of this four-syllable word.

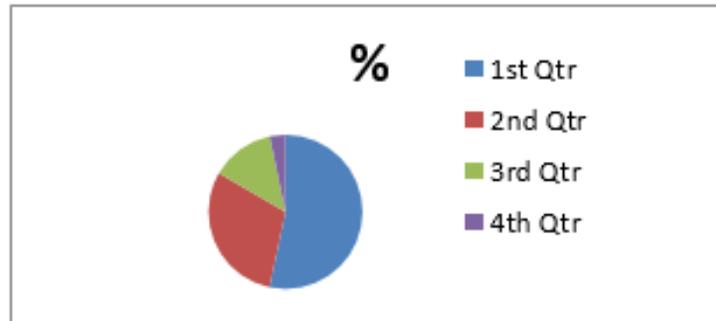


Chart (15): Number of Syllables in the Word 'Information'

16 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word 'information' which are four. As displayed in the chart, 51.7% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 9 students said that the word has got three syllables. 4 students thought that it has got two syllables and 1 student said that it has got one syllable. The responses of failures are unreasonable because the spelling of word says that it has five vowel letters. The percentages of failures were 30%, 13.3% and 3.3% respectively. This means that almost half of the respondents are not aware of the syllable number of this four-syllable word.

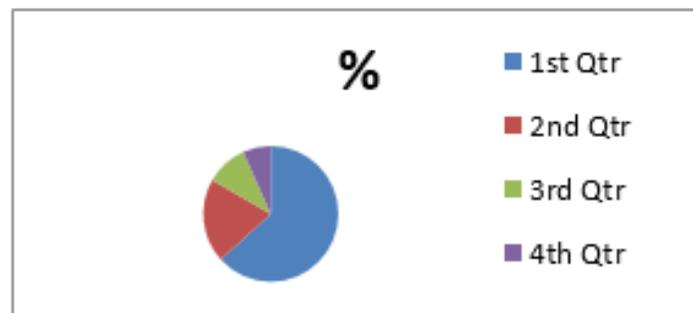


Chart (16): Number of Syllables in the Word 'Revolution'

Only 2 out of 30 students succeeded in recognizing the number of syllables in the word 'revolution' which are four. As displayed in the chart, 6.7% of the study sample are aware of the syllable number found in this word. 19 students said that the word

has got three syllables, which is unjustifiable. 6 students thought that it has got two syllables and 3 student said that it has got one syllable, which are both unreasonable. The percentages of failures were 63.3%, 20% and 10% respectively. This means that the majority of the respondents are not aware of the syllable number of this four-syllable word.

Table (4): Recognition of Four-syllable Words

No.	Word	Pass	Percentage	Failures	Percentage
1	Development	21	70%	9	30%
2	Beautiful	2	6.7%	28	93.3%
3	Information	16	51.7%	14	48.3%
4	Revolution	2	6.7%	28	93.3%
<b>Average</b>		<b>10.3</b>	<b>33.8%</b>	<b>19.7</b>	<b>66.2%</b>

Table 4 shows the results concerning all the four-syllable words contained in the study. Almost 10 participants were successful regarding recognition of the number of syllables in the four words. In contrast, about 20 participants failed to recognize the number of syllables in the same group of words. The percentages of success and failure are 33.8% and 66.2% respectively. The word ‘development’ gets the highest score of success. It could be said that it is so hard to recognize the number of syllables in four-syllable words by most Saudi EFL learners when compared with the other three groups of words.

Table (5): Four Types of Words

No.	Word Type	Pass	Percentage	Failures	Percentage
1	Monosyllabic	21.5	71.7%	8.5	28.3%
2	Two-syllable	22	73.3%	8	26.7%
3	Three-syllable	20.3	67.5%	9.7	20.3
4	Four-syllable	10.3	33.8%	19.7	66.2%
<b>Average</b>		<b>18.5</b>	<b>61.6%</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>38.4%</b>

Table 5 compares the results of the four types of words. It is clear that most Saudi EFL learners encountered no problem in recognizing the number of syllables in monosyllabic, two-syllable and three-syllable words. It is easier for them to

recognize the number of syllables in monosyllabic words and two-syllable words than three-syllable ones.

On the other hand, most of them experienced a sort of difficulty in dealing with four-syllable words. This indicates that the more number of syllables words have, the more difficulty Saudi EFL learners encounter.

The overall performance percentage is 61.6% which is acceptable. However, when EFL learners complete the two courses of Phonetics and Phonology, their performance is expected to be better.

## V- Conclusions

It is significant to conclude the results and discussions to come out with the major findings in order to answer the study questions and confirm or reject its hypotheses.

In conclusion, the findings show that most Saudi EFL learners are able to recognize the number of syllables in a variety of English words to an acceptable degree (61.6%). They also indicate that words having four syllables are more challenging than those with one, two or three syllables.

The study two hypotheses, that Saudi EFL Learners at Al-Baha University are expected to perform well in recognizing the syllable number in various types of words and that the more syllables in words, the more difficulty is experienced by Saudi EFL Learners at Al-Baha University when counting the syllable number, have been confirmed.

## VI- Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Studies

Both College EFL instructors and learners are recommended to pay more attention to the study of syllable structure. Knowing the syllable structure improves EFL learners' pronunciation at the supra-segmental level.

Further studies on syllables concerning EFL learners should include more complicated words; those with more than four syllables. These studies should also examine other skills related to syllable structure such as the analysis of syllables into onset, center and coda. Moreover, analyzing the consonants of both onset and coda can also be examined: the pre-initial consonant, which is only one: /s/, initial consonants, post-initial consonants, prefinal consonants, final consonants and post-final consonants.

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## Appendix

### Paper Test - Number of Syllables – 2024

Dear students,

This test is intended to collect data for a scientific paper conducted by Dr. Mohamed Eltayeb.

Please choose one of the four options bearing in mind that 1= one syllable / 2= two syllables / 3= three syllables / 4= four syllables.

1- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'school'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

2- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'modern'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

3- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'difficult'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

4- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word ' development '.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

5- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'beautiful'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

6- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'restaurant'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

7- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'biscuit'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

8- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'sport'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

9- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'street'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

10- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'record'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

11- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'pollution'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

12- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'information'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

13- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'revolution'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

14- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'inflation'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

15- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'physics'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

16- There is / are.....syllable(s) in the word 'crowd'.

Mark only one oval.

1  2  3  4

**END OF TEST**