

Phonology: Helping Low-level Learners with Connected Speech

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1. Introduction

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I have decided to focus on helping lower level learners recognise and use features of connected speech. I am particularly interested in researching this since I noticed that some of my current learners are having difficulties with this in both comprehension and production. Although I tend to deal with pronunciation issues as they arise, I am not convinced this is adequate or effective. Also, while finding the teaching of pronunciation enjoyable, I feel the need to study it in greater depth so I can be more confident and knowledgeable in class.

2. Analysis

ending in a vowel sound to a word beginning in consonant sound e.g. blue carpets /
◉ *▼▲

2.1.3 Elision

This is the omission of a syllable or sound that exists in its written form. For example, fish and chips usually sounds like *↗z↘▼z↘↗▲.

/ * / is often deleted e.g. tell him: ▼*

/ ▼ / and / / are often deleted when they occur between two other consonants e.g.

must be: ▲◉*, you and me: **.

In addition, they are often not pronounced when followed by p or b e.g. that boy /

ⓁⓅ◉Ⓛ↗, red paint: / **↗▼.

/ ▼ / is commonly replaced by a glottal stop in, for example, water /

2.1.4 Intrusion

Also called liaison (Thornbury 1997, p37), this is the insertion of an extra phoneme or transition sound in order to facilitate articulation. For example, / * / in try it on /

▼ *↗*↗↗, / / in too upset /▼ ①▲,*▼ / in vodka and tonic / *▼↗*.

The latter is not heard in Ireland, where there is a glottal stop instead of the intrusive /

:/ *▼↗*.

2.1.5 Weak Forms

In order to make room for important and therefore stressed words in a spoken sentence, other words appear in their weak form. They do this most frequently by sacrificing their normal vowel sound for the schwa. For example, in their weak forms the following words are most often pronounced with / / : but, some, them, for, the, are.

Other weak forms include been /b ↗ n/

2.2 Teaching Connected Speech

Teachers have to decide when and how to include pronunciation teaching. Harmer (2001, p186) proposes four alternatives: whole lessons, discrete slots, integrated phases and opportunistic teaching.

Undoubtedly, there is something to be said for isolating particular pronunciation areas such as connected speech from time to time and paying close attention to problem areas.

This is particularly relevant when teaching in an English speaking country because learners are hearing connected speech every day and can experience real frustration because they do not recognise the sounds. In my experience, students are highly motivated to learn to recognise aspects of connected speech and are anxious to produce these features themselves.

There is an issue about whether to teach connected speech to low level students from the beginning or not. There is no doubt that certain types of learners have the aural ability and/or the motivation to hear and produce connected speech easily while others

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get stuck in the detail and can't see the wood for the trees (or can't hear the sound for the spelling).

3. Range of Problems

Different nationalities will have various degrees of difficulty with this area of pronunciation relative to the distinctive features of their own mother tongue. For example, Japanese learners are unlikely to recognise or use the schwa sound or the “blurrings” of connected speech because these are not features of Japanese. Arabic does not have linking glides and uses glottal stops to separate vowel from vowel, and vowel from consonant in consecutive words. Because of many consonant differences between Chinese and English, the borders between words are often poorly negotiated and so Chinese learners’ speech can sound jerky. French and Italian learners tend to aspirate final / /, / ▼ ♯ ✱. This tends to work against smooth linkage in for example I want to: ✱↗ . (Kenworthy, 1987)

The difficulties faced by the learner can be divided into two categories: recognition and production. At lower levels, the problems in relation to connected speech are more likely to be receptive. It may be unrealistic for the teacher to expect students at this level to produce connected speech consistently.

3.1 Recognition

The most fundamental problem which the low level learner has is distinguishing one word from the next in spoken English. Thus s/he can have difficulty knowing how many words there are in an utterance. Sometimes learners panic in the face of native speakers even though an utterance might be well within their competence grammatically and lexically.

3.1.1 Linkage

Because words run into each other without pause, a phrase such as not at all can sound like not a tall. The learner thinks that s/he hears a word that is not there and thus misunderstands the utterance.

Students can also not recognise when the same consonant sound ends a word and starts the next word. For example, team meeting sounds very like tea meeting.

Sometimes when consonants occur together across words, one of the sounds is left out (elision) e.g. ‘last Sunday becomes ♯▲✱↗. This can confuse the learner who may know the two words but not recognise them when heard in connected speech.

In cases of intrusion, for example, when saying go in, speakers add / / so that learners mistake it for go win.

Finally, where assimilation occurs, the learner may not recognise meaning because of the pronunciation of a new sound e.g. ten pounds sounds like /▼✱ ✱①■

3.1.2 Weak forms

Because students may have learned the strong pronunciation of words which have weak forms, they may have difficulty recognising their weak forms in everyday conversation.

Students have problems recognising weak forms in sentences such as have you been to the shops?. They may have understood been and shops but are afraid that they have

missed something important in between. This can result in confusion and a loss of confidence.

The inability to hear contractions such as 's or 'd can cause difficulties because misunderstandings can occur e.g. I love a Guinness vs I'd love a Guinness.

3.2 Production

In my experience, some students can perceive their accent to be a greater problem than it actually is. The real problem is that the standard by which they judge themselves is too high. The role of the teacher is to propose intelligibility rather than perfection as their goal.

Low level learners tend to give full value to unstressed syllables, particularly those which contain the schwa. They are unaware of the high frequency of unstressed syllables in English and therefore struggle to produce them, particularly if their own language is not stress-timed.

It is quite difficult for learners to use linkage and Kenworthy (1987, p115) cites two reasons for this. Firstly, there is no visual reminder of linkage and secondly, the rules for linkage are difficult for learners to remember and to put into practice.

If learners do not use linking strategies of elision and assimilation, their speech can sound quite staccato and it places a strain on the listener. As well as omitting linking devices, some learners add their own. An Italian, for example, might add a vowel sound to the end of a word in a phrase such as It's a big one. This leads to misunderstanding as it sounds like It's a bigger one: / ↗▼▲⊙↗➡➡.

4. Strategies

4.1 Recognising catenation

I have found with lower level students that a varied and fun approach to pronunciation is successful. By introducing them to a tongue-twister such as: “A noise annoys an oyster, but a noisy noise annoys an oyster more”, students can hear how consonant sounds link into vowel sounds. By writing the tongue-twister on the board and drawing links between the end of one word and the beginning of the next, students can see how one sound links to the next. If there is a / / or / * / linking sound, they can be written above or below the link in order to raise students’ awareness of their intrusion.

4.2 Recognising weak forms and assimilation

In his introduction to **Pronunciation Games** (Cambridge University Press 1995), Mark Hancock points out that pronunciation is often taught through the teacher providing a model for learners to listen to and repeat, but that this neglects a need many learners feel to understand what they are doing. The games and activities in his book are an attempt to give learners insights that will help them in their future learning.

One activity which I have found useful for supplementary awareness-raising is the Dictation Computer game (Hancock, 1995, pp78-81) which consists of a weak forms puzzle and an assimilation puzzle. Students have to correct a list of sentences which the “dictation computer” has misheard. For example, “Alaska if she wants to come with us” should be “I’ll ask her if...”. Although the activity does not mirror real life (where utterances are misheard rather than read), it nevertheless satisfies the need for some learners to see a visual representation of what happens when weak forms and assimilation cause comprehension difficulties.

4.3 Sensitising learners to assimilation and elision

Poetry, rhyme and chants are appealing ways to draw learners’ attention to the rhythms of spoken English. For example, in **Rhymes and Rhythm** (page 79), a rap which is full of examples of assimilation and elision is the springboard for a dictation task which highlights these aspects for the learner. All the names of things to eat or drink are removed and students fill in the gaps as they listen. Although quite fast, the rap is in fact no faster than normal informal speech. The teacher may decide to pre-teach some vocabulary, depending on the level of the students. In addition, during pre-listening, the learners’ attention may be drawn to some examples of connected speech they are likely to hear.

The **Connected Speech Dictation** in **The Pronunciation Book** (Pilgrims Longman 1992 p56) is an unorthodox approach to raising learners’ awareness of these aspects of connected speech. The procedure involves dictating only the unstressed syllables from a list of collocations such as “good grief”. For this example the teacher dictates / ➡①➡ . Then s/he dictates the complete phrase, making sure the pronunciation of the originally-dictated syllable stays the same as before. Learners compare answers and comment on what they have heard. The authors, Bowen & Marks, acknowledge that it

is unusual to give these syllables their connected speech forms when they are spoken in isolation, but it is a way of forcing learners' awareness of these aspects.

4.4 Using song lyrics for awareness-raising

The lyrics of pop songs are often sung in a colloquial style which mirrors spoken English. This is the starting point for an interesting activity in **Pronunciation Tasks** (Cambridge University Press 1993 p51). Students are given five examples of features of connected speech as might be found written on the lyric sheet of an album cover e.g. "All you've gotta do is call". Students are asked to identify what they think the underlined words might be in slow, careful English. This activity might be usefully reversed by presenting students with lyrics in which connected speech has been replaced by formal English. Students have to restore the lyric to its original form e.g. "I want to hold your hand".

4.5 Production

Kenworthy (1987, p115) advocates that teachers treat phrases or groups of words as units for the purposes of drawing learners' attention to their pronunciation. Opportunities should not be missed when doing vocabulary work to look at idioms, compound words and phrases such as "not only" and "must have" from the point of view of linkage in their pronunciation. An example of how this is done can be found in **Headway Elementary Pronunciation** (OUP 1997, p27) in which phrases of the form "a - of -" are examined for stress, weak forms and linking. This task might easily be expanded to allow students to practise using these features in a role play.

5. Conclusion

The main aim is to help learners at this level understand connected speech, while sowing the seeds for fluency in production activities.

In their introduction to **Cutting Edge** (Longman 2001), Cunningham & Moor provide ten useful tips for helping students with pronunciation. They advise giving pronunciation priority, integrating it whenever students have a problem and taking a light-hearted approach.

I have understood the value of occasional dedicated pronunciation lessons and the desirability of helping low level learners be realistic about their pronunciation goals.

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