

IATEFL Poland 2012

“Pronunciation for listening: understanding authentic English”

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Abstract

Pronunciation is not only about the **mouth**, but also the **ears**. And, with English being a **global** language, the ears must learn to be **flexible** in order to make sense of all those varieties of spoken English out there. This session is about helping learners to deal with this variety. We focus on features of fast **conversational** English, and on parameters which are most vulnerable to variation across different **accents**. We also look at ways of exploiting **authentic** audio in the classroom.

This article is a summary of the main points of a presentation at the IATEFL Poland conference in Wroclaw, 2012. The complete slide show, handout and audio material from the talk are available in the “Talks” section of the author’s website Hancock McDonald ELT (<http://hancockmcdonald.com>).

A. Introduction: the difficulties of authentic listening

Listening material in ELT materials is usually a simplified version of speech, scripted and carefully articulated. While this is fine as a way of helping learners into the language, it does not prepare them for the kind of speech they will encounter in “the real world”. Fast, spontaneous speech is messy, in that speakers are thinking about what to say next as they speak, so they stop and start and change direction as they go. In their hurry to say their piece, they often under-articulate words and phrases. Different participants in a conversation compete to take turns to speak and frequently their speech overlaps. And last but not least, every speaker has their own accent, or combination of accents, and only a minority speak in one of the standard varieties favoured by coursebooks and dictionaries. In Section B, we look at activities to raise awareness of features of fast spontaneous speech, and in Section C, we look at activities related to accent variation.

B. Connected Speech

i. Word Boundaries

It's very disheartening, when, as a listener, you discover that you can't even tell where one word stops and the next one starts. Somehow, you expect there to be a gap, as there is in writing. This activity shows very graphically what it is like to be unable to hear the gaps between words, or to hear them in the wrong place.

Not Feeling Well

Patient: Doctor, doctor - I've got a two theik, a near rake, sore rise, bruise darms,
a stummer cake, and I far tall the time!
Doctor: I see. Perhaps you'd like to way tin the corridor.

This transcription displays how the listener has failed to identify word boundaries. In particular, it shows how the consonant at the end of one word may often seem to attach

to the beginning of the following word. (Field 2008). For example, the *d* at the end of *bruised* sounds as if it is at the beginning of the next word so that *arms* sounds like *darms*. To raise awareness of this feature, you could give this example to learners around B1 or B2 level and ask them to decide what the text should say.

Answer Key:

Patient: Doctor, doctor – I've got a tooth ache, an ear ache, sore eyes, bruised arms, a stomach ache, and I fart all the time.

Doctor: I see. Perhaps you'd like to wait in the corridor.

ii. Simplifications

Linking of final consonants to the following word is one of four features of connected speech which you could raise your learners' awareness to. The following mishearings, all on the topic of food, display linking and three more features:

In the kitchen

- 1 sol tum pepper
- 2 a loafer slice bread
- 3 a napple ana norange
- 4 wom potato
- 5 frozum peas
- 6 fruik cake
- 7 greem beans
- 8 sick seggs
- 9 a tinna sweek corn

You could use these as follows. Take each mishearing and ask students to suggest what it could mean (salt and pepper) and then suggest why it has been written wrongly.

Guide them towards awareness of the following features:

- a. Linking: The T of *salt* has linked to the following *and*.
- b. Weak form: The vowel of *and* has been reduced to schwa.
- c. Elision: The D of *and* has been elided.
- d. Assimilation: The N of *and* has changed to /m/ under the influence of the first P in *pepper*.

Answer key:

1. *salt and pepper*; 2. *a loaf of sliced bread*; 3. *an apple and an orange*; 4. *one potato*
5. *frozen peas*; 6. *fruit cake*; 7. *green beans*; 8. *sick seggs*; 9. *a tin of sweet corn*

iii. Systematic Practice

According to John Field (2008), the brain of a listener contains a corpus of traces of all the words and phrases they have heard. The bigger this corpus, the better prepared that listener will be for speech variation. In the classroom, we may reinforce this corpus of traces by exposing the learners to multiple examples of a specific feature of spoken English. The following example is a rhyme which is very dense with examples of weak forms of pronouns and possessives. Showing them in such density makes them much more noticeable.

Paul and Grace

He saw her, he liked her face
He asked her her name, she said it was Grace
She liked him, his name was Paul
She gave him her number, he gave her a call
He bought her a gift, he went to her flat
She gave him a drink, she showed him her cat
He liked her, but hated her cat
He never returned, and that was that

iv. Reception or Production?

An interesting point to note relating to teaching features of connected speech, is that their importance is more for listening rather than for the students' own spoken production. Although they may help learners to speak more fluently, they do not necessarily make them more intelligible internationally. Indeed, Jennifer Jenkins argues that the use of connected speech features such as weak forms may make a student *less* intelligible (Jenkins 2000). You may nevertheless choose to drill a chant such as "Grace and Paul" because there is no better way for a learner to become aware of something receptively than attempting to actually produce it.

C. Accents

1. Local Pronunciation, Global Understanding

Traditionally, speaking and listening in ELT were treated as symmetrical with regard to accent. A standard model was chosen such as British RP or General American (GA), and learners were exposed to this receptively in listening texts and productively in pronunciation work. Nowadays, with English as a global lingua franca, it seems much more reasonable for speaking and listening instruction to be asymmetrical. Instead of aspiring to speak RP or GA, a learner could instead set the much more manageable goal of learning to speak intelligibly, but with their own local accent of English. However, in this new scenario, they need to be much more flexible as listeners, in order to accommodate to all the other local accents of English they are likely to come across. With this in mind, it will obviously be useful to give learners exposure to a range of accents in listening texts. But we may also supplement this by making them aware of parameters of variation.

ii. Vulnerable Sounds

All the sounds of English may vary from one accent to another, but they are not all equally likely to do so. Some sounds are more vulnerable than others. In the table below, I have identified 8 sounds which are especially vulnerable to variation. In each column, the two words shown may be homophones across different accents. For example, the word *bad* in a New Zealand accent sounds very much like the word *bed* in a British accent.

VOWELS

1 /æ/	2 /ɔ:/	3 /ɒ/	4 /əʊ/
bad	walk	hot	cold
<i>bed</i>	<i>wok</i>	<i>heart</i>	<i>called</i>

CONSONANTS

5 /r/	6 /h/	7 /t/	8 /θ/
sore	hair	waiter	thank
<i>saw</i>	<i>air</i>	<i>wader</i>	<i>tank</i>

iii. Accommodation

A listener needs to be flexible in their expectations of these sounds. We can show them the kind of flexibility which is necessary through the written medium. For example, show your learners this limerick and ask them to work out what it means. Then ask them to identify which of the vulnerable sounds has been changed throughout.

Fred

I once add a friend called Fred
Ooo wore is at in bed
When E took off is at
They said, 'Look at that –
E asn't an air on is ed!

Answer key:

I once had a friend called Fred

Who wore his hat in bed

When he took off his hat

They said, 'Look at that –

He hasn't a hair on his head!'

(Vulnerable sound 6 has been changed throughout – the /h/ sound is cut).

D. Using authentic texts: micro-listening

i. Microlistening

Field argues that the typical listening lesson, featuring a text plus a series of comprehension questions, tests rather than teaches (Field 2008). He suggests that listening lessons should also include a close-up focus on very small segments, or *micro-listening*. This will help to make the students more aware of the kinds of characteristics of speech described earlier in this article.

ii. Audio Editing

Published listening materials rarely feature segments of authentic text extracted for micro-listening, but you might like to make some yourself. For this, you will need some audio-editing software. Audacity is one such product, available free from <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>. In Audacity, when you open an mp3 file with your audio text, you will see it displayed visually. You can then select the micro-segment

you wish to focus on, copy it and paste it into a fresh file. You can also alter the speed of it. You can use these techniques to produce what could be called an “acoustic drill”.

iii. Acoustic Drills

We usually think of drills in connection with spoken production, with multiple repetition to train articulation. But the same idea could be transferred to listening, for ear training, as follows:

Identify a feature of your audio text which is noticeably frequent and potentially confusing for an apprentice listener. Copy and multiple examples of the feature, plus a small amount of the co-text to the left and right of it, and paste them into a fresh file. When you play this collection of fragments for your students, it will make the targeted feature very noticeable and thus raise awareness of it. For example, working with a podcast from a radio station, I found a discussion with multiple occurrences of *actually*, and it was radically reduced and elided. I made the following acoustic drill. The word *actually* is transcribed roughly as it sounds.

An Acoustic Drill

... do you *achly* know ...
...if you *achly* highlight...
...have you *achy* met them all...
...but it *sachly* ...
...*tachy* ninety...

The idea is that by hearing multiple instances of such commonly reduced features of authentic speech, the learner reinforces their mental trace of that feature and is therefore better prepared to cope with it in the future.

Postscript

A great activity for raising student awareness of the difficulties of pronunciation for listening is to look at misunderstood song lyrics – something that most (or all?) of us have experience of. Here is a misunderstood version of the world’s most recorded song:

Yes, Today

Yes, today
Old men’s doubles teams so far away
Now it seems they’re over here to say
Oh why be leaving yesterday?

Certainly,
Why not have the man I used to be
There’s a chateau hanging over me
Oh why be leaving yesterday

Why she, had two goes
Eyes and nose,
She wouldn’t say

Eyes head, something wrong
Now along for chess today

Yes, today
Love washed up her knees and came to play
Now my knees are placed too high to weigh
Oh why be leaving yesterday?

Many of these mishearings can be explained in terms of the connected speech and accent features mentioned in this article. You can find a You tube recording and a lesson plan for this lyric on the website hancockmcdonald.com.

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References

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- Jenkins, J (2000) *The Phonology of English as an International Language*, Oxford, OUP
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