



TESOL Connections

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Listening to Real-World English, Part 1: Connected Speech

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Listening in a second language (L2) is hard! A challenge for many L2 listeners is that spoken language is quite different from written language. Unplanned speech usually contains connected speech, pauses and hesitation phenomena, and backchanneling, all of which can cause comprehension problems for L2 listeners:

- **Connected speech** is the natural process of articulating rapid speech resulting in phonologically modified forms that differ from citation forms (clear pronunciation of a word in isolation).
- **Hesitation phenomena**, including false starts, repetitions, and pauses, are often found in oral language because speakers are composing and uttering their message at the same time.
- **Backchanneling**, through which an effective listener demonstrates engagement with the speaker, indicates comprehension and agreement.

Materials developers and teachers often address L2 listening difficulties by modifying spoken texts to make them more comprehensible to learners (often referred to as “textbook texts”). An obvious way to do this is by using audiotexts created especially for L2 listeners, where the speakers speak slowly without the authentic aforementioned features. This approach can be beneficial in exposing learners to spoken language without overwhelming them, because listening to rapid, authentic speech with abundant connected speech, false starts, and hesitation phenomena can be frustrating for learners, especially beginning learners, and can even be demotivating.

However, an overreliance on these artificial textbook texts can also be problematic. Too many language learners have had the unsettling experience of diligently studying a foreign language for years, only to visit a country where that language is actually spoken and discovering that the language sounds vastly different from what they learned in their L2 classroom. In rapid speech, the act of articulating an utterance is affected by numerous processes, including word stress, sentence timing and stress, reduction, elision, intrusion, assimilation, juncture, and contraction. These processes result in extensive instances of connected speech (Brown, 2012). Common examples of connected speech are phrases like *What are you doing?* or *I am going to*, which are not fully articulated in everyday, natural speech. Instead, they sound more like *Whatch doin’?* or *I’m gonna*, respectively. Connected speech is not bad, sloppy, or lazy speech; rather, it is a

naturally occurring process in virtually all spoken registers and styles, although it is more common in informal contexts. Connected speech can be more difficult for L2 listeners to comprehend than spoken texts without connected speech (Brown, 2012).

The purpose of this series of three articles is to give concrete examples showing how teachers and curriculum developers can effectively incorporate real-world spoken language in the L2 classroom, without overwhelming or discouraging learners. We provide three general lesson outlines for teachers to use and adapt for their particular class contexts.

Real-World Spoken Language in the Classroom

Three Lessons

These three lessons are focused on raising learners' awareness of (1) connected speech, (2) hesitation phenomena, and (3) backchanneling in real-world interactive conversations. They include web addresses for videotexts and audiotexts that can be used in the lessons, and suggestions about how to use the spoken texts. Though these lessons are focused on upper beginners, the texts can be used with a variety of ability levels. In fact, one of the advantages of using authentic, real-world spoken texts like these is that activities can be tailored for use with both advanced and beginning learners (Wagner, 2014).

It is important to remember that humans are not good multitaskers. Thus, you should avoid asking L2 listeners to simultaneously listen for overall comprehension and specific vocabulary or linguistic features. With this in mind, the three lessons focus on particular forms in the text (i.e., connected speech, hesitation phenomena, and backchannels). Before focusing on these forms, however, we suggest that lessons begin with a focus on comprehension. After the learners have a fairly complete understanding of the text, you can then do postlistening tasks focused on specific linguistic features. Indeed, it is important to provide multiple playings of a spoken text, each time with a specific while-listening task.

Rationale

Connected speech is often covered in speaking instruction (mainly with the goal of speaking more naturally) but may be neglected when teaching listening. This is unfortunate, because acknowledging the importance of connected speech in listening can not only help learners develop better L2 listening skills but can also facilitate students' understanding of the differences between oral and written language. The lesson presented in this article is designed to capitalize on the benefits of utilizing top-down processing in the first few steps to support comprehension, and then, after learners achieve a basic level of comprehension, the lesson shifts to develop their bottom-up processing skills (Field, 2003). The lesson provides students with direct and guided instruction on connected speech, which benefits them even with no prior knowledge of the linguistic feature. Because much of the difficulty in connected speech comes from students' inability to draw the nexus between the connected words in spoken language and the citation form, using visuals to introduce connected speech is important. The visuals for this lesson include slides and handouts with an accessible definition of connected speech and several examples of common occurrences of connected speech in English.

The noticing connected speech in discourse activity (Steps 5 and 6) requires re-viewing the video to give learners an opportunity to identify connected speech in discourse and use it as a tool for comprehending aural input. The final step, a brief discussion on the effectiveness of recognizing connected speech, is especially important, because the debrief helps promote metacognition, which is an important factor in L2 listening comprehension (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Adapting for Different Proficiency Levels

The use of real-world spoken texts should be motivating for learners, and you can stress to your students that this is the type of language they will hear outside the classroom. Instead of using textbook texts that lack the characteristics of real-world spoken language, use authentic spoken texts in your classroom but make them accessible and comprehensible for your learners by modifying the task demands according to their needs and abilities. For beginner learners, more prelistening and scaffolding activities will be needed to provide context and allow learners to access their background knowledge. In addition, shorter segments of the texts can be used, with repeated playings. Pauses can be inserted (at natural discourse boundaries) to provide opportunities for the learners to catch up with the aural texts.

Understanding Connected Speech: Lesson 1

Materials: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “UC Riverside student talk about their first year of college” YouTube video (beginning to 1:10) • Appendix A: Connected Speech Examples (.pdf) • Appendix B: Connected Speech Guided Practice (.pdf) • Appendix C: Connected Speech Cloze Activity (.pdf)
Audience: WIDA level 2; CEFR A2
Objective: Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify connected speech in real-world language. • evaluate their own comprehension of connected speech.
Outcome: Students will <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • watch a video, • identify connected speech in a video, and • evaluate their experiences processing connected speech.
Duration: 45 minutes–1 hour

Prelistening Activity

Assign each of the following topics to a pair or group of students to activate background knowledge. The students should discuss the topic and prepare to explain what they discussed. As they share out, record some of their responses on the board or on poster paper.

- Challenges that first-year college students face
- Myths vs. the reality of college

- Differences between high school and college
- The best things about college

Procedures

1. Show the video and instruct students to listen for the four themes discussed in the previous activity.
2. After listening, have students complete the following tasks:
 - a. Write down examples of the four themes that they heard in the video.
 - b. Share and compare examples with a partner.
 - c. As a class, add anything new that was said in the video on the board or poster paper from the brainstorming in Step 1.
 - d. Have students relisten and note any areas where they have difficulty understanding the speaker.
 - e. Discuss difficulties as a class.
3. Introduce the concept of connected speech to students by explaining that native speakers talk quickly, resulting in connected speech, which occurs normally in English. Define connected speech in general (e.g., when talking quickly, a speaker joins words together, so the words sound different than they look when written). Provide examples of connected speech ([Appendix A](#)).
4. Hand out [Appendix B](#). Students will listen to you pronounce a phrase or a sentence containing an example of connected speech and work with a partner to match the connected speech they heard to the citation form provided in the word bank. This activity could be facilitated in a number of ways based on the composition of the class and the background of the learners—as an individual paper-and-pencil task, as a whiteboard activity, or as a partner listening and matching activity.
5. Transition the students back to the videotext used in the comprehension portion of the lesson, explaining that the video they watched at the beginning of the class contained examples of connected speech and that it is possible that the connected speech may have made the video more difficult to understand. Explain that they are going to watch the video one more time to identify the connected speech and that on the first listen, they should just listen and note any examples of connected speech that they notice while listening. After listening, ask students to share instances where they noticed connected speech or to identify areas where they thought the speaker was talking quickly and they had difficulty understanding.

6. Distribute the cloze activity (**Appendix C**) and word bank with the citation forms. Play the video a second time so that students can complete the cloze. Repeat as necessary. After listening, students consult their partners to compare their responses.
7. Finally, debrief the students, asking questions about the effectiveness of attending to connected speech while listening. Possible questions are:
 - Did learning about connected speech help you understand the video? How?
 - Do you think paying attention to connected speech will help you with comprehension in other situations? What situations?
 - When do you think understanding connected speech would be most helpful?

Conclusion

This lesson is meant to introduce and draw learners' attention to connected speech in listening because connected speech can cause comprehension difficulties and is often neglected in L2 listening instruction (Wagner & Toth, 2014). Ideally, this lesson would be the first in a series on connected speech and segmenting aural input.

The next two lessons in this series will focus on introducing and drawing learners' attention to hesitation phenomena and backchannels.

References

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