Connected speech

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Teaching pronunciation used to involve little more than identifying and practicing the sounds of which a language is composed, that is to say, its phonemes. Recently however, there has been a shift of focus towards the other systems operating within phonology, which may be more important in terms of overall intelligibility.

What connected speech is

"English people speak so fast" is a complaint I often hear from my students, and often from those at an advanced level, where ignorance of the vocabulary used is not the reason for their lack of comprehension. When students see a spoken sentence in its written form, they have no trouble comprehending. Why is this?

The reason, it seems, is that speech is a continuous stream of sounds, without clear-cut borderlines between each word. In spoken discourse, we adapt our pronunciation to our audience and articulate with maximal economy of movement rather than maximal clarity. Thus, certain words are lost, and certain phonemes linked together as we attempt to get our message across.

How this affects native and non-native speakers

As native speakers, we have various devices for dealing with indistinct utterances caused by connected speech. We take account of the context, we assume we hear words with which we are familiar within that context. In real life interaction, phonetically ambiguous pairs like " a new display" / " a nudist play", are rarely a problem as we are actively making predictions about which syntactic forms and lexical items are likely to occur in a given situation.

Non-native speakers, however, are rarely able to predict which lexical item may or may not appear in a particular situation. They tend to depend almost solely on the sounds which they hear. Learners whose instruction has focused heavily on accuracy suffer a "devastating diminuation of phonetic information at the segmental level when they encounter normal speech." (Brown 1990.)

Aspects of connected speech

So what is it that we do when stringing words together that causes so many problems for students?

Weak Forms

There are a large number of words in English which can have a "full" form and a "weak" form. This is because English is a stressed timed language, and in trying to make the intervals between stressed syllables equal, to give the phrase rhythm, we tend to swallow non-essential words. Thus, conjunctions, pronouns, prepositions, auxiliaries and articles are often lost, causing comprehension problems for students, particularly for those whose language is syllable timed. Some examples of words which have weak forms are;

- **And**
  fish and chips (fish´n chips)
  a chair and a table (a chair ´n a table)
- **Can**
  She can speak Spanish better than I can (The first "can" is the weak form, the second the full form.)
- **Of**
  A pint of beer
  That´s the last of the wine!
- **Have**
  Have you finished? (weak)
  Yes, I have. (full)
- **Should**
  Well, you should have told me. (Both"should" and "have" are weak here)

The relevance of certain features of connected speech to students' needs is often debated. However, this is not the case with weak forms. Learners must come to not only recognise and cope with the weak forms they hear, but also to use them themselves when speaking English. If they do not their language will sound unnatural and over formalised, with too many stressed forms making it difficult for the listener to identify the points of focus. This, the degree to which connected speech contributes towards "naturalness" or "intelligibility", is a useful starting point from which to measure the value to students of the different features of connected speech.

Working on weak forms

Here are some ways in which we can attempt to help our students with weak forms.

- *How many words do you hear?*
  Play a short dialogue, or a group of sentences, and ask students to listen and write down the number of words they hear. Go over each phrase to check whether they could identify all the words and then to see if they can accurately produce what they heard. Contrast the weak or natural version with the full version, pointing out that the full version is often more difficult to pronounce.
- *Unnatural speech*
  Activities built around "unnatural speech" are an enjoyable way of working on weak forms and rhythm. To obtain "unnatural speech", record someone reading a sentence as if it were just a list of words. A good way of doing this is to put the words onto flash cards, and to reveal one at a time, so the reader gives each word its full pronunciation.
  When you have a few sentences, play them several times to the students, who should then work in pairs to try to make the speech more natural sounding. They can then either use graphics to show the points they would change, or take turns reading out their different versions, or record themselves using a more natural pronunciation. Conduct a general feedback session at the end of the activity, discussing reasons for the changes the groups have made.
- *Integrating*
  Integrate pronunciation into vocabulary work, practising, for example, the weak form in phrases with "of" (a loaf of bread, a cup of coffee, a can of coke).
    - Integrate weak forms into grammar work. If practising "going to" for example, the teacher can write on the board examples such as;
      - Go on holiday
      - Earn more money
      - Buy a car
    - Ask different students to read these phrases as a sentence with "going to". Listen for and highlight the weak form of "to" before the consonant sounds, and the "full" form of "to" with the linking "w" sound before the vowel.

Conclusion

Pronunciation work should be seen as an integral part of what goes on in the classroom. Try not to fall into the text book trap of dividing language up into isolated chunks. One lesson on grammar, the next on vocabulary, then pronunciation and so on. All language, like speech, is connected, and students will benefit from learning the weak forms and stress patterns of new words from the start, rather than in a remedial lesson months later.

Raising students awareness of these forms, whenever they arise, is the first step towards helping your learners to speak a little more naturally. Even if they do not assimilate these forms at first, "...in many cases, the simple awareness of their existence can help enormously in enabling students to better understand the language they hear." (Gerald Kelly- "How to Teach Pronunciation.")

Further reading

Sound Foundations by Adrian Underhill
Pronunciation by Dalton and Seidlholfer
How to Teach Pronunciation by Gerald Kelly
Teaching English Pronunciation by Joanne Kenworthy