



Language Skills Assignment 1: Phonology  
Cambridge DELTA Course at International House Bangkok (Centre No. OO001)

**Connected speech for upper-intermediate learners**  
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## CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Analysis</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.1</b>	<b>Assimilation</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.2</b>	<b>Elision</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.3</b>	<b>Liaison</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Issues for teaching</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Teaching Suggestions</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Appendices</b>	<b>12</b>



## 1. Introduction

Connected speech involves treating words and sounds as a continuous 'stream of speech' rather than separate, individual units (Underhill, 2008: 171; Richards and Schmidt, 2010: 174). Research studies show that it is often a difficult area for EFL learners (Brown, 2016), and its awareness and practice enhances listening comprehension and clarity of speech among the learners. (Underhill, 2008).

My experience shows that upper-intermediate students, although often competent in using other features, fail to notice or use assimilation, elision and liaison. This could be because these three features involve modifications to the original word-pronunciations. Furthermore, the changes are often only noticeable in rapid, natural speech and much less in slow, careful speech. (Kelly, 2000; Roach, 1991)

Although some feel that many of these features are actually non-standard, and hence should not be taught (Kelly, 2000:114), not using these features can lead to a make one sound very unnatural and less fluent. (Yule 2010; Underhill, 2008). The lack of "characteristics of natural speech" was also pointed by Richards (2008) as a common problem among upper intermediate learners who are otherwise efficient speakers.

For all the aforementioned reasons, I have focused this essay on assimilation, elision and liaison for upper-intermediate EFL learners.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1 Assimilation

Assimilation is said taken place when a phoneme takes some or all of the qualities of its preceding or following phoneme (Underhill, 2008; Brown, 2016; Richards and Schmidt, 2010; Yule 2010). In other words, the assimilated phoneme is influenced by the phoneme coming immediately before or after.

#### 2.1.1 Progressive or perseverative assimilation

This takes place when the preceding phoneme influences the change in the one which follows (Richards and Schmidt, 2010; (Eulenberg, 2016). For progressively assimilated phonemes, the change is usually one of voice.



The following are some common scenarios

**(2.1.1 A) The voiceless /s/ assimilates to the voiced /z/ when preceded by a voiced phoneme**

Dogs /dɒgz/ , Loves /lʌvz/ , Teams /ti:mz/

**(2.1.1 B) The voiced /d/ assimilates to the voiced /t/ when preceded by a voiceless phoneme**

Cracked /krækt/ , laughed /lɑ:ft/

**2.1.2 Regressive or anticipatory assimilation**

In this case, a phoneme influences the preceding phoneme (Richards and Schmidt, 2010; (Eulenberg, 2016; Kelly, 2000). For regressively assimilated phonemes, the change could either be in **the place** of articulation, **the manner** of articulation or **the voicing** (Roach, 1991).

**(2.1.2 A) Assimilation of place:** Almost all the examples of this assimilation are of alveolar consonants, primarily /t/ and /d/ (Roach, 1991). The following are some common scenarios of this assimilation:

(Kelly, 2000; Roach, 1991):

**(i) The Alveolar /t/ /d/ and /n/ becoming bilabial before the bilabial /p/ /b/ and /m/**

Hot <u>p</u> ot	(/t/ → /p/)
Good <u>p</u> erformance	(/d/ → /p/)
Thin <u>m</u> an	(/n/ → /m/)
Thin <u>b</u> oy	(/n/ → /m/)
Fat <u>b</u> oy	(/t/ → /b/)

**(ii) /t/ assimilating to /k/ before /k/ or /g/**

Hotkake ; Fatkgirl ( /t/ → /k/ )

**(iii) /d/ assimilating to /g/ before /k/ or /g/**

goodgirl ; Badgcake ( /d/ → /g/ )

**(iv) /n/ assimilating to /ŋ/ before /k/ or /g/**

thisŋgirl ; Runŋquickly ( /n/ → /ŋ/ )

**(v) /s/ assimilating to /ʃ/ before /j/**

Thisʃshoe /s/ → /ʃ/

**(vi) /z/ assimilating to /ʒ/ before /ʃ/, /j/**

Hisʒshoe ; Theseʒyears /z/ → /ʒ/

**( 2.1.2 B) Assimilation of manner:** This type of assimilation is quite hard to notice (Roach, 1991) and is usually found in the following situations:

**(i) The /s/ sound in swim is made using rounded lips, “in anticipation of the lip action required for /w/”** (Richards and Schmidt, 2010)

**(ii) The plosive becoming a fricative or a nasal** (Roach, 1991)

Thatside ( /t/ → /s/ )



good\_night (/d/ → /n/)

### (2.1.2 C) Assimilation of voice

- (i) Unvoiced → Voiced
  - a. Hot dog /'hɒt ,dɒg/ → /'hɒd ,dɒg / t boy /t/

It should be noted that the examples shown in 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 are progressive assimilations of manner across morpheme boundaries and not across word boundaries. In such cases, they usually become 'fixed' without any exceptions. (Roach, 1991: 126)

### 2.1.3 Coalescent Assimilation

This takes place when two consecutive phonemes fuse together to form a different one (Underhill, 2008; Kelly, 2000; Richards and Schmidt, 2010)

The following are some common scenarios (Underhill, 2008; Kelly, 2000; Richards and Schmidt, 2010)

#### (2.1.3 A) /t/ and /j/ coalescing to form the unvoiced affricate /tʃ/

Whatyou are saying...  
Gotyou !

#### (2.1.3 B) /d/ and /j/ coalescing to form the affricate /dʒ/

Mindyou  
Couldyou...  
Would you....  
Did you...

/d/ and /j/ can fuse, or coalesce, to make a less plosive sound, the affricate /dʒ/  
And similarly /t/ and /j/ can coalesce to give the unvoiced affricate /tʃ/:

## 2.2 Elision

Elision occurs when a sound which might be present in careful pronunciation is omitted in rapid connected speech. (Richards and Schmidt, 2010; Underhill, 2008; Yule, 2010).

The following are some common scenarios of elision (Roach, 1991: 127; Kelly, 2000: 110-111)



### 2.2.1 Elision of /d/ and /t/ within clusters of three plosives or two plosives and a fricative

Parked car	/t/ elided
Acts	/t/ elided
Scripts	/t/ elided
Looked back	/t/ elided

### 2.2.2 Elision of /ə/ in unstressed syllables

Interesting  
Perhaps  
Tonight

### 2.2.3 Elision of /v/ in 'of'

Lot of work  
Part of me

## 2.3 Liaison

This is the process of linking two words in connected speech, often by inserting an additional /w/ /j/ or /r/ within the two words. (Underhill, 2008; Richards and Schmidt, 2010)

The following are some of the common scenarios of liaison:

### 2.3.1 Linking /r/

- 3 Unlike rhotic accents (e.g. American English, Irish English), speakers of non-rhotic accents, such as the RP, do not pronounce the /r/ at the end of a word and following a vowel sound. For example Bar would normally be pronounced as /bɑː/. However, when the /r/ is at the end of a word and between two vowel sounds, it links the two words and hence is called the linking /r/ (Underhill, 2008; Kelly, 2000):

Example: The linking /r/ joins the words bar and outside /bɑːr, aʊt' saɪd/



### 3.1.1 Intrusive /r/

The use of the intrusive /r/ is unique to rhotic accents where an /r/ is inserted when a vowel sound follows the /ə/ /ɔ:/ or /ɑ:/ vowel sounds.

Example: The intrusive /r/ joining the words *law and order* / /lɔ:r ən 'ɔ:.də /

It should be noted that despite its widespread usage, some teachers do not consider it as the ideal pronunciation (Roach, 1991: 128)

### 3.1.2 Linking /w/

This the /w/ sound used to link the /u:/ and /ʌ/ sounds at the end of a word with a vowel which follows it. This is because /u:/ and /ʌ/ have lip rounding and form the starting point for the bilabial semi-vowel /w/. This happens as the sounds /u:/ and /ʌ/ end at the starting point of /w/ with same lip rounding as /w/ 's. (Underhill, 2008; Kelly, 2000)

Example: You almost / ju: 'jɔ:l.məʊst/  
How are.../ həʊ 'jɑ: /

### 3.1.3 Linking /j/

This the /j/ sound used to link the /i:/ /eɪ/ and /aɪ/ sounds at the end of a word with a vowel which follows it. This happens as the sounds /i:/ and /eɪ/ end at the starting point of /j/ (Underhill, 2008; Kelly, 2000)

Example: They almost / ðeɪ 'jɔ:l.məʊst/  
always / aɪ 'jɔ:l.weɪz/



## **4 Issues and Learner Problems**

### **4.1 Learners Trying to pronounce each and every sound too carefully**

This was mentioned by Underhill (2008) and I have also found this to be true from my experience, Arab learners and South East Asian (Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani) learners often sound unnatural because of this tendency leading to the lack of connected-speech features mentioned in 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3

### **4.2 Learners lacking features of connected speech despite being fairly accurate**

This was highlighted by Richards (2008) as a common problem among upper intermediate learners and this lacking can also demotivate the learners. The possible cause of this is simply lack of awareness of the features of connected speech mentioned in 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 and the teachers not focusing enough on specific features.

### **4.3 Loss of speaking fluency and listening comprehension due to not recognising or using assimilation**

The problem here is similar to 3.1 but specific to assimilation. Learners sound unnatural as they do not assimilate phones like native speakers do.

### **4.4 Loss of speaking fluency due to not using the linking phonemes /j/, /w/ and /r/**

Again, most foreign learners try to pronounce words separately, possibly because they see them written separately. The lack of awareness and practice of liaison therefore costs them their fluency.



## 4. Teaching Suggestions

### 4.1 Activity on Assimilation (Bowler and Cunningham, 1999: 52) [See 6.1 for original]

Aim: Increase the learners' awareness of regressive assimilation (See 3.1,3.2 and 3.3)

Procedure: The teacher will say one of the example phrases slowly and carefully, without assimilation, and then repeat it in a more natural way, assimilating the final phoneme of the first word. The teacher will then elicit from the learners what was done differently the second time. Both the styles of speaking can be repeated to make it clearer. Ultimately, the learners will notice or the teacher will explain that in the second case, the final phoneme changed. The teacher will write down the change on the board using phonemic symbols. The teacher will write the other marker phrases on the board and ask students to work in pairs/groups to say them using assimilation. The teacher will then elicit the answers and model them for the learners. Afterwards, students will try and predict the assimilations of the other phrases of the listening exercise and then check the answers while listening. The teacher will pause the audio after each phrase allowing them time to check with each other.

Value: This activity generates inductive learning, and fulfils the aims of raising their awareness of assimilation. The multi-sensory approach (board work, elicitation, speaking with a partner, listening, checking) all reinforce this awareness. The learners will also feel more confident once they are able to identify the assimilations in the listening track.

### 4.2 Activity Elision and other features (Kelly,2000: 120-121) [See 6.2 for original]

**Aim:**

- Learners notice elision in natural speech and are able to such speech during listening activities
- Learners have controlled practice of elision and connected speech
- (See 3.1 and 3.2)

Procedure: The teacher reads out a few lines from a listening text audio script at a slow pace. The students are expected to write down the sounds (not the spellings) either in phonemic scripts or using alphabets. Next, the teacher will play the audio (at a natural pace). The students will identify the differences between what wrote (or heard from the teacher) the first time, and what they heard in the rapid speech. The teacher will then check their findings and give feedback, clearly pointing at the elisions. Finally, students will look at the corrected versions of the pronunciation scripts and try to imitate the conversations using some or all of the features of connected speech.

Value: This activity is particularly useful in helping the students identify what is actually elided in natural speech. The follow up speaking activity will further enhance their awareness of elision.

### 4.3 Activity on Liaison (Hancock,1995, pp.76-77 ) [See 6.3 for original]



- Aim: This activity provides practice of using the linking /j/, the linking /w/ and the intrusive/linking /r/ in an enjoyable way. (See 3.1, 3.2 and 3.4)

Procedure: Students will work in pairs and find their way out of the maze. The teacher will give instructions on which direction to move towards based on the liaison used. Once a student finds a route, the teacher will give another starting point.

Value: Unlike many other connected speech activities, students actively engage in this task while practicing the target language. As the marker sentences are written down, students can work out the rules at their own pace.

Follow up: The learners will try and read out the sentences at a natural pace while the teacher will give feedback.



## 5. Bibliography

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