Understanding Fast Speech with Online Videos and Quizzes

by STEPHANIE HANSON

Understanding fast speech can be an ongoing challenge for English learners of all levels. Even after years of study, learners might be accustomed to clear, slow classroom English and struggle with understanding the reductions that proficient speakers of English use in fast, fluent speech. Some common reductions in American English include *gonna* for *going to*, *tellem* for *tell him*, and *didja* for *did you*. Luckily, because these reductions often follow linguistic patterns, they can be taught.

Research shows that direct implicit instruction on fast-speech reductions aids learner comprehension. Lessons on reduced forms can significantly improve students' scores on dictation tests (Brown and Hilferty 2006; Matsuzawa 2006) and on listening-comprehension tests (Ahmadian and Matour 2014). Research also shows that lessons on reduced forms can improve test scores not just immediately after instruction, but also on a retention test a month or so later (Cormier, Zhang, and Matsuzawa 2013).

Many online resources exist to help students learn about fast-speech reductions commonly used in English. The Minnesota English Language Program at the University of Minnesota developed five videos, available at https://ccaps.umn.edu/esl-resources/students/listening, that explain blending, flap, H elision, syllable elision, and common fast phrases. Each video is about one minute long and describes these fast-speech phenomena with an oral explanation, visual cues, and several examples. In the H elision video ("Dropping the H Sound"), for example, students learn when the /h/ sound is commonly dropped from words such as *he*, *him*, *her*, *have*, and *has*. In the "Blending Sounds" video, students learn when combinations of sounds can change to another sound. For example, /t/ + /y/ = /ch/, so a phrase like *not yet* will often sound more like *nochet* or /natʃɛt/.

Each video also has an accompanying audio quiz, with several examples of each reduction. Students can listen to a short sentence containing that reduction and check their comprehension of it. For students who want a more challenging quiz, there is a sixth audio quiz that mixes sentences with all five types of reductions.

These online videos and interactive quizzes were designed as self-study tools for international students at U.S. universities. Fortunately, these materials can be used anywhere with teens or adults who wish to improve their listening skills. You can share the URL with students who want to improve their listening comprehension, then direct them to watch one or more videos and take the accompanying quizzes.

These materials can also be used in a prepared class lesson. First, choose one of the reduced forms that you want to teach. For the purposes of this example, we will work with syllable elision.

1. **Warm-up** (2–3 minutes). Ask students if they have noticed that English speakers in TV shows, movies, and songs sometimes drop parts of words. Elicit any examples they can think of. Common answers might include *I wanna*, *I'm gonna*, and *Whatcha doin'?* If students can't think of any examples, you can provide a few.

2. **Video explanation** (3–4 minutes). Show the video "Dropping Syllables" and ask students to write down examples of syllable elision from the video. You may want to play the video two or three times.

3. **Comprehension check 1** (5 minutes). Ask students what example words they wrote down. Make a list of these on the board. Ask students which syllable in each word gets deleted; draw a line through that part of the word to visually show the syllable elision.

4. **Comprehension check 2** (5–10 minutes). Ask students what the rule or pattern is for dropping syllables. You can do this comprehension check informally as part of a whole-class discussion. If you want to formally assess students' understanding, give them a multiple-choice quiz where they need to select the correct rule (easier version) or explain the rule in their own words (harder version).

5. **Application** (5–10 minutes). Put students into small groups and give them a list of words (e.g., *average, beverage, business, camera, chocolate, conference, difference, different, evening, every, family, favorite, federal, general, grocery, interest, memory, numerous, probably, salary, separate, several, traveling*). Ask them to identify which syllable should be dropped from each word to fit the pronunciation pattern. You could also ask groups to brainstorm other words that fit this pattern. Debrief with the whole class to check their answers.

6. **Listening practice** (5–10 minutes in class, or as homework). Have students take the "Dropping Syllables" listening quiz at https://ccaps.umn.edu/esl-resources/students/listening/listening-quizzes. They could do this during class in a computer lab or on smartphones, or as homework to practice their listening skills.

7. **Listening-comprehension assessment** (5–10 minutes). Make your own listening quiz by selecting five words that commonly drop a syllable in fast speech. Create a short sentence with each word. For higher-proficiency students, give a dictation quiz using full sentences. Make sure you say the sentences relatively quickly so students must understand fast speech to succeed on the quiz. For lower-level students, give a cloze quiz where they write only the missing word (which is a quickly spoken word that is missing a syllable) instead of the entire sentence.

8. **Rule-comprehension assessment** (5–10 minutes; optional). Test students on their understanding of the pattern for dropping syllables. One option is to ask them to write ten words that lose a syllable when pronounced quickly. They can also mark which syllable is dropped in each word. Another option is to give them a list of words and ask them to cross out the syllable that is dropped.

While this sample lesson could take about an hour of class time if used in its entirety, you can pick and choose the activities that are most useful to your students and adjust the timing to suit your learning objectives.

ADDITIONAL PRACTICE

If you are looking for additional listening resources to expose students to more fast

speech, YouGlish.com may be useful. This website allows you to search for words or phrases in YouTube videos, giving you spoken examples of the word or phrase in each video result. Because the spoken samples are pulled from millions of YouTube videos, some results might not be appropriate for your students (e.g., strong language, politically sensitive topics, adult content). The website also contains a lot of advertisements. It is therefore recommended that you as the teacher select some appropriate videos before class to use with students.

As an example, you can search for "interest" in the search box on YouGlish.com and choose three or four appropriate video clips that appear in the results. Save these videos to use in class. Before showing the videos to your students, ask them to listen for whether the speaker says *INT-e-rest* or *INT-rest*. How many syllables do they hear in each example? This gives students an opportunity to hear the word pronounced by several different speakers and confirm whether or not each example follows the fast-speech pronunciation rule (some speakers might not drop syllables if they are speaking slowly or carefully). You could also prepare a worksheet for students to complete while listening to YouGlish examples that you pre-selected. For each video, students can circle whether they hear the target word pronounced with two syllables or three.

This sample lesson and the optional extension activities are meant to give you ideas for how to use the videos and audio quizzes at https://ccaps.umn.edu/esl-resources/students/listening for listening practice with your students. You can choose and adapt the activities that will best suit your teaching context. A combination of (1) explaining rules of fast-speech reductions (with the videos), (2) analyzing example words and phrases, and (3) testing student comprehension of fast speech (with the audio quizzes) can help students be better prepared to recognize and understand common reductions when they hear them outside the classroom.

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