

# Pronunciation and Music

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper I would like to take the opportunity to discuss the uses of music in teaching pronunciation, in particular the *whys* and the *hows* of using music to introduce connected speech patterns (especially reduced speech, contractions and elisions) and to introduce students to "Global Englishes" (e.g. different varieties of English). I will discuss first what is reduced speech, why it should be taught, and then finally what music has to offer in this regard.

## 2. The Importance of Introducing Reduced Speech

One major challenge in pronunciation for speakers of Japanese and other "syllable-timed" languages (where the length of an utterance depends on the number of syllables which all take similar stress) is that English is a "stressed-timed" language—that is, English has a rhythmic beat which moves from stress to stress, regardless of how many syllables are in between.

The following example is a good way to demonstrate what this means to students. Give the following sentences, one at a time, and clap out the stressed beats. The number of beats will remain the same regardless of how many syllables are added to the sentence. (adapted from Celce-Murcia, 1996, p. 152)

●	●	●
CATS	CHASE	MICE
The CATS	CHASE	MICE
The CATS	CHASE	the MICE
The CATS	could CHASE	the MICE
The CATS	could have CHASed	the MICE
The CATS	could have been CHASing	the MICE
The CATS	couldn't have been CHASing	the MICE

Students will see how the content words (in this case, “cats”, “chase”, “mice”) take the stress and the function words here (the, could, not, have, been), get progressively reduced or “swallowed up” (e.g. *couldina been* for “couldn’t have been”).

The kinds of pronunciation changes that occur in connected speech (reductions, contractions, and assimilations) due to the stress timed nature of English present ongoing challenges for non-native speakers. Assimilation (for example, have + to = *hafta*; going + to = *gonna*) is often misunderstood as “lazy”, “casual” or “sloppy”. However, it is actually an important feature of English. This is demonstrated in Nina Weinstein’s research. Using recordings of unscripted, educated native speakers, she identifies three levels of reduced speech (Weinstein, 2001, p. 119):

Level 1: What do you, what do (we / they), what are you

Level 2: whadda you; wha do (we /they); what’re ya

Level 3: whaddaya; whadda; whaddaya

Level one speech occurred a mere eight times, level two reductions 47 times, and level three reductions occurred 258 times! This strongly indicates that reduced speech forms are the rule rather than the exception among educated native speakers.

### **3. Student Interest**

It can be clearly seen, therefore, that it is important to introduce reduced speech patterns to students because they are an important feature of English. Another compelling reason is that students themselves are very interested. Recent investigations of language learners' demands in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language have shown that pronunciation is one of the highest-ranking aspects of student interest in many different countries (Willing, 1988). Surveys of Japanese students have also shown a high interest in learning pronunciation. "According to a survey of the attitudes of Japanese university students, they.... are more interested in pronunciation training than in learning foreign culture or foreign literature" (Makarova & Ryan, 2000). Informal surveys that I have conducted at five junior colleges and universities in the Kanto area also reveal a very high interest in learning pronunciation.

Moreover, not only is there a high demand for learning pronunciation in general, students are also interested in reduced speech forms in particular. In surveys conducted at the beginning of the year, students frequently mention a desire to understand the speech of native speakers, and to sound like native speakers themselves. In light of Weinstein's research on frequency of reduced speech of

native speakers, combined with the fact that most students are not taught about them, I believe reduced speech to be an important factor in addressing these desires. Students also consistently mention wanting to learn “slang”, which I strongly suspect may also tie into the reduced speech question, since students also mention on end-of-the-term course evaluations that they liked learning reduced speech and want to learn more.

#### 4. Teaching Reduced Speech

One way to introduce reduced speech is through listening exercises where students listen to conversations containing reduced forms. Although they practice listening to reduced speech, they write in standard spelling in order to stress the fact that standard written form is different from oral English. In the example below, the student would hear a conversation between two people in a restaurant. A: “*Whaddaya gonna* have?” B: “Let’s see. I *wanna* try a chicken sandwich. “ A: “I *wanna* have a cheeseburger and some fries. *Whadda* you *wanna* drink?” While listening, they would fill in as below:

A: \_\_\_\_\_ have?  
(Writes: *What are you going to*)

B: Let’s see. I \_\_\_\_\_ try a chicken sandwich.  
(Writes: *Want to*)

A: I \_\_\_\_\_ have a cheeseburger and some fries.  
\_\_\_\_\_ drink?  
(writes: *want to, what do you want to*)

(Adapted from Weinstein, 2001, p. 22)

## **5. Using Music in Pronunciation Teaching**

In addition, I have found using music in pronunciation can also be a great way to look at reductions. There are several reasons to use music in pronunciation class. Pronunciation has been called the Cinderella of ELT (being locked away and out of sight). One of the criticisms of pronunciation teaching is that it is thought to be boring. Perhaps this is due to the dominant image of audio-lingual methods drilling minimal pairs. Another complaint by some teachers has been that pronunciation is “imperialistic”, or imposes a monolithic and unreachable North American (sometimes British) “standard” on the rest of the world. Music, on the other hand, can address both of these concerns. Music can offer a wide range of different kinds of English. “Standard” as well as regional American and British popular music is, of course, readily available as are reggae, gospel or many other varieties of English from around the world. Yet another compelling rationale for using music in class is the fact that it is deeply enjoyable (by college students in particular) is relaxing, and holds students’ interest and attention. Since students often express anxiety about their pronunciation and can, consequently, contribute to a fear of speaking, music can be an effective tool for lowering their affective filter (e.g. reduce stress and anxiety) and facilitating learning. In short, music offers a fun, non-drill based way to introduce varieties of authentic English.

Music also offers a great way to look at reductions and elisions in connected speech. One way to use music in class is to create cloze exercises with the target language (function words, reduced speech,

contractions, assimilations) blanked out. Students often seem to find these exercises both enjoyable and challenging. Students can be asked to write in standard spelling in order to emphasize the difference between the correct written form and spoken English. Usable material is rife in many songs, as can be seen in the examples are excerpted below:

*This Little Light of Mine* (American Gospel)

This little light of mine,

I'm \_\_\_\_\_ (gonna/going to) let it shine. (x3)

Ev'ry day, ev'ry day, ev'ry day, ev'ry day

\_\_\_\_\_ (gonna / going to) let my little light shine

*Blowing in the Wind* (Bob Dylan)

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ ('n /and) How many roads must a man walk down,  
before they call him a man?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ How many seas must a white dove sail,  
before it sleeps in the sand?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ How many times must a cannonball fly,  
before they are forever banned?

The answer, my friend is blowing in the wind,  
the answer is blowing in the wind.

*Aimee* (Pure Prairie league)

(chorus)

Aimee \_\_\_\_\_ (whatchyu/ what do you) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (wanna/want to) do?

I think I could stay with you, for a while, maybe longer if I do.

*Tears in Heaven* (Eric Clapton) (chorus)

\_\_\_\_\_ (wouldjyu/ would you) know my name,  
if I saw you in heaven?

\_\_\_\_\_ (wouldjyu/would you) feel the same,  
if I saw you in heaven?

I must be strong, and carry on, cause I know I don't belong,  
here in heaven.

*Comes a Time* (Neil Young)

It's \_\_\_\_\_ (gonna/going to) take \_\_\_\_\_ (a  
lotta/a lot of) love

To change the way things are.

It's \_\_\_\_\_ (gonna/going to) take \_\_\_\_\_ (a  
lotta/a lot of) love

Or we won't get too far.

## 6. Conclusion

Music is a great method of introducing reduced speech forms of connected English. It has the potential to address students' ongoing concerns about wanting to understand native speakers and wanting to sound more like native speakers. It also offers a way to lower their anxiety about pronunciation in particular, and speaking in general, by providing a non-threatening, enjoyable context. Music can also address the concerns of some teachers about pronunciation being too boring or imperialistic by providing lively and authentic context in which the possibilities for variety are unlimited.

## 7. Bibliography

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